



The Story on the Wall

Although the history of murals dates back thousands of years, in recent years, brightly-colored murals have become eye-popping tourist attractions. The larger the better, these iconic pieces of outdoor art entitle its communities to sought-after spots on “don’t miss” lists along Route 66 and other historic highways. But a mural on a historic red brick wall does something else — it proclaims the shared history of a community.

The small town of Virden, Illinois, 25 miles south of the Illinois capital along the original alignment of Route 66, is proud of their Virden History Mural, adorning the west-facing brick wall of the Sav-Mor Pharmacy building. Located at the busiest downtown intersection, the mural is an approximately 40-year-old landmark on the side of a 125-year-old building, facing Illinois Highway 4/Route 66. But the current rendition of the mural is not the original painting — this is actually its third and newest incarnation.

Created around 1990, “The Circus Mural,” as it’s known by those who remember it, was a community-sponsored piece by local commercial painter Jim Palmer. The image depicted circus animals and train cars, and the spaces upon it could be bought by local businesses for advertising purposes. The Circus Mural remained a source of pride until Palmer eventually relocated, and the artwork fell into disrepair for lack of someone to repaint it.

In August 2004, the local citizens chose to depict the town’s history on their second mural. Painted by Greenville, Illinois, artist John Hubbell, the 19-by-50-foot-long mural displayed the community’s story in four panels. The first panel showed the prairie before the town was erected, while the second showed the Virden Hotel, established by namesakes John and Emily Virden, following the location of his stagecoach stop next to the train tracks. The third panel depicts the town’s economy built around coal mining and also nods to Melvin Vaniman (a famous aviator and “Acrobatic Photographer”) and Charles Lindbergh, a U.S. postal service pilot who made an emergency landing in a field north of Virden. A view of how the downtown square would appear to motorists on Route 66 completed the fourth panel.

The thing about murals is that they are not made to last on their own. By 2017, Hubbell’s mural was beyond repair

due to severe weathering, a forming of mold or mildew, and the peeling of its protective sealant. However, devoted in their pursuits to keep this essential element of their town alive, the Virden Mural Committee — headed by dedicated committee chairman Suzanne Gray — began a fundraiser in December 2017, intending to raise \$20,000. By May 2018, they had surpassed their goal and raised over \$22,000, with the additional funds being saved for future preservation needs of the mural.

With the funds in, it simply became a matter of choosing the artist(s) to create the next iteration. The committee contacted the husband-and-wife artistic team of Bernie Gietl and D.L. Whitlock-Gietl from nearby Carlinville, Illinois. “We approached the Gietls after seeing samples of their work at Gillespie [Illinois] and online,” said John Alexander, local historian and co-owner of Books on the Corner in downtown Virden. “They’re residents of the area, enjoy a good reputation with the community, and were easy to work with on the project.”

By August 12, 2018, almost exactly 14 years after the creation of the John Hubbell mural, the Gietls finished the third mural. The current design is a collage of disparate images that represent and tell the town’s history and story. The images range from a dedication of founder John Virden to the Illinois stretch of Route 66 to a presidential campaign badge for Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson and a portrayal of the Virden Mine, emphasizing the importance of coal mining in the town’s history. That’s to name a few. The project took around two months to complete, and it was painted with an ultraviolet clear-coat protective finish to make it last longer.

The hard work of the Gietls and the committee’s determination have paid off big-time, as the mural stands as a metaphorical picture of the town while still looking new due to the protective finish used to seal it. “Our town has a rich history like many small towns,” said Alexander, “The mural and [Virden] Mine [Battle] Monument shed some light on what makes us a bit unique. Corn and coal have provided economic legs to the community, but its flavor has come from lots of interesting people. Some of them are depicted on the mural.”