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**LINKS OF HISTORY:**

***Chicago's Roads Before 66***

*Story and Photos by David G. Clark*

**M**y wife Carol is a life-long Chicago resident, and I have immersed myself in the city's history since moving here over twenty years ago. During this past summer of 2002, we took a walking tour of the Windy City's historic downtown buildings. During the walk, we came to a stop on the east side of Michigan

Avenue, in the block just north of Congress Street. The Art Institute and the Santa Fe Railway Exchange Building were clearly visible to the north, the latter's brilliant cream-colored terra cotta walls gleaming in the bright summer sun. These landmarks anchor the eastern extremity of our beloved Route 66, and they marked the end of our tour, which had begun and would end in the Chicago Architecture Foundation's store and tour center in the Santa Fe building.



*The Studebaker/Fine Arts Building. The arched doorways at street level on the left and right were originally entries for customers and their carriages to an interior drive. The top three stories were added during the 1896 renovation. The ground floor currently includes the Artist's Snack Shop, a fine eatery, and Bookseller's Row used book store.*

**Ed, our tour guide, had been quizzing us, the only locals in the group, on the buildings and their background.**

"Before we finish our tour, I wonder if our Chicago friends can tell us about this building across the street." Ed pointed to a building I knew well, so I informed the tour

participants that it was the Fine Arts Building, built in the late 1800s. Frank Lloyd Wright had an office there, and the building contained studios for artists, rehearsal space for dramatists and musicians, and offices for small publishing firms specializing in literary and artistic journals.

Ed smiled, then said, "Very true, Dave. From 1896, this building has been known as the Fine Arts. However, it was built in 1885. What was its original name and purpose?" Stumped, I shrugged my shoulders and listened as Ed educated us all. This was the Chicago showroom and assembly plant for the Studebaker Carriage Company, a South Bend, Indiana firm that made 75,000 horse-drawn vehicles per year at their peak. Studebaker later transitioned to making automobiles, the only carriage-maker to do so successfully. They outgrew this building and moved to Wabash Avenue, so this became one of the earliest Chicago examples of renovation and adaptive re-use when the original architect transformed it from commercial and light industry to offices, art studios and theaters. Ed let us know that the building's foyers bear the inscription: "All passes—Art Alone Endures. **I looked at this grand old structure with new understanding.**

The arches and the huge red granite columns that carry them were a means of opening the load-bearing east wall for the windows into the Studebaker carriage showrooms, which occupied the first five floors. The heavy rusticated stone at the building's base provided support for the structure, which included the assembly factory on the original sixth floor (See Source list at end of article: AIA Guide).

I tried to imagine 19th century Chicago, when Michigan Avenue and other downtown streets were filled with horse-drawn streetcars, omnibuses and wagons. While railroads had been operating to and from Chicago to other parts of the country

since 1848, transit within the city was mainly limited to "on foot" and "via horse." When the village of Chicago was born in 1836, those pedestrian and equestrian feet trudged through mud, until the Common Council mandated three years later that property owners must provide sidewalks. These wooden plank walkways proved too popular, so further laws were enacted to restrict horses, livestock, and teamsters to the quagmired street. (Chicago Transit)

**Chicago was built on a swamp, so early street "improvements" of stone created thicker mud.**

The entire city was eventually raised out of the muck with landfill and higher foundations. Sewers were laid at original grade and covered, then plank roads were placed on top along the major streets. Pine block and brick were later used when money allowed, with macadam in the less-traveled areas. (Chicago Transit)

Automobiles would never have made it on those early "hard roads," and the municipal budget of the time could not afford more. Unpopular special assessments on landowners for street improvement were often challenged in court, and more often avoided via bribes to tax collectors. First with the horse-drawn streetcar operators, then with the traction companies of the 1880s, with their steam, cable, and electric systems, the city awarded right-of-ways with stipulations that the private transit operators improve the streets they operated upon. Concrete, sheet asphalt and brick gave rails a solid foundation and created a lasting roadbed. Electric streetcars operated along Adams Street through the first decades of the 20th century; the brick and tracks were left intact and covered in asphalt when the traction companies folded. (Chicago Transit) Adams became the westbound alignment of 66 in the 1950s.

