Ghost Tour

FADED SIGNS POINT TO THE CITY'S VIBRANT PAST.

By Charles Buchanan Photos by Jonathan Purvis

FIRST AVENUE SOUTH is haunted by the Ghost of Commerce Past. You'll find it clinging to a wall beyond 24th Street—in the form of a chicken.

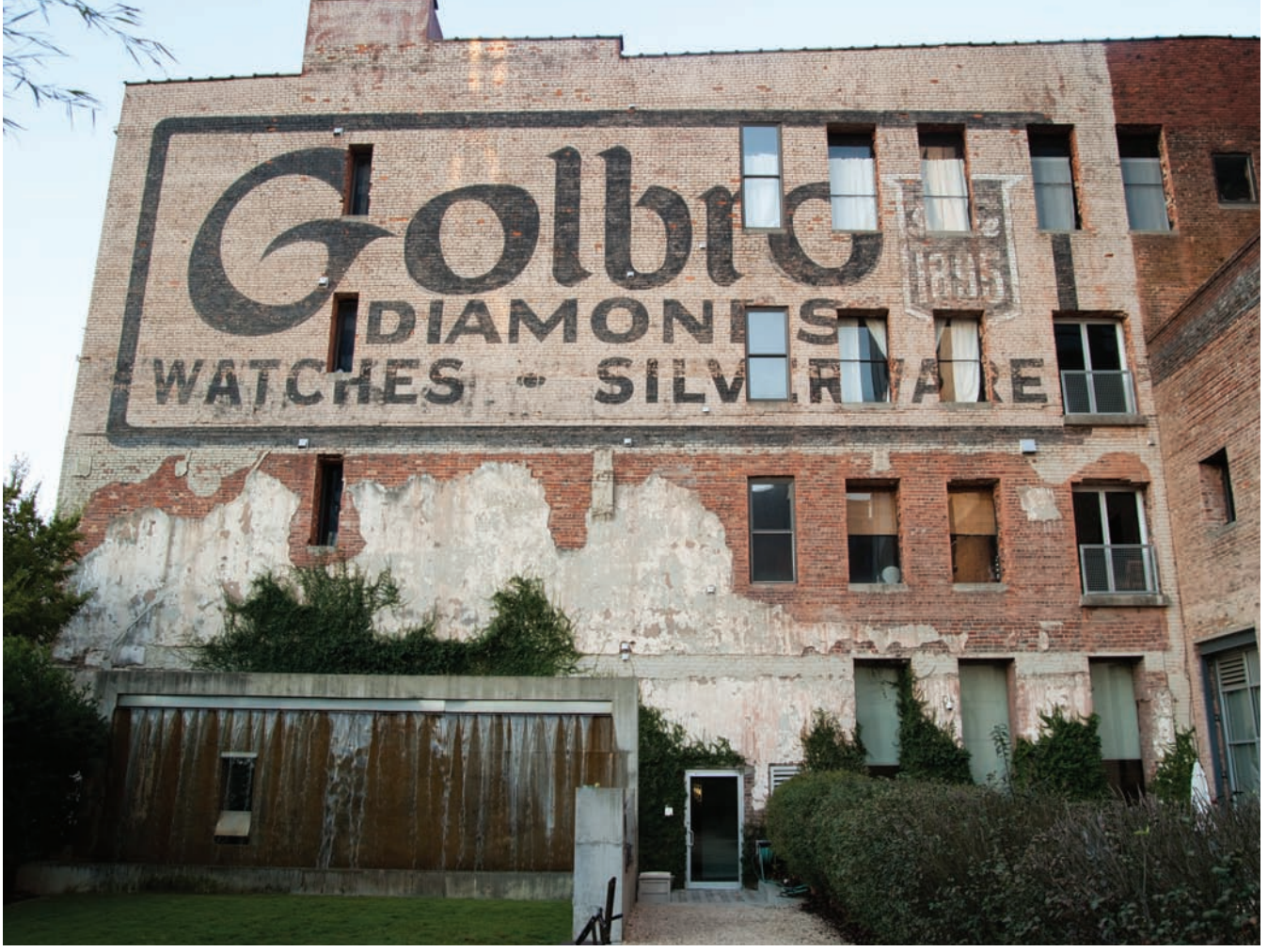
This is not a hallucination but a classic example of a "ghost sign," a painted advertisement that has faded over the years. Once upon a time, the hen was an icon for Ballard's Insurance brand chicken feeds. It was painted atop a bright blue background, sharing the wall with an Egyptian obelisk, the symbol of Ballard's Obelisk Flour. More than half a century after Pillsbury bought Ballard & Ballard of Louisville, Ky., the company's name and imagery endure on this lonely wall.

