

Profile:

Jon Harl

Cypress, California



6'-by-15' banner. "The panel copies the end of the 'Hot Dog' letter style," says John.



4'-by-10', 1/2" overlaid plywood. "When I got the copy on this one, I almost fainted. Two different messages with English and German — plus an arrow."

Ask Jon Harl how big his shop is, and he'll tell you, "1367 *small* square feet — and it looked like the Carlsbad Caverns when we first walked in here." Since moving in to this shop two years ago, Adcraft Signs has already outgrown it.

Most of the work at Adcraft is banners, so Jon was having an unusual day when *SignCraft* talked with him — there were three wall signs and some plywood signs to do. "In fact," says Jon, "I think we've only done one wall sign all year, and now we have three in the works at the same time!"

Most of Jon's recent banner work has come from his regular customers. He's getting ready to do a direct mailing to about 4000 area businesses in hopes of drumming up some new customers. "I did a mailing like this when I first started Adcraft," Jon remembers. "It worked out real well. You can expect a one or two percent return on direct mail, so if you pitch enough businesses, things usually work out pretty good."

"Southern California is a conglomeration of cities — you drive five minutes in any direction and you're in another city. It's almost one big continuous city. I'm in Cypress, and that's pretty close to Long Beach and Buena Park. We choose the people we mail to by zip code — there's no point in market-

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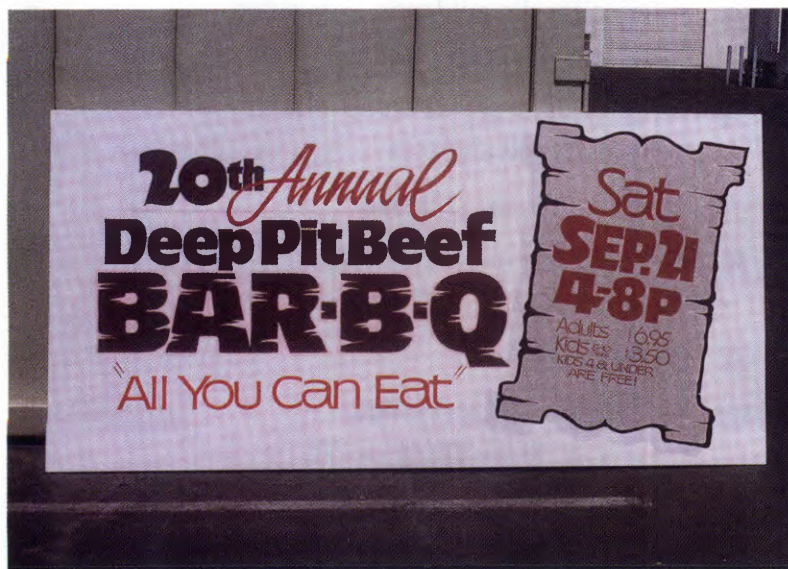
ing yourself to businesses so far away that they won't want to drive to you. There are 700-and-some-odd sign shops right here in Orange County, so a business person doesn't have to go too far to find one." [Laughter]

Jon found his way into the sign trade via the produce business.

After working a few years in a grocery market, Jon went to work for the sign painter who painted paper signs in the market. "His trade always interested me because he seemed to have a nice job and loose hours. I had been hammering away in the produce business hours upon hours each day, so I got

myself a roll of paper and some cruddy old brushes [laughing], and started painting paper signs for the other grocers I knew in the area." That was in 1982. A year later Jon enrolled in the sign graphics program at L.A. Trade Technical College.

From there, Jon went on to work



4'-by-8', 1/2" overlaid plywood. "The background is off-white. I got the panel from a Mike Stevens showcard."



4'-by-4' overlaid plywood. "This seems to be everyone's favorite, including myself. It's plain, clean, and easy to read."



3'-by-6' quickie. "That's my adaptation of the Nueland typeface."



