

# We tell the WORLD

\* WORDS Michael Bogle

Sydney signwriting and decorating firm Althouse & Geiger was begun in 1875 by two American immigrants from Pennsylvania. The Library's collection offers glimpses of the company that once boasted, 'We tell the world everything it wants to know'.

Arriving in Sydney from the United States in 1875, John Althouse and FA Geiger quickly found work with painter and decorator JA Kean. Kean was a major figure in Sydney's temperance movement and became a founder of the Master Painters Association in 1889.

Within a year of beginning work with their abstemious employer, Althouse & Geiger established their partnership as signwriters, painters and decorators to the trade. Like many artisans in the city's competitive market, they were able to supply a wide range of services including the arcane science of silvering mirrors.

Althouse had worked in graining and marbling in Philadelphia, where Geiger had apprenticed. Little is known of their family backgrounds, but when Geiger came to Sydney he took classes in drawing and painting with the Sydney Art Society. Paintings signed by FA Geiger have been noted in auction records, including an oil portrait of Sir Henry Parkes dated 1916.

Advertisements for signwriting in the *Sydney Morning Herald* since the late nineteenth century reveal that practitioners worked across a number of other trades such as traditional painting, gilding on glass, wallpapering and decorative painting such as *faux* wood-graining. While Althouse & Geiger and their highly trained craftspeople supplied general house painting and the traditional trades, they possessed considerable skill in decorative and banner painting.

The firm quickly developed an enviable reputation in trade and commemoration banners, including painted textile banners for parades supporting the 1885 Irish National League march for St Patrick's Day, the 1901 Federation celebrations, the '8 Hour Day' and the Seamen's Union.

'We were privileged on Thursday evening to have a peep at the handsome new banner,' reported a March 1885 edition of the *Freeman's Journal*, 'to be carried in the procession of the Irish National League and the Hibernian Society on St Patrick's Day ... The banner in all its glory of green and gold presented a ... gorgeous appearance.'

By 1908, Althouse & Geiger were promoting themselves as sign and banner painters and exhibited regularly at the Painters and Decorators Trades Exhibition at Sydney Town Hall. The company prospered. After FA Geiger died in 1921, leaving two daughters, John Althouse's son Jack purchased Geiger's share of the business. Jack's son Fred later entered the firm but he was the last of the original families. Althouse & Geiger had kept a city building for many years, first in George Street, then shifting to Liverpool Street before settling in Sussex Street and finally to 190 Parramatta Road, Camperdown.

OPPOSITE: HOYTS PLAZA CINEMA, BUILDING SIGNAGE, GEORGE ST, SYDNEY, 17 APRIL 1930, EB STUDIO, ALTHOUSE & GEIGER ALBUM PXE 1514 / BOX 1







There are two Althouse & Geiger trade union banners in the State Library's collection, one promoting the Federated Society of Boilermakers and the other the Blacksmiths' Society of Australasia. The Boilermakers' banner appeared in the 2010 exhibition *ONE hundred*, celebrating the Mitchell Library centenary. The banner's display drew Jennifer Sims, the wife of Mr Leonard (Len) Sims, one of Althouse & Geiger's later managers, into the exhibition where she met Senior Curator (now Emeritus Curator) Paul Brunton and generously offered her family's Althouse & Geiger archive to the State Library of NSW.

The late Mr Sims joined Althouse & Geiger in 1954 when the trade was learned through technical college training and apprenticeships. The Library's collection contains several indenture agreements showing that an Althouse & Geiger apprenticeship in the 1920s required five years of on-the-job training at a beginning salary of 13 shillings a week, concluding

in year 5 with 53 shillings, 3 pence. An apprentice painter was exposed to a bewildering range of trade practices from house painting to burial vault repairs.

In 1985, Leonard Sims became the Althouse & Geiger director in the absence of interested heirs. Sims acted as the firm's unofficial historian, writing speeches and historical summaries, and collecting photographs and memorabilia. The company's work came to include such diverse items as Royal Agricultural Show prize ribbons (sold through Anthony Hordern's department store), hand-painted in-store cards (Sale! Discount! Bargain!) and stencil-printed felt banners for lifesaving clubs and schools. In the new era of the motorcar, trade vehicle designs (for panel vans, sedans and lorries) replaced processional banners, with vehicle painting awards given annually at the Sydney Motor Show. Althouse & Geiger also produced banners for carnival sideshows including 'Jimmy Sharman's Touring Stadium' and his famous boxing troupe.

Few things excited the profession and the trade journal *The Decorator and Painter* more than BIG signs. Althouse & Geiger were responsible for memorable pictorial signage painted over the walls of city buildings up to five storeys high, most now lost through demolition. They also produced large hand-painted billboards advertising motorcars (Hudson and Essex models) that once graced the Oxford Street walls of the Victoria Barracks in Paddington. The scale of this signage required first-rate talent, and Archibald Prize winners William Dobell and Henry Hanke picked up the painter's maulstick for Althouse & Geiger. The archive preserves several photographs of a large over-awning 1963 mural of a portrait of Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra for the Mayfair Cinema in Castlereagh Street.

Signwriters had no doubt of their creative worth. 'Sometimes I think Sydney must be the world's best sign-written city,' asserts a 1965 handwritten letter in the archive from the late signwriter Walter Tarr. 'To the public, Sydney is just one shop after another but to an observant [sign]-writer, it is an art gallery ... We tell the world everything it wants to know.'

As the twentieth century advanced, Len Sims often complained that much of Althouse & Geiger's work came from advertising agencies and design shops. Although he directed the firm through illuminated signage, automated displays and fluorescent lighting, Jennifer Sims says her late husband was not fond of change. As a highly trained artisan with decades of experience, he could not embrace computers, graphics software and the now ubiquitous signage franchises.

Following a 1999 Lawsons auction of pub signs and ephemera by Althouse & Geiger, Jennifer Sims says Len gave the business to Max Henderson, a Gladesville painter, who was an office holder in the Master Painters Australia (NSW) organisation. Mr Henderson in turn passed Althouse & Geiger on to the Klimczyk family of Baulkham Hills. Len Sims might smile to know that the historic firm lives on as [althousegeiger.com.au](http://althousegeiger.com.au).

**Michael Bogle is a historian working in the field of design and architecture.**

**An album from the Althouse & Geiger collection is on display in the Amaze Gallery.**

OPPOSITE: ALTHOUSE & GEIGER ILLUSTRATIONS IN ALBUM, C. 1945-59, PXA 1514 / BOX 2

RIGHT FROM TOP: OSRAM BUILDING SIGNAGE, C. 1937-50, KENT ST, PHOTO C. 1964-70: INTERIOR OF STUDIO SHOWING SIGNWRITERS AT WORK WITH BRUSHES AND MAULSTICKS, C. 1940, PHIL WARD COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHER; SIGNAGE ON PANEL VAN OUTSIDE ALTHOUSE & GEIGER BUILDING IN CAMPERDOWN, C. 1978, PXA 1514 / BOX 3

