

ELEVATION

4,085
FEET

POPULATION

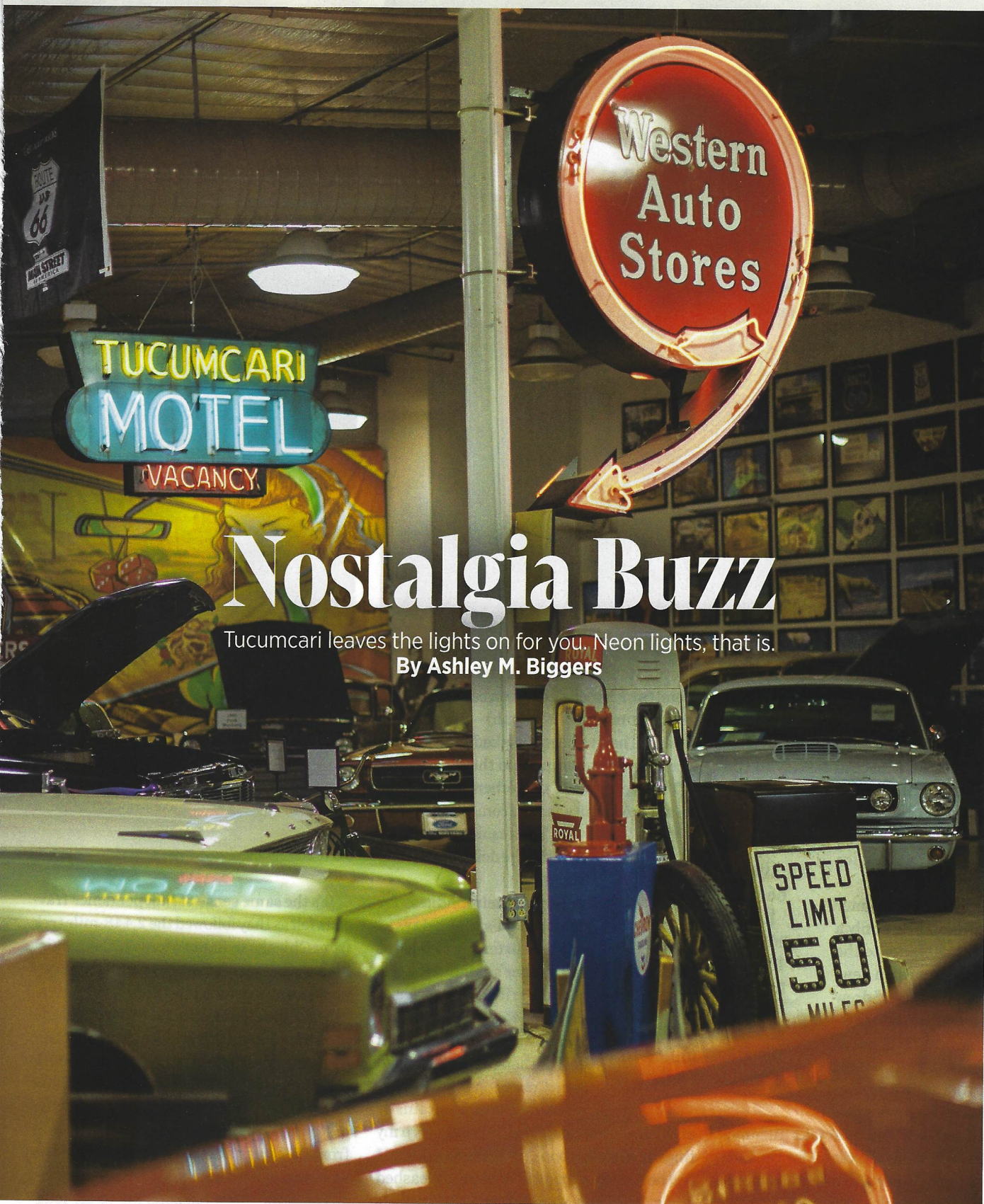
4,867
PEOPLE

ROUTE 66

5
MILES IN TOWN

RETRO LODGINGS

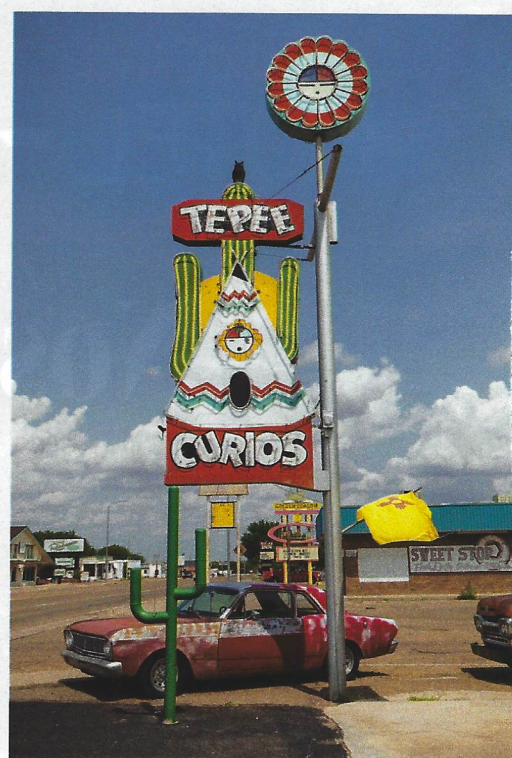
4
PERIOD MOTELS



Nostalgia Buzz

Tucumcari leaves the lights on for you. Neon lights, that is.

By Ashley M. Biggers



IN ITS HEYDAY IN THE 1950s AND '60s, Tucumcari glowed with so much neon that it was dubbed “Little Las Vegas.” Period photos hanging in the New Mexico Route 66 Museum testify to the illumination of this eastern New Mexico burg, with signs advertising everything a motorist might need—gas, lodging, dinner, and an ice cream cone.

The Tucumcari I encounter today, however, bears only a passing resemblance to the one from the era when new-fangled “motor lodges” drew travelers alerted to their presence by a series of billboards that promised TUCUMCARI TONITE! As I take a sunset cruise along the town’s five preserved miles of Route 66 (aka Tucumcari Boulevard), signs flicker on for the Blue Swallow Motel, Tepee Curios, and a handful of other town staples. Two signs—for the

The pull of Route 66 is so strong that it can produce a nostalgic buzz for a time and place we never experienced ourselves. It’s a sentiment many of my fellow millennials chase today.

Cactus Motel and RV Park and the Paradise Motel (which included a neon bathing beauty diving into a pool’s splash)—are notably absent. They’ve been whisked away by collectors in Albuquerque and the Midwest.

The neon glow in this otherwise agricultural community is far from what it once was. The residents know it. And they’re doing something about it.

I share their fondness for Tucumcari’s glory days. I grew up listening to tales of my mother’s childhood here. She described memories of cruising Route 66 in its halcyon era so vividly that I often feel as though I, too, stopped for a Coke at one of the since-shuttered soda fountains or ate a hamburger, its juices dripping down my fingers, in a vinyl booth at a fast-food joint. I feel her sense of freedom of being unleashed along America’s Main Street.

It’s the same sense of independence travelers felt as they followed the 2,448-mile trek from Chicago to Santa Monica, California, before what was often called the Mother Road was decommissioned in 1985.

The pull of Route 66 is so strong that it can produce a nostalgic buzz for a time and place we never experienced ourselves. It’s a sentiment many of my fellow millennials chase today as they increasingly travel stretches of Route 66, panning for authenticity away from the interstate’s pyrite mines of big-box stores and chain hotels.

The same quest beckons me to my lodg-



We've got just what you need.

