



## WALL SIGNS MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES

Driving through any downtown in the early part of the 20th century would have been a much different experience for many different reasons. The automobile was beginning to take over the streets, beautiful buildings lined the busy Main Street, and as you look down the streetscape your eyes would have been overwhelmed by the clutter of signs that took over every open piece of wall space on every building down the street.

These wall signs were the past's version of the modern billboard, and with brick buildings dominating the landscape potential billboards stood everywhere.

Wall signs became popular in a commercial setting after the Industrial Revolution took hold of Europe. Towards the end of the 19th century, wall signs had made it to the American landscape and would remain the most popular form of commercial advertisement until the 1950's.

As the 1950's came to a close and new, more modern ways of advertisement came, the fine art of wall sign painting began to disappear for the sake of convenience.

After over 50 years of neglect, these signs that once advertised the premier products of the day now advertise products that have long since been taken off the shelves and most signs have faded beyond legibility. These faded images that remain are labeled **ghost signs** because of the ghostly image that is left.

During the last decade of the 19th century, talented young sign

painters began crisscrossing the nation painting hundreds of wall advertisements a year for more than 50 years. These painters could be found dangling from roofs of buildings and balancing on tall ladders in downtowns throughout the country. It is said that the painters worked as hard as dogs, and soon became nicknamed "wall dogs."

As the sign painters made their way from town to town, the wall spaces to paint were prearranged for them by lease men, who would scour the countryside ahead of them in search of empty wall spaces for signs to be painted.

These lease men carried boxes of gold watches and vouchers for the different products they advertised to be used as payment for use of the owner's walls for national product advertisement.

In a commercial setting, the owner of the wall was often given a "privilege" for use of the wall. That is, a smaller ad for their own store or cafe or whatever was painted above or below the ad for the national product.

There are two basic types of wall signs: pictorial and informative. Pictorial signs include a prominent picture; like Bull Durham cigarette ads which boasted a large bull. In-



formative signs just include writing; like many Coca-Cola signs.

The design for each sign was a stock design drawn up in a studio and used for all the signs for a particular company. But depending on the size and shape of the wall, the sign painter would add his own style to the sign to make it work for each wall.

Pre-1940, each of the signs that were painted would have been done completely free hand only with the aid of a scale drawing done in the studio. Painters would use tricks like snapping chalk lines and counting bricks to ensure proper scale and straight lines.

After 1940, wall dogs used a technique called 'pounce patterns' to complete each sign. This technique is still utilized by many sign painters that practice today.

Pounce patterns involve heavy sheets of paper perforated to outline the designs and lettering. The pattern is then placed up on the wall and along the outline; a bag of powder (called a pounce bag) is used to leave a powder line on the wall.

Modern sign painters also utilize projectors to project the image on the wall, so the painter can simply outline and fill in the shapes with color.

Historically, wall dogs used a thick lead based paint, which would have had to be mixed before each job. The paint consisted of a mixture of white lead and color, usually either a dry pigment or pigment ground in linseed oil. This paint mixing process could have taken up to an hour to mix a single color.



This thick, toxic paint produced a flat finish that would flex with weather conditions and would soak into the porous brick for a longer life. But because of repeated exposure to white lead, not wearing gloves, and lack of washing correctly, cases of lead poisoning, or painters colic as wall dogs nicknamed it, flourished among sign painters.

Most sign painters now use an oil based or latex paint that is much safer but does not last

nearly as long as the old lead based paint. Modern paints even though richer and brighter just create a layer of paint over the brick, which makes them very susceptible to weathering.

Sign painters used many techniques to make their signs stand out on the city scape. They would use high contrasting color, deep shadows, and extreme highlights to help make a lasting impression on the viewer.

As the 1950's came to a close, the need for painted wall signs began to diminish. With the creation of billboards and plastic channel signs, advertising became much cheaper and wall signs began to be phased out. Other contributions to the decline of wall signs were the many sign ordinances of the 1960's, which were created to cut down on the clutter of signage on Main Streets, and the freeway system that made signage on downtown buildings expendable.

As these wall signs aged and

began to acquire their ghostly appearance, the true mystery of ghost signs begins to become apparent. These faded signs on brick walls throughout America are now just mysterious whispers of a dying booming commercial age.



Most signs that can be found today are incomplete and require you to fill-in-the-blank to understand the whole message. These signs often advertise products that are no longer available at a price that is unheard

of in today's market, but they can be a very important historic point of view for a community.

Some signs can even be found that have been painted over with two or more advertisements creating a double negative appearance.

Many questions have been raised about whether to preserve and repaint these old signs or to leave them as they are. Is it historic art or an eyesore? Is it a cultural artifact or tacky commercial advertisement from the past? Or even does the community want a ten-foot tall cigarette advertisement on the side of a prominent downtown building?

Many times in today's society, ghost signs, like neon signs and other pieces of the recent past, are overlooked as historical and simply painted over or thrown away.

Today many efforts have been made to help save these mysterious links to the past. The Society of Commercial Archaeology, an

organization devoted to the buildings, artifacts, and symbols of the 20th-century commercial landscape, has begun to stand out as an activist for the preservation of ghost signs throughout America.

Many believe it is all right to repaint old, well-done signs, as long as they are repainted to original specs, including correct paint colors and the exact design. In the past, they actually would have been maintained and repainted by the wall dogs and would have always looked freshly painted.

If a sign is to be repainted, it should be researched to find exact colors and designs. This is not a weekend job to just go out and do on a whim; the job should be well planned and done tastefully as not to become a tacky novelty painting.

Others think that a ghost sign is part of the building's patina and should be left as is, as a ghost of the original advertisement. Many purists feel that repainting them takes away their historic value and integrity.

Whether signs are preserved, conserved, or restored, they all remain a link to a disappearing past. Historic wall signs can be a symbol of a city's heritage connecting a product or company to the area or even a time of booming commercialism to the downtown.

#### For More Information:

*Design Consultant, Main Street Iowa  
Iowa Dept of Economic Development  
200 East Grand, Des Moines, IA 50309  
515-242-4762  
515-242-4792*