

Talking Shops: Detroit Commercial Folk Art

David Clements

(Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005)

176 pp. \$34.95 softcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

A pair of big feet, size 22 to be exact, has long been my roadblock to visiting the Motor City.

Let me explain. My favorite basketball player as a kid was Bob Lanier, an All-Star center in the 1970s for the Detroit Pistons. A big guy with a soft touch from the outside, Lanier was once asked about his chief concern about an upcoming home game. His response — and this is from a guy imposing enough to fill size 22 sneakers — was something to the effect of making it from his car through the Cobo Arena parking lot without being mugged. Yikes!

Despite this daunting tale, the recent release of David Clements book, *Talking Shops: Detroit Commercial Folk Art*, has convinced me that the Motor City's many charms outweigh any attendant risks in touring the metropolis.

In this special issue of the *SCA Journal* focusing on segregation, it seems appropriate to feature this photography book. *Talking Shops* documents the signage of independent, predominantly Afro-American businesses in Detroit, a city that has become a poster child for urban decline. Recent statistics indicate the city is losing 10,000 residents a year, has 12,000 abandoned houses, and 30 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Yet among these stark figures, Clements' lens has captured an array of exuberant signs created or commissioned by self-employed owners proud of their businesses.

Clements, an urban archaeologist, believes, "Even more so than diners and roadside attractions, the images of America's changing commercial landscape are fleeting and should be documented, if not preserved." He admirably accomplishes this by focusing on local businesses such as hair salons, churches, and car washes. SCA members mesmerized by vintage neon signs will find no such images in the publication. Paint is more affordable than expensive glass tubing for these inner-city businesses, often operating with financial hardships.

These commercial advertisements, usually painted on the building itself, share many common features with tourist-oriented highway signs. Each is a homespun marriage of art and commerce. They are created, according to the articulate foreword written by Wayne State University English professor Bill Harris, because "... the lure of the American dream of ownership overshadows the daunting rate of failure among independent inner-city entrepreneurs. Commercial enterprises continue to open, declare their existence, and state their dream of ultimate independence. This is the message that resonateseven when the businesses pictured have been stricken from the tax rolls and the signs are peeling, sun-faded, or weed covered."

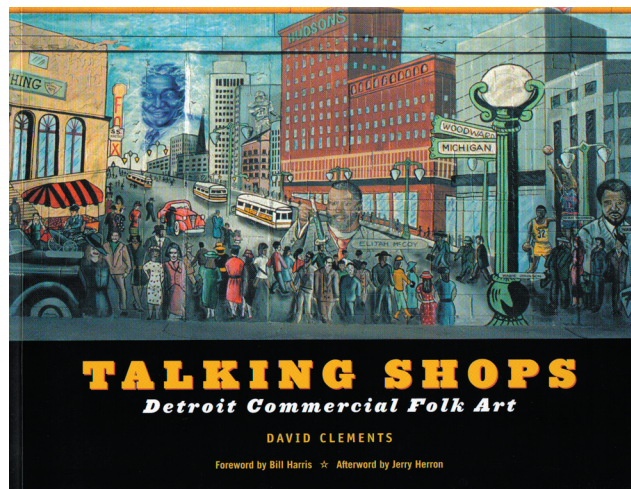
For those who only look to trendy Route 66 for colorful signage, these inner-city advertisements are an intriguing study because they are even more cutting edge in their use of color, imagery, humor, and messages. It's difficult to pick out a favorite. There's Hudson Exterminating proclaiming its existence with a super-sized KO'd rat next to the message, "Kill Them Dead." Or the image of a chef BBQing on a grill

next to the Eiffel Tower at the Paris 'N' Soul Food Restaurant. The prize image may go to the guy being shocked while trying to fix an electrical appliance as he's admonished by his wife, "I told you to go to Digital Sales & Service Fool!!" Then there is the unlikely business pairing such as the Hallelujah Beauty & Barber Salon and Gospel Records.

My only disappointment with the book is that there's no accompanying map showing photo locations. Although addresses are provided for each business, there is no way to know if the businesses are located

predominantly in one neighborhood or spread throughout the city. There is no reference to dates either; are the images still extant or were the photographs snapped years ago?

Although I spied a KFC outlet lurking alongside one of the featured businesses, the book's color images paint a hopeful spectacle for commercial archeologists: a present-day American landscape full of independent businesses that compose a vibrant folk art. No matter how hard I look in my hometown, there's little chance of discovering a "Mr. Foote Hand Car Wash" or "Yetta Boo's Boobs & Bunns Hand Car Wash" or "Home of the Murder Burger Restaurant," though I consider myself fortunate with the latter.



Clements urges us all to discover hidden commercial treasures in our own communities, "... enjoy looking around a little more to discover unique slices of life and vitality in your own environment." That may be so, but I'm still adding Detroit to my travel list.

As a teenager, book review editor Douglas Towne experienced the many joys of operating his own landscaping company, including the time his lawn mower was taken for a test drive by jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie.

The Jersey Shore Uncovered: A Revealing Season at the Beach

Peter Genovese

(New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003)

225 pp., \$29.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Harold Aurand Jr.

