

IMAGE FILE

A Journal from the Curt Teich Postcard Archives, Lake County Discovery Museum



VOLUME 13 NUMBER 3/4 2004

- GRASSROOTS GRAPHICS
- BOOK REVIEW:
Hollywood in Vintage
Postcards
- PACE 2003 WINNERS
- CATALOGING NOTES
- INDICIA:
Recent Publications



5A-H735

**THE CRANBERRY BOTTLE,
ONSET, MASSACHUSETTS, ON ROUTES 6 AND 28 TO CAPE COD**

The giant Ocean Spray Cranberry Cocktail bottle, an unusual structure that drew more than 250,000 visitors, was a Cape Cod landmark. The connection between the item being advertised and the form of the structure is undeniable. This style of architecture, coined "programatic" by architectural historian David Gebhard, describes architecture whose identity includes an organization of meaning either directly or indirectly. Curt Teich Archives 5AH735. 1935. See article beginning on page 3.

GRASSROOTS GRAPHICS

By Cynthia Elyce Rubin

Outdoor advertising signs, bits and pieces of commonplace, everyday life, contribute to the way we see and understand our world. As old as civilization itself, such visual communicators reflect a lively collage, deriving from the complexity of public and community life that tacitly surrounds us day and night. By means of postcards, we view images of signs in all their metamorphoses, allowing us today to touch antiquity through a sign-language inheritance transmitted from a powerful past.

We are constantly made aware of graphic design and advertising, in part because of the extraordinary increase of communication products designed by advertising, marketing, and public relations professionals. By selecting typefaces and manipulating type sizes and shapes, professional designers and art directors have learned how to best establish a mood, evoke images, and suggest a tone. The full impact of these specialists, even in a subliminal mode, bombard us via print and telecommunications.

Outdoor signage, however, harkens back to ancient times. Having been around since recorded history, signs are among the earliest graphics ever produced. At a time when few people could read or write,

signs, whose ultimate purpose was to attract attention by means of a strong, visual message, were indispensable to city life. Their evidence, traced to the Roman Empire, has been unearthed in the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii where painted and carved stone and terracotta pilasters proclaimed the nature of the businesses behind hidden storefronts. A painting of Bacchus pressing a bunch of grapes announced a wine merchant. A boy receiving a lashing with a birch rod appeared at the door of a schoolmaster. When archeologists found these same sculptured indicators on tombs in the catacombs, scholars concluded that Romans also carved images of tools into their houses to indicate professions.¹

During the Middle Ages, with the spread of civilization, the trading community began to expand and simple emblems or tools of trades became signs, visual symbols of myriad occupations, often in the form of a product. At a time when few could read or write, these signs by necessity distinguished one place of business from another. A knife stood for the cutler, a stocking for the hosier, a hand for the glover, and a pair of scissors for the tailor. As luxury increased, the number of houses or shops dealing in the same article multiplied and something more was warranted.

With reading still a hard-to-find skill, to spell out the owner's name would have been of little use.

Besides simple "tool" signs, coats of arms, crests, and badges gradually made their appearances at the doors of shops and inns. In the Middle Ages, vacant town and country houses of nobility were used as hostelry for travellers. While the family coat of arms always hung in front of the house, the most conspicuous object within its design gave a name to the establishment. Innkeepers soon adopted hanging out such signs as the best way to acquaint the public to the fact that they offered food and shelter. Their visibility even inspired popular ditties, such as "Good entertainment for all that passes, — Horses, mares, men and asses."

As both shops and trades increased, so did the variety of signage. Sometimes a rebus, a play on the owner's name or a visual pun was used. Names and symbols today can be traced to Greek and Roman mythology, medieval heraldic emblems, and guild designs. No possible source of material was overlooked or underestimated as animals, birds, trees, flowers, stars, and noted personages all contributed to a historic, kaleidoscopic world of symbolic advertising references. Described by Carl Jung in *Man and His*

