

# Fort Collins Ghost Signs – 2006

Historical Outdoor Advertising History



# Ghost Signs – A Study

A research study of ghost signs.....what’s out there, what’s left in Fort Collins, what are other cities doing, and what is their importance in the literature. Information was taken from Preservation Brief #25, The Preservation of Historic Signs, Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1991, and from a 1980s joint CSU and Fort Collins Library Local History Archives research /slide presentation.

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**The Important Role of Ghost Signs...**

**Introduction:**

“Signs speak of the people who run the businesses, shops, and firms. They project an image, they set a mood and define a place. Signs are signatures. They reflect the owner’s taste and personality. They often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there. By giving concrete details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not. And multiple surviving historic signs on the same building can indicate several periods in its history or use. In this respect, signs are like archeological layers that reveal different periods of human occupancy and use.”

“Historic signs give continuity to public spaces, becoming part of the community memory. They sometimes become landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand. Furthermore, in an age of uniform franchise signs and generic plastic “box” signs, historic signs often attract by their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events.”

**Historic Ghost Sign Type and Practices:**

- “Nineteenth Century – Signs were painted on the building. Signs of this type tended to use several “lines” of text, the name of business and short description, for example. The message, reading from top to bottom, sometimes covered several stories of the building. Other painted signs presented figures, products, or scenes. Such signs were typically more vertical than horizontal in emphasis. Whether such painted signs featured text or images, they became major features of the building, as their makers intended them to be. The building itself often became a backdrop for the sign.”
- “Twentieth Century – Signs in this period stemmed from business trends rather than from technological breakthroughs or design movements: the rise of chain stores and franchises. National firms replaced many local businesses. Standard corporate signs went up/ local trademarks came down. The rise of mass culture, of which the national chain is but one expression, has meant the rise of standardization, and the elimination of regional differences and local character. The result is not just sameness, but impersonality as well; it is becoming rarer, for example, to find owners’ names on signs. But the preservation of historic signs is one way to ensure that at least some of these expressions of local history continue to enliven our streets.”

**How were these original advertisements painted?**

One technique was to first draw a freehand sketch on graph paper. The wall would be divided into one foot sections, and the pattern would then be traced onto the wall using charcoal. Another way was to draw a full-sized pattern, again freehand, and then transfer the design onto the wall by using a tracing wheel to perforate the edges and a bag of chalk dust. Then the actual painting would begin, using the lightest color first, and working from top to bottom. Along with black and white, other frequently used

colors were yellow, red, and green—all bright, bold colors that really attracted the eye. Interestingly, sign painters did not coat their finished advertisements with shellac or varnish, as this would actually speed up the deterioration process. Instead, the paint they used was 85 to 95% pigment, with a very high lead content, which would last for years. The Society for Commercial Archeology writes, “A ghost sign is a faded, painted sign, at least 50 years old, on an exterior building wall heralding an obsolete product, an outdated trademark or a clue to the history of the building’s occupancy. They are “ghosts” because they often reappear after a rainstorm or following the demolition of a neighboring building.

### Sign as an Icon:

“Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners—or from many vantage points across the city—for a long time. Such signs are valued for their familiarity, their beauty, their humor, their size, or even their grotesqueness. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as vehicles of information, as identifiers of something else. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layers of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons.”

### Why don't we see more of these advertisements today?

“Cost is a factor, as well as changes in mobility. When these signs were most popular, in the 1930s and 40s, people drove more slowly and they walked more—they had time to really look at an advertisement. Today it is cheaper to purchase mass-produced signs. Also, in the past, a sign reflected the character of the store and the shop proprietor more personally—his shop’s name was usually painted right along with the advertisement. Now, with so many large corporations and franchises spread all across America, signs tend to be much more generic in nature.”

### Preserving Historic Signs:

“Historic signs can contribute to the character of buildings and districts. They can also be valued in themselves, quite apart from the buildings to which they may be attached. However, any program to preserve historic signs must recognize the challenges they present. These challenges are not for the most part technical. Sign preservation is more likely to involve aesthetic concerns and to generate community debate. Added to these concerns are several community goals that often appear to conflict: retaining diverse elements from the past, encouraging artistic expression in new signs, zoning for aesthetic concerns, and reconciling business requirements with preservation.”

