



# The Murals of Cuba (Missouri, That Is)

By Jane Reed

## A Town Project Breathes New Life Into Old Route 66 Town

In early 2001, members of Viva Cuba, a community beautification organization in Cuba, Mo., had no idea that they would become the organization that put the Mural in “Route 66 Mural City,” as the town would be designated by the Missouri legislature. At that time, there were no murals, many of the businesses that would develop in the Historic Uptown area didn’t exist, and things looked a lot different along the Route 66 corridor than they do now.

It took not only murals but also a concentrated effort by the local newspaper, the Historic Preservation Commission, city workers and officials, and Cuba’s already established businesses and organizations to begin and continue the Cuba renaissance. It also took new businesses to commit to the area by locating in “old” Cuba, along the Route 66 corridor.

The first mural was a private commission by

Peoples Bank to celebrate the bank’s 100th anniversary. Local artist Shelly Steiger was instrumental in bringing Michelle Loughery, a Canadian artist known for painting outdoor murals, to Cuba for the first mural, which is a tribute to A.J. Barnett, the first cashier and president of Peoples Bank for almost 40 years. He is pictured with his Model T, the first in Cuba, at the site of an earlier Peoples Bank.

### Murals Spur Town Renaissance

The response to this first mural was so positive that the Viva Cuba beautification organization adopted the mural project with a goal to complete 12 outdoor murals by 2007, Cuba’s 150th anniversary. Although mural painting was not inexpensive, through fundraisers and donations by private individuals and local corporations, the money was raised for the murals, which depict local and national history.

This was an ambitious project for a town of less than 3500, but Cuba has always been a small town with a colorful history and an enterprising spirit. In 1857, Cuba was platted in anticipation of the railroad’s arrival. When it came time to name the new



The town’s first mural was a private commission by People’s Bank of A.J. Barnett, the first cashier and president of Peoples Bank for almost 40 years, pictured with his Model T, Cuba’s first. (photo: Alise O’Brien)



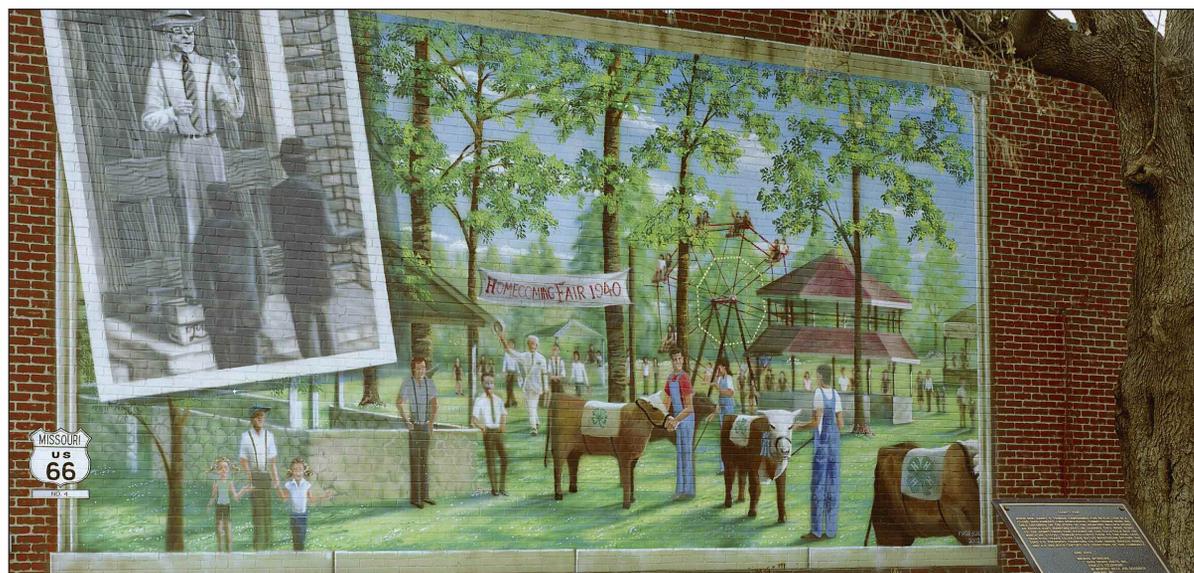
Area artist Shelly Steiger's wrap-around Apple/Barrel mural showcases harvesting apples. Fruit production was an important early 20th century industry in Cuba. (photo: Alise O'Brien)

town, some wanted to keep the name of the post office, which was named Amanda after the postmaster's wife. Others wanted to name it Cuba after the beautiful island that was fighting for its independence. A stick was cast into the air, and depending on which way it fell, the new town's name was chosen.

