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ILLINOIS ROUTE 66 SCENIC BYWAY DELIVERS SERIES OF INTERPRETIVE STATUES IN NINE COMMUNITIES ALONG THE MOTHER ROAD

A new series of interpretive statues and corresponding wayside panels are in the process of being installed in nine Route 66 communities along the famous highway in Illinois. The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway coordinated the project, which was funded through grants from the Federal Highway Administration’s National Scenic Byway Program and the Illinois Office of Tourism.

Bill Kelly, Executive Director of the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway, explained the significance of this latest series of interpretive exhibits along Illinois Route 66. “Statues tell the story of The Road in a way that is unique and unexpected by visitors. They also serve as a fun photo opportunity”, said Kelly. The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway in the past has also worked with community partners to develop a series of 31 wayside exhibits and 14 experience hubs that have already been installed for the enhancement of the Route 66 experience for the traveler.

The “shadow statues” are so nicknamed because they are two-dimensional iron statues depicting a famous scene from the history of Route 66 in Illinois.

Running north to south, the interpretive statues are as follows:


- Elwood: Rosie the Riveter – the symbol of the female worker during WWII at the Elwood Arsenal, two massive plants that employed 20,000 workers making bombs and shells.

- Pontiac: Motorcycle Police – this exhibit, located at the old Illinois State Police headquarters in Pontiac, tells the story of the beginning of the Illinois State Police motorcycle patrol.

- McLean: Dixie Gas Attendant – interprets Illinois oldest truck stop, The Dixie Truckers Home, opened in 1928 and still in operation today. The historic McLean Depot is also featured.

- Elkhart: Shirley Temple – tells the story of the famous visit of Shirley Temple to the House by the Side of the Road Café in 1938.

- Sherman: Wayside Park – depicts a picnic during the heyday of Route 66 at one of the few remaining wayside parks along Route 66.

- Gillespie: Miner – Gillespie also was black diamond mining country and central to the development of unions, with organizing conventions and subsequent riots that killed over twenty people.

- Benld: Coliseum Ballroom Dancers – the biggest dance floor between Chicago and St. Louis attracted large crowds, many top-name performers, and the gambling and bootlegging that inevitably came along with it. The Coliseum burned down in 2011.

- Staunton: Illinois Traction System – Electrified interurban railways connected travelers before Route 66 became the major national highway. They became obsolete in the mid-1950s.

For more information, contact the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway at 217-525-9308 or visit www.illinoisroute66.info & www.illinoisroute66.org. SEE IMAGES BELOW.
Mining Black Diamonds

Braidwood's Coal Boom

In 1864, farmer Thomas Byron dug a well and struck "black diamonds"—coal.

The next year, Scottish miner James Braidwood saw the coal deposit. James and his brother, Colin, invested $500 and opened the Braidwood Coal Company. The brothers used a simple hand auger to dig shafts to the coal seams. By 1870, 50 men worked in the mines.

In 1872, a mine explosion killed 10 men. The Braidwood Coal Company went bankrupt, and the town was abandoned. The coal seams were redeveloped by the state in the early 1900s.

Elwood Arsenal

depth from the Homefront

Threat of war in 1940 transformed the farming town of Elwood into a munitions manufacturing hub.

The War Department acquired 40,000 acres and built two massive plants to assemble bombs and shells. The plants employed more than 20,000 people. Route 66 carried workers from nearby cities and provided a corridor for shipments.

The Motor Police

Patrolling Route 66

The Illinois State Police was appointed in 1925 to provide law enforcement.

Spearheaded by Assemblyman Charles D. Harris, the law was ratified by the Illinois General Assembly in 1925. It took effect in 1926.

In 1927, the Illinois State Police was authorized to operate on state highways, and police officers were given the authority to enforce traffic laws.

The Illinois State Police was the first state law enforcement agency to operate on state highways. It was charged with enforcing traffic laws and maintaining public safety on the state's highways.

In 1935, the Illinois State Police was assigned to enforce the state's laws on state highways.

The Illinois State Police was responsible for maintaining public safety on the state's highways. It was also responsible for enforcing traffic laws, including speed limits and seat belt laws.

In 1940, the Illinois State Police was assigned to enforce the state's laws on state highways.

The Illinois State Police was charged with enforcing traffic laws and maintaining public safety on the state's highways. It was also responsible for investigating accidents and traffic collisions.

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In 2015, the Illinois State Police was assigned to enforce the state's laws on state highways.

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In 2020, the Illinois State Police was assigned to enforce the state's laws on state highways.

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In 2025, the Illinois State Police was assigned to enforce the state's laws on state highways.

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An Oasis on Route 66
Sherman Wagons Park

Wagons Park was a stop on the old Route 66 and once featured "The Mother Road" restaurant.

Heart of Coal Country
Gillespie Area Mines

Waves of European immigrants poured into Gillespie in the 1880s to work its coal mines.

In the early 1900s, the Chicago and North Western Railroad opened four mines to fuel its locomotives.

Locals knew each town by its mine number: Eugeneville (No. 1), Sewaneeville (No. 2), Mount Clare (No. 3), and Willowville (No. 4). The Little Dog Mine operated here from 1918 to 1966. Although the mines are now closed, Gillespie still celebrates this heritage each June with Black Diamond Days.

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