

By Douglas Towne

Sole-Full Signs

After decades spent gazing into idyllic sunsets and the starry heavens while photographing almost magical neon commercial signs, it seems I'm not the only SCA member with their head hanging low these days, brushing away leaves, litter, and wishing that piece of discarded chewing gum would miraculously vaporize. Judging by the feedback to my editor's column, "Advertising Underfoot" (*SCA Journal*, Fall 2012), quite a few SCA members are now on the hunt down low for new commercial archeology prey, namely elegant terrazzo, tile, or brass floor signs popularly called store aprons. These beautiful and resilient advertisements were used by downtown and Main Street businesses in their entryways to welcome pedestrian traffic.

The first hint this topic would attract interest came from two of our most colorful members, Brian Gallagher and Kevin Patrick at the 2012 Wildwood Conference. Gallagher indicated a Canadian research interest in store aprons while Patrick pointed out examples we were sometimes unknowingly standing on in his erudite and entertaining Wildwood tours.

With the publication of my column, the emails began. Noted roadside scholar and frequent *SCA Journal* contributor, Dr. Lyell Henry of Iowa City, Iowa,

commented, "I've just finished reading your article on 'Advertising Underfoot' and am writing to convey my appreciation for it. I've noticed those entryway designs all my life, always was fascinated by them and their frequent beauty, but never thought to consider them as the important aspect of commercial archeology that they obviously are. Your article does that job very well, so many thanks for writing this truly valuable piece. Now I'm going to pay closer attention to some spots downtown that may very well still have these old embellished entryways."

SCA member Robert Solomon of New York, New York, offered his kudos and included images of his favorite store aprons including the brass letters spelling out "Steamship Tickets" in a Port Chester, New York, sidewalk. The blue-collar village of Westchester County developed as a shipping and shipbuilding center and, in the late 19th century, attracted manufacturers like Beech-Nut LifeSavers and Fruit of the Loom.

A rags-to-riches business tale was elicited by a Katz terrazzo floor sign sent by SCA member Steve Hartwich of Kansas City, Missouri. Katz's was a drug store started by two brothers in Kansas City who began their commercial empire with a fruit stand around 1914 and had 65 stores in the Midwest by 1970. "Let's go to Katz" became a refrain as the brothers innovated beyond filling prescriptions to stocking



cameras, cosmetics, clocks, shirts, pet food, cigarettes, beer, and liquor.

Another Hartwich discovery was tile denoting the Kansas City, Kaw Valley and Western (KVV) Railway in Lawrence, Kansas. The electric interurban railway operated from 1914 to 1963. "Many years ago some of my fellow car club members and I followed the right-of-way of the KVV from Lawrence to Kansas City through farm fields, country roads, and city streets," Hartwich writes. "It was quite exciting and something I've never forgotten. We located old bridge abutments, former passenger stations, and power stations that were still standing."

