

What started out as a simple idea now provides this sign maker with 75% of his income

Making antique wood signs

by Dennis Gerathy



17-by-29-in. with mounted canoe



20-by-30-in.

“Imagination is more important than knowledge.” So reads the little plaque above my desk. I keep it there as a daily reminder that the human mind is a storehouse of unlimited ideas.

I can't believe that I have been making my old-fashioned wood signs for almost six years now. I have arrived at one very definite conclusion: a great many people maintain an ongoing love affair with the past.

What started out as a simple idea in February, 1992, now provides me with 75% of my income, and I believe I have only touched the tip of the iceberg.

The chemistry at work here combines three entities: my deep love for hand lettering, my intense desire to utilize my creativity, and my fabulous memories of my years as a kid.

I can visualize at will all those wonderful signs I saw on the way to northern Michigan for summer vacation—cottages for sale, cabins for rent, bait and tackle, hunting camps, night crawlers, minnows, groceries, boats to rent, etc. It's all stored right here in my memory bank. I only need an old board and my imagination to bring them to life.

I do about ten of the best craft shows in the country, and my booth is always busy. Believe me when I say that the compliments mean more to me than the checks. The money is

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quickly spent but the wonderful things people say about my work stays in my heart for good. I save every thank-you note or card that people send me as a confirmation that dreams do come true.

Rewards of being a sign painter

One lady recently called me to say that she had seen my work at a show. She wondered if I could incorporate an old picture into a sign. I was pleased to do it. It was an old black-and-white 8-by-10 of her father-in-law who had played football at a local high school. I put the picture in an old frame, painted the sign in the school colors with varsity-style lettering, and mounted the picture next to it. I shipped it to her and when she sent the check, she enclosed a note saying that her husband would have tears in his eyes when he saw the sign. For me, this is what being a sign painter is all about.

I remember how I used to draw and color for hours when I was a little boy. My mother knew that the way to my heart was a new coloring book and crayons, or a set of watercolors. The deepest wish in my heart

was that someday the things I painted would be so good that people would want to buy them. Now here I am so busy that I can hardly keep up.

My wife, Sylvia, has been wonderfully patient and tolerant of my long hours because she knows how much I love my work. I would not be where I am today without her encouragement and support, and I tell her that often.

The Letterheads meets have also been a tremendous source of inspiration to me since I attended my first one in 1985. Over the years, I had nearly become lost in my own little world and had no idea how many wonderful, talented people there are in the world. I make a concentrated effort to attend at least two or three meets a year, and always return home motivated and inspired.



18-by-34-in.



16-by-25-in.



16-by-28-in.

The joy of sharing

I am more than willing to share every technique, special effect, and concept that I utilize in my work with anyone who is interested. I've done several workshops because I believe that one of the greatest things you can do during the course of your lifetime is to teach others how to do something that will be a benefit to them. I don't fret about

creating competition—I carry an inner confidence that I will always have my share of the pie. That is sufficient for me.

People not connected to the sign industry say that I shouldn't show others how I make my old wood signs. I just smile and tell them that everything I ever learned, I learned from someone else. When we want to keep our knowledge to ourselves,

we become narrow-minded, selfish, and not very focused.

Ever since I walked out of a factory in 1968 to open my own sign shop, I have felt fulfilled. I know beyond a doubt that I am living my destiny. Few people can say that. My studio is my sanctuary. It is loaded with old boards, molding, and window frames. Old metal signs and theater posters grace the walls. I put on the



16-by-28-in. with carved trout



17-by-34-in. with carved trout



40-by-15-in.

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coffee, play the music I want, and paint what I want when I want. Who has it any better?

I might get a creative rush and immediately grab just the right boards and begin to assemble them and paint the sign and see it through to completion. More often than not, I'll turn out some of my best pieces late at night.

One of the most wonderful things to take place in my career happened a couple years ago. I located my grade school art teacher, Evelyn

Kazakos, whom I had not seen in 35 years. We had lunch together and when I showed her my portfolio, she told me how proud she was of my work. We now meet for lunch about once a month and share some great conversation.

It is incredible how many opportunities await us when we start each day with a positive attitude and a passion for life itself.

Custom sign opportunities

On a recent Christmas morning,

I sat in the cozy warmth of my Victorian living room. With coffee in hand, I stared at the Christmas tree, thinking about all the people who have opened gifts that I've made. There is no greater joy than to do a special-order job or custom-made sign that someone is going to give as a gift. Having my work hanging on the walls of homes and restaurants across America is a confirmation that I have made good use of my God-given talent.

Along with the numerous signs that I create for my gallery, I also do a lot of custom pieces and special orders that provide me with great joy. I love every opportunity that people give me when they ask me to create a great-looking old cottage sign or a sign they want to present to a friend or relative.

Some of my baseball signs presently reside at Field of Dreams in the Mall of America in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I also have signs in four galleries in Michigan, two in Kentucky, and one in Indiana. I was truly honored when a young couple ordered ten special signs—one for each person in their wedding party. I decorated the Copeley Hill Lodge in Dryden, Michigan, with sixteen signs and have done two restaurants for Holiday Inn.

I encourage every sign painter to experiment a little with these old wood signs. The response you get will delight you, and you just might add a whole new dimension to your business. □

Dennis Gerathy's shop, Colonial Sign Company, is in Redford, Michigan.



Tin with wood frame, 16-by-30-in.



18-by-30-in.