However, 66 aficionados know that

the original alignment of 66 in downtown Chicago in 1926 was along Jackson Boulevard, not Adams Street. The term "boulevard" has special meaning in Chicago history. In 1869, Chicago's park system formed a ring around the center of the city: Lincoln Park on the north lakefront; Grant Park to the east of the Loop; Jackson and Washington Parks to the south; and Douglas, Garfield, and Humboldt Parks along the West Side. The boulevards were



*Two vehicles eastbound on the boulevard section of Ogden Avenue through Douglas Park. In the foreground are the "local" eastbound lanes. The main thoroughfare has 4 total lanes, two each direction. The local westbound lanes are on the far side of the road.*

the streets that connected these urban greenspaces together like the chain on a necklace of emeralds. Boulevards were wide, with a gravel or paved thoroughfare in the middle flanked by parkways of grass and trees, and more driving lanes on the outer edges for traffic local to each city block. As automobiles became popular, these streets designed as scenic respites from urban life for horse-drawn carriages and strolling pedestrians became the first highways for a city besieged with motorcars. (Historic Parks) Jackson Boulevard and a boulevard section of Ogden Avenue connected Grant and Douglas Parks and later were part of the Mother Road.

If Chicago's nineteenth century road improvements were sketchy and fitful, rural Illinois' were virtually non-existent. A few

trails and "traces" connected the populated areas to the waterways. The coming of the railroad halted most road-building outside of projects paid for locally in various cities and towns and occasional privately financed improvements of "farm to market" roads that connected rural areas to rail stations.



*The Plank Road Inn, located in Lyons, Illinois on Ogden Avenue just west of Harlem Avenue. This modern, well-kept motel pays homage in its name to the days when horses ruled the Southwestern Plank Road.*

**Ogden Avenue, Joliet Road, and other "pre-66" paths followed trails first blazed by Native Americans.**

Ogden hugged a ridge north of the south branch of the Chicago River, forded the Des Plaines River near Lyons, and then crossed the Illinois Prairie toward Iowa. Early French explorers mentioned Lyons, the oldest village in this area, as a meeting place frequented by Native Americans and fur traders. Located at the western end of the Chicago Portage, it was the place that the main overland trails from the southwest met and continued east-ward along that same path later known as Ogden. However, Lyons residents of the mid-1800s called it the Southwestern Plank Road. (Portage, Pioneers and Pubs) Similar to the planking used at the same time in Chicago, the method involved laying "stringers," flat wooden timbers laid parallel on the ground six to seven feet apart, then placing a deck of planks three inches thick and eight feet

long on top. (Chicago Transit) The road was completed in 1850 and extended to Madison Street in Chicago. A toll gate was located at Joliet and Ogden Avenues and charged the following tolls: 37 cents-Carriage pulled by two horses; 25 cents-Carriage, cart or buggy pulled by one horse; 10 cents-Horse and rider; 4 cents-Head of cattle. By 1894, the Ogden Avenue Railway Company improved the road for their street-cars, under contract with the town of Lyons. (Portage, Pioneers and Pubs)

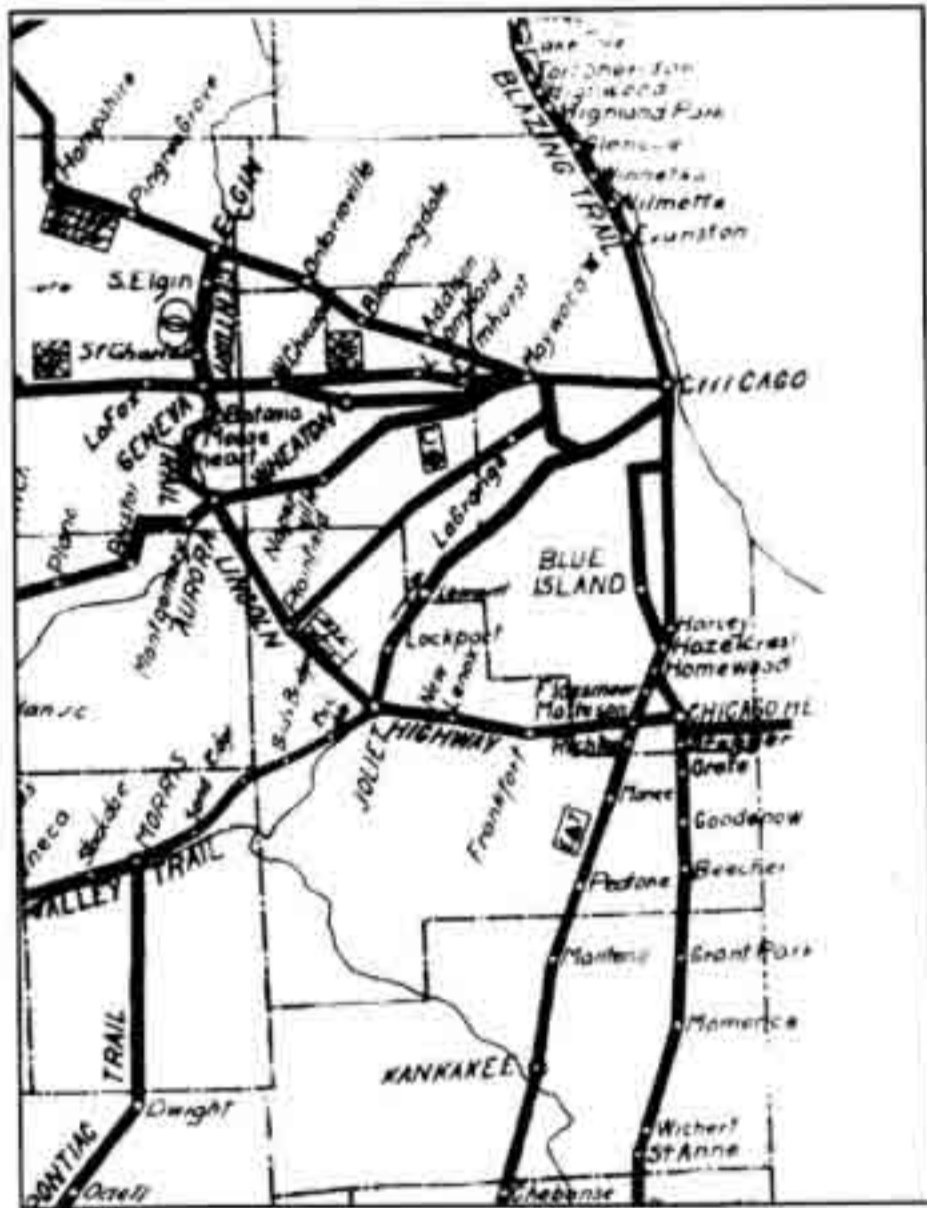
Just below Lyons, Joliet Road veered south along the west bank of the Des Plaines on its way to its namesake city, following the old Portage Road Trail (Portage, Pioneers and Pubs). Although this would one day be known as 66, in the early heyday of motordom, highways were called by name, not by number. The named



