

## New owner makes Route 66's Wagon Wheel on National Register shine again



The Wagon Wheel Motel in Cuba, Mo., has undergone a careful restoration under the historic guidelines of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

BY DAVE HOEKSTRA February 22, 2013

CUBA, Mo.— Life spins around.

And when it settles into a deep rut, I hit the road. I have found myself at the Wagon Wheel Motel in modest Cuba, Mo., about 85 miles west of St. Louis.

Most people think the arch in St. Louis is the gateway to the west. I think it's the Wagon Wheel, which is the oldest continuously operating motel on Route 66. It's listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

I've made two memorable stops to sleep at the Wheel. My first visit was in the summer of 2005 when I test drove my new Pontiac Sunfire from Chicago to Cuba, just to make sure it was in working order. In January I drove that same car (132,000 miles) back to the wheel to think about 2013.

The wheel was a flea bag in 2005; I paid \$30 for a room. The motel was mostly empty, even in tourist season. The few rooms that were occupied consisted of kids drinking cans of Busch beer and scorching meth. I just got lost in Sam Shepard short stories.

Things have turned around at the Wagon Wheel. In a big way.

Long time Cuba resident Connie Echols bought the Wagon Wheel in 2009. The vintage tourist court consists of 19 units and 24 brand new beds (there are five rooms with two beds) and new white linens. Echols, 63, transformed a former Wheel service station into

Connie's Shoppe, which features arts and crafts and the potpourri that drives me crazy in B&Bs. The Wheel is set back from Route 66 on a soft curve outside of Cuba. The superb Missouri Hick Bar-B-Q (opened in 2002) is on the east end of the motel parking lot and it continues to grow in popularity. Try the wild cherry smoked pulled pork, \$8.99; call (573) 885-6791.

Echols spent 15 years owning and operating the Wildflower floral shop in downtown Cuba (pop. 3,400).

Echols' favorite flower is the tulip. Ironically, tulips were planted years ago throughout the five acres of land anchored by the Wheel.

"They always bloom in the spring time," Echols said during a conversation before I checked in.

And I checked in pen-to-paper like Ricky Ricardo in "The Long, Long Trailer."

"One granddaughter works at Missouri Hick and she's probably the one who could run this," Echols said after we got to talkin' (Ozarkesque). She's got the bossy genes." She noted that the women who work at the barbecue joint are known as MOHICK Chicks.

"I told her if anything happened to me she had to keep the check-in cards, which drives her crazy," Echols said. "We have the original check-in cards from the 1930s through 1957. I wish we had them in the '60s and '70s to continue to tell the story, like the entertainers who stayed here. She told me, 'Those cards are out the door and we're computerized.'"

"I said, 'Nope, it's in my will.' "

It's that kind of rugged conviction that gave birth to new life at the Wagon Wheel.

"A lot of motels were named like this because of wagons moving west," Echols explained. "It started as Wagon Wheel Cabins. Then Wagon Wheel Cottages. It was changed to the Wagon Wheel Motel in 1947. This was one of the first motels that consisted of the cabins put together."

The Wagon Wheel's cabin-cottages are designed in English Tudor style. Original exterior Ozark brownstone was imported by local farmers, but it had chipped away over time. Original plumbing and wiring was a mess.

“It was like a treasure hunt,” Echols said. “I didn’t want to go down to the basement at first. It scared me. Then we found 13 of the original metal lawn chairs.” (The chairs now rest in the motel’s front garden area.)

Rooms have been restored down to original hardwood floors and door knobs. All the restoration was done under the historic guidelines of the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation.

Since it was early January, I had my choice of rooms. I stayed in a suite with a large flatscreen television, refrigerator and triangle jacuzzi tub with walk-in shower (\$110 per night). The tub was a perfect setting for me to finish reading Rod Stewart’s autobiography along with a glass of Mother Road Red Wine. Wish you were there.

Echols’ husband Les was an area cattle farmer. He died in 1993. She financed the motel as an independent operation.

Echols said, “I got matching preservation grants to heat some of the units. And for the roofs. When I bought the place I called the banks and all three jumped on it overnight so I knew I got a good deal. I didn’t even tell my kids.” Her son, daughter and all four granddaughters live in Cuba.

“Actually my daughter’s husband [Joe Medwick] built the [World’s Largest] rocker,” she said in reference to the town’s other Route 66 landmark a few miles west of the wheel. (The 5th Annual four-mile Race to the Rocker from downtown Cuba to the rocker is March 23. Visit [www.jog-inc.com](http://www.jog-inc.com).)

“This was one of the first AAA-rated motels in Missouri,” Echols said. I stay away from chains, AAA, AARP and all that. I didn’t realize how historically important this was at the time. I was just determined not to fail. My grandkids will eventually know they will have a place that will always be here.”