

Creative Living

CLASSIFIED REAL ESTATE

Bob Sklar editor/591-2300



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Left: Dan Hershberger, a graphic design associate professor, is shown here with several of the historic roadside signs he has collected. All are made of porcelain-enamelled steel except for the Wadhams sign, which is made of embossed tin. Clockwise, from upper left: Sunoco, 1930; Wadhams Motor Oil, late '20s or early '30s; Texaco, 1935; Gargoyle Mobiloil, 1920s; Shell architectural gas station ornament, 1920s. Wadhams Oil and Grease Co. became a major regional distributor for Mobil Oil. Gargoyle Mobiloil was produced and marketed by Vacuum Oil Co., which merged with Standard Oil Co. of New York and became Mobil Oil.

JILL ANDRA YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHY

Roadside graphics: vintage signposts

By Cathleen Collins Lee
special writer

Bates Hamburgers.

To some of the many people who pass by, it's just an old hamburger stand. But to Dan Hershberger, roadside enthusiast and associate professor of graphic design at the Center for Creative Studies (CCS) in

Detroit, it's a vintage example of late '40s roadside architecture and a significant piece of American history.

"It's a great example of a prefabricated restaurant from that time period, and it's virtually unscathed," Hershberger said. "You literally ordered one from a catalog and you were in business. They were so standardized that only one of the two owners of Bates could get their name in the space above the door."

Hershberger, who grew up in Plymouth, has spent the last several years studying these bits and pieces of the American roadside: hamburger stands, service stations, signs, diners and maps. And he presents the results of his research in a course at CCS titled, "Gas, Food and Lodging: the Design of the American Roadside."

For Hershberger, these seemingly mundane signs and oil company logos show how effective graphic communication can be. And they help mark the tremendous influence of automobile transportation on American life.

HERSHBERGER is worried that soon much of the history of the

American roadside, as reflected in graphic and architectural design, will have vanished from the landscape.

Many people don't see roadside artifacts as historically significant, so they don't make an effort to save them. And everyone from Mobil Oil to McDonald's tries to obliterate company logos and styles that they feel are outdated.

"A lot of 20th-century American history is rooted in the automobile," Hershberger said. "Much of what we do, where we eat lunch, where we get our car serviced, the whole development of suburban area, would not exist without the automobile. But we're going to wake up in the 21st century and find that much of what happened in the 20th century will be torn down."

Hershberger begins his course in the late 19th century, when much of the roadside lodging and food took its early inspiration from what was available along the train tracks. But the automobile offered a personal freedom to go where you want to go, something we take for granted today.

In the 1920s, '30s and '40s, driving cross country was an adventure. Instead of our well-marked interstates, there was a network of state and regional trails marked by signs along fenceposts and telephone poles. People would strap some folding cots and a tent on the running board of an open-air touring car, tie on at least two spare tires and set off for weeks.

THE OIL companies offered a certain amount of security along uncharted and often bumpy roads. They built gas stations to look like country cottages, offered oil and windshield cleaning and maps.

Around 1915, an advertising man named William B. Akins, who often got lost driving the mountains of Pennsylvania, approached Gulf about the idea of distributing free maps to customers.

The idea caught on, and soon all the major oil companies were distributing free maps stamped firmly with the company logo. All these design elements helped to create a corporate image that drivers could identify with as they drove across the country.

In addition to gas stations, Hershberger also studies other institutions that sprang up to serve the American driver: diners, drive-

ins, McDonald's and tourist camps. Diners, which were entirely made in a factory and always offered counter seating, were an important sociological phenomenon.

"There are no class distinctions at a diner counter," Hershberger said. "A doctor can sit next to a plumber

and have free conversation. There are no first-class seats, no second-class seats."

Often located next of factories, they were also largely a male domain, although some tried to

Please turn to Page 2



JIM JACOFF/ELDI/Staff photographer

Bates Hamburgers, at Five Mile and Farmington Road in Livonia, is an untouched example of a late '40s, prefabricated hamburger stand. The exterior and interior are porcelain-enamelled steel.



JOHN STORMZAND/Staff photographer

Red Knapp's Dairy Bar, on Main Street in downtown Rochester, was built in the early '50s with panes of glass called Vitrolite glued to the exterior. The building was bricked in the early '70s, then restored at great expense a few years ago.

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