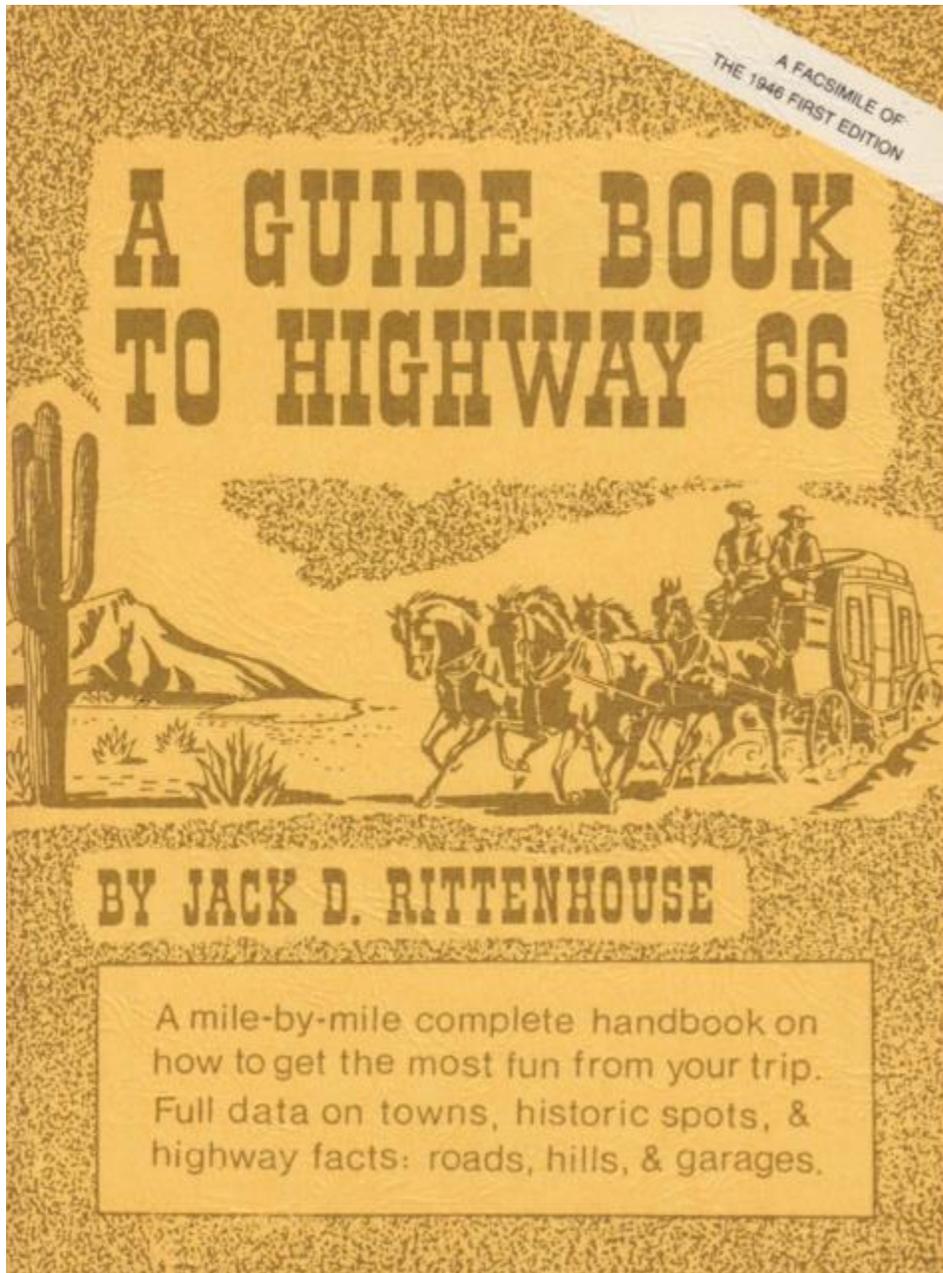


# THE MAN WHO WROTE ROUTE 66

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There is one man – other than, of course, Cyrus Avery – to whom Route 66 aficionados owe a debt of gratitude. Yet most people know very little about Jack DeVere Rittenhouse, other than the fact that he wrote one of the seminal works on the Mother Road.

In 1946, Rittenhouse published *A Guide Book to Highway 66*, not only the first book on Route 66, then only two decades old, but the first to chronicle any major highway in the USA. When

that book was reprinted in 1988, Rittenhouse wrote the foreword, which is how we know that he undertook the trip in a 1939 American Bantam. For the time, it was tiny – even to modern eyes it looks like the sort of car Noddy or Minnie Mouse might have driven and, in fact, a 1938 American Bantam was the inspiration for Donald Duck's car. Rittenhouse doesn't even tell us which model he drove, although it seems likely, as he refers to the lack of trunk, that it was a four-seater Model 60.

Jack Rittenhouse was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1912 and developed a love of books in childhood. When he was little more than a toddler, his family moved to Arizona, although he returned east as a young man and attended Indiana State Teachers College for three years until the Depression forced him to leave and get a job. Unfortunately his first job, writing book reviews at the Fort Wayne *Journal-Gazette* didn't pay, and the young Jack made a few dollars by selling his review copies to libraries. Little is known of his early personal life, although he married Beulah Rose Scherrer on 17th May 1935 in Elkhart, Indiana when she was just 19 years old. There couldn't have been much of a honeymoon for the very next month, Rittenhouse was riding freight trains to New York City to search for work in publishing.

He was employed by Park Row Books & Magazines in lower Manhattan where he sold used books for six months. But, by 1936, he was off riding freight trains across the country. What Beulah thought of this is not on record, nor what she did while he was off seeing the country, although he was clearly home on occasion because the marriage produced a son. There's almost no trace of this child, although an obituary for Rittenhouse's daughter mentions a brother David.

