



SIGNS OF THE ROAD AND SOME RELATED HISTORIES

*A Paper for the Hopkinsville, Kentucky
Athenaeum Society
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As I understand it, Athenaeum papers were traditionally intended to be well-researched, scholarly presentations. Since I have had the privilege of being in Athenaeum I have heard many papers that were truly such scholarly works, but many of them have certainly not been! However, among those that have not been scholarly works, many have been very interesting and entertaining. I am here to say at the beginning that this paper tonight will not be classified among the scholarly, but I do hope that it will be interesting and entertaining.

Advertising along "travelways", from foot paths of the past to super freeways of today, has in various forms been around since ancient times. Pictographs placed on cave walls and those such as the ones I've seen carved on large rocks on the banks of the Snake River in Southeast Washington state were likely at times a means of getting a message to others who would pass by. Other early outdoor advertising has included eye-catching signs painted on the wall of a building. Archaeologists have discovered many such signs, including those of ancient Rome and Pompeii. One example is an advertisement in Rome that offered property for rent, and another on a wall in Pompeii telling of a tavern located in another town. Messages on wooden columns announced the public games in ancient Greece, and various notices on papyrus were used in Egypt. Also in ancient Rome, triumphal arches were erected in all parts of the empire, originally built to support honorific statuary but eventually developing into veritable billboards covered with extensive relief panels advertising the victories and good deeds of the emperors as well as specific historical events. For a long time early signs along the byways were mere

pictures or symbols of something pertaining to perhaps a business establishment and at times accompanied by an arrow pointing toward the place, since few people could read.

As methods of transportation changed and as more and more people learned to read, the nature of signs along the way changed and their number increased. Some signs of the road have been, and still are, for the purpose of advertising businesses and products and some for travel and safety information. One of the earliest signs of travel information I recall was an amusing but practical one from back in the late 1940's. Some of you youngsters may not know that at that time some rural roads were narrow, gravel, or even plain dirt roads. After a good rain these roads would become quite muddy and after one or more vehicles had gone down the road, ruts would begin to form in the mud, sometimes quite deep, and once you got into one of these ruts it was often difficult to get out. A minister friend of mine at the time told of turning onto such a road and seeing a make-shift sign that someone had thoughtfully erected. The sign read, "Choose your rut well because you'll be in it for the next twenty miles." The minister made a good sermon illustration out of that one!

I have driven quite extensively throughout much of the United States and have, of course, encountered countless numbers of signs of every kind and description, some of which have been quite memorable. When I was in seminary in Atlanta I would often drive home to western Mississippi and would usually leave Atlanta rather late in the day, being somewhat fatigued even before I left. By the time I got to western Alabama it would be late at night and I would be starting to get weary of driving when I came to a small town that knew how to attract possible newcomers. There was at the entrance to town a large billboard that read, "If you lived in Eden, Alabama, you would be at home now". And then there was the billboard at the entrance to the

town just next to where I lived which read, “10,000 nice people and a few old soreheads welcome you to Leland, Mississippi”.

Many highway and roadway signs are far better known than these examples and can sometimes been seen in many areas of the country. A number of years ago my wife and I were driving one of our many trips to the Pacific Northwest, this time taking a northern route. Before getting very far west we began noticing a recurring sign advertising Wall Drug Store in South Dakota, and we were a long way from South Dakota! The signs continued at various intervals for hundreds of miles with our comments that they must have used more lumber on the signs than they did in the business building. Some of the signs would offer “Free Ice Water” and other such attention getters. We eventually got to the Black Hills-Badlands area and, of course, stopped at the small town to see this drug store. It was a complex of buildings perhaps larger than this entire convention center and offered everything you could imagine and more, from gift items to food and drink, including the advertised free ice water and a replica of one of their signs. The founder, Ted Hustead, and his wife started Wall Drug in 1931. Signs advertising Wall Drug have been found in Paris, France, Viet Nam and the North Pole! A recent news note indicated that Ted Hustead just died this year at the age of 96 but that his grandson will continue the “Ice Water Dynasty”.