Birmingham is full of ghosts like this, advertising everything from butter and eggs to soft drinks, alcohol, furniture and cold storage for fur coats. Painted signs were the original pop-up ads, highlighting products and services on brick walls all over America. In an era when traffic moved slowly, and many commuters rode streetcars, covering the side of a building with an ad was an effective way to attract attention from potential customers.

"A painted sign also would have been cheaper and required less maintenance than a neon sign," says historian Tim Hollis, *Vintage Birmingham Signs* author and *Birmingham* magazine "Timepiece" columnist. "The painted signs were most popular until neon took over in the late 1930s, but even then, new painted signs would appear from time to time." City directories identify five sign painting companies in Birmingham in 1920; by 1930 there were 12.

The local sign industry hit its peak in 1959, with 27 companies listed as "sign painters and manufacturers," which included the makers of neon signs. Hollis says that some companies created a hybrid of the two forms, "where a painted sign would be enhanced with neon. The western side of the Thomas Jefferson Hotel (now the Leer Tower) had a huge vertical painted sign, but the letters were outlined in neon for night viewing."


OBELISK
INSURANCE


DIAMONDS
WATCHES

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Even after 50 years, the sharply dressed man on the corner of 22nd Street and Third Avenue North continues to smile and promise "Uniforms for Every Purpose." Hollis calls this sign, which promotes McCain Uniform Company, Birmingham's "most nostalgic" because it evokes "a lost era when hotel bellhops and service station attendants needed certain types of uniforms."

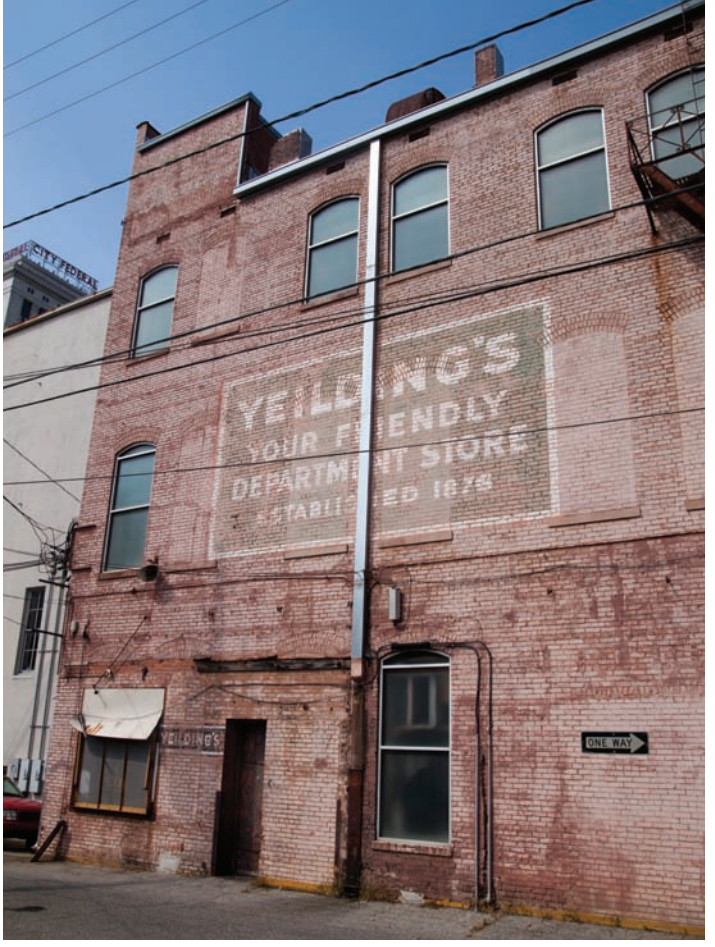
The company that created this ad, McBride Signs, was the city's largest sign-painting firm, Hollis notes. Other key painters included Skidmore Signs and Alabama Outdoor Advertising. But many small shops were in the business as well. Tim Rocks opened his sign company in 1938, painting everything from walls to real estate signs to storefront windows and company vehicles. That's where his son, Larry Rocks, learned the foundations of the trade.

"I started with walls, and as time went on, I learned to paint little letters and the gold leaf that we put on doors," says the younger Rocks, a professional sign designer with 50 years of experience in the field. He has worked in Birmingham and Chicago, often as a member of the two-man crews assigned to paint a brick wall or billboard high above the city streets.