We make the world brighter

Complete service in paints, glass and wallpaper

the paint pot
S. J. OTTLEY & SONS
2157 HIGHLAND DRIVE
Sugar House. Phone 7-2291
SALT LAKE CITY 5, UTAH

the paint pot
S. J. OTTLEY & SONS
2157 HIGHLAND DRIVE
Sugar House. Phone 7-2291
SALT LAKE CITY 5, UTAH

WALLPAPER • CLEANERS
WAXES • POLISHES • GLASS
FREE PAINT

GLASS
FREE
PARKING

the paint pot
S. J. OTTLEY & SONS
2157 HIGHLAND DRIVE
Sugar House. Phone 7-2291
SALT LAKE CITY 5, UTAH

During the Middle Ages, when few people could read or write, signs were necessary to distinguish one business from another. These signs were often visual symbols of tools of the trade. Here the message is simple and direct. What better way to demonstrate the interior product but to exaggerate it on the building's facade. Like a column of a Greek temple, this light-hearted symbol makes an icon out of the store's business — a tradition that can still be found in the twenty-first century. Curt Teich Archives 8BH278. 1938.

the middle of the century, street names caused their virtual disappearance. Their use to distinguish inns and shops, however, remained.

One can say that the trade-sign seed was literally transplanted to the New World when Thomas Hariot reported the discovery of tobacco in his 1588 publication, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia*. Unwittingly, he aided the spread of tobacco's popularity and the rise in shops to promote its sale. Signs for these shops took on a commercial significance and since the Indian was indelibly connected to the product in the popular imagination, "Virginians," Indian-figured signs, became fashionable appearing over and outside shop doorways. The earliest representation, illustrated in a 1617 English book, was one designed to sit on a store counter, an African-like figure wearing a feathered skirt holding a roll of tobacco leaf.

With the spread of tobacco shops, by 1860 the common sign for American tobacconists was the three-dimensional cigar-store Indian. Its earliest documented use as a sign is illustrated in an 1880 watercolor drawing by Baroness Hyde de Neuville, now owned by the New York Public Library, which displays a small Indian beside a shop's doorway in what is today's Greenwich Village. Later, cast-iron figures were considered more practical since their paint, applied at the time of casting, lasted longer in the outside elements than that of their wooden counterparts. Men, like William Demuth in New York City, manufactured a complete line of metal figures and proudly advertised their durability.

Additional forms of English descent were intricately connected to early settlement. Apothecaries used the mortar and pestle, their well-known implement for

REAL ESTATE.

633

633

633 · LOUGHEED & COATES · 633

CRAIGVALE

SOUTH 3/4 OF BLOCK 9 D.L. 50

1/4 No 1 ROAD - SOUTH VAN

14 LOTS ONLY

SALE COMMENCES 9 AM

FRIDAY 15th

Terms 1/3 & 2/3 Cash

Not arranged to suit

Buy More Cheap
WORK

LOUGHEED & CO.

Borrowing from the past that employed the hanging sign to convey meaning, this real estate office also used signs to advertise and sell services and products. In addition, painting signs directly on the walls of buildings and rural barns transformed them into giant advertising signs, the forerunner of today's billboards. Postcard courtesy of the author.

Symbols as possessing "specific connotations in addition to conventional and obvious meaning," these images are symbolic when they imply something more than an obvious and immediate meaning. A hare and a bottle stood for Harebottle; two cocks represented Cox. Portraits of great men of all ages, views of towns, articles of dress, implements of trades, domestic utensils, things visible and invisible, symbols direct and indirect — everything was fodder to attract attention and obtain publicity.

In today's computer-driven age, a sign can be an ephemeral object. It was not always so. When few people received schooling, signs were an integral part of a town's appearance and vital to city life. As education spread, they became less necessary and when in the last century, literacy grew commonplace and urban systems, such as house numbering, became widespread, symbolic trade signs for thoroughfares were no longer a positive necessity. Today their original value may have partially disappeared, but trade signs still manage to linger, not so much by reason of utility, but as homage to the decorative humor and whimsicality of their makers.

