

Bob Waldmire – How the Artist’s Route 66 Adventure Began and Ended

Waldmire earned the Steinbeck award and Hall of Fame honors for living and fostering the spirit of Route 66

By Miche Collins



Route 66 artist and icon Bob Waldmire heard the call of the open road and found the courage to follow his dreams.

Waldmire’s journey began with big ideas and ideology, plus a zeal for sharing his art, talent and love for people and life on historic Route 66.

The work of another artist inspired Waldmire’s detour to a life that was off the beaten track. While a student at Southern Illinois University, Bob discovered the artwork of another SIU student who had drawn a highly detailed, bird’s-eye-view sketch of Carbondale, Ill.

Waldmire was inspired to draw a similar perspective of his home base in Springfield, Ill., located on historic U.S. Highway 66, otherwise known as Route 66. The rest is Route 66 history. Before long, Waldmire had drawn detailed illustrations of over 30 cities along historic Route 66. He sold space on his posters to local businesses and then sold prints on-site at those businesses, too.

He soon discovered that the income was just enough to fuel – literally and figuratively – his love for the open spaces, the free-spirited lifestyle and the leisurely appeal of the open road.

He began spending more time at various stops on Route 66, while striving to live “off the grid.” His artwork, lifestyle and bumper stickers often incorporated his passionate advocacy for a number of causes. This included conservation of resources, wildlife preservation, simple living and peace.

Bob Waldmire – Resident Peacenik, Mayor, Ambassador and Naturalist of Route 66

Waldmire was a unique breed of “snowbird.” In autumn, he followed Route 66 south from his home in Springfield, Ill. He discovered new people and places, and created portraits of communities and attractions along the way. By the time it was winter in Springfield, Bob was enjoying the sunshine in Arizona, New Mexico or California.

He made a lot of friends and his art captured the essence of many Route 66 icons. He drew vintage motels, family-style restaurants, full-service gas stations and quirky icons. He sketched the Rock Café in Stroud, Okla., Angel’s Barbershop in Seligman, Ariz., the Dwight Windmill in Dwight, Ill., and the Edsel graveyard in Shamrock, Texas. He created large, detailed posters featuring entire states on Route 66, from Illinois to California.

He was called the Mayor of Route 66, the Ambassador of Route 66 and – a name he gave himself – the Naturalist of Route 66. In addition to roadside icons, he drew wildlife that reflected his love of nature. His drawings featured scenic views and local flora and fauna, from raccoons to rattlesnakes.

Enjoying the Road and the Ride

Waldmire cruised Route 66 in his own unique style, whether it was in a VW Squareback minivan or a Ford Mustang Fastback. The Stang was white with a blue stripe decorated with a map drawn from his own Route 66 artwork.

In 1985, Waldmire bought his trademark yellow 1972 Volkswagen minivan. It became his studio, his business office, his residence and his ride. It had a bike rack on top and a side table where he could display and sell his art. Waldmire dubbed his van a “billboard on wheels.” It was covered inside and out with cause buttons, peace signs and bumper stickers.

He later converted a retired yellow school bus into an environmentally friendly homestead. He added on to the top and used water tanks instead of running water, a wood stove or solar heat, and a windmill for electricity.

Waldmire Meets Fillmore, Bumper to Bumper

Bob and his vintage VW minibus were the inspiration for the colorful "Fillmore" peacenik character in the Disney/Pixar movie “Cars.”

"Fillmore" was a personified 1960 Volkswagen bus and resident Route 66 hippie. Disney/Pixar creatives wanted to name their character Waldmire after the Route 66 legend who inspired it. But Bob Waldmire – who called himself an "ethical vegetarian" – turned down the offer. He didn't like the prospect of his namesake's toys being sold with McDonald's decidedly non-vegetarian Happy Meals.

Waldmire captured the concept, though, with humor and style, in an intricately sketched “Wish I was there” postcard. It was titled: “Waldmire and Fillmore: A Chance Meeting.” It featured a personified and surprised version of Waldmire's yellow VW facing – bumper to bumper – the green movie version of his van as "Fillmore." The card noted that the two minivan characters had met “somewhere on Old 66.”

The colorful background includes detailed landscapes dotted with the familiar red Burma Shave signs. The intricately drawn duo also appeared in a Waldmire sketch of the Rock Cafe in Stroud, Okla. Dawn Welch, owner of the real-life Rock Cafe, was the inspiration for Sally, the Porsche character in the “Cars” movie.

Farewell Tour: “Come as you are. Leave different.”

Waldmire earned the John Steinbeck Award for his work to preserve and commemorate Route 66. He was inducted into the Route 66 Hall of Fame, and his familiar Volkswagen van will eventually be displayed in a museum along Route 66.

Waldmire helped preserve and promote nature, heritage, his beloved Route 66 and life in the slow lane. He created a lot of artwork, inspired a lot of people, made a lot of friends, and lived the good life until he came to his own end of the road at the age of 64.

On December 16, 2009, Bob Waldmire died after a battle with cancer that had sidelined his travels, but not his spirit. Before he died, he planned a farewell tour and requested that his ashes be buried by his parents, Ed and Virginia Waldmire, in Rochester, Ill. He asked that some of his ashes be scattered along Route 66 and by his second Route 66 home in Portal, Ariz. His brothers planted *Forget-Me-Not* flowers on his Rochester gravesite.

Waldmire lived a humble and frugal, yet rich life that enriched others, too. In November of 2009, he held a farewell art show at his family's restaurant and Route 66 landmark, the Cozy Dog Drive In, in Springfield, Ill.

The invitation read, "Come as you are. Leave different." Bob signed prints of his art and greeted old and new friends from near and far.

Visitors can still see and share his artwork and memories at The Cozy Dog Drive In on Route 66 and at BobWaldmire.com. In one way or another, most who encounter the man, the Mother Road and the memories, really do "leave different."

More about Bob Waldmire and about the Waldmire Family Restaurant on Illinois Route 66

Route 66 Road Trip - the Original Cozy Dog, Springfield, IL
Illinois Route 66 Cozy Dog Drive In Road Food Menu
Route 66 Cozy Dog Drive In Breakfast Menu and Retro Vacation

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