

THE BEGINNINGS OF A MOVEMENT

by Mark Oatis

The "birth" of the Letterheads took place during the winter months of 1974-75. Bob Mitchell, Mike Rielley and I were then union apprentices, attending weekly classes together.

One night, Mike Rielley suggested that we meet after school to pay a visit to a signshop he'd discovered. It turned out to be Rustic Sign Studio.

Arriving about 10:00 p.m., we found Rick Flores putting a finish coat on some sandblasted signs. To say the least, our awe-struck enthusiasm and Rick's friendliness proved a good combination that very night.

We ended up, hours later, eating green chili and drinking beer at Bob's house. When I finally got to bed, my mind was swimming with designs and ideas. I was too excited to sleep. (Maybe the chili had something to do with it, too.)

Soon after, Rick joined our classes and the "after school" meetings

became routine. Earl Vehill, himself a graduate and journeyman, and a friend of Rick's, often joined us in our rambles . . . usually to a local watering hole or some other refuge featuring strictly "wholesome entertainment."

Late in 1975, I went to work at Rick's shop, and our gatherings began to include more signpainters and were held on nights other than after-school. The year of 1976 was the high point of those early years. We began to meet regularly, or at least bi-monthly, often inviting guest artists. Noel Weber became involved, bringing along with him, Larry Albaugh.

Rick's trip that year to Chicago and the National Hotel and Restaurant show prompted new and more experimental work, which, in turn, inspired more projects. Lakewood Sign Co. began to blossom with Letterhead-inspired designs.

We began searching out and collect-



J.L. Frazier/1980

AN EX-ROOKIE WARNS "WHAT TO EXPECT..."

To the editor:

You've given considerable coverage to Letterheads over the years. With the Denver extravaganza just around the corner, I think the time is ripe for you to offer equal time to the not-so-glamorous side of the movement.

Signwriters who've never attended one of these meetings need to be alerted to the potential dangers to their mental and physical well-being. Call this what you will — A Rookie's Primer or Attending A Letterheads Meeting Safely — but print it you must.

Having returned recently from my first bash in Naples (believe me, after what Knecht and friends did to me, two months ago is recently), I can provide a fairly accurate warning for future first-timers.

Consider my expectations: lots of sun; short days and long nights; dangerous amounts of free time, alcohol and irresponsibility; a couple new acquaintances; a tip or two, and a few lingering memories to take home.

Little remains of those expectations. Four 16-hour days made a shambles of them. (I went down two days early on the advice of some masochistic vets I'd never met.) Forget the carving projects I did. How about pinstriping motorcycles (I've never done either), decorating windows (never), learning showcard layout (nope), or lettering and otherwise defacing anything with wheels?

Listen. These guys don't sleep. I ran out of tape for my new Wonder Mini-Pocket Cassette Recorder. 35mm film, too. I even tried absorbing, recording or writing down anything and everything that seemed useful. In less than two days, burn-out had a new definition.

Sound dangerous? It gets worse. Back at my shop, I tried to reconcile my new techniques with my old clock. It seems even Letterheads can't create more than 24 hours in a day. I've got new carving tools to get used to (you'll pay for this, Yaxley), and my wife Ann won't let me near our station wagon any more. (She heard Mark Klein had given me a

striping sword to try out.)

Yes, I'm dangerous, and not just to the station wagon. Now that I've been to a Letterheads gathering, God help any vacationing signwriters who stop by my shop. "Good heavens, Jay," my art director said the other day, "he just wanted to say hi and see the shop!" Rick's right; I'm out of control.

My wife agrees. She got the prints back, along with the \$615 invoice. "The pictures are great," she said, matching faces with tales, "so why the new camera?"

"Because," I pleaded, "things happen so fast at these things that I'm helpless unless I get a motor drive. And the new flash unit cycles so much faster . . ."

This is not good. Our normally good communications have been nosediving ever since Naples. How does anyone answer THE question after your first Letterheads bash — "How was it, honey?"

