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# THE HISTORIC HUNTSVILLE QUARTERLY Of Architecture & Preservation

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## Contents

### ROADSIDE ARCHITECTURE

by Linda Bayer

- 3 Introduction
- 5 The Gasoline Station
- 25 The Motel
- 39 Preservation

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# ROADSIDE ARCHITECTURE

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Crossroads  
store and gas  
pump. Walker  
Evans, 1936.

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by Linda Bayer

The American city—like its European prototype—developed during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a pedestrian city. The densely settled downtowns combined retail and wholesale dealers, professional and governmental offices, churches, theaters, and industry in one centralized area. Residences were an integral part of this mix with families often living above their business while detached or row houses were built immediately surrounding this multipurpose concentration. This informal arrangement of functions was dictated by a lack of efficient modes of transportation and communication which made it a necessity for people and businesses to be in close proximity to each other—ideally within walking distance. Following the Civil War, the cities rapidly increased in population yet the physical limits of the pedestrian city remained constant at two to three miles, the distance a person reasonably could be expected to walk to work. As a consequence, the larger cities became dangerously congested as more and more people crowded into them.

But during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, this historic fabric began to unravel as a result of the introduction of local mass transit in the form of street railways. As tracks were

laid from the city center into the surrounding countryside, the wealthy could escape the chaos of the city and build comfortable suburban homes along the lines of the railway. Cities began to expand beyond the previously imposed boundaries as residential neighborhoods built up on either side of the car lines. The result was a city which still had a congested core of laborers and poor while the wealthy spread out along spokes radiating from this center.

This process greatly accelerated during the early years of the twentieth century with the introduction and mass acceptance of the automobile. For the first time in history people had the means for highly efficient individual travel. No longer did they have to live within walking distance of the downtown or of the streetcar line: with a car, they could choose to live anywhere there were roads. And as more and more people found the means to own an auto, they created a demand for more and better roads. Once again the shape of the city experienced an alteration because the land between the streetcar spokes could be developed for homesites as could land lying at a considerable distance from the downtown.

During the twentieth century, the multitude of functions that once had been

forced into the central business district began to disperse, and as they did so, pressure was exerted by homeowners to segregate land uses through zoning. Specific sections of the city were designated for industrial and wholesale use and for retailing to protect the residential neighborhoods from these incompatible uses. The retail merchants, who were always eager to be convenient to their clientele, began relocating on major streets that offered easy automobile access and convenient parking. The attempt to capture the automobile consumer led merchants first to neighborhood shopping districts, then to retail strips along major streets and highways, and finally to large enclosed shopping malls surrounded by acres of free parking. In short, the layout, shape, functioning, and organization of the American city today has been determined to a major degree by the automobile.

The railroads during the nineteenth century were responsible for the creation of a new type of building—the depot—which had not existed previously. In the same way the automobile has been responsible for a variety not only of new building types but also of new activities which required yet more unique structures. Just a few of these twentieth century types are gasoline stations, tire stores and auto repair shops, motels, drive-in movies, drive-in banks, shopping malls, fast food restaurants and parking garages, not to mention the extraordinary interchanges created as part of the interstate highway system.

Yet for the most part all of these structures of our car culture have escaped serious consideration by preservationists and cultural historians. There are several reasons for this neglect. Roadside architecture is widely perceived as a necessary evil, something we must tolerate in order to maintain our style of life, while its ubiquitous presence lulls us into the belief that it will always be around. However, these structures evolve and then

disappear so quickly that already the earliest examples are becoming exceedingly rare. But probably the characteristic that makes auto architecture most unappreciated is its reliance on loud, assaulting visual images: bright shiny colors and odd shapes seem to scream out for our attention. And indeed that is their very purpose.

