

Ami Merchant- The Curve Inn

The English writer Samuel Johnson once said, "There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced by a good tavern." It's not hard to envision Ami Merchant nodding in agreement at these words. "Everything about a tavern I think is important," she says.

The owner of The Curve Inn in Springfield, Ami bought the place in 2002 having started working there as a bartender in 1992. Yet, while her journey with the Curve began over thirty years ago, when taking in the sum total of the place's history, her time there represents a mere fraction of its existence. Built and opened as a grocery store in 1932, it was called Copps Corner until 1945 when it was bought by businessman Guido Mancini who re-christened the establishment The Curve Inn. Explaining this name choice Ami says, "This used to be the main entrance into Springfield, and it used to curve. So they wanted you to curve in here."

Primely positioned on Route 66 between Chicago and St. Louis, in the beginning Ami says The Curve Inn was a favored gathering spot for mobsters. "It was very scandalous. There was prostitution upstairs, there were little apartments, there were gangsters, there was illegal gambling. It was quite a place back then."

While still fun, The Curve Inn has evolved a great deal since and is now regarded as a friendly, unfussy dive. "It's a good neighborhood tavern," Ami says describing it today. "We have wonderful food. We have live music. We also have darts and games and sports. It's just a big melting pot in one building. Even if you just want to sit and have a conversation, this is the place to be." Elaborating she adds, "It's just a great environment. It's the stories, the memories, the walls... You feel it in just sitting there. You can feel the history of this bar."

Now an important figure in this history, Ami remains committed to The Curve Inn for the long haul ahead. "This place is my heart," she says before adding with a laugh. "I will be here forever in my afterlife!"

Buz and Josh Waldmire – The Cozy Dog Drive-In

Few businesses along Route 66 can boast the longevity of Springfield's Cozy Dog Drive In. Opened in 1949 and now in its third generation of family ownership, it claims to be the birthplace of the first batter-fried hot dog on a stick. But while the uninitiated could be forgiven for calling this creation a "corn dog," Buz Waldmire argues they're not exactly one and the same. "A cozy dog is a corn dog," he admits. "But not all corn dogs are cozy dogs."

The distinction, he emphasizes can be found in their preparation- and history.

Invented by his father, Edwin Waldmire Jr., Buz says his dad “never stopped looking for the next best way to get rich. He really admired the guy that came up with hula hoops.” As he tells it, the elder Waldmire saw great potential in corn dogs. He first tried one in Muskogee, Oklahoma and while he loved the taste, felt frustrated by how long it took to prepare as it was baked in an iron. Feeling inspired, he called up his friend Don Strand who owned a bakery to see if there was a way they could develop a batter that would enable them to fry wieners in shortening. Then stationed in Amarillo, TX, with Don’s guidance and a few ingredient shipments he experimented in the mess hall until a formula was perfected. Upon leaving the service, he brought it to Springfield where its staying power has been proven many times over.

Much has changed for The Cozy Dog since then. They now take credit cards and moved to a new building in 1996. But while they stopped cooking with lard some time ago, their recipe remains unchanged and each dog is still freshly dipped to order. Entering the dining room one also immediately feels a sense of permanence. This is, no doubt, owed to the fact that the Waldmire family remains at its helm.

Buz, who co-owned and ran the Drive In with his wife between 1975 and 2001 learned how to work the register before he could even reach it without standing on a crate. Likewise his son, Josh, first got a taste of the family business by wiping tables and filling sodas outside school hours before officially purchasing and taking over from his mother in 2013. Years later, he remains as committed to the Cozy Dog as ever. “I guess I like to be busy,” he says when describing his work schedule which starts at 7AM with little room for breaks. Yet he consistently gains energy from his customers. “I cannot thank the travelers on Route 66 enough,” he says. “When they see places like us and they hear it’s the third generation, they’re overjoyed to hear that things have lasted that long and when they leave they say ‘Please keep it going. Don’t let it die!’”

It’s safe to assume that as long as the Waldmires keep running the show, The Cozy Dog still has many years ahead.

