

By Douglas C. Towne

Welcome Arches

When new acquaintances learn of my interest in commercial archeology, the more curious inquire as to the root cause of this somewhat unusual pursuit. Was it a bonding experience from a pubescent trip down Route 66 or perhaps a distinctive drive-in frequented as a teenager? Alas, no single experience or place jump started this passion; rather my curiosity had a long gestation marked by several milestones.

The initial attraction was a Texaco gas station that featured on its sign a ferocious feline nattily outfitted in a tuxedo above the phrase, "We're A Bobcat for Service!" As a youth I pestered my dad, a child of the Depression, to patronize this incongruous business built of river rock in the Denver enclave of Glendale even though the adjacent new Vickers station sold regular for a cent less. Upon moving to Arizona, I became enchanted with the desert environment and neon light—passions that breathtakingly came together in what remains my favorite roadside advertisement, the sign

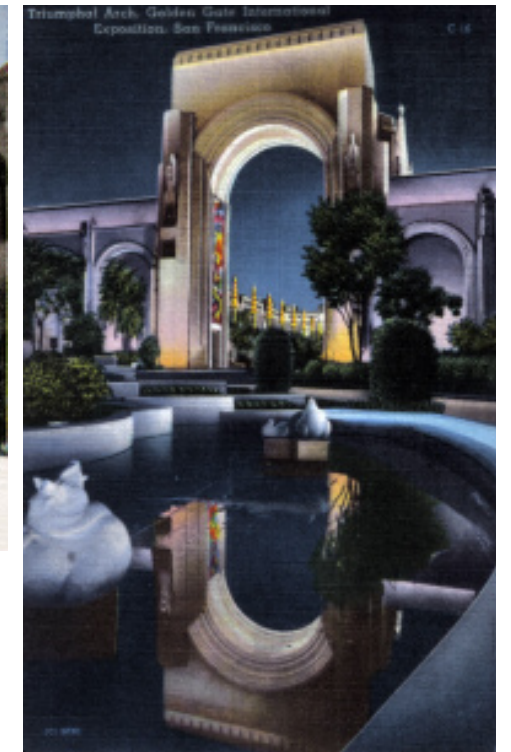
for the Desert Moon Motel on Fremont Street. Glimpsing it late one night in 1985 while touring Las Vegas in a friend's old Volvo, its homespun charm resonated more than any slick spectacle on the Strip. Casual appreciation blossomed into a lifelong passion the following year with an indelible stay at the Pioneer Hotel in Globe, Arizona, with my kindred spirit, the late Catherine Weiler. For a mere \$13.50, we received the key to Room #24 and immeasurable delight as the hotel's only overnight guests to explore the mysterious, untouched-by-time interior of the 1906 building. The hotel is long gone but its neon sign has resided in my garage since 1989.

Recently I was reminded of another early inspiration by, of all things, its prominence in a Coors beer commercial. While McDonald's Golden Arches dominate today's roadside, Golden, Colorado's welcome arch is a product of an earlier roadside use of this architectural form. Since 1949, it has spanned Washington Street bearing the message, "Howdy Folks! Welcome to Golden Where the West Lives."



Opposite: Desert Moon Motel sign in 1999, Las Vegas, Nevada; Catherine Weiler at the Pioneer Hotel in 1986, Globe, Arizona. **Above:** Golden, Colorado welcome arch postcard; **Right:** Triumphal Arch, Golden Gate Exposition postcard, San Francisco, California.

Next page from top: Mizpah Arch postcard, Denver, Colorado; Fresno California welcome arch in 2001; Original Reno, Nevada, welcome arch in 2002; Weed, California, welcome arch used in an advertisement for the Mt. Shasta Brewing Company. All photos by Douglas Towne.



In my youth, this town, nestled between Lookout Mountain and Table Mesa, had an ambiance unlike anything in the Denver metropolitan area. The powerful aroma of malted hops courtesy of Coors Brewery, the bucolic campus of the Colorado School of Mines (my brother's alma mater), and—I believe—this sign, made it a special place. Despite my longstanding fondness for the Golden gateway, welcome arches weren't a focus of my early roadside expeditions. This changed one morning in California when I inadvertently drove underneath an arch touting, "Fresno: The Best Little City in the U.S.A. Van Ness Ave." The charming arch was erected in 1925 over what was then the town's main drag. When I encountered it 75 years later, however, it was oddly located in a warehouse area that seldom receives out-of-town visitors. It felt like a special greeting reserved only for intrepid commercial archeologists—and a few truck drivers.