How can one possibly describe an immediate camaraderie with over 100 professionals you've never met? Or a head full of new techniques and the courage to try them all? Or the sense of place in your profession? I tell you, this Letterhead thing is even dangerous to the basic family unit.

Fortunately, we have a good marriage. We dealt calmly with this crisis and settled on a realistic solution — we'd *both* go to a Letterheads meeting so she could ask other people who couldn't answer THE question.

Am I going to Denver? I doubt it — even with one under my belt, it may be too dangerous. And besides, I've got these trucks to letter, and there's this window I took on, and I have to keep working on this Vermont Letterheads Bash . . .

Yours truly,
Jay Cooke

Ex-Rookie, I.O.A.F.S.

Jay Cooke attended his first Letterhead meeting last March at the Signs & Things-hosted gathering in Naples, FL. He owns and operates a signshop in Stowe, VT and is a past winner in ST's Commercial Design Contest.

ing every modern and antique resource for design we could find. Among these were Rick's photos of his trip to Houston, where he met the Raiford Brothers. The year 1976, overall, saw many creative "seeds" planted and careers launched. Sometime during the year, the "Letterheads" name was coined.

The year 1977 brought more memorable meetings and events, though changes in partnerships, family problems and time limitations seemed to take their toll. Regular large meetings were less frequent, and a pattern of informal study sessions and chance (and always fun) encounters became the status quo for the next four years. New techniques were learned and shared; books bought, sold and traded; friends made and introduced.

In one year's time, Noel, Bob and Mike all moved away from Denver. The movement seemed to slow down. People were spread out, and meetings were relatively non-existent. Then, in the July, 1980 issue, *Signs of the Times* featured the Letterheads as a result of the exposure that some of the members had received through the Commercial Sign Design Contest.

By the time that Keith Knecht arrived a year later to do the *Signcraft* article (and become the first "initiated" Letterhead), curiosity was piqued. An interest and enthusiasm had begun to grow. The rest is history, as they say.

My feeling is that our movement will continue to grow and move forward provided the following happens:

- 1) That all concerned remember that this "club" was started by apprentices, and that the enthusiasm and contributions of new, often less experienced members are its life blood.

- 2) That the key word to remember at a meeting is participation. Bring something to show, trade or demonstrate. . . or at least, bring your kit and

continued on page 134

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BEGINNINGS

continued from page 73

be prepared to get your hands "dirty." It's impossible to learn anything from a chair positioned over in the corner.

3) Leave your ego at the door. Our clients should believe that we're "the best," but we know better. People who waste time trying to convince others of their genius stop growing.

4) Finally, it's important that a formal organization — with officers, dues, etc. — is never made of the Letterheads. As long as things remain somewhat spontaneous, dependent upon individual effort and participation, things will remain fun. Give it a president and collect dues, and it becomes an establishment to rebel against. . . and sign artists are a typically rebellious lot, anyway.

— Mark Oatis
I.O.A.F.S.

Mark Oatis' work has appeared in *Signs of the Times* numerous times, most recently in the October, 1984 special issue on goldleaf (see "Through the gilded glass, a sign fantasy" by Carl Rohrs). Mark still resides in Denver and just recently, re-established his own shop.

Rick Flores, the host of the earliest Letterhead meetings, has been working with Earl Vehill under the name AV Sign Studio, in addition to freelancing. Rick aka Papa Smurf is chairman of A Denver Exchange.

Noel Weber's work has also appeared in *ST* numerous times, again most recently in the October issue where he demonstrated his gilding techniques. Noel still resides in Boise, ID, where he hosted the first out-of-state Letterhead gathering (see *ST*, July, 1982 issue, page 136).

Mike Rielley, most recently of Amarillo, TX, where he operated Tanglewood Graphics, is currently back in Denver as a pictorial painter for Denver Exchange host, Gannett Outdoor.

There's still time to register for the Letterheads' national gathering — A Denver Exchange — set for Memorial Day weekend this month. Call (303) 935-3659 (days) or (303) 458-6810 (evenings) for details.

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