

There's a growing market for signs with the look and feel of yesteryear

Step-by-step: How to make an old Western sign

by Dennis Gerathy

Ever since I was young, I have loved Western movies. It seems as if I just can't get enough of that good old rough-and-tumble, shoot-'em-up cowboy action. My personal favorites are *Tombstone* and *Silverado*. Western art and antiques are very popular right now. So, let's saddle up and ride on out to the old sign shop.

We'll rustle up some weathered boards and a few bottles of acrylic paints, and make ourselves the neatest old rodeo sign this side of the Rio Grande. And, yer old trail partner will see you through

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each step of this exciting adventure. When the dust clears, we'll have ourselves a mighty fine

masterpiece.

And, by the way, you might just as well take that computer gadget out back and bury it, cause a person would have to be plumb loco to think that he could make an old-fashioned wood sign with that dang fool contraption.

Getting started

It is important to create the perfect work atmosphere, so I put on a CD titled "Themes from Great Western Movies". I enjoy playing music that pertains directly to the project I am doing at the time. Music is a great inspiration for me.

Three slats from an old shed door provide the panel I need (Figure 1). I glued and clamped them together to form a 15-by-36-in. piece. We will letter on it just as it is, because each smudge or imperfection provides the aged appearance we wish to produce.

With a thin charcoal stick, lightly lay out the entire sign, allowing for the area where the picture will go (Figure 2). Just let it flow. Nothing has to be critical. Keep it simple and have fun.

Painting the graphics

Squeeze a small amount of paint onto a piece of glass. I use this method instead of wasting money on strip palettes. I highly recommend Accent® acrylics. They are wonderful to work with. They mix well, cover nicely, dry fast, and come in a wide range of colors.

The use of an overhead projector



Figure 1. Gluing up the panel



Figure 2. Doing a quick charcoal layout



Figure 3. The graphic was laid out with the help of a projector.

will save you time and provide the perfect picture to work from (Figure 3). Books with fantastic copyright-free clip art of every theme imaginable are available at most large bookstores.

All of the lettering is done with sable showcard brushes (Figure 4). They tend to ride over rough surfaces much better than a quill. This was probably a plain sign, painted many years ago, so it needn't be fancy. The letters don't have to be perfect. The end result will look aged and original.

Cut out a 3½-by-12½-in. piece of old, rusty metal. Don't wipe it off or clean it up. Just letter directly on the metal and, when it's dry, rub the rust right into the lettering with a cloth. The effect looks great.

Lay the sign flat on your worktable and lightly sand the entire panel with a piece of 120-grit sandpaper (Figure 5). Don't press too hard; all you want to do is just break the surface of the lettering.

Making a frame

Now you will need three pieces of 40-in.-long, old white picket fencing. I spend considerable time looking for old wood, so I have an ample supply, neatly stored. You could use new wood and paint it, but it just won't look as real or as old. Take the time to do it right. Use old material.

Set the guide on your table saw to 1¼ inches. Lay the fencing flat and cut three pieces, 40-in. long. This will provide enough for the entire frame.

Miter the corners and assemble the entire frame with finishing nails. The well-worn edges of the picket fence provide your sign with a very authentic look. It will appear that this sign has been around for many years.

I have a storage shelf piled high with molding, twigs, odd pieces of wood, and strips of old shelving and window trim. I find a couple pieces that match and use these to add a little extra dimension to the sign.

With small brads, I apply the molding (Figure 6). They don't even need to be consistent in length. Remember that you are making a very old sign that could

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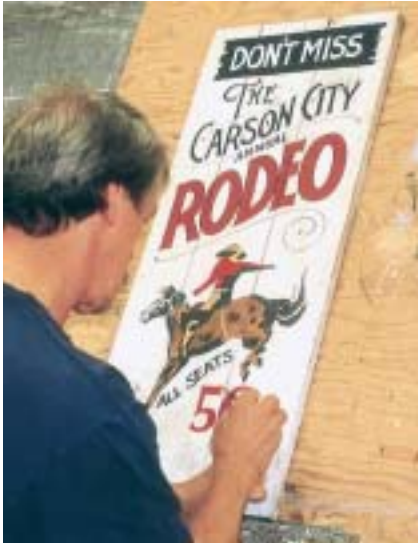


Figure 4. The lettering is done with sable showcard brushes.