Casey Claypool – Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway

A few years ago a friend urged Casey Claypool to consider a job with the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway. A member-based organization that works to market, promote and teach communities and business owners about leveraging the road for economic development, on paper she met most qualifications. Still, she says she had good reason to be skeptical of her chances. “I was like ‘Cool- but Route 66, what?’”

Officially hired in 2019, she now works as the organization’s director. During her tenure she’s helped facilitate countless grants, and among many improvement efforts played a significant

role in teaming with Visit Springfield to launch The Route 66 Experience at the Illinois State Fairgrounds. Looking back, she says taking on this role has been the best career decision she's ever made. "The excuse of going out on the road for work and just being able to head out for a day and meet all these small business owners and see what other people are doing along the Route is probably one of my favorite parts of my job."

A neophyte no more, Casey is an unabashed champion for 66's potential. "I think one road trip is all you need and you'll be hooked," she says. "It's a living, breathing, tangible, fantastic icon. Some people are always like, 'It's just a road.' It's not a road. It's people's livelihoods."

Casey knows this from experience. In 2021 she herself became an entrepreneur when she bought an old soda fountain 28 miles south of Springfield in the town of Girard. "After being the director I had this overwhelming desire to be a business owner on Route 66, become a part of history or save something from being lost to history."

Called Doc's Just Off 66, it's perched on Girard's picturesque town square in a former apothecary built in the late 1800s. Boasting a menu of comfort food, burgers, ice cream, milkshakes, and even a few boozy indulgences, it's open seven days a week from 11-8. When asked how she juggles the responsibilities of ownership with her full-time job at the Byway she laughs, "Anyone that knows me knows that I've always done ten things at one time."

More than this, though, she clearly believes her work at Doc's is part of a broader effort to help invest in 66's future. "I think there was a time when people didn't think about it at all," she says of The Route. "(But) I think that everything comes full circle and think we're back to that point now where Route 66 was in its heyday and everybody saw the benefits... Time will tell, but we all truly hope the Centennial is going to open up the doors for another hundred years."

Narrator: Dennis Bringuet

Sign making runs in Dennis Bringuet's blood. The retired third-generation owner of Springfield's historic Ace Sign Company, his German fore bearers adopted the craft before migrating to America nearly a century before he was born. His journey in this field, though, is most directly owed to his Grandfather and childhood hero Franklin G. Horn who founded Ace out of his garage in 1940.

A hand painter by trade, in the years following WWII Mr. Horn embraced neon and illuminated Route 66 with iconic signs for local businesses like Mel-O-Cream Donuts and the A. Lincoln Motel. Not one to scorn change he often said, "If your business isn't growing, it's dying!"

These words have always stuck with Dennis. As a child, he was put to work sweeping the floors of Ace's warehouse and dove headfirst into the family trade upon his high school graduation.

Building on the legacy of his Grandfather and parents, he helped steer Ace into the 21st century. Now boasting a team of 86 managed by his sons, with projects that now include LED and full motion video boards, the company has come a long way in the 84 years since Franklin Horn started painting signs in his garage. Yet Dennis insists the foundation his grandfather established remains unchanged-

“He taught my mom and dad how to succeed just by getting up every morning and working hard and treating customers like you want to be treated- and they’d come back.” As these principles remain very much secure, he sees this cycle continuing and looks towards Ace’s future with optimism. “I’m a part of what my parents and grandparents are. Hopefully my grandkids will be a part of what my wife and I have tried to teach them and now they’re to the point where they can teach us.”

Jeff Fulgenzi – Mahan’s Filling Station

Entrepreneur and former County Board Rep Jeff Fulgenzi’s roots on Springfield’s North End run deep. “My great-grandfather Nicolo Fulgenzi came over in 1908 with no education and limited skills from rural parts of Italy and came here and became a coal miner,” he says of his family’s beginnings. “Every paycheck, money went back home and more relatives came over.” People like these, he says, are the ones who made this neighborhood the hardworking, tight knit community it is.

One need only sit down for lunch at his parents’ restaurant Fulgenzi’s Pizza and Pasta to experience the North Side’s spirit firsthand. Perched on the corner of Sangamon and Peoria on Route 66, it’s emerged as an anchor for the district since it first opened as an ice cream shop in 1979. “Our living room was the front end of the restaurant,” says Jeff who grew up on the property. “We saw tourists and fairgoers for much of my life coming in and out of this restaurant. All walks of life from heroes to zeroes, to hoodlums to politicians. You want to hear a story about an American family who put everything into a small restaurant and made it work? It was good food and good friends that kept ‘em open in the leanest of years and surviving yet today.”

