

GASOLINE ALLEY

By Mitchell Brown

Photographs by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66



S

mall businesses are the lifeblood that fuel the economy of the United States. Every massive conglomerate like Amazon, Target, or Apple started with a single person or a select few people who wanted to run their own shop and bring a product into the world. Whether it be something they believed could benefit another person or something they thought that they could make a living selling, the most prominent businesses often come from the humblest of beginnings. Route 66 is like a magnet that draws in unique and sometimes niche businesses. Many have been around for decades, but some are still in their infancy and steadily growing. Some are restaurants or hotels to welcome those who need a break from a long — potentially cross-country — drive, while others are more distinct but fitting with the culture — specifically car culture — often connected to the Mother Road. One such occurrence stands in Sapulpa, Oklahoma, the city that's home to the Heart of Route 66 Auto Museum. It's there that a relatively new but thriving shop celebrates the past of the city it lives in, the historic road it's built on, and a passionate love for automobilia. Welcome to Gasoline Alley Classics.

Part of Sapulpa's stretch of Route 66, located on the corner of Main Street and Hobson Avenue in historic downtown Sapulpa, Gasoline Alley Classics is the brainchild of co-founder Michael Jones, a resident not of Sapulpa, but of Broken Arrow in northern Oklahoma. While not easy to immediately identify by passing onlookers whether it's a store or a museum due to its extensive automotive commemorative items and cars that line the showroom, Gasoline Alley Classics is a shop that specializes in nostalgic memorabilia and décor that is fit for the mancave of any car enthusiast. However, like all successful businesses, it didn't start out neat and polished.

Street Rodders

To understand where Gasoline Alley Classics comes from, we must go back to 1994. The same year that the internet was created, and Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as President of South Africa, *Street Rodder* magazine published a photo of a pair of strollers that were in the style of classic-looking cars. These strollers were imagined and brought to life by Jones, who at that time didn't have any career ambitions in the auto industry and was working as a sales representative for Nestle—later retitled Nestle Carnation, following a merger. However, Jones was a car fanatic who wanted to bring his young sons, Austin and Evan, to car shows, while pushing them around in something that wasn't your run-of-the-mill pram. Jones enjoyed working on his car in high school, but this project was a new experience.

The endeavor involved taking a 1940s-era BMC pedal car and repurposing it, with the help of some friends, by welding it and painting it. The other involved scaling up a model of

a 1937 Ford convertible and sculpting it from Styrofoam. Before Jones had even finished constructing them, there was an inkling that he might have created something that people would be interested in buying; a fact that would be confirmed on one of the strollers' earliest uses. "Before we called the cars complete and had the bodies made, somebody said, 'Michael, you could probably sell those,' so we ended up pulling fiberglass molds out of them, and I started selling bodies to people. Then they could build their own," said Jones. "I remember going to one particular car show in Illinois, and I was pushing my son around and hearing funny things. I remember going by one guy who said to his friend, 'He's got more money in the paint job in his [little] car than you've got in yours.'"

After putting the strollers together, Jones discovered a friend who was skilled at making miniature gas pumps. He wanted one to create a set with the strollers. However, he discovered that his friend didn't plan on making any more of them and intended to sell his tools. So, Jones bought the tools from him, and with the help of his uncle, Larry Dunne, they created miniature pumps of their own and started showing them off at car shows. At one show in particular, a woman approached them and said that if they had a smaller one, she would use it as a table lamp. Since they already had moldings to make smaller pumps, this inspired them to convert them into lamps. They reached out later to that customer, and she received one of the first models. From there, Jones began restoring parking meters and drive-in speakers. These were their earliest products, and it's what kicked everything off.

Working Out of the Garage

In the beginning, it was just Jones, his uncle Larry, and his friend Bob McCray. Larry was a high school and college admissions recruiter at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College in Miami, Oklahoma. Bob was a retiree from a Phillips 66 station, which gave him some know-how in the auto trade. Things started primitively with Jones being the primary salesperson and making calls to wholesale companies. At the same time, Bob and Larry did most of the assembly, with the work being done out of Jones' garage over weekends and selling what they made and restored at trade shows and national car shows. "As we went to these car shows, we met people there, and that's how we found out about the catalog companies," said Jones. "It didn't take us very long to get the business going because we had some contacts even before we bought all that equipment. I'd have to say that within the first three to five years, it was always growing and moving upwards."

And grow they did. Their days were swamped with building their inventory, ordering materials in bulk, and reaching out to more outlets and businesses specializing in mancave décor catalogs to ensure the business kept growing. Being forward thinkers, they incorporated the business in 1996. Just a year later, they would come across an IP that was sorely overlooked by the trademark office but would become a mascot for the business years later: Lady Luck.

People are generally still familiar with Betty Boop, but Lady Luck, not so much. She is a character geared toward car culture who was frequently used as a pin-up girl to be painted on the nose and sides of bomber planes during World War I. Since no one had the foresight to trademark the image, Jones made quick work of obtaining it. "I noticed



Michael Jones.

that Lady Luck was listed in there and no one had registered or trademarked her, so I got with my trademark attorney, we applied for it, and we've had her ever since," continued Jones.

Jones didn't quit his day job as a sales representative (at Hershey's, where he worked for 13 years) until 2006, a decade later. By then, they were selling wholesale to catalogs. That same year, he and Larry acquired a warehouse in an industrial park five miles away from his house. Besides the change of venue, they also upgraded their gear by purchasing some like-new equipment (having only been used for six months) from a friend in Oklahoma City. This meant that they could manufacture the products and powder-coat them without sending them to an outside source. The business was starting to boom. Unfortunately, Bob wouldn't see it, as he would leave the company (on good terms) and lose touch with the duo sometime in the early 2000s. A short time later, he passed away. Tragically, he would not get to see the business bloom into what it would eventually evolve into.

