



Interview:

Bruce & Jodie Janssen

Boyne City, Michigan

If you had known Bruce Janssen back in 1970, you would never have suspected that he would end up in the sign business. An anti-sign lobbyist, possibly; a sign maker, absolutely not. Whereas most people may simply have little or no opinion about signs, Bruce did: he hated them — all of them. To him, there were too many signs, too big and too bold.

"When I was in college I really got disgusted with signs. I hated them. To me, there was no such thing as a good one. I would often point out how many there were and how much clutter they caused. As a result, I always noticed signs, no matter where I went, and always in a negative sense.

"In 1975 I went on a trip to New England. I saw all these beautiful wood signs and just couldn't believe it. I thought that would be a great way to make a statement about something I didn't like. As I got more involved with them, I began to really appreciate attractive sign work. I realize there are a lot of shops that depend on them, but I still have a problem with billboards, though, because of their density and overuse."

Bruce is a Detroit native with a business and marketing degree from University of Detroit. While in school, he worked as an apprentice to a furniture repairman in a furniture store. Bruce learned the trade, graduated, then decided to move upstate Michigan. There he planned to continue doing furniture repair and refinishing.

"Once I got there," he says, "I found northern Michigan didn't have any new furniture. I wound up getting into antique restoration real quick."

He was there for about a year when his trip to New England opened his eyes to wood signs. When he got back he began learning to make wood signs by trial-and-error and reading all he

could. Sign work was more creative and challenging than antique restoration — and more profitable. Bruce continued to do more and more wood sign work until 1978, when he quit the furniture work completely to become a full-time sign maker.

Bruce met Jodie in 1980 and they married in 1982. He is 40; Jodie is 33. She is originally from Virginia. Jodie's art background gave the shop's work a new creative edge.

"I think the husband-and-wife team," says Bruce, "is a pretty successful unit in the sign business. It

works well for us, and there have been quite a few examples of others in the magazine."

The Wood Shop is housed in two buildings that total 5000 square feet. The 3800-square-foot original building includes the office/computer space, layout and design room, and the woodworking shop. The separate 1200-square-foot building, Bruce built two years ago, is divided for sandblasting and finishing. There is also a covered area outside for the storage of redwood, which is bought in quantity. Each department is well-equipped and divided from the others so that all work moves through the shop on its way to completion.

At present Bruce and Jodie employ six people — five full-time and one part-time. During the summer, the staff usually expands to between nine and twelve. Boyne City is a town of about 3500 in the northern part of lower Michigan.

Jodie was out of town when SignCraft recently talked to Bruce about their work and their shop.

SC: How do you two divide the responsibilities of the business?

BJ: We work together on sign concepts sometimes, but most of the time Jodie comes up with the design ideas. Then either she draws them or I take her leads and do the final drafts.

Jodie does some painting on special projects, though she doesn't work down at the shop much. We think that's better for us. Jodie is also a wildlife artist, and lately more busy with that, so she's a little less involved with the shop work than before. She has been getting some recognition for the very detailed pencil drawings she does. This coming September, in fact, she has a one-woman show at the National Wildlife Federation's



Back row (from left); Karl, Jodie, Bruce, Todd; front row (from left); Terry, Kathy and Jane.



Kathy at work in the shop

gallery outside Washington, D.C.

SC: So you more-or-less handle the running of the shop.

BJ: I do a little bit of everything. I'm so busy running the shop that I do less of the actual layout and fabrication than I used to, but I do oversee every job. We now have a bookkeeping service that keeps the books on computer, which is working out great.

I do get involved with finishing. We do a lot of spray finishing and little hand finishing. We pre-finish much of our work. I like a fine, professional finish with no brush marks. I guess it's from my furniture days. You can't justify a poor finish to the customer. He can see that it isn't professional-looking.

I don't do woodworking any more because I have asthma, largely as the result of eight or ten years of exposure to sawdust. I hate to see a photo in a magazine of anyone working in a woodshop with no mask. It's a big mistake. During the winter, it's chronic — I can't even walk through the woodshop. The woodwork is done in a separate room through two sets of doors.