This last trait evolved as a direct response to the very specific requirements of high speed individual travel. In the pedestrian city people walked down the streets so they could easily read small signs and window shop; the subtle sales pitch was effective when the customer was on foot. All of this changed when the shopper was in a car moving at high speed; his attention had to be focused primarily on the road so that for anything else to catch his eye it must be highly visible and easily read. Because of this, the highway businessman perfected an architecture based on bright colors, distinctive forms, and huge illuminated signs. In addition to attracting the motorist's eye, this architecture aimed for instant recognition based purely on consistent combinations of shape and color, which explains the popularity of standardized designs and colors for all the buildings of each franchise. The motorist can identify at a glance his brand of gasoline, his favorite hamburger, and his choice of motel—all without reading a single word or taking his eyes from the road.

All the varieties of roadside architecture have been constantly evolving over the last sixty years to reach their present forms, which are even now being refined and altered in response to present day social and economic conditions. Although there are several building types that could be examined to illustrate the origins and adaptations of auto architecture, two of the earliest and most interesting are the gasoline filling station and the motel. The following discussion is by no means definitive; it is meant to serve merely as an introduction to a subject that has been too long neglected.

# The Gasoline Station

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For Americans the automobile was love at first sight. People began buying and driving autos before there were roads to drive them on or filling stations to service them. In 1905 there were 50,000 cars in the United States, but only 13 years later the number had escalated to an astonishing 6.2 million due largely to the constantly decreasing price of Henry Ford's Model T. As the price of the Tin Lizzie approached \$300, Americans took to the road—thereby creating an overwhelming demand for highways and a market for gasoline and other auto-related services and goods. Private enterprise immediately accepted the challenge of supplying the motorist with gasoline and accessories while the federal government began work on a national system of highways following the First World War.

Petroleum had been—until the advent of the automobile—a waste product of the kerosene industry. Almost overnight it was transformed into a highly valued commodity; the immediate problem was how to package it for sale. The fuel was stored at bulk stations, usually on the edge of town, in huge overhead tanks. From there it was gravity fed into tank wagons and pulled by horses to the merchant who sold it by the bucketful. Obviously this method of filling a car

tank was messy and exceedingly dangerous. But a major breakthrough occurred about 1905 when a St. Louis man conceived the idea of equipping a hot water heater with a glass gauge and a piece of garden hose with a faucet. This contraption allowed the gasoline to be fed directly from the storage tank to the car tank. Another man refined this idea further and marketed the gas pump—a storage tank fitted with a pump attached to a self-measuring device. This primitive gas pump made possible the first stage in the development of the retail gas station which was the installation of a pump or two on the curb in front of an existing business. The automobile tank could be filled mechanically from the storage tank, and at night the pump could be locked for security. While this solution marked a definite improvement, it was still dangerous and created a traffic hazard as cars waited in line on city streets to fill up. These curbside stations were banned in most cities after 1920, and only those in rural areas continued in use.

But already an alternative filling station arrangement had evolved which consisted of a city lot supplied with gas pumps connected to underground tanks, a paved or gravel driveway, and a small shed which functioned as an office and

storehouse. These earliest stations were crude affairs and no attempt was made to beautify them because demand for the product exceeded the supply. Nevertheless, this arrangement marked the beginning of the off-street, drive-in gas station and became the prototype for all the varieties of drive-in structures that now characterize our car culture.

Once these basic components of the drive-in gas station were combined during the first decade, the only feature that changed through the years was the manner in which gasoline was marketed. During the teens the discovery of plentiful new oil fields combined with the government ordered breakup of the Standard Oil trust initiated an era of fierce competition among oil companies. No longer was it sufficient to throw up a small shed on a vacant lot; instead each company actively pursued customers by constructing an attractive station in a choice location. In their quest after an ever larger share of the market, station operators began offering additional services such as clean restrooms and free road maps; and oil companies initiated the credit card, which could be used at any station belonging to the company, to encourage customer loyalty to a specific brand.

The first structures designed and constructed specifically for the sole purpose of selling gasoline date from about 1910 while the first chain of gas stations can be dated to 1914 when Standard Oil of California built 34 stations to a standardized design and color scheme, each identified by a common sign. Filling stations began opening at the rate of more than 1000 a year so that by 1920 there were some 15,000 stations in the United States.