In the 1980s when factories closed and jobs were lost, officials lobbied to make Cuba an Enterprise Zone, which gave businesses special incentives to locate in Cuba. Cuba went from boom to bust and was written up in the *New York Times*. Cuba runs

parallel to I-44 and is about 80 miles southwest of St. Louis. It is near the geographical center of the country, and nearby rivers and wooded countryside make it a desirable location. It has been called the "Gateway to the Ozarks."

As the mural project developed, local artist Shelly Steiger's first solo mural, the Apple/Barrel mural, which wraps around two sides of a building, shows workers harvesting apples to be shipped in barrels throughout the U. S. The apple industry was an important one in Cuba during the early 1900s.



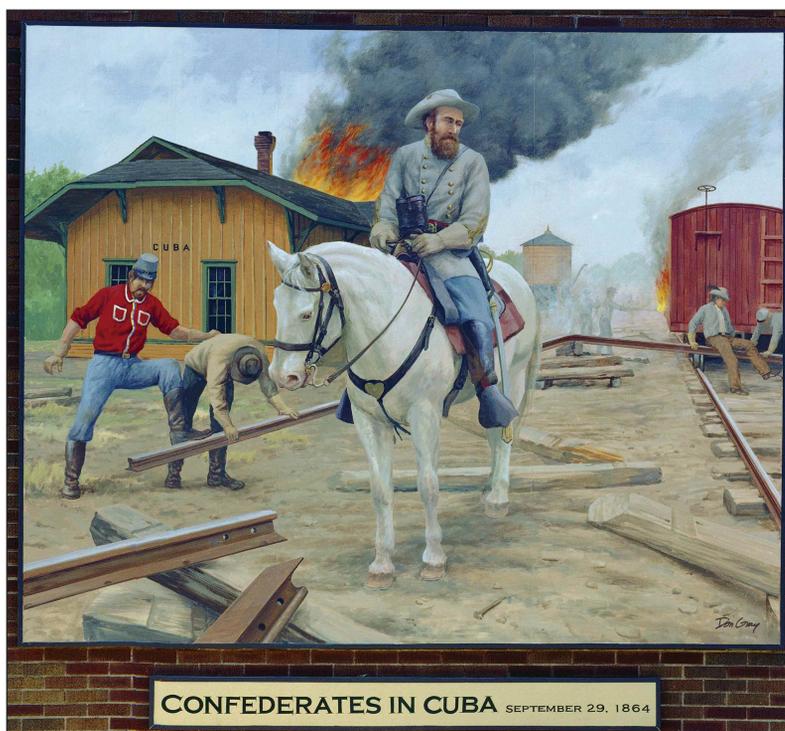
Though Harry Truman had already served two terms in the U.S. Senate, he was in Cuba campaigning because of the tight 1940 Senate race. The Kansas City-area politician was painted by St. Louis artist Jay Ferger. (photo: Alise O'Brien)

Canadian artist Loughery returned to Cuba to work on the Gold Star Boys train mural, which features the faces of young men from the Cuba area who went away by train to WW II and never returned. Their families received the Gold Star Medal for families who lost a loved one during the war. Steiger assisted Loughery and developed as an outdoor muralist and eventually trained another local artist Julie Balogh Brand.

The fourth mural, by St. Louis artist Jay Ferger, showcases a visit by Harry Truman to Cuba in 1940 when he was campaigning in a senate race. When locals kept passing him by as he stood on the steps of the Methodist Church to make a speech, he asked the local committeemen why folks didn't stop. He was told that they were going to the homecoming, as the county fair was called. "Well, we'll go too," he was reported as saying. As legend has it, they had to pass the hat for Truman to get gas money to continue to the next town.

Amelia Earhart and her Avro airplane were forced down outside Cuba in 1928 during a cross-country flight. Steiger and Brand teamed on this mural that shows Earhart and a historically accurate Avro plane sitting in a field outside of Cuba. The *Muskogee Times-Democrat* article that chronicled the event is also pictured.

