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Route 66 was built to carry travelers from the bustling streets of Chicago in the east to the sun-soaked avenues of Los Angeles in the west, yet it never did follow a straight path. It twisted and turned, linking big cities and small towns. It became a road that carried not just people, but the very soul of Americana. One of those turns in El Reno, Oklahoma, led westbound travelers to veer left at the spotlight on South Choctaw Avenue (U.S. 81) and Sunset Drive (Route 66). It's here, at this simple corner, at 120 S Choctaw Ave., that a reimagined 1930s Texaco gas station stands today as the Filling Station Visitor Center. The station no longer fills tanks, but it does carry the stories and spirit of every station that came before it.

For decades, this corner has seen the comings and goings of countless travelers. Known as the "Crossroads of the Continent," it is where Route 66 intersects U.S. 81, a 1,200-mile highway stretching from the Canadian border to Fort Worth, Texas, and an unofficial part of the Pan-American Highway that extends to South America.

Accounts differ on exactly when the property first opened, but as early as 1935, newspapers were already advertising it as the Schulte Service Station. Just a year later, the Huckabee Service Station moved in from North Choctaw, only to be replaced by a Goodyear under Don Bishop by the end of 1939. In May 1942, the Henry Schafer Oil Company gave the station a new twist, opening it as both a service station and a supermarket, an example of multitasking on Route 66. The station's ownership seemed to change as often as the cars that rolled through. In 1944, it became a Texaco under Courtney & Baker, only for Murray W. Baker to take sole ownership the following year and rename it the Baker Service Station. By early 1951, Robert L. Harvey and Lyle McGoffin were at the helm, and by December, McGoffin bought out his partner and rebranded it simply as Lyle's. The decades that followed are murky, but by 2003, the property was serving cars as Kelley Dodson's Gentle Touch Detailing. But even with its storied history, by the early 2020s, the building had seen better days.

In the winter of 2023, the City of El Reno began exploring ways to boost tourism, especially with the Route 66 and U.S. 81 centennials approaching in 2026. With a history so deeply tied to auto service and repair, it's no surprise that the City turned to this corner for inspiration. The once-proud Texaco station had fallen into disrepair, used mainly for storage, while mobile homes and RVs blocked the view of its iconic "Crossroads of America" mural. Painted in 2009 by local watercolor artist Chris Small, the mural captures an idyllic vision of the open road; a cherry-red Corvette cruising across the Oklahoma prairie. It had the potential to be a magnet for travelers, but only if it could be seen. Recognizing that opportunity, the City stepped in with a plan to renovate the building and make the most of its prime location at the junction of two historic highways.

In February 2024, the City took ownership of the property, envisioning the station as a hub for travelers heading in every direction. By June, their vision gained momentum

with the approval of a \$1.2 million matching grant from the Oklahoma Route 66 Revitalization Grant Program. Over the following year, the City teamed up with Lingo Construction to bring the station back to life: fresh concrete underfoot, thoughtfully designed retail space, and LED lighting that mimics the warm glow of classic neon.

After the restorations were complete, the City held a soft opening on May 3, 2025 — coinciding with El Reno's famous Fried Onion Burger Day Festival. With thousands of visitors flooding downtown for a taste of the city's beloved burgers, it was the perfect moment to cut the ribbon on the Filling Station Visitor Center and give locals a sneak peek before the official opening on May 24.

But the Filling Station holds a delightful surprise: beyond its polished facilities and memorabilia, it doubles as a showcase for classic cars. A rotating "Car of the Month" display allows local enthusiasts to present their prized vehicles in the station's gleaming two car bays, giving visitors an unexpected glimpse of automotive history.

"We've had visiting cars from as far as Sapulpa," said Iyndsay Bayne, the Public Information & Marketing Manager for the City of El Reno. "It's been so much fun."

Car culture isn't just present here; it's woven into the town's identity. The City's annual three-day event, A Small Town Weekend, draws Americana enthusiasts from across the state, celebrating classic cars, nostalgia, and of course, the open road. By recreating the 1950s charm of this Texaco station, El Reno has given visitors the chance to see midcentury vehicles exactly where they belong. And the appeal has been global: visitors from more than 50 countries, including Mongolia, Spain, and India, have stopped by, exceeding even the City's expectations.

"We had no idea how popular it was going to be," said Bayne. "Locals were kind of naysaying at the beginning, but as soon as we started reporting how many people were stopping, our haters became our defenders. It's been a real point of pride for the community."

The Filling Station reflects El Reno's history not just in its car culture but also through displaying the work of its local artists. From Cheyenne and Arapaho beadwork to Joseph Buchanan's Route 66 paintings and postcards, and a quilt by MaCrae Putnam.

"It's so much fun to display all of this local art that wouldn't otherwise be showcased," continued Bayne. "A lot of these people don't have their own stores. So, it's been really nice to sell their merchandise, and the travelers really appreciate the custom stuff over the generic stuff. They want the Route 66 experience."

Every Route 66 stop has a story, and The Filling Station is no exception. From early gas pumps to local artwork and classic cars, it captures the rhythms of a town shaped by movement, by travelers, and by community, a vivid reminder that the spirit of the endless road is alive and well in El Reno. In this town, the road doesn't just pass through, it pauses, leaving a mark on both the people who live there and the ones who wander through.