



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 18, 2018

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**CELEBRITY AUTOGRAPH DAY AT THE MILL MUSEUM ON ROUTE 66 IN CONJUNCTION WITH TROPICS SIGN RELIGHTING CEREMONY ON SUNDAY JUNE 24<sup>TH</sup> IN LINCOLN, ILLINOIS**

The eagerly anticipated Tropics Sign Relighting Ceremony in Lincoln, Illinois will be held on Sunday evening, June 24th, 2018. In conjunction, with this event, The Mill Museum on 66 in Lincoln will hold a Celebrity Autograph special event from 1pm-6:30pm that same day, with plenty of time in-between to get from The Mill Museum to The Tropics Sign event.

In addition to getting a chance to view celebrity autographs, visitors will get to see an extensive Tropics collection that is on display at The Mill Museum, including an original Tropics dining table and chairs from the 1950s-70s era (courtesy of Bob & Tami Goodrich – Tami being the daughter of Lew and Bev Johnson, who owned and operated the restaurant), rare Tropics documents dating back to the early years of the restaurant (including a liquor license, and a sales tax document), and a selection of Tropics menus, postcards, matchbooks and photographs. Additionally, there will be a featured document signed by “Coonhound Johnny” Schwenoha, who was a local “beverage distributor” for Al Capone during the Prohibition Era. Coonhound Johnny’s son, Vince, was the original owner of the Tropics Restaurant.

Route 66 Roadie, Rod Ferguson, of Hot Rod Travels, will be the featured guest presenter, and he will have on display for this one-day only event, his collection of celebrity autographs, including an autograph from the late Jerry Maren, who passed away on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2018, having been the last remaining munchkin in the “Wizard of Oz” movie. L. Frank Baum authored "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" book published in 1900, and a series of sequels. The book was later adapted into the famous "Wizard of Oz" movie that featured Judy Garland as Dorothy Gale. The Dorothy character was inspired by Baum's niece, Dorothy Gage, who died within a year of her birth and is buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery along Route 66 in Bloomington, Illinois.

Tina Crow is the Evergreen Memorial Cemetery Manager, and over the next several days, a new memorial to Dorothy Gage will be created. “There is a tree in the vicinity of the Dorothy Louise Gage grave site that was dying. We thought why not see about getting a tree carver to carve Dorothy out of the trunk if it is in good enough shape. As it turned out it was, so we had a tree removal service cut the tree down with the exception of a 12-foot stump. We spoke with a

Gentleman from Top Notch Chainsaw Carving out of Lombard Illinois about doing a carving for us. He will be carving Dorothy who is about 5-foot tall holding a basket and Toto sitting beside her. He will then carve the Yellow Brick Road around the remaining stump at the bottom.”

“On June 1, 1997 Mickey Carroll one of the original Munchkins from the Wizard of Oz along with others from the cemetery unveiled a new headstone for Dorothy. The headstone was purchased by Mickey Carroll in memory of Dorothy. It was then that the cemetery decided to come up with a new section for infants at the entrance of the cemetery named after Dorothy. It is called Dorothy Gage Memorial Gardens,” said Crow.

Rod Ferguson will also have autograph displays from the late Adam West who played Batman in the original “Batman” TV show, the late Noel Neill who played Lois Lane in the original “Superman” TV show, and Cindy Morgan who was part of the cast of the “Caddyshack” and “Tron” movies.

Route 66 enthusiasts will also get a chance to see a unique display of autographs from the late Ernie Edwards of the Pig Hip restaurant and famous Route 66 artist Bob Waldmire – both signed on a piece of original wood siding from the famous restaurant. Also on display will be a picture of Disney/Pixar “Cars” character “Sara Safestreet” from the State Farm TV commercial, signed by actress Eva Longoria who did the voice for the character in the ad.