STANDARD PROCEDURE

Birmingham's biggest ghost sign might be the one on First Avenue North, just past 18th Street. It's a bit of a two-dimensional archaeological dig, with ads layered atop one another. As the fresher paint weathers, traces of the older signs resurface, revealing giant letters declaring Bull Durham chewing tobacco to be "the Standard of the World." A Nabisco ad is barely visible near bolder signs for Dixie Cycle and Toy Company and Cook Furniture.

All of these signs, no matter what decade they came from, would have started as a small paper sketch, Rocks says. "The client might provide the image and the phrasing, but I would put it together to fit the sign," Rocks says. He would also add the measurements for each letter.



"If you start on one end, you'll discover that your margin won't be right when you get to the other end," explains professional sign designer Larry Rocks. If a painting crew found that their spacing was off, they could make room by drawing certain letters a little wider or narrower than others.

Then the painting could begin. Suspended on a metal stage attached to the roof edge by hooks and ropes, the crew would add a primer coat to the brick and draw the letters and images in charcoal.

A bumpy brick wall is not a perfect canvas for pictures and words that need to look straight and even. But Rocks reveals several tricks of the trade: The crew would first snap chalk lines to create a grid. Then they could draw to scale—one inch on paper would translate to one foot on the wall. Horizontal chalk lines also provided a level guide for lettering. "You start drawing the letters in the middle of the sign," Rocks explains.

Some sign shops also relied on paper patterns. Using a projector, painters would trace letters and images onto large sheets of paper backed with felt or cardboard. Then they would go back over the lines with a perforating wheel—similar to the sewing tool—to punch holes through the pattern. At the job site, crews would lay the pattern against a wall and pat it with a handkerchief or sock full of chalk—a technique known as pouncing—which would transfer a dotted outline of the image onto the brick.

SKILL AND SENSE

Tucked in an alley, visible from First Avenue North, a sign proclaims Yeilding's to be "Your Friendly Department Store." It advertises the former flagship location of the venerable Birmingham retailer, which constructed this building in 1911. The faded sign is simple: just an outline, a background and words.

That simplicity is the result of skill, science—and common sense. For decades, sign crews relied on oil paint, which often contained lead, but they switched to more versatile latex paints as they became available in the middle of the 20th century. "We learned that it was better to use latex for the background because the wall could 'breathe' better," Rocks explains. Many sign painters also relied on a type of brush called a fitch, which Rocks says is "nothing like a housepainting brush." Made of pig's hair with an angled edge, fitch brushes provided the best detail for outlines, particularly on the uneven brick. "We altered the pressure on the brush every time we came to a bump," he says. Also, to save time and paint, the crews wouldn't paint the background color under big letters.

Experienced sign painters could complete a brick wall or billboard quickly. Rocks recalls that when he worked in Chicago, his crew often didn't get started until 9 a.m. because the weather was so cold. But they would finish the entire painting process by midafternoon—even with billboards 12-feet tall by 40-feet wide. "There was no wasted motion," he says.

PRESERVED IN PLASTER

When the building at the corner of 22nd Street South and Second Avenue South was torn down a couple of years ago, the workers discovered a hidden treasure: a vividly colored Double Cola ad hidden behind the brick. Downtown Birmingham is full of these secret signs. As buildings went up, they covered—or even incorporated—the former exterior walls of neighboring structures, preserving everything painted on them.

The bold Double Cola ad offers a glimpse of what ghost signs looked like when they were new. And now that it is exposed to sunlight, weather and varying temperatures, it, too, will start to fade. Rocks says that sign companies usually didn't coat their creations with sealers.

Wall signs continued to go up in Birmingham throughout the 1970's and into the 1980's, but new technologies began to change the field. "When we sketched, we would draw the roundels [curved shapes] by hand," Rocks says. Now his chief design tool is a computer, and his signs are printed on vinyl instead of painted. "Everything changes," he says. "With vinyl I can produce so much more. Paint is so labor-intensive."

"We would take a felt-tip pen and make a dot pattern around the letters," Rocks says. "Then you could add your finish coat to the background. If you brushed over that line, the pen would bleed through. Then you could come back and paint the inside of the letters."

Despite the cost, new painted signs are popping up in downtown Birmingham. Dog Days of Birmingham recently painted a mural on the side of the former Hunter Furniture building on 19th Street. Sheppard-Harris and Associates, an accounting firm, is planning one for the side of its building, a former firehouse on 24th Street North.