Working Solo

From 2006 to 2015, Jones operated the shop, powder-coating and creating signs. The former involved spraying anything from patio furniture, wheels on cars, or even tornado shelters. The act is more durable than spray paint and creates what Jones describes as a "baked-on finish." He would also make signs for businesses and individuals, often vinyl or window graphics, that could be used for exterior and interior applications, many of which were business logos that could

be found in office complexes. Following the loss of his Uncle Larry in 2013, Jones would carry the weight of the business himself. However, by the time 2015 came around, the business would find its home in Sapulpa.

While Sapulpa is a city that makes the most of Route 66 passing through its city limits, when Jones came to visit, it hadn't quite hit its stride yet. While there were landmarks like the Waite Phillips Filling Station, Tee Pee Drive-in Theater, Happy Burger, and even the annual Route 66 Blowout Car Show, The Heart of Route 66 Museum wouldn't open for another year, and the Route 66 Christmas Chute wouldn't come into existence until 2022. It was in 2015 that Jones met with Cindy Lawrence, director of Sapulpa Main Street — an organization for which Jones would eventually become Board President — and he mentioned that he loved the downtown area and had affection for the older buildings surrounding the Mother Road.

In response, the director showed him around town with her friend, Larry White. As they walked, Jones casually noted that he had a potential interest in buying property. White informed them that he knew about one building in particular that wasn't made public yet. "It was called the Williams Sewing Center. And J.E. Williams was the owner," said Jones. "I walked through those front doors, and I had a vision of what I could do with the building. Sometimes, some things just click with you, and it did that day. Larry said he called J.E., and J.E. said he wanted to talk to me the next day. So, we did and got acquainted, and a couple of weeks later, he called me back over, and that's when everything



Inside is a throwback to yesteryear.

kind of fell into place.” The deal was made in March 2015, and after the purchase was completed and the building was cleared out, by July 2015, the building would belong to Michael Jones. That’s when the real work began.

The building was a perfect fit for a business specializing in automobile memorabilia. In 1917, it had been home to the Sapulpa Motor Company Model T Plant & Dealership and by 2015 still had the bones and foundation of a car dealership. The building had a brick façade and large rectangular front windows ideal for passing onlookers to catch a glimpse of the cars on display inside. Unfortunately, the building could be considered on the rare side of cooked and wasn’t in the proper condition yet to welcome customers. After several occupants’ worth of neglect, the building needed to have work done. Lots of work. The electrical system and plumbing had to be replaced entirely, and the floors and walls had to be stripped down and replaced. Ceilings, rafters, duct work, everything — including the front windows — had to be fixed, replaced, or improved somehow. While others could see this as a burden, call it a money pit, or view it as an overwhelming workload, Jones was excited to take on the task.

Bringing a Dream to Life

“DIY” gets thrown around a lot, but that was exactly the case when Jones began work on Gasoline Alley Classics’ new home. There would be next to no outside help, and everything would be paid out of pocket. It would take him seven years to complete. “That was the 401K; we didn’t take out any loans,” shared Jones. “We did all the work ourselves, and that was the only way to stretch the dollar. The only things we didn’t do was the heat, the air, and the windows. We did the electrical and the plumbing. We repurposed all the wood in the building. I’m not a professional, so I’m not fast. It wasn’t until the last three months that the other five

people came on board and helped me finish it. I stayed true to my vision on the whole project.”

During the years of restoring the building, Jones’ primary source of income came from his powder-coating and sign business. He worked alongside his wife Teresa (who had and still maintains a full-time job in the health care industry while also helping with the shop), his two sons, and at least six friends at one point. It was a team effort. All of this was done behind paper-lined windows of the Sapulpa Motor Company building to try to bring it to life while also keeping their heads above water.

After seven years and two months, Gasoline Alley Classics would have

its official grand opening on September 2, 2022, and reveal what was growing from behind those paper-lined windows. The timing was perfect because it opened before the annual Route 66 Blowout Car Show, so Sapulpa had more than its fair share of Route 66 enthusiasts in town. Once the doors were opened, the guests would bear witness to the exhibit honoring the historic road. The showroom floor was filled to the gills with product displays crafted from gas pumps and the beds of pickup trucks. The walls had exposed brick, giving the place an authentic, rustic feel; signs hung from the ceiling, and the glossy-finished wood floor was stained with a massive Route 66 shield and a map of all eight states that the iconic road spreads across.

Keeping with the dealership lineage of the building, Jones lined the massive front windows with a 1926 Model T Touring and a 1929 Model A Roadster pickup truck. Both were lent out by friends of Jones. Whatever hung from the walls or rested on the showroom floor that Jones didn’t make himself was memorabilia that he collected during the off-hours of his travels while working for Nestle and Hershey. It’s a collection twenty-five years in the making.

While Gasoline Alley Classics is a recent addition to Route 66’s long line of self-starters, it has already begun to make a name for itself. Within its first three months of opening, its guestbook acquired over 2,200 visitors from forty states and twenty-one countries. By the time it reached its first anniversary, it had reached forty-eight states and fifty countries. It has also received several acknowledgments from the community when, in 2023, it received two Oklahoma Main Street Awards for ‘Best Visual Merchandising’ and ‘Best Adaptive Reuse of a Historical Building.’ While often confused for a museum, with some guests asking what the admission price is to get in, Gasoline Alley Classics is a shining example of what can happen when you have a dream shared by others and the hard work and determination to bring it to life.