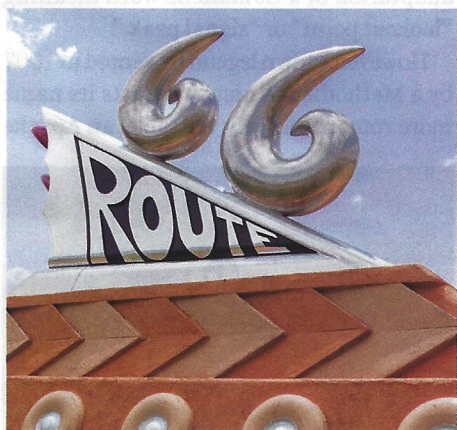
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Clockwise from facing page, far left: A Motel Safari room dedicated to rockabilly legend Wanda Jackson. Blue Swallow Motel owners Robert and Dawn Federico. The Route 66 Motel and Tepee Curios celebrate Americana through signage.

ings: Motel Safari, one of four restored vintage hotels in town. (There are soon to be five, as renovations are underway at the Apache Motel.) That's more than nearly any other town on the Mother Road.

Larry Smith, a Knoxville, Tennessee, transplant who followed his Route 66 passion to Tucumcari, purchased Motel Safari in 2016. Smith has bolstered the motel's 1959 doo-wop style with details like painted teal, orange, and brown protruding bricks. An Elvis mural on a perforated brick wall that greets customers completes the period feel. The motel's original sign has been adapted over the years but still bears the original's

Nativity by Michael Kanteena of Laguna Pueblo
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More southwest nativities can be found in *Nativities of the Southwest*

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hallmarks: a marching camel and its rider.

“We’ve lost several historic neon signs since I’ve lived here,” Smith says. “It’s like watching history drive out of town on a truck bed. I want these neon signs to stay here, in their natural environment. They’re made to be enjoyed against a rich blue sky and glowing at night.”

This year, the 95th anniversary of Route 66’s founding, some new lights have flickered on in Tucumcari. With neon reclamation and restoration projects underway, the town is finding a balance between celebrating what once was and evolving into what could be.

With neon reclamation projects underway, the town is finding a middle ground between celebrating what once was and evolving into what could be.

