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SIGNS: A TREATISE ON THE USE AND MISUSE OF AN AMERICAN INSTITUTION

INTRODUCTION:

In an effort to put my paper into proper perspective, I must tell you that it differs from my previous ones in at least two ways: First, it is not nearly as philosophical and intellectual as my papers on crime and the criminal justice system; Secondly, and closely related to the first, it is not as controversial as my other papers. My hope is that Jack Amis, who has never been known for being conservative in offering criticism, or who has never been known for being liberal on any great social issue, will be so entertained by this paper that he will have no need to respond with a Lester Maddox or a George Wallace "one liner".

Billboards, marquees, yardsigns, bumper stickers, etc., are all part of an American institution. The sign, in one form or another, has graced the American landscape since the early days of the American Frontier. They are used by local and state governments to tell us what we can and cannot do. They are scattered across the American landscape to convince us to buy certain products, to encourage us to attend certain churches and to help us prepare for the grand finale, death.

Columnist Glenn Rutherford, writer for the Courier-Journal, Louisville, ^{recently} wrote an article entitled, "Assignment", ~~recently~~ in which he dealt with this heavy subject. Mr. Rutherford took a casual drive around Louisville to take a look at various signs throughout the city.

Mr. Rutherford found several "No Parking" signs. He was most impressed with the one belonging to the Free Public Library at Fifth and York. It reads, "Parking Area For Library Staff Only, Trespassers' Vehicles Shall Suffer Abrupt Removal".

One garage owner has failed to get his "No Parking" message across and has resorted to a more direct approach. "OK. I Mean It!", the sign says. "Don't Block The Drive!"

Mr. Rutherford found at Fifteenth and Broadway an eye-catcher of a restaurant sign that reads "U-Neek Soul Food". Think of the originality of the business sign at Sixth and Oak; it says, "Mom's Liquors".

New Albany, Indiana, recently celebrated Harvest Homecoming. A foot-long hot dog stand had a sign which read, "Get A Long Little Doggie".

There is a hamburger place on Broadway in Louisville which has a marquee that says "Fastest Carryout On The Block". The only other building between twelfth and thirteenth on the north side of Broadway is a supermarket.

A travel agency has a model of the Titanic sitting in their front window. This would appear to be poorly conceived, in light of the fact that the Titanic was a cruise ship which sank and killed more than 1500 people.

Mr. Rutherford observed three billboards which belonged to local parking companies. They read: "Tender Is The Bite"; "Feed Your Multitudes With Loaves and Fischers"; and "Jack Sprat Eats Mellwood Bacon".

Contemporary humorist, Andrew A. Rooney, has written a book entitled, A Few Minutes With Andy Rooney. One of his chapters deals with the subject under consideration. He observes:

"Someone's always trying to push us around with signs they put up, aren't they? I mean, what's your reaction when you come up against this sign: "Keep Out"? Even if you don't want to go in, my reaction is always: 'To hell with you, fella, I'm coming in!'"

Rooney observes that while some signs are put up to scare you, others are

very polite. For instance, "Thank You For Not Smoking". In reference to smoking, have you noticed some of the signs around high schools? I saw one which read, "No Smoking -- By Order Of The Board of Education". Now, I want to ask you a question. Do you know of any kid who has ever NOT DONE anything by order of the Board of Education?

I have been amused by the signs which read, "No Right Turn On Red". Since passing the law that we can turn right on red, we now keep sign painters busy painting signs which read, "Except Here".

My mother lives near the top of a long, steep hill in Central Kentucky. The new road cut straight through the hill and left the old winding mountainous road as it was. I noticed a sign on the old stretch recently which was a little late in coming. Standing proudly over a garbage dump was the sign which read, "No Dumping".

A sign in front of a Roman Catholic Convent in Southern California reads: "Absolutely No Trespassing. All Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted To The Fullest Extent Of The Law". It is signed "Sisters of Mercy".

Small towns and large cities have tried to capture our hearts through the medium of signs. Each one speaks of the uniqueness of the community.

One small town in Texas has a sign which reads: "The largest small town in Texas". Apparently, the town fathers are saying their town is small but thinks big.

Hartford, Kentucky, welcomes visitors with a sign which reads, "Welcome to Hartford, Kentucky -- The Home of Two-Thousand Happy People and A Few Sore Heads".

My hometown of Burkesville, Kentucky, a community of two-thousand, without access to a railroad and with only one major industry, has a sign at the west

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end of the city limits which reads, "Welcome To Burkesville -- A Few Places Left Like It".

A sign gracing Pennyrile Parkway at Madisonville, Kentucky, reads, "Welcome to Madisonville, The Best Town On Earth". A noble boast isn't it?

