

A Century of Signs

**Tod Swarmstedt - Founder, American Sign Museum
Preserving Historic Places - September 22, 2023 – Muncie, IN**

Sponsored by the Cornelius O'Brien Lecture Series



Mission Statement

To celebrate the rich history of American signage through preservation and education.



Milestones: A brief history

- Founded in 1999
- Opened in April 2005 in rented space of 4500 sq. ft.
- Purchased 40,000 sq. ft. abandoned factory in October 2009
- After a \$3.5 million renovation, opened at present site in June 2012 in 20,000 sq. ft.
- Currently expanding into the remaining 20,000 sq. ft.—a \$5.5 million campaign



Photo credit: Wayne Clause



Photo credit: Wayne Clause



Photo credit: Wayne Clause



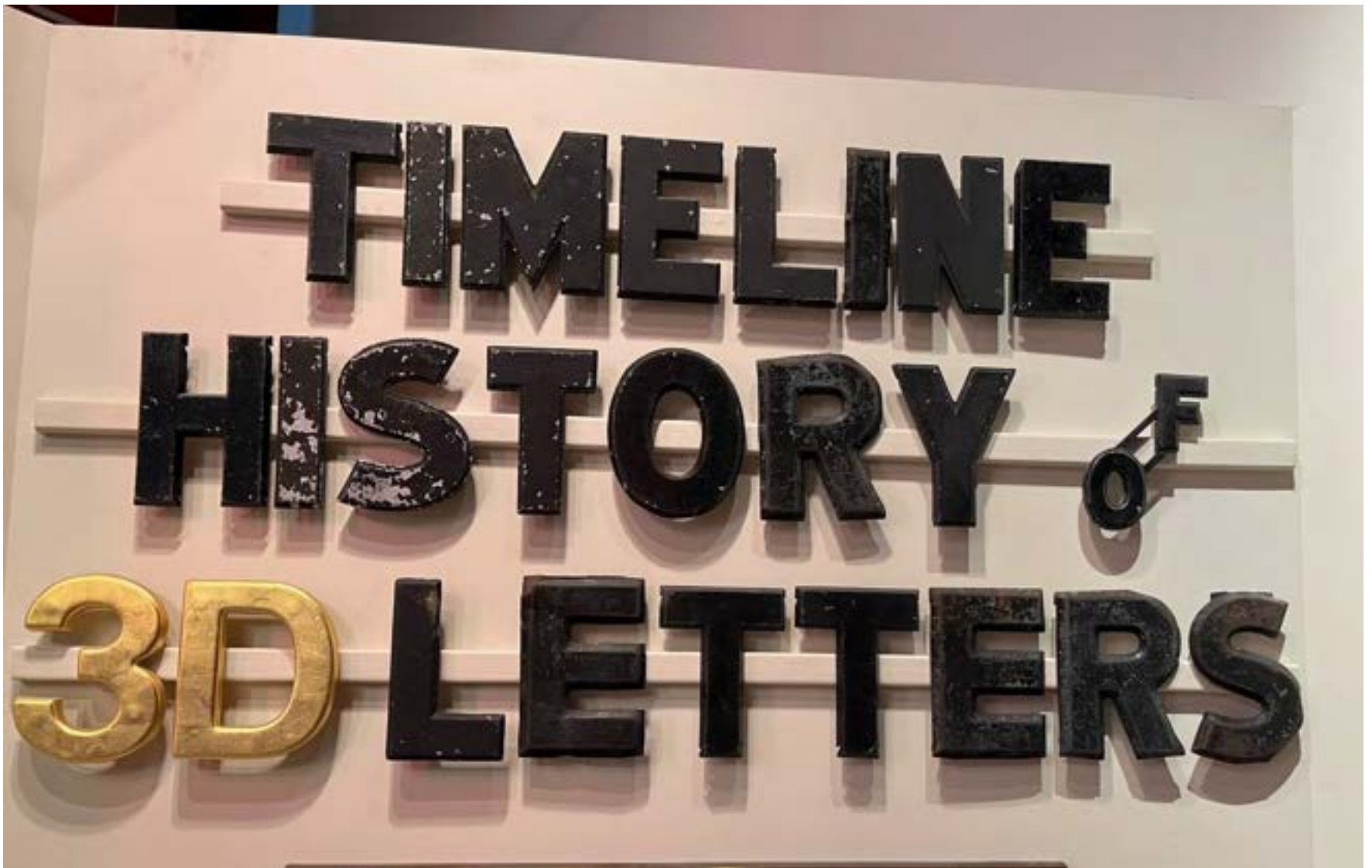
Photo credit: Wayne Clause

**A walk through the American Sign
Museum is more than a lesson in the
history of signs . . .**

**It is a visual survey and walk through the
history of America as told through the
history of signs.**

It's the history of American . . .