For the sixth mural, Viva Cuba built a wall for the



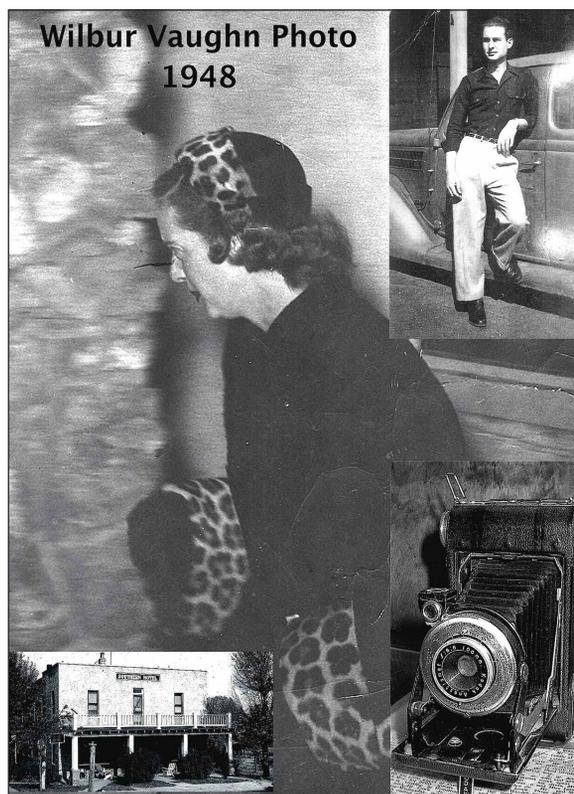
*Five murals by California artist Don Gray portrays the area's role in the Civil War. (photo: Alise O'Brien)*

mural, which pictures the former business and likeness of long time mayor Al West, Sr., who was credited with escorting Cuba into the modern times of post-WWII. The Whitesitt group of St. Louis painted the mural that has working vintage lights on it.

Cuba's Hayes Shoe Store allowed the two exposed sides of its building to be completely covered with a mural showing a business that existed on that corner in the 1900s. The business was called Prosperity Corner, and its owner faked his own disappearance. Townspeople thought him the victim of foul play. Later, it was discovered that he was alive and well in Shreveport, Louisiana, but he refused to return to his wife and children in Cuba.

A 1940 millworks building with vintage signs, which were restored, was the site of the next mural, which pictured millworks' employee Francis Nixon, who had worked there for 54 years. Steiger and Brand were the main artists, but Julie Nixon Krovicka, a South St. Louis artist, returned to Cuba to paint the image of her father working in the millworks. She remembered her father as smelling like "sawdust, juicy fruit gum, and Old Spice."

Continuing their collaboration, Steiger and Brand painted *The River*, which features an Ozark river scene that shows a family enjoying an area river. *Missouri* comes from the Indian word *Missouli*, which means "canoe man." Local rivers were one of the first draws for area tourism when trains delivered St. Louisans to Cuba, where buggies met them to



*A collage of photos illustrates the Bette Davis mural. A 19-year-old Wilbur Vaughn used the camera to take the star's photo at the Southern Hotel in 1948. (collage: Jane Reed)*



*Cuba's newest artwork is a sculpture. The 3-D steel train is 15' long and weighs approximately 325 pounds. Father and son team Glen and Curtis Tutterrow sculpted the train in three pieces, which were welded together this May when the train was placed on a decorative brick wall. (photo: Jane Reed)*

take them to river resorts.

When the *Cuba Free Press* built its new building, it designed the upper façade for a mural. New Haven artist Ray Harvey painted the mural, which chronicles the visit of Bette Davis to Cuba in 1948. When a 19-year-old local reporter Wilbur Vaughn asked to take her photo, her husband rudely told him "Absolutely not!" The young reporter waited outside the Southern Hotel where she was eating, not one, but two turkey dinners. When Davis came out, the reporter snapped her photo and was chased down the street by her husband, who was cursing and threatening to kill him. When the reporter heard a thud, he turned to see the husband face down in the mud. Vaughn escaped to his darkroom and printed the photo of Davis that was in the next week's *Cuba Review*. Vaughn still lives in Cuba and can show you the camera he used and the photo that he took.

California artist Don Gray painted a series of Civil

War panels that follow the battle at Pilot Knob that progressed to Cuba and Leasburg. Besides its panoramic scenes, the mural is notable for the participation of 15-year-old Chip Lange who researched the mural and helped to raise half the funds as part of his Eagle Scout Project. To show his appreciation of Chip's work, Gray painted Chip's likeness into the Leasburg panel. He is the soldier with the red band on his hat.

Harvey returned to paint the mural on the vintage 1932 Phillips 66 station that the Wallis family restored as part of a Route 66 preservation grant. The station, which was the first office of the fledgling Wallis Oil business in the late 60s, lent itself to three mural panels on its garage bays. The panels feature, a vintage highway patrol car; the neon sign of the Wagon Wheel Motel, an icon of Route 66; and Bill Wallis, founder of the company, who passed away in 2001. The mural is titled History at the 4-Way because of its location at Hwy.19 and Route 66.

## Mural Impact Continues

With completion of this mural, Viva Cuba reached its goal of 12 murals by 2007, Cuba's Sesquicentennial. During the six years of painting, many changes occurred that were a harbinger of new times in Cuba.

