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Two guys, a T-bird and Route 66

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Retirees to raise awareness for diabetes during trip along iconic U.S. highway



Photo Credit: TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Jim Pickett and Joe Roberts found just the right vehicle, a 1966 Ford Thunderbird languishing for years in an Aloha garage, to spruce up and take on their upcoming trek from Chicago to Los Angeles in the path of old U.S. Route 66.

When asked to come up with something, anything, that's improved since the swinging 1960s, Joe Roberts, 66, has to think a bit before responding.

"I have become more mature," he finally says, with a mock seriousness that fails to mask his ever-beating young man's heart. "You hear a lot of people these days say the '60s were good. No, the '60s were great. We had the great music. We were ... developing."

The Aloha resident and Jim Pickett, Roberts' longtime friend and fellow 66-year-old, are preparing to carry the torch for his youth and the Woodstock Generation to a nostalgic, but soul-building destination: A six-week "bucket list"-inspired cruise along old U.S. Route 66 in a restored 1966 Ford Thunderbird.

The T-bird carrying the retired in-laws — Roberts' son married Pickett's daughter eight years ago last Tuesday — will pull out of Portland on Monday. A leisurely cruise across the northern midwest states leads to Chicago, the starting point of what was known for decades to those migrating west as America's "Mother Road."

Roughly six weeks later, they'll conclude their journey at the Santa Monica Pier near Los Angeles, where the long-decommissioned and sporadically marked route reaches the Pacific Ocean.



Photo Credit: TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - As his driver's cap indicates, Joe Roberts is fulfilling an item on his bucket list to drive the entire route of U.S. Route 66 with Jim Pickett in a 1966 Ford Thunderbird.

Bucket-list endorsement

With the goal to motor 220 miles per day, their adventure will include car shows and sight-seeing along the way at many of their long-desired destinations and historical sites, Mt. Rushmore and the Crazy Horse Native American Memorial among them. Highlights include a Route 66 Car Show in Springfield, Ill., along with stops in cities such as St. Louis and Joplin, Mo.

The same-aged pair, who met when their respective children started dating and now share a granddaughter, plan to document their journey through blogs, a website and social media outlets.

"The whole thing is about 66," says Pickett, a retired corporate trainer for the Home Depot, says with a grin. "We're both 66 years old. I'm about 6-foot, 6-inches ... and he's 66 inches tall."

The journey is not all about fun and frivolity.

Roberts and Pickett intend to raise funds and awareness for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, a leading global organization for funding Type 1 diabetes research. The disease is diagnosed in 30,000 people each year, according to the foundation.

"We thought, if we're gonna do this, maybe we can help somebody out," Pickett says. "We have a lot of friends and family with Type 1 diabetes. If nothing else, we can bring some awareness to this. It's out there, but you don't see a whole lot of (publicity)."

Despite the good intentions, one might suspect the fellows' plan might be met with resistance from their wives.

Fortunately for the duo, their buddy expedition received a ringing endorsement from Priscilla Roberts and Dianna Pickett.

"I'm just happy they get to do this," Priscilla says, "because they're going to have a great time. Joe's had this on his bucket list, and seeing places like Mount Rushmore, for years. It's nice to see them going together."

She and Dianna will join their husbands via airplane midway through their east-west trek.

"Our wives are flying down to Albuquerque" for the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta, and visiting Santa Fe, says Roberts, a retired maintenance worker from Legacy Emanuel Hospital. "They're leaving for home after that, and Jim and I are moseying down the road."



Photo Credit: TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ - Joe Roberts and Jim Pickett will drive a 1966 Ford Thunderbird they purchased together for a bucket list adventure of driving the entire corridor of U.S. Route 66.

T - b i r d r e v i v a l

A l t h o u g h o t h e r m o s e y i n g o p t i o n s , i n c l u d i n g R o b e r t s ' 1 9 4 7 F o r d n a m e d " F i l l m o r e , " w e r e c o n s i d e r e d , t h e R o u t e 6 6 t r i p w o u l d n ' t b e q u i t e t h e s a m e w i t h o u t t h e " m a r i n e r t u r q u o i s e " - c o l o r e d T h u n d e r b i r d . T h e l o n g , l o w , s t e e l - b o d i e d v e h i c l e w i t h 1 0 6 , 0 0 0 m i l e s o n i t h a d l a n g u i s h e d i n a n A l o h a r e s i d e n t ' s g a r a g e f o r a b o u t 1 4 y e a r s .

