

FUELING NOSTALGIA

By Mitchell Brown

Photographs by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66



The allure of Route 66 is rooted not just in the romance of cross-country travel and the freedom and adventures that it promises, but much of its magic lies in the nostalgia that it evokes, the deep appreciation for the era when it flourished. This nostalgia — generally, a longing for the past and simpler times — is what makes Route 66 impactful for so many, and what has sustained a plethora of landmarks, ensuring that they stay relevant, even decades after their doors first opened. Special locations like Shea’s Gas Station Museum in Springfield, Illinois. Once a bustling stop along the Mother Road, Shea’s now stands as a living tribute to that golden age, inspiring generations of travelers who seek not only the romance of travel, but a glimpse into a bygone era.

In the Beginning

Like many notable locations across the historic highway, the story of Shea’s Gas Station spans generations, beginning with Springfield native William “Bill” C. Shea—known early on by many simply as Bus (short for Buster). Born on December 30, 1921, Shea spent much of his childhood hanging around a local Texaco station, where he formed a close bond with the owner, Moise “Mud” Deruy. Little did he know that this humble gas station and his early friendship with Mud would kick off a career in the industry that would later become his legacy.

In 1941, at the ripe age of 19, Shea joined the U.S. Army and headed off to fight in World War II. While overseas, he was fortunate to survive the Allied invasion of Normandy (known more commonly as D-Day) and served his country well, earning himself five European Theater battle stars and a Pathfinder badge. After the war, he returned to Springfield, where his old friend Deruy offered him an opportunity at the station. Shea agreed to a partnership, and they renamed the gas station Deruy and Shea Texaco. Tragically, some years later, Deruy passed away from a blood infection, leaving Shea to carry on the business on his own, which he did for the next eight years, working seven days a week serving Route 66 travelers and locals alike. By 1955, Bill had outgrown the small Texaco station. So, he closed it down and opened a bigger and better (heated with inside bays) Marathon brand gas station only a few blocks away at 2075 N Peoria Road. It is still a prime spot on Route 66. Here, he continued to serve millions of travelers for many years until the winds of the Eisenhower interstate system began to sweep the nation. The oil embargo in the early 1970s also created a decrease in the number of gas customers, and the EPA standards on storage required a significant upgrade in fuel tanks. Thus, by 1982, Bill Shea decided to stop selling fuel and pivoted to selling truck accessories: Shea’s Finest Truck Covers. A couple of years later, Route 66 was officially decommissioned.

Bill, The Collector

Fortuitously for Shea, he was both a traveler and a collector. Over the years of running his gas stations, he spent weekends driving around Illinois, trading for items related to gas stations, oil companies, and Route 66 memorabilia. And he never really got rid of anything. So, by the time he stopped selling fuel, his station was packed with treasures that he had gathered: old gas pumps, oil cans, gas company signs, vintage candy, cigar boxes, and even wooden telephone booths, which filled the store to the brim. Tourists and travelers who still journeyed along the old road continued to stop by, snap some photos, and chat with Shea, gradually turning his station into a roadside attraction in its own right; a museum that celebrated not only the highway’s significance but also the culture and memories tied to the era of road trips and filling stations.

“I believe that Grandpa’s decision to display his collectibles and begin sharing them with the world is what kept him alive for so many years and gave him purpose,” said Tiffany M. Baker, Bill’s granddaughter. “He was a very stoic man with a dry sense of humor, but he thoroughly enjoyed the distance people would travel to see him and his collection. He always wanted to know their name and where they were from, and you couldn’t leave without signing a guest book.” That guest book became something of a trademark for both Shea and the gas station because it became a point of pride for how many names were in it and the number of countries that the visitors hailed from, cementing both the famed nature of the road and his place in its culture.

Like Father, Like Son

As his now roadside attraction and museum gained popularity, Shea, now in his 70s, found himself needing assistance managing it. His wife Helen helped operate the station, but she was also balancing work being an inspector at Sangamo Electric. Fortunately, their only son, Bill T. Shea, stepped in to lend a hand. A devoted son and family man, Bill T. — a fellow veteran who served in the Vietnam War — found himself with some free time on his hands after retiring from the Operating Engineers local union. He also shared his father’s passion for welcoming guests and wanted to support him in continuing to do what he loved, even as his father’s health declined. With his warmth and charm, Bill T. quickly became just as familiar to the visitors as his father, making them excited to return time and time again to say hello.

Although he didn’t officially take ownership of the station, Bill T. was dedicated to preserving its history and legacy. He made it a point to be there every day with his father, and like him, he found a more profound sense of purpose and joy through their shared passion, especially when engaging with travelers from around the globe. One of his favorite activities was giving tours of the station museum to visitors, which earned him the affectionate title of “Bill Shea, Tour Guide,” from his family.

Over the years, the station evolved into a multi-generational hub for the Shea family. It became a cherished destination for the five grandkids to visit their grandfather. Saturdays during the school year and summer months were often spent there, making it the go-to spot for family gatherings. The kids swept the floors, trimmed weeds, and learned how to maintain the property. It was here that they also learned



Bill Shea.

to weld, prep camper shells, and collect aluminum cans, crushing them with a forklift to cash in for spending money. A particularly special spot was Shea’s napping loft. This elevated space overlooked the station floor, allowing him to keep an eye on visitors while he worked. It also served as a cozy retreat for the kids, where they could relax and watch Saturday morning cartoons. It was a place where they created joyful childhood memories and cherished time with their father and grandfather. In 1993, after 47 years of being a fixture of the Springfield community and on Route 66, and for everything he accomplished in his life and what he witnessed in the war — even returning to Omaha Beach twice for the 40th and 50th anniversaries of D-Day in 1984 and 1994, respectively — Bill Shea was inducted into the Route 66 Hall of Fame. December 30, 2011, Bill’s birth date, was declared Bill Shea Day in Springfield, to honor what he and his family had done for the community.