### Retaining Historic Signs:

“Retain historic signs whenever possible, particularly when they are:

- associated with historic figures, events or places (Nedley Hotel)
- significant as evidence of the history of the product, business or service advertised (Denver Post, Coca Cola, Owl Cigar)
- significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district. A sign may be the only indicator of a building’s historic use. (The Fair Store, Damm’s Bakery)

- integral to the building's design or physical fabric, as when a sign is part of a storefront made of Carrara glass or enamel panels, or when the name of the historic firm or the date are rendered in stone, metal or tile. (Julian's)
- outstanding examples of the sign maker's art, whether because of their excellent craftsmanship, use of materials, or design. (Coca-Cola, Owl Cigar)
- local landmarks, that is, signs recognized as popular focal points in a community. (Nedley Hotel, Coca Cola, Owl Cigar, Damm's Bakery, etc.)"

### Maintaining and Repairing:

"Recognize that the apparent age of historic signs is one of their major features; do not "over restore" signs so that all evidence of their age is lost, even though the appearance and form may be recaptured."

### Local and Regional References to Fort Collins Ghost Signs:

**"Signs of the Time," Loveland, Colorado, *Daily Reporter-Herald*, Weekend, Dec. 8-9, 1990**  
(Damm's Bakery, Denver Post, and Coca-Cola signs.)

**Fort Collins Yesterdays, Evadene Swanson** (Damm's Bakery, Colorado Bakery and Grocery signs.)

**Preservation Rag, News from Historic Fort Collins Development Corporation, Spring 2002**  
(Owl Cigars, Coca-Cola and other signs.)

New Signs & Historic Buildings..New murals, alive & well today. What's going on around the country...

**Denver** paints advertising murals on blank walls of buildings, sadly a dying art, using Chris Krieg of Evergreen Signs. New wall signs advertise events like exhibits at the Denver Botanic Gardens (giant beetle on flower), and visiting shows like Cirque de Soleil. Under city ordinances, only 5% of such paintings in the Downtown area may be devoted to advertising. **"Giant Beetle Devours Headless Man Downtown," Dick Kreck, Denver Post, May 29, 1999**

**Golden, Colorado** has allowed an Arby's new mural wall sign to be painted.

**Tacoma, WA** – is proud of its ghost signs. Reuben McKnight, historic preservation officer, says if someone wanted to paint over a ghost sign, it is something city preservation commissioners would look at.

**Minnesota** muralist Gary Butzer turns ordinary barns into moo-see-um places with murals of cows, horses, cowboys, etc. In the country, he paints ordinary things on unusual canvases. **"Outstanding In His Field," People Magazine, 6/30/97**

**Toppenish, Washington**, has found a way to exploit its natural beauty and its native American and Hispanic cultures while reveling in its northwestern working-class roots. More than 40 murals painted

on the sides of downtown historic buildings celebrate the history of “Where the West Still Lives,” as they say there. The Toppenish Mural Society selects designs from the regions’ top mural artists.

**Chemainus, British Columbia,** uses new murals and signs to create a town image.

**Port Townsend, WA.,** new murals have to be advertising signs like the old.

**Aspen, Colorado** – Where present, ghost signs are considered to be one of the landmark features of a building. They are incorporated into the landmark description of the property and are a feature that can’t be altered except to be restored.

**New York, NY,** although the landmarks commission is not actively working to protect the city’s ghost signs, some of its citizens are. Frank H. Jump ([www.frankjump.com](http://www.frankjump.com)) has a website set up to preserve New York’s ghost signs, and he sells photographs of the signs for \$750 each. His “Fading Ad Campaign” works to preserve remaining signs. Walter Grutchfield ([waltergrutchfield.net/signs](http://waltergrutchfield.net/signs)) also maintains a web site devoted to photographs of the ghost signs to increase public awareness and appreciation.

**California,** because of their rarity and the era they represent, Hand-painted signs have become chic again. In **Palo Alto**, the Peninsula Creamery has a new sign custom-built, still hand painted, but copied to look like the motifs of the ‘50s. The **Santa Clara Valley** still has a small stock of hand-painted wonders, some captured inside of buildings, others lovingly preserved on restaurant walls. Individuals and citizen’s groups in **San Jose** and the **Silicon Valley** are waging a publicity political campaign to preserve ghost signs. (Dan Pulcrano, “Sign Language, What they say about our lives, and why action is needed to save the valley’s scarce reminders of its commercial past.”)