Another North End family who earned Jeff’s respect over the years are the Sheas. Their patriarch, Bill Shea, owned and ran a gas station that sat two blocks down from Fulgenzi’s. A pack rat, upon retirement Mr. Shea converted the space into a museum to house his collection of objects and in 2002 moved Mahan’s Filling Station onto the property. A small, 1920s-era tin structure that is believed to be the oldest metal gas station in Illinois, its future fell into question when it went up for auction in 2015 following Mr. Shea’s death.

“I didn’t want to have the station,” says Jeff. “What I wanted was to not see it leave Route 66. I didn’t want to see it leave the North End of Springfield.” As he tells it, he had no intention of attending the sale because his son was competing in a basketball tournament that day. When he discovered there was a break between games, though, he raced over in time to bid against some interested buyers who hoped to move it to Decatur. “I called my wife to let her know she was the proud owner of the Mahan Filling Station and she wanted to know if I could sleep in it because that was her suggestion. So, I was in a lot of trouble for a long, long time- but she’s a fan now.”

Today the station proudly stands next to Fulgenzi’s, and to Jeff it represents far more than what some might notice at first glance. “It’s what those gas stations meant and what that meant was the freedom of the open road,” he says. “Route 66 is important to understand our history but also the future. I hope that it will continue forever and ever and ever!

Keaton Weinhoeft

While he has no memory of it and the photos were regretfully lost in an old basement, Keaton Weinhoeft will proudly tell you that as a baby, he met famed Springfield artist and Route 66 legend Bob Waldmire at the Cozy Dog In. Born in 2009, which was the same year as Waldmire’s death, Keaton represents a new generation of Route 66 travelers. A YouTube hobbyist and aspiring Amtrak conductor, like many youngsters he discovered Route 66 through the Pixar movie Cars.

“It sparked my imagination,” he says, as he was captivated by its story of perseverance. This interest only intensified when he learned it ran through his hometown of Springfield. Since then, he’s gotten the chance to explore some of the Route in Illinois, hopes to someday drive it to California and is passionate about its preservation.

When asked why the Route is important, he stresses that understanding it is helpful for building the future and that driving it forces people to ease up on the pedal.

“You need to slow down in life. I’ve learned that very quickly and very easily.” And while he’d like to see more done to improve the Route’s pavement and signage, he continues to believe in the Mother Road’s promise and potential. “Route 66 didn’t die. It went away,” he says.

“I don’t think it can die. It definitely will not die because there’s too many people on its side.

Mary Alice Davis

"I'm very proud of my age," says Mary Alice Davis. Having been born in 1936 this attitude is well deserved as she can claim to be ten years younger than Route 66 itself. More than this, she had a front row seat to its early evolutions and mid-century Golden Age as she spent many formative years at Springfield's long shuttered A. Lincoln Motel.

Built by her father she recounts, "In 1945, he decided that with gas rationing going out and building supplies becoming somewhat abundant again, he would start a lumber company and a motel because people were going to be building and they were going to be traveling. So- he quit his industrial arts job, which must have been very brave because he had a family with two small children and started two businesses on Route 66."

Managed and run by her parents, they called the motel the A. Lincoln in honor of our 16th President and catered to travelers in Springfield for over a decade. Near the long-closed Lake Club, Mary Alice recalls they hosted many performers including "The Blind Whistler" Fred Lowery. Yet her Mom and Dad's hospitality also extended to those who couldn't afford a room. "Traffic was steady and (there were) a lot of hitchhikers," she remembers. "They would come to the front office and ask for a drink of water or something to eat. There were so many of them (I thought to myself) that maybe there was a mark on one of the telephone poles or something which indicated that the people that ran that business were friendly and helpful and so forth. Or maybe there were just a lot of hitchhikers at that point."