An even more familiar sign of the road, probably known to all of you here, has received national fame for a time. I recall a movie or TV sequence that depicted someone in a lifeboat far out to sea after a shipwreck and after drifting a long time. The persons in the lifeboat, still far out at sea, then looked up to see on a buoy a sign that read, “Stuckey’s 10 miles”! Stuckey’s stores with their combination of snack bar, souvenir stand, candy and nut store, rest room facilities and

gasoline service station beckoned to travelers at numerous rural highway interchanges for a half-century. At the peak there were more than 360 Stuckey's but the number is now down to about 51.

It seems that our travels across Texas at different times have yielded more memorable signs than perhaps any other one area. In fact, it was on a fairly recent such trip that my wife came up with the crazy idea of writing an Athenaeum paper about these signs and we started writing down some of them. We recalled the time several years ago when driving into a northwestern Texas town early in the evening, we saw a neon sign on a motel advertising, "The best little snore house in Texas!" This was shortly after the familiar movie had come on the scene. Some other Texas road signs that caught our attention include: "Don't mess with Texas. \$1,000 fine for littering the highway", "DWI-You can't afford it", "Speed Limit 75" (I liked that one!), and at the entrance to a roadside convenience store, "No guns inside." We've all seen many signs advertising various flea markets, but one we saw in Texas a few months ago read, "Flea and Tick Market!" One of the most impressive signs that I am not likely to forget was seen in Texas a year or two ago. My wife and I had been driving a long time, were tired and hungry, and were, shall we say "discussing without agreement" where to stop for dinner. It was early evening and I was driving on the freeway at the edge of Austin. The traffic was heavy and as I looked up I saw a large lighted billboard that simply read, "Exit now, Nash!" I, of course, immediately took the exit and saw a nice restaurant right in front of me! Wow! We went inside and as we sat at the table we looked out the back window and saw the real reason for the sign—an automobile dealership named, Nash Motors. A somewhat similar though less dramatic experience was when on the Texas side of Texarkana I missed my exit and was trapped going

down the freeway further than I wanted to and wondering, “Where will I find a place to turn around?” Immediately I saw a sign that read, “Exit Nash,” followed by one a little further with just an arrow pointing to the right and the word, “Nash.” It was an exit sign to the small community of Nash, Texas, but it did provide a place to turn around. One other one just out of Texas and into New Mexico was at a rest stop where there was a sign that read, “First class, award winning rest stop,” followed by the warning, “Beware of rattlesnakes.” Talk about mixed feelings!

A few signs along the highways have been seen in so many places, over such a long time and in such unique ways that they have achieved the status of unofficial national landmarks. One, I am sure, is well known to all of you. In 1823 Rev. Butrick wrote in his diary, “...I ascended Lookout Mountain to visit a citadel of rocks.” Later, after hearing amazing stories, sightseers came to ride mules through the naturally formed “streets and avenues” of the place that became nicknamed ROCK CITY. About 100 years later, in the 1920's, Garnet and Frieda Carter developed a garden walkway on their estate that included part of this fascinating area. Then, during the Great Depression the Carters decided to open their unique gardens to the public in 1932. It paid off and by 1940, Rock City was a roadside institution. An interesting side note is that Garnet Carter has been credited with inventing miniature golf! He also developed what was to become one of the most unique advertising ideas ever, perhaps rivaled by only one other that I will discuss a little later. All over the southeastern United States, Carter arranged to paint farmers' barns located near the highways. The barns were generally painted black, with the rooftops and at times the sides bearing the now familiar white letters which read, “See Rock City” or “See 7 States From Atop Lookout Mountain.” Anyone who has driven through this part

of the country, especially in the 1950's and 1960's, has become quite familiar with these landmarks. Most of the original barns are gone now, but if you are lucky you might still be able to see one beside one of the old two-lane highways. I just recently discovered that there are, in fact, two of the barns on Highway 41 between Hopkinsville and Pembroke. One of these, with "See Rock City" on the roof appears to have been recently re-painted. The other one has both, "See Rock City" and "7 States Atop Lookout Mountain" on the side, but is almost faded away. The memory of these signs is so cherished that miniature replica "See Rock City" birdhouses are still sold worldwide.

