



A TOUR OF MURALS & GHOST SIGNS

Compiled by W. F. Jannke III

Since the dawn of time, man has been painting signs on structures. Be it an ancient pictograph or an ad for cigarettes, the mural, especially the advertising mural, has been with us for centuries. Our early pioneers recognized this when they began to settle in Watertown in the 1830s and 1840s. They used the sides of buildings and trees as spots to post signs and broadsides. Photos taken in the nineteenth and early twentieth century show the city festooned with posters and large painted advertisements on almost every available wall of buildings along Main Street.

The practice of painting an advertising sign on a barn or a building began to fade in the 1940s with the creation of super highways and the development of the billboard. These roadside advertisements could be changed often, whereas the painted ad on a building was, for the most part, permanent.

So what happened to these ads on buildings? Many bit the dust when the building they were painted on either burned down or were demolished to make way for another structure. But some survive, and that is the purpose of this tour. Many advertisements are hidden in alley-ways or high on the sides of buildings in Watertown, most dating from the late 1800s or early 1900s. Some, such as the ad painted on the side of the bar located at 715 West Main Street, have retained their color and are surprisingly detailed. Others, such as the ad for “Galvanic Soap” on the side of the tavern at 114 N. Water Street are hauntingly beautiful, though largely unseen due to their location. It is hoped that some of these signs might be repainted and restored.

It is not just “ghost signs” that this tour concerns itself with, but also the mural project, which was introduced by the Watertown Tourism Board in 1999. The Tourism Board decided that the city needed something to attract visitors. Taking a leaf from the pages of other cities, it was decided to create a series of murals which would be produced by local artists. Since then, various colorful murals depicting events from Watertown’s history have begun to appear, with the first one being painted on the side of Mullen’s Dairy Bar & Eatery. The murals are sponsored as a joint venture between the Tourism Board, the Main Street Program and the Watertown Arts Council. The goal is to utilize every available space in the city’s business district and to give the citizens and tourists coming to Watertown something to marvel at and be proud of. And if someone happens to learn a little something from the murals, well, that’s good too!

If you would like to donate towards the mural project, you may do so by sending in your tax deductible contribution, large or small, to The Watertown Tourism Board, c/o The Watertown Area Chamber of Commerce, 519 E. Main Street, Watertown, WI 53094.

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WALKING TOURS MURALS & GHOST SIGNS



*A Guide to the Historic Neighborhoods
of Watertown produced by the:*

Watertown Tourism Council

Visit our website: www.watertowntourism.com

1 EAST OF REAR ENTRY TO BISMARCK'S MAIN STREET BAR & GRILL 105 EAST MAIN STREET. This ghost sign can only be viewed from an alley located on the east side of S. First Street. It advertises Hertel & Hoffman, which was a men's clothing store. Obviously painted over another sign, this advertisement dates to the 1920s.

2 SOUTH SIDE OF 115 SOUTH FIRST STREET THE CARLTON HOUSE APARTMENT HOTEL. There has been a hotel of some sort on this site since the mid 1840s. In the 1880s the present building was erected and known as the Commercial Hotel. A ghost sign advertising the hotel can just be made out on the corner of the building, along the Market Street side.

3 TOP OF THE EAST SIDE OF 209 EAST MAIN STREET. Located high on the side of the red brick building is a sign that advertised the Schempf Bros. Department store. Known as "The Big Cash Store", this business was the leading store in the city from the late 1840s to 1936. After its closing The Montgomery Ward and the S.S. Kresge Companies took over the building, dividing it in two. If you look closely you can just make out a small sign located in the upper corner of the building that advertises "Wards".

4 114 NORTH WATER STREET. On the north side of Don's Bar, partially hidden up an alley, is a set of very interesting advertisements for "Galvanic Soap, Manufactured by the B.J. Johnson Co." The sign furthest up the alley, the most interesting, is an image of Thor, the god of thunder, along with the ad copy. These signs date to the close of the 1890s. Another sign is painted above this sign, but it is, sadly, unreadable.

5 715 WEST MAIN STREET. On the west side of the Monkey Bar, partially hidden by the building along side it, are some of the most colorful and interesting ghost signs. The one most visible advertises Wrigley's Gum and dates to the WWI era. The colors have held up admirably. To the south of this ad is a detailed painting of a Holstein and surrounding this are ads for the "Dodge

Co. Holstein Association, Francis Darcey, Sec." Also featured on this wall are badly faded signs for a former owner of the tavern, Robert Woelffer, and one for what appears to be Blatz Beer.

6 510 NORTH FOURTH STREET, NORTH SIDE ALONG THE TOP. This was the site of grocery store once owned by John Mundt which closed in the mid 1930s. This sign is yet another example of an advertisement for Galvanic Soap.

7 EAST SIDE, 200 WEST MAIN STREET. One of the new murals created for downtown Watertown, "It's Our Water" is the title of a mural painted by local artist Vance Hull in an imitation of a popular soft drink ad of the 1940s. This mural presents a puzzle: how many ways can you find water directly or indirectly referred to in the mural?

8 WEST SIDE, ALONG THE TOP OF 212 WEST MAIN STREET. This building, in addition to sporting an new mural, also maintains a ghost sign which advertises "Bull Durham Tobacco", which was popular from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries. This sign seems to date from the late 1890s.

9 212 WEST MAIN STREET, WEST SIDE MULLEN'S DAIRY BAR & EATERY. This mural, painted by Vance Hull and Sherry Ertl, depicts great moments in Wisconsin dairying. It features images of, among others, W.D. Hoard, the father of modern dairying, and of the last Mullen's milk delivery van. This was the very first mural painted in the on-going series.

10 5 EAST MAIN STREET, WEST SIDE. One of the most detailed murals to date, this painting entitled "Wilkommen In Watertown" highlights the city's German heritage and it depicts Main Street as it appeared in the 1880s. It was painted by Sherry Ertl.

11 400 EAST MAIN STREET, WEST SIDE. Painted by Gail Towers-MacAskill, this mural pays tribute to the First Brigade Civil War Band, which relocated to Watertown in 1994. This nationally known band recreates Civil War era music and plays upon vintage musical instruments.

12 416 MAIN STREET, EAST SIDE. It is fitting that this mural, depicting the highlights of the life and career of Arthur "Turkey" Gehrke, graces the wall of his former tavern. Turkey's claim to fame was that he slept through every winter, never rising from his bed until spring. This mural was painted by Vance Hull and Sherry Ertl.

13 519 EAST MAIN STREET, EAST SIDE. Painted on the side of the Chamber of Commerce office is a mural depicting various goods that were either made or invented in Watertown. The items pictured include shoes, boxes, table-slides, and the "ice velocipede", which was a fore-runner of the snow mobile. This mural was painted by Vance Hull.

14 516 EAST MAIN STREET, EAST SIDE. This mural, painted by Gail Towers-MacAskill, depicts various cigar companies which once proliferated in Watertown, The cigar industry flourished here from the 1850s through the mid 1960s.

15 616 EAST MAIN STREET, WEST SIDE. Depicted here, in a mural painted by Jerry Sawyer, is Watertown's once famous cottage industry, the stuffing or "noodling" of geese. This small but thriving business helped put Watertown on the map and was practiced here from the 1850s through the early 1970s.

16 207 SOUTH SECOND STREET, NORTH SIDE. This mural, painted by local artist John Byrne, depicts a circus parade. Watertown was a very popular circus stop and over the years virtually every famous circus from Barnum to Ringling Bros. Has performed here.

