

# Rainbow Bridge, on historic Route 66, celebrates 100 years

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CHEROKEE COUNTY, Kan. (KOAM) - The Rainbow Bridge, on historic Route 66, is celebrating its 100th anniversary.

Brush Creek Bridge in Cherokee County is the only remaining Marsh Arch bridge on Route 66, with "Marsh" derived from James Marsh, the bridge's designer.

Every day for the past 12 years, Robert Dean Walker has followed the same routine. "Every morning, I just drive right through it, go right into town," says Walker. He considers it a hobby -- to ensure that Rainbow Bridge looks good and remains safe from vandals. "Sometimes, they will write their name on it, and I paint it out."

Walker is so iconic to the bridge and the route that he inspired the creation of one of the most important characters from the movie Cars - Tow Mater. His ability to turn his feet backwards is reason why the truck drives backwards.

But Walker's not alone in the mission of taking care of the bridge.

In the early nineties, a new bridge was built on the east side of Rainbow Bridge to accommodate the increasing needs of local traffic.

"When they came out with this project, the plan was to build the new bridge next to it, and the older bridge would be closed. It wouldn't be torn down, but it would be closed to traffic," remembers Scott Nelson, owner of Nelson's Old Riverton Store, another local attraction on the historic highway. "We didn't think that was a good idea for Route 66 travelers and the tourists."

Nelson did his research, contacted authorities, and helped keep the bridge open to visitors. "It works perfectly because they don't have to worry about people, you know, the local traffic coming through, and they're in the way," says Nelson. Currently, the bridge is open, one way.

"We know how important it is to our Route 66 travelers to do their photo stops and check it off their bucket list that they've seen," says Mary Billington, director at the Baxter Springs Heritage Center & Museum.

The bridge is not only open for pictures, but it also hosts some very special events.

Joe and Kelly Casillas got married on the bridge on a hot day in July 2005. They believe they are the first American couple to get married there. With her being from Kansas and him being from California, the wedding on a bridge on Route 66 had a special meaning. "I just always have loved the bridge. I always would come out here, and everybody comes out here," says Kelly. "It's kind of a historical spot. We still drive by it all the time," added Joe. A historical and important spot for Joe and Kelly's family, and also for the four-states area.

"When they were originally planning the road across America, that plan was taking it up north. But folks in Tulsa wanted that highway going through there because that's business," says Nelson. "And so we just benefited from them dragging that road down into Oklahoma because it still came by here."

Billington explains that the Route 66 project - originally using the number 60 -- used existing roads to connect small towns to small towns. "And with Kansas, we were pretty much already paved; the Rainbow Bridge was already in," says Billington.

Many Old Riverton Store visitors also check out the bridge. "If they're going to the west, they'll stop here first and they'll say, 'How do you get to the bridge?' And so we say, 'This is how you get to the bridge,'" says Nelson.

"People get to Baxter Springs and realize they missed it, and they've gone looking for it just because they have to have that picture, and it brings back memories," Billington adds.

Memories of a bridge that connected places and people.

In 2026, Route 66 will be celebrating its centennial. According to the Baxter Springs Heritage Center and Museum, the hope is to have the bridge painted for the centennial. Every single day over the last 12 years, Robert Dean Walker has had the same routine.

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