



## **Four Illinois Route 66 Preservation Projects are Recipients of the 2016 National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program Cost-share Grant Awards**

**For Immediate Release: Tuesday, August 30, 2016. To set up media interviews contact Bill Kelly, Executive Director, Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway at [wkelly@illinoisroute66.org](mailto:wkelly@illinoisroute66.org) or call 217-525-9308. Also contact Kaisa Bartuhli, Program Manager, National Park Service, Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program at [kaisa\\_bartuhli@nps.gov](mailto:kaisa_bartuhli@nps.gov) or 505-988-6701.**

The National Park Service, Route 66 Corridor Preservation cost-share grant program “provides grant assistance for eligible historic preservation, research, oral history, interpretative, and educational projects. Grants are offered through an annual, competitive grant cycle. Since 2001, 130 projects have been awarded \$1.9 million with \$3.1 million in cost-share match, totaling \$5 million in public-private investment toward the revitalization of the Route 66 corridor.” This year, four of the eight projects that were awarded grants are from Illinois!

The Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway is pleased to share the information provided by the National Park Service, Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program (<https://www.ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/2016-cost-share-grants-announced/>). The announcement comes at a special time in U.S. history, with 2016 being the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park Service and the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Route 66.

From the National Park Service, Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program, here is the information on the Illinois recipients:

### **Rialto Square Theatre Marquee Restoration Project**

Location: Joliet, Illinois

Total Grant amount: \$55,710

“The Rialto Square Theatre in Joliet, Illinois, was built on an original alignment of Route 66 in May of 1926, just six months before the National Highway Act of November 11, 1926 ushered the Mother Road into existence. These two entities – (1) an ornate vaudeville stage and movie palace dispensing “talkies” to a gleeful American public, and (2) a national highway designed to accommodate the new automobile “fad” – would become important elements of US culture from those days forward.

Known as the Jewel of Joliet the theatre was constructed to spare no expense. The building’s style was a wildly eclectic mix of Greek and Roman Neoclassical Rococo, Italian Renaissance, and Art Deco, among others. Every detail of the theatre was more ostentatious than the next, and it was touted as “one of the world’s wonder theatres.”

By the 1970’s both Route 66 and the Rialto had fallen into disrepair as Route 66 was bypassed and by the Interstate Highway System. By 1978 the Rialto was targeted for demolition to make way for a parking lot. In response the Will County Cultural Arts Association was created to save the theatre from the wrecking ball. They listed the property on the National Register of Historic Places, and by the 1980s restored the theatre back to operating condition. The theater has served as a matinee and community center ever since, welcoming over 100,000 visitors a year.

Watching over Route 66 for nearly a century is the Rialto's distinctive, seven-story vertical neon sign and marquee, which have heralded films and events to residents and travelers alike. Grant funds will assist with the restoration of the marquee to its 1926 appearance."

### **The Mill on Route 66 Accessibility Project**

Location: Lincoln, Illinois

Total Grant amount: \$22,720

"The Mill Restaurant in Lincoln, Illinois, is a prime example of early American roadside architecture, and is one of the few buildings from the era still standing. The restaurant was first opened on Route 66 in 1929 under the name of the Blue Mill. The eatery was constructed by local contractors in the shape of a small Dutch windmill with sails on the front. It was white with blue trim, with continuously turning sails decorated with lights.

In 1945 an army barrack from Camp Ellis was attached to the back of the building to accommodate a restaurant, bar, and dance hall. It was then that the entire building was painted red and renamed The Mill. One of the restaurant's claims to fame was its fried schnitzel. The Mill also offered a display of strange objects to attract and entertain customers: a mechanical leg kicked its way through a hole in the ceiling; four life-sized figures, a suit of armor, and a 20-pound stuffed catfish were on display; and a basket above the bathroom door – when opened – would blast a loud siren throughout the restaurant.

The Mill closed in 1996 and stood deteriorating for many years. In 2006 the Route 66 Heritage Foundation of Logan County was created to promote and preserve the Mill and other Route 66 sites in Logan County. The foundation worked with the City of Lincoln to save the building from the wrecking ball and gain title to the property. The foundation has been working to restore the National Register-eligible property to a museum and visitor center ever since. A NPS grant in 2008 helped with structural repairs. The current grant will provide accessibility to the building including an entrance and bathroom. The original basket and loud siren that once adorned the bathroom door will also be restored."

### **Del Rhea's Chicken Basket Neon Sign Restoration Project**

Location: Hinsdale, Illinois

Total Grant amount: \$34,600

"The Chicken Basket began in the 1930s as a lunch counter attached to a service station in then-rural Hinsdale, Illinois. This mix and match of functions was typical for Route 66 establishments, which often operated on very thin profit margins that required them to be creative in attracting customers. Legend has it that in the late 1930s two local farm women offered a deal to original owner Irv Kolarik, who was looking to expand his food menu. They would reveal their excellent fried chicken recipe to Mr. Kolarik and his customers if he would promise to buy the necessary chickens from them. To sweeten the deal the women offered to teach him how to actually fry the chicken. Soon, the service station was history and the Chicken Basket was born.

The restaurant we see today was built in 1946 adjacent to the original location of the 1930s station. The one-story brick building was constructed in a no-nonsense, utilitarian commercial style of the immediate postwar period. Overall, the restaurant retains much of its original 1946 appearance and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The restaurant has a flat, steel roof that did double duty in the 1950s; to attract customers, Mr. Kolarik flooded the roof in winter and hired youths to ice skate on top of the building.

The restaurant flourished, but like many other successful businesses along Route 66, the Chicken Basket faced a serious challenge with the coming of the interstate in 1962. However in

1963, Delbert (Dell) Rhea, a savvy Chicago businessman, purchased the restaurant and turned things around through aggressive advertising aimed at Chicago's expanding suburban population as well as Route 66 travelers. Today the restaurant continues to flourish. NPS grant funds will assist with restoration of the neon sign."

### **Sprague's Super Service Rehabilitation Project**

Location: Normal, Illinois

Total Grant amount: \$31,398

"The brainchild of William W. Sprague, the two-story, Tudor Revival style Sprague's Super Service on Route 66 in Normal, Illinois, was a combination cafe, filling station, and service station, built toward the beginning of the Depression to provide service and food to travelers. The second story of the building provided housing for both Mr. Sprague and for the service station attendant.

The Sprague's Super Service is an excellent model of preservation through partnership. In 2003, the current owner began the preservation process by listing the property on the National Register of Historic Places. The owner then applied for grant funds from the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation program to develop a preservation plan and to address urgent needs/repairs. With the preservation plan in hand, the owner was able to appeal to the City of Normal for additional funds to assist with repairs to the roof and heating system. Because of this positive track record, the owner next applied for and received additional grant funds for heating and air conditioning work from the Illinois State Tourism Department. In addition, the owner arranged for volunteer work days at the station involving the Illinois Route 66 Association. In 2011, the building was designated as a local landmark by the Town of Normal, and in 2016, the town voted to acquire the property to secure its preservation and protection. Now known as Ryburn Place, the goal is to open the property as a Route 66 visitor center.

Following a preservation plan prepared in 2009 a new roof and bathrooms have been installed, and the historic, wood frame windows and doors have been rehabilitated. The NPS grant will help repair and stabilize the exterior stucco and masonry and rehabilitate the last of the windows."

For additional information, visit <https://www.ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/2016-cost-share-grants-announced/>, or search the National Park Service, Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program grant database at <http://ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/grant-projects/>.

SEE PHOTOS BELOW

(Hi Res photos available)



Rialto Square Theatre



The Mill



Del Rhea's Chicken Basket



Sprague's Super Service