I imagine that Bob Sivley has heard about this next sign since the experience of seeing it was related to me by mutual friends of ours. In southern Oklahoma in an area that produces natural gas, there is a very small out-of-the-way community called Gas City. As our friends drove through this community a number of years ago they noticed as they were leaving town, a medium size, well made sign which simply read, "You just passed Gas!" In South Carolina there is a road sign that I'm sure some of you would appreciate. There is actually a town there by the name of "Clinton," and one nearby with the name of "Prosperity." At one intersection there is a sign that reads, "Clinton" with an arrow pointing to the left, and "Prosperity" with an arrow pointing in the opposite direction to the right. I have also often been amused at other signs in that area that point to the community of "P-o-m-a-r-i-a" (which I pronounce, "Po Maria") which is just down the road from and oh so close to Prosperity. There is also a speed reminder sign near Ashville, North Carolina, which reads, "Slow down and save a possum!"

A couple of my favorite signs were seen in the Pacific Northwest. Many years ago Annette and I, along with a couple of friends were on a dirt road way out in the mountains of

Montana, many miles from any civilization on a rock hunting trip. As we came to a meadow area we looked over and out in the middle of the field was a potty chair and a metal sign, obviously taken from some service station, which read, "Clean Rest Rooms." Some of you know that my wife and I were privileged to live in the mountains of north Idaho for a time near the town of Kellogg, the heart of the richest silver mining area in the country and one of the richest in the world. Before the area was settled, prospectors roamed these mountains in search of gold and other riches. One such prospector by the name of Noah Kellogg had stopped to rest a while and perhaps to eat. Then when he wasn't watching, his burro, carrying his supplies, etc., ran away. Noah chased after him and when he finally caught up with him, the burro was standing on an outcropping of obviously rich ore which turned out to be the richest silver deposit in the country. A community began to grow there which became the town of Kellogg, Idaho. At the entrance to town, even today, there is a large billboard which reads, "Kellogg, Idaho—The town founded by a jackass and inhabited by its descendants."

One summer on a trip to the Northwest we drove through Ogden, Utah, next to Salt Lake City. In the downtown area there was a small restaurant with what I considered a clever sign: "Come on in before we both starve!" And elsewhere, another sign to attract weary travelers: "South Pole—6,200 miles. Manchester—only 19." Then there was the funeral home with this sign in front: "Boxwell—Funeral Directors." I certainly hope they did! And one to seriously consider read, "Go to church. Don't wait for the hearse to take you."

In discussing the nostalgic "See Rock City" barns, I suggested that this highway advertising idea was perhaps rivaled by only one other. In some ways this other one may have even exceeded the famous barns. During the years from 1925 until 1963 sets of signs appearing

in a sequence of usually five signs in a row, each set with a message that always ended with the product name became so popular that they were indeed an unofficial national landmark. One of the sets told of this popularity quite well: "If you don't know—whose signs these are—you can't have—driven very far—Burma Shave." In the early 1900's Clinton Odell founded the Burma Vita Corporation in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to sell his own homemade concoction, a liniment designed to treat certain ailments, but because of a limited clientele and competition, sales of Burma Vita were not doing well. It was suggested that perhaps it would be more profitable to market a product that could be used every day and by more people. This was a time when essentially all shaving was done using a special soap-like shaving cream applied with a brush. One exception was a new product, a brushless shaving cream that was made in England and available world-wide. The Odell family decided to hire a chemist and after about 300 mixtures were tried, Burma Shave brushless shaving cream was born. At first the marketing efforts were not very successful and Burma Shave almost didn't make it. One such effort was called "Jars on Approval." The Odell boys would go to a man's office and give him a jar of Burma Shave with the agreement that if he liked it he would give them 50 cents the next time they came around. If he didn't like it they would take back the unused portion and remain friends.

