

A STATION IS REBORN

As Route 66 winds southwest through Edwardsville, Illinois — now designated as State Route 157 — it transforms into St. Louis Street, where a humble 1,200-square-foot, sand-colored brick building quietly claims its place as the town's oldest enduring façade. Situated at the corner of West Street, the aptly named West End Service Station has been a fixture almost as long as the Mother Road itself. Its original red-brick structure was built in 1927, standing as a beacon for early adventurers embarking on journeys into the great unknown.

The two-pump station began its life as Springer's Madison Oil Company, a venture launched by Henry Springer, a well-to-do businessman who operated the business while Mobil Oil Corporation retained ownership of the building, leasing it to entrepreneurs. Springer managed the station successfully — even weathering the Great Depression — but in 1936, at the height of its success, he sold the business to Robert Smith and Ralph Ladd. The new owners renamed it Ladd's West End Service Station, with Ladd enlisting his brother Earl to assist in running the operation. Meanwhile, the then ten-year-old Mother Road was also poised for change.

"In 1937, all the roads on Route 66 were reconstructed through Edwardsville, and they were approached by the State of Illinois about rerouting, [and] resurfacing Route 66. They widened the pavement and moved from brick streets to paved roads," said SJ Morrison, an alderman for Edwardsville City Council. "Construction didn't actually begin until 1939, but when that happened, it made travel so much nicer. So, there was increased business and they needed an expanded station."

The original structure was soon torn down for a larger one, with two bays for quicker service, a small store space on the left, and the light yellow brick exterior seen today. Its Grand Opening ceremony was in August 1939.

"Because of his bad eyesight, [Earl] eventually needed to get out of the business. So, in 1948, Hank Dohle and Doc Heidinger bought the station. They both worked locally in the automobile service industry, and were well known individuals in town. They ran it longer than anybody, from 1948 to 1959," recalled Morrison. "It became a

place where neighbors and customers assembled to read the newspaper, catch up on local gossip, or sit around and listen to a ball game on the radio. It was sort of a neighborhood hangout."

However, in 1960, interstate 55 ripped its way through Illinois, diverting 66's previously unmatched traffic and ushering in its decline. Mobil raised the rent, so Dohle and Heidinger sold operations to Ralph Ellsworth, a local businessman who renamed it Ralph's Mobil Service Station.

In 1964, after outgrowing the lot, Ellsworth sold the building and moved business to the corner of West and Short streets, keen to the fact that service stations were morphing into the convenient gas and snack havens that travelers now know and love. Thus, the service station business at West End drew to a close, but it would find surprising new life as a dentist office after being purchased and remodeled by John

Beatty that same year. In 1981, dentist Dale Clawson took over until retiring in 2021, when the Illinois Department Of Transportation bought the building, seeking to demolish it and expand the Route 157 and West Street intersection. However, this would not fly with SJ Morrison.

"I'm a member of Edwardsville City Council, and I have been involved with saving old buildings that I think have historical value, so I went to our staff at the city and said, 'Do you think

IDOT (Illinois Department of Transportation) would give us the building?' IDOT said, 'No, we have to sell it at a public auction.' Then I approached the Great Rivers and Routes Tourism Bureau, and we found out that this was one of the last remaining Route 66 service stations within 60 miles. So, we were like, 'Wow, you got to be kidding me,'" recalled Morrison. "We applied for a grant, got \$460,000, and were able to buy the station from the state. We hired an architect, and renovated and restored it."

West End was unveiled to an adoring public once again in June 2023, its almost 90-year-old exterior welcomed, this time, by those seeking knowledge about this little station's big history. It is not only a historic landmark, but also a spot for free events and community meetings, harkening back to its past as an unassuming neighborhood hangout and kitschy tourist attraction on one of the most iconic roads in America.

