



# One-Man "Chain Gang" Cleans Up Illinois 143

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter  
August 2 2023 4:26 PM

WOOD RIVER/EDWARDSVILLE - When Rusty Wheat complained that garbage trucks were losing trash on their routes and asked if they could pick up what they left behind, he was told it wasn't their problem.

So Wheat decided it wasn't just his problem either, and he was going to let people know about it. A few months later, he has cleaned up thousands of pounds of trash along Illinois Route 143, and Madison County is preparing to implement an adopt-a-highway program largely because of his efforts. The landfill and trucking companies might not have listened to Wheat, but he has created something bigger than them.

"I just started picking up trash and trying to call as much attention to this as possible," Wheat said. "is the first thing they see when they come into Wood River off of 255, and that's my stretch of highway. I call it my stretch of highway, it's everybody's stretch of highway, but I've adopted that road and I take a lot of pride in keeping it clean."

Every few weeks, Wheat treks out and collects trash on the side of the road. He works with the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) to clear away the bags he fills. He noted that the biggest concern is safety, so he recently started putting up a handmade sign that warns, "Chain gang ahead, slow down." Wheat explained that the sign "looks official, but it's not illegal" and does successfully slow down traffic.

And it has certainly caught some attention. Wheat has been working with local officials to sponsor more Earth Day programs and trash clean-up initiatives.

Adam Walden, the Madison County engineer, has shown interest in starting a Madison County adopt-a-highway program that would allow people to adopt stretches of county roads. The program encourages people to keep their adopted roads tidy, and it also

allows them to put up a sign in honor of their organization or in memory of a loved one. Wheat hopes to be the first person in the program, but he tells anyone who is interested to call Walden at 618-296-4540.

“Believe me, there’s enough out there for everyone,” Wheat joked. “I welcome anybody that wants to help out.”

Wheat has a sign on his stretch of road in honor of his brother. He explained that there was always a reason why all the trash on that road bothered him so much, but he just recently figured it out.

“It was just driving me crazy. And I never really understood what was driving me nuts about it,” Wheat said. “One day I was out there, and it occurred to me that on that hillside going up Kendall Hill, that’s where my brother was killed 45 years ago.”

His brother David Wheat and best friend Jeff Arnold were killed by a drunk driver.

“It’s kind of been this sacred ground for me, but out of sight, out of mind for a long time. But I guess subliminally, it must have stayed there because it bothered me and infuriated me,” he continued. “It’s been something that’s been on my mind for a while. Obviously, you can’t escape things like that. So the best thing I could do was put it in a positive light, and that’s what I started doing.”

Wheat invites anyone who is interested to join him, whether on his stretch of road or in their own community.

Trash is everywhere, but so are people who can help. If you have ideas or questions about the adopt-a-highway program or Wheat’s work, you can contact him at 618-670-6804.