

## **ROUTE 66 - Via NEW MEXICO.**

I think of all the eight states you pass through on Route 66 from Chicago down to LA, New Mexico is my favourite. I suppose because parts of it remind me of the hot, dry areas of the Western Australian goldfields, though they are totally flat and in New Mexico you can always see mountains in the distance. The New Mexico license plate is the only one in the country that has "USA" on it obviously to stop any confusion with travellers.

To recap .....Tony and Marny Howe and Alan and Lois Haime, travelling in a 2003 Buick Le Sabre from Flint, Michigan, have at this stage reached New Mexico and have swung off Route 66 to head north to Santa Fe. The old route 66 had initially gone through Santa Fe but often cars were stuck there in the winter, Santa Fe being at 7,000 feet and often snowbound. Hence the more modern route runs straight across New Mexico through Albuquerque, the largest city in New Mexico.

Spanish settlement in this area started in 1540 when Francisco de Coronado set off from Mexico City with 336 Europeans and some 1,000 Indians in search of gold. The road up from Mexico City to Santa Fe was named the El Camino Real or Royal Road. Spanish settlers, missionaries and Indians shared this region, often with conflict, violence and bloodshed. The Mexican-American War of 1846 to 1847 gave the USA control of this area which was named New Mexico. The Santa Fe Trail which we have all heard of through Western movies, runs between Santa Fe and Independence, Missouri.

Before Santa Fe, passing through the mountains, we called in at the Pecos National Monument and wandered around the old Pueblo buildings and ruins. There were many signs saying "Don't Disturb the Rattlesnakes", like we had any intention of doing that!

Architecturally, Santa Fe is very much a Spanish town. Nearly all buildings are adobe with a height restriction of three storeys. The central plaza area is typically Spanish and the old Palace of the Governors is alongside the plaza. This is the oldest inhabited dwelling in the USA, dating back to 1610. The local Indians sell silver jewellery under the verandah of the Palace in all weathers. On previous occasions visiting here I thought the Indians were somewhat po-faced, but they actually seemed to be smiling and pleasant this time.

We checked into the El Rey Inn on the Cerillos Road, which was whitewashed adobe and sat outside our room with a few cold beers, in a lovely garden setting watching the humming birds. The food in New Mexico is of the category called South-Western, which is a mix of Mexican and Texas type food. Plenty of burritos and chilli!

On a visit to the local Kinko's (where you can access a computer and check your emails etc), we spotted a familiar shape in the parking area and the call went out "Boattail"! Alan got talking to the young driver who had no idea it was the century of Buick. I don't think the Buick Centenary was highly publicised in the US.

The car was a Black '72 and was in good nick, it had originally been his Dad's car. The young bloke was in the army and was soon to be shipped off to Iraq which wasn't an ideal destination.

The next morning we drove north into the Jemez Mountains to Los Alamos. In 1943 Los Alamos was a boys' school perched on the top of a 7,400 feet mesa. This site was chosen as the top secret headquarters of the Manhattan Project - the development of the Atomic bomb. Surrounded by barbwire at the time, the project was so secret that even

the inhabitants of Santa Fe had no idea the project existed. All residents of Los Alamos had the postal address of Box 1663, Santa Fe. Any babies born at Los Alamos during this time had their births registered in Santa Fe.

On July 16, 1945 the scientists working at Los Alamos (Oppenheimer, Teller, Fermi and others) detonated the world's first atomic bomb at Trinity, southern New Mexico which is now part of the White Sands Missile Range.

The town of Los Alamos is very pleasant with lots of mountain pine and a cool breeze. It must have been a hell of a road getting up and down in 1943 though with sheer drops over the edge nearly all the way. The museum recreates the atmosphere of the people who lived and worked up there in wartime.

From there we struck across country to Taos in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, another Spanish town. Taos is smaller than Santa Fe but is bustling with art galleries, silversmiths and lots of interesting shops - again all built from adobe. Marny managed to buy some gorgeous silver bracelets there, really unique stuff. A few kilometres from town the Rio Grande runs through a deep river gorge and is a favourite spot for white water rafting.

From Santa Fe we drove south to Albuquerque, crossed over the Rio Grande again and picked up Route 66. The local sheriff whizzed by in his police car - a Chevy Camaro. You wouldn't want to try and outrun him. Mind you, space for prisoners in the back would be a bit limited. Heading west the Buick was put through its paces on some lovely long stretches of road with virtually no traffic. This was definitely one of the best features of '66, long stretches of relaxing driving with virtually no traffic compared with the congestion on the interstates. We passed through little ghost towns, usually on Indian territory.



We moved over when the Sheriff whizzed by in his Camaro!

About lunchtime we arrived at Cubero, a little adobe town run by the local Navajo Indians. Cubero was the place where Ernest Hemingway took himself off to write "the Old Man and the Sea". His theory was that he had to get as far away from the sea as possible so as to concentrate his mind on the story. We stopped and had a look at the Villa de Cubero where he had stayed for a few months in 1952. It all paid off because he won the Pulitzer Prize for this book. The locals tell the tale that he drank lots of rum every night and had a rousing time in the bar. Good for him!



#### Ernie's waterhole

The dry desert air was a good place for wrecking yards along the way and there were many stops and U-turns to check out what had been spotted from the car. Some of the places were quite happy for you to browse but others were locked up with the mandatory junk yard dog on patrol.

All in all a wonderful time in this very unique state.

*L. Haime (WA Buicks)*