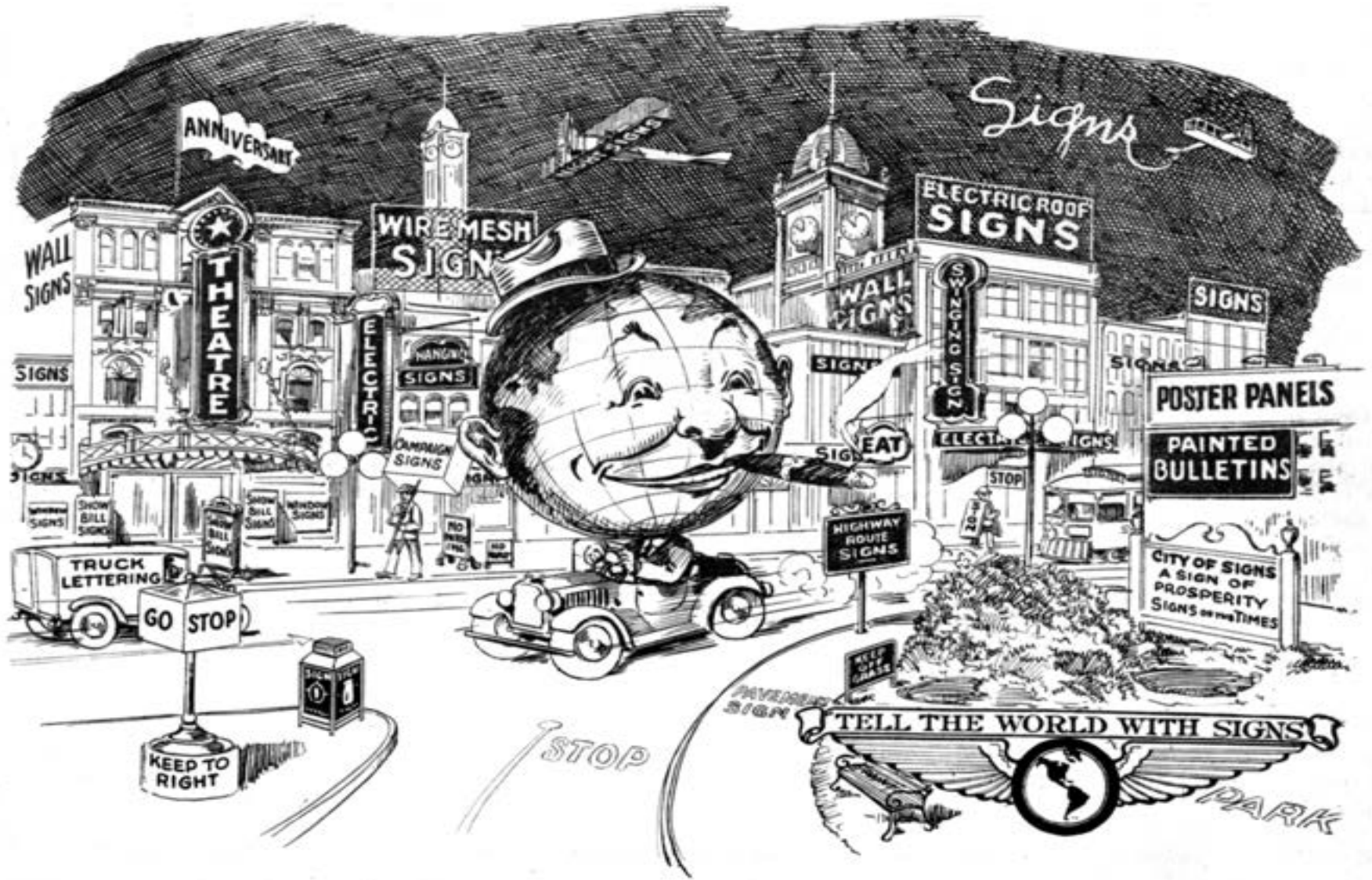
- **Design**
- **Technology**
- **Commerce and marketing**



A technical introduction to the history of sign materials and fabrication techniques begins at the top of the ramp.