From the end of the nineteenth century until 1920, oil companies and retailers were concerned principally with the mechanics of storing and dispensing gasoline. As a new product it required the development of new technologies and new marketing techniques. The technical problems had been mostly solved by 1920 although further refinements in the design

of gasoline pumps continue to be introduced even today with the latest models being computerized. But after 1920 the oil companies focused on marketing techniques, a major part of which involved developing an effective architectural image for their stations that would attract and hold customers.

The influx of major oil companies and their filling stations to Huntsville can be followed through the city directories. The earliest listing for an automobile dealer and parts supplier was the Huntsville Carriage Works and Auto Garage located at the southwest corner of Clinton and Greene streets. This firm apparently had begun as a carriage works and expanded their line to handle autos when they became available; the firm also dispensed gasoline from a 200 gallon tank located behind the building. At this time there were three oil companies in town that presumably sold their gasoline from aboveground tanks at bulk stations on the edge of town. Standard Oil of Kentucky, the first national oil company to establish a distributor in the city, occupied a storage site at the southwest corner of Church and Wheeler. While Huntsville supported only one automobile dealer in 1911, it still had twelve livery and feed stables indicating that autos remained a distinct novelty on local streets.

In fact, automobiles had been trickling into Huntsville for several years but only one or two at a time. It was not until the summer of 1912 that the first train car load of autos arrived—Fords naturally—and the following October the Graham Automobile Company received a Cadillac for exhibition purposes.

This situation did not last long though; by 1916 there were five automobile dealers, two garages, four major oil companies, and two filling stations, while the number of livery and feed stables had dropped to eight. There was also one auto painter, three auto repair shops, and a tire repair company. The two filling stations listed in 1916 were probably the first businesses established

in Huntsville for the retail sale of gasoline at a location separate from the wholesale yard. A Standard Oil filling station was located on West Clinton, and Gulf Oil opened a filling station on East Clinton, neither of which have survived. By 1916 the Texas Company, which later became Texaco, also had established a distributor in Huntsville which was located on the south side of West Holmes at the railroad tracks. This site apparently served for many years as both a wholesale and retail operation although the Texas Company was also very active in leasing filling station sites during the twenties and thirties at a variety of locations around Huntsville.

By 1920 Huntsville could boast of eleven car dealers and seven filling stations, one of which is still in business as the Downtown Chevron station and has the further distinction of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The year 1922 marked the appearance of the first used car dealer in Huntsville with a lot on Washington Street. An unusual station of this decade was the Wocomobile Inn which offered not only gasoline and oil but also tires and accessories, thereby becoming a forerunner of the trend that would later transform the filling station into the full service station. By the start of 1930 five major oil companies had wholesale branches in Huntsville and were distributing gasoline to a series of retail stations scattered along the major streets of town with Madison, Greene and Meridian streets proving the most popular sites.

This rapid proliferation of auto-related businesses during the 1920s reflects the growing demand for cars in Huntsville; at mid decade a local newspaper observed that potential customers were so avid to own a car that they met the incoming train at the depot and drove their new cars away before they could be delivered to the showroom. By 1925 the number of cars on the streets of Huntsville had become so great that the city council was forced to purchase eleven

traffic lights which were installed along Jefferson, Washington, and Greene streets. The first week of operation a man was stationed at each intersection to instruct the motoring public in their proper use.

This sudden enthusiasm for automobile ownership contrasts sharply with the local reception given the first gasoline buggy brought to Huntsville. The Weekly Times reminisced in 1926 about this obviously memorable event:

Just a few years ago on a bright sunshiny morning a peculiar contrivance coughed and snorted its way down Washington Street after making the circuit of the court house square and throwing some score of usually quiet and well-behaved mules into fits of hysterics while so doing.

