

Interview:

David Showalter Bryan, Ohio



Bryan, Ohio, is a community of about 9,000 people near the northwest border of the state. It is a rural town, supported primarily by agriculture as well as local industry. David Showalter is a 35 year old sign artist who works out of Bryan, serving it and the surrounding towns.

David works alone in his 24 by 30 shop. His work includes all types of commercial signs plus some display work. Having operated his own business in a small town for eight years, David qualifies as "small town sign artist."

SC: *You described your area as sort of conservative. How do your customers react to your work?*

David: I have a lot of satisfied customers and a lot of repeat work. Even though I am in a small conservative area, I can still do fresh clean designs and get a decent price. Most of my prices are based on the Signwriter's Guide. I think it's fair for myself and the customer.

I feel when you bid low to get

every job, you run the risk of feeling the job is not worth putting much thought into the design, and I think design is important.

When people are shopping for price, I lose some jobs. I pride myself on being honest and up front with my customers. I also feel being on time with the completed work is very important. I agree with Mike Jackson (See Mar/Apr 1985 issue).

SC: *How did you get started?*

David: I was painting houses, and did this fellow's house that was next to a sign shop. I walked over and told the folks that I'd like to learn to paint signs. Of course, they almost slammed the door in my face!

I went back and told the story to Howard Lawrence, the fellow whose house I was painting. As it turned out, he was a retired sign man. He said if I wanted to learn, he'd be glad to help. It was fantastic!

Howard is very particular. We

spent hours making patterns. It was frustrating sometimes at first, but it really paid off. I just kept scratching it out and finally got to where I could do a decent sign. I started in 1976 and more or less set up shop in the summer of 1977.

I'm now as particular as Howard, I think. It helps to be your own worst critic. I've noticed it especially in the last two years. When I look back at parts of some of that early work, I'm glad it's gone!

SC: *Did you jump right into the business fulltime?*

David: No, I worked part time at another job for about six months. By early spring of '78, I was busy full time with sign work. It was kind of hard the first few winters, because people don't think about signs during the winter. Now I have built some accounts that keep me busy during the winter, and that smooths things out.

SC: *What type of work is that?*

David: It's mostly display work for a few corporations that are headquartered in our area — Spangler Candy Co., Ohio Art Co., and so on. I do their trade show displays and a few other projects.

SC: *What do you think about selling design in a small town . . . It is possible, right?*

David: Definitely. I think you really have to want to do it, though. I could just concentrate on getting things out as fast as possible, and probably do just as well financially. But I want to do better work, and I enjoy my work this way. I've got to look at these signs all the time! That's another thing about small towns.

SC: *What problems do you think you have in a small town that you wouldn't encounter in a big city?*

David: Well, first of all, we don't



Black letters outlined in white on grey panel with dark green and brown graphics



White letters on dark brown and imitation gold background



David sent this alphabet as his Christmas card last year. Inside of which were made up of the alphabet. Printed red and

it said "Ho, Ho, Ho!" in bold block letters, the strokes green on white, the card was attractive and unique.

have the same volume as a big city. There just aren't as many signs in a small town. The second thing is price. I feel I could be making more in a larger city.

I also realize that I am cut off from other sign people. It's not like I have had the opportunity to work with other sign artists. There are only about three shops in my area.

I like to visit other sign shops and be in touch with other sign people. I learn so much that way! It's the same way with the magazine. If I see

someone's work that really hits me, or if I have a question about how someone did a certain sign, I just pick up the phone and give them a call.

SC: How about promoting your business in a small town?

David: I sign every bit of my work. It really pays off for me — people notice it. In fact, I have customers ask me now, "Will you sign this when you're done?" I put my little bug on everything. I used to advertise occasionally in the classified section of the local newspaper but don't

any more. I just have a bold listing in the phone book.

SC: Do you have any particular influences in your work?

David: The biggest influence on my work has been the Letterheads. I've gotten so many ideas from the conventions I've been to. "It's great to rub elbows with some of the best in the sign business". The Mike Steven's Journal is excellent and taught me a lot. I refer to it often.

It's very obvious to see from my work that I am influenced by many

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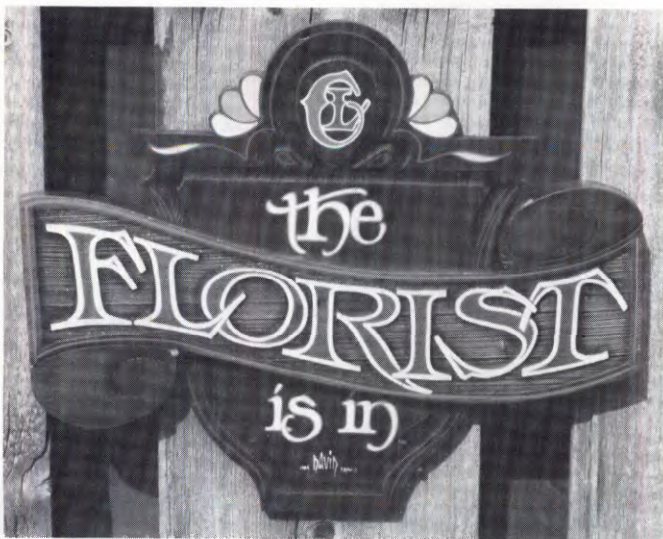




Ivory and dark green on sandblasted panel.



White with light blue outline on sandblasted panel. Blue monochromatic flowers.



White, shades of blue on medium brown sandblasted panel



White, imitation gold on dark brown panel.



Imitation gold, shades of purple and black on white panel.



Dark brown letters on white panel. Orange and brown stripes.



Dark brown, imitation gold on white panel



Green, dark brown on white panel, dark brown outline, white numbers

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putting much thought into the design.***

different sign artists. I like variety. That's why I love the business. It's enjoyable to learn new techniques along with the old. I'm learning every

day. Most of the signs I have in my portfolio can be traced back to a customer who said, "Just do something nice." And, those signs

bring more customers who say, "Do mine as nice as the one you did for so-and-so."

