

https://tulsaworld.com/life-entertainment/local/art-theater/article_41b190f8-03d6-11ee-b2c6-d739219b8c10.html

Founder's personal story reflected in new Route 66 Spirit of America Museum

Jimmie Tramel

Jun 12, 2023

 Prefer us on Google 



STROUD — Various Route 66 museums in Oklahoma pay tribute to the Mother Road.

The newest Route 66 museum in Oklahoma also pays tribute to a mom.

The Route 66 Spirit of America Museum opened this weekend in Stroud. Founder and director Steve Brant hung a framed photo of his mother on a wall in the Wonder Woman Theater inside the museum because, well, she was his Wonder Woman. He has a story about that. In fact, the museum sprang out of his story and, ultimately, the museum is about hope.

Brant provided details about his life and the museum's origins after pointing out a recent magazine that focused on the impact museums need to have.

People are also reading...

- 1 Stabbing at Illinois River resort leaves four injured, two in custody**
- 2 OSU regents have some sympathy for villains at Texas Tech | Berry Tramel's ScissorTales**
- 3 Update: Two killed in officer involved shooting on Will Rogers Turnpike near state line**
- 4 Download a sample ballot for State Question 832; Election Day is June 16**

“In other words, it can't just be, ‘oh, come on in and look at a nice collection of paintings or a nice collection of automobiles,’” he said.



A photo of Steve Brant's mother — his Wonder Woman — is on a wall that pays tribute to women at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World

“A museum should want to make a difference. Now, I’m a car guy, so frankly, if I’m in a museum and there’s nothing but automobiles, it’s making a difference to me. But how do you make a museum make a difference in the larger scheme of things? And so I want this museum to do that. I want this museum to give people the kind of hope that I had as a kid because I grew up in a very crazy household.”

Brant said his parents did not have a good marriage. He compared family life to a war zone.

Disheartened by what he observed at home, Brant knew there had to be something better. He came up with a strategy to look for that something better.

Brant, raised in New York, found “it” at the nearby American Museum of Natural History. He discovered happier versions of family life on television.

But this was the 1960s, the decade when John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. What kind of world is this?

“But at the same time, I was watching Walter Cronkite report on the space program because I was kind of a science nerd more than anything else,” Brant said. “I gravitated towards this idea of us going through the moon and we were doing it for real. It wasn’t like a science fiction movie that I was watching. ... And so I knew as a kid that, as desperate as things looked, there was still some good going on.”

Fast forward to the present, where we are still dealing with tumult, and Brant wants the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum to offer examples — some from the pop culture realm, some from the real world — of hope for a better future.



Steve Brant stands in the lobby of the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World

Stroud spirit

How does a retired engineer from New York wind up launching a museum halfway between Oklahoma City and Tulsa?

Brant is a “car guy” who took a dream trip down Route 66 in 2011. Because he’s also a movie guy, he learned through research that **Dawn Welch**, who has owned the Rock Cafe in Stroud since 1993, is part of “Cars” history. Filmmakers picked Welch’s brain for research, and the Porsche character Sally Carrera was modeled after her.

Welch was raised in Yukon, then returned to Oklahoma after working on a cruise ship. Seeing how Welch was accepted as a business owner in Stroud planted a seed in Brant’s mind. If he ever needed a new start, maybe it could be somewhere on Route 66.

Brant didn’t immediately select Stroud. He first considered taking ownership of a pre-existing Superman museum (the Supertam on 66 Museum and Ice Cream Parlor) in Cartersville, Missouri, but realized he would rather pursue his vision for a museum.

When Brant decided to go house-hunting in Stroud in 2021, it was a happy accident that his trip coincided with Stroud’s Summerfest event. He got to see the town and its people in celebration mode. How could he not buy a house there?

Brant is selling his house in Stroud, but not because he is leaving. He had living quarters built into the new museum so he and his cat, Inky, can live on Route 66 near the Rock Cafe.

Other Route 66 museums in Oklahoma are more Mother Road-centric. Brant’s museum is a different flavor.

“And that’s why I call it the Spirit of America Museum,” he said. “It’s on Route 66 and Route 66 is a great example of ... we’re going to do something new. We’ve got the ability. We are going to finally connect the country up with a road. This was the first time doing it. And we are going to finally go to the moon. We’re going to finally do all these dreams. I can only celebrate a certain number of them, but I want that process of what dreams are still to be fulfilled to be a part of what the museum talks about.”