It was immediately dubbed a Gasoline Buggy and looked upon with deep suspicion by the majority of the population of the town in addition to the mules and staid buggy horses who regarded the machine as a direct infringement upon their positions as the proper means of transportation from place to place about the county and budding little city.

In operation the new invention seemed to merit the distrust and aversion in which it was held as it gave forth a cloud of smoke and vapor, strongly suspicious of the infernal regions while emitting sounds very much like a machine gun in operation while suffering from an acute attack of asthma.

It was the first thing of the kind to make its appearance in the town and did not enjoy any great amount of popularity either then or later as the general impression was that it only awaited a favorable opportunity to blow its self and its passengers to kingdom come without providing the unfortunate and venturesome persons with any return trip ticket from the indefinite destination to which they might so unceremoniously be hastened....

Some years have passed since the sensitive feelings of Madison County mules were disturbed by the first Gasoline Buggy and the aforesaid mules have almost passed from the streets and lanes of the city, but today Huntsville has become almost a city of motors, the records of the county showing that there is about one automobile for each qualified voter of the county of Madison.

The earliest filling stations—those

having curbside pumps or off-street pumps and a primitive shed office—had been located in the downtown areas, but beginning in the 1920s oil companies started relocating in neighborhoods. They wanted corner lots, which provided easy access from two directions, on the best residential streets, and this policy was followed in Huntsville where almost every station site leased during the twenties was on a corner. Correctly predicting that these residential sites would stir neighborhood opposition, the companies consciously designed their stations to resemble small houses in an attempt to minimize their visual intrusiveness. A Huntsville example of neighborhood resistance to the construction of a filling station occurred when C. E. Baxter proposed to erect a station on the northeast corner of Gates and Madison streets in 1926. Attorney Clarence Watts, representing three nearby residents, appeared before the city council to argue that the establishment of a filling station on that site would decrease property values and otherwise prove a nuisance. However this attempt to block construction failed as the station was completed the following year.

Stations from the twenties usually consisted of just a small office and storage room and featured windows and doors of domestic scale and styling. The roof could be extended beyond the facade to form a canopy over the gas pumps, which provided some protection from the weather.

The Downtown Chevron station in Huntsville is a fine illustration of this phase of station design. Built in 1919 by Standard Oil of Kentucky, the Downtown Chevron is most certainly the oldest structure in Huntsville designed and built to sell automotive gasoline. This lot, located at the southeast corner of Clinton and Greene streets, was the type of site the oil companies favored, a corner lot on a predominantly residential street. The design of the station displays a conscious effort to blend with the residential surroundings through the use of red brick,

bungalow type windows, and a low hip-ped roof, all features characteristic of domestic architectural design of the period.

The original station consisted of just the office portion and the tiled canopy roof. Before 1930 most retail outlets were called filling stations because the services they offered were usually confined to the sale of gasoline and oil. The term service station came into use around 1930 when stations expanded to offer a fuller line of automotive services. Obviously a filling station required only a small structure while a full service station needed large specialized work areas; consequently, these first filling stations were often enlarged during the thirties with enclosed service bays such as was done with the Downtown Chevron. Apparently the first phase of this station was built to a standard company design because other stations displaying almost identical features and layout have been discovered. Its diagonal placement on the corner lot represents an early recognition of the special requirements associated with automobile travel and makes it an early example of the drive-in building form.

Each major oil company during the twenties selected a standardized style for their stations that would either blend well with the surrounding neighborhood or rely on historical associations to achieve an acceptable image. Other stations in the domestic mode include the English cottage stations of the Pure Oil Company which featured white stuccoed walls under a steep gabled roof of blue tile. Gable end chimneys, a bay window, round-topped door, and shutters further contributed to the residential appearance. This cozy domestic motif could be completed with window flower boxes and extensive landscaping. Other companies chose styles traditional in their marketing region. Stations in the Northeast quite often featured colonial touches such as fanlights, roof balustrades, cupolas, and even columns and pilasters while Spanish or mission style stations achieved popularity in



Both the Acklin Garage, above, on Meridian Street and the Downtown Chevron, below, on Clinton Street are early examples of cottage-styled filling stations. Both continue in use for auto-related businesses, but Acklin's is located in the proposed path of I-565, making its future uncertain.



