

INTERVIEW WITH LINDA DRAKE

By David K. Dunaway

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Hereford, TX – schooling – Vega, TX – Oldham County – Joann Harwell, Oldham County Remembers – changing interest in Route 66 – Run to the Heartland, Landergin, TX – Oldham County Chamber of Commerce – travel Route 66 to see “the real America” – guidebooks as cross-language communication – reliance on tourism dollars and per capita impact of tourism in Vega – moving Reno City – no locals using Route 66 – Route 66 in her family’s history – increased interest from the government (e.g., Smithsonian, NPS) – Dot’s Mini-Museum – advocates for Route 66 in Texas – future of Route 66

David Dunaway: Tell me your name and where you were born.

Linda Drake: My name is Linda Drake. I was born in Hereford, Texas and raised on a farm about 40 miles south of Adrian.

DD: And your schooling?

LD: I went to school in a small country school out in that area between Adrian and Friona called Walcott. Then from there I completed high school in Hereford.

DD: Where do you live today?

LD: I live in Vega, Texas.

DD: When did you move there?

LD: I moved to Vega around 1990.

DD: You're from Oldham County, for more or less most of your life?

LD: Yes.

DD: You work today in at the Oldham County Chamber of Commerce?

LD: Correct.

DD: I understand that you got to the Oldham County Chamber of Commerce soon after Joann Harwell left. She had produced the book Oldham County Remembers. Are we likely to see any more copies of that printed? Are there any left over?

LD: There are not any left over. There are not any at all. We hope to produce and also include more histories of people in the Oldham County area.

DD: One of things that I really particularly want to talk to you about was the way that interest in Route 66 seems to have been picking up a little and how you have seen that interest changed from the time you moved to Vega in 1990.

LD: One of the things I have really seen changed is, and it might be my perspective changed more than the route changed. Because being from that area and I can remember as a girl going to Adrian and being in the cafés there. This would have been in the early 60s and 70s. It was just the road to town; it was the road to work or wherever we were going. It really wasn't until my work with Joann that I understood how important the road

was beyond just our local trade route. My real enthusiasm came when I volunteered with the Chamber with Joann in 1996 when we had the first national Route 66 gathering “Run to the Heartland” at Landergin.

So I went to help the Chamber just as a volunteer. I met these wonderful artists, authors, people that were promoting the route, travelers, vendors and I realized that Route 66 was something special, not only to use locally but to others and to the history of America; potentially to a number of travelers who would continue to travel on Route 66 from abroad.

DD: I remember when I interviewed Dot Leavitt, she was just amazed at all the foreigners who would come down Route 66. Do you have any idea what they were attracted to in Route 66?

LD: I think it is the way of life, the people as much as the history. I think they want to see real America. They don't want to see what has been portrayed in television and movies. They want to see real America. When they travel Route 66 they are able to do that. They are able to see it in the forms of big cities and very small towns. Through that, they get a sense of America; who we are, where we have been, a sense of our history, and our communities. I think that is what they are searching for.

I think it is much like what we would be searching for in our travels. We always want to see and experience those things that are real and it is more interesting often for us in traveling abroad to meet those people and speak to them one-on-one and get to know a sense of really and truly who they are. I think that is what travelers from abroad are looking for an experience in Route 66. As far as Americans that travel Route 66, I think it is more nostalgia. It is more getting back to our roots; remembering that time when life may have seemed easier and more fun because we were children. Just to go back and see neon and things that we remember from our childhood and I think that's a lot of the American interests.

DD: So a different side of interests in some ways that you have contrasted the foreign and the American. I wonder if it isn't true, though, that to some extent that Americans are trying to find America too. I mean somebody who grows up on the East Coast or the West Coast and all they've known is big freeways, and big cities. Suddenly they think, “Oh, there must a road you could take back to the past.” I guess people come to it from that.

LD: I love the way you say that, “Americans searching for America.”

DD: Well I interview so many people about this and I get a sense sometimes why people are on the road. I do sense that they looking for a simpler and less complicated America but also there is a part of it which is something that is maybe a myth. I mean you could also look Route 66 and find a lot

of sad stories; a lot of people that weren't welcome on the road and I think that is part of our story too. Do people come into your office in Vega and ask about Route 66? When people are thinking about visiting your part of the world, is that one of the things that comes to mind?

