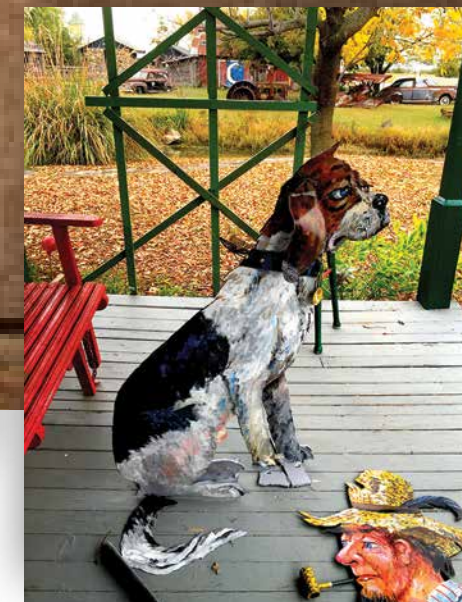


If You Build It...

Artist Lowell Davis reconstructs mid-century America at Red Oak II.

PHOTOS & STORY BY GREG KINKEADE

Artist Lowell Davis presides over the town he built—Red Oak II, Missouri—along historic Route 66 near Carthage. Behind him sits a historic mule barn from Sarcovie.



Above left: A newly constructed train depot is one of the few buildings at Red Oak II that is not vintage. **Above:** Artist Lowell Davis's metal sculptures are a work in progress.

“I threw my television in the pond thirty-seven years ago; you can’t watch TV and build a town,” Lowell Davis

says, as he saunters between his collection of relocated buildings plucked from the prairies of the Midwest and from places along Missouri’s stretch of the Mother Road, Route 66. It is the most impressive collection of preserved rural architecture in the state. It is called Red Oak II, Missouri, and in some ways, it is the rebirth or reinterpretation of its namesake, Red Oak, Missouri, some twenty miles away.

Route 66 once cut a bias cross-section of America, from frozen Detroit lakes to California desert towns. And right in the middle of the route sits a nearly forgotten place called Red Oak, a small town near Carthage. Lowell Davis was born there in 1937, and he spent his childhood helping his family in the general store, which he would later move to Red Oak II. Lowell’s father loved the far western United States, and Lowell’s early childhood was filled with scenes of the vast West as the Davises traveled to California and points in between. Young Lowell would sketch scenes of cowboys, dusty service stations, mom-and-pop stores, and adobe villages.

Discerning which came first is difficult: his love of art or his love of the American country-

side and frontier. By the time Lowell was four, it was clear to his family that Lowell had a natural artistic ability, so they journeyed to nearby Carthage to buy him a set of oil paints and brushes. That set became his favorite possession and the tools of his trade for years to come.

Like many other men and women from small towns in Missouri, Lowell would leave the Carthage area first to serve in the military. From 1954 to 1958, Lowell served as an Air Force radio operator and navigator for a C-19 aircraft in Europe and Africa. There, he fostered his love for cartoon art and filled countless pages with sketches of military life. After the service, he landed a job creating commercial art and was eventually able to develop a clientele interested in paintings of his native and beloved Missouri. To his surprise, the popularity of regional art gave him freedom to begin his next great work of art.

Over the years, Lowell’s canvas grew from the two-dimensional representations of rural life to a full-scale reanimation of his childhood. In 1987, Lowell began building Red Oak II with masterful precision. Slowly, each corner of the gravel road that winds through the town came to hold a new picturesque scene of pre-World War II and mid-twentieth century Missouri life.

Almost thirty years later, Red Oak II is a marvelous act of preservation. Each building and artifact is genuine. If a house looks to have been built in 1920, it was—it just wasn’t built at Red Oak II. Every structure, from privy to trolley car, is authentic and has a story of its own. Each

was meticulously disassembled and then reassembled on location. There are even antebellum mule barns and chicken coops that harken back to the German settlers who braved the Atlantic to make a home in the Missouri territory.

But this is no ghost town. Red Oak II was always meant to be lived in. Each building is, has been, or will be occupied by permanent residents, which makes the town less of a tourist destination and more of a unique example of living rural art.

“None of it was ever for dollars,” Lowell says.

Ultimately, however, after a divorce in 2000, some of the structures were sold to friends and others who shared his passion for preservation. Some people live here now, some intend to move here after retiring, and others simply want to continue Lowell’s dream.

Obtaining entrance to Red Oak II is as simple as arriving at any town: you just drive in. While residents could exploit the town’s tourism on nearly a daily basis, they charge no entrance fees and have no parking lots or hints of commercialism. Instead, visitors walk or drive slowly back in time to a scene pulled directly from a Norman Rockwell painting.

In fact, several art reviewers at the beginning of his career called Lowell Davis “the Norman

Rockwell of rural art.” Lowell is known nationally for his paintings, but he is equally recognized for his sculptures—three-dimensional figurines that depict the joys of rural farm life. The Ertl Company, which produces realistic toy and model tractors, uses Lowell’s miniature figurines to help bring life to its farm toys: cows for toy paddocks, dogs for the backs of pickup trucks, and horses to pull toy buggies. His figurines are stunningly real, whether cast in bronze, pewter, or porcelain, and they have captured the imaginations of children and collectors for decades.