California and the Southwest by combining stucco walls, red tile roofs, and arched openings.

The 1931 Huntsville city directory lists fewer than 25 filling stations, but undoubtedly there were other businesses that sold gasoline as a sideline. Two of these filling stations, in addition to the Downtown Chevron, still stand although one has been considerably altered for other uses. Acklin Garage at 801 Meridian Street was constructed in 1927 for the Texas Oil Company. Like the Downtown Chevron, Acklin's was sited diagonally on a corner lot and probably was constructed from a standard company plan since an identical station survives in Montgomery as a dry cleaners. This design also was patterned on the domestic bungalow although the front wall in this case has been opened to glass except for the corner piers.

The other extant Huntsville station that dates from the late twenties is located at the northwest corner of Madison and Williams streets. It was built in 1927 by Shelby S. Fletcher for lease to the Pan American Oil Company and illustrates yet another variation on the "filling station as cottage" theme. The cottage influence is obvious in the stuccoed exterior walls with decorative brick quoins, the steep intersecting gabled roofs, and the size and scale which approximated that of a contemporary house. Most likely the station was further domesticated when new with flowers and plants. The brick veneer that now covers the two street facades was probably added during the fifties when the building was converted into a dry cleaning business. It now houses a church congregation.

Edgar Love, a local architect, is credited with the design of this station; however its close similarity to other stations of the period suggests that his contribution may have been limited to reworking a standard company plan to fit the specific site and the architectural preferences of the community. During construction, a local newspaper referred

to this structure as a "modern drive-in station." It was probably the first full service station erected in Huntsville to have enclosed lubrication and washing floors incorporated as an integral part of the design, thereby marking a distinct departure from the small filling station. The T-shaped plan allowed service bays to the side and rear in addition to the canopy which extended beyond the front wall. Although this station continued the cottage styling while incorporating additional new functions under a continuous roof, the design of stations would undergo a radical transformation during the following decade in response to a new set of conditions within both the industry and society.

One other gas station now standing vacant in Huntsville appears to date from the 1920s based on its architectural design; unfortunately no documentary evidence has been discovered to verify this assumption. The first mention of a station occupying the north side of West Holmes at the railroad tracks occurs in 1940, but it is unlikely that such a station would have been constructed at that late date. A more plausible explanation for this inconsistency may be found in the early marketing strategies pursued by the oil companies.

As they began looking for station sites removed from the downtown area, companies could not be certain which sites would prove financially successful for stations. Part of this uncertainty can be attributed to the lack of any precedent for marketing such a commodity and part to the rapidly fluxuating traffic patterns of the urban landscape. When automobiles first appeared there was virtually no national highway system and only a few unpaved intercity roads because late nineteenth century society had relied totally on the railroads for freight and passenger travel. As the number of automobiles in use increased, their drivers raised an enormous clamor for the construction of adequate roads; and, as this demand was met, traffic patterns shifted so that a



The Pan Am station, above, now serves as a church, while the West Holmes Street station, below, stands abandoned.





prime site for a station one year might be worthless the next when an old street was improved or a new one opened. Company officials were reluctant to make long term commitments to specific sites; instead they developed a two-fold strategy that kept their options open and their station sites mobile. Rather than buying lots, they would lease locations for short terms which permitted them to move to new sites if the first were unsatisfactory.

The second policy frequently employed was the use of pre-fabricated stations which could be quickly installed on a leased lot and could be just as quickly transported to a new location if the first one proved unprofitable. These pre-fab stations, constructed of structural steel, were available in a choice of designs, or an oil company could create a custom station for their exclusive use. Additional advantages of the pre-fab station were its low cost, which allowed a distributor to saturate a large territory with many stations, and its visual versatility, which permitted the structural frame to be veneered with that material most acceptable to each community.