Several autographs from professional sports figures who were born in Lincoln, Illinois will be on display, including NBA basketball player Brian Cook, NFL football player Tony Semple and MLB baseball players Kevin Seitzer and Ryan Aper.

At 3pm, celebrity authors will be on hand for book sales and signings, including Route 66 author and historian John Weiss, author of “Traveling the New, Historic Route 66 of Illinois” & “As the Story Goes...”; and retired local newspaper editor and author Danny Tackett, author of “Big Stories from a Small Town” & “Even More Big Stories” – a companion to his first book.

This will also be an opportunity to meet the volunteers and board members who brought The Mill back to life as a museum, including Geoff Ladd, who began the restoration project back in 2006. Special pieces of wood from The Mill will be on sale, with a certificate of authentication signed by Ladd (quantities are limited). Also featured for sale will be a variety of Mill-branded t-shirts, hoodies, women’s apparel and ceramic pottery available exclusively at The Mill. Also on sale will be original Tropics matchbooks and memory beads designed by Teri Lynn Parrish, that are made with bricks from The Tropics restaurant. Parrish is the niece of the late Tropics owner Lew Johnson.

Also on display is a special memorial to the late Charles Ott, who portrayed Abraham Lincoln for several decades. Charles was the official Abraham Lincoln for the State of Illinois and traveled globally in that role. He also was the official Abraham Lincoln in the Sears catalog. You’ll be able to see Charles Ott’s signature from his Illinois State Bee Inspector license. His widow Marge Ott, is now a volunteer at The Mill and will be among the volunteers greeting visitors at the event.

“One of the special aspects of Route 66 is the balance of old and new along the most famous Road in the world,” observed Bill Kelly, Executive Director of the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway, who will be present for the festivities. “We have attractions and businesses along the Road here in Illinois that are practically unchanged since the twenties and thirties. We also have attractions that have re-invented themselves.”

“Lincoln is fortunate to have two great examples of that re-invention on Route 66 with the Tropics Sign and the Mill. One of the most iconic Signs anywhere on the Mother Road returns to its former glory in the evening sky. The Mill has just celebrated its first anniversary as a Museum, showcasing the Lincoln area Route 66 memorabilia that includes many artifacts from the Tropics Restaurant in its heyday,” said Kelly.

Specialty coffee and tea samples, as well as cold water will be available at The Mill Museum. There will be a 50/50 drawing and prize giveaways. A suggested donation is encouraged to help with ongoing utility and insurance expenses for The Mill.

After the conclusion of the special event at The Mill, patrons and visitors are encouraged to attend the Tropics Sign Relighting Ceremony main event at the original location of the famous Route 66 neon sign, which is now at the McDonald's restaurant in Lincoln. There will be a reception beginning at 7:15pm. The formal program begins at 7:45pm, with representatives from several organizations scheduled to speak. The switch for the restored neon tubing for The Tropics sign will be turned on at 8:15pm. Seating is limited, and attendees are encouraged to bring lawn chairs. The Lincoln, IL McDonald's restaurant is offering a special \$1.66 cheeseburger and small fries meal throughout the day. Commemorative T-shirts of The Tropics also will be available at the Tropics ceremony. Attendees are encouraged to wear tropical attire. The famous sign was restored by Ace Sign Company of Springfield, Illinois, utilizing a grant by the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program, City of Lincoln hotel/motel tax and individual fund-raising efforts of the Tropics Legacy Campaign.

The Mill Museum is located at 738 South Washington Avenue (the 1926-1940 alignment of Route 66) in Lincoln, and the Tropics Sign is located at the McDonald's restaurant on 1007 Hickox Drive (the 1940-1977 alignment of Route 66) in Lincoln. More information is available at [www.illinoisroute66.org](http://www.illinoisroute66.org).



Rod Ferguson at The Mill (photo courtesy Rod Ferguson)



Restored Tropics Sign (photo by Geoff Ladd)



Jerry Maren autograph from the Rod Ferguson collection (photo by Geoff Ladd)