

# SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE A SIGN: Signmaking, Vermont style

By Lou Varricchio

For baby boomers who remember the 1970 pop song “Signs”, performed by the Five Man Electrical Band, the signs of our times are a’changin’. But here in Vermont, those signs may be everywhere, but luckily they happen to be wonderful little works of art.

Most visitors to Vermont are often surprised not to see garish advertising billboards along our roadsides. Starting in 1968, Vermont became the first of four states, preceding Maine, Hawaii and Alaska, to ban billboards.

This fact doesn’t mean Vermonters can’t resist to advertise a business or a point of interest along the way. So, in place of the familiar, large billboards seen elsewhere, our state’s anti-billboard law has, in its own way, created a cottage industry all its own — the craft of artisan sign making.

Vermont’s artisan signs are discreet and bear the look of creativity lacking in big, ugly billboard art.

You’ll see signs in our state clustered, to reduce visual distractions to the motorist, at both ends of a town, or in front of a business establishment such as a shopping plaza. Businesses with frontage along state roads and highways may install signs that conform to local sign regulations, according to the Vermont Natural Resources Council (VNRC).

Vermont’s anti-billboard law began with the late Ted Riehle. Not everyone believes the sign law is fair, especially some advertising businesses. Others, perhaps based on principle, find it one more step in Vermont state government’s heavy hand of regulation. No matter, the law is here to stay: Sign makers understand the law while businesses, by and large, seem content with it; some even enjoy the creative challenge unleashed by a

law that in some ways says to “go subtle”.

Going subtle with creative signage means going small or at least smaller than what’s normal regarding outdoor advertising in other states.

According to Vermont law, “On-premises signs may be erected or maintained, with a total area of not more than 150 square feet, advertising activities being conducted on the same premises. However, this limitation does not apply to signs existing on May 1, 1971, or attached to or part of the building in which the activities are being carried on. An on-premises sign shall not be located more than 1,500 feet from a main entrance from the highway to the activity or premises advertised. The 1,500-foot distance shall be measured along the centerline of the highway or highways between the sign and a main entrance. A main entrance shall be a principal, private roadway or driveway that leads from a public highway to the advertised activity. For the purposes of this subdivision, premises shall not include land



Design Signs artist Phil Seeley at work on the iconic Woodchuck Cider sign in Middlebury.

that is separated from the activity by a public highway, or other intervening land use not related to the advertised activity. Undeveloped land or farmland shall not be considered as an intervening land use.”

The legal text quoted above is an excerpt from Vermont’s sign law. To read the complete legal text see online at: <https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/10/021/00495>.

Vermont’s sign law may appear to be complicated but it is straightforward enough; in place now a half century, those involved in the making of signs understand what’s legal and what isn’t. Signmakers are in a competitive business but there’s also a feeling of “mutual admiration” that has grown among the professionals involved with the craft.

The basics of sign making involve, first, consultations with the customer about needs and desires. Next, preliminary sketches, by hand or on computer; they are always rendered when necessary.

A color mockup may be presented, and when approved by the

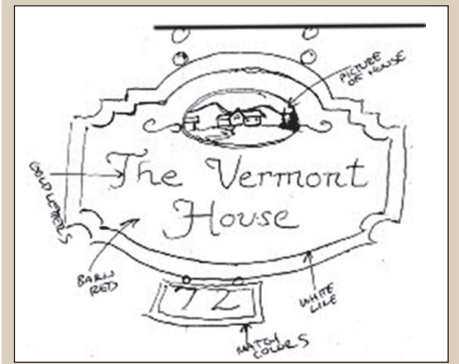
requester, work can begin on the final product.

Creating a beautiful artisan sign means working with hand and power tools as well as fine wood products that are purposed for either indoor or outdoor use. Special paints are employed, too, again determined by the sign’s purpose and placement.

Needless to say, today’s signmakers need plenty of room to create and you’ll find their workshops are busy places.

Workshops of Vermont signmakers are well-lighted places often abuzz with tools and discussion. And just like many other businesses, you might hear music being played on a dusty, portable radio. After all, music helps soothe the artist’s temper and the beast of deadlines. Many professions have a “bible”, a book which is aimed not only at the apprentice but the pro, too, providing the underlying principles and ideas of the profession.

While there’s no official “bible” for the sign making industry, one of the best unofficial, contemporary



Artist Melissa Crane of Southern Vermont Signworks shows how a sign is created from sketch to finished product.

guides is “Mastering the Art of Dimensional Signmaking” by Michael Bloomquist. Bloomquist, an award-winning signmaker from Wisconsin wrote the book in 1999. It has become an inside favorite ever since. Two Vermont signmakers we talked with cited Bloomquist’s book as a good reference for apprentices in the field.

Just as no two artists are alike, so it’s true that no two Vermont signmakers are alike. We talked with several signmakers to get a better idea of the rewards and challenges of this unique craft.

Among several Vermont’s best known sign shops is Design Signs located in Essex. Established in 1985, owner Tom Juiffre goes out of the



An illegal billboard being torn down in Vermont in 1968.