Because this practice of moving filling stations was so widespread, it is entirely reasonable to assume that the West Holmes station was transferred to its present site in the late thirties from a previous location. Although this station has been considerably altered through the years, it still retains the size and configuration that has come to be associated with the early Pure Oil stations which embraced the English cottage motif described earlier.

But there is yet another feature that makes this station of exceptional interest to the historian—the existence of an exterior, unsheltered grease pit beside the building. When filling stations first began offering lubrications and car washing, the work was carried on out-of-doors. A concrete apron would be poured on which cars could be washed, but in order for the mechanic to get under the car to lubricate it, either the car had to be raised or the ground had to be lowered. A common solution, as illustrated here, was to dig a pit or trench below two metal tracks onto which the vehicle was driven. An alternative solution involved elevating the tracks above the ground and fitting them

with an access ramp. These exterior grease pits were in wide use until the mid twenties when rotary lifts operated by air compressors replaced them.

By the end of the decade, the oil companies had begun to provide enclosed bays adjoining the station office for the lubrication and washing floors. These earliest covered bays frequently carried through the architectural design of the station such as was done with the Pan American station at Madison and Williams. But after the mid thirties, bays usually took the form of rectangular, flat roofed boxes located to one side of the station. For example, when the Downtown Chevron station was enlarged by the construction of two bays, they consisted of simple brick boxes under a flat roof and had large multipaned windows set in metal sashes. The only attempt to provide continuity with the original portion of the building was the use of a brick exterior.

Many of the early leases for station sites in Huntsville required the lessor to provide the station and equipment according to plans supplied by the lessee. One such lease from 1929 reveals that the lessor was responsible for constructing one station (type N-2), a fence and a sign post, and for installing three 10 gallon gas pumps, one 1000 gallon underground tank, four 65 gallon lubricating oil tanks, an automobile lift, an air compressor, and various smaller pieces of equipment. For this the Texas Company would pay rent of \$150 per month for ten years. However the rental terms of other leases tended to be considerably lower. During the 1930s the terms were frequently computed on the quantity of gasoline sold each month.

Although the extant 1920s Huntsville stations all fall within the cottage style, this approach to station design was not universal. Another popular method of creating a respectable station involved the introduction of historical architectural styles in a modified form. Obviously a community could not object to a gas station that looked like a miniature replica of the state capitol or the city hall. Probably

the prize for the most blatant attempt to transform the gas station into a temple of civic pride must go to those stations designed as copies of circular Greek temples. The most spectacular of these was a station built in Philadelphia by the Atlantic Refining Company which was an enlargement of the Temple of Lysicrates surrounded by an Ionic colonnade. The architect apparently thought of this creation as a temple to the goddess of internal combustion.

However the most memorable stations were those designed to capture the attention of the motoring public through shock or humor. These stations were usually constructed by independent dealers with each design being unique. Some of the more popular themes exploited were Indian wigwams, Chinese pagodas, airplanes, giant gas pumps, windmills, and mosques.

The lack of any precedent for a commercial building type designed to attract a clientele speeding quickly past in an automobile opened the field to a rash of experiments. The aim of the designer was to create a building that would intrigue the motorist enough to stop and buy goods or services. In their quest to devise an architecture of communication, designers were often attracted to literal or symbolic statements. Food establishments made the greatest use of such devices by offering ice cream in igloos, barbeque in pig-shaped buildings and so forth. But gasoline merchandisers also were responsible for some of the more outlandish constructions that lined our highways during the period between 1920 and 1935. The literal approach favored gas stations built in the shape of gigantic gasoline pumps or emergency oil cans. One series of stations for the Shell Oil Company consisted of large replicas of seashells formed of concrete and set on end.