Demolished in 1996 well after her family had moved on, the motel is probably best remembered for its sign which featured a profile of Abraham Lincoln. Advertising air conditioners, TV and telephones, it was the first neon piece built and designed by the local Ace sign company. While little is known about what happened to the original, to Mary's surprise it experienced a resurrection a few years ago when it was rebuilt in advance of The Route's centennial for the Illinois State Fairgrounds' Neon Village. "I discovered that Ace Sign Company was going to make a replica of it," she says. "And they very kindly invited me out to see it after it was done out at the Fairgrounds and they wheeled it out and plugged it in for me. And it was very exciting."

More than this, its design was included alongside the Gemini Giant and other state landmarks on a float in 2024's Rose Bowl Parade. Sponsored by Illinois tourism, seeing it on national television was an unexpected thrill. "It's just amazing that something far back in my childhood, almost 80 years ago, is suddenly in the Rose Bowl Parade."

Kelly Grant Jr. and Mel-O-Cream Donuts

While America might “run on Dunkin’,” in Springfield, Illinois Mel-O-Cream Donuts rightly reigns supreme. Older than Krispy Kreme, but still privately owned, its story inspired Amanda Crossland to pivot from a career in marketing to purchase the homegrown company’s retail stores in 2019. “There’s just so much community love for it,” she says. “It has a brand recognition you just can’t pay for. I tell new employees that this is a happy place to work because 98% of the people that walk in the door are in a great mood.” Echoing this sentiment is VP and co-owner of Mel-O-Cream International Chris Larson who says, “Because of the many years it’s been in town, everyone associates it with a happy thought or a good time.”

Founded as a single shop at the height of the Depression in 1932, its longevity is largely owed to Kelly Grant Jr. who picked up the mantle of ownership from his father in the early 50s and remained at its helm for over 66 years. Though he sold his interests and officially retired in 2018 after building Mel-O-Cream into a successful wholesale behemoth, at 95 years young he remains a passionate proponent of donuts. “I eat them every chance I get,” he exclaims. “I used to warn people, ‘Don’t bring up donuts because you won’t get me to shut up... I estimate I’ve eaten somewhere between 15 and 18 thousand donuts in my lifetime!’”

Penny Black – “Roadie”

Route 66’s most ardent travelers are casually known as “roadies.” That’s a title Penny Black has unquestionably earned. A retired 411 operator and familiar Mother Road fixture, the miles of 66 her decal-plastered Chevy has covered are incalculable and suggests not anyone can simply proclaim themselves a roadie. “It’s somebody who’s gone from end to end (on the Route) and has made friends along the way,” she says. “It’s not just stopping by and taking pictures of signs. You’ve got to meet people.”

Raised in California, as a young girl 66 was the road her family drove each summer to visit her grandparents in Springfield. From the window of her Dad’s station wagon, she still remembers marveling at sites like tee-pee courts and filling stations that seemingly vanished without warning once they switched to the interstates. It wasn’t until decades later, when by chance construction forced her to exit I-40 that she discovered the Route was hiding in plain sight. “That’s when I realized 66 was still there. I was just on the wrong road,” she says.

Since then, she’s never looked back and has dedicated years to exploring as much of The Mother Road as possible. Even so, despite her many travels she confesses, “I will never ever see all of it- through my whole lifetime. There’s just no way.”

To Penny, the people of Route 66 are what keep her coming back for more. "It's a family, she says. "Never go a day without a hug on 66. More than likely you will get several. And if you don't, you've done something wrong."

Randy Pickett

"I've just always loved to drive," says Randy Pickett. A retired state worker, who now fills his days working as a long-haul trucker, his appreciation for the open road is only exceeded by his passion for automobiles. "There's just something about an old car," he says. "Whether it's the sound of the engine or the ride it gives you- They're just my thing."

This love played no small role in inspiring him to purchase the site of Shea's Gas Station in Springfield, Illinois.

A former Marathon fuel stop that came to house a makeshift museum for its owner, Bill Shea, it evolved into a treasured Route 66 attraction. Located on a nondescript corner on Springfield's North End, its mishmash collection of signs, pumps and memorabilia were as famous as Mr. Shea himself. A D-Day veteran who always greeted visitors in his old workman's uniform, he shared stories with willing listeners into his early 90s before entering assisted living.

