



# ROUTE 66

M A G A Z I N E

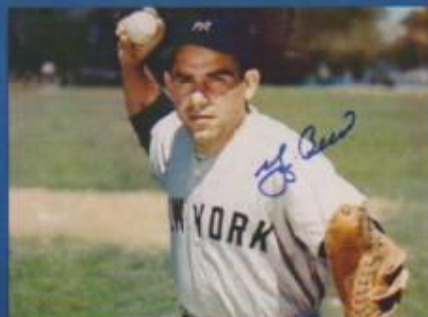
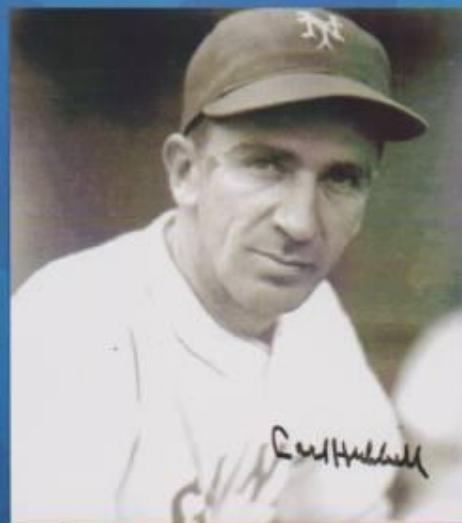
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## MOTHER ROAD

# ALL★STARS



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# A Basement full of Memories



John T.'s namesake grandson, John Ruh. However, the legacy of the grandfather's work serving travelers is celebrated in greater measure by what John Ruh has created below the framed and signed black-and-white publicity shots. The journey between Chicago and L.A. unfolds through a panorama filled with model trains and icons of Route 66, the highway that followed the

Gemini Giant statue in front of Wilmington's Launching Pad, then proceed past well-known Illinois sites such as Odell's restored Standard Oil gas station, Broadwell's Pig Hip restaurant, and Litchfield's Sky View Drive-In Theater. After passing the Chain of Rocks Motel and bridge, the rails lead to Missouri's Hooker Cut and the Marsh Arch Bridge in Riverton, Kansas.

Trains run through Oklahoma, and we see Catoosa's Blue Whale, the Round Barn of Arcadia, and the sign for the National Route 66 Museum in Elk City. After passing the restored Phillips Gas Station of McLean, Texas, the trains go through a tunnel into the basement's second room where they encounter Britton's leaning water tower, Groom's giant cross, Amarillo's Big Texan and the Cadillac Ranch.

After the ninety-degree turn to the third wall, the trains encounter New Mexico's La Bajada Hill and the Route 66 Casino near Albuquerque. The Painted Desert and Twin Arrows welcome the rolling stock to Arizona, where we also see the Holbrook Wigwam Village and Angel Degadillo in front of his Seligman barbershop. Around the final bend, the trains pass into California, where we see the famous Hollywood sign on our way to L.A.'s Union Station.

Throughout the display, there is a mix of set pieces



## From 1937 to 1956,

John T. Ruh worked as the bartender on the Little Nugget, a plush bar car on the luxury passenger train City of Los Angeles. The streamline train operated at first by the Central Pacific and later by the Union Pacific and Chicago Northwestern railroads, provided service between L.A. and Chicago. Hollywood stars such as Bing Crosby and Jimmy Durante were frequent

**This page, top left:** John Ruh stands in front of a display of photographs of his grandfather John T. Ruh. **Immediate above:** Illinois section of layout features drive-in theater (with minivideo monitor) depicting Litchfield's Sky View Drive-in. Meramec Caverns sign celebrates the attraction on barn near Hamel. **Facing page, top right:** Route 66 crosses the Marsh Arch Bridge of Riverton, Kansas, and on into Missouri. Hooker Cut and the Ozarks loom behind the Gateway Arch of St. Louis. **Top left:** Los Angeles Union Station features recording of ambient train noise in station, punctuated by conductor's loud call of "All Aboard." **Center, right:** Teepees represent Holbrook, Arizona's Wigwam Village. Route 66 Motel sign is seen in Moriarity, New Mexico. **Bottom, right:** Painted Desert and Black Mountains dominate Arizona section of display. Images shown here are a small sampling of the basement display. *Courtesy the author*