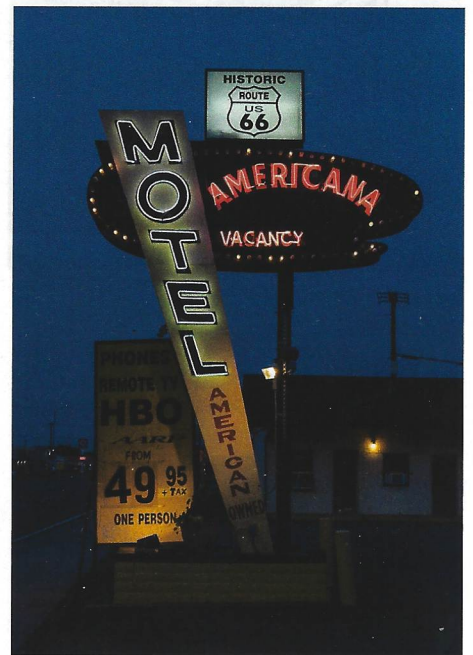
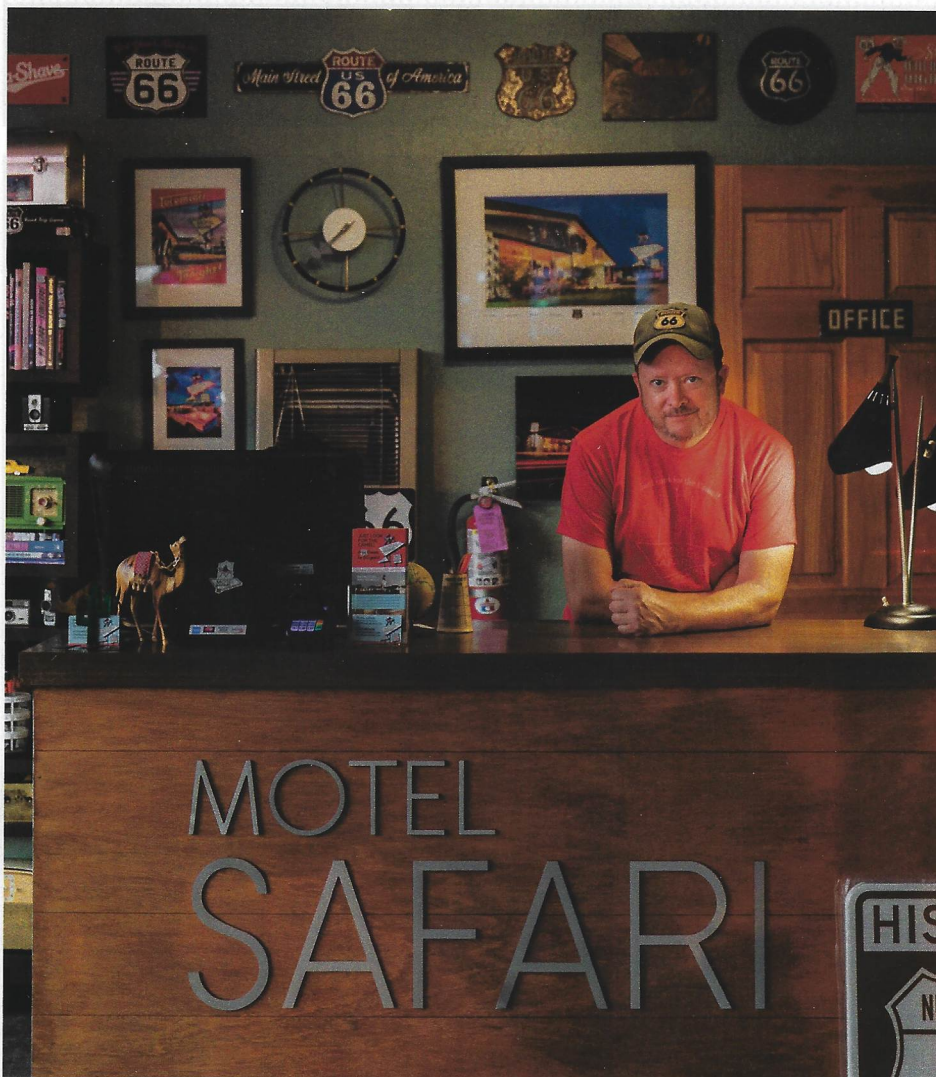
ONE HUNDRED MILLION YEARS BEFORE THE town took on an electric glow, Tucumcari was a beachside landscape along the western edge of a great sea. It has that shoreline to thank for its abundance of marine fossils—including an oyster that, for a brief time in the mid-1850s, was named for the now-landlocked town. The town’s Mesalands Dinosaur Museum celebrates that paleo past, often with traces of ancient life gathered by Mesalands Community Col-

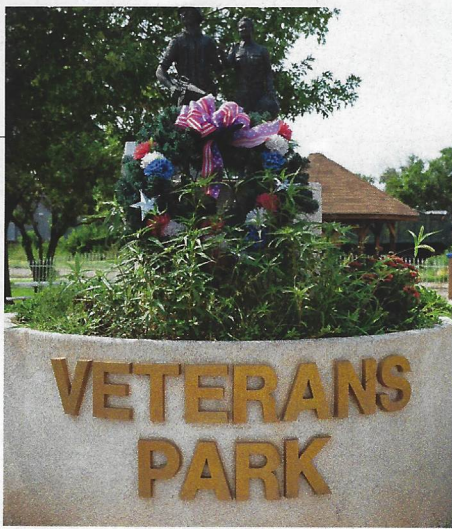
lege students and faculty. Other students cast them into bronze at the school’s renowned art foundry.

In its more recent past, the town blossomed in 1901 when the Rock Island Railroad pushed westward. The growth of a rowdy camp—Six-Shooter Siding—cemented this place as a railroad town until Route 66’s arrival. Tucumcari Railroad Museum chronicles that history in the town’s historic depot.

In 1902 the founders renamed the town-site Tucumcari, after the nearby flat-topped mountain where the town’s “T” now stakes its claim. The mountain, which offers views into the Texas panhandle, some 50 miles away, might have earned its name from an adaptation of a Comanche word meaning “lookout point” or “signal peak.”

