



IN THE MIDDLE OF TULSA

By Abigail Singrey

Photographs by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66



Tulsa, Oklahoma, holds a place of quiet reverence along legendary Route 66. Among its famed landmarks is 11th Street, a stretch of road that has undergone dramatic transformations over the years, mirroring the rise, fall, and resurgence of the Mother Road itself. Among the new businesses riding this wave of revitalization is the Wildflower Cafe, a cozy and vibrant eatery at 1306 East 11th Street. This humble address, steeped in history and a legacy of housing various businesses, has silently stood as a witness to the ebb and flow of 11th Street's storied journey. By opening the Wildflower Cafe, owner Heather Linville joined a vibrant wave of visionaries breathing new life into the district, transforming what was once a symbol of decline into a thriving destination once again.

The Glory Days of 11th Street

In the golden age of Route 66, which spanned from the 1930s to the 1950s, 11th Street was a bustling thoroughfare serving as a vital artery for travelers heading west toward California or east to Chicago. Lined with motels, diners, service stations, and mom-and-pop stores, neon signs would light up the night, advertising clean rooms, hot meals, and the promise of adventure. America was a much larger country in those days.

In 1934, amid the bustling heyday of 11th Street, Robert W. Brinlec, a long-time Tulsa wholesale grocer, opened the Brinlec Grocery and Market at 1324 East 11th Street. Next door, at 1302-1308 East 11th Street, James Calvin Meck and his family operated Meck's Hardware & Furniture Company, with the space at the corner of 11th and South Peoria Avenue serving as an office building, accommodating various tenants over the years. Together, these businesses thrived, becoming cornerstones of the community, where locals and travelers alike found connection and commerce in the heart of Tulsa.

Then, came the advent of the interstate system. Businesses began to shut their doors as travelers opted for the faster, more efficient highways. The neon signs that once illuminated the night were dimmed, their messages of welcome fading into obscurity. After more than 40 years, the Brinlec store closed its doors in 1975, and Meck's Furniture followed shortly after, closing during the 1980s. By 1983, the building that had housed the Brinlec Grocery and Market was demolished and the property was converted into a parking area. In the early 1970s, the office building at the corner to the west at 11th Street and S. Peoria Avenue was purchased by Elmo Ray Ferrell, Sr. and converted into a restaurant named Mexican Fiesta, which later became Mark and Mary's Good Food Cafe until 1991. In 1994, it was reopened as The Corner Cafe.

11th Street had become a shadow of its former self with many of its landmarks neglected or demolished and soon the area gained a reputation as the Red Light District. The

Mother Road in Tulsa had lost its luster and it seemed that 11th Street's storied chapter had closed.

But then, several decades later, a resurgence began to take shape.

A Symbol of Revival

In 2009, the iconic 1930 Meadow Gold sign was officially restored and relocated to a plaza on 11th Street and Quaker Avenue. This site was the spot that the Brinlec Grocery store had once occupied. In 2007, Markham D. Ferrell — grandson of Elmo Ray Ferrell, Sr. — and now the third generation owner of this property, learned that the Meadow Gold sign was in need of a new home and donated the property to the City of Tulsa.

The reinstallation of the Meadow Gold sign wasn't just about saving a historic artifact, it symbolized the beginning of 11th Street's revitalization and the establishment of the Meadow Gold District, an area that stretches between Peoria and Utica Avenue. This act sparked renewed interest in honoring the street's history and laid the groundwork for ongoing efforts to revitalize the area.

In 2017, Aaron Meck, second-generation member of the Meck family, as well as owner of the luxurious Campbell Hotel and Group M Investment — a real estate firm in Tulsa — reclaimed his family's legacy by repurchasing their former Meck's Hardware & Furniture Company building, which is now home to Meadow Gold Mack's gift shop. He also purchased the office building on the corner. After the closure of The Corner Cafe in 2019, he transformed the property into multiple retail spaces, becoming a key player in the revitalization of 11th Street. Today, these retail spaces house a diverse array of businesses, including the Wildflower Cafe, The Meat and Cheese Show — a specialty grocery store — and Southwestern Trading, which offers Native goods such as pottery and blankets. Above the storefronts are stylish rental lofts, adding to the district's dynamic appeal.

"Investment in the Meadow Gold District over the last few years has helped elevate all of the businesses in that corridor," said Rhys Martin, Oklahoma Route 66 Association president. "Once the building on the corner was rehabbed, it drew a lot of interest. The Wildflower Cafe is always busy; the locals love having dining there, and Route 66 travelers want an authentic, locally-owned spot to enjoy a meal before continuing down the road. That big neon sign on the corner, made possible by the City of Tulsa Route 66 Neon Sign Grant, also helps draw a lot of attention!"

A Lady with a Vision

For Heather Linville, opening the Wildflower Cafe represented a fulfillment of a lifelong dream. She has always worked in restaurants, starting with her first job at a simple Simon's [Pizza] in Euftawa, Oklahoma. "I made hamburgers and pizza, and I don't know what else," Linville explained. "Then I got a job at Goldie's. I think every young waitress of my age probably worked at Goldie's. Then I moved on to college and continued waitressing. It was flexible for my college schedule. And then I became a wife and mother, and it was easy to just have a couple shifts a week."

With each restaurant that she worked at, Linville made mental notes: what she liked and disliked; and she dreamed of how she would one day run a place of her own.



Owner Heather Linville.

