

Walldogs, Ghost Signs and Slappy Hooper

BY CATHLEEN NORMAN

At the turn of the last century, a busy group of commercial artists traveled the country creating a painted legacy that today takes us back to simpler, calmer times. Once outlawed as eyesores, wall signs have been revived as a nostalgic art form.

The first wall sign appeared in the U.S. in 1894 – a Coca Cola advertisement painted on the Young & Mays drugstore in Cartersville, Ga.: the hometown of Coca Cola inventor Asa Chandler. Painted wall signs caught on quickly nationwide. Many brick-wall signs advertised wares within the building. Drugstore walls advertised health remedies or soda fountain treats. Saloon walls hawked beer, whiskey and tobacco. Signs on second-story hotels and upstairs boarding houses advertised rooms for rent. Often a building owner leased the wall to an advertising company in exchange for cash or a gold watch or a keg of beer.

Sign painters, called “walldogs,” plied cities and country sides applying advertisements on blank walls of commercial buildings and barns. Acrobatic artists, they worked on an enormous canvas, creating eye-catching images with 4- to 8-foot high lettering. A crew of painters could finish a sign in one day.

Design techniques varied. For simple advertisements, a painter merely counted the bricks to determine the letter size and made sure that the images and words didn’t run off the end of the building. For elaborate signs, walldogs used a pouncing technique perfected by European fresco painters during the Renaissance. A small-scale design was enlarged by mathematical calculations. The artist-painter transferred this full-scale paper pattern to the brick wall by punching holes along the drawn lines of the pattern using a “pounce tool.” Then he applied paint to the dotted design lines.

Walldogs preferred walls 40- to 100-square-feet in size and un-obscured by trees or branches. They avoided windows and doors or locations that were too high.

“People will not get cricks in their necks for Coca Cola’s benefit,” chuckled one old wall dog.

Quite a few sign painters learned their trade at Chicago’s Institute of Lettering and

Design, then served a one-year apprenticeship for \$12.50 a week. A few company painters made money on the side with a “snap,” a custom job on their own time.

Tall tales flourished about the great high-wall men. Slappy Hooper, the Paul Bunyan of walldogs, swung his scaffold from skyhooks and painted ads on the clouds. Hooper once painted a wall so big it took a gallon of paint just to dot the “i.” Supposedly, Norman Rockwell began his art career as a walldog.

Painters stood on suspended platforms called “roof swings” – often merely a horizontal ladder covered with a board. Sign painters sometimes gathered a crowd of onlookers and some were showmen. A few daring walldogs entertained passersby with acrobatic antics – sliding like an ape man down the rope, falling onto the scaffold below or dropping down to the street.

The profession had its hazards, especially in the days before electric scaffolding and pre-mixed paint. Sign painters working above the seventh floor received higher wages for dangerous duty. Famous walldog Battler Smith of Chicago waddled because both his legs had been broken in falls from high-wall platforms. Many life-long sign painters also suffered painter’s colic – lead poisoning symptoms such of stomachaches, headaches and general disorientation, brought on by hand-mixing paint from white lead, linseed oil and powdered pigment.

In the early 1900s, major sign companies included General Outdoor Advertising, Thomas J. Cusack, Foster & Kleiser, P.H. Morton and O. J. Gude. These firms maintained shops in urban centers like Saint Louis, Cincinnati and Chicago with several artistic designers and a storehouse of paint and painting tools. The companies dispatched crews of itinerant painters throughout their territory. One group of painters would work the brick-walled cities, while another ranged the countryside for months painting virgin barns and prime walls in small towns.



Dixie K. Clare's wall signs can be seen on Cripple Creek's Bennett Avenue.

Some paint crews came West on six-month painting circuits. “Lease men” usually preceded the painters, scouting the territory for sign space – prominent walls and barns along the main roads. When they found a good location, they’d offer the building owner cash on the spot. Independent sign painters, meanwhile, acted as their own leasing agents, and they operated out of their home or rented boarding-house rooms.

Major advertisers selected specific locations. Coca Cola wanted ground-level walls of corner drugstores. Wrigley’s Gum preferred warehouse walls. Bull Durham Tobacco always advertised in the ballpark vicinity. The baseball term “bull pen” developed because every baseball park had a Bull Durham sign where the pitchers practiced. Mail Pouch Tobacco signs became ubiquitous on barn walls.

The grand era of walldogs and wall signs lasted well into the 20th century, until several factors created their demise. Billboards and neon signs gained popularity by the mid 1900s, and local sign ordinances prohibited painted wall advertisements. The Federal Highway Beautification Act of 1966 banned painted barns and any other type of signage within view of interstate highways. In the 1970s, urban renewal raised gleaming skyscrapers that replaced old brick buildings and their artistic painted wall signage.

Wall signs no longer dominate today’s cityscapes, but quite a few ghost signs still linger on historic downtown buildings – phantom reminders of the painters, products and places that long ago faded into the past. The north-facing sides are best preserved because they have received less sun exposure.

Painted wall signs have experienced a modern-day revival through the artistry of skilled

mural painters. No longer considered vulgar or banned by local law, vivid new wall signs are showing up in historic commercial districts like downtown Delta, Colo.

Denver sign painter Mark Oatis created nostalgic murals advertising fictitious products, such as the Sharp Shooter Biscuits and Pot O’ Gold Coffee. Owner of Mark Oatis Designs, he entered the industry in 1972 as a member of the Signpainters Union. Oatis’ most visible creation is the puppy with its head stuck in the dog food bag on a towering industrial building beside I-70 near the Denver Coliseum. Oatis helped found the Letterheads, a grassroots group united dedicated to preserving the art and craft of sign painting.

Meanwhile, the Walldog Movement, an international coalition of professional sign painters, spawned in 1993, has sponsored Walldog Jams – sign painting festivals in towns in Connecticut, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Kentucky, California, Canada and Australia. Signaling the significance of outdoor advertising, the American Sign Museum opened in Cincinnati in 2005 to display, explain and promote preservation of vintage signage, from painted wall signs to blinking neon and blatant billboards.



A ghost sign lingers in an alley near Larimer Street in downtown Denver.

Photos by Cathleen Norman