Steve Brant, founder and director of the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum, wears Clark Kent's hat while sitting at Kent's desk inside the museum.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World

Pop culture icons

The Route 66 Spirit of America Museum is big in ambition and compact in size. There are only a few rooms, including a recreation of Clark Kent’s Daily Planet newspaper office.

Brant watched reruns of the television series “The Adventures of Superman” after school when he was a kid. He’ll always have a soft spot for the George Reeves version of Superman, never mind that Brant was blown away by the 1978 Superman movie starring Christopher Reeve.

If you’re going to theme a museum around hope, Superman is a nice cornerstone. So, too, is “Star Trek,” a television series that provided a glimpse into a future where humans of all nationalities and ethnicities could work together and boldly go where no one has gone before.

Brant has cosplayed at pop culture events as Clark Kent and Gary Seven, a one-off character from the original “Star Trek” series. Gary Seven was accompanied by a shape-shifting black cat, Isis. Brant’s cat, Inky, could be a doppelganger for Isis.



Clark Kent's hat rests on a radio inside his replica Daily Planet office at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World

Brant figures his last big pop culture splurge was buying a ticket to board a celebrity-laden Star Trek cruise ship last March. Now he’s funneling money into the museum.

“I was able to do what I think is a pretty nice little beginning, what I call phase one,” he said.

Brant can explain if you visit, but there are shout-outs to Jimmy Stewart, Steve McQueen, the Wright Brothers and the films “Easy Rider” and “Star Wars” in the museum. There’s also a wall display that acknowledges the positive impact R. Buckminster Fuller (author of “Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth”), Russell L. Ackoff and W. Edwards Deming had on Brant’s life.

A story room features waist-up statuettes of DC’s “big three” characters — Henry Cavil’s Superman, Gal Gadot’s Wonder Woman and Ben Affleck’s Batman. There are tablets of blank paper in the story room so visitors can tell their story for the museum’s story archive project.

“Superman had to find a place for himself on a new planet where he had powers far beyond those of mortal men,” Brant said. “Wonder Woman had to adapt to learning the larger world is constantly at war. Batman chose crime fighting because his parents were killed. They had pretty dramatic beginnings. I don’t expect everybody’s beginnings to be dramatic like that, but I want people to feel that they can say something about themselves and they can do it anonymously. I’m going to leave it up to them.”

Brant’s plan is for guests’ stories to eventually be shared on the museum’s website.



Recreations of Henry Cavil's Superman, Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman and Ben Affleck's Batman add visual appeal to a "story room" at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World

A mother's love

The Wonder Woman Theater at the museum is equipped with a large screen for viewing and seats.

Brant wants to make sure women are celebrated as part of the American dream, so he has photos of female actors and historical figures on the theater room wall alongside the photo of his mom, a former chorus girl in Broadway shows.

Also on the wall is a framed story Brant wrote when he was a Huffington Post blogger. It's a story about how he saw the 2017 Wonder Woman movie multiple times and cried every time because a scene reminded him of something from his childhood.

In the story, Brant wrote that things were so bad at home that his mother needed to escape. It was a separation rather than a divorce. Brant and his sister, after spending six months with their mother in Cleveland, were sent back to New York to live with their father.

Mom, in phone conversations with Brant, noticed her son was changing — and not for the better — so she chose to return to the home that she had fled.

“The next three years were very, very hard for her,” Brant wrote. “I’ll never know how hard because we didn’t talk about the abuse she took. She was there to fight for the love of her son and daughter. And she won that fight! How do I know? When I was 13, she and my father did divorce. And I very happily began to live with just her. My sister at that point was old enough to be on her own. Mom’s unconditional love triumphed over my father.”

Brant’s story about his mother was shared on social media by Gadot. Wonder Woman, meet Wonder Woman.

Photos of Brant with his mother and with Gadot are framed with the story at the museum.

There’s a full-sized statue of Gadot’s Wonder Woman in the theater room. Brant said he bought it because every museum needs something that people will want to stand next to while getting their picture taken. A framed sign next to the statue reads “Only love can truly save the world.”

