

GET YOUR KICKS UNDER THE ROAD

While it may not look like it today, at one point, during Route 66's heyday, numerous sections of the highway were incredibly busy with automobile traffic, making pedestrian crossing certainly a little dangerous. So, several towns devised plans to safeguard their foot traffic while ensuring that the flow of the motoring public went undisrupted. Today, underneath a section of Route 66 that runs through peaceful Chelsea, Oklahoma, survives one of these plans; a pedestrian underpass that holds a piece of the town's storied past and is a symbol of the historic road's legacy.

By 1956, parts of 30-year-old Route 66 had approval to expand from two lanes to four due to the pressure of growing traffic. At that time, Chelsea was nearing the completion of a new elementary school building on the east side of town, raising concerns among residents about students crossing the four-lane Route 66. As a result, plans to build a pedestrian

underpass were introduced and approved by the Oklahoma State Highway Commission later that year. In November 1958, the subterranean pedestrian underpass was opened.

"We [used] to walk across town and use the underpass. It wasn't really nice down there then, but it wasn't too scary for little kids, either. We were in fourth, fifth grade at the time. But after Route 66 was decommissioned, it was abandoned,"

recalled Pam Stanbro, a lifelong Chelsea resident.

Once Highway 66 was de-certified in April 1985, traffic reduced, and the underpass ceased to be of use. For three decades, it lay neglected and decrepit until a chance road trip sparked an idea. In 2015, Stanbro and her husband, Bill, traveled west to celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary in Malibu, California. Debating on a route back to Oklahoma, they decided to embark on a Mother Road adventure.

"At that time, we were stopping and getting brochures and maps and stuff. Chelsea wasn't even listed as a Route 66 town. So, we're like, 'We've got to get Chelsea on the map!' So, all the way home, I'm getting these ideas, and I'm planning to go home and tell my friends, 'We've got to do something!'"

Pulling up to the only stoplight in Chelsea, the Stanbros unexpectedly spotted the forgotten underpass across the street and found inspiration. Along with

other residents concerned about Chelsea's decline, they created Project Chelsea with the goal of preserving and promoting the town's Route 66 history. Their first project to restore the pedestrian underpass and highlight its historical significance came to life in January 2016 with the recruitment of local Sapulpa muralist Kenneth Hollingshead, who was excited to help alongside the Stanbros' son, Parker. The plan was to have painted mural illustrations of the history of the town.

"They wanted to include some kind of business that was actually on Route 66 in Chelsea. I had a picture of my grandfather's station, and Hollingshead had the idea to paint it on there. Then we got to talking about Parker's old car — a Buick — that he was given when he was two years old. So, Hollingshead said, 'Well, let's paint that car on there too,' and decided to paint the little boy and the older man. It looks like Parker is standing there in front of his great-

grandpa's station. And it made it more than just a mural for my family. It made it pretty special," said Stanbro.

Hollingshead also added other postcard paintings along one wall that included several beloved Chelsea landmarks, including the Pryor Creek Bridge, built along Route 66 in 1926 and used until the highway's realignment in 1932, the Chelsea Motel, built in the mid-1930s, a view of Main Street from the early 1900s,

and Oklahoma's first oil well, among others. The opposite wall of the tunnel was titled "Sign Our Wall" to encourage visitors to sign and leave their mark under America's Main Street.

Four months and \$6,000 in donations and fundraising later, the restored underpass was unveiled to 300 people at the grand reopening on April 30, 2016. The event included Cherokee nation speakers, a barbeque, and a car show.

Once an abandoned relic, the revitalization of the underground tunnel has put Chelsea back on the map, despite declining activity and some challenges with vandalism. Now existing as the only 'open' pedestrian tunnel of its kind on the Mother Road, the Chelsea Route 66 Underpass serves as a nostalgic reminder of the heydays of Route 66 and the efforts to accommodate both vehicular and pedestrian traffic on one of America's most famous — and busy — highways.