Cuba's Historic Preservation Commission developed a color palette for use in the original business district and encouraged restoration and rehabilitation of

Admission is free to the Ozarks Celebration Festival, which features three stages of music, artists, craftspeople, exhibits, films, storytelling and dancing. Free parking is available in lots near the corner of National and Monroe and all lots south of Grand for the weekend festivities in front of Carrington Hall and inside Plaster Student Union. Shuttles pick up at Bear Park North, Bear Park South, lots 14 and 24 and the visitors' parking lot during the Music and Crafts Festival.

**September 5-11, 2008**

For a complete schedule of events go online at [ocf.missouristate.edu](http://ocf.missouristate.edu)

**Missouri State**  
UNIVERSITY  
Springfield

EO/AA

the buildings that lay along Route 66, which intersects Cuba and is a rich cultural influence in the town. The community received a block grant that provided for new sidewalks, vintage lights, benches, planters, and other infrastructure improvements for the historic area. With the help of Mayor John Koch and State Senator Sarah Steelman, Cuba was designated “Route 66 Mural City.” Viva Cuba re-landscaped its garden at the 4-way intersection and commissioned a historical train sculpture for the area. With the emphasis on Cuba’s history, a *Cuba: Celebrating 150 Years of History* book was produced as a sesquicentennial project.

Fourth graders in Cuba study a curriculum that includes each of the 12 murals. On Saturday, during the annual Cuba Fest a 1904 style motorized trolley takes townspeople and visitors on narrated tours of the murals. Visitors gravitate to the murals, and tourism boosts the economy. International travelers of Route 66 are a common sight. TV features and magazine and newspaper articles on the murals brought more travelers to town to photograph the murals and stroll the town’s streets.

As the murals multiplied, so did businesses along the Route 66 corridor. Missouri Hick BBQ, Frisco’s Grill & Pub, Main Street Bakery & Back in the Day Café, Scrapbook Addictions, Porter’s Trading Post & Jewelry, Route 66 Fudge Shop, Mace’s Grocery, Java.net, Fanning Outpost (with its World’s Largest Rocking Chair), the Visitor Center, and many other enterprises have grown up in a booming business area since 2001. The area known as “Six Miles on 66” is a special draw for the Route 66 traveler. Cuba’s young people return to the area for jobs or to open businesses. Bus tours come through Cuba, and Viva Cuba members join them for narrated mural tours.

Another side effect of the Viva Cuba Mural Project is the proliferation of art throughout the town. Area businesses have incorporated murals and artwork both inside and outside their businesses. There are murals in the bakery and café; in the grocery store; at Victorian Manor, the assisted living complex, and on storefronts throughout the town. Even billboards are done in the “mural” style.

The mural committee has developed a brochure, art cards, a Mural City candy bar, t-shirts, and an urge for promoting Cuba. The town has pride in its history, its art, and its businesses. Visit Cuba, and you will see why! ❁

—Jane Reed Cuba, Mo., is a retired English teacher who now does public relations work and freelance writing.

For more information about the Cuba murals and group tours, visit [crawfordco.com/murals](http://crawfordco.com/murals) or call 573-885-2627. For general information on Cuba and special events visit [cubamochamber.com](http://cubamochamber.com) or call toll free 877-212-8429. Cuba is at the junction of I-44



*Kathy Lasley, a Viva Cuba member, pauses while planting flowers to give mural directions to a visitor from California who was traveling Route 66. The murals have drawn visitors from across the U.S. and Europe. (photo: Jane Reed)*

and St. Hwy. 19. While in town, visit the Cuba Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center at the I-44 Overpass for brochures of area attractions.

## Visit During October’s “Cuba Fest” For Family Fun

**October 18 & 19**

**Saturday:** Crafts, Taste of Cuba, Chili Cook-Off, Narrated Trolley Tours, Wine Tent, Music, Apple Butter Making

**Sunday:** Crafts, Music, Food, HS Band  
See [cubamochamber.com](http://cubamochamber.com) for details or call toll free: 877-212-8429.

### Cuba’s Area Attractions

- Route 66 Fudge Shop for Mural City Candy Bars
  - World’s Largest Route 66 Rocker
  - One of America’s last drive-ins (in season)
  - Golf Course
  - I-44 Visitor Center for mural brochures and information
  - Two side-by-side Antique Malls
  - Great Restaurants & Specialty Shops
  - The Meramec River, Huzzah Creek and Courtois Creek are nearby for floating, fishing, and camping
  - Crawford County History Museum: [www.crawford-countymohistory.org](http://www.crawford-countymohistory.org)
- See [cubamochamber.com](http://cubamochamber.com) for details