During some of his travels trying to promote Burma Shave, Allen Odell had noticed the gas station signs that told travelers there were gas, oil and rest rooms ahead. He began to wonder if they could sell shaving cream that way. At first Clifford Odell, Allen's father and founder of Burma Shave would not agree with the suggestion, but Allen kept trying to sell the idea. Finally his father gave in and agreed that he could have \$200 to try out his idea. He purchased some second-hand boards which he cut into 36-inch lengths and painted them red, using white letters

for the message. At first he used four consecutive signs with wording that did not rhyme. One example was: "SHAVE THE MODERN WAY—FINE FOR THE SKIN—DRUGGISTS HAVE IT—BURMA-SHAVE." The first set of signs was erected in a farmer's field along Route 35, between Albert Lea and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The time was right. It was 1925 and automobiles were getting popular enough that people were beginning to explore the roadways of America. A dozen sets of signs were erected and soon orders started climbing. Travelers began asking druggists about that shaving cream they saw advertised on those funny signs and as drug stores began running out, they began ordering more and more Burma-Shave. In spite of this, the company was already broke and it was decided to incorporate and to sell stock to raise capital. Within three weeks 49% of the stock was sold and in 1926 the first sign shop was set up. It was decided to use five or six consecutive signs and to employ rhymes. That year they spent \$25,000 on signs and sales for the year hit \$68,000. (Remember, this was 1926 and that was a lot of money then.) By having the rhymes build suspense until the last sign, people were hooked into reading the entire series so that the message could be understood and enjoyed like a good joke—always ending with the product name. For example: "THE BEARDED LADY—TRIED A JAR—SHE'S NOW—A FAMOUS—MOVIE STAR—BURMA-SHAVE." It was sort of like eating peanuts or potato chips—nobody could read just one of the signs. BEN MET ANNA—MADE A HIT—NEGLECTED BEARD—BEN-ANNA SPLIT—BURMA-SHAVE. For those of you who have never seen them, the signs at first were 10 inches high and 36 inches wide, but evolved to 18 inches high and 40 inches wide and the distance between the signs was also increased as roads got better and cars got faster. The later signs were mounted on steel posts 10 feet high.

Clifford Odell had a very strict rule about the verses to be used on the signs. Nothing would be used that he thought would in any way be offensive to anyone and for this reason many suggestions for verses were turned down. One such rejection was: MY MAN WON'T SHAVE—SAID HAZEL HUZ—BUT I DON'T WORRY----DORA'S DOES. Eventually, the signs spread to almost every state. No "official" signs were placed in Arizona, New Mexico or Nevada because there was so little traffic there then. Also, Massachusetts had so many winding roads and so much foliage that it was too difficult to find locations to place the signs. It was said that the signs were so effective that the Burma Shave Company did not even feel the effects of the depression. This jingle suggested the popularity: RIOT AT DRUG STORE—CALLING ALL CARS—100 CUSTOMERS—99 JARS—BURMA-SHAVE. The company eventually grew to \$3 million in annual sales and there were about 7,000 sets of the signs. WHEN THE STORK—DELIVERS A BOY—OUR WHOLE DARN FACTORY—JUMPS FOR JOY—BURMA-SHAVE. With such jingles as this one, the wide spread use of the signs and the popularity of the product, many people had the impression that the Burma-Shave Company must have been quite large. The fact is, even at the peak the company never employed more than 35 people, and all those signs were erected and maintained by two persons in each of eight small trucks. Each truck had a sign on its side which read, "Cheer Up, Face!", and the road crew called themselves "PHD,s" (Post Hole Diggers).