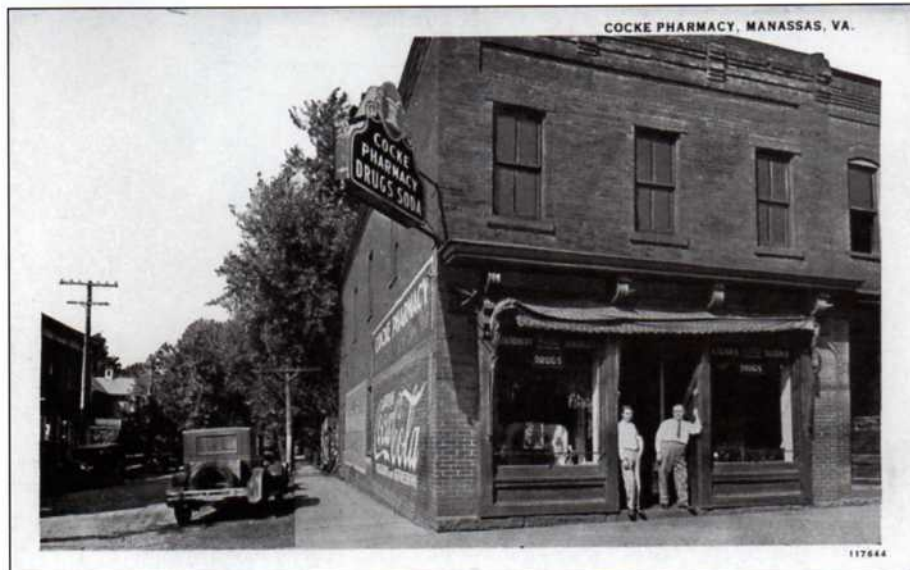
In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, signs had long been compulsory for English innkeepers, their use optional for tradesmen. Charles I, on his accession to the throne in 1625, granted a charter to London giving the citizens the right to hang out such signs and signboards as they pleased "for the better finding out such citizen's dwelling, shops, arts or occupations, with impediment, molestation of interruption of his heirs or successors." As businesses grew more competitive, one recognizable effect increasingly revealed itself. Growing larger and more elaborate, signs reached gargantuan proportions. Competitiveness, so highly touted as today's hot topic, was more distracting some three hundred years ago when, in rainy and windy weather, monstrous, hanging signs creaked and

groaned, frequently causing accidents to passing consumers.

A writer in London's *Spectator* of April 2, 1710 inveighed against the use of unsuitable signage:

I would enjoin every shop to make use of a sign which bears some affinity to the ware in which it deals. What can be more inconsistent than to see a bawd at the sign of the Angel, or a tailor at the Lion? A cook should not live at the Boot, nor a shoemaker at the Roasted Pig; and yet, for want of this regulation, I have seen a Goat set up before the door of a perfumer, and the French King's Head at a sword-cutters.

Though street numbers had been in partial use in England since the beginning of the eighteenth century, it was not until the latter part that they came into more general use. Even then many shopkeepers seemed reluctant to adopt them.



By the seventeenth century, the mortar and pestle was used to indicate an apothecary, a practice still seen today. The Cocks Pharmacy in Manassas, Virginia displayed the mortar and pestle at the top of their sign in a powerful link to the past while extolling the virtue of a popular contemporary drink on the side wall. Curt Teich Archives A117644. 1927.

pounding drugs. Different combinations of the ball symbol introduced myriad shops, with three blue balls indicating a pawnbroker's establishment. Today's most recognizable sign, however, was that of the barber-surgeon. At the time when barbers performed bloodletting, the patient grasped a long pole in order to ease his blood flow. Since the pole readily stained from the blood, it was painted red. When not in use, barbers habitually suspended it outside the door with white linen twisted around it, giving rise to today's modern interpretation. In a very eloquent refusal to die, few contemporary barbers carry out their tonsorial duties without displaying such a pole. The same can be said for the pawnshop with its distinctive logo of three hanging balls and the druggist's mortar and pestle.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a restive American populace encountered outdoor signage on a scale and significance that defied credulity. When automobile-mania arrived, the nation's highways became "the most hugely extensive market the human race has ever set up to tease and tempt and take money from the human race." Blacksmiths, wheelwright shops, and taverns gave way to hot dog stands, gas stations, and motels as the alchemy of progress transformed the rural turnpike into the modern highway.