Photo credit: Wayne Clause



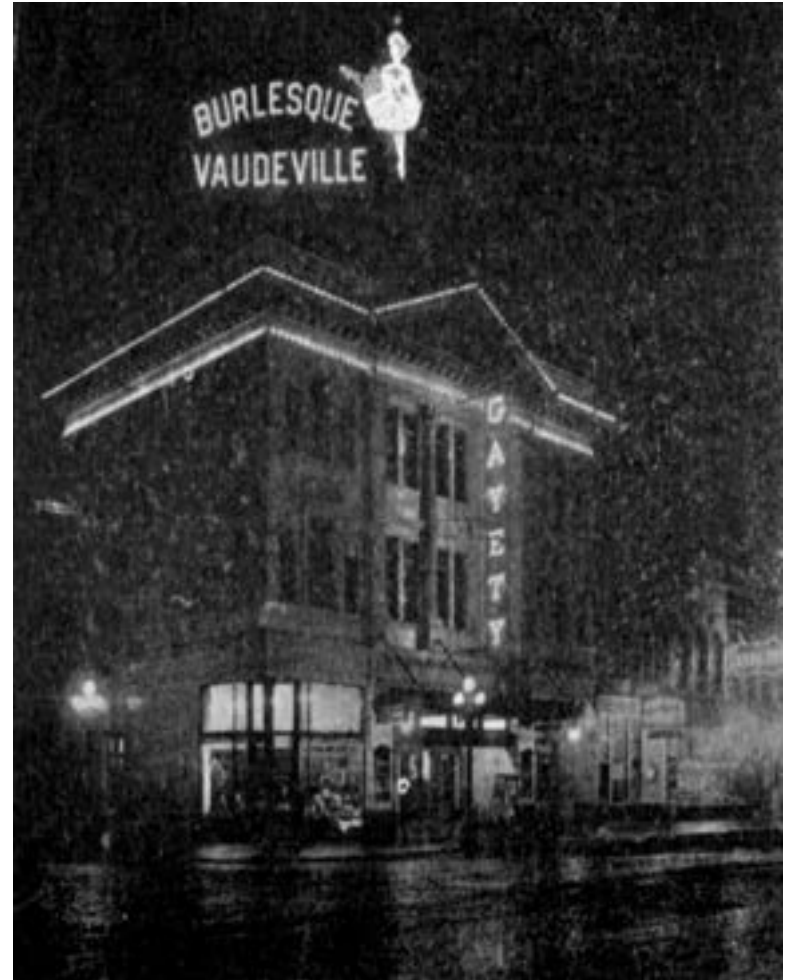
Large or small, illuminated or non-illuminated, there was a variety of materials from which the sign industry could draw from to create all types of signs

Electric Signs in the 20th Century

- Pre-Neon or Lightbulb Era: 1900 -- late 1920s
- Heyday of Neon: Mid 1920s – late 1960s
- The Age of Plastics: Late 1940s – late 1970s
- CAD/CAM and LEDs: 1980s – present

The Modern Age of Electricity: *Growth and progress is probably no more evident than in the new sign spectaculars . . . headlined by The Great White Way.*





Signs could be very large. *There were very few restrictions on sign size, placement or brightness at the turn-of-the-century. This would change as signs proliferated . . .*

Lightbulb Era: 1900 – late 1920s





One style of lightbulb-illuminated sign created the stroke of a letter by single rows of lightbulbs





Others used glass “buttons,” which were threaded and screwed into the sign face, creating the stroke of a letter. These too were internally illuminated.





The incandescent lightbulb was only available in clear glass, so the ever-inventive sign industry developed lightbulb “caps” to fit over the clear lightbulbs and create a color palette of light.



Another style used these slump-molded opal glass letters which were pushed through a sign's face and internally illuminated from within the sign cabinet.

**ANTHONY
REST HOME**

FEXLUME SIGN CO.
Buffalo N.Y.



Side view shows the dimensional, or embossed, glass



Theaters used changeable, lightbulb-illuminated letters on their readerboards to announce the latest attractions



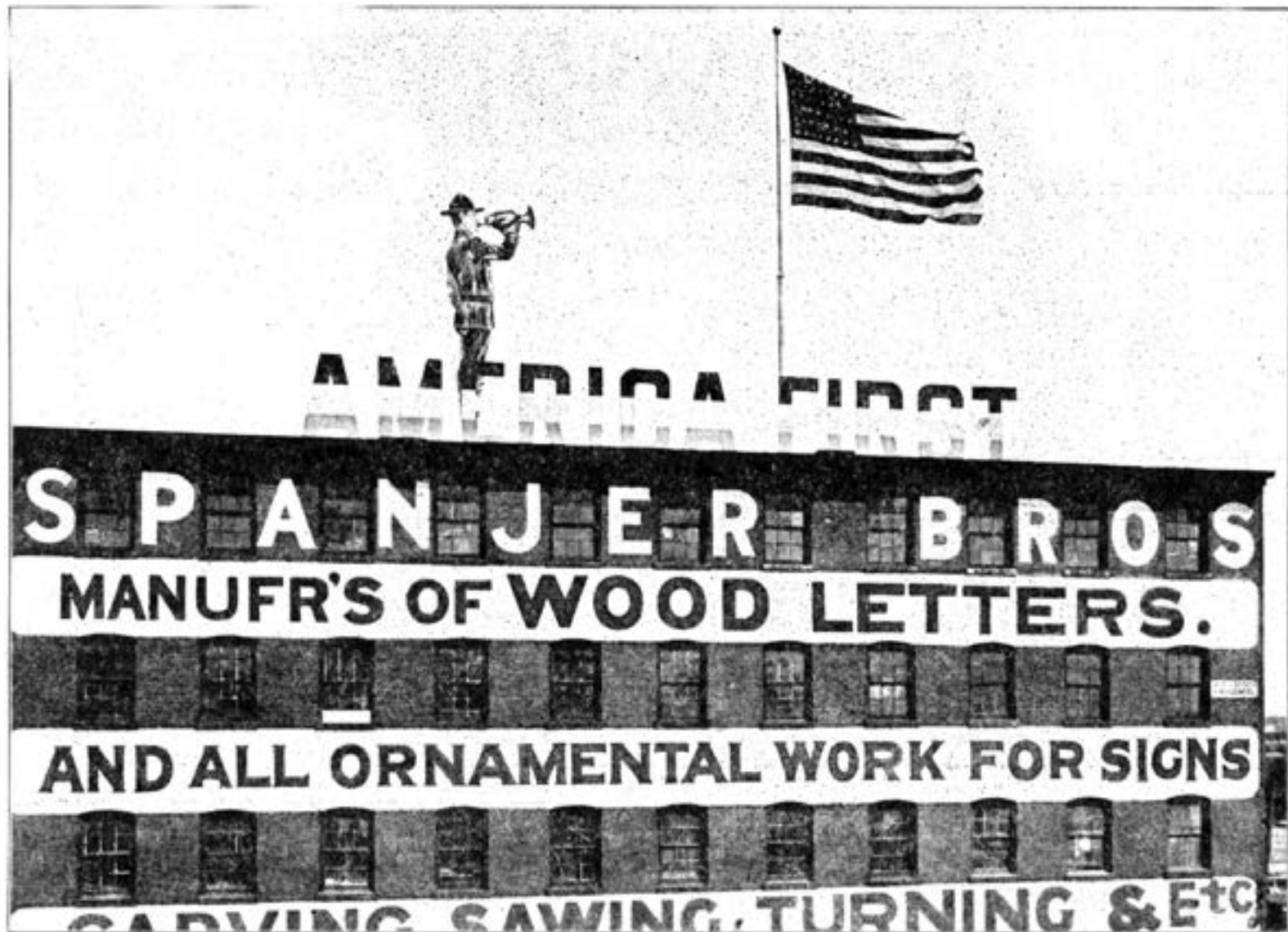
Note “L” bracket above and below the hand, and wire coming from bottom of letter, which is plugged into an outlet behind the wall/