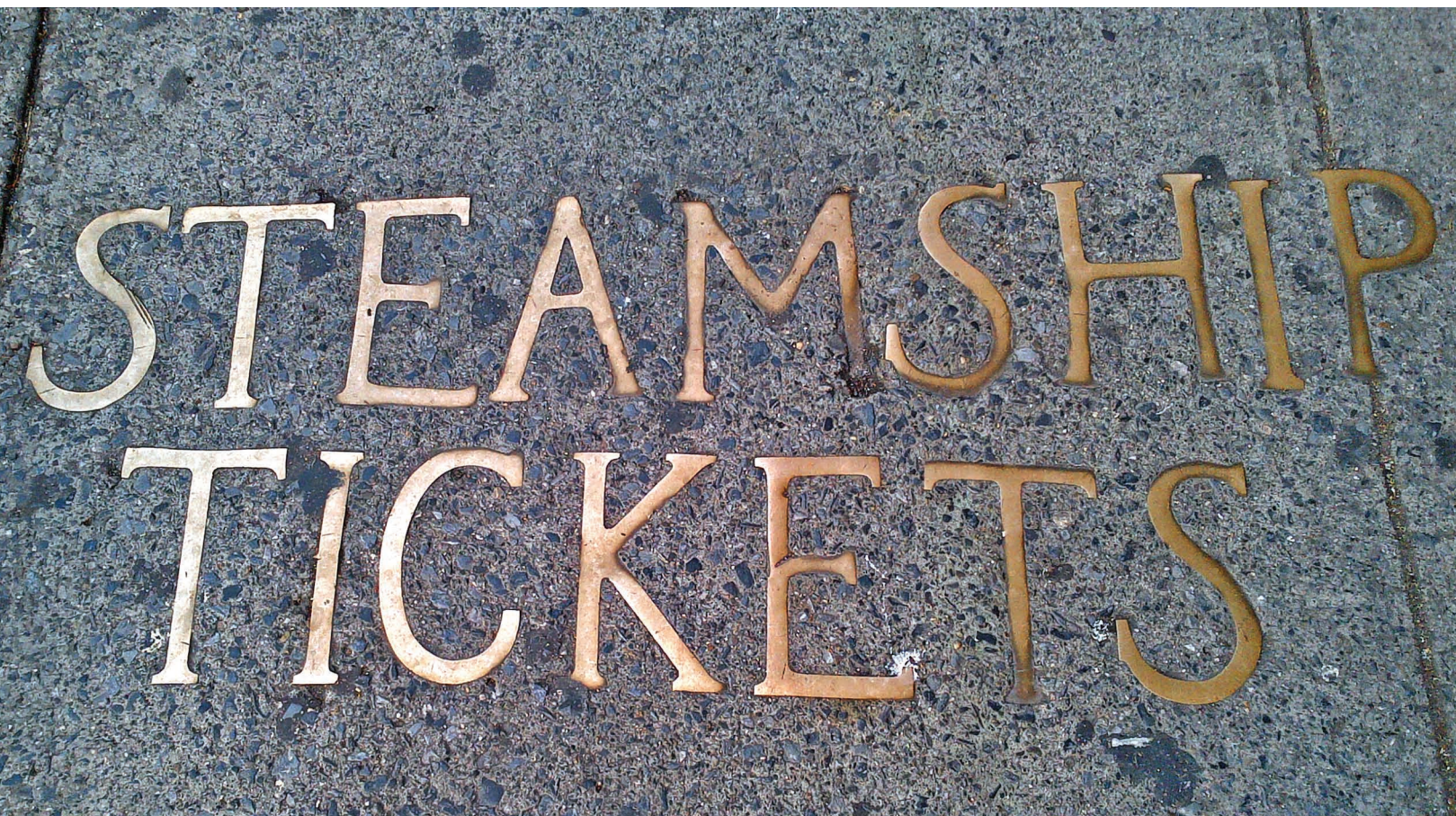
Most significant to the Kansas City auto enthusiast is the Buick script in tile at the former Mueller-Harkins Buick dealership in Tacoma, Washington. "As of 2007, the building was used as a secured parking lot,"

OPPOSITE: Steamship Tickets, Port Chester, New York. ROBERT SOLOMON

LEFT: Katz Drugs, Linwood Boulevard & Troost Avenue, Kansas City, Missouri. STEVE HARTWICH

BELOW: Katz Drugs entryway, 7th & Minnesota Avenue, Kansas City, Kansas. STEVE HARTWICH

BELOW: Kansas City, Kaw Valley, and Western (KVV) Railway, Lawrence, Kansas. STEVE HARTWICH





ABOVE: Mueller Harkins Buick, Tacoma, Washington. STEVE HARTWICH

BELOW: Concord Theater, Concord, New Hampshire. DAVID GUSS



Harwich writes. "Having previously taken some poor photographs through a chain link fence of the Buick sign, my friend, Rich Gibbs, and I were elated when the door to the parking garage opened so a renter could retrieve his BMW. We both jumped out of Rich's 1959 Buick Electra, and vaulted up to the entrance (formerly the entrance to the Mueller-Harkins showroom) and took some straight-on photos of this wonderful sign!"