However, a town legend (invented in 1907 by a Methodist minister) recasts its name more romantically. In the fable, an Apache





Pay honor at Veterans Park. **Facing page, clockwise from left:** Larry Smith, owner of the Motel Safari. The Americana's neon allure. Mid-mod style on the Safari's deck.

warrior, Tocom, fought to the death for Chief Wautonomah's daughter, Kari. As Tocom lay dying, a grief-stricken Kari rushed forward, killing the warrior's rival with her blade before taking her own life. As the two lay dying, the chief repeated the ill-fated lovers' names: "Tocom ... Kari ..."

THE TOWN BOOMED WHEN ROUTE 66 CRUISED through, bringing tourism with it.

Ken Christian, director and curator of the New Mexico Route 66 Museum, remembers that time well, because he lived it. "Being a teenager, I didn't appreciate it," he says. "It wasn't until I got to see it through other people's eyes that I knew what we had."

The museum's collection of antique cars, gas pumps, and a jukebox is purposefully homegrown. Take the 1970 Plymouth Road Runner that Dwight Haller lent to the museum's long-term collection. Haller drove the classic car through Tucumcari when he originally had it in high school. Then he sold it. Years later, he tracked it through its VIN, rescued it from languishing in a pasture, and restored it—only to park it in the museum for others to appreciate.

The museum buzzes with the sound of three glowing neon signs gathered from Tucumcari businesses—the Tucumcari Motel, Tucumcari Western Auto, and one of two from the Cactus Motel and RV Park. Increasingly, local buyers are priced out of purchasing the town's signs as businesses close and sell



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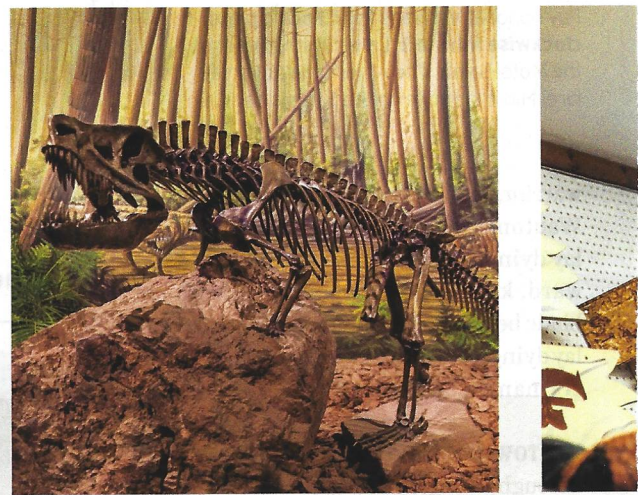
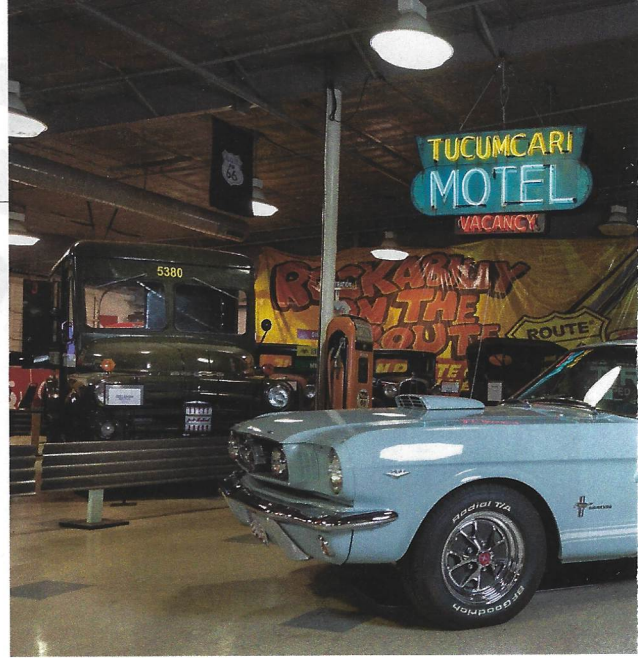
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MODERN TREASURES

Eat. **Del's Restaurant** (delsrestaurant.com) is a Route 66 staple and a must-stop for its New Mexican classics and down-home fare. You can shop for topsoil and grab lunch at Tucumcari Ranch Supply, which is also the home of **Watson's BBQ** (nmmag.us/watsonsbbq), where smoked brisket, pulled pork, and spareribs are served by the plate or the pound. **Kix on 66** (nmmag.us/kix66), housed in a renovated Denny's, serves the best breakfast in town.

