

ROOM FOR TWO

A particular jail sits in the middle of the village of Gardner, Illinois. It's one that onlookers and weary travelers make an effort to see with their own eyes while traveling along Route 66. Is it because it has a dark and lurid history? Not exactly. Does it have a long list of notable past inmates? Not particularly. Quite the opposite actually, this is Gardner's famous Two Cell Jail. It's a quaint little lockup that charms those who come across it. For nearly sixty years, its compact size has made it a popular tourist site and photo opportunity for travelers along the Main Street of America.

The Two Cell Jail was commissioned on July 1st, 1904, through a joint effort between the village of Gardner and the Hunter Lumber Company. It was agreed to be completed by August 10th with a construction budget of \$550. It's a minuscule

amount by today's standards, but when accounting for inflation, it calculates to roughly \$19,000. They met the deadline, developing the sixteen-by-twenty-foot building with concrete floors, walls, and a wooden ceiling. The choice to use concrete was likely due to the town's previous jail being burnt to the ground by a town drunkard who set it on fire with a mattress, which is ironic, considering that the former jail was located behind the village fire department.

While a jail is certainly a necessity in a community, Gardner, incorporated in 1867, has never been known to have a notable crime wave. It didn't even have a police officer until Mike Likeness was appointed its first in 1898. "In the time I've grown up in Gardner, there's always been only one officer in the town," said Tom Perkins, Village historian and owner of The Shop on Route 66. "Nothing great or violent ever occurs around here besides the occasional kid speeding down the street." The year that the jail was built, Gardner had roughly 1,000 people living in the community. Most of whom were farmers and miners. Any grand expectation of high-profile criminals like John Dillinger or "Pretty Boy" Floyd was not in the cards for the town.



Even calling it a jail is somewhat of a misnomer. "It was mostly used by the vagrants that would get off the train into Gardner. They didn't want them roaming around at night, so they would put them up so that they would have a place to sleep," said Perkins. "I don't think it was ever a question of major crime; I think it was just in case that they needed a place to put people. It wasn't a cowboy shoot-out town; it was a farming and mining community." If it were necessary to lock someone up for criminal charges, they would be taken to the county jail in Morris, Illinois.

By 1951, the tiny prison was shut down as a functioning jail, and for an extended period of time, it was used as a storage facility for odds-and-ends items like the town lawnmower.

That was until May 1970, when it was renovated. "The Gardner Junior Women's Club restored the building as

a historic preservation project. The inside walls were cleaned and redone by local plasterers. The old roof was replaced, new wiring installed, and a little potbelly stove was put in for authenticity," said Deborah Steffes, Curator of Grundy County Historical Society & Museum.

Whether intentionally or coincidentally, the restoration timing turned out to be ideal for catching

the attention of travelers along the Mother Road.

The jail breathed new life into the small Illinois town as its popularity with Route 66 travelers grew. It's estimated that the village now gets around 20,000 visitors a year who come from all over the world. Possibly the most famous visitor of the jail to be documented was Paul McCartney. Back in 2008, when he did a tour of Route 66 on his 66th birthday, McCartney stopped in to see the jail and even signed their guestbook. You're unlikely to find the page, however, because it was promptly stolen sometime after. Even though the jail is one block south of where the historic road passes through Gardner, it's become a staple of the town, where, to this day, people take the long way around to catch a glimpse and a photo of the miniature detention center. Route 66 really has always been the road of the unexpected.