A framed Muhammad Ali poster (Brant and Ali share a birthday) hangs in the museum’s reception area next to a large photo of a girl reading a Washington Post headline that says “The Eagle Has Landed—Two Men Walk on the Moon.” Above the photo are the words “Dreams Save Us.”

Said the founder and director of a new Route 66 museum in Stroud: “I believe in the power of dreams.”

The new Tulsa World app offers personalized features. Download it today.

More photos from the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum



Inky, the resident cat at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud, poses alongside a stuffed animal version of Isis, a cat who was a character in the "Gary Seven" episode of the original "Star Trek" series.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



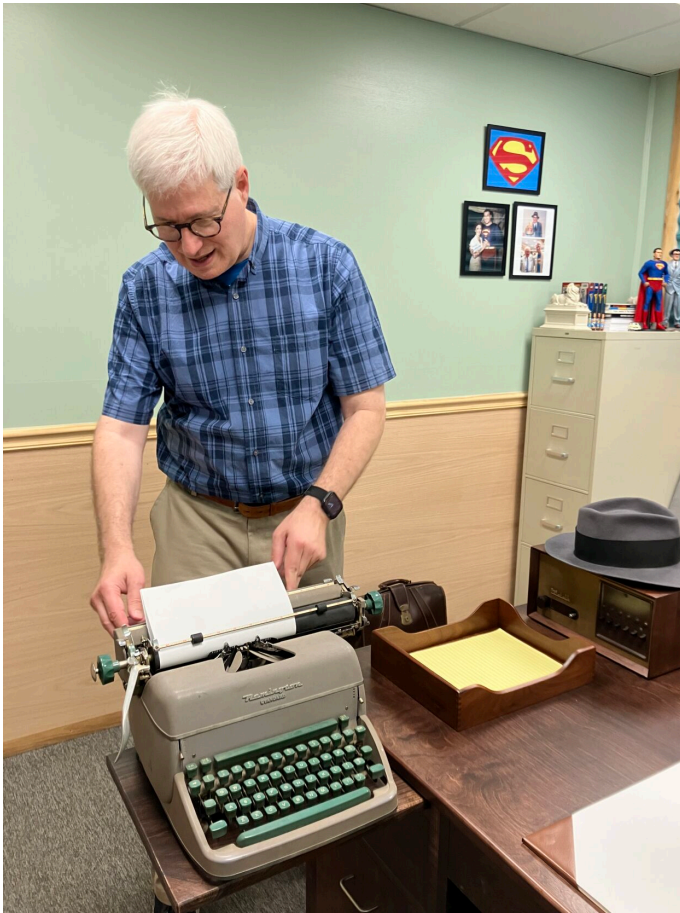
A phone booth is conveniently located inside the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum just in case Clark Kent needs to put on the Superman costume.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



A miniature version of an Abraham Lincoln statue greets visitors in the lobby of the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



Steve Brant, founder and director of the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud, stands over a typewriter in a replica Clark Kent newsroom office at the museum.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



Inky is the resident cat at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



Steve Brant, founder and director of the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud, stands next to an astronaut figure at the museum.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



What's behind the door with the Clark Kent nameplate at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum?

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



Action figures representing Steve McQueen's character and his German jailer from the film "The Great Escape" are part of a McQueen display at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



A replica of Clark Kent's Daily Planet office is inside the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud. Pointing to a nameplate is the museum's founder and director, Steve Brant.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