Metal changeable letters were also used on theater marquees. They were positioned on a track against a white milk glass background face, which was internally illuminated.

World War I: A call goes out to the sign industry from President Wilson . . . but “Lightless Nights” follow, and in turn, a new awareness of the value of signs.





Despite the “Lightless Nights” setback, the sign industry got behind the war effort.



No. 1



No. 2



No. 4



No. 3

The above group of cuts are now available by sending \$2.00 to SIGNS OF THE TIMES. These cuts are the exact size and will fill any need the sign contractor may have, whether blotters, folders, letterheads, newspaper advertising, etc.

The electric sign industry rebounded in the post-war era, aided by a backlog of work and a new campaign—"Tell the World with Signs"—initiated by *Signs of the Times* magazine.

The heyday of neon: Mid 1920s – late 1960s





Neon was a significant development for the sign designer. It not only offered flexibility of shape, but eventually, a greatly expanded color palette. Nevertheless, neon's adoption by the sign industry was gradual.



The Neon Era bridged the period between Art Deco and Mid-century Modern



Late 1940s art deco neon sign. Shreveport, LA. Unknown manufacturer. Sometimes it's difficult to discern between late 1930s and late 1940s design. There were basically new electric signs made during World War 11. When sign production resumed after the war, designers picked up where they left off in the late 1930s.



Early 1930s art deco neon sign. Flexlume Sign Corp., Buffalo, NY



**Early 1950s neon sign. Manufactured by Gust Mitchell Signs,
Pittsburgh, PA**



Ovals were big in the 1950s. Notice also the lower case, “g.” Very 40-50s



Late 1950s Big Bear Grocery. Columbus, OH (*unknown manufacturer*)



Mid 1950s neon sign. Kansas City, MO (unknown manufacturer)

)



Early 1960s neon and lightbulb sign. Los Angeles, CA. (unknown manufacturer)



Not all neon was dramatic. Sometimes it took a more subtle look such as in this Art Deco salesman sample . . .



... or this 1950s salesman sample

WWII: *The sign industry offers significant support; electric sign production comes to a halt . . .*





Yes, YOU can help!

Buy **U.S.**
War Savings
BONDS-STAMPS

WE DID
DID YOU?