New Jersey has been good to commercial archeologists the past few years. The ongoing debate over what should be done with Wildwood's classic seaside resorts has brought a lot of attention to the issue of preservation of the recent past. In addition, Rutgers University Press has become a leading academic publisher for books of interest to the roadside enthusiast.

The Jersey Shore Uncovered is Peter Genovese's fourth book brought out by Rutgers. The earlier ones looked at roadside attractions in the Garden State, New Jersey's diners, and US Route 1, from Maine to Florida. This one, in Genovese's own words is "an account of one season at the Jersey Shore-people, places, events, happenings, and encounters along the 127-mile stretch from Sandy Hook to Cape May." It is a coffee table sized book, divided into forty-two brief sections. Each is illustrated with black-and-white photos, and there are two sixteen page sections of color photos as well.

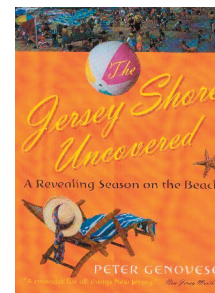
About half of the sections of *The Jersey Shore Uncovered* deal with what we could call the classical topics of commercial archeology-restaurants, miniature golf courses, and the other buildings providing services to roadside or boardwalk customers. Some of the subjects Genovese presents are well known, like Lucy the Elephant in Margate. Originally built in 1881 by a real estate developer trying to draw attention to residential lots, Lucy is probably the country's oldest example of zoomorphic architecture. Despite harsh sea breezes, the six story wooden elephant is still standing and open for tours. Other examples are less well known, like the tent colony in Ocean Grove. Originally a Methodist camp meeting, Ocean Grove today is probably New Jersey's quietest resort, with the beach closed for part of each Sunday. About one quarter of the tents still remain. Most are occupied by regular seasonal visitors, who've been coming there to enjoy the shore and semi-religious environment for years.

The other sections of *The Jersey Shore Uncovered* focus on the different events and festivals that can be found

near the beach, like Atlantic City's annual Unlocking of the Ocean Ceremony, which opens the traditional tourist season, or the Miss Deckadance bikini contest, or the unique people you can find there, like bird watchers or beach cleaners. In all of the sections, what Genovese does really well is put people in the landscape. He doesn't just describe a restaurant, like Pat's Lunch outside Stone Harbor, he goes in and talks to Pat Tirotta, the owner, and quotes him extensively. As a result, you get the feeling that you actually know these places and events, and how people use them.

If there is a weakness in *The Jersey Shore Uncovered* it's a weakness common to a lot of coffee table books. There is no clear system of organization. A reader could open the book at random, read a few pages, and come away with a complete story, not really tied into the other sections. I guess that's the way coffee table books are meant to be read. Overall, *The Jersey Shore Uncovered* is a fun book. I grew up in Pennsylvania, and my family did take a few vacations to the shore, although we weren't regulars. This book made me want to go back. Still, a few more overarching themes, or attempts to tie what Genovese found in with the other literature on commercial archeology would have been nice.

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was a 1920s or '30s vintage barrel-roof diner known as Charlene's operating. I actually visited it for a meal within the last couple of years, luckily. Because on this trip, we were coming down Route 12 and spotted the sign for the diner but realized this sign was now located on a business block and the diner itself was not there. I called the diner when I got home and found out they were forced off the property a year or so ago and moved the business to where it is now, the diner itself was torn down.

Continuing south on Route 12 you eventually get to Groton, Conn. where within a few blocks of the southern end of Route 12 there are 2 operating Silk City diners, Norm's Diner and Rosie's Diner. So this concludes our little Route 12 Diner drive through Massachusetts and Connecticut. Maybe next year we could do the northern end of Route 12 into New Hampshire where there are a few more interesting diners.

Notes from the Hotline

- I hit a milestone this summer when I actually logged over 800 diners. Since I started this personal research project back in 1980, I had early on racked up thousands of miles and photographed hundreds of diners up until the late 1980s when my constant traveling and diner hunting was easing up. From 1988 on to now I only managed to log maybe a handful of diners every year after already logging close to 700 in the years previous to this. The reason that I finally made it over 800 was the fact that I had a business trip planned for the Langhorne, Pennsylvania, area in early July and I got to document nine diners in the greater Philadelphia area that I had yet to see. I even had a mini-SCA get-together by having breakfast with Len Davidson as well as Illona and Dale Mifflin at the Domino Diner in Philly, the day I got down there. I also connected with Jack Mulholland who was a gracious host to me at the Mayfair Diner in North Philly one evening. At this rate I estimate logging 900 diners is going to be a long way off.
- It's been quite a while since I have mentioned Gordon Tindall in the Hotline. Long-time readers of this column may remember how Gordon Tindall relocated the Clarksville Diner from New Jersey to Decorah, Iowa. He restored and reopened the diner but never did the business he thought he would do and after 6 plus years gave up the ghost and sold the diner to a French TV network who relocated the diner to France. Gordon's next venture was to purchase the 1927 vintage Tierney built Lackawana Trail Diner, last operated as Jerry's Diner in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. He moved this diner to a storage location in Lancaster and proceeded to begin restoring this antique while scouting out a possible new operating location. It took a few years but he found the diner a new home in Towanda, Pennsylvania, and finally reopened the newly renamed Red Rose Diner this summer and has been getting a great reaction from both local customers and travellers alike. We wish Gordon well in this new endeavor.