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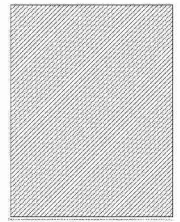
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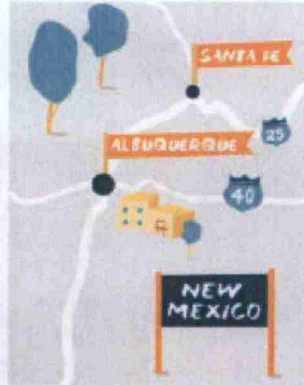
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NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

Route 66 Renaissance

The historic highway runs through Nob Hill, a neighborhood in Albuquerque, New Mexico, luring adventurous travelers with neon signs for more than 80 years
 By Jess Swanson Photos by Gabriella Marks



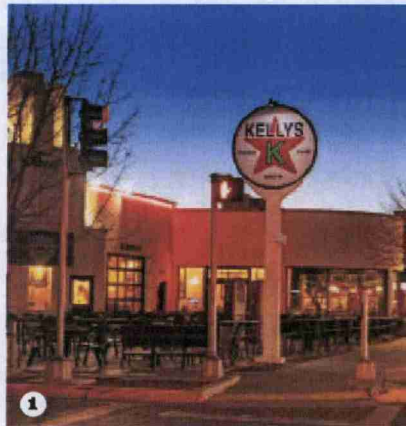
MAP ILLUSTRATION MELANIE CHADWICK

IN 1937, ROUTE 66, WHICH stretched from Illinois to California, became the first paved road to cross New Mexico. It helped put the state's most populous city, Albuquerque, on the map, and became fixed in the American psyche—its glowing signs and open-road romanticism drew cross-country travelers like moths to a neon flame.

By the 1970s, however, the route had become all but obsolete with the advent of air travel, and by 1985, the federal government decommissioned it as a highway. Businesses began swapping iconic neon signs for

cheaper alternatives, such as LEDs. Slowly the Americana aesthetic faded.

It still glows, though, in Albuquerque's Nob Hill neighborhood, where Route 66 became the city's "main street" and was later called Central Avenue. Today, local businesses have proudly committed to preserving and revitalizing the old Route 66 vibe. "Route 66 was once a beautiful necklace of neon light from Chicago to L.A.," says artist Robert Randazzo, who owns the neon shop/gallery Absolutely Neon. "Now, we're the last remnants of it."

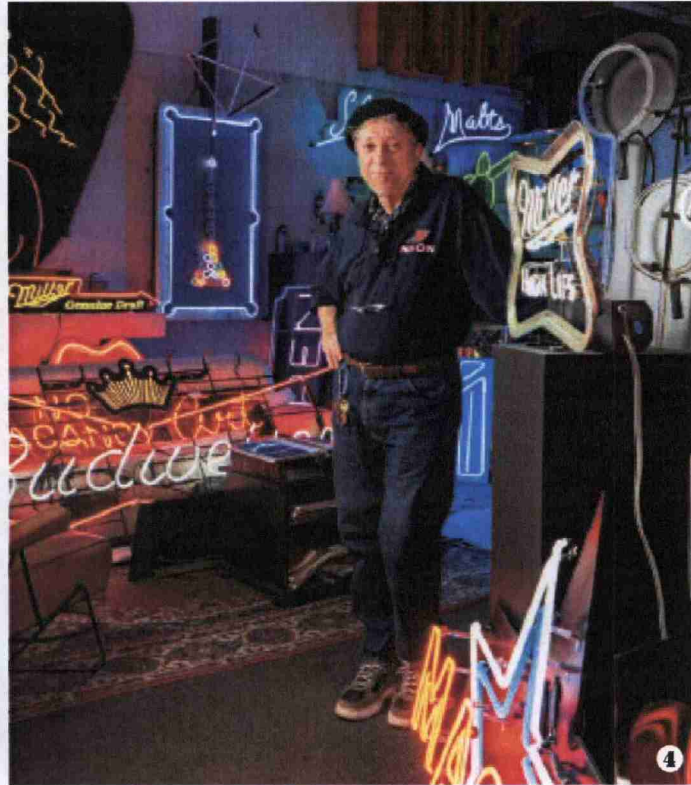




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1. Kellys Brew Pub

With its art moderne style, this former car dealership and gas station became a regular pit stop for road-tripping travelers until it changed locations in 1957. Kellys Brew Pub began restoring the gas pumps and original garage doors in 1999. Today, customers down canned beers in the glow of the red neon lights that wrap around the exterior. kellyspubabq.com

2. Frontier Restaurant

Since 1971, this landmark restaurant has been serving classic New Mexican food, including its famous breakfast burritos, green chili stew and sweet rolls. Inside, Western-themed artworks (including many John Wayne portraits) occupy nearly every inch of wall space. Outside, the bright neon sign and yellow roof pull in hungry students from the University of New Mexico campus across the street. frontierrestaurant.com

3. Lobo Theater

Opened in 1938, the Lobo Theater is the oldest standing cinema along Route 66 and was once operated by Paramount Pictures. Catering to nearby University of New Mexico students,

it played independent, classic and cult films for over 60 years until it closed in 2000. The space is now used as a church and doubles as an intimate concert venue. The vintage neon sign and marquee remain.

4. Absolutely Neon

For more than three decades, artist Robert Randazzo has been designing neon art in his cozy Central Avenue gallery filled with radiant signs of pinup girls, curious animals and sayings. He creates original neon artworks but also designs custom signs for local businesses looking to recreate the Route 66 vibe. "When I first came to Albuquerque, there was a good dozen neon artists here," Randazzo says. "Now I'm the last man standing." absolutelyneon.com

5. 66 Diner

Opened originally as a Phillips gas station, the building was repurposed into a retro diner in 1987 with streamline moderne architecture and nostalgic Route 66 signs. Waitresses in vintage turquoise uniforms shuttle classic fare and malted shakes as the original jukebox still (mostly) plays era-appropriate tunes, including Nat King Cole's "Route 66." 66diner.com