[www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/04.26.01/cover/signs1-0117.html](http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/04.26.01/cover/signs1-0117.html)

A Doggie Diner dog’s head object sign was threatened with a redevelopment project until Bill Griffith, nationally syndicated cartoonist (Zippy the Pinhead) wrote the dachshund into his cartoon and championed sign preservation. The **Ocean Beach** Historical Society led the preservation campaign until the **San Francisco** Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board declared the icon a local landmark. Griffith says, “It’s still in its original position...it’s something that only the public can see, and it’s a wonderful example of what I call Brand X America, the non-McDonald’s America.”

**Milwaukee, Wisconsin** – The Museum of Beer and Brewing documents and advocates preservation of Ghost Signs. They have a gallery of photos to celebrate this example of the sign maker’s art. ([http://www.brewingmuseum.org/ghost\\_signs.htm](http://www.brewingmuseum.org/ghost_signs.htm))

**Ghosts on the Bricks** – Joel Vance (<http://www.finetravel.com/unitedstates/midwest/ghost.htm>) In Mr. Vance’s article he says that “the Arkansas Historic Preservation program has recognized the value of “ghost signs” and actively searches for the survivors. You can report Arkansas sightings to them at 1500 Tower Bldg., 323 Center St., Little Rock 72201.”



# Ghost Signs In Fort Collins

The following information was taken from a 1980s joint CSU and Fort Collins Library Local History Archives research /slide presentation. The photos were taken June 2006. This may not be an exhaustive list.

Signs on North and South College Avenue

## OWL CIGAR:

- Located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, south wall of Robert Trimble Block (1905), 113 S. College, above the China Palace.
- Probably painted by Robert Forington, sign painter, who was known locally for his bird (owl) paintings, in the 1930s.
- The advertisement was painted on top of the natural brick color, which is unusual—most signs were painted on top of a base coat of white or black.
- Owl Cigars were said to be made until 1948 in Fort Collins.



**Close-ups of the Owl Cigar sign.**

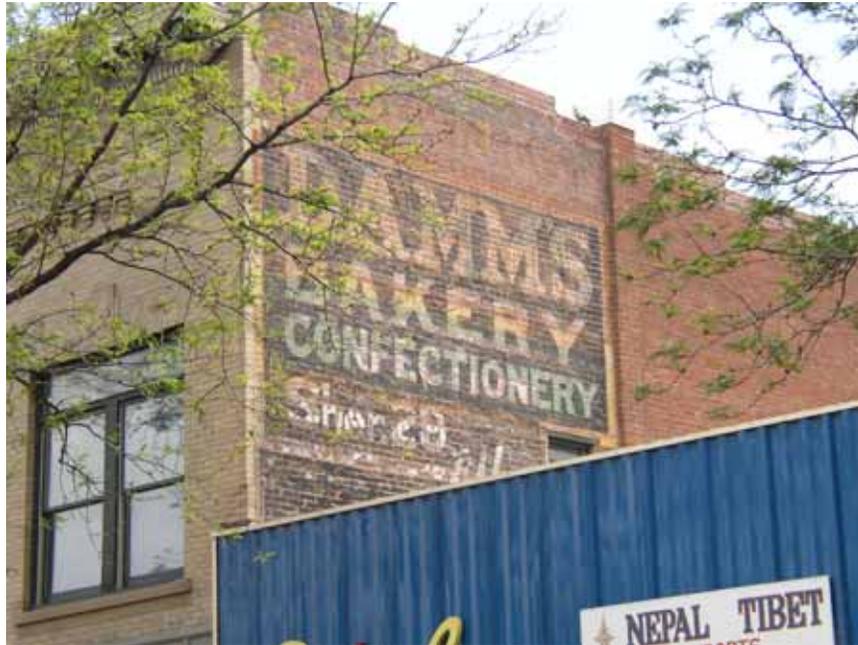


**Tyler-Lowe Mercantile CO., listed in the Fort Collins Directory as a “department store” was the first store in the building in 1905.**



## DAMM'S BAKERY:

- Located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, north side of the Colorado Building, 131 S. College, above Garwood's Jewelers. They made candies and ice cream.
- Painted in the 1920s or early 30s, most likely by Stewart Case.
- The business went out in 1936. (Fort Collins Yesterdays, Evadene Swanson)
- The bakery's telephone number was easy to read—this was still the era of asking the operator to connect you with “Sherwood 29”, instead of direct dialing.