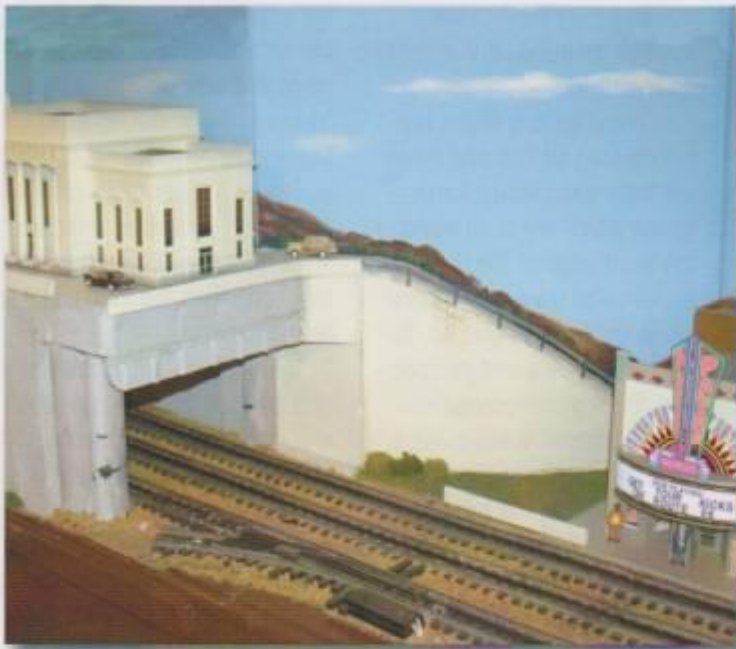
travelers that John T. served.

Today, photos autographed for John T. by Crosby, Durante, and other famous people adorn the basement walls of the Chicago home of

path blazed by the railroads.

The display along one wall depicts the journey from Chicago's Art Institute to the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. Trains pass by a miniature

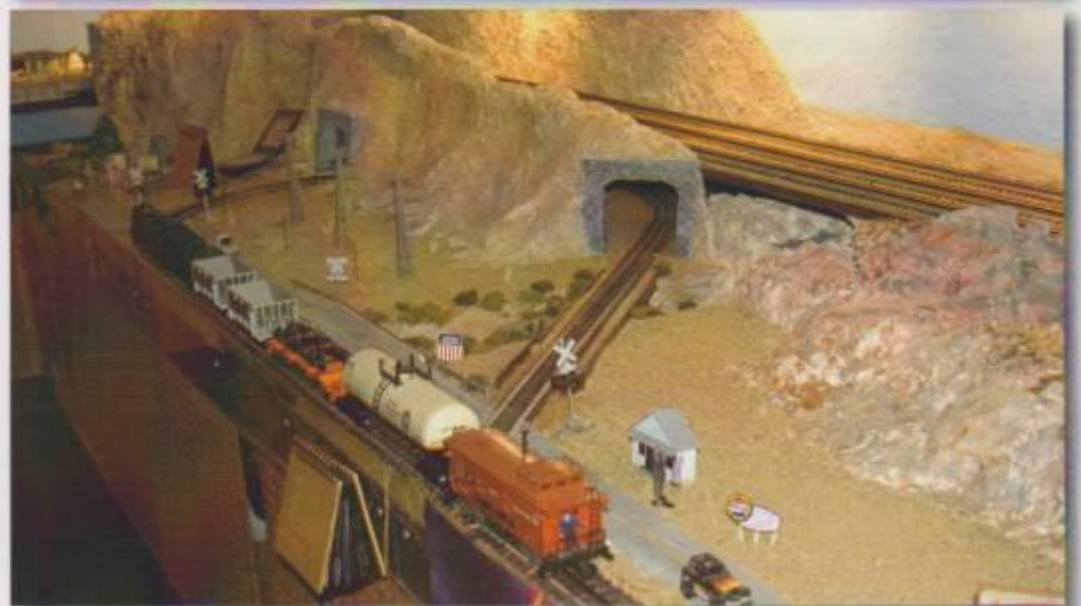




that can be purchased in hobby shops and original work that Chicago artist Michael Erzen created from scratch. Erzen is a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago and professor of art at Triton College. Over the past decade, Ruh has commissioned Erzen to create landscapes from Ruh's photographs taken during his many trips along the Mother Road.

The project has continued to expand from a small display begun twelve years ago, and the creative team continues to add new elements and refinements. The result is a mix of model railroading expertise, Erzen's artistic abilities, and Ruh's vision and understanding of the close connections between road and rail. Different transportation infrastructures can be seen by anyone who has driven Route 66.

Less than two blocks from the start of the highway at Chicago's intersection of Lake Shore and Jackson Drives, a viaduct carries travelers over the tracks first laid by the Illinois Central and still used by the country's only still-func-





tioning electric interurban line, the South Shore and South Bend Railroad. At Michigan Avenue and Jackson Boulevard, the Railway Exchange Building still sports a sign on its roof that reads "Santa Fe," since from 1904 to the 1980s it was the headquarters of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad - the very railway that blazed the trail for Route 66 from Albuquerque to Los Angeles.