Customer logo; 3'-by-4' A-frame.

at ABC signs in Long Beach. After that came Jon Harl Signs and 300 or 400 paper banners each week for grocery markets around southern California. Then two years ago, Jon and Lyle Young started Adcraft Signs. (Lyle has since struck out on his own, targeting the custom sign market. — Eds.)

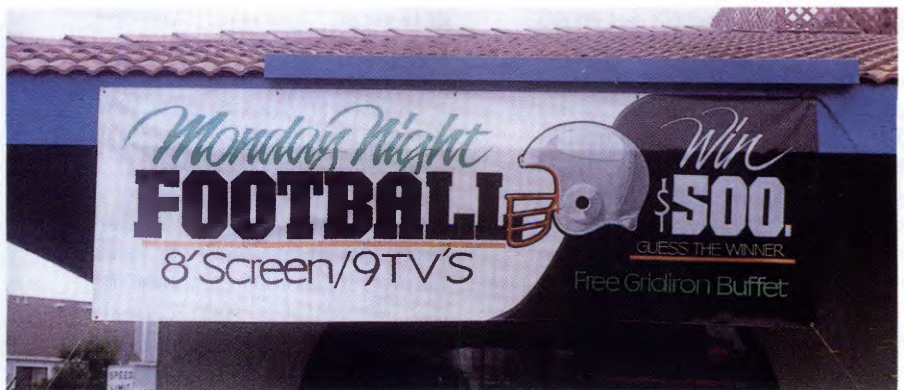
Jon now operates Adcraft Signs with the help of one full-time employee, Ruben Soria, who just graduated from L.A. Trade Tech. Jon's wife, Gwen, comes in twice a month to keep the shop's books in order. "In a small shop like ours, that's not an overbearing amount of work. My father-in-law is an accountant, and he's a big help in that area, too."

There is no graphic computer on the bench at Adcraft Signs, and Jon doesn't plan to add one. "Some people may think I'm back in the Stone Age, but I'm going to stick with hand lettering. I think there's a place for the graphic computer in the sign industry, and it seems to have its own niche in the market. But I really enjoy lettering by hand, and I intend to continue working that way. That's what I was trained to do, and that's what I like to do."

The shop rate at Adcraft is \$50 an hour. Jon tries to use the *Signwriter's Guide to Easier Pricing* as a basis for most of his pricing. He turns out an incredibly high volume of banners, and considers them his one "red tag" item. Costs are cut by buying banner material in bulk and sewing them right in the shop.

Jon considers Lane Walker, Terry Wells, and the late Mike Stevens his biggest design influences. "Lane's way out there," says Jon, laughing. "I really enjoy his work and his friendship. We're always sending sign pictures back and forth to each other. But there's a whole slew of sign painters out there who are really good. Like Cosmic Ray, in your September [Sep/Oct 1991] issue — he's outrageous!"

Sandblasted redwood signs are



4'-by-15' banner. "Monday Night and 8' Screen/9 TV's were single stroked with large No. 24 and No. 30 Cosmos brown quills. Ruben Soria painted the helmet."



3'-by-15' banner. "Plain and quick."



"This is my truck, really the first truck I'd ever done. Lane Walker did the design; Lyle Young and I lettered it."

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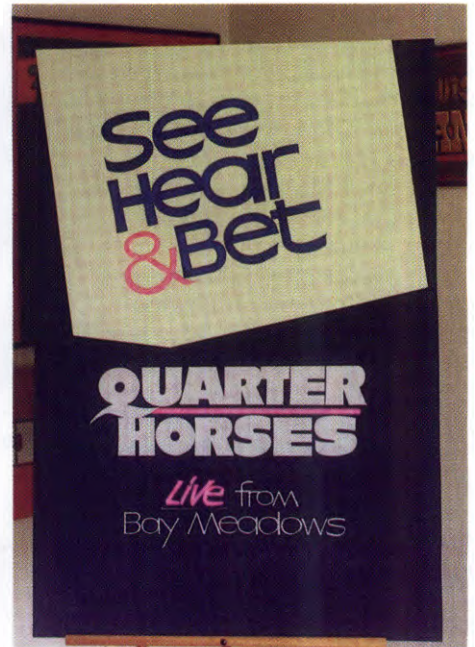
something Jon doesn't get to do very often, but he really enjoys making them. He plans to put a few sandblasted signs on display in his showroom and start marketing them more. "I like the banner business an awful lot, and I don't know whether the two kinds of work will fit together very well or not. But we'll find out."