During World War II some from the U.S. Navy put up a set of Burma-Shave signs at McMurdo Sound, Antarctica, and other GI's put them up in Alaska. Homesick soldiers in the infantry erected "field made" Burma-Shave signs through various parts of Europe as they marched – all the way to Germany. At home the signs often followed some general theme and

during the war the patriotic theme was popular. BUYING DEFENSE BONDS—MEANS MONEY LENT—SO THEY—DON'T COST YOU—ONE RED CENT—BURMA-SHAVE. LET'S MAKE HITLER—AND HIROHITO—LOOK AS SICK AS—OLD BENITO—BUY DEFENSE BONDS—BURMA-SHAVE. MAYBE YOU CAN'T—SHOULDER A GUN—BUT YOU CAN SHOULDER—THE COST OF ONE—BUY DEFENSE BONDS—BURMA-SHAVE. SHAVING BRUSH—IN ARMY PACK—WAS THE STRAW THAT BROKE—THE ROOKIE'S BACK—USE BRUSHLESS—BURMA-SHAVE. Then after the war came this one: TESTED—IN PEACE—PROVEN IN WAR—BETTER NOW—THAN EVER BEFORE—BURMA-SHAVE.

One report stated that a study of average highway speeds conducted by the University of Pennsylvania reported that no phenomenon more reliably slowed down speeders than a set of Burma-Shave signs. Driving safety was a favorite theme of the signs throughout their history. Here are just a few: ANGELS WHO GUARD YOU—WHEN YOU DRIVE—USUALLY RETIRE—AT SIXTY-FIVE—BURMA-SHAVE. BROTHER SPEEDERS—LET'S REHEARSE—ALL TOGETHER—GOOD MORNING, NURSE—BURMA-SHAVE. PAST SCHOOLHOUSES—TAKE IT SLOW—LET THE LITTLE—SHAVERS GROW—BURMA-SHAVE. A MAN-A MISS—A CAR-A CURVE—HE KISSED THE MISS—AND MISSED THE CURVE—BURMA-SHAVE. THE MIDNIGHT RIDE—OF PAUL FOR BEER—LED TO A—WARMER HEMISPHERE—BURMA-SHAVE. REMEMBER THIS—IF YOU'D—BE SPARED—TRAINS DON'T WHISTLE— BECAUSE THEY'RE SCARED—BURMA-SHAVE. IF YOU DISLIKE—BIG TRAFFIC FINES—SLOW DOWN 'TILL YOU—CAN READ THESE SIGNS—BURMA-SHAVE.

Another favorite theme was, of course, the relationship between a man and his mate. A CHIN WHERE—BARBED WIRE BRISTLES STAND—IS BOUND TO BE—A NO MA'AMS LAND—BURMA-SHAVE. USE THIS CREAM—A DAY OR TWO—THEN DON'T CALL HER—SHE'LL CALL YOU—BURMA-SHAVE. DINAH DOESN'T—TREAT HIM RIGHT—BUT IF HE'D SHAVE—DYNA-MITE!—BURMA-SHAVE. IF WIFIE SHUNS—YOUR FOND EMBRACE—DON'T SHOOT THE ICEMAN—FEEL YOUR FACE—BURMA-SHAVE.

At least a couple of the signs got unexpected results. FREE OFFER! FREE OFFER!—RIP A FENDER OFF YOUR CAR—MAIL IT IN FOR—A HALF-POUND JAR—BURMA SHAVE. The company got quite a few fenders sent in or drug in from junk yards or taken off of toy cars, and they had to pay up! Perhaps the best and certainly one of the most famous stories came from: FREE-FREE—A TRIP TO MARS—FOR 900—EMPTY JARS—BURMA SHAVE. The manager of a supermarket in Appleton, Wisconsin, decided to accept the challenge and wrote to the company asking where he should send the 900 jars for the free trip. I imagine that in somewhat of a panic, the company finally came up with this reply: "If a trip to Mars you'd earn, remember, friend, there's no return." However, the store manager, Arliss French, was determined and started what became a fantastic promotion for his store and for Burma-Shave. He set up large bins in the store and invited people to bring in their empty Burma-Shave jars. He also put a model rocket plane on display and little green men on the roof firing toy rocket gliders into the parking lot. Eventually, "Frenchie" took his 900 jars in a Brinks truck to Minneapolis. He arrived with the truck, wearing his space suit and helmet. The company agreed to send him and his family to Mars—Mars, Germany, that is (Spelled Moers, but

pronounced Mars). When Frenchie and his wife arrived by plane in Germany they looked out the window at the airport to see a huge crowd of people. Frenchie said, "There must be some celebrity on the plane with us." When they stepped off the plane, the crowd shouted, "Put on your space suit!" Then he knew who the celebrity was!