Welcome arches have an impressive lineage as this architectural form has long been used as a city gateway. The most famous may be Berlin's Brandenburg Gate which was constructed in 1791. Arches were also incorporated into monuments used to celebrate military victories such as the Arc de Triomphe, completed in Paris in 1836. In America, before they became fashionable highway accessories, welcome arches were associated with railroad travel. In Denver, there was the Mizpah arch constructed in 1906 adjacent to Union Station. The 70-ton, bronze-coated, steel gateway stood 65-feet high by 86-feet wide and supported a huge "Welcome" sign illuminated by 2,194 light bulbs. Although this greeting was originally placed on both sides of the arch, the sign was soon altered so the word, "Mizpah" would be seen by departing visitors. Incorrectly thought to be a Native American term meaning, "Howdy

Partner", it's an emotional bond between people who are separated either physically or by death and is derived from the Hebrew parting salutation found in Genesis 31-49; "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another." In a speech dedicating the arch, Denver Mayor Speer declared that it "is to stand here for ages as an expression of love, good wishes, and kind feelings to the stranger who enters our gates." Ironically 25 years later it was deemed a traffic hazard, dismantled and sold for scrap.

From the 1910s through the 1940s, many welcome arches were built over roadways in American towns to greet arriving motorists and create a sense of place. Business or civic booster organizations often financed their construction since the highway leading into town was an important conduit for travelers—and money. Besides free-standing arches of masonry, steel or wood suspended over public thoroughfares, "welcome signs" were also popular that were suspended arch-like across a roadway. Whatever the design, these signs proclaimed the town name, a word of welcome, a catchy slogan or some combination of these elements. The most famous welcome arch declares, "Reno: The Biggest Little City in the World." There have been three incarnations of the sign overhanging Virginia Street and, amazingly, all are still in existence. The original arch was built in 1927 for the Lincoln Exposition which celebrated the completion of the Lincoln Highway that ran through Reno. Its unlighted message read, "Reno Nevada's Transcontinental Highway Exposition June 25-August 11, 1927". In 1934, the arch was updated with neon lighting and the now famous slogan. With only minor modifications, it remained until 1963 when it was removed for storage, only to be reinstalled over the nearby Lake Street Bridge in the 1980s.

Installed in its place was an off-center double arch featuring distinctive bright yellow and orange plastic panels. Nicknamed the “Hippie” arch, it was replaced in 1987 and its frame was donated for use in the Northern California town of Willits. The current arch features two golden towers representing the twin cities of Reno and Sparks, 800 feet of neon tubing and 1,600 light bulbs representing the multitude of opportunities awaiting all who visit downtown. The mirrored star on top stands for prosperity, with its beams pointing in every direction to signify that all dreams are possible.

Reno’s arch may be the most famous but Modesto, a town located in California’s San Joaquin Valley, has one of America’s oldest arches. In 1911, the local businessmen’s association built it over “I” Street near the town’s train depot at 9th Street. The city council held a contest to select a motto and, out of 199 entries, the \$5 first place prize went to “Nobody’s Got Modesto’s Goat.” Although this lowbrow slogan was popular with citizens, city officials later reversed themselves and used the runner-up jingle that still greets visitors today, “Water, Wealth, Contentment and Health.” Another favorite welcome arch is found in Redwood City, California. It proclaims, “Climate Best By Government Test,” referring to meteorological studies conducted by the United States and German governments in the early 1900s that concluded the area within a 20-mile radius of downtown Redwood City had one of the three best climates in the world. (If you’re curious, the Canary Islands and the Mediterranean Coast of North Africa were the other two selections.)

Despite the distinctive personality welcome arches have created for their communities, countless numbers have been razed over the years. Reasons include the physical limitations of being unable to accommodate wider highways and bigger trucks, the expense of their upkeep, and the public’s ever changing tastes.

As evidenced by the recent beer commercial which featured Golden’s welcome arch, the public appears to be once again embracing these structures. The arches’ warmth and uniqueness in our predictable, ever homogenized commercial landscape now inspires public outcry for their conservation. Welcome arches deemed incompatible with modern traffic flows are increasingly given new lives by being relocated to less congested streets, parks or fairgrounds. Others, long in storage like Yreka, California, have been reinstalled. New ones have even been built such as the Great Platte River Road Archway placed over Interstate 80 near Kearney, Nebraska, in 1999. Resembling a covered bridge, the mammoth 1,500-ton structure spanning 308 feet is part of an American heritage museum.

Ranging from engineering marvels such as the Gateway Arch in St. Louis to the humble sign in the northern California town of Weed that announces the town’s unusual name without any further embellishments, arches remain popular ways for communities to throw out welcome mats and distinguish themselves. For travelers, they beckon those who pass beneath to a slightly new reality—and perhaps inspire some future commercial archeologists. ●



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