## **NEDLEY HOTEL and MEYER Clothing and Dry Goods Store:**

- Located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, north side of 130-134 S. College.
- The hotel was located on the second floor above the Meyer Clothing Store.
- The Meyer sign had the slogan, “Pay Cash and Save” that gives us a very real flavor of how Mr. Meyers operated his business.
- The Nedley sign was one of the first signs to be lit up at night in Fort Collins, using a flood lamp which is still visible in the picture.



**Flood Lamplight**



## **BANK:**

- Located on the south 3<sup>rd</sup> story wall of the Opera Galleria building, 121 N. College Avenue, over the Children's Mercantile below.
- A tree obscures the sign except in the winter.
- In January 1881, Franklin Avery opened the Larimer County Bank here when it was known as the Welch Block. It then became the First National Bank of Fort Collins and the sign simple read "BANK." By 1898 Avery had moved the bank to the Avery Block across the street.



## **AUTO PARTS Store:**

- Located on the south 2<sup>nd</sup> story wall of the Brinker Grocery Block (Shanahan Block), home of Starry Night Coffee Co., 112 S. College today.
- The Auto Parts Store was in the first floor of the building from 1936 to 1988.
- The sign is now barely visible.



## Signs in the Historic Old Town Fort Collins District

### Coca-Cola:

- Located on the east wall of the J.L. Hohnstein Block, 220 E. Mountain, Coopersmith Brewing Co. today.
- This sign was for the “new, 12 oz, king-sized” bottle of coke.
- It was also the former location of Angell’s Delicatessen.
- It was painted by Don Brown in 1958.
- The sign is a “privilege” sign; a company pays for a business’ sign for the privilege of putting up another sign advertising its product. The Coca-Cola company paid Brown to do the “Angell’s Delicatessen and Party Service” sign that stretches across the top of its own soft drink sign promoting the king-size 12-ounce bottle, which just hit the market. (“Sign Survives Seasons,” Rick Heredia, *Fort Collins Coloradoan*, October 7, 1985.)
- The cost then of painting was 50-60 cents per square foot, about \$400—for the 3-5 day project.
- Cost now could be \$5-\$6/square foot, plus labor, or \$2,000-\$3,000.
- This may easily be the most popular sign in Fort Collins, in part because it is in a very visible location on E. Mountain Avenue, and also because it is an advertising product that exists today and everyone is familiar with.
- The “G” in BIG and the “12 oz.” after it, have faded away already.



## DENVER POST and Colorado Bakery & Grocery:

- Located on the east wall of Coopersmith's, 142 Linden Street, right around the corner of the Old Town Plaza.
- Denver Post was painted in the 1930s over an old Owl Cigar sign painted in the late 1920s, which in turn was painted on top of an even earlier sign.
- The Denver Post had a location there, where the truck from Denver could drop off the papers for delivery. The Denver Post, Fair Store, and Coca-Cola signs were purposely retained as part of the Old Town Project.
- The sign is on the bottom covered by two Aspen trees needing removal.
- It is difficult to make out, but at the bottom of the sign is the old Post slogan: "Always Fair and Unafraid."
- The "Colorado Bakery & Grocery, F. H. Knemeyer..Proprietor – STAPLE & FANCY GROCERY & PROVISIONS" sign is more visible at the top.
- The shop opened here in 1903. (Fort Collins Yesterdays, Evadene Swanson)



## **The Fair Store:**

- **Located on the east (rear) wall of the Miller Block, #11 Old Town Square.**
- **The Miller Block used to house the Fair Store in the left section at 162 Linden St.**
- **The Fair Store was a very popular mercantile store in Fort Collins, and many long-time residents can remember standing there for hours as children, trying to decide on just how to spend their pennies or nickels.**
- **The sign was painted in the late 1920s or early 1930s.**
- **It was painted in black and white which was cheaper. The store owners were probably just trying to save money, but due to the purity of the colors, black and white are the two sign colors that last the longest.**
- **This sign has faded a great deal over the years, but it is probably over 75 years old. This is incredible that it has lasted this long without either being painted over, built in front of, or the building torn down and replaced.**



## **CHAMPION Spark Plugs Sign:**

- Much faded sign on the east wall of 238 E. Mountain, the side of Coopersmith's Brewery and Billiards establishment.
- The building was built in 1926 and housed a variety of garage and auto related shops to repair automobiles.