" W e l o o k e d a t i t , a n d i t w a s j u s t b e a u t i f u l , " P i c k e t t r e c a l l s . " I t h a d j u s t b e e n s i t t i n g t h e r e . W e s a i d , ' Y e a h , s u r e , w e ' l l t a k e i t . ' W h e n y o u g e t a c a r l i k e t h a t , y o u t a k e i t t o t h e e x p e r t s t o s e e w h a t ' s w r o n g . W e h a d t h i n g s l i k e t h e t r a n s m i s s i o n a n d c o o l i n g s y s t e m s c h e c k e d o u t a n d s t a r t e d w o r k i n g i t o u t . A s w e s i t h e r e t o d a y , w e f e e l i t ' s r e a d y t o g o . "

N o t h i n g i n t h e c a r ' s g l e a m i n g c h r o m e a n d b a b y b l u e v i n y l - s e a t e d i n t e r i o r s u g g e s t s a n y t h i n g b e y o n d v i n t a g e ' 6 6 . A g l i m p s e b e l o w t h e s u r f a c e , h o w e v e r , r e v e a l s s l y l y p l a c e d 2 1 s t - c e n t u r y u p g r a d e s s u c h a s a b l u e t o o t h w i r e f o r h a n d s - f r e e c e l l p h o n e c a l l s , a n o r i g i n a l - l o o k i n g i n - d a s h r a d i o w i r e d f o r S i r i u s s a t e l l i t e s e r v i c e a n d t w o a s h t r a y s r e t r o f i t t e d w i t h d i g i t a l d e v i c e p l u g - i n s .

" W e h a v e a R e t r o s o u n d - b r a n d r a d i o , w i t h t h e s a m e d i a l a s t h e o r i g i n a l r a d i o , " P i c k e t t o b s e r v e s , " b l u e t o o t h , e i g h t d i f f e r e n t i n p u t s f o r t h u m b d r i v e s , i P a d s , s a t e l l i t e r a d i o a n d f o u r w i r e d U S B p o r t s . A l l o f t h i s i s c o n c e a l e d . Y o u h a v e t o k n o w w h e r e i t i s . "

W h i l e J o e a n d J i m m a y r e s e m b l e t w o B o o m e r s a t a J i m m y B u f f e t c o n c e r t m o r e t h a n P e t e r F o n d a a n d D e n n i s H o p p e r f r o m " E a s y R i d e r , " t h e f e l l o w s h a v e l o s t n o f a i t h t h a t t h e y w e r e , a s t h e 1 9 6 9 m o v i e ' s o p e n i n g s o n g g o e s , " B o r n t o B e W i l d . "

" T h e f i r s t t h i n g t h a t ' s o n (t h e r a d i o) w h e n w e ' r e p u l l i n g o u t o f h e r e i s S t e p p e n w o l f , " R o b e r t s s a y s . " T h e ' 6 0 s w e r e g o o d t o u s . "

W h a t : J o e R o b e r t s ' a n d J i m P i c k e t t ' s T - B i r d T r i p o n R o u t e 6 6 , f o r f u n a n d t o r a i s e f u n d s a n d a w a r e n e s s f o r t h e J u v e n i l e D i a b e t e s R e s e a r c h F o u n d a t i o n

W h e n : S i x t o e i g h t w e e k s s t a r t i n g M o n d a y , S e p t . 1 5

D o n a t i o n i n f o r m a t i o n a n d t r i p u p d a t e s : V i s i t tbirdtrip66.com

F i n d i n g t h e i r w a y o n 6 6

D u r i n g t h e i r b u c k e t - l i s t j o u r n e y i n t h e i r 1 9 6 6 F o r d T h u n d e r b i r d , J o e R o b e r t s a n d J i m P i c k e t t w i l l u s e d e c i d e d l y 2 1 s t - c e n t u r y t e c h n o l o g y t o s t a y a s c l o s e a s t h e y c a n t o t h e o r i g i n a l R o u t e 6 6 c o r r i d o r .

A f t e r m o d e r n i n t e r s t a t e h i g h w a y s t u r n e d t h e o n c e - t h r i v i n g p a s s e n g e r a n d c o m m e r c i a l - t r u c k i n g r o u t e — w h i c h i n s p i r e d a c l a s s i c r h y t h m a n d b l u e s s o n g a s w e l l a s a T V s e r i e s — i n t o a s l e e p y b a c k r o a d , t h e U . S . g o v e r n m e n t d e c o m m i s s i o n e d i t i n t h e 1 9 8 0 s .

With a revival of interest in the route's historical significance, various states it bisects have committed to remarking and revitalizing sections of the road that remain intact. Taking up the cue, entrepreneurs have brought long-shuttered diners, motels and roadhouses — many marked by elaborately kitschy neon signs — back to life.

“A lot of people will drive it in sections,” Pickett says. “Individual states have their own Route 66 associations that are dedicated to the preservation of the Route 66 phenomenon.”