SCA book reviewer Dr. David Guss submitted an image of the Concord Theatre entrance in Concord, New Hampshire, taken in 2008. The theatre has been closed for some time although there is hope the shuttered building will be restored. The professor, who chairs the Department of Anthropology at

Tufts University, included another eye-catching image that crosses into performance art. "Here's a great one from my Lost Theatres website (www.losttheatres.org/theatres.htm)," Guss writes. "It was taken by Henry Cataldo in 1976 as he spotted a couple of kids imitating the Sam Peckinpah movie then playing, *Killer Elite*, with the tag line, 'Death Is the Cure.' The theatre, which closed in 1982, was located on Broadway in Somerville, Massachusetts, and, after a wonderful renovation, has been reborn as a pottery studio called Mudflat."

Guss also encouraged lapsed SCA member Dave Hebb to submit images including a real gem from E.B. Horn Jewelers, in business in downtown Boston at 429 Washington Street since 1836. The independent, family-run business has the rare store apron which actually advertises its current business.

Another Hebb image is of the former Johnny Corey's Cocktail Lounge at the corner of Northampton Street and Harrison Avenue in Boston's South End. "A 1950s postcard advertised 'Good Service, Convenience, Good Atmosphere and 3 Television Sets' along with a capacity of 300 (which seems impossible)," Hebb writes. "By the early 1980s it was a dive known as Doc's Cafe which received some attention when it was discovered by punk rockers. Doc's was name checked in the Turbines' huge local hit 'Wah Hey!' and part of the accompanying video was shot there (www.youtube.com/watch?v=n71zcxuUIQ4). I went to Doc's once and some of the Johnny Corey's decor had survived including a curved bar and at least three TV sets (probably not original). It's been closed for years, stripped of signage and the entire interior except for what may be original linoleum floor tile."

Another Hebb submission is Sherman's, which, contrary to rumors is not a roadside think tank run by Harvard-employed SCA member Paul Sherman but rather was a small department store at 44 Bromfield Street in Boston. "It moved around the corner and then across the street and may have finally given up," Hebb writes. "City Sports occupies the site now."



ABOVE: Broadway Theater, Somerville, Massachusetts. HENRY CATALDO

BELOW: E.B. Horn Jewelers, Boston, Massachusetts. DAVID HEBB





Perhaps the most significant aspect of store aprons is that they're often the last bit of signage to vanish from a business. Created from stone and built tough to endure foot traffic, the difficult-to-remove floor signs often survive long after a metal sign has rusted away (or been snatched by some collector) or paint has peeled away from a ghost sign on the side of a building.

But maybe there are other things in play with the recent interest in store aprons. Certainly there is the fun of artistically using reflections in the store apron's windows or even creating performance art pieces. There's also the serendipity of having mysterious pedestrians with shapely legs and stylish foot wear become part of the picture. When I asked Guss about obtaining a higher resolution image of Hebb's shot of the Highland Shoes entryway, he responded, "It would be possible, though the girl with the great boots would be hard to duplicate." •

TOP: Johnny Corey's, Boston, Massachusetts. DAVID HEBB

MIDDLE: A vintage postcard from Johnny Corey's in Boston. DAVID HEBB

BOTTOM: Sherman's in Boston, Massachusetts. DAVID HEBB

BELOW: Highland Shoes, Somerville, Massachusetts. DAVID HEBB



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Stewart's Petrified Wood, old Route 66/I-40 15 miles east of Holbrook, Arizona.

Painted billboards beckon for miles with the promise of dinosaurs, meteorites, free postcards, and polished wood. Upon arrival you feel as if you've been transported back to the golden age of the roadside attraction — giant mechanical dinosaurs draped in Christmas lights move slowly in the wind while scattered sun-faded mannequins maintain a vigil over the surrounding desert. And while the ostriches may bite, they do seem to enjoy having visitors.

Vintage Roadside, founded by husband and wife Jeff Kunkle and Kelly Burg, works to preserve and share the unique history of America's roadside. Visit www.vintageroadside.com to learn more.