

ROUTE 66 EXPERIENCE

By Mitchell Brown

Photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66



Trying to condense 300 miles of culture and history into a single confined space is no easy task, especially concerning something as prolific as the Illinois stretch of Route 66. It's the lifeblood of the state. The celebrated road not only starts in Chicago, but it spans the Land of Lincoln and sustains so many small businesses and highlights plenty of visually unique attractions. So, how do you celebrate something so massive and extravagant? That's what the Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau asked themselves with the approaching centennial of the Mother Road, and that's what put the ball in motion to simulate the Illinois Route 66 Experience and what led to the creation of...well, The Illinois Route 66 Experience.

Created as a self-guided educational exhibit, The Illinois Route 66 Experience in Springfield was developed to inform younger generations of the importance of the road and the 92 communities it passes through, while also showcasing the romance of road trips and traveling. The Experience combines informative exhibits that describe the small businesses (past and current) and communities on Route 66 with large-scale attractions that display the road's iconography, including vintage billboards, a miniature drive-in theater, a neon sign park, and a tribute to Muffler Men giants. All of this, combined, creates an immersive experience of a micro-version of driving down Route 66 in Illinois.

The concept came in early 2020 when Scott Dahl, director of Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau, approached the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway to collaborate on a project and celebrate what the road means to Illinois. The timing was perfect, as they had recently appointed a new executive director, Casey Claypool. However, it would come at a price. "I started on March 2nd, 2020, two weeks before the stay-at-home orders came in for COVID," said Claypool. "I think, on my 10th or 11th day on the job, Scott called and introduced himself to me. They knew a non-profit could get it done faster than a city entity. That was my first meeting with him, and he sold me on the project as soon as we were done talking."

Even before collaborating with the Byway though, Dahl was already location scouting the Illinois State Fairgrounds to potentially use a corner of the property for what would eventually become an exhibit. It was deemed that the area wasn't being utilized to its fullest capacity, having been mostly vacant for several years, and since it runs along America's Main Street, it morphed into the perfect location. Development was initially set to get started in June 2020, but due to the pandemic, progress would come to a standstill until June of the following year.

However, once the world opened back up and people were able to get back to work, there was nothing that got in their way to bring their idea to life. "It was pretty seamless. We had no hurdles with the fairgrounds or the Department of

Agriculture, and were able to obtain grants," said Claypool. "Ace Sign Company did the project from start to finish. Every ounce of fabrication and installation." The company went on to create everything in the park, from the miniature replica of the Route 66 Drive-in that used to be on South 6th Street in Springfield (which plays silent clips from films like *The Wizard of Oz* and the original *Godzilla*) to the recreations of iconic neon signs such as the Bel Air Drive-in and the Chain of Rocks Motel. The signs were chosen based on the criteria of having existed at the time of Route 66's inception or in its earliest incarnations, with the final four selected out of ten potential options. Since the group responsible was relatively small—five people in total—and were all on the same page, making a decision proved to be an easy process. The signs ultimately became one of the more popular attractions for visitors, some old enough to remember visiting the locations represented, giving the park a nostalgic ambiance that comes to life when the sun goes down. In many ways, a visit to the neon park at night is a wonderful assault on the senses. The larger than life and brilliantly lit signs really dazzle and captivate against the dark night, as neon is supposed to do.

The original idea in the concept stage was to include miniature versions of attractions on the road, but that was eventually shot down when the realization came that that would create less urgency to see the attractions in person and ultimately defeat the purpose of the entire exhibit. "We talked about doing replicas early on, and we quickly nixed the idea," said Claypool, "The whole point of the project is to get people to think, 'Wow, we really need to get out on the road,' so the project was restructured to turn it into a teaser and an educational project, but still gives people's imaginations room to run."

The Route 66 Experience was completed in August 2023, following a lighting ceremony that took place in late July. Since its creation, the exhibit has exceeded the creators' expectations. With the available viewing hours being from dawn until dusk, visitors can be seen coming in at all times of day to take pictures, whether it be early in the morning or late at night. Businesses in Springfield have also used it for commercials, and the state's tourism office has used it as part of their nationwide 'Middle of Everything' campaign, giving Claypool high hopes for its future sustainability. "We've done radio interviews, television interviews, and several articles. So, I think it's just naturally going to become one of the biggest attractions in Illinois for Route 66."

There has always been a lot to draw people to Springfield, Illinois, a land steeped in history and legend. It is the state capital and a place that truly celebrates the life and work of Abraham Lincoln and the impact of the automobile. It's now home to a new attraction on the Mother Road that brings together the vintage and the new and inspires visitors to see that America is really still out there.