Following Mr. Shea's 2013 passing, the station fell into a state of limbo until his family made the emotional decision to sell. Then, Randy became its unlikely savior.

"I didn't want it to become another Dollar General," he says of the space that now houses a few of his cars. "So I bought it and just pay the mortgage. I'm just doing my part for this short period of time."

While the station's interior looks far different without Mr. Shea's bric-a-brac and limited funds have made it challenging for Randy to do much with the space, he takes his ownership responsibilities seriously and is waiting for the right person to sell to. "I do realize it's not all about me," he volunteers. "I've had several opportunities to lease this place. And very tempting... But I turned them down. I didn't want to be the guy that was known as the person that bought the legendary Shea's and let it just deteriorate... If I break even at the end of this, I'm happy."

He also adds- "There's nowhere I'd rather be than around the Route 66 aura- the cars, the pumps, the people, the stories, the dedication to it... You stop and think about the millions of people in this country. There's not a lot of 'em can say, 'Hey, I own a piece of history!'"

George Reisch and Vince Salvo

“Beer is good for the soul,” says George Reisch. A successful fifth-generation brewmaster, his great-great-grandfather Franz learned the craft in Germany before bringing it to Springfield where he christened the Reisch Brewery in 1849. Open for 117 years, at its peak Reisch Beer sold more than 100,000 bottles annually until steep competition forced the company’s closure in 1966. Yet its memory persisted and is enjoying a miraculous rebirth thanks to hobbyists like Vince Salvo whose appreciation for Reisch artwork or “breweriana” inspired them to revive the brand as a charity. Relunched in 2019 with George’s blessing and stewardship, its first batch sold out in under an hour. Now available at many local retailers and restaurants, George attributes this success to Reisch’s history. “The story brings people to their first beer,” he says. “We have a story that just knocks people’s socks off... I just hope that 117 years from now the charity’s still running and we’re doing some really good things in this world. The world needs some more good things to be done.”

Ron Metzger

Ron Metzger defines a motorhead as “Anybody who loves anything with a gas pedal or a brake pedal.” Raised in a family of car fanatics he says, “I’ve been a motorhead pretty much since the day I was born.” For this, when the time came to fulfill his years long dream of opening a restaurant, it only seemed right to call the place Motorheads.

A Springfield native and successful veteran of the flooring business, Ron insists his move into hospitality isn’t as large a pivot as some might think. A self-described “people person” he argues, “If it’s selling cars, selling flooring or selling food and booze- it’s all about the customers. If you make sure the customers are happy first, you’ll be successful in business.”

Judging from its packed parking lot and 90-person staff, Motorheads is by all accounts a success. Opened in 2017, Ron’s journey in reaching this place required hard work and major investment.

Housed in an old Stuckey’s just off I-55 on Route 66, the building had suffered from years of neglect. Nevertheless, upon entering the space for the first time Ron proclaimed, “I’m going to turn this into a restaurant.” To most, this seemed a fool’s errand. “Everybody advised me not to do it,” he recounts- and for good reason. It was filled with drug paraphernalia, mattresses, water damage, mold and even a few raccoons. Yet he was captivated by its wooden, ship-like ceilings and recognized the property’s potential. “I’m a car guy,” he says. “If you find a ’67 Corvette, I don’t care how bad it is- you’ve got to restore it. You can’t just throw it away. And when I looked up, this building was just that deal. You can’t tear this building down even though they should have. That ceiling saved it all. And if you walk in the bar now and look up, you’ll see my thought process.”

More than polished beams, looking up diners will notice antique light fixtures, Ron's first car which is mounted near the bar, and his extensive collection of vintage signs that extends into an adjoining museum. Featuring neon and decorated tins from old local businesses like Shea's Gas Station and the A. Lincoln and Bel Air Motels, Ron insists his interest in these objects extends beyond their visual appeal. "That's what built America," he says of small businesses, and emphatically proclaims- "Route 66 is here to stay!"

Sam Quasi – Maid Rite Sandwich Shop

As a child growing up in Jordan, Sam Quasi's perceptions of America were largely shaped by TV shows like Gunsmoke and old Hollywood pictures. "We thought if you'd go to America, you'd be in one of those movies," he jokes.