After World War II, factors such as increasing costs, bigger highways and faster cars eventually led to decreasing sales for Burma-Shave. The signs weren't working as well anymore. The final end of the era came in 1963, when the company was sold to Phillip Morris to become an operating division of American Safety Razor Products. All the signs were then removed. Allen Odell, creator of the signs, said this was his favorite: WITHIN THIS VALE—OF TOIL—AND SIN—YOUR HEAD GROWS BALD—BUT NOT YOUR CHIN—BURMA-SHAVE. A set of this one stands at the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan. The Smithsonian Museum also owns this set as well as another favorite: SHAVING BRUSHES—YOU'LL SOON SEE 'EM—ON THE SHELF—IN SOME MUSEUM—BURMA-SHAVE.

Some effort has been made in recent years by the American Safety Razor Co. to revive the interest in Burma-Shave but the magic just isn't there. In 1997 there was a TV spot which showed a man in his mid-50s and a younger woman at this side driving in a 58 Corvette down a seaside road. They passed signs which read: YOU DON'T HAVE A CARE—YOU DON'T HAVE A WORRY—YOU'VE REACHED THE POINT—WHERE YOU DON'T—HAVE TO HURRY—BURMA-SHAVE. At the final sign, a question appeared on the screen: "Where will it take you?" The Corvette was last seen empty, parked beside the beach, with not-too-subtle implications of what might be happening behind the dunes. This effort certainly misses what Frank Rowsome Jr.'s 1965 book, "The Verse by the Side of the Road," refers to as "the essential

spirit of Burma-Shave.” It was also reported that the company was planning to re-open the roadside sign campaign in 1998, but I haven’t seen any yet and I doubt that it would work today. With the multi-lane freeways, super heavy traffic , high speeds and wall-to-wall 18 wheelers it would be impossible to read the signs. Even if large billboard size signs were used, an 18 wheeler would surely block at least some of them and in an attempt to read the whole series you would likely run over, or get run over by, several other vehicles! I think it best to simply second the quote at the end of the video, “The Signs and Rhymes of Burma-Shave”: “We thank you for the laughs you gave with roadside ads of Burma-Shave.”

Does this mean that roadside advertising must be a thing of the past? Certainly not. Billboards and other modern signs are alive and well in spite of some unsuccessful efforts to eliminate the use of billboards for safety and beautification reasons. Someone, who obviously doesn’t like the proliferation of billboards has referred to them as, “Litter on a stick!” I prefer the wording of one of my favorite poets. In, “Song of the Open Road,” Ogden Nash wrote (with all due respect to Joyce Kilmer), “I think that I shall never see—A billboard lovely as a tree—Indeed, unless the billboards fall—I’ll never see a tree at all.” The outdoor advertising industry has monitored public opinion, by means of independent research polls, for over 25 years and reports that people still like billboards, believe they promote business, and are useful to drivers. There was a 20/20 research of Nashville in 1992 which reported that nearly 80% of Tennesseans use billboards to locate various products and services when traveling, and nearly six out of ten use them often. Eighty percent disagreed with banning billboards. In 1991, the U.S. Travel Data Center reported that 93% of all travelers agreed that billboards are important to travelers when looking for tourist and travel-related services. In 1987, in Georgia, 91% of

respondents agreed that billboards were useful to drivers in finding restaurants, gas stations, lodging and other products or services. There have been many other similar reports. I certainly agree with these opinions—how else would I settle a discussion with my wife in the middle of traffic when looking for a place to eat, or find a turn-around when I've gone too far. Those personalized signs are especially helpful!

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SPOKE OF AMUSING SIGNS
FOR THOSE WHO SEE 'EM
FRANK NASH