

CHAPTER TEN

Asphalting the Mother Road: Route 66

144 *The highway to San Juan de la Cruz was a blacktop road. In the twenties hundreds of miles of concrete highway had been laid down in California, and people had sat back and said, "There, that's permanent. That will last as long as the Roman roads and longer, because no grass can grow up through the concrete to break it." But it wasn't so. The rubber-shod trucks, the pounding automobiles, beat the concrete, and after a while the life went out of it and it began to crumble. Then a side broke off and a hole crushed through and a crack developed and a little ice in the winter spread the crack, so the resisting concrete could not stand the beating of rubber and broke down. Then the county maintenance crews poured tar into the cracks to keep the water out, and that didn't work, and finally they capped the roads with an asphalt and gravel mixture. That did survive, because it offered no stern face to the pounding tires. It gave a little and came back a little. It softened in the summer and hardened in the winter. And gradually all the roads were capped with shining black that looked silver in the distance.*

—John Steinbeck, *The Wayward Bus*



Route 66 was one of the first highways where Americans could drive for miles on asphalt.