"THE PICTURE STAYED"

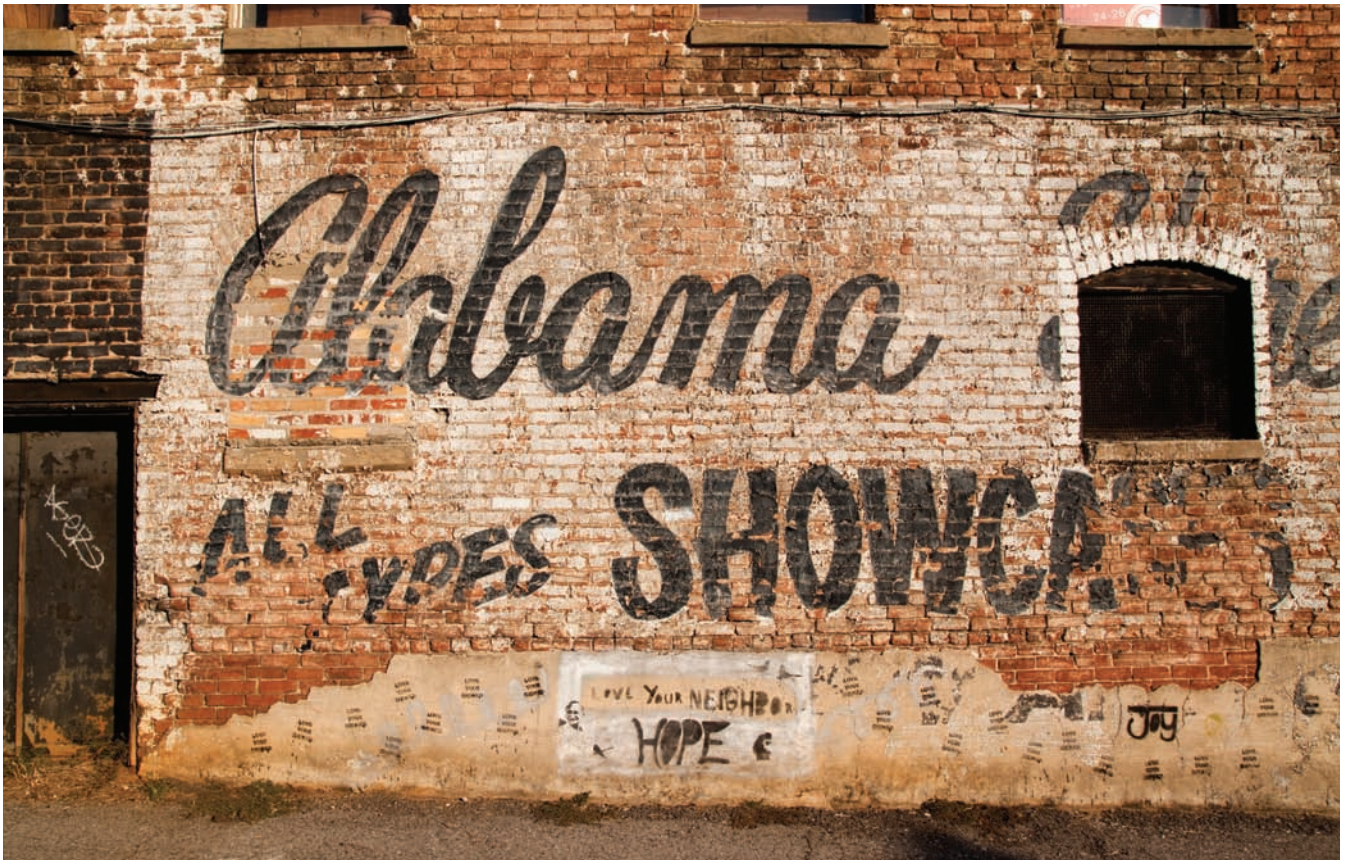
A vision of the past hangs near the new Railroad Park. A ghost sign for the Sentinel TV proclaims "the hours passed" but "the picture stayed." This particular picture has indeed shown some staying power. According to Hollis, this sign dates from after 1949, the year television came to Birmingham. But it has also been restored in recent years, ensuring that it survives for a few more decades.

Hollis has mixed feelings about the restoration of vintage painted signs. "It's great to keep them from fading away, but sometimes it just isn't the same," he says. "It's like someone painted a new sign where an old one used to be, and you aren't able to see the original anymore."

Hollis and Rocks agree that ghost signs add character to the cityscape and offer a nostalgic reminder of Birmingham's younger days. "They're definitely a type of art," Rocks says, "though it looks like they have become art after they've aged—after they're gone."

"If there's a lesson to be learned from the signs, I guess it's that no matter how hard we try, we can't hold on to the past indefinitely," Hollis notes. "At some point, despite all our best efforts, it's going to be the past." ●


DIXIE CYCLE & TOY CO.
BICYCLES TOYS LAWNMOWER SUPPLIES
EASY
CREDIT
Fast Friendly Service!
LEER TOWER


Alabama
HOPE
Joy