SIGN ARTISTS

LOCAL UNION
NO. 620

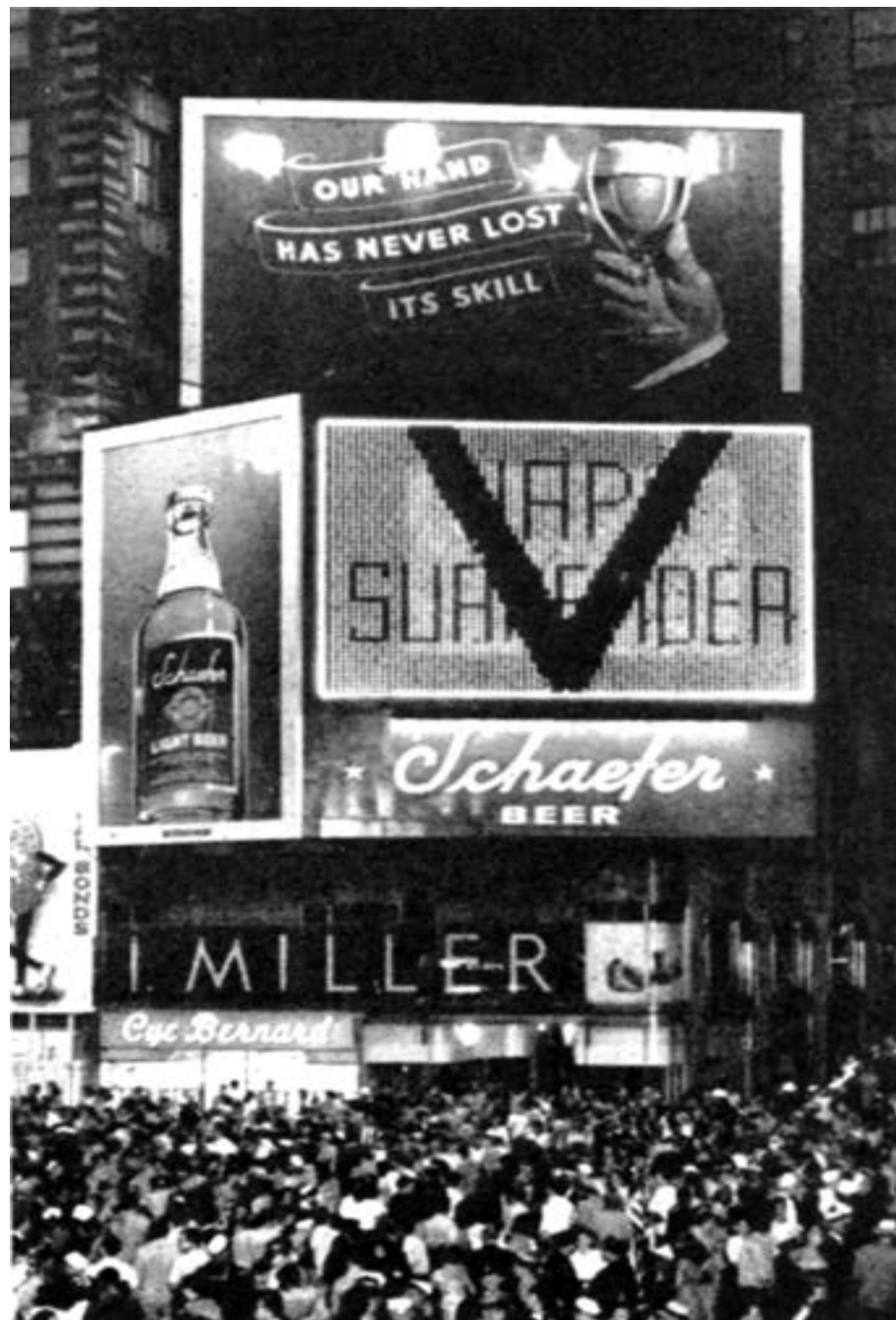




THEY'RE PAINTING UP ON
GUADALCANAL...

SIGN SHOP

AND THEY'RE USING
SHERWIN-WILLIAMS



The Plastic Era: Late 1940s to late 1960s





“Plastics. That’s the future . . .”



The first plastic letters were flat, and glued onto a flat or corrugated plastic face. Vacuumforming and injection molding soon followed, offering more dramatic dimension to letters as well as sign faces. . .



The first production vacuumformed plastic sign

ABC's of Quantity Plastic Displays



Plastics were not only used for outdoor signs, but for indoor, point-of-purchase, signs as well as this ad illustrates.





Lightbulbs never really went away, they just took a backseat to first neon . .