End of an Era

By 2013, Shea faced health issues that required hospitalization, ultimately reaching a point where he and Helen could no longer live independently. Their health forced them to transition to a nursing home. When the couple moved into the nursing home, it signaled the end of the museum’s regular hours. At that time, neither he nor Bill T. — who was in his 60s at that point — were in good enough health to manage it, and the grandkids were not in a position

to take it over. Sadly, Bill Shea passed away on December 14th of that year at the age of 91. Helen followed soon after, a year later, in December 2014. She was 96. Since the business wasn’t profitable, only charging one to two dollars for entry, which wasn’t sufficient to cover expenses and often required out-of-pocket payments, it meant difficult decisions had to be made.

“We did what was best for our family. This was a hobby for Grandpa, and it was also very seasonal. He may get a large quantity of visitors during the summer, but other months would go days or weeks with no one,” said Tiffany. “My father was retired and disabled and could not run this as a business. All of us grandkids had full-time jobs and could not maintain it either. As much as we hated to see it go, we wanted to see our father get to do the things that he enjoyed while he still had time.”

By 2015, the property and the contents of the building were put up for auction, with certain items of the collection preserved by Shea’s grandchildren. Among the collection was Mahan’s Filling Station, believed to be one of the oldest filling stations in Illinois, going back to the 1920s, which Shea bought in 2000. The filling station was purchased at auction by Jeff Fulgenzi and is now on display at Fulgenzi’s Pizza & Pasta, which is just up the road from Shea’s. As for the rest of his possessions, his cherished guest books were saved and were later donated to Ron Metzger, owner of Motorheads Bar & Grill, and a fellow enthusiast and collector of Route 66 memorabilia. Today, the guest books



Vintage gas pumps outside of the station.

and other pieces of the collection can still be seen in a space designed to resemble Shea's station. This seemed like it would be the end of the historic location's story. Or, at least, that's how it appeared until Randy Pickett entered the scene.

A New Beginning, Sort Off.

For nearly 37 years, Randy Pickett worked for the state of Illinois at the Department of Transportation, dedicating his entire career to roadways in various capacities. When he retired in 2015, he sought ways to fill his days. Known for his passion for classic cars, it was only natural that in 2017, he partnered with his friend Jake Niewold to launch a business in the auto repair industry, specializing in vintage vehicles. The plan was for Randy to purchase the building while Jake would handle the repair work and the client list. You can probably guess where they decided to set up shop: Shea's Gas Station.

Randy was not a stranger to Shea's. Having worked in Springfield, he frequently stopped by the location to browse the memorabilia, and soon became acquainted with both Bills, particularly Bill T., who revealed a surprising link to Randy's family history. "He goes, 'Oh yeah, I knew your great-grandfather,'" said Randy. "So, he started telling me stories about my great-grandfather owning some of the properties across the street, which I never knew. Nobody in the family ever said anything. Both Bills knew my great-grandfather, so that was cool to have that connection."

Although the building purchase was finalized in May 2017, the business never actually took off. Randy's partner had to back out due to family commitments, leaving Randy with an empty building. "I had no plans for it," said Randy. "I knew I had no ability to repair old cars. I thought about buying and selling old cars out of it, but that would've required a lot of red tape, and I didn't want to take something like that on into my 60s."

While the building sat unused, Randy received several inquiries about leasing the property. Although the offers were lucrative and could have helped him pay off the mortgage, he understood the significance of the location and was

committed to preserving Shea's legacy.

Back in Business

In June of the same year (2017), Randy decided to park some of his cars on the property. He also added some vintage antique signs (as well as some gas pumps), displaying them in the windows. He steadily began to bring more of his gas station or automobile-related collection into the building until it eventually filled the station. Among his collection are several cars, including a 1957 Chevy two-door Sedan, a 1965 Corvette Stingray, a 1964 Impala, and a 1972 Jeep Commando. With no plans to use the building for

profit — but instead use it to facilitate his hobby — Randy got a job as a truck driver. This allowed him to earn extra income to help cover the building's expenses. For a time, the station seemed to be just a hobby and a means to keep him busy, or so he thought. But the city of Springfield had other interesting plans.

Fast forward to 2021. Enthusiasm for the much-anticipated Route 66 Centennial was beginning to spark renewed interest in the rekindling of lost nostalgia. Scott Dahl, the director of Springfield's Convention & Visitors Bureau, approached Randy with a proposal to restore the station to its former glory. The city of Springfield would cover all expenses, with the total grant exceeding \$100,000 aimed at restoring the building's exterior and resurfacing the parking lot to enhance safety and aesthetics. The only commitment Randy had to make was to keep the place open until 2026, a task that required little convincing on his part.

After two years of securing funding, restoration work began in August 2023. Sadly, Bill T. was not there to see the legacy that his father had created, and one that he had championed, be given a new lease on life. He passed away on July 28th, 2023.

On May 21, 2024, the gas station officially reopened to the public, primarily for photo opportunities around the exterior, with Randy making occasional appearances to allow visitors to explore his collection inside. "Some people say that I put my blood, sweat, and tears into this place. I'm not a hero or anything; I'm just old-school. I saved it for someone else to come along," continued Randy. "Some locals came in and said that they remembered coming in and seeing Bill, and how nice he was, and how much they missed him. I think they were just happy it was open [again]."

Founded during the golden age of Route 66 and the Great American Road Trip, Shea's Gas Station evolved from a bustling service station into a cherished museum. Today, it continues to not only preserve the rich history of the road for new generations of travelers, but its timeless charm continues to inspire those seeking a connection to the past, as they journey along the iconic highway. Both Bills would undoubtedly be proud.