LD: Yes, they do come to the Chamber and ask questions. We are often asked to meet with a group, possibly do some interviews. Then sometimes it is just someone trying to locate something. Most of the people that travel will have some sort of guide book that helps them along the way. I remember one time, a Japanese couple came and they were trying to find one of the restaurants. I couldn't speak their language and they couldn't speak mine so it was just a matter of pointing the way. The guide books and maps that have been independently produced have been invaluable in bringing tourists to Route 66. Without that I don't think that we would have the number of travelers we do today.

DD: Your perspective is that, since you work at the Chamber of Commerce, of economic development. What do you see is the role of Route 66 in the economic future of small towns like Adrian and Vega?

LD: I think it is very important. I think if towns have other industry, they aren't relying totally on tourism dollars. Being with the Chamber I am acutely aware of how important the tourism dollars are. For instance, based on a formula through the Texas governor's office, we are able to calculate that the per capita impact of tourism in Vega is about \$4000 per person. This is something that I tell local groups and explain how that formula comes about. It is based on hotel/motel tax revenue. So we've got a clean-cut number to deal with. Even at that, the state governor's office feels that the numbers that I come up with were more conservative. But I feel like they're a truer number. The dollars are not going to turn over as much in small town, especially when it is closer to a larger place like Amarillo, where people can spend their money.

To put this in a nutshell, it is worth almost \$4000 a year to every man, woman, child in Vega that we have tourism dollars coming through Vega. Often when I will give this presentation to a group, I will get the blank stares. This is almost unbelievable to them. What it means is that this is what we would have to pay to keep the quality of life in our community if we did not have the tourism dollars based on Route 66 and Interstate-40.

Then I tell people, this is not so hard to imagine, because we have been through this. We know what it is like. "Just remember," I tell them, "Think for a moment if we didn't have the tourists on Route 66, the traffic on I-40, or US Highway 385 coming through our town. We can understand this; we have been through it before. Remember what happened when the barricades went down and traffic flowed on I-40

instead of Route 66. We've seen that economics happen. We've seen nine service stations close. We saw those cafes. We drive down and we look at these empty buildings. The owners couldn't sell it; it was no longer valuable business. There were no customers. We have seen what that economically does to our community."

Then everybody's eyes perk up and they go, "Yes, you're right. These dollars are important to every one of us, even if we are not involved in the tourism industry." So, to answer your question about Route 66, it is very important and possibly more important to the smaller communities who are relying on so heavily upon it, such as Adrian. To have 2 cafes that are deriving income from the tourists that come through, and we have seen that with Glenrio. That community thrived only on tourism dollars and now it is gone. We are going to see more and more communities fade away, the community and their history. The Route 66 travelers can keep that alive for generations to be able to enjoy those same communities and those same stops along the road.

DD: Yes, well said. You mention Adrian. The last time I was in Adrian, which was just 2 weeks ago, there were 25 people in the Mid-Point café and they were all part of a Route 66 bus tour. There weren't any locals in café, except the cook. It is really hard to over-estimate what that must do for Adrian because of what they have. It's almost as if some of these small towns have been blessed by Route 66.

LD: Absolutely!

DD: This is an old phenomenon. In fact in Oklahoma, there is a little town, you know it, El Reno. It used to be called Reno City and used to be on the train tracks. When Route 66 was built, they moved the town to Route 66. They knew where their bread was buttered. Does everybody understand this?

LD: No, no.

DD: So you have talked to groups and people who don't understand the economic impact of having Route 66?

LD: Yes.

DD: How is it that they don't get it?

LD: I think I can offer a unique perspective from being someone in the community and not seeing the big picture of Route 66 and then being able to see the picture of Route 66. One thing I think most, is people locally do not realize the number of Route 66 tourists that we have. It is wonderful they come through your cities slowly, quietly, gathering information,

looking at your historic buildings, visiting with people, having a meal, possibly staying, and then off they go. Most people, like for instance, you were saying that you went to the Mid-Point and the number of people there but there were no locals. The locals are not seeing that. Although most towns and the people in them along the way realize that it is important that they are deriving economic development through that.

But I think even as a nation, we don't realize how important Route 66 is. What a treasure it is to us historically and economically. I think a lot of people don't understand and don't get it.

DD: How did you get it?