*1831 map of Hardscrabble, the community that predated Bridgeport at the eastern end of the I&M Canal Zone. The trail that would become Archer Avenue runs from the lower left of the photo diagonally to the upper right. It is marked "Road to Widow Brown's" on the lower left, inside Canal Land section 31 (University of Illinois at Chicago Photo).*

precursors to 66 took a different path on their way from Chicago to that city of Iron, Joliet. Both the poetically named Pontiac Trail and the literally named East St. Louis-Springfield-Chicago Trail would follow a road that roughly paralleled Ogden and Joliet Roads, but it was south of the I & M Canal, and east of the Des Plaines. (Marked

Routes 1917) An 1831 map indicates that the road was known as "The Road to Widow Brown's". (Lock Zero) The official name was Archer Avenue, named for Col. William Beatty Archer. He was a member of the board that was commissioned in 1836 to construct and manage the Illinois and Michigan Canal. (Streetwise Chicago) Archer



1917 map showing the Pontiac Trail running from the lower left northward toward Chicago. At the center of the map, the arrow above Lemont is the symbol for the East St. Louis-Springfield-Chicago Trail. This is Archer Avenue, which was not utilized as an alignment for 66.

Avenue was improved to aid in the construction of the canal by giving the crews a reliable method to transverse the canal area and transport their equipment and supplies as the project progressed. (Lock Zero) Southwest from Bridgeport, the avenue ran to Summit, Lemont, and Lockport on the way to Joliet. Archer was the principal autoroute to Joliet before the U.S. Numbered Highways were commissioned.

**The human population of Chicago jumped from under 30,000 in 1850, to half a million by 1880, and a million before 1890.**

At the turn of the 20th century, the metropolitan population of over 2 million accounted for 43 percent of Illinois' total. This immense concentration required a huge transportation network. Chicago transit systems owned more than 6,600 horses in the early 1880s. They dumped about 1 million pounds of manure and 25,000 gallons of urine on city streets annually. The health commissioner of Chicago publicly endorsed automobiles over horses as a boon to public health as early as 1901. However, there was only a little over 5000 cars in Chicago in 1910, and fewer than 800 trucks. Pre-Depression Chicago was a city that ran on steel wheels and steel rails. At its peak in 1927, the Chicago transit systems carried 882 million passengers on streetcars, and 226 million on elevated lines. Motorcoaches (buses) began service in 1920, and by 1927 they served 59 million passengers. On average, a Chicago resident took 362 transit rides that year. (Chicago Transit)

However, rubber tires and gas-powered engines were coming on strong. In 1908, only 1 in 380 Chicagoans owned a car. By 1927, more than 1 in 10 did, and the records show over 330,000 registered autos. By the end of the Depression, Chicago planners decided to embrace the private automobile. The largest street railway network on the planet was dismantled in result. Streetcars would not disappear until after World War II, but their funeral was already planned. (Chicago Transit) **Chicago became the first municipality in the country to impose a vehicle tax, as well as car and driver licensing fees, to pay for pavement upgrades.**

Half of the city's 2900 miles of streets were paved by 1910 (Chicago Transit).