Eventually, she landed in Tulsa, where she climbed the ranks to management at a local establishment. Frustrated by the limitations of her role, she began spending her free time exploring vacant buildings, envisioning the perfect space for her vision. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, bringing the restaurant industry to a standstill. Laid off and at a crossroads, Linville saw an opportunity to finally turn her long-held dream into reality.

But first, she needed to settle on a location. She lived in midtown Tulsa at the time and found herself drawn to the atmosphere of an up-and-coming area that was revitalizing as part of the Route 66 renaissance.

"I was very, very interested in the building across the street. It's called The Wrench. It was a mechanic shop forever and ever; since 1989 is what it says on the sign," Linville continued. "But it sat empty forever on that corner, and I had this vision of it being a cute little cafe with an outdoor patio. I could never get anyone to communicate with me about it, and it still sits empty five years later. And so, as I was sitting over there [in 2020], I saw some signs in the windows over here and I just thought, 'Okay, I'm going to call.'"

When she toured the building on 1306 E 11th Street, she saw endless possibilities. As the former home of The Corner Cafe, the space had been in serious need of repairs before its closure. The current owners, Group M Investment, had gutted the interior, leaving it stripped to the studs with no plumbing or electrical systems in place. For Linville, this

presented an opportunity to start fresh and create a space tailored to her personal vision. After signing the lease, she teamed up with contractors to bring her ideal layout to life.

"It was intense. It took a lot of my time and energy, and it just consumed me really. But it was really fun because like I said, that whole year and a half when we were all stuck at home with nothing to do, I was fortunate enough to be shopping in the marketplace or online for different things and just kind of putting the whole vision together in my head; without a lot of pressure because the world was on hold at that time."

The "Wildflower Cafe" is Born

When it came time to name the restaurant, she found herself at a loss. She spent countless hours a day dreaming, letting her imagination wander through endless possibilities. Then, inspiration struck and everything fell into place.

"I've always loved wildflowers, and it just seemed like a really cute thing to design the restaurant around, and who doesn't like flowers? They make everybody happy. And that was kind of my style," Linville reflected. "One day, my friend Carrie sent me this really nice message about how every time she hears the song from Tom Petty called Wildflowers, she thinks of me, and that was kind of sweet. It was at the same time that we were in the naming process, and it just sounded right."



Inside of the café.

Linville collaborated with Encinos 3D Signs in Tulsa to create the striking neon sign now displayed at the street corner. She envisioned a design inspired by Oklahoma's state wildflower, the Indian Blanket, and Encinos brought this concept to life, working closely with her to finalize the colorful look. With support from a Route 66 Commission grant, half of the sign's cost was covered, making this vibrant addition possible. In May of 2021, the Wildflower Cafe officially opened for business.

Inside the restaurant, greenery abounds. A potted succulent hangs in every window, and a gallery wall of wildflower prints — a combination of vintage prints Linville has been gifted and items she found antiques — hangs above the counter. In the back corner, an accent wall with whimsical, colorful wildflowers adds extra flair. Linville carefully considered every detail, down to wildflower-themed light fixtures and string lights that provide extra light, though the sun-drenched space hardly needs it.

Linville focused the menu on simple, fresh and easy items, but it has also evolved over time. At first, Linville only planned to provide lunch, but her staff talked her into adding breakfast as well. The cafe specializes in made-from-scratch items such as biscuits, pancakes, waffles, and cheese grits. Her chef, Chuy Gonzalez, makes a mean huevos rancheros, so that got added as a blue plate special.

"[Gonzalez] has this extra level that he adds with. He just makes everything with love and he doesn't want anything to go out that doesn't make him happy or doesn't satisfy him," said Linville. "I don't know how [the kitchen staff] make the eggs so fluffy and delicious. They just sprinkle magic over everything they do."

For Linville, opening Wildflower Cafe was a chance to do everything her way. She wanted it to be more than a restaurant: she envisioned a community hub and a vehicle for

giving back, both to customers and to the community around them.

"We run it for people, not for ourselves. Obviously we benefit, because we have other people in mind and in our hearts. But when I say that we run it differently, I'm blessed to have the money to keep it going, but it's not about that. It's about giving back to as many people as we can, to make their day better just by coming here, or feeling seen or heard or loved. It's not just a meal. I want people to know that they're cared about here."

As Linville and her staff have become invested in the

community, Linville has established a Community Impact Fund, which both the restaurant and regular patrons donate to. At one point, the fund helped a local man who was struggling with his day-to-day life to get a motorized wheelchair that makes daily tasks a little more achievable.

"That was a really fun day because he was very, very surprised. I think my happy moments come from when I see other people being affected by what we are doing, and then it makes them want to do it themselves. And so, when I see that happening here, it makes me incredibly happy."

A Road Reclaimed

Today, this storied building, where the cafe now operates, has been reborn as The Meadow Gold Shops & Lofts complex — a blend of retail, dining, and residential spaces — a fresh and vibrant addition to the uber famous Route 66 corridor. After more than a century, new investors and entrepreneurs are breathing life into the historic Meadow Gold District, reviving its charm while honoring its legacy. With each new project, they're restoring the district's unique character and sparking fresh energy, creating a destination where the past and present intersect.

The Wildflower Cafe, nestled in the heart of this revitalized area, is now an integral part of the District's resurgence, a cornerstone in a neighborhood that continues to grow and evolve. It embodies that spirit of renewal and growth, welcoming both locals and travelers to experience a special little slice of history. Tulsa and towns like it are setting the standard about how once depressed communities can be renewed and lead the charge in bringing historical structures and areas back to life. And right at the center of it all is a cozy café that is the answer to one woman's dream.