Other Ghost Signs in Fort Collins...

This is the **PARAMOUNT LAUNDERS AND CLEANERS** sign on the west side of the old Armory, 314 E. Mountain Avenue. The business was there from 1930 to 1994.



This is the “**SEDER & SON MOLDED PRODUCTS CO.**” sign and the more recent “**A Classic TOUCH**” motorcycle shop at 300 N. College Avenue.



A back metal sided addition has a sign, “DENVER FORT COLLINS TRUCK LINE.”

**This is the SCHRIVNER'S GROCERY & MARKET SIGN located at 152 W. Mountain Avenue (Steak-Out Saloon.) The owners had planned to paint their new sign over it and cover it up, but the Fort Collins Historical Society and several pioneer citizens convinced them to save it as a "ghost sign" of the past history of the building.**



Signs That Are Gone In Recent Times...

This is the former "A. W. SCOTT DRUG CO." sign featuring that they had "KODAK SUPPLIES"...on the south side of 125 S. College (Stonehouse Grill.) It is shown existing in this 1931 historic photo.



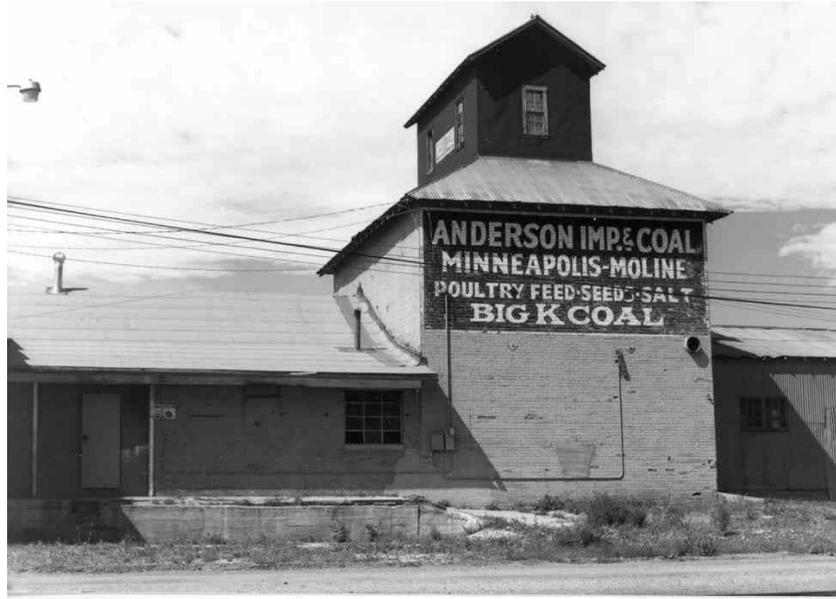
1931

2006



**This is the circa 1910 building at 119 Lincoln St. where the historic sign “ANDERSON IMP.& COAL MINNEAPOLLIS-MOLINE POULTRY \*FEED \*SEEDS \*SALT BIG K COAL,” has been painted out sometime since 1986. Anderson’s business started in the 1940s.**

