

THE LAST MURAL

Photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pies On Route 66



America's most famous highway is home to a number of memorable characters, individuals who represent the spirit of the nation, people who have defined their own path and future. But perhaps none is as beloved and well-remembered as the wandering artist and environmentalist, Bob Waldmire. Traveling up and down the 2,448 miles of road coursing through America, Waldmire embodied the free and friendly nature of Old Route 66, certainly making an impression with his bright orange 1972 Volkswagen Microbus, towed by a school bus that he had converted into his home on wheels. He was quite the sight, but people loved it.

"Everybody loved to see him coming," remembered Buz, Bob's brother. "He'd be traveling on the highway, and people would see his van go down the road, and they'd make a U-turn and try to catch up to him."

Born in 1945, Waldmire exhibited an interest in art from childhood, constantly sketching and creating posters, filling in any blank spaces with details and information — a style that would become recognizable throughout his career. This passion for drawing followed him throughout high school and into his time as a student at Southern Illinois University. There he began drawing birds-eye-view posters of towns across the state. One day, while stopping back home in Springfield, Illinois, for a visit, his father, Ed, who owned and operated the historic Cozy Dog Drive-In, inspired Bob to embark on his own Route 66 journey.

"My dad asked, 'Why are you doing a poster of one town in the whole state? Increase your customer base.' My dad was a capitalist. Bob was not. But he did four state posters, starting in Missouri, and then he got the idea to do a map of all Route 66," continued Buz.

Waldmire would go on to live much of his life on the Mother Road, making a living from selling hand-drawn postcards of businesses — sometimes being paid via food and lodging in place of cash — and forming friendships that would grow as he drove up and down America's Main Street. Later in life, he bought and settled on a piece of land in Arizona.

"He bought some property in the Chiricahua Mountain range in southeastern Arizona, and moved down there," noted Buz. "A lot of friends helped him move. And then he was pretty much off the grid. He had a generator system, he had a windmill system, he had somebody bring water once in a while, and he had befriended all the natives."

By 2008, the City of Pontiac, Illinois, was coordinating with community artists and Diaz Sign Art, a local company that had experience with large-scale artwork in the area, to plan the Walldogs Exhibit for the upcoming year, an event that would culminate in a festival surrounding the painting of 18 iconic advertisement murals that celebrate American aesthetics. Hearing that they wanted to commission his work, Waldmire came back to Illinois and took a couple of weeks to design a mural of Route 66, intending to paint and mount it. However, numerous engagements and his own declining health hindered this effort and it was soon clear that he could not complete

the mural. As such, he gave the design to Buz for the City of Pontiac to complete another time. On December 16, 2009, he passed away from cancer. He was only 64.

With Waldmire's design, bus, and van in tow, his brother went back to Pontiac.

"The city of Pontiac rolled out the red carpet. I wasn't sure what to do with his van and his bus, but they wanted it up there. So, we made a deal: I would rent them the bus and the van on indefinite loan, and they agreed to store the van inside a museum and put the bus outside the museum," said Buz.

Having Waldmire's design already prepared, the City of Pontiac once again enlisted the help of Diaz Sign Art to put it up in all its glory. To augment the already picturesque design, they added a panel of Waldmire's smiling face, ready to create in his dad's old pink-and-white striped painting shirt — a suitable addition to Waldmire's well-thought-out vision.

Sixty-six feet long, the mural depicts all of Route 66, littered along the way with detailed vintage postcards that are unmistakably Bob. Red dots mark stops along the way from Santa Monica to Chicago, with a blue arrow pointing to Pontiac. The background is marked by soft greens, pinks, and blues to reflect the different regions and environments that the highway ribbons through.

Waldmire's mural was mounted on the wall of the Rathbun Building, a historic anchor of the downtown area that was constructed in the late 1800s. The building is adjacent to the Route 66 Association Hall of Fame & Museum — a simple but packed museum located in an old firehouse and within the city's former City Hall building — where Waldmire's beloved vehicles are also housed as part of the Bob Waldmire Experience.

In May 2011, more than 500 visitors flocked to the Red Carpet Corridor Festival, an annual celebration honoring towns along Route 66's first 100 miles, spanning from Joliet to Bloomington, Illinois. With an eye-popping turnout, the Diaz's set metal panels at ground level with the design outlined via projector and guided people as they came up to paint it in — many leaving their handprints in the paint, making the community part of the mural itself. The painting was completed at the end of the festival and was mounted with brackets onto the brick wall facing Route 66.

"It was more memorializing him, but there was still a lot of happiness, a lot of fun, so it was a little bit of both, and having his family here was really important," said Ellie Alexander, former Pontiac tourism director. "I think that every one of them came up to us and thanked us for what was happening. They were happy to see so many people there. Most of these people had some kind of connection or knew Bob, so it was a beautiful, sunny day."

Now, Bob Waldmire's smiling face and expansive mural stand — along with 25 other murals — in the city of Pontiac; a poetic ending for the man who lived his life creating and sharing his art along its many curves, himself delighted with each and every new discovery and meeting with longtime friends.