Statewide, efforts were underway to improve roads where local tax bases could not support the expense. State auto registration fees began in 1910, and a bond issue was ratified in 1917. State-aid roads were constructed starting in 1915. Fifty percent were concrete, 20 percent were brick, 10 percent were gravel or macadam, and the remainder was graded dirt. (Roarin' Road Buildin')

**These highways and byways were called by name: Lincoln Highway; Pontiac Trail; Burlington Way; Corn Belt Route; Alton Way (Marked Trails 1917).**

Signage on these roads was privately financed, and the results were often misleading and hard to follow. In 1918, the first State Bond Issue (SBI) highways began to be signed as numbered routes. Unlike the Pontiac Trail, which had taken Archer Avenue all the way to Joliet, State Bond Route 4 started at 48th Avenue (now Cicero Avenue) and Ogden (The Mother Road). It then turned south on Lawndale Avenue in Lyons, across a series of bridges over the Des Plaines river, the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, and the I & M Canal, to the town of Summit, turning southwest on Archer Avenue to Joliet. From there, Route 4 ran all the way to Springfield and East St. Louis.

A May 1926 highway Route Bulletin shows Illinois Bond Road 4 starting at Jackson and Michigan, then following Ogden through Chicago's west side towards the suburbs, with the Archer Avenue route to Joliet still being used (Route Bulletin May 3, 1926). Why SBI 4 started in Cicero in 1918 on the outskirts of Chicago rather than through the urban center is not clear. Possibly, road closures due to grade separation work at Cicero and Ogden for the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroad may have kept the official highway to the suburban trackside. Another possibility has to do with financing. Section 15d of the State

Highway Bond statutes held that local government could pay for improvements to the future alignments of the bond roads, then be reimbursed when the state took over maintenance and upgrade (Annual Report 1920-21). Perhaps Ogden in Chicago was paved at local expense, and the State Bond Road designation came only after the state started paying some of the bills. Whatever the reason for SBI 4's original



*Ill. Route 4, the precursor to 66, shown running from Jackson and Michigan, down Ogden to Lyons. The road south from Ogden is Lawndale, which connects to Archer on the south side of the waterways. This map appeared in the Illinois Highway Route Bulletins from May through November of 1926.*

suburban starting point, the Route Bulletins indicate that by the birth of 66, Route 4 was already designated within Chicago.

**Archer Avenue's status as a portion of SBI 4 was temporary.**

In the fall of 1926, Joliet Road paving was in progress. Work was nearly done by November 11, 1926, when the agreement on the numbering scheme for the U.S. Highways was finalized and 66 was born. A feature in the November 28, 1926 "Motordom" section of the Chicago Tribune stated, "Nimrods of the steering wheel will find this week's tour suggestion valuable for the winter months. The map shows some of Chicago's all weather highways leading to the best spots for winter rabbit hunting and, in addition, indicates the new opening

to the southwest afforded by completion of the new Joliet road." A new day had dawned, for rabbit hunters and 66 enthusiasts alike.

**At the time of the completion of Joliet Road, the state of Illinois had hard-surfaced 6040 miles of roads, 80 percent built from 1920-1926.**

Illinois boasted more paved miles than any other state in the nation. (Annual Report 1926) In the 41 years between the opening of the Studebaker Carriage Company showrooms on Michigan Avenue, and the beginning of Route 66, the car had pushed the horse back to the barn. Studebaker made its last wagons in 1920. Cars were replacing streetcars in urban areas, and with the paved roads moving further into rural areas, passenger railroads would be the next victim.



Map from the November 28, 1926 Chicago Tribune showing Joliet Road running from the bottom center of the image to the upper right at a diagonal: "All Concrete - Now Open To Joliet." The shaded circle on the bottom left of the image shows the "Best Rabbit Hunting Grounds Around Chicago." The dotted line connecting Summit and Lemont is the still-gravel or macadam Archer Avenue.

As we finished our architectural tour this last summer, we walked past the Fine Arts building, and past the Santa Fe, down streets once choked with streetcars, then later with travelers in their Studebakers going west on the Mother Road. What are left of those times are the jewels and

artifacts that have withstood the march of progress and the passage of time. 66 had been the future, a way for the auto to erase the way of life that existed before. Officially killed in Illinois in 1977, now 66 is too a memory, our jewel and artifact. The motto at the Fine Arts building says: "All passes, Art Alone Endures." If this is true, then the Mother Road is Fine Art indeed.

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