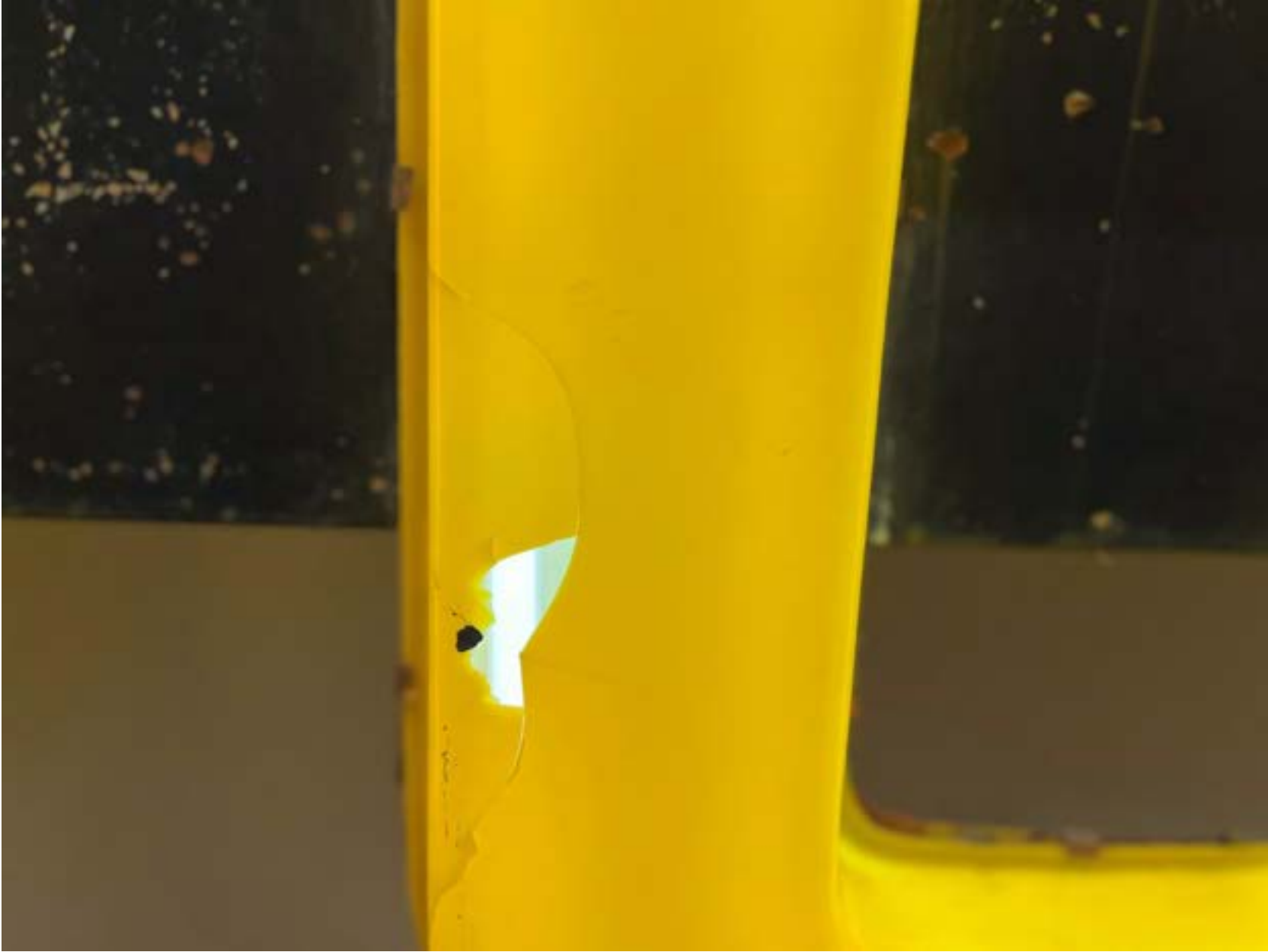
And then plastic . . .



Or even neon and plastic . . .



Nor did neon go away for that matter . . .



A GALLERY OF DISPLAY ADVERTISING ART AND CREATIVE IDEAS

Display Art

tell the **WORLD..**
with
SIGNS

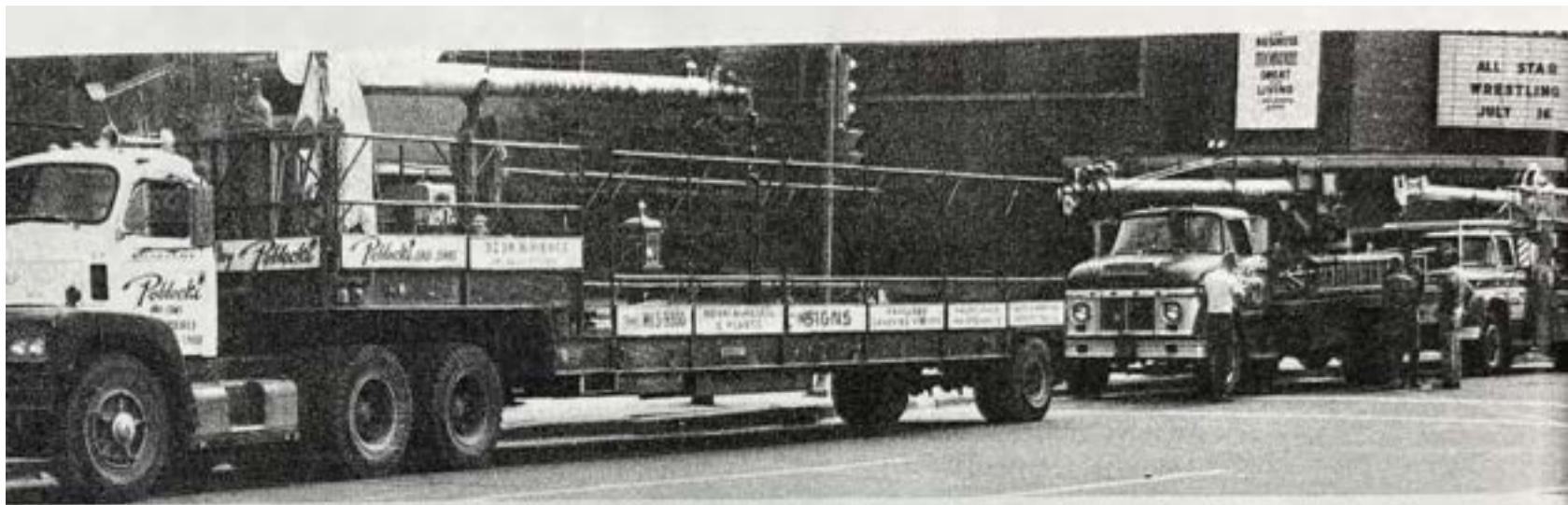


Here's The Winner!