The automobile, declared *Fortune* magazine in 1934, "became a hypnosis . . . the opium of the American people."² Thanks to the auto's popularity, spellbinding temptations along the roadside lured people throughout the landscape as each and every creative American entrepreneur attempted to cash in en route. Driving hardly any distance at all, the viewer could encounter fantastically-shaped motels, restaurants, and roadside stands. From Connecticut to California, the roads were strewn with not only signs and billboards but "stands built like tamales, tea rooms built like teapots and papier-mâché owls lettered 'I-SCREAM,'



GERONIMO'S CASTLE — GREYHOUND BUS DEPOT — BOWIE, ARIZONA

The juxtaposition of the exotic architectural form of the castle with ownership by an Indian Chief jars today's sensibilities, but at the time, it was undoubtedly meant to amuse. This visual oxymoron was undoubtedly seen as simply that of a teepee, the Indian's home and a man's home is his castle, after all. Curt Teich Archives 5BH1487. 1945.

laughing swine with neon teeth and in fact almost any eye-widening outlandishness you can imagine."

In addition, *Fortune* asserted "the roadside took the ice-cream cone to its bosom," and regional culinary delights including hot dogs, "thick along both coasts, thickest east of the Mississippi" were on their way to becoming American icons. Westward the Bar-B-Q sandwich held the lead while the hot tamale took hold in the Southwest. Down along the Gulf Coast, the road hungry found native specials of the "snack-and-run" sort — creole pralines, pecan pies, and the famous fried-fish sandwich, specialty of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

Gullibility reigned on the road, particularly in California where "fresh from the farm" vegetables were often fresh from the nearest city market. "For in Southern California at least it is almost a tradition for housewives to buy perhaps half their vegetables along the roadsides, and with

such a volume the temptation to cheat seemed irresistible."

The American Automobile Association estimated the average American on tour in 1934 spent about \$7 per person per day on the road. One dollar forty per cent for transportation costs, including gasoline, garaging, and accessories bought en route. An equal amount went for lodging. One dollar forty-seven cents was spent on eating. One dollar seventy-five cents was in exchange for linens, lotions, goggles, Kodak films, postcards, beads, baskets, pottery, blankets, antiques, balsam cushions, and the like. Forty-two cents more went into candy, ice cream, hot dogs, and similar snacks. And fifty-six cents was spent in theatres and places of amusement.

Commercial as well as mom and pop owners did their best to capture their own portion of this expenditure. Creating bizarre and whimsical formations to function as advertising was one way to beckon the newly initiated American traveler to stop and partake. Even during the Depression's hard times, people couldn't stay put. Roads, such as U.S. Route 20, wrote Daniel R. Porter, became a "hypnotic spellbinder that lured and transfixed its devotees" as nothing else did.³

Along every mile of Route 20, as early as 1927 when it was designated a U.S. highway, "antique shops, tourist courts, diners, filling stations, roadside stands and a host of nondescript structures selling everything from concrete lawn ornaments to rubber tomahawks sprang up beneath screeching, tasteless, oversized symbols and signs that with their very garishness sought to attract and hold the traveler long enough to part him from his pocket change."

With neither zoning restrictions nor the policing of any Better Business Bureau, marketing easily incorporated sleazy and tacky strategies on the highways that now served as the all-American main street. Windmills, teepees, and assorted



This real photo postcard boasts that this building is the "Only petrified wood filling station in the world." Built in 1932 by W. G. Brown, a lumber dealer, the station still stands in Lamar, Colorado and is used as an office for a tire dealer. Postcard courtesy of the author.



With the rapid expansion of automobile ownership after World War I, the windmill and the ship became favored large-scale roadside structures whose appeal continued long into the twentieth century. This photo shows the Ship Refreshment Stand, Chicago, July 1930. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

exotica became the norm with their hodge-podge placement taking over the roadside's landscape. It was "a panoply of signs and symbols designed to entice and entreat, plead and preach, tantalize and titillate. In their effort to grab the motorist's attention, entrepreneurs sought to use popular symbols that represented domesticity, tidiness, the quaint, the familiar as well as the bizarre and the outlandish."