LD: I think being a part of "Run to the Heartland" immediately from that, because I had lived in these small communities, played basketball, and then was raising my family there and you meet people and see people. Most of them you know and see at the post office and school, then, all of a sudden, here are all these people so thrilled to be out between Adrian and Vega in the middle of nowhere, under a tent and excited. That excited me. It made me see that they're excited about something that I can't see. Then through that I began to possibly explore I guess you would say.

Then I learned how important Route 66 was to my own history, to my own roots. In visiting with my mother and father, my dad was raised in Adrian and had been there since 1928 since he was 2 years old. My mother was raised in Picher, Oklahoma. Her sister had gone off and mother gets a telegram that her sister is getting married and would like for her and her mother to come to her wedding in Adrian, Texas. Mother told me, "We didn't know where Adrian was." So they got a map and actually hitchhiked to Adrian from Picher, both of them being Route 66 towns.

The sister was married and then ran off to go on her honeymoon with her husband and start their life. My mother and grandmother were wondering how they were going to get home. Mother went to work at the Bent Door café, and raised enough money for grandmother to go home. Then she met dad. He was just a local shy boy who was coming in every day just to watch her work, and then they married.

So Route 66 has a lot of personal history for me. I don't know what it is about Texans and Oklahomans and Route 66. It seems like we are always meeting so many couples that are from Texas and Oklahoma and from Route 66 towns. Route 66 brought them together more or less, my parents, and my husband and I as well. Then too, my husband, Rocky, and I, we also are just travelers of the route. We loved to travel and it gives me some insight of what travelers enjoy, because if I enjoy that, if that's what I like

to see in a town or community, that they do too. But it was that hot summer afternoon in Landergin in 1996 that really set me on fire.

DD: Well that's a lovely story. Now you've been 10 years now, almost working you could say, in the Route 66 business in a sense of using it as a means of promoting your local community. Have you seen any changes over that decade?

LD: Yes I have. There is more interest. There are more tourists. There are more people interested in opening old businesses. There is more interest in restoration projects. We have been seeing more interest from the government. As you probably know, the display they have put in the Smithsonian about Route 66, the Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program. So yes, I have seen a lot of changes. I think that came from a lot of grass-roots, people who love Route 66. I think at one time the interest could have died away had it not been for that.

DD: Do you have any objective measures? Is there any way to do tourists counts? How do we know that there are more Route 66 travelers?

LD: In our small community, we have two places that have guests' books; one is Dot's Mini-Museum. This Mini-Museum, which is off the beaten path, is only found through these guidebooks or an occasional traveler who stops at the Chamber and asks for local interests. The guestbook can tell you so much about the travelers. I don't know the numbers right now, but we were amazed. I took the numbers to the city to let them know because over one summer, I guess this has been, I believe it was 2001 or 2002, 270 people had found this out-of-the-way spot with no other advertising other than in a couple of the guidebooks where they had found their way. It represented 27 states and nine countries. There is also a guidebook at the Mid-Point café.

So we have seen an increase in the number of people that have come through, signed the guest books, and also be able to keep these businesses up and going. Businesses that were literally on the verge of putting up the closed sign because they didn't have enough customers. Now there's enough tourism through the summer to keep those businesses thriving.

DD: That is a very happy story. Do you sense that the other places in Texas are moving in your direction in terms of understanding 66 and its potential?

LD: I hope so. I don't know that they are. I think when you have a strong advocate for Route 66, Joann was one, myself, Fran Houser at the Mid-Point. Then looking across the state I think Shamrock has the picture. They have the newly restored U-Drop Inn. Then you have Delbert and Ruth Trew from McLean who have always been not only advocates but

great work horses for Route 66. But as a whole as a general population I think not. I think we still have a long way to go. I think there's a lot of potential I think there's hope, I guess I should say, that more people will understand. More and more projects will take place which will enhance the travelers' experience.

Some of these little small communities ask, and you probably have heard this in some of the interviews, why are they here? Why are they coming? Yet it is very interesting to note the number that return. So they are seeing here something that they are looking for. I think one of the challenges that we have now is instilling that curiosity and the love for the history and the love for Route 66 in the next generation. If we are going to continue to see growth and progress on Route 66, that's going to be the key in the future.

DD: Well thank you. That seems to give us a very nice way to end this and again may I have your permission to transcribe and deposit this in an archive?

LD: Yes you may.

DD: Thank you very much. Maybe even broadcast it?

LD: You may.