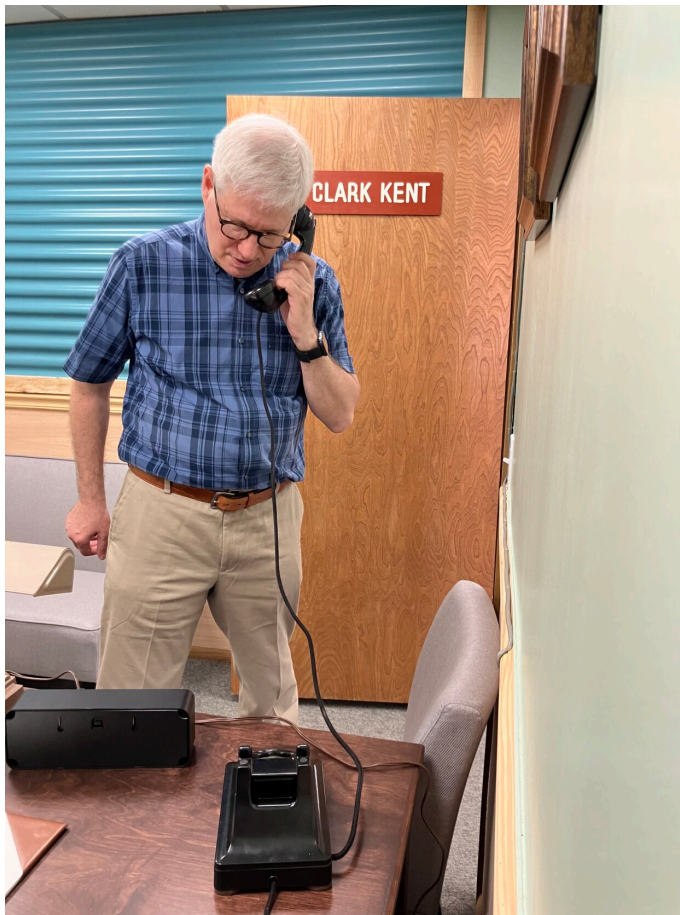
A typewriter is handy in case Clark Kent needs to bang out a story at his "office" inside the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



Legendary news anchorman Walter Cronkite is part of an aerospace display at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



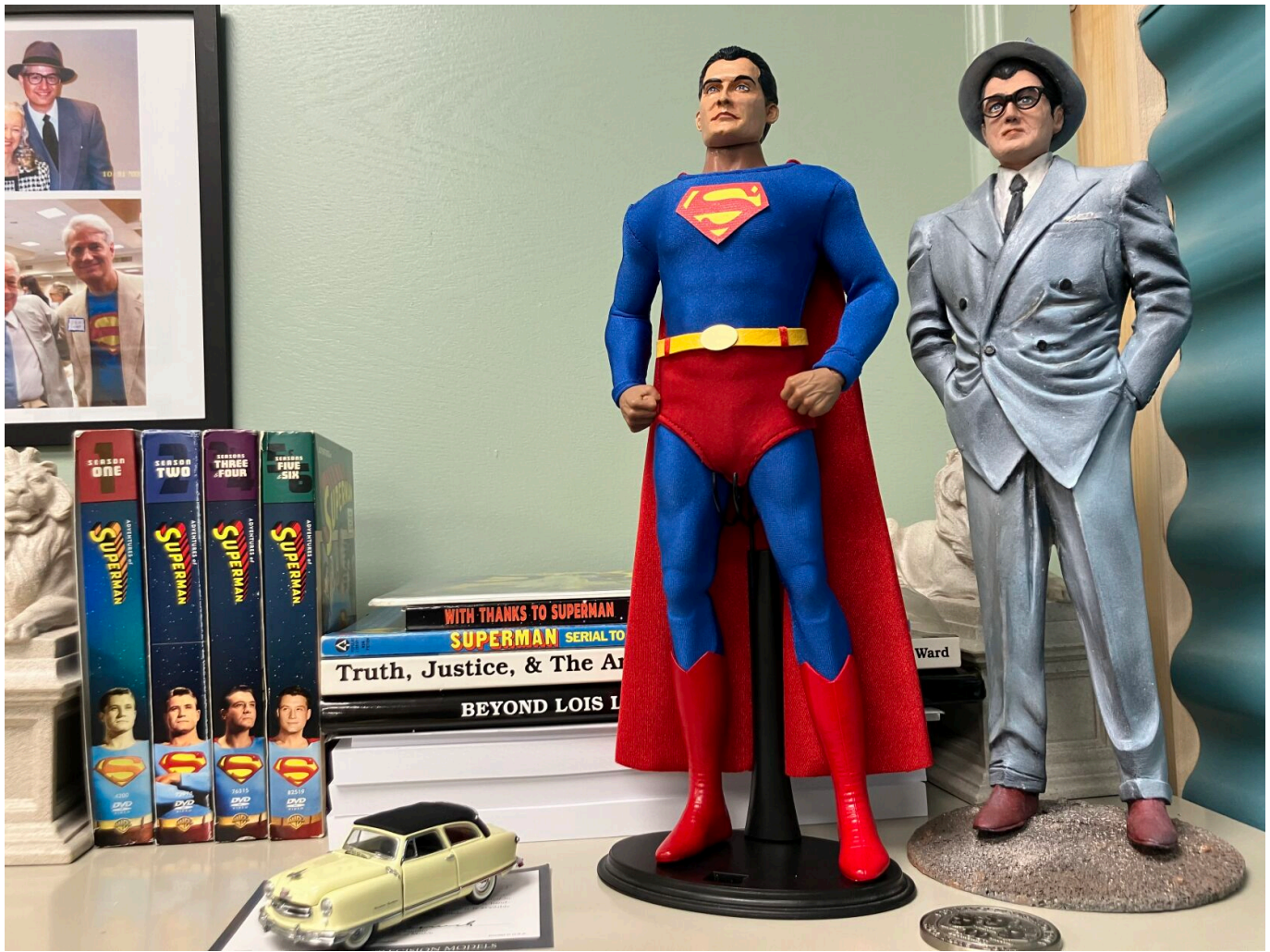
Steve Brant answers a 1950s-era phone in Clark Kent's Daily Planet "office" inside the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



The Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud was built to inspire hope.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



Figures of Superman and Clark Kent are part of the decor inside Kent's "office" at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



A photograph of Gary Seven holding his cat, Isis, and a stuffed animal version of Isis are on display at the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum in Stroud. Gary Seven was a character in an episode of the original "Star Trek" series.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



A Wonder Woman statue is ready to pose for photo ops with visitors to the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World



A model recreation of a Route 66 service station is in the lobby of the Route 66 Spirit of America Museum.

Jimmie Tramel, Tulsa World

jimmie.tramel@tulsaworld.com

Route 66 Spirit of America Museum

The Route 66 Spirit of America Museum is located on Route 66 in Stroud. Museum hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday and 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. on Sunday.

Founder and director Steve Brant provided this statement about the museum:

My Route 66 Spirit of America Museum offers exhibits and programs designed to inspire people to see ways they can help America take its next big leap forward towards the founding fathers' vision: A society that recognizes "all... are created equal" and have the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

This big leap only became possible when the scientific community discovered how to overcome the last great barrier to achieving that vision: The belief that we will always live in a scarcity-based, zero-sum "us against the world" world.

Communicating that this (largely unknown to the public) breakthrough has occurred and catalyzing an effort to implement that breakthrough's use is the mission of this museum. I seek to connect with organizations and individuals that see value in helping achieve this society-wide breakthrough, both in the USA and throughout the world.

Route 66 museums in Oklahoma

The Spirit of America Route 66 Museum opened this weekend in Stroud.

Among other Route 66-themed museums in Oklahoma:

Oklahoma Route 66 Museum

Clinton

The museum offers visitors a personal journey through the history of the nation's most revered highway. Visitors can learn about the dreams and the labor needed to make the road a reality or experience the Dust Bowl as thousands traveled westward in hopes of a new beginning.

National Route 66 and Transportation Museum

Elk City

The National Route 66 Museum focuses on the people who lived, worked and traveled the Mother Road. The museum provides visitors with a "journey" through all eight Route 66 states.

Heart of Route 66 Auto Museum

Sapulpa

The museum began as the dream of Richard Holmes, a Tulsa attorney and car enthusiast. He put together an advisory board of members who were car lovers and collectors. They first searched for a location in Tulsa before a decommissioned armory became available on Route 66 in Sapulpa. The museum has been open since 2016.

Route 66 Interpretive Center

Chandler

Here's a description from route66interpretivecenter.com, the center's online site:

"More than a display of chrome and neon, or Dust Bowl pictures, the Route 66 Interpretive Center strikes at the heart of what we believe is the true meaning of Route 66. We have created a place that compliments the exhibits like those in Elk City and Clinton and goes one step further.

"We emphasize the life that Route 66 instilled — and continues to breathe — into the most American of our communities. In other words, Route 66 remains alive. It is where opportunity is created for all who seek to truly understand the American dream."

By Jimmie Tramel

Tulsa World Scene Reporter
