

## History of the Old Trails Bridge

West bound Route 66 travelers leave Arizona and enter California crossing the Colorado River on Interstate 40. A vast panorama awaits travelers with superb views of the river, bridges and Needles Mountains. Before Route 66 was commissioned in 1926, there were two bridges that crossed the Colorado River: the Red Rock Bridge, a railroad trestle bridge for the Santa Fe Railroad, and the Trails Arch Bridge for automobile traffic. The Trails Arch Bridge was constructed in 1916 and was an engineering feat for that time period. It was the longest bridge - spanning 800 feet - and lightest bridge of its kind due to the cantilever arch construction.

In the 1930s, entry into California was a time of trepidation for Dust Bowl migrants aware of the treacherous desert travel that awaited them on this "Road to Opportunity". Not only did they face the extreme desert temperatures and rough desert roads, they were stopped at the border by police who checked if they carried adequate money and proof of employment in the state. Those who did not were turned back. The Trails Arch Bridge is the same bridge that the Joad family crossed in the 1940 version of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox movie, *Grapes of Wrath*. Later during World War II, thousands of servicemen crossed the bridge on their way to train at the Desert Training Center under command of U.S. Army General George S. Patton.

In 1942, the Santa Fe Railroad began construction on a bridge to replace the Red Rock Bridge. In 1947 the original Red Rock Bridge was turned over to the highway departments of Arizona and California. A new alignment of U.S. Highway 66 was constructed over the Red Rock Railroad Bridge, replacing the rail deck with a concrete deck to accommodate automobile traffic. This newly configured bridge was wider and could carry more weight than the Trails Arch Bridge. It opened to automobile traffic in May 1947. Route 66 travelers during that era included men seeking jobs in the California aviation industry, wanna-be actors heading to Hollywood, musicians attracted to the West Coast jazz scene and vacationing families on their way to Disneyland and the Pacific Ocean. With the signing of the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1956, the interstate highway system was established. When Interstate 40 was built, a new bridge was constructed and completed in 1966.

The beautiful Trails Arch Bridge exists today and supports a natural gas pipeline for Pacific Gas & Electric. The bridge was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988. The Red Rock Bridge was dismantled in 1976.

After crossing the Colorado River on Interstate 40, visitors take the 5 Mile Rd exit to the BLM's Historic Route 66 California Gateway Site that includes an interpretive panel and a shaded picnic area. Route 66 continues into Needles, the gateway town for California Route 66, the Mojave Trails National Monument.

(From California Historic Route 66 Association <https://www.route66ca.org/>)

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## The Trails Arch Bridge



Image name: F1a – Trails Arch Bridge

Image owner: BLM

Photo release: Yes

## The Trails Arch Bridge 508

The Trails Arch Bridge was built in 1916 and spans the Colorado River. The 800-foot bridge is painted white and features a graceful curved arch. The Trails Arch Bridge is considered a landmark of American civil engineering. At the time when it was built, it was the longest arched bridge in America. It features a pair of giant steel arches with a span of 600 feet, anchored on each bank of the River and supports the bridge with suspension cables.



Image name F1b Trails Arch Bridge

Image owner: BLM

Photo release: Yes

## Trails Arch Bridge

With the Colorado River and Trails Arch Bridge as a backdrop, the City of Needles welcomes west bound travelers to Route 66 in California with its iconic sign.

The sign is almost six feet in height and fifteen feet wide. It has a white stucco finish and a five-foot-high “Historic Route 66” shield. “Welcome! Turn Right Next Exit” is painted in big black letters. The billboard is supported on a river rock base with two rock-lined concrete towers on each end with Spanish-style red tiles.



Image name: F1c – Trails Arch Bridge

Image owner: BLM

Photo release: Yes