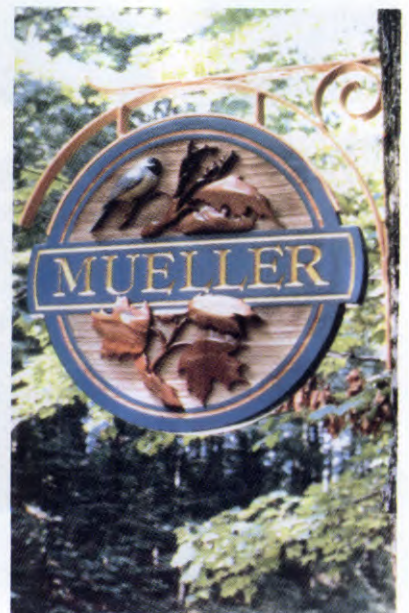
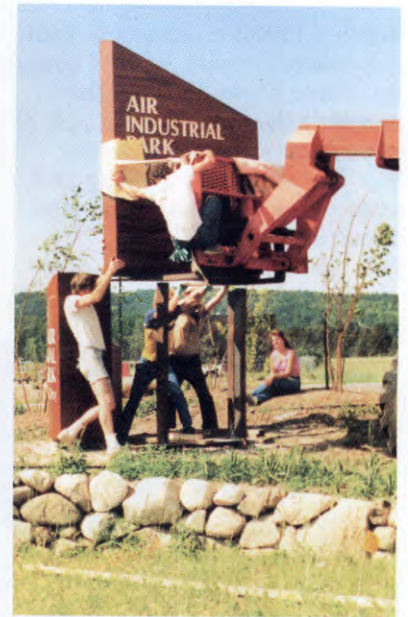
SC: That's a health risk I'm sure most sign people never think about.

BJ: Everyone in our shop has a respirator. We've got a ventilation system, and our part-timer vacuums the whole place every other day at least. Everyone should have a \$30 dual cartridge respirator. For dust, you should have a 3M 8710 dust mask. They cost about \$1.25 each. And we go through rubber gloves by the box.

SC: What do you stress when you sell your work to the client?

BJ: To us, the sign is a piece of art that also functions as a sign. It has to be a beautiful and interesting thing to look at, since that's the object — to get people to look at it. If I had to just make signs, I'd be out of the business. I've got enough background that I could make more doing something strictly for the money. I like the satisfaction of making something special.

Jodie and I often go out



together to see a customer. That way when it comes time to design, she's been there and met the people. I think that's a big part of coming up with a nice design.

SC: Do you mean working as a team or meeting the people and discussing the job?

BJ: Both, actually. But to come

up with a good design, the client has to give you more than just the copy and an idea. He's got to give you some enthusiasm, and show a little confidence in you. Some don't have confidence in you when they first walk in the door, though after this many years, most do. Ninety percent of those who come to us

have seen our work, and they come to get a sign from us. It makes sales easy, because we don't have to sell our capability first. We get right down to the sign.

You just know when there's that perfect marriage between the customer and us. And you know the sign is going to turn out great. They have an idea and they're excited about it. Or, you get them excited about it. Then things start to happen. You swap some ideas and it becomes a reality. You sort of keep a special eye on that job as it goes through the shop.

I try to instill that in my employees. That's why we encourage customers to come to the shop. We show them around and the people who work here get to meet the person behind this sign we're going to make. Even if they're only here a few minutes, it helps. The sale would have probably happened anyway, but this keeps us all pumped up about the work.

SC: Would you say the bulk of your work is in wood?

BJ: The majority is wood signs, but we do glass and brass and we mix things on the same sign. We don't do much hand lettering, because I don't have any lettering experience. I came to this from woodworking, furniture refinishing and antique restoration. We do most of our lettering layouts with transfer type, though we may alter it slightly. I envy these people who can design wonderful lettering or hand-letter well.

The disadvantage to using a lot of type is that it has a somewhat mechanical look. I've never hired a sign painter, though, because they don't usually come upstate to work. I've always hired woodworkers. We just added a computer to help with some of the lettering and are waiting for it right now.

SC: Where does most of your work come from right now?

BJ: We have been in the residential development market for years. Along with large resort projects, that's probably half of our business. The other half is the nice one-of-a-kind signs for small businesses.



I have a friend, Michelle Wilkie, proprietress of Folio Advertising in Detroit who also sells and designs for us there. The market has been good down there over the past two years. I think the residential development market is a great way for the small shop to make their mark as far as growth and production and still have creativity.

SC: What does the resort work involve?

BJ: That started in 1984 when we began doing a lot of the work at the Grand Traverse Resort Village, which is now one of the largest resorts in the country. They have a 15-year development program, which started with Michelle designing the logo and Jodie and I developing the various sign systems for the exterior and interior. We have been doing a great deal of sign work there ever since. We also did a package for Arrowwod, a Raddison resort in Minnesota.

