

Route 66 Icons Were Packed On Float In Legendary Rose Bowl Parade

by Cheryl Eichar Jett

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PASADENA, CALIF. - Imagine all your favorite Illinois Route 66 photo ops packed onto one float in the legendary Rose Bowl Parade on January 1, 2024! That's exactly what happened on New Year's Day in Pasadena, California, with Illinois Route 66 icons like the Joliet Prison, Shea's Gas Station Museum, and the World's Largest Catsup Bottle (to name just a few) represented on an amazing float. Here's how it happened.

In Pasadena, the theme of “Celebrating a World of Music” was chosen for the 135th Rose Bowl Parade. And in Chicago, the Illinois Office of Tourism (IOT) team pondered that theme as they thought about the state's rich musical heritage and the legacy of music associated with the greater Chicago area. Those musical thoughts, along with the IOT award-winning marketing campaign of “Middle of Everything” sparked the Enjoy Illinois float theme: “Illinois: The Middle of Beats and Blues.”

“The thing is, music is a universal language, and of course it really struck a chord with us, excuse the pun, because if I think about Chicago and Illinois, it was the birthplace of Chicago blues music,” said Daniel Thomas, Deputy Director of the Illinois Office of Tourism. “So as we started to think about how we tell that story, we sat down with our design team and Phoenix Decorating in Pasadena. We talked about music. We talked about Chicago, Illinois, being a city and state of 'firsts.' We started to talk about some of the famous movies and music that have been connected, and it became very clear that Route 66 and the Blues Brothers was the perfect collaboration. Out of that discussion, it became 'Illinois: The Middle of Beats and Blues.'”

The Phoenix Decorating Company from Irwindale, California, won the bid to design and construct the float, and they worked for several months with the IOT team's input to achieve the eye-catching design. As for construction specifics, it then took 300 volunteers 22,000 hours to place 30,000 flowers on the 24-foot-tall Illinois float!

The float's design featured a drive-in movie scene with the Blues Brothers – “Joliet” Jake Blues and his brother Elwood – on the screen, with a classic 1950s car signifying the movie's audience watching the hit movie, “The Blues Brothers,” which was filmed in Illinois. Iconic attractions from up and down Illinois Route 66 were included in the design, including: the “begin” Historic Illinois Route 66 sign in downtown Chicago; the Gemini Giant in Wilmington; the Pink Elephant Antique Mall in Livingston; and the World's Largest Catsup Bottle in Collinsville.

Also featured were two attractions in Springfield that have been in the news within the past year. The beautifully recreated (from Ace Sign Company) Lincoln Motel sign represents the new-last-year Route 66 Experience and Legends Neon Park at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield. Shea's Gas Station Museum, which closed after owner and collector Bill Shea passed away in 2013, has recently had its signage redone (again from Ace Sign Company) and will be re-opening as a museum in the spring. (Watch this column for the full story on Shea's in an upcoming issue of The Prairie Land Buzz Magazine.) Besides its homage to Route 66 landmarks, the float also incorporated elements such as pumpkins, corn, prairie grass, and blue violets, the state's official flower, in a nod to Illinois' agri-tourism industry.

“What we wanted to do was bring to life some of those iconic memories and moments that people have experienced and that people desire in their bucket list of traveling Route 66. And so we thought to stop off at places like the Gemini Giant, the Pink Elephant Antique Mall, and as we get to Springfield, Shea's garage, one of the original pumping stations along Route 66, has been brought back to life and of course the Legends Neon Park Route 66 Experience,” Thomas said. “We wanted to tell the musical journey through Route 66, so starting in Chicago and hitting the road, heading out to the old Joliet Prison and some of those iconic stops along the Route, the outdoor drive-in movie theater and the Blues Brothers made complete sense to us.”

Those intentions produced an unforgettable moment in the parade – in fact, it was rated as one of the top five moments in the parade by the Pasadena Star News – when the popular men's nine-piece a cappella group Straight No Chaser took the stage, er, float, to perform a medley of the Blues Brothers' hits! (One of the group's members, Randy Stine, was born and raised in Illinois.)

“Of course, knowing that we're coming up to the Centennial of Route 66 in 2026, there's going to be a lot of opportunity and a lot of great things happening up and down the route. We were inspired by this, and so when you look at our float, I think it just shows how we not only brought Route 66 to life but leaned into the Blues Brothers and showed the rest of the world part of what we're proud of but also what they desire as a visit when they come to the State of Illinois,” Thomas said. “It's an investment in our experience and it's an investment in our local and regional communities that helps us to not only promote Illinois to the world but also is good for our residents. The other thing that

I just really love about the 'Middle of Beats and Blues' and why we continue to partner with the Rose Bowl Parade is it really does give us an opportunity to focus on what Illinoisans are proud of.”

Cheryl Eichar-Jett is the author of numerous books and articles about Route 66. Find her at route66chick.com and cheryleicharjett.com.

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