A few blocks west at Dearborn Street, 66 travelers can glance south and see the tower of Dearborn Station, where the Santa Fe Chief and California Limited departed on the journey to L.A. The Rock Island Line's Golden State Limited served the same destination and departed daily from the LaSalle Street Station just one block south of 66 starting in the early years the twentieth century into the 1970s. Across the Chicago River and two blocks north, the Chicago Northwestern Station is where John T. Ruh, the Little Nugget bar car, and the City of Los Angeles began their western trek.

The railroads that blazed the Mother Road's trail through Illinois departed from Union Station, located directly on Route 66 at Canal Street. The Chicago, Burlington & Quincy crossed the highway at Chicago's city limits at the suburb of Cicero. More importantly, the Chicago & Alton left from Union Station, and then it became the template for the Route 66 corridor from Joliet through Springfield, Illinois. The C & A's Abraham Lincoln and Midnight Special passenger trains provided service from Chicago south-

west along the main line to St. Louis.

Through Missouri, Kansas, and eastern Oklahoma, 66 travelers encounter rail right-of-way built by the Missouri Pacific, the Frisco, and the Katy Line. The highway rejoins Chicago's Rock Island Line from Oklahoma City, across the Texas Panhandle to Tucumcari, New Mexico. Then, from Albuquerque to Los Angeles, it is the Santa Fe all the way.

This alignment of travel corridors was not a random coincidence at all; rather, it was a testament across eras of the importance of Chicago as the gateway to the west, and the development of Los Angeles as the commercial capital of the west coast. L.A. emerged due to the discovery of oil in 1896, and by 1926, the area was providing one-quarter of the world's petroleum production. The growth of the Hollywood entertainment industry followed.

Thus, it was no accident that the original map of U.S. Highways adopted in 1926 featured a single number to directly connect Chicago to Los Angeles. John Ruh's elaborate panorama of rails, concrete ribbons across the west, and the iconic sights that can be seen on the journey is a testament to his love of history and the importance of his home town of Chicago to the growth of the United States.

Ruh runs a consulting business that assists small businesses, and part of his attraction to Route 66 is the entrepreneurial spirit of the people along the highway who survive and prosper by catering to travelers and

building their businesses through their industry, creativity, and thrift.

Some details of the layout created by Ruh and Erzen are truly spectacular. Larger gauge trains are used along the front edge of the display, and smaller trains are placed along the back to give an illusion of distance and perspective. One of the locomotives carries a small video camera, and the view from the train as it moves along the tracks through eight states is displayed on a television monitor. The model of the Sky View Drive-In Theater also features a small TV screen that shows a Route 66 documentary to the toy cars in the theater lot. There is no sound accompanying the movie-in a drive-in you have to be in the cars to hear anything!

Erzen created the mountains of New Mexico, Arizona, and California by stretching chicken wire over wooden forms, then covering them with plaster bandages and clay. Other features are crafted with balsa wood, foam core, Styrofoam, and patching plaster. The furnace in the center of the basement has been decorated to look like a Texas oil refinery. An audio recording near L.A.'s Union Station provides ambient noise of a bustling train depot punctuated by the voice of a conductor barking out an announcement of "All Aboard!"

Chicago's elevated trains follow a loop as a recording of

the actual voice used by the transit agency calls out the stops and advises riders that "doors open on the right" at Monroe street. A full-size replica of a diner table complete with a jukebox and placemats from the Pig Hip restaurant continues the road trip ambience.

John Ruh's tribute to his grandfather, the rails, and the road fascinates all visitors, especially kids and people who share his passion for Americana, rail rolling stock, and the world's most iconic highway. After twelve years and thousands of hours of work, his passion continues. He has plans to rework the Illinois and Oklahoma sections and continue to layer in additional features. Even when he cannot travel, John Ruh can get his kicks on 66.



## Story by David Clark

*The Little Nugget bar car where John T. Ruh served thirsty Hollywood stars, is undergoing a thorough restoration. It is on display at Travel Town, the free outdoor rail museum in L.A.'s Griffith Park. Once the restoration is complete, there are plans to place it in an enclosed climate-controlled structure to prolong its preservation. Back in Chicago, the Route 66 Association of Illinois organizes occasional tours that visit John Ruh's Mother Road model train display. Visit [www.il66assoc.org](http://www.il66assoc.org) for details.*



**About the author:** Dave is author of "Exploring Route 66 in Chicagoland," a guidebook that details history of the Mother Road in Cook County, Illinois, and "Route 66 in Chicago." Dave is available as a guide for entertaining, historic walking and driving tours through downtown Chicago.