These architectural oddities were appearing all over the country, but according to John R. Crossland, a British author travelling in 1938, California seemed to have a greater than average proportion in this strange new world, an echo of *Fortune's* observation that to "behold such haywire crowned and seated in its ultimate glory, you must go to California."

If, when you went shopping, you found you could buy cakes in a windmill, ices in a gigantic cream-can, flowers in a huge flower pot, you might begin to wonder whether you had not stepped through a looking glass or taken a toss down a rabbit burrow and could expect Mad Hatter or White Queen to appear round the next corner.⁴

This was Crossland's view of Hollywood, a place wholly distinct from mainstream America. Hasn't Hollywood always had a life of its own? But Hollywood it turns out was not unique. The American landscape was

teeming with this unusual mixture of sign and symbol. Along the great migratory trails, Americans moved in habitual waves, as *Fortune* recounted:

Every winter they swarm southward from the Middle West and the Lake States toward the Gulf, and mail home a somewhat gruesomely carved and ornamented Florida coconut. Every spring and summer the South swarms toward the westward fingers of the Great Lakes and buys from Wisconsin Indians the Indian souvenirs made in Japan and Rahway (NJ). Every summer a great hinterland wave converges on unwelcoming Manhattan and another washes clean through the peaks of New England and another swales across Kansas and bravely tries to fall in love at first sight of the disappointingly blunted, scarcely perceptible line which they know means the great Rockies ahead. Winter and summer alike the restless waves flex and reflex among the palms and the lush stage props of California: in winter, the native sons themselves get into their cars and swim over the roadstead making love to their state in a touristic-narcissistic orgy which reaches its peak about the middle of February. And every summer, by the thousands upon thousands come the out-of-staters, to get an eyeful of all they've seen before or heard tell of. They expect outlandishness — and they get it.

Eye-catching structures, pregnant with meaning, were what architectural histo-

rian David Gebhard termed "programmatic." He explained, "the vocabulary employed in these buildings hinged on a program organized to convey meaning not directly but by indirection. The audience then, was being asked to respond not to the artifact but to the programmatic utterance lying behind the form."⁵ This differed from traditional classic architecture which more or less stands on its own.

High art relates to low art here in just the same way as the hanging trade sign of a pair of eyeglasses was more meaningful than the word itself or in the same way as a cut-out sculptured sign of a lamb's head indicated the Lamb's Head Inn more meaningfully than its literal translation. This mode of communication has never completely gone out of style. But during this period, advertising enterprise took on an even greater significance. Now huge sculptures of whimsical forms were placed sometimes in front of buildings; sometimes on top of them; or at times, the sculptured form became one with the structure, indistinguishable from the building itself. Teepee-shaped motels and iceberg-shaped gas stations, a sign language of the era, captured innocent roadside adventure in fantasy of stucco and paint.

With the completion of an extensive portion of the national highway system by the early 1930s, visual landmarks in the form of billboards and repetitive signage became a familiar sight. The most well known of these were the Burma-Shave signs with their enticing text luring drivers to the last of the punch line. Begun in 1925 by a young Minneapolis businessman trying to figure out how to sell his father's inventory of a new-fangled brushless shaving cream called Burma-Shave, their signs were spread across Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. By 1927, the entire Midwest was looking forward to these serial, side-of-the-road verse-messages. Planted one hundred feet apart as they took advantage of the region's flat topography, this new style of American comedy broke the tedium of the prairie highway.

Following their lead, Ted and Dorothy Husted, founders of Wall Drug Store (1931) in Wall, South Dakota, borrowed the idea and assigned he task to a local boy who was pretty good at lettering and whose father, a carpenter, cut up the sign boards. Ten days later, Ted Husted went out and put the signs up. Just a couple at first. Then lots more. It

just mushroomed. GET A SODA GET A BEER TURN NEXT CORNER JUST AS NEAR TO HIGHWAY 16 and 14 FREE ICE WATER WALL DRUG⁶ Soon the store was giving away thousands of signs a year to anyone who would take a sign home and put it up. In a countryside where you could look for miles and see little note of civilization, these signs drew thirsty customers to its unlikely Mecca at the "geographical center of nowhere" near the Badlands.

