

# CLICKIN' ON 66!



BY JANET WISE

*I was 10 years old when my family migrated West. We lived in Detroit, where family roots ran a couple of generations deep. During the glory days of the Motor City, Grandpa owned a chrome factory. But for my Dad, the city lost its shine in the 60s. He was successful enough in the insurance industry, but longed for some deeper meaning and purpose in life. Thinking he might find it in public service, he ran for the school board, but was trounced. Then he was rejected again, this time by President Kennedy's newly created Peace Corps. At the time, men with young families weren't the ones JFK envisioned in an African village, changing the world.*

**R**estless and bored, Dad set his sights on an American frontier: New Mexico. Before my sister and I knew what was happening, there was a big U-Haul parked in the driveway, and Mom was packing the Volkswagen. Good-bye Wolverine State, hello Land of Enchantment!

The journey yielded many adventures, including taking the ferry across Lake Michigan. I confess it was kind of fun watching my sister turn various shades of green, heaving with each surge of the mighty Great Lake. But once we hit dry land and settled our stomachs in Chicago, it was Route 66 all the way to Albuquerque. The road to the future stretched out for days, and we took advantage of every mile, stopping at diners, spending dimes and nickels on souvenir trinkets, posing for pictures along roadside attractions.

At the end of each day the folks would pull into a motor

court lit brightly by a neon sign. Those roadside motels were all pretty much the same, but the signs were a work of art, all pink and blue, green and blinking. "That one! That one!" we'd yell, as fancy neon cowboys, goofy looking broncos or a huge blinking cactus caught our attention. We'd finally pull into the one with the prettiest design.

Back then, Route 66 was heralded as America's great new highway — the way to get goods and people from Chicago to Los Angeles. Now, of course, the highway John Steinbeck christened the "Mother Road" is a legend. It's a story CSF Photography Professor Steve Fitch knows well. He's had his eye on the highway for 30 years, chronicling everything from billboards and drive-in movie theaters to truckstop waitresses. His first book, *Diesels and Dinosaurs, Photographs from the American Highway*, was published in 1976. There and in books and magazines since then, he would often focus

The Palomino (1989) is still in business in Tucumcari, but the sign was acquired by a private collector in Santa Monica. Now it's in a gallery. Many signs along the Mother Road wait for restoration. If they don't become part of the nostalgia movement, they will probably end up in a landfill.

on those old concrete crash pads where a traveling family could find respite after a long day.

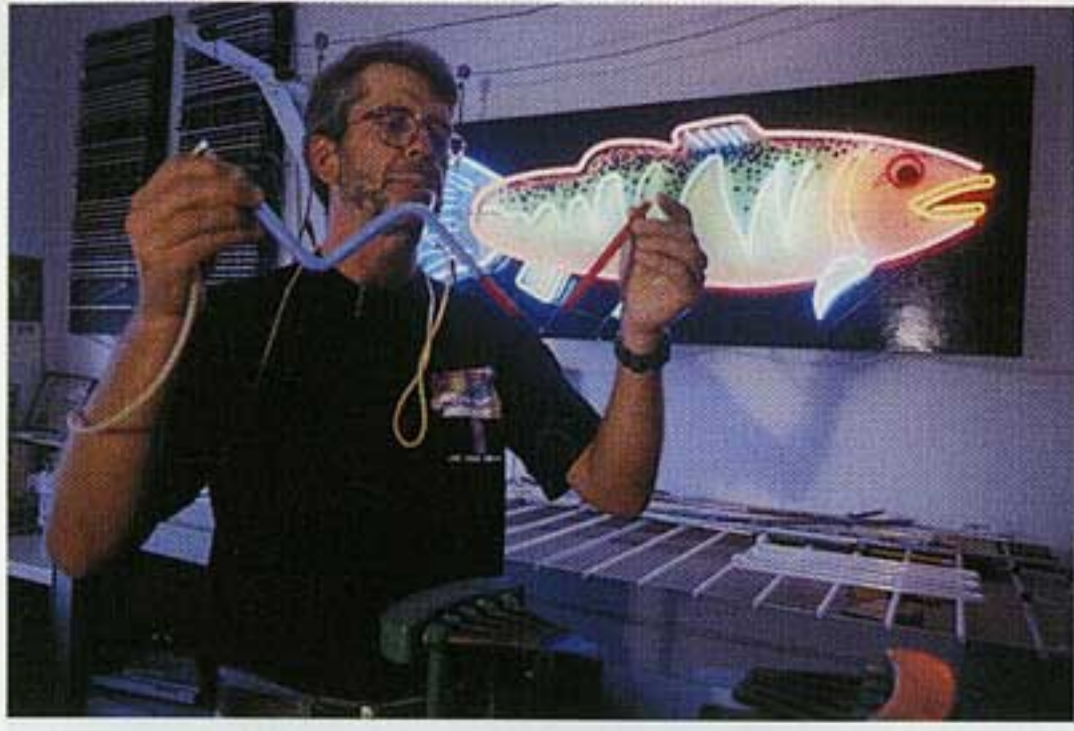
On a recent visit to Fitch's office in the Marion Center, I caught a glimpse of the spring 2002 issue of *Route 66 New Mexico* magazine. There on the cover was an electric blue bird sitting on top of Tucumcari's Blue Swallow Motel. Underneath sat a bow-legged, smoking, neon cowboy. I just know it's the place my family stayed on the last night of our journey to New Mexico.