Jon believes design is what sets a sign shop apart. He feels that getting established in your market is difficult — but is easier if you have something out of the ordinary to offer. "Mike Stevens said that the difference between an average letterer and a good letterer is small, while the difference between an average designer and a good design-

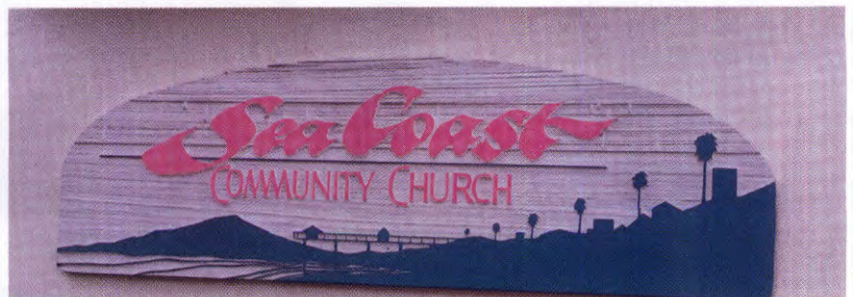
er is great," Jon says. "Anyone starting out in this trade should concentrate on design — it's all learnable. If you can offer better design, you'll attract better customers."

"Remember to keep it fun. Don't get all caught up in the problems of the business — even though it isn't an easy one. It's not like you just open your shop and the customers beat a path to your door. Building confidence in customers is very difficult, but once you've done that, you've really got something." □

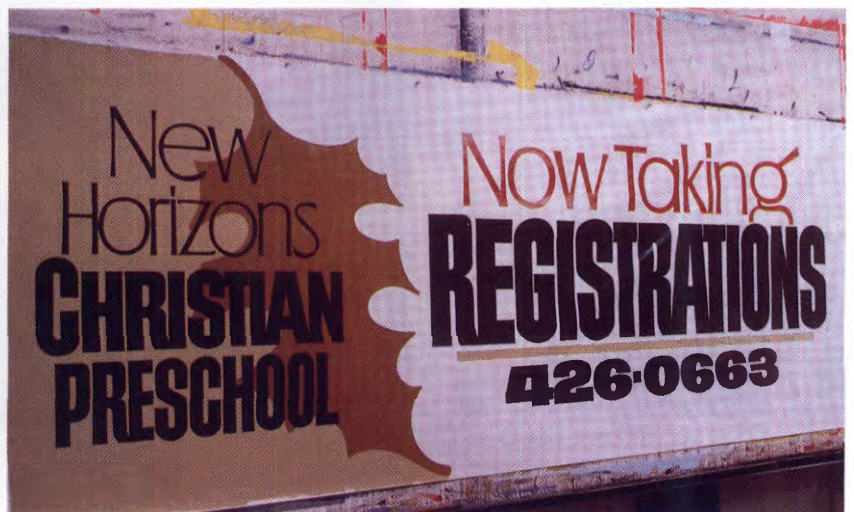
28"-by-44". Seafoam green with midnight blue. "The off-center arrow creates interest."



4'-by-8'. "The word Apartments could have been heavier. The background is off-white. (I like that — it makes the colors 'jump'.)"



38"-by-9'6" sandblasted sign. "Design by Lane Walker; the customer specified the colors."



4'-by-15' banner. "The leaf is a little bit too dark, but I like the idea."