

Signs to Complement Natural Beauty

VIRGIL R. "BUS" CARRELL



FOR A QUICK look at the signs of our day, let's locate our credit cards, jump into the family car, and take off to see America first. On our way, allow me to point out some things about signs you might like to know.

The signs we will see are just about as varied in purpose and tone as they are in design. They welcome, plead, command, guide, remind, warn, identify, interpret, inform. Whether regulating traffic, identifying places or plants, calling attention to a bump in the road or a garbage pit in a campground, inviting the motorist to a nearby motel or restaurant, they are the numerous silent voices that help bring some order and safety to our cities, highways, and other places where the public gathers or travels.

To do these things well, good signs are designed, made, and erected with skill and according to plans. A sign is good when its function is achieved without calling attention to itself.

Notice the traffic signs, for instance. These are designed to be read at high speed. The letters must be 10 inches in height, and some are 18 inches. At 60 miles per hour, we are forced to quickly "absorb" the traffic sign message without consciously reading it. See how the use of letters, shapes, colors, and text format help us quickly comprehend. Helping, too, is the uniformity of certain signs.

To enjoy the great American outdoors, we need good traffic signs to direct us to a destination, warn of dangers along the way, and regulate the flow of traffic.

A major national effort is being made to get standard, uniform traffic control signs into use. The U.S. Department of Commerce has published a manual called *Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways*, which describes them and their use.

Signs other than those used for traffic control can no longer be placed along a high-speed road without special consideration of traffic control signs already there and coordination with them. In addition to the commonsense need for safety considerations on all our roads, the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 further limits the placement of signs on interstate and primary highway systems constructed with Federal aid. The purposes of the act are to protect the public investment in these highways, promote safety and the recreational value of public travel, and preserve natural beauty.

A second group of signs called identification—or sometimes information—signs identify things for us and add pleasure to a trip. At least I always like to find signs announcing a familiar name or place. A name of a river on a map can



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Old Oregon Trail Route sign features art, clear lettering, simple design, and use of native materials.

increase anticipation, but it cannot compare with the excitement that comes with seeing the sign that says "MISSISSIPPI RIVER, mightiest of all American rivers." Anticipation is then at its peak and is (or should be) second in intensity only to the actual scene.

An identified landmark can have a special significance to the viewer. For example, a sign that identifies boundaries of the 154 national forests is welcomed by the sportsman who knows that here he can hunt, fish, or just tramp around in the forest and glades.

I once saw 35 vehicles parked near a boundary sign that identified an entrance to a national forest. It was the first day of hunting season. The hunters' tracks upon the light snow were all inside the national forest behind the sign. The sign assured them. They knew just where they were, and that they could engage here in an exhilarating hunt for deer.

Many persons have said it is also reassuring to come upon signs that identify public or semipublic authorities like those of an automobile club, State police, or the forest ranger's headquarters. We can stop at the latter to find out where

Achieving two objectives with one sign is rarely successful, but Virginia does it. This sign at the Tennessee line catches your eye with art identifying the Virginia State bird and flower and welcomes you with its clear, easily read script on a simple sign.

the fishing is good (and hope for a clue to a little known, good fishing hole!).

If the sign has an understandable purpose, is properly designed, made, and appealing to sight and emotion, it adds to the security, understanding, and pleasure of the tourist. Imagine the pleasure of entering strange country and finding an information sign that tells you what's ahead, where the tourist accommodations may be located, and rules and laws you should observe. Such a sign should be designed and located where it is safe to stop and to park off the road while reading it. Roads to and from it should be designed to let you leave and reenter the streams of traffic safely. The scenic view from the main highway should be screened with trees or shrubs to avoid risking damage to the natural lines and native beauty of the landscape.

Information signs that tell us the rules can be the most important of all signs. Fire prevention signs are a case in point. Without effective wildfire prevention on rural America's forest and range lands, the initial noticeable result when fire destroys is loss of natural beauty. Land managers know that in addition to ugly fire scars, the aftermath is also loss of payrolls, recreation pleasures, fish and game, and loss of the soil, which in turn



makes scouring, muddy, low quality waters. Clubs like 4-H, Boy and Girl Scouts, Future Farmers of America, and the fraternal or civic organizations often sponsor erection of a major fire prevention sign, supporting competent stewardship of our priceless natural resources.