Resort work is a lot of fun because it has to be especially creative. Residential developments are a little more routine. You have one, maybe two, main-site signs, then a couple of clubhouse signs. Then its 27 street signs, 35 stop signs, and all that sort of work. It's like anything else — once these people have confidence in you, it leads to more work.

SC: What's the market like in your area? Is it mostly small tourist towns?

BJ: More or less, though the northwest corner of lower Michigan is a real hot spot right now. It's a great vacation area — you've got sailing and skiing so it's a year-round resort area. It's an ideal area for wood signs because there are a lot of beautiful old buildings. It's a quaint atmosphere.

SC: Is there anything you'd like to change about The Wood Shop?

BJ: Well, we have a good team, a good customer base and a great location — everything seems to be working out well. I would like to have a little more money to put back into the shop, mainly for health concerns. I'd like to improve the ventilation system and improve my paint storage. I worry about the

fumes, vapors and dusts that are a part of this work. All this is expensive, but it's necessary. I regret that I didn't have the money to buy what I have now earlier. I learned about five years ago that this is a very legitimate expense. That's my biggest disappointment — you can never get a good

enough handle on safety interests. I think I'm doing better than most shops, but there's still more to do. I want my employees to look back on me in twenty years in a healthy way. I don't want them to have health problems as a result of their work.

SC: You mentioned before that

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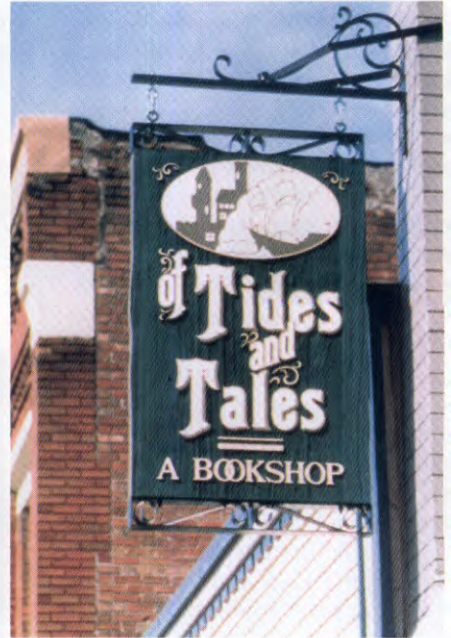
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you never expected the business to grow like it has. Are you happy with the direction it has taken?

BJ: I am. Last year we took a three-week vacation — the first vacation in a long time. But I have a good crew, and I can leave things in their hands. Of course we worked pretty hard before and after the trip, but that goes with it. We've been working for years to get to this point, though.

SC: How do you make that happen — is it just a question of constantly keeping that one of your priorities?

BJ: It's attitude and teamwork. I can't say enough about that. If you're going to be a manager, you have to be on top of every project, but you have to let your staff make their own decisions. If they're not sure, they can come to me. But if they make a decision they believe is right and it turns out wrong, I can't chew them out. If they knew they should have asked for help, that's different.

I used to try to stay too much in control, and then people don't want to make their own decisions. Of course, you have to have people with the right attitude working with you. I have a husband-and-wife team, Karl and Kathy Beal, who have been with me for several years. They are very energetic and good managers. With my other employees, Jane Oliver, Terry Stradling, Todd Eggers and Don Luebke, they make up one of the best crews I've ever had.

I read a little bit and I'm interested in others' opinions on management. I take it all in and sometimes it takes two years before I act on it, but it helps. If you carry a smile, if you like your work and have a good attitude toward it, it's got to rub off on everyone. You have to be consistent, though.

Ask any small shop owner, and they'll tell you employees are their biggest problem. I know, because they were my biggest problem from about year 5 to year 13. In the past two years I have learned how to deal with it. First, I try not to hire someone who doesn't have a good attitude. If I hire them and they turn out to have a bad

attitude, I don't keep them around. I do that by explaining that there is a 30-to-60-day trial period for all employees.

Secondly, I try not to worry about things so much. I try not to get too excited when things go wrong. It's just money and it's just a mistake. With wood, you can

most always repair it. The worst that can happen is you can lose money. If I'm pushing up daisies ten years ahead of time because I was worried about losing a little money, I won't be able to spend the money that I did save.

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