**Picture from July 1986.**



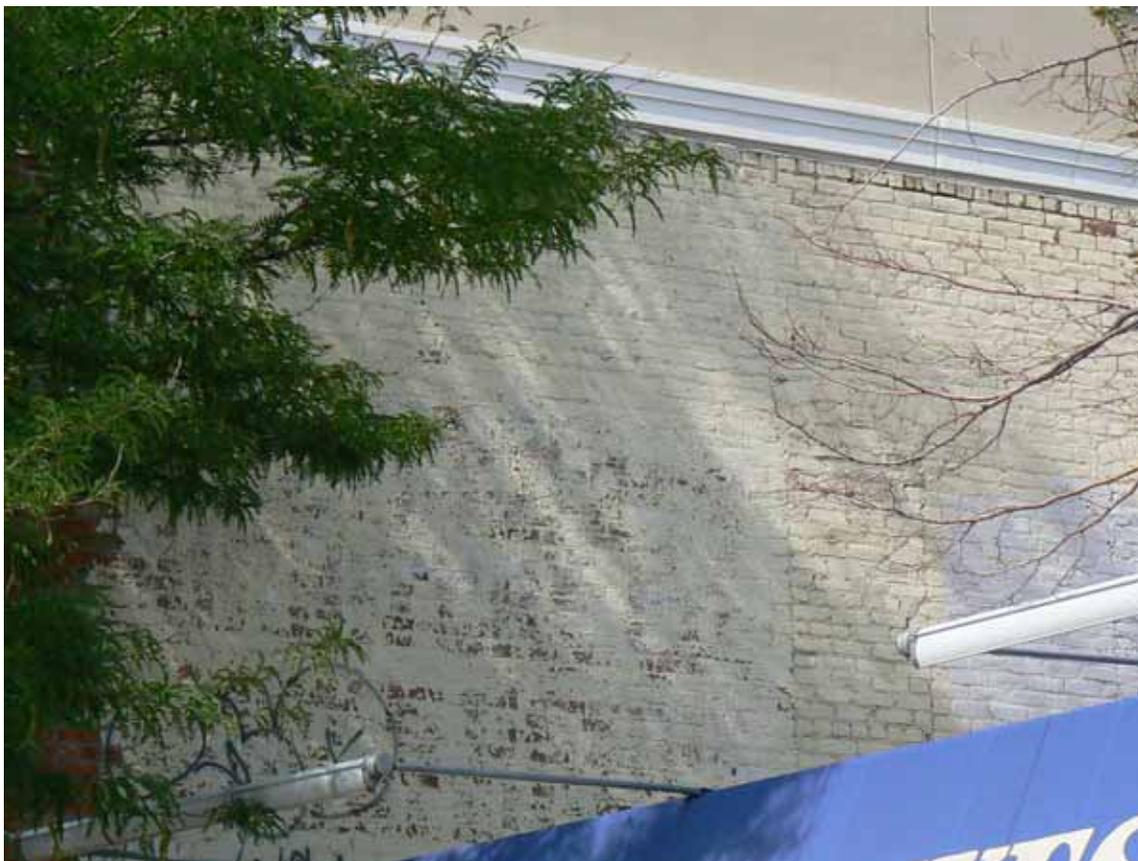
**Picture today with the sign painted over.**



**This is the HODGSON'S JEWELERS ghost sign painted out on the ground-floor, north wall of the Armstrong Hotel, 259 S. College Avenue. Charles Hodgson had his Jewelry and Gifts store at 249 S. College Avenue during the 1930s and his sign was at pedestrian eye-level facing The Hottel House mansion next door. Ace Hardware is the adjacent building today, and the painted out ghost sign is still barely visible in the space between the two buildings.**



**This sign is on the second-floor, south elevation of the Aggie Theater at 204 S. College Avenue. It has been whitewashed out so that it is all but gone, but the words FURNITURE CO. can still be made out. Since the building was constructed in 1916, it has been the site of furniture businesses until 1952 when it was converted to the Aggie Theater. The furniture businesses were Werner-Ingfield Furniture Company (1916), Harris-Warner Furniture (1927), Pendergrass Furniture (1940), and Neutze Furniture Company (1948.)**



**This is a lost PEPSI-COLA sign possibly painted by Don Brown, sign painter. Pepsi-Cola was one of his earliest customers when he set up his own business in 1953 and painted signs in Fort Collins through the 1960s. This also is a “privilege” sign where a company pays for a business’ sign for the privilege of putting up another sign advertising its product. In this case, Pepsi-Cola paid for the sign with its product and above it was “Rogers’ Plumbing and Heating,” the business in the building in the 1960s. The sign was likely painted then. Unfortunately, the sign is mostly gone from having been painted out, and then a building was built in front of it in 1974.**