Instead, he pursued studies in Chicago before following friends to Springfield. "We always looked for friends at that time because if you're alone, you'll get lost," he says. More than friends, he found a wife and work, and around 1995 began looking for properties to buy and flip. Then employed by the Illinois Department of Revenue, his real estate agent encouraged him to check out the Maid-Rite which happened to sit across the street from his office.

Nearly thirty years later, he stands as the longest serving owner and manager in the businesses's history and remains its greatest cheerleader.

"Home of the Loose Meat Sandwich," which is a blend of ground seasoned chuck served on a steamed bun with mustard, pickles and onions, the Maid Rite is no less beloved among locals for its homemade root beer served in frosted mugs. Housed in a converted caboose, on an old alignment of Route 66 at the corner of Pasfield and Jefferson, little about the menu has changed since it was officially opened in 1924. "It's a lot of history," says Sam, who as its caretaker reports to work at 7 AM, 6 days a week to make sure everything is in order for lunch service. More than this, he's there each day to greet customers from behind the counter and encourages new visitors to sign his guest book. Boasting signatures from around the world, it stands as a living document of the many souls he's met during his time here. "There's too many stories," he chuckles.

While Sam acknowledges that retirement is something he's pursued and thinks about, he also isn't necessarily in a rush to hang things up and suggests he has a few years left in him. "I'm looking for somebody local to keep the place going, follow my steps. I just want to make it going for the next generation," he insists and until then stresses, "I'll be here. I'm not going to give up. I'm going to keep her going."

And despite his decades in the kitchen, swears he's never lost his taste for loose meat. "I've been eating one every day. I have to taste one each morning. I get sick on Sunday because I don't have one!"

Dr. Stacy Grundy- Route History

Dr. Stacy Grundy hails from a rural corner of southern Illinois. "There wasn't a lot to do growing up, so I just read," she says with a laugh. "I love reading and I love to learn!" Years later, she's putting this passion to use as co-CEO of Route History. "As an adult it comes in handy because what is common knowledge to me is not to everyone else."

The only physical museum dedicated to Route 66's African-American experience, Route History describes itself as a place where history and technology are integrated "through exhibits, storytelling and a virtual reality experience that highlights the significant roles of Black businesses, the Negro Motorist Green Book, the Great Migration and sundown towns along the Illinois leg of Route 66 during the Civil Rights and Jim Crow eras."

Housed in a converted 1948 Texaco station, Dr. Grundy says the museum is the brainchild of co-owner Dr. Gina Lathan who having researched the Green Book "wanted her grandson to see people that looked like him and to know that they made great contributions to the city of Springfield."

Dr. Grundy confesses she hadn't thought much of Route 66 until this project got moving, but that it's come to resonate with her. The granddaughter of migrants from Mississippi, who grew up surrounded by historic sundown towns, she recognizes much of her family's past in the Route's overarching narrative. "What made me excited was being able to connect the stories of my history to the road," she says. "We have a Route 66 story, but it just looks different."

To Dr. Grundy, sharing this story is important to help build a future. "Our history is tied to everything," she says. "It is tied to our health. It is tied to our education. It is tied to economics. And so, if you don't know your history, then you don't know where you're going."

The Chili Parlor- Marianne Rogers, Roy and Stephanie Beal

The people of Springfield take their chili seriously. A staple of Illinois bar menus, its preparation has a way of eliciting strong opinions in its most ardent fans. But whether served spicy or mild, oily, or with or without beans, The Chili Parlor on South 9th takes pride in making each order to suit their customers demands.

“I like mine firebrand with light beans and light oil,” says Marianne Rogers whose father founded The Parlor in 1945. “Here, my dad always cooked the beans and the meat separately. He used to say it was chili as you like it- whether it’s with different beans, or different spice level, or different oil. He was the only one who ever did that.”

Born a year before The Parlor’s opening, Marianne started helping out by washing dishes and cleaning beans at age 12. When her dad died in 1973, she bought the business from her mother and quit a job with the state to work early mornings in the kitchen. “I’ve known this my whole life,” she adds. “I didn’t want this part of history to die. This is for me to keep my father alive.”