The photograph is one of Fitch's favorites. He took it in 1990. He's going through his files, pulling out a number of those old photos now. It's clear why he was just tapped by the National Park Service for a large-scale Route 66 75th anniversary restoration project.

The restoration project is focused on the signs that made America's highway famous, and Fitch and fellow panelists have traveled across the state, evaluating a number of the ones nominated for this special revival. Renovation of these vintage signs can run in the tens of thousands of dollars, so the professor is pleased the Park Service has earmarked funds for several in New Mexico.

Fitch knows his neon. He bends the colorful tubes himself in his studio off Airport Road in Santa Fe, making the occasional sign but mostly concentrating on artistic works suitable for collection. He pursues his twin passions of neon and photography with equal vigor, experiencing the creation of one with his hands and the other through his lens.





Fitch's twin passions are neon and photography. His studio off Airport Road in Santa Fe is an alchemist's paradise, full of tubes waiting to be lit and bent to the artist's will. But black and white photographs line the walls, too.



Steve Fitch's first collection of images from the road was published in the book *Diesels and Dinosaurs* (Long Run Press, 1976). In it, he talks about his fascination with the highway. "This is me as an adult photographing the highway. I didn't realize as I was doing it, but when it was all done, I saw that the book is really

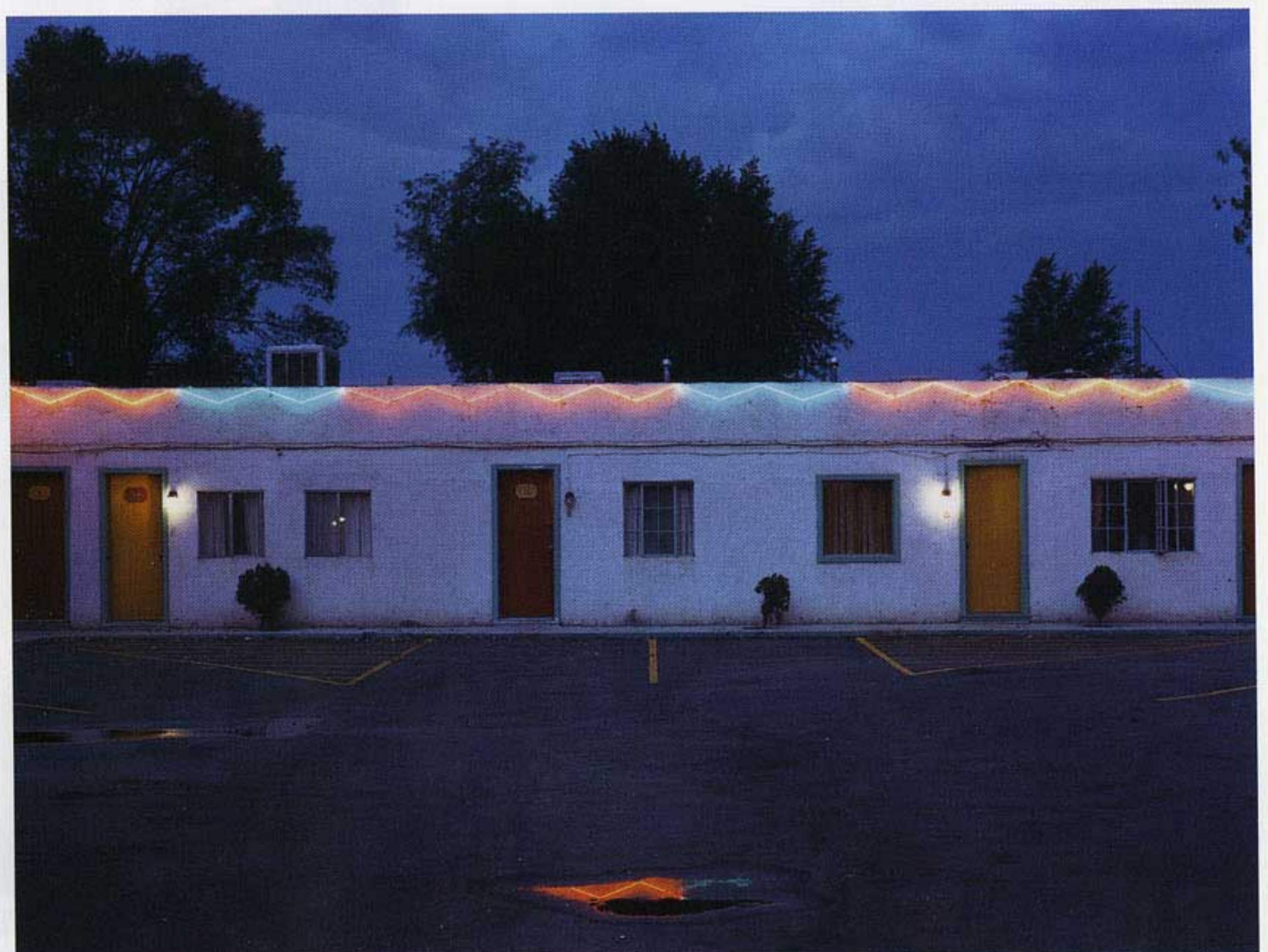
the highway from a kid's perspective. As a kid, my family would take these road trips, and we'd stop at these neon-lit motels, and these crazy dinosaur parks, and all this stuff along the road. That's really what these pictures are all about."

Times change, and now Fitch has a new perspective. "It's different today.

The interstate changed everything. The motels are all the same, you can stay in a Holiday Inn and go 600 miles and stay in another one just like it. But when I was a kid, the journey of getting someplace was as important as actually getting there. Now people just want to 'get' someplace, so they fly. It's fast, but it eliminates the experience. For it to be a journey it has to occur through both time and space."



The Blue Swallow Motel (1990) is a familiar landmark for travelers. "To me, neon really figured in the migration movement on Route 66. The farther you got out West, the more neon you'd see, especially as a presence on hotels. You can see towns like Tucumcari, New Mexico, coming from 20 miles away," says Photography Professor Steve Fitch.



There are motel signs in museum collections in California and at the Smithsonian, and plenty of private individuals who amass vintage neon collections. But Fitch says neon is best when it's outdoors. "What I really like about the Park Service restoration project is that the signs are still going to exist out in the landscape along the roads." This photograph of the Sandia Motel in Albuquerque (1980) is a favorite because it was shot at night, when neon can give a building an entirely different look.