

Signs

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Ghosts of ad campaigns past

be my documentary photo project," said Jump, who lives in New York.

Nearly 50 ghost signs around New York City are displayed on Jump's Web site (www.frankjump.com). Jump, who has taken pictures of some 2,000 signs, recently photographed ghost signs in Jersey City, and hopes to visit Newark, Trenton and Camden, plus some older New England manufacturing towns, in the next year or two.

"It's a form of advertising that's timeless," said Jump, who has climbed trees and talked his way into the apartments of strangers to photograph signs. "As long as there's been writing, there's been wall paintings."

Wall painting is as old as prehistoric times, but most of the fading commercial signs visible today date to the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, when teams of painters would hit the road for weeks, even months, at a time.

The sign painters were known as "wall dogs" because of their work environment and because they worked like dogs.

"They painted many signs (on buildings) along the railroad tracks, because that was the primary means of transportation back then," said David Maxwell, president of the R.C. Maxwell Co. in Trenton, an outdoor advertising firm founded by his father in 1894.

The company's collection of photographs of wall signs and billboards is the largest collection of outdoor advertising memorabilia in the country, according to Maxwell.

Another collection, gathered by the Outdoor Advertising Association of America, is housed at Duke University's John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History. The collection was formerly kept at Fairleigh Dickinson University, but budget cuts in the early 1990s forced the university to search for a new home.

Jack Lingle knew plenty of wall dogs. Lingle owned a sign business on Market Street in Newark from 1951 to 1967.

"Like a swarm of bees they used to come, traveling through the South in the winter and coming north in the summer with the first signs of spring, carting their sign kits, harmonicas, guitars, mouth harps," Lingle once recalled. "They could capture a likeness or paint a landscape in no time flat. They could letter a truck or swing a scaffold on a wall or billboard on the side of a building eight stories in the air."

Because of the volume of work, wall painters often worked quickly, but there was an art to their craft.

"They talked about 'swing' — how the letters would swing from one letter to the other," Maxwell said. "I

Ghost signs around New Jersey:

GARWOOD:

- Syrup/Plain & Flavored/Light & Dark
Location: North Avenue and Center Street, on side of Mr. B's Grooming and Pet Supply

IRVINGTON:

- 7up The Uncola
Location: Springfield Avenue at Florence Avenue, above Turko's Food Store.
- Weber Bros. Bread
Location: Springfield Avenue off Frederick Terrace
- The Flavor Lasts
Location: Springfield Ave. and Ellis Ave.

NEWARK:

- Hyger's Expert Simonizing/A Clean Car Rides Better
Location: Springfield Ave. and S. 12th St.
- Uneeda Biscuits/Sold Only in Packages/National Biscuit Company
Location: Springfield Avenue, off Fairmount, above Nubian Flava restaurant.
- Yours For Value/Your American Amoco Gas Dealer
Location: Norfolk Street and Central Avenue

PATERSON:

- Groceries and Provisions/Tobacco/Cool Smoke
Location: Main Street, just off Weiss Street, on side of laundromat.
- No More Morning Backache/Posturepedic
Location: Martin Luther King Way/Broadway), in front of the Orpheum sign.

PERTH AMBOY:

- Margaretten Company/est. 1909/Real Estate/Travel/Mortgages/Insurance/2nd Floor Elevator Service
Location: Above Supremo Food Market, Smith Street.
- New Hope for Perth Amboy/For Mayor/Jankowski/Something to Crow About
Location: 284 Smith St.

PLAINFIELD:

- J.D. Loizeaux Lumber Company
Location: 420 Watchung Ave.

SOUTH AMBOY:

- Green's Men's Shop/est. 1902/Name Brands
Location: 102 Broadway

TRENTON:

- Irv's Shoes/Men's and Ladies Shoes/Unbeatable Prices
Location: Lafayette Street, just off South Warren

umented scores of wall signs across the country in his book "Ghost Signs" (Signs of the Times Publishing Co., 1989).

Wall signs could be brief: "Panda Paints — a Bear for Wear;" "Pevely Select Ice Cream — Deliciously Different;" "Coca-Cola — Relieves Fatigue;" "Taste that Beats the Others Cold — Pepsi Pours It On;" "Fontella Cigars — Better than Most Ten Cent Cigars."

Or they could be delightfully, even deliriously, verbose. Witness this turn-of-the-century wall sign from the owner of a Chicago clothing store:

This is Tom!

Clothing I sell at \$10.00 is not \$10.00 Clothing!

I Don't Pay State Street Rents

It is good enough for me to wear

good enough for you to wear

if you don't think so

you don't know what you're thinking about

Sign painters were exposed to many hazards — lead paint, shaky scaffolding, heights, even lightning. Until the 1940s, all sign painters used white lead paste mixed with dry pigments and linseed oil. Lead, while highly toxic, was responsible for the signs' longevity.

The 1950s marked the beginning of the end for wall signs. Billboards, plus neon, electronic and vinyl signs, took over. There are no wall dogs anymore at R.C. Maxwell.

"It's a dying art, an obsolete skill," David Maxwell said.

All the more reason for photographers like Jump to chronicle ghost signs before they fade away entirely. Smyk says the Orpheum sign in downtown Paterson should not only be documented but restored.

"That sign has been photographed, but it really should be repainted before it just fades away," the historian said. "It's getting more and more indistinct. This is really part of American culture."

remember one painter saying 'R' was a beautiful letter to paint. They really got into stuff like that."

Arthur Krim, founding member of the Society for Commercial Archaeology, sees in wall signs evidence of a "lost civilization."

"At first glance, they seem almost insignificant, speaking for some by-gone brand of shoes or coffee or motor cars," said Krim, a Cambridge, Mass.-based geographer. "Yet, in their boldness and simplicity, these signs speak of another time, the infancy of American advertising."

Springfield Avenue through Newark and Irvington is a particularly rich storehouse of ghost signs. On Springfield Avenue and S. 11th Street in Newark is one of the state's more striking ghost signs. It apparently has been painted over several times; the message reads:

Bridal

Refreshing

Tomato

Drink Coca-Cola

Photographer William Stage doc-

