

Nov. 14, 2009---

ROCHESTER, Ill.----Lots of things could cross the mind of Bob Waldmire as he lies dying on the futon of his 1966 Chevy bus-house. Waldmire is an artist, bioregionalist and the free spirit of Route 66.

He has been diagnosed with colon cancer, which has spread to his liver. He has declined medical care with the exception of some fine pain-killers. Doctors say he has between three weeks and three months to live.

When a visitor enters the bus last week Waldmire has one request. "Can you feed my birds?," he asks.

Waldmire, 64, is wearing a black Route 66 T-shirt that reads "Leave Earlier. Drive Slower. Live Longer."

For a quarter-century Waldmire has traveled up and down the Mother Road, selling his R. Crumb-inspired art and promoting the good life. He traveled in what he calls "his children": The converted bus, a white 1965 Mustang or 1972 Volkswagen van that was a prototype for the hippie van in the hit film "Cars." The van was going to be named "Waldmire" in the movie, but the artist had issues with promotions for the movie by McDonald's. He had been a free-wheeling vegan until the home stretch.

During the mid-1990s Waldmire established the Old Route 66 Visitor Center and hiking trail in Hackberry, Ariz., and most recently was caretaker at the Chiricahua Nature Sanctuary on the east slope of the Chiricahua mountains in Portal, Ariz. The area is one of the most popular bird-watching sanctuaries in the world.

Waldmire is weak and does not eat much solid food except for cottage cheese and fresh doughnuts from the Dixie Truck Stop, up the road on Route 66 in McLean. A chocolate twist makes him smile.

He has enough strength to get up and peer out his bus window. "Chicakedees, blue jays, gold finches, and cardinals, of course," he says while looking at a birdhouse swinging in the late autumn wind. "Birds have been one of the great highlights of my life."

The bus is parked in a muddy lot on Cardinal Hill in Rochester, five miles southwest of Springfield. The hill is part of the Waldmire homestead where his father, Ed, farmed soybeans on a 208-acre plot along the Sangamon River. The bus has a woodburning stove, solar panels and features shelves from a barn on the Waldmire farm.

The elder Waldmire, who died of cancer in 1993, invented the deep-fried hot dog on a stick, which he called "Crusty Curs."

During the mid-1940s the elder Waldmire sold the hot dogs on Old Route 66. He renamed the delicacy "Cozy Dog" and in 1949 opened a restaurant on Route 66 in Springfield. The original joint was razed in 1996 and a new one was built next door.

Route 66 has always been about change in motion.

Bob Waldmire made his first journey down Route 66 in 1962 with his family to visit Disneyland.

Acclaimed writer-historian Michael Wallis met Waldmire 25 years ago. "With this gypsy wandering up and down the highway, I've seen how his presence and artwork has impacted people from all over the world," Wallis says from his home in Tulsa, Okla. "People collect 'Waldmires' and they live in little towns along the Mother Road and beyond like Paris and Tokyo. Waldmire is the real thing, just like the road -- warts and all. He has the philosopher's heart I'm sure he inherited from Ed Waldmire, yet he's feisty."

In mid-September Waldmire drove his Mustang back to Rochester because he wanted his next journey to begin by his roots. "I realized there was a good possibility I wouldn't be able to make it back to Arizona," he says with eyes closed. "It turned out that is the case."

His '72 VW van will be displayed in the soon-to-be-built Route 66 Experience along the Arkansas River in Tulsa. The 1966 bus, which once hauled students in Gallup, N.M., will remain on Cardinal Hill.

It still has the original engine and tires. There's also a back porch, shower stall and never-used self-composting toilet.

"I purchased the bus for \$1,800 from a retired rancher in Grants, N.M., in the fall of 1987 just a day or two after the light bulb hit to make a map of Old Route 66," he says. "Which is my magnum opus -- because it took 4 1/2 years to complete. It has over 100 individual microsketches and easily over a million strokes. Maybe 2 million strokes. I did a research trip to find every drivable piece of 66, learn about the motels, diners and stations along the road."

Waldmire worked on the map on a hinged counter he installed on the bus. He uses fine point Rapidograph and India-ink pens in his sketching. Waldmire is a self-taught artist with the exception of a quarter semester of art he studied at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. He has an impeccable eye for detail.

"Two of the greatest honors of my life were helping care for my dad and mom," he says, covered by a blanket. "They were both enrolled in Home Hospice Care, one of the best programs on the planet. I am getting enrolled now."

Enrolling in anything is new territory for Waldmire.

He will always be a free bird.

Bob Waldmire died on Dec. 16, 2009, a month after I fed his birds.