A creative mix of stone by Thea Alvin and a simple wood sign by Design Signs helped create this stunning entrance to Gardener's Supply greenhouse and café in Williston, VT.

way to come up with his remarkably creative sign solutions.

"We work 100 percent as a team from design to installation," Juiffre tells OSV. "We collaborate on solutions that will handle our climate and provide the best visual impact."

For Juiffre and his team of signmakers, creating a sign can be fast and simple or it can be complex, like Michelangelo working on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

"We work to educate the customer on each inquiry, gaining their trust in our expertise. Depending on the complexity of each project, sign lead-times can range from a day up to months," he notes.

Juiffre's work came to the attention of many Addison County residents when he unveiled the fantastic, now iconic Woodchuck Cider sign.

"Phil Seeley and James Narsh were equally responsible for the engineering and production of the Wood Chuck Cider sign, from the beginning to the end. Both were instrumental and really demonstrated our capabilities. It was a true pleasure," Says Juiffre. Many creative elements were used in the creation of this sign, giving it a distinct character. This sign had great collaboration between the customer and our Design Signs team.

Always in demand, Juiffre somehow manages all his work with a small crew--four full-time employees and two part-time craftsmen.

"There's Phil Seeley, Jim Narsh, Nicole Dileo, Andrew Magennis, John Floyd and myself," he adds. "The years of expertise are significant among these individuals, which is what makes our knowledge of solutions so robust."

Artist Hendrik Glaeser, who owns Glaeser Signs in Burlington,

says having a graphic eye can make or break a groundbreaking sign design. Glaeser started out in the sign business as a supplement to his art career as a fine arts painter.

I taught art at Burlington College from 1979 to 1994," he says. "During that time in 1984 I received a grant from the Pollack-Krasner foundation to paint for six months."

So, it helps to be an artist in the sign making trade.



Design Signs craftsmen James Narsh and Phil Seeley take a break after erecting the Woodchuck Cider sign in Middlebury.

"If we get to design a sign, it's my effort," Glaeser says. "I'm a trained graphic design person, with a BFA degree in graphic design and advertising from Syracuse University. However, most of our work is carrying out the technical end of a developer's or designer's layout guidelines. On our website, you'll see the sign for Olde Orchard Park pays homage to another era when the apartment complex it showcases was a rambling orchard from Route 7 down to the water's edge of Lake Champlain. We designed and built that in 2006."

From customer inquiry to finished sign, there's more involved than meets the eye, according to Glaeser. "The process varies depending on the scope of the project," he notes. "I think customers are usually considerate and seldom micromanage us. I encourage customer participation especially if we're designing their sign. It makes them appreciate the results, that much more."

"When I design a project, I ask for feedback from the customer through a number of generations of design and response exchanges: that was the case for the Shelburne Square (on Shelburne Road in South Burlington) directory sign, and the Midd South Plaza sign in Middlebury, all projects for local developer Bill Townesend."

Glaeser also says good signs never really grow old.

"Some of my earliest efforts are still being used," he adds. "We carved the Blair Park signs in 1983. They're made of Honduran mahogany panels. They've been rehatted a number of times over the years but they're still there. The signature sign for the Kwiniaska Golf Club, I believe, is still being used. That's also from 1983. And the Three Cathedral Square sign is still up from 1987."

Signs are all about image, as both Juiffre and Glaeser seem to concur.

"I think businesses in Vermont are more conscious of the image they project," according to Glaeser. "To me it's a no brainer. It's preferable to look at something attractive on the side of the road. There are more people that are self-employed. Maybe there is a larger percentage of people with good taste. Maybe there's a greater percentage of creative visual arts oriented people in this state."

If you visit the Burlington International Airport, check out the Hudson News kiosk. In 2014, the news distribution firm hired Glaeser to design a special Vermont identity panel visible only at the airport. "It's the four seasons of



Downtown Burlington's Burton signage, created by Hendrik Glaeser of Glaeser Signs, is a familiar site to residents and visitors alike.

Vermont in a simpler time," he says.

Artist Melissa Crane of Southern Vermont Signworks in Manchester Center, along with her family members, loves to share her personal signmaking story; her cottage-like design studio is open to curious visitors, an unusual thing among busy signmakers.

"I love the beauty of Vermont and love to make beautiful signs," Crane says. "We get visitors from everywhere here in southern Vermont and to give others a little piece of Vermont to remember forever makes this business all the more rewarding. As long as there are homes and businesses that need unique, high-quality handcrafted signs, we'll be on the job. We have been at it since 1993 and plan on continuing for a long time to come. Stop on by and see the process up close."

While commercial billboards are illegal in Vermont, local artisans have, instead, created a better way to "advertise" outdoors by having created a unique cottage industry where personal vision, individual craftsmanship and dedication-to-quality now make the Green Mountain State a true visual standout among the New England states.



A Blackfork Towing crane is often used to help place heavy signs in place.

Photo credits: Vermont Historical Society, Design Signs, Southern Vermont Signworks and Glaeser Signs