She held on for decades. Then, after a few mixed attempts at selling the Parlor, in 2014 she found two willing buyers in married couple and regular customers Roy and Stephanie Beal.

“He was not happy at his job,” says Stephanie, who was at the time working as a medical secretary. “I called him and said, ‘Marianne’s selling the place. Do you want to do it?’ He’s like, ‘Yep, let’s do it.’ And that was pretty much it.”

Having not worked in restaurants since he was 21, Marianne brought Roy into the kitchen to show him the ropes. Together, they worked side by side for roughly a year until all papers were officially signed. “With her help, we were able to carry on her family tradition,” he says. “And here we are now, almost nine years later!”

Like Marianne, the Beals recognize The Chili Parlor’s proud history and are committed to doing their part to ensure it has a long future. “I’m hoping that we can keep it going until we can’t keep it going any longer,” Stephanie says. “I hope there’s someone that can step in and take it over. It’s a great tradition and I would just hate for it to ever go away.”

That day hopefully won’t come for some time. And reflecting on their ownership, Marianne- who still helps here a few days out of the week- can’t help but beam. “They really don’t know how much I love them and how proud I am for them,” she smiles before adding with a laugh- “I love them more than their parents ever could!”

William “Bill” Crook – Artist

Born and raised in Springfield, Bill Crook’s mother gave him a drawing set around the age of four and even remembers her allowing him to scribble on the walls. Yet, he admits to having little interest in art until discovering the underground comics movement of the late 1960s. Soon after, captivated by the power of the expressive graphic medium, he gave up his engineering degree to pursue drawing full-time.

“I started out trying to copy what other people did, and then I got criticized for that rightly so,” he says reflecting on his journey. Undaunted, he began practicing in a sketchbook, cultivated an eye for recognizing the subtleties of the natural world in lighting and form and developed a talent for rendering three dimensional images of architecture. Since then, he’s earned the respect and acclaim of many luminaries including R.J. Crumb who’s called him “a top American artist of our time.”

He also developed an endearing friendship with fellow Springfield artist and counterculture figure, Bob Waldmire. An itinerant bohemian, who found his spiritual home in the southwestern desert, Bob famously endeared himself to the residents and workers of Route 66 by drawing detailed maps that combined jumbles of text and cartoon imagery into cohesive scenes. And while Bill took a different approach to his work, he says their kinship was born out of a mutual understanding-

“He came out of the 60s, with the same influence that I had which was San Francisco, rock music, psychedelic art,” Bill recounts. “As an artist we have this common ground. Bob’s one of the great ones.”

Beyond drawing, one of Bob’s most famous creations was his “Road Yacht,” which was a two-story residence on wheels he built out of an old yellow school bus. Featuring a kitchen, shower, sauna and self composting toilet, Bill helped him navigate the Yacht on 66 as he made his way from Springfield to Arizona.

Reflecting on that trip Bill says, “He knew people everywhere. The whole stretch. And whenever he showed up, they’d always be thrilled to see him. It’s be like an occasion when Bob pulled into town.”

But while some called him “The Mayor of Route 66,” in many ways Springfield remained his home and was where he chose to return when he realized his days were numbered.

“He was cryptic about it at first,” Bill remembers. “He didn’t go to a doctor so he didn’t really know that he had this specific ailment which turned out to be cancer.”

Recognizing Bob needed funds, Bill and others rallied to host a sale they called Bob’s Last Art Show at his family’s renowned Cozy Dog Drive-In. While jaundiced and confined to a wheelchair, Bill says his spirits remained strong and welcomed the opportunity to spend time among friends. “There was a line through the parking lot of people waiting to get in,” he says. “It was a tremendous outpouring of support and love.”

Bob died roughly three weeks later, and Bill paid him a bedside visit the night before his passing.

“We just sat there and both drew. And that was the last time I saw him alive,” he reflects. “He died with a lot of integrity.”

Bill continues to honor his friend and a few years ago wrote and self-published a book celebrating Bob's legacy. "What compelled me to write it was just that I realized my own mortality and that if I didn't do it, it would never get done."

As Waldmire was himself an entirely independent, self-starting artist, it's safe to` assume he would only approve.