

Last week my wife and I went over to the bookstore to catch some folk music. Somehow, I got sidetracked before the music got underway and picked up a couple books of illustrations and color photos of old warplanes. You're wondering what old airplanes have to do with signs, right? Well, hang on. Let me explain.

I couldn't help notice the hand-painted and sprayed paint jobs of these war birds. They were beautiful. I started to daydream a little about those people who were responsible for these masterpieces, and all the thought and pride that went into each plane. It must have been a romantic time when graphic artists used their creative skills to create such graphics not only on planes, but in ads, newspapers, signs, home decorations, and many other applications.

I have a few old tin signs and other memorabilia of days gone by, including a cover from an early 1960s Chicago Cubs baseball program. Looking it over, one can tell the original art was done by hand. With a close inspection of those tin signs, one can see they were drawn out and the stencil cut by hand! Looking at photos of signs from the past, it seems that those sign pioneers must have had lots of time to complete those jobs, or they were very fast and proficient at their trade.

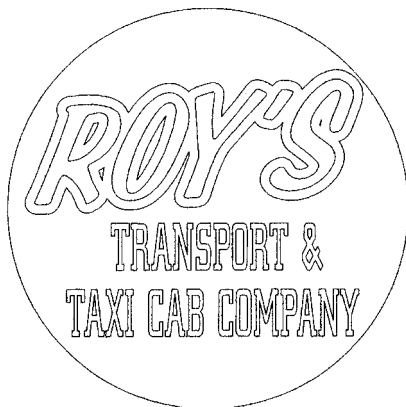
Sitting here, I'm wondering why I have these on my walls in my home. I guess it's because they look good and remind me of times when life was simpler and slower. I don't know why others like to collect and display antiques, but for me it's a link to the hand-crafted part of life.

Today the commercial sign

Adding character and readability to layouts

industry seems to gravitate to quick and quicker. With current advances in technology, the sign computers help us to effectively generate modern graphics. This is all well and good, but with this medium comes a certain look of perfection or "stiffness" in our finished products.

After talking to a few good friends of mine in the sign industry, we all agree the general look around town has gotten very sterile and too perfect lately. So much so, that when you spot something like that old war bird, it really jumps right out and hits you between the eyes. I would have



Bob Behounek: Adding character and readability to layouts

to say you *want* to look at it.

It's obvious we can't live in the past by using antique machines or tools, but I really feel a need to create our signage to look like it was done for humans by humans. I sat down the other day and sketched out some common examples of what could have happened with some hypothetical sign jobs. Please excuse me if I use some extremes, but some of the signage I've seen lately has reflected this perfect, printed typographical appearance.

A few months ago during our stormy season, we lost all power at the shop. The two generators we had were used to keep the phones working. This day was going to be special. One 8-by-16-ft. billboard and a cargo van needed to be completed within those eight hours. A snapline, some chalk,

paint, a paper pattern hand pounced with a wheel, and voila—both jobs were complete! I don't know how you would have felt, but we were on a sign painter's high for a few days after this.

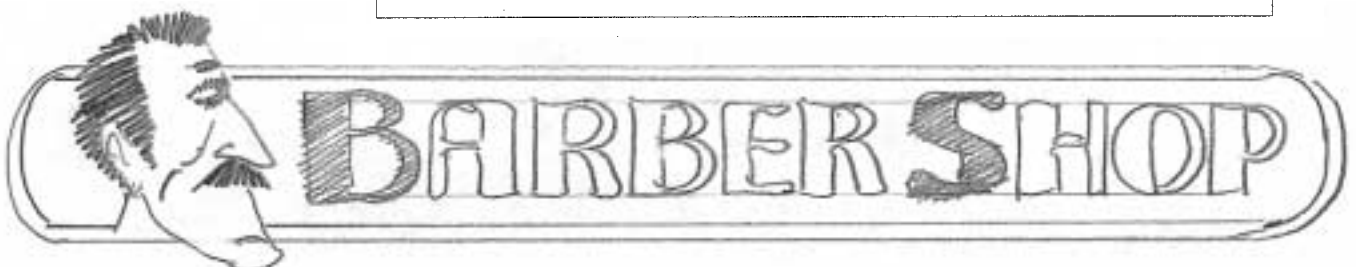
Let's look over these sketches, and I will walk you through the thought process behind the layouts. Keep in mind that these five original designs work and look good as advertisements, but with a little help from a pencil and a few sheets of paper, they have the potential to be even better.

Poor old **Roy's Taxi Cab Company** must have had some buttons or pins made up somewhere with all the copy within the confines of the circle. Notice what the letters that protrude outside of the sign do—they direct your eye into

the design and message. For some reason, squares used up the open area inside the circle—a taxi cab motif if you will.

New Cicero Sign Works is a tough one. I can see what was trying to happen—an old-appearing sign with dated type. Yeah, that works, too. The words *Cicero Sign* are the biggest and that's good. I would have liked to make the word *Sign* the biggest, but instead, a palette, brush, and mahlstick would graphically send the message along with another hand-done typeface. So it was back to that magical '30s-'40s book again. It's still a bit hard to read, but it fits the era better.

The **Barber Shop** sign kind of puts me to sleep. The copy is



jammed into the space and allows very little breathing room. Dumping the overused Souvenir style and digging deep into an old 1930s to 1940s font book, I pulled out this style for a hand-drawn look. The graphic of the face helps our eye enter the ad from the upper left.

Benny's had good contrast between typestyles, but *Used Cars* was a bit jammed and hard to read. By enlarging the "B", our eye has a focal point to draw our attention into the message. *Used Cars* was stacked in a colored panel for easier readability. *Cars* could be made a bit bigger so you read *Benny's Cars* at first glance.

Ashland Transmission had the right idea by giving some

emphasis to the word *Transmission*. However, that typestyle was hard to read with all the curlicues. Leaving the left and right words the same helps the sign to read *Ashland Repair*. With a large italicized *Transmission* stylized type set in an arrowed panel, it helps direct all eyes toward what this shop repairs.

These examples were rough at best, but I hope you can see the difference between the "before and after" layouts. Try sketching your own alternatives to these five signs and see how you can improve on

the hand-done look. Right now, I'm heading back to the bookstore for some books on old signs!□



Bob Behounek is a sign artist/designer at Van Bruggen Signs in Orland Park, Illinois. His book, *Trucks*, is available from SignCraft.

To order, use the order form bound into this issue, or send \$18 plus \$5 shipping and handling to SignCraft, PO Box 60031, Ft. Myers, FL 33906.