Explore. Download the interactive **Tucumcari Mural Map** (tucumcarinm.com/muralmap) to hunt for more than 30 outdoor murals created by local artists and schoolkids. Take yourself on the self-guided **Tucumcari Talking Tour** (tucumcari talkingtour.com). It leads to the town's four museums, including the **Mesalands Dinosaur Museum** (nmmag.us/dinomuseum), where you can spot

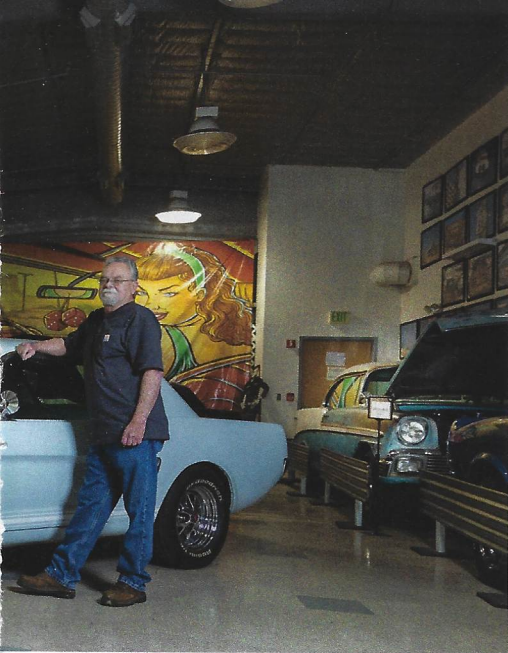
paleontology students and the curator preserving specimens through a viewing window. At the **Tucumcari Historical Museum** (cityoftucumcari.com/museum), wander three floors of a 1903 redbrick schoolhouse to see the collection. Don't miss the decorations near the ceiling; they pay homage to local cattle brands. The small but significant collection at the **Tucumcari Railroad Museum** (tucumcarirailroadmuseum.org) doubles as a chance to explore the restored 1926 depot. The **New Mexico Route 66 Museum** (nmrt66museum.org) houses the world's largest Route 66 photo exhibit, a collection of 167 photos by Michael A. Campanelli.

Watch. The restored 1936 **Odeon Theatre** plans to begin screening first-run movies soon (check its Facebook page, nmmag.us/odeon-tucumcari). Its Second Street location also places it at the center of a

just-completed Great Blocks project by Tucumcari MainStreet, aimed at making downtown more pedestrian-friendly.

Stay. **Motel Safari** (themotelsafari.com) oozes midcentury-modern charm, from the painted boomerangs on its exterior to the original Zia-like room dividers in its guest rooms. The **Blue Swallow Motel** (blueswallowmotel.com) catches motorists' eyes with its restored neon and classic cars, but travelers should book a stay to better appreciate the period details of this 1939 classic motor court.

Don't miss. The town's last **Fired Up Friday** of the year is slated for September 17, from 11 a.m. until 8 p.m., at the historic railroad depot. Happening every third Friday throughout the summer, these events feature local food trucks and entertainment from throughout the state.



Clockwise from facing page, far left: Tucumcari wraps up Route 66 kitsch, museum-caliber cars (say hi to Director Ken Christian!), five-star barbecue, and cool dinosaurs in one easy road trip.

off their assets. That's a trend Tucumcari MainStreet is fighting. "Neon is a huge part of the history and heritage of the town," says Executive Director Connie Loveland.