DENNIS L. WHEATON is 24 and married, and he and Mrs. Wheaton have a 6-month old son. After graduating from Salina, Kans., high school, Dennis Wheaton attended Bethany college, Lindsborg, Kans., where he majored in art, and included lettering and design courses. He is currently continuing his art studies. After a year and a half with Hedges Nease Sales in Salina, he joined a partnership in formation of B & W Sign Company in Salina in June, 1955, specializing in highway signs and other types of commercial sign work.



In the 1950s, a new “Tell the World with Signs” logo was unveiled



Scrap Old Signs Week Wins Friends in Milwaukee

MUCH interest and good will for the sign and outdoor advertising industry was generated by the Scrap Old Signs campaign held in Milwaukee from July 10 to 16. The campaign had only one month's preparation, which is amazing considering its obvious effectiveness.

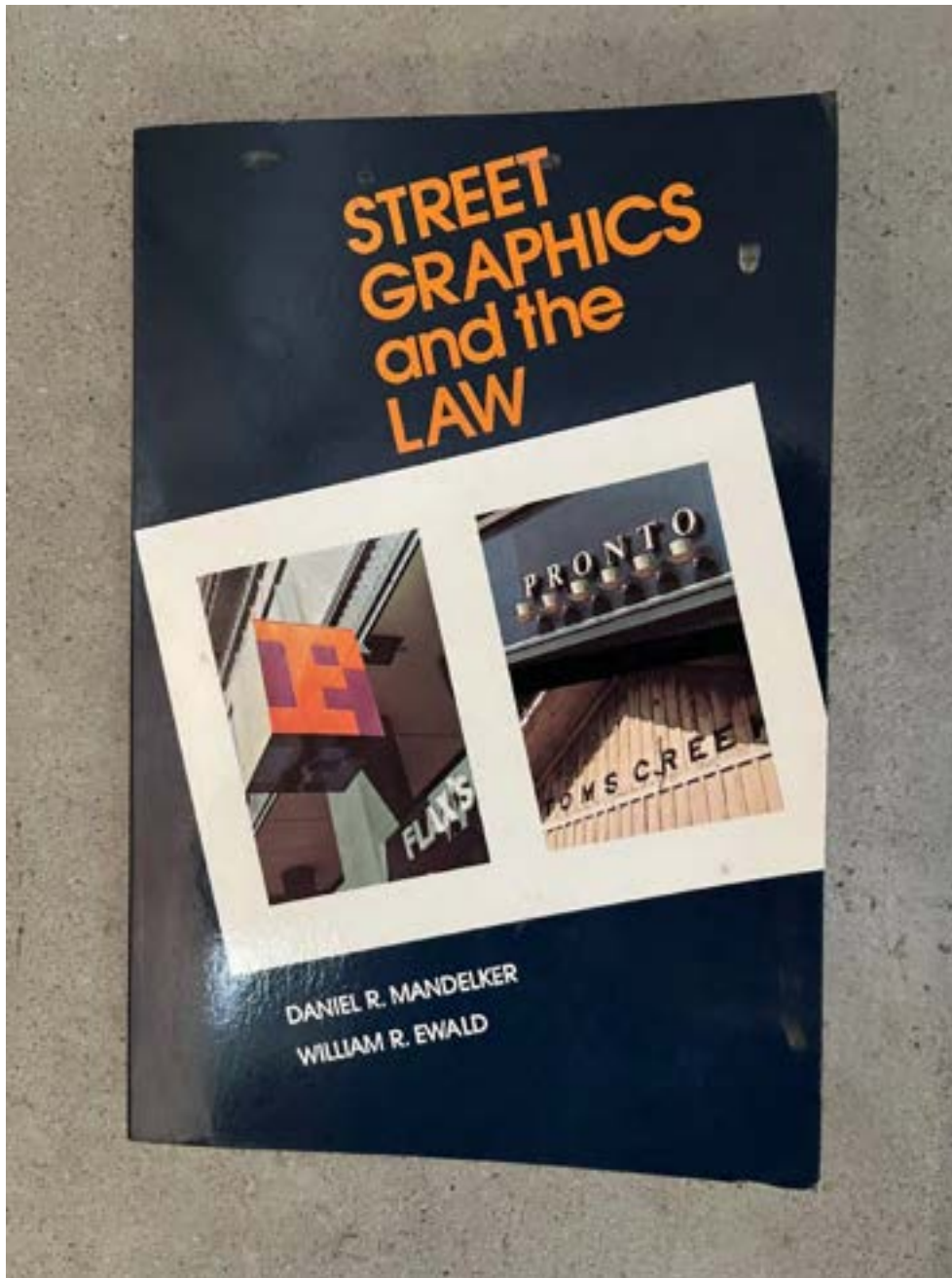
The campaign began when the Com-



door Adv.; Wayne Fox, ABC Outdoor Adv.; John S. Soliva, Milwaukee Adv.; Bill Frederiksen, Everbrite Electric Signs.