Figure 5. Lightly sanding the lettering

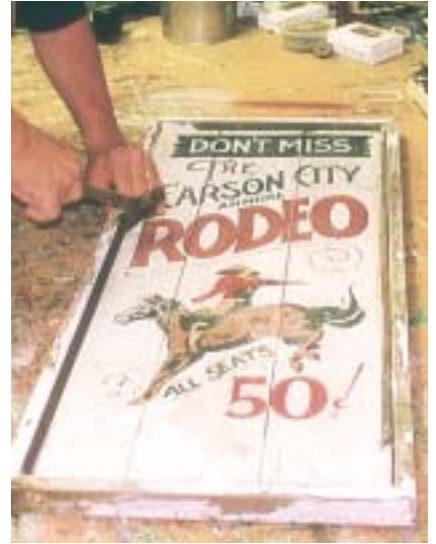


Figure 6. Attaching the frame



Figure 7. Aging the sign

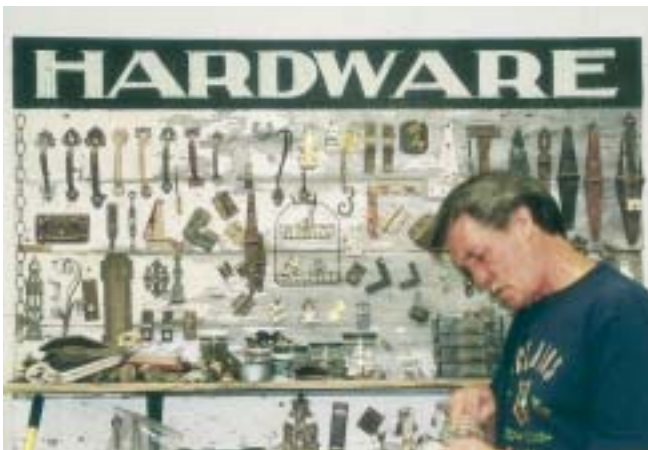


Figure 8. Selecting the hardware

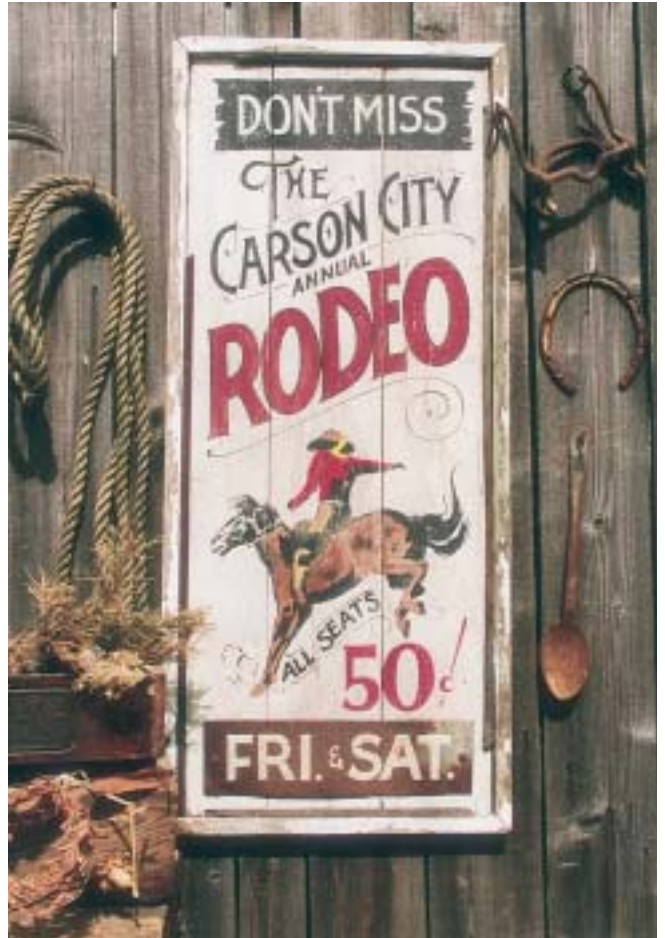


Figure 9. The completed project

have some of the molding broken off. Anything goes. No restrictions. Run wild with your creativity. Don't create mental boundaries. Experiment!

Use old hardware

I keep an old piece of terry-cloth in a can of dry dirt. I rub the surface of the sign to produce smudges and dirt marks that will give me the exact look I want (Figure 7).

From my supply of old hardware, I pick out a couple rusty tacks to mount the little metal piece (Figure 8). I have found everything for my hardware supply for free while picking through piles of "junk": old hinges, hasps, brackets, eye hooks, knobs, handles, etc. If you're serious about making real-looking old signs, you must use old hardware. There are lots of old detail items out there if you just look for them.

Give it a try

I hung this sign on an old cedar gate behind my shop. Just add a couple old boxes, some rope, and a few Western elements for a complete effect (Figure 9). It looks like this rodeo sign has been around for quite some time.

It took about two hours to make this sign. I challenge you to find some old boards, buy some acrylics, and bring to life the romance, passion, and history of the Old West.

I thank my wife and family for their love and support. I thank God for the seed of artistic ability that he placed in me at birth. I thank all my Letterheads friends for their knowledge and willingness to share. Last, but not least, thank you, Pete, for taking the pictures for me. □

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