Returning to New York City, he found work with Alfred A Knopf before moving into advertising because it paid better (he did, however, continue to write a column for the *Journal-Gazette*, still selling off the books when he'd finished with them). When the Second World War came, he was exempt from joining up and was instead employed writing training manuals for the US Air Force. By now, his marriage to Beulah had ended in divorce and he was living in Chicago, where he met his second wife, Charlotte Jewell High, ten years his junior. They were married in 1944 in Missouri. His job in advertising took them to Los Angeles and along the way Rittenhouse realised that, with the war over, people would want to travel for pleasure and the freedom of the highway, particularly those servicemen and women from the Mid West and the East Coast who had been stationed in California, and they would use Route 66.

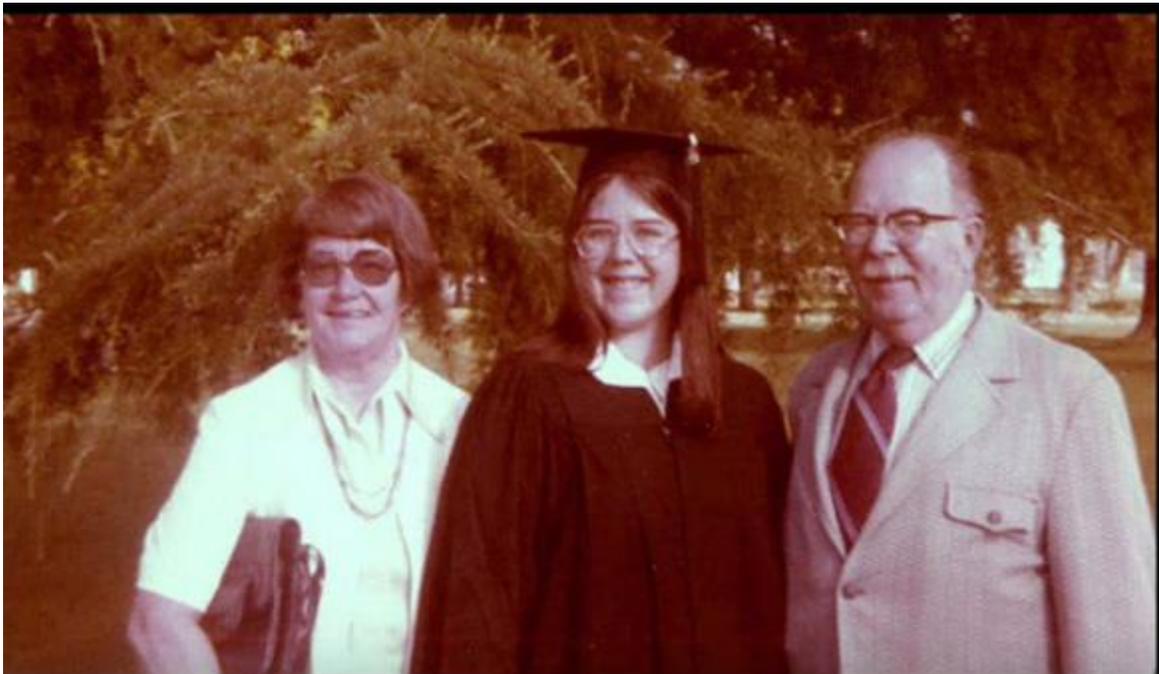
So, taking to the road again, this time in his little automobile rather than hopping trains, he began on his travel guide. One presumes Charlotte was a tolerant lady. He researched, wrote, designed and self-published *A Guide Book to Highway 66*, even drawing the maps and little illustrations, working out mileages and documenting the gas stations, tourist cabins and motels in each place along the road. He printed 3000 copies and sold them for a dollar apiece. In the rather poignant last line of the book, Rittenhouse wrote 'If you have any suggestions on improving this Guide Book, address them to the publisher, so they can be included in future editions.' Poignant because there were no future editions and it's true to say that *A Guide Book to Highway 66* was not a runaway success. In fact, the 'second edition' wouldn't come until 1988 and that, of course, would be an accurate facsimile of the original book rather than contain any updates.

For the next few years, Rittenhouse hopped between selling rare books and working in advertising, as well as running his own one-man publisher, the Stagecoach Press. In 1952 he began his own agency, selling it to the Marsteller Company in 1959. The following year, he devoted his time to the Stagecoach Press, producing a number of titles. The publishing house went into hibernation when, after two years at the Museum of New Mexico Press, he joined the staff of the University of New Mexico Press where he worked until he retired in 1978 and promptly started up the Stagecoach once more. However, when the guide was reprinted in 1988, it was with his old employers rather than the Stagecoach Press.

Having fallen in love with New Mexico, he and Charlotte settled in Albuquerque, while Rittenhouse took great pleasure in documenting ghost towns, Indian ruins, mining camps and anywhere that ever had a post office, and many of his photographs are in the Rittenhouse Collection at the New Mexico State University Library.

Charlotte lived to the age of 90, surviving longer than her husband and all three of their children, each of whom died relatively young. Douglas died in 2001 in Texas aged 54; Susan passed the following year at the age of 49, also in Texas, while her sister Anne was just short of 55 when she died in California, having moved there with her husband, Harry Briley, in 1976.

Jack D Rittenhouse died in 1991, having lived long enough to see his little guide become a late success among a whole new generation for whom the Mother Road means nostalgia rather than freedom. Now it's referred to and quoted by just about anyone who ever writes a word about Route 66, as well as becoming a glovebook essential, just as he intended more than half a century ago.



JACK AND CHARLOTTE RITTENHOUSE WITH THEIR DAUGHTER ANNE AT HER GRADUATION