The organization has led efforts to keep neon in town, including purchasing two ice cream signs—one for Borden's and another in the shape of a cone. In the past year, it also crowdfunded a campaign to bring back to town a MOTEL sign that hung outside the Trav-O-Tel Motel when a Maryland collector posted it on eBay for \$3,000.

Travelers are welcomed into the fundraising fold. The self-guided, donations-welcome Tucumcari Talking Tour leads visitors to 16 landmarks, from Del's Restaurant to the Quay

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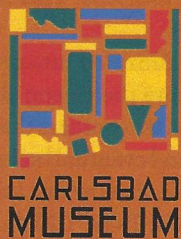
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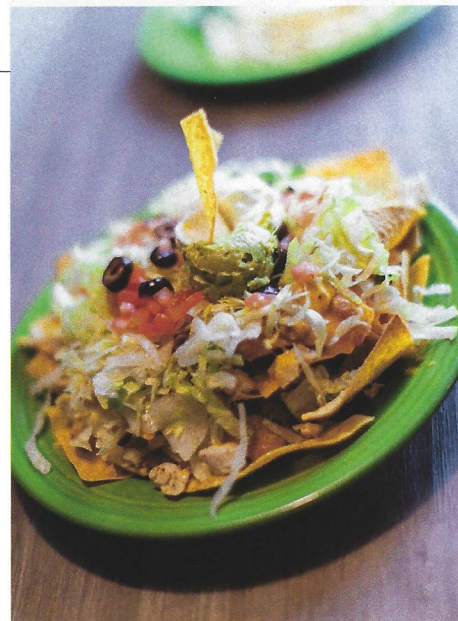
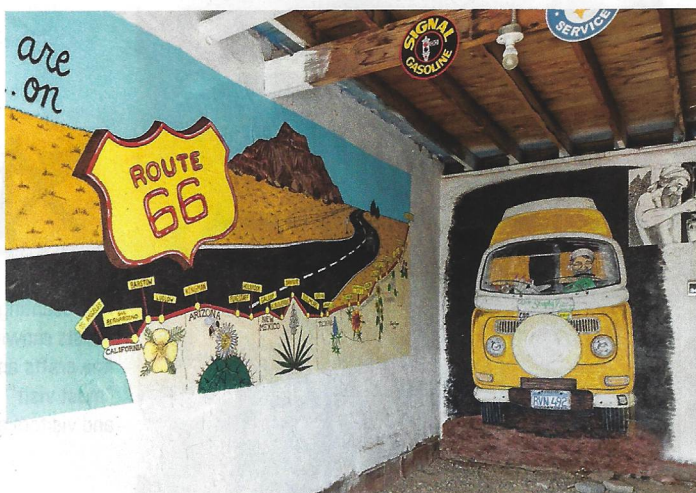
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Clockwise: Keep your eyes peeled for murals all over town. A plate of classic nachos at Del's Restaurant. License plates from pretty much everywhere turn into decor at Watson's BBQ.



County Courthouse, where WPA-era reliefs bedeck the exterior and a mural presides over the second story. Audio narration on the history and significance of each destination arrives via a 1640 AM radio signal.

The tour was the brainchild of Tracy Johnson, another town transplant. "I saw a post on a Tucumcari Facebook group that said, 'I've lived on Route 66 all my life. What's the big deal?'" Johnson recalls. "My jaw dropped. People come from all over the world

to experience Route 66. I wanted to shout its importance from the rooftops! This is my version of that."

Tour donations are funneled into grants for businesses to restore their neon signs. The town has recovered three others that are awaiting restoration and eventual inclusion in a planned neon park, like the one taking shape along Route 66 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, or the more famous Neon Museum, in Las Vegas, Nevada.

With the 100th anniversary of Route 66's 1926 commissioning on the horizon, there's a shared urgency to powering up the lights. "Tucumcari will never be what it was, but it can always be better than it is," Smith says. "I really want to see the town shine." **NM**

Ashley M. Biggers grew up in Albuquerque, but her grandparents lived in Tucumcari for more than 65 years. She considers it her second hometown.