In an attempt to compete with our neighboring town, Hopkinsville once had a sign near the parkway which read, "Welcome to Hopkinsville, Stay A Night Or A Lifetime". As an outsider, I find the latter part of the invitation very appealing. However, the Bishop will see that my time here will fall short of that ~~devotion.~~ *donation.*

With the many signs scattered around Nashville, Tennessee, proclaiming Nashville as "Music City", one would expect to hear Beethoven's Fifth Symphony" blasting from the roof tops of the downtown buildings. However, visitors have to settle for Johnny Paycheck's, "Take This Job And Shove It", being played on WSM Radio.

In Cairo, Illinois, there was recently a plywood fence around a construction site. Among other things drawn and written, there were the words, "All Four Letter Words Aren't Bad". The anonymous author listed the four letter words of love, hope, etc.

I have always been amazed by religious messages splashed on signs along the highway. I saw a sign recently, set in concrete with a concrete frame which read: "Jesus Is Coming Soon". I couldn't help but wonder why all the concrete.

Recently, right there on the brand new sign in front of First Baptist Church before God and everybody, were the words, "Come in, we're rated G". One could only hope that David Gardner would serve pop corn after the show.

An enthusiastic evangelical pastor put the following message on the bulletin board on the front lawn of his church: "If you're through with sin, come on in". All was well until a woman of the evening took lip stick and wrote the following message on the glass: "If you're not, call 429-8473".

In a small town in Eastern Kentucky a Baptist minister had the following message on his bulletin board: "Baptists don't give a Damn!" The United Methodist Pastor across the street, after observing the honesty of his colleague, rushed out and posted the words: "Methodists Don't Either".

On a Buffalo, New York bulletin board the following message was posted: "All new sermons; no summer reruns".

Bumper stickers, a form of signs, are amusing. If you can get close enough to the car in front of you to read them (and pray that the driver doesn't suddenly apply his brakes) you can be entertained by the messages. Consider only a few:

"Honk if you love Jesus"

"Tithe if you love Jesus"

"Hear Good News At Edgewood Baptist"

"Jesus First at Second Baptist"

"Don't Blame Me, I voted for Jimmy Carter"

"Caution, I break for animals"

"Caution, tobacco chewer driving this car"

"In case of rapture, this driver evicts"

"Shoot pool, not people"

"I'm not an old man, just a sexy senior citizen"

"You're a child of God, please call home"

I enjoy reading signs in post offices. The most common one says: "No dogs

allowed". In small print are the words, "Except seeing-eye dogs". The sign seems almost useless. The blind person can't see it and the dog doesn't know how to read.

A certain non-smoker carries a small sign in his attache' case. When he is forced to sit by a smoker on an airplane he wheels it out. It reads: "I chew tobacco. Don't blow smoke in my face and I won't spit in yours".

During the lengthening of runways at Standiford Field in Louisville, a sign was placed near the entrance which read: "Pardon the inconvenience, we're spreading our wings".

Some things happen in Texas which couldn't happen anywhere else. Near the towns of Comfort, Texas, which is between the towns of Alice and Louise, a motel had this sign: "Sleep in Comfort between Alice and Louise". Another Texas sign in front of a gas station and restaurant reads: "Eat here and get Gas".

A San Bruno, California, bank has a sign in the lobby which warns: "Don't Kiss Our Girls. They're All Tellers".

Margaret Hance, Mayor of Phoenix, has a sign in her office which reads, "If you can't take the heat, get back in the Kitchen".

I have always thought that I wouldn't let a daughter of mine go out with a boy who had a van with drapes and carpeted interior. However, I must admit that one "van man" was pretty clever. He had a sign in his door which proclaimed: "Rich van, poor man". On the back of his van were these words: "When the van is rocking, don't come knocking".

Sometimes during the seventies, Les Emmerson sang a song about signs. It confirms my position that signs are used and misused in our beloved America.

SIGNS

Sung by Les Emmerson

"And the sign said long haired, freaky people need not apply,
So I tucked my hair up under my hat and I went in to ask him why.
He said you look like a fine up-standing young man, I think you'll do.
So, I took off my hat and said, imagine that, huh, me working for you.

Sign, Sign, everywhere a sign blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind
Do this -- don't do that, can't you read the sign?

And the sign said anybody caught trespassing will be shot on sight.
So I jumped on the fence and I yelled at the house, hey what gives you
the right?

To put up a fence to keep me out, or to keep mother nature in?
If God was here he'd tell you to your face, man, you're some kind of sinner.

Sign, sign, everywhere a sign blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind
Do this -- don't do that, can't you read the sign?

Now, hey you mister, can't you read -- you've got to have a certain tie to
get a seat.

You can't even watch, no you can't eat, you ain't susposed to be here.
The sign said you've got to have a membership card to get inside --

And the sign said everybody welcome, come in kneel down and pray.

And then they passed around the plate at the end of it all.

I didn't have a penny to pay,

So I got me a pen and a paper and I made up my own little sign.

I said, thank you Lord for thinking bout me, I'm alive and doing fine.

Sign, sign everywhere a sign, blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind.

Do this -- don't do that, can't you read the sign?

Sign. Sign. everywhere a sign.