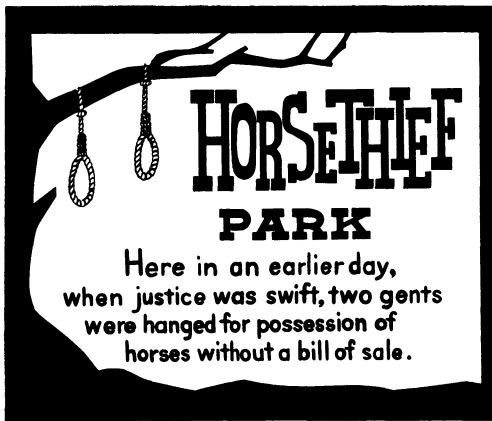
Interpretive signs also appeal to sight and to the emotions. A good interpretive sign may stimulate the mind, help us to understand what we see, or help us to imagine for a minute that we are part of an important past or present event. This enriches our personal experience and makes a visit to strange lands more enjoyable. The historical sign that creates the feeling that "but for the years, I was there" has appealed to the emotions and succeeded in its interpretive mission.

The interpretive sign is the most difficult to make and requires a skilled designer. He first studies the site, then the message or the purpose. He employs many techniques. He knows that the effectiveness and attractiveness of interpretive signs are improved through good headlines, a wise choice of lettering, skillful use of artwork, and professional arrangement of shape and colors. He knows, too, that the design of the sign support and the use of these techniques should complement but never overwhelm the sign's message. The sign, its support, and its placing on the site should be designed in view of these requirements.

Such things as conservation practices, identification of breeds of stock or crops, are being interestingly indicated with

A boundary of public land is pleasingly marked, at the foot of Mt. Dana in California. The sign's shape, colors of cream on brown, trademark lettering for national forest, and arrangements of symbols and identification are standard.





Sketch for an interpretive sign whose deadpan humor is now brightening the day of visitors to the High Rockies.

signs. Tourists like to learn the names of crops which are unfamiliar. A well-planned sign gives Dad a good chance to tell his son, in a knowledgeable way, that that crop he's looking at is peanuts or cotton or seed grass.

The text is the most important design feature of all signs, but far more so for interpretive signs. If you think about it a minute, the text is the reason for the sign's existence. All the other features are designed to exhibit the message in its most effective and pleasing form. So the text must be readable, brief, and above all, accurate. You don't like to be misled by error or otherwise, and neither do I. The text should develop no more than one topic and have a warm tone.

The sign I saw at Horsethief Park in the High Rockies illustrates the brevity, clarity, and effectiveness that are sought in an interpretive sign.

Good headlines attract attention. For example, a sign which interprets a conservation practice, like the place of a pond in a successful farm plan, might be titled "Harvesting Raindrops" rather than "Erosion Control Project." I remember the sign that stood on a dry spot in a marshy area with the message "Swamp Regeneration." This meant a great deal to those who were reclaiming

the land for forest and wildlife habitat, but certainly not to me.

No matter what the sign's job may be, it is wise to use the best materials available at a reasonable cost. To keep costs low, signs should be uniformly standard and simple. A sign does not have to be the gaudiest, the biggest, and the most colorful to be the best one.

Signs and their supports need to be proportionate, well balanced, and constructed with materials which can stand the test of time. There are many good materials for signs and supports.

Wood has proved its worth for many years. It blends naturally with the rural environment. It is attractive, and this must be a component of all signs. It is available, easy to shape, fit, preserve, paint, color, and maintain. Wood is also inexpensive. But it must be used right.

500-Page Handbook

The *Wood Handbook*, Agriculture Handbook No. 72, is available from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D.C. 20402, for \$2.25. Its nearly 500 pages tell the proper ways to use wood, paints, glues, and wood preservatives, among other key tips. Whatever material is used, signs must be maintained to retain their intended usefulness. Rangers have told me that a good sign, kept in good condition, will not be vandalized as readily as one that is poorly maintained.

Signs can be made to serve people in a variety of useful ways, yet complement the beauty of our environment, if there is forethought in planning, skill in execution, and if people really care. Improvements are being made in signmaking to help you to travel safely at the pace you like to go, to find the basic facilities that you need, and to learn more about our wonderful land.

I suppose the test is that if you have arrived at your destination without any difficulty and you have enjoyed the trip, the chances are that the route was well signed—not too much, nor too little, but just right.