

**Lost and Found:
Roadside Classics from the Past**

Vanishing Roadside America

Warren H. Anderson

(Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1981)

Currently out of print

Color illus.,

144 pp., \$14.95 softcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

Humor, beauty, and insight are the qualities that attracted me to roadside culture way back in the early 1980s. Unfortunately many of the publications that addressed this nascent topic lacked one or more of these attributes, typically being either dry texts or picture books. The arrival of *Vanishing Roadside America* in 1981, with both eye-catching illustrations and discerning text, was the synthesis I was seeking.

At first glance, the book appears to be a showcase for the colored-pencil drawings of Anderson, who was an art professor at the University of Arizona at the time of publication. His subjects are classic roadside signs--with a few associated gas pumps and cars thrown in for good measure. For material, Anderson drove the remains of Highway 80 from San Diego to Savannah, sketching along the way.

In his creations, Anderson uses artistic license to evanesce the flaking paint and pigeon poop that were undoubtedly components of many signs. Cropping is occasionally employed to highlight certain aspects of a sign, though this technique may leave the reader insatiably curious about the make-up of the entire advertisement. The resulting artwork mirrors the high-chroma, linen-textured, bordered postcard styles popular during the early days of highway travel. Beautifully detailed and arresting with color, many of these original drawings have been displayed in museums and galleries, garnering rave reviews from the art community. In *Vanishing Roadside America*, the original drawings have been faithfully reproduced in smaller formats.

The hidden genius of *Vanishing Roadside America* is the extended caption that accompanies each drawing. The text creatively dissects the images, forms, and styles that comprise each sign. Anderson's keen wit and knowledge bound to the forefront as he cleverly describes the often incongruous elements of each sign, but with an affection one would use teasing an old friend about some personality quirks. Roadside America provides plenty of ammunition for Anderson with its milieu of misplaced names, Indians, and cacti. His literate analysis of sign feature origins at times borders on the amazing. For example, with the help of styles and linguistics, he traces the primary colors used on the modest Rainbow Tourist Court sign in the backwoods of Terrell, Texas to the 1933-34 Century of Progress World's Fair held in Chicago. After reading this book, exploring the various elements of a sign takes on new depth--and enjoyment!

One might say that *Vanishing Roadside America* has achieved a cult status since its publication in 1981--its popularity apparently not great enough to warrant a second printing, yet it's difficult to find a copy to buy or just peruse. Like a Hollywood starlet harassed by fans, the book's beauty might also be its undoing. The saga of my local library copy probably tells an all-too-familiar story. Patrons coveting various drawings in the book gradually ripped out their favorite pages until some yokel decided to just keep what little remained of the tattered book. And that is perhaps the litmus test of any successful roadside book--it's too popular to be kept in general circulation.

If you are lucky enough to own *Vanishing Roadside America*, take good care of it. If not, the search in used bookstores and on the Internet will be worth the nostalgic journey down Highway 80. And if you come upon a copy at the library or a friend's house, resist the temptation to keep even a single page for your own...

Douglas Towne is book review editor of the *SCA Journal*. Although he treasures the time spent obtaining a Master's Degree in geography from the University of Arizona, he still regrets missing the opportunity to take an art class from Warren Anderson. Anderson's original drawing of "Marie's Truck Stop" is proudly displayed in his abode.