However, for Lowell, they weren’t real enough. He wanted to reproduce his memories on a life-sized scale. On what was once a forgotten farm, there is now a new burgeoning city, smaller in size than either Carthage or the original Red Oak but tremendous in authenticity and artistic scope. It is an idyllic puzzle made of tangible pieces. It is a place that yields photographic fruit from sunup to sundown.

The humor and genius of Lowell Davis are evident everywhere. The town cemetery demonstrates his mastery of line, color, and shape. To visitors, it might look like it has been there for generations. However, it’s a cemetery of lies. In fact, every single gravestone was a mis-cut reject from a local granite shop, not a testament to the precious memory of a loved one. And there is a spooky twist to the story. There are two real gravesites there, which remain unoccupied: one for Lowell and one for the First Lady of Red Oak II, Rose, whom Lowell married in 2012.

“I want to live here, die here, and be buried in the cemetery,” Lowell says. “Where would you be buried if you were me? Right in the middle of my dreams, and right in the middle of my art.”

Even the steps to the massive old church, which still holds weekly services and regular bluegrass jams, are made from the reclaimed gravestones. When the foliage is thin in the fall, both the church and cemetery cast eerie shadows on the town.

The automobile is also a part of the Red Oak II narrative, given the town’s proximity to Route 66. Perfectly patinated buggies, cars, and trucks, mostly unrestored, dot the landscape and lend

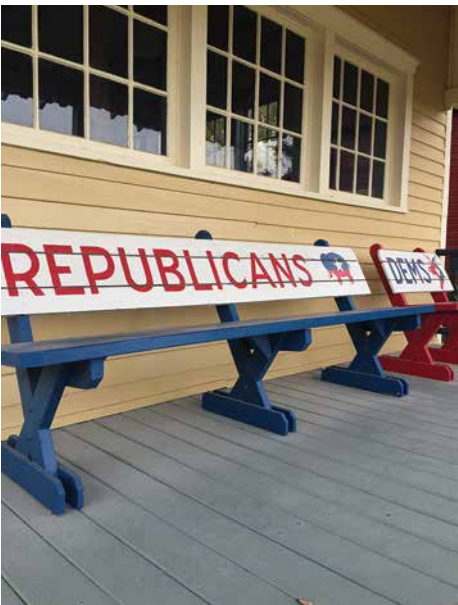


Above: The Red Oak Child Care Center is actually a vintage jail from a nearby mining town. **Right:** At Red Oak II’s town hall, seats for Republicans are plenty, while Democrats have few.

context to the buildings. In the middle of the twentieth century, soldiers like Lowell returned home from service overseas and bought big Fords, Chryslers, and Chevrolets to explore America via the Mother Road. With the ubiquity of the automobile and the relative quality of the tarmac roads, towns like nearby Carthage saw increased population and tax bases. Meanwhile, trusty old Model Ts sat in barns back on the farm alongside newer farm trucks.

Another Route 66-era relic, the Butler steel building that once served as a filling station, is one of the more interesting buildings at Red Oak II. These Butler “buildings in a box” were simple steel kits a franchisee would assemble at points along the route to facilitate America’s growing petroleum needs. Like the church, the station is pure white—a true temple for Route 66 sojourners. It gleams at sunset with its restored gas pumps in shining red and blue.

Another part of Red Oak II’s story is the streetcar. In the 1920s, towns like Carthage relied heavily on streetcars to safely and efficiently move a growing workforce and customers from point to point. However, the streetcar systems could not escape the growing popularity of automobiles, and most were dismantled. Fortunately, though, not all the streetcars from Carthage were destroyed. Lowell found one, moved it to Red Oak II, carefully placed it back on stationary rails, and added a seating area and kitchen. For a time, the Davises ran a restaurant out of the streetcar, and some of Lowell’s fondest memories come from the days he spent working alongside his children in the now defunct diner.



Lowell still lives in Red Oak II, in the Belle Starr house, which was once the quarters of the notorious Southern sympathizer and Missouri sharpshooter. A rebel theme persists in Red Oak II. The adjacent log building, moved from Oklahoma, was a known hideout for some of the Dalton Gang. Not all buildings have a rebel history, though. A mule barn from Sarcoxie also sits nearby. It once housed the straight-walking Missouri mules used to cultivate geraniums and petunias at a large flower farm. A schoolhouse, a general store, and ornate outhouses round out the collection. All speak equally to the vision and effort of its first resident and de facto mayor, Lowell Davis.

If you’re lucky, you’ll spend all afternoon at Red Oak II. If you’re luckier, you’ll catch Lowell walking, pipe in hand, telling the stories each building holds. Red Oak II is a Missouri Route 66 masterpiece, worth a visit no matter which route you take to get there.



Clockwise top left: A gas station is restored at Red Oak II. The former Carthage streetcar once served as a restaurant. A former mill house advertises chew. The town church still holds services.



Finding Red Oak II

Directions to Red Oak II are easy. Go east on Highway 96 from Carthage. About one mile out, look for the Lake Flyin’ W Convenience Store and an old car on a post. Turn left on County Road 130, and follow the signs to Red Oak II. Or you can search “County Loop 122, Carthage, MO 64836” on Google Maps. Call 417-237-0808 or visit redoakiimissouri.com if you get lost.