During the Depression, marketing professionals called outdoor advertising specialists took signs and created huge billboards with little text and gigantic images. New York's Times Square took on its unique sparkling luster in the 1920s where sixty-foot plastic movie stars vied with each other for attention.

Neon soon appeared. American in feeling but French in origin, neon began in Paris in 1910 with experiments by George Claude. He tried to find a commercial alternative to the incandescent bulb by bending glass tubing into different shapes, making them glow with a rainbow of colored gasses. After a visiting California car dealer bought two neon signs advertising the Packard automobile, overwhelmed drive-by consumers in Los Angeles literally stopped traffic as they gazed at the tubular images in neon light. Soon anonymous craftsmen were lighting up the country. At the Chicago Century of Progress Exposition (1933-1934) and the World's Fairs in Paris (1937) and New York (1939), some neon examples comprised miles of tubing. People easily understood their messages without the help of any verbiage just as they had understood earlier trade signs.

Pulsating incandescent bulbs indicating modernity and progress became welcoming beacons of the American dream to a Depression-weary nation. Then as World War II slowed neon's production, by the 1950s, the art of bending gas-filled tubing was on the skids. However, today both New York and Las Vegas have revitalized the art, taking neon to new and lofty heights. Living in the shade of its past, neon once again is dazzling a whole new audience. In Times Square, jostling crowds of tourists and locals jam the hub where dazzling lighted signs enthrall even the most jaded viewer. Formerly the Camel sign that blew giant smoke rings of steam (1941-1966) fascinated the public. Today new technologies

display giant fiber-optic signs where streams of financial and news data, ten feet high, move magically across the face of buildings at different heights and different speeds.

As traditions in American signage live on to innovate and thrive, you can find reminders from handmade folk-art signs and the painted side of a building to spectacular outdoor skyscraper displays. Whether on a rural country road or in the big city, these indicators persist, alerting people that food, lodging, and souvenirs are available. With motifs often derived from ancient usage, today's signs retain the power to seduce and astonish. Still recording their forms and symbols, postcards continue to attest to the fact that grassroots graphics endure and flourish, alive and well in America. □

Cynthia Elyce Rubin, Ph.D. is a visual culture specialist and devoted deltiologist. She is co-author with E. Morgan Williams of *Larger Than Life: The American Tall-Tale Postcard, 1905-1915* (Abbeville Press) and is currently on the New York Council for the Humanities, Speakers in the Humanities Program with "Postmarked New York: The Postcard in American Life."

NOTES

1. For a detailed history of signage, read *English Inn Signs*, a revised and modernized version of *The History of Signboards*, (New York: Arco Publishing, Inc., 1985).
2. "The American Roadside," *Fortune*, September 1934, volume X, number 3, pp. 53-63, 172, 174, 177.

3. Daniel R. Porter, editor, "Route 20 Ribbon of Memories," *Heritage*, the magazine of the New York State Historical Association and The Farmers' Museum Inc., September/October 1988, volume 5, No. 1, n.p.

4. John R. Crossland, ed. *The Modern Marvels Encyclopedia* (London and Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1938), p. 313 quoted in Jim Heimann and Rip Georges with an introduction by David Gebhard, *California Crazy: Roadside Vernacular Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1980), p. 11.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

6. See Dana Close Jennings, *Free Ice Water!: The Story of Wall Drug*, (Stickney (SD): Argus Printers, 1990).

How to find it in the Teich Archives...

The following subject headings from the Teich Archives' computer index may be searched for topics related to this article:

SIGNS/Advertising
 SIGNS/Billboards
 SIGNS/Cities, town marker
 SIGNS/Geographical location
 SIGNS/"Ghost"
 SIGNS/Historical, informational
 SIGNS/Manufacturer
 SIGNS/Warning



This Ice Cream Stand in Berlin, Connecticut was another amusing architectural gem. Who wouldn't want to buy their ice cream in a building shaped like an ice cream carton? Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Ca. 1930s.