A week prior to sign removal, the Building Inspector's Office sent all of its men (21) to each abandoned sign location. They either tracked down the

The early 1960s saw the renewal of Scrap Old Signs programs across America. These public service efforts were complimented by an official Sign Week, highlighted by “sign parades.”



With the enactment of the Highway Beautification Act in 1965, coupled with urban renewal efforts, sign codes became ever more restrictive. The book *Street Graphics*, published by the American Planning Association in 1971, further promoted such restrictions. There was little concern for sign preservation and/or restoration.

Case Histories



Pledge of Allegiance



Satellite Shopland



Big Boy



Kona Lanes



Regal Boot



Speedee McDonald



I pledge allegiance
to the Flag of the
United States of America
and to the Republic for which
it stands, one Nation
indivisible, with Liberty
and Justice for all.

- Close-up



Photo credit: Pete Phillips 1992



Photo credit: Wayne Clause











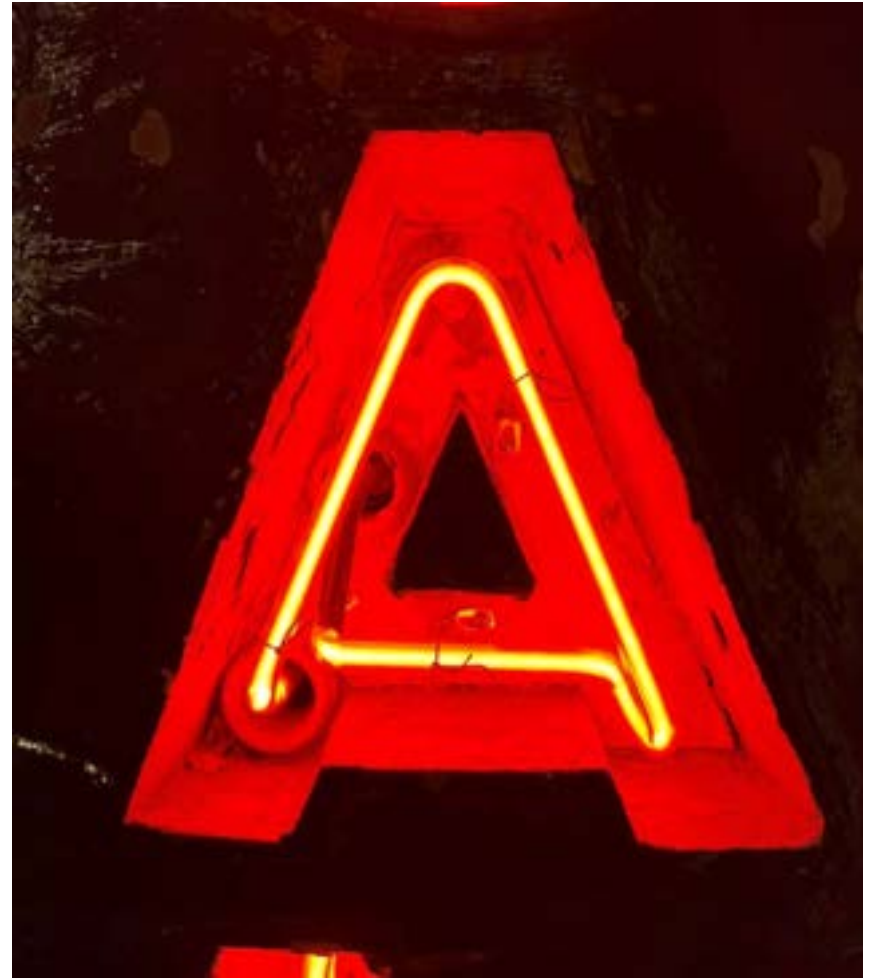
Slingshot is “embossed” into pants vs. a full three dimensions



1950s neon sign. Costa Mesa, CA (unknown manufacturer)



Electric trade sign. Brooklyn, NY. Circa 1910.



Close-ups of individual letters: In the retrofit neon version (right), the original light sockets were removed and “plugged” with metal, except for two “holes” which became opening for glass housings. In the “restored” lightbulb version, we simply removed the plugs and installed light sockets.



1963 Speedee McDonald sign. Huntsville, AL.







**CAD/CAM and LEDs:
1980s to the present,
or . . .**

**The Golden Age
of Sign Preservation?**

Conclusion

There seems to be little information readily available to the historic preservation community on the subject of vintage signs. The American Sign Museum would like to explore ways it might fill that void and become a resource for all.



Open Wednesday through Sunday

10:00 am – 4:00 pm

www.americansignmuseum.org