More frequently though an unrelated object was pressed into service for its symbolic associations which, combined with its eye appeal, created an unforgettable



roadside sight. Lindberg's historic flight across the Atlantic in 1927 made the airplane a highly topical object charged with high-spirited, patriotic feelings. Numerous station owners discovered that a quite serviceable structure could be fashioned from a small plane by using the fuselage as the office and one wing as a canopy over the pumps. Later owners were content to merely place an airplane on the roof of an otherwise unnotable station. In either case the sight of an airplane sitting along the highway definitely attracted attention and subtly symbolized sophisticated, high speed travel.

Another popular theme was based on the Indian wigwam which was believed to summon up the romance of nomadic travel as well as make reference to our own native history. Wigwam villages experienced a brief popularity, particularly in the Southeast for gas station-motel combinations with the station and motel

office in a large wigwam surrounded by a semicircle of smaller wigwam-cabins. The traveler who spent the night in one of these villages could imagine himself braving frontier hardships to explore the countryside while participating vicariously in a recreation of history.

The traditional forms of almost every culture and historical period were modified for use as filling station designs. In these cases the exotic and the unexpected were capitalized on to evoke the romance and mystery of travel, thereby elevating a Sunday drive to the status of a special event. The Chinese pagoda was an especially felicitous form with which to conjure up visions of faraway, exotic lands while producing a building that was totally distinctive. The most fascinating and probably one of the largest of the Chinese gas stations was erected in Mobile, Alabama, in 1926. It displays a blue tiled roof—complete with curled eaves—which extends to form three



parallel canopies, each supported at the front by a single post and massive brackets. Spindework panels along the tops of the windows and an ornately carved spire atop the main roof transform this complex into a true fantasy environment for the mundane sale of gasoline and oil.

The Hat and Boots station in Seattle is a uniquely personal expression of vernacular design as well as an amazing structural feat. The glass office is sheltered under a large red concrete cowboy hat having an extensive cantilevered brim, while the restrooms are housed in a pair of decorated cowboy boots—the blue one for boys and the yellow one for girls. A small free-standing cactus contains electrical outlets and water taps. Truly the wild west survives in south Seattle.

Perhaps the award for the most outrageous station design must go to Mammy's Cupboard located south of Natchez, Mississippi. Constructed during

the 1940s as a combination Shell station and sandwich counter, Mammy's stands 28 feet tall and has a tin torso above a billowing red skirt fabricated of brick.

Unfortunately these imaginative, vernacular stations remained a minor sub-category of roadside architecture. Very few were constructed after 1940, and many of the best earlier examples have already disappeared. Beginning about 1930, the oil companies embarked on a program of producing even more standardized station designs than they had used during the first decade and a half.

By this time automobiles were no longer a novelty but had become an indispensable part of American life; a growing system of highways made intercity and even cross-country individual travel a reality; and the major oil companies were maturing into marketing giants. However the Depression presented them with a new problem: unemployment and low salaries curtailed the ability



Above, Mobile's Chinese station; below, Mammy's Cupboard in Natchez.



of most Americans to travel freely. As the sales of gasoline and oil declined, the distributors looked for new products and services to offer and for new methods of marketing them. One result was that stations began handling tires, batteries and accessories in addition to taking on a wide range of auto repairs that had previously been conducted by local garages. This considerable addition to the line of stock carried by the stations required both expanded display areas and storage space, while extensive repair services further increased the need for large enclosed work bays. These demands were met by altering the shape of the filling station to that of a large rectangular box having the bays, office, restrooms, and storage areas totally integrated under a single roof.

Accompanying this change in function was a corresponding change in company attitude towards the role of station design. The strained economy of the depression years encouraged the oil companies to abandon their policy of appeasing community demands by building attractive stations and replaced it with a hard sell policy. Company officials, anxious to build customer loyalty while expanding their sales territory, adopted standardized designs that would be immediately recognizable and totally associated with their specific brand. This decision was reinforced by each company's desire to further increase sales by saturating their region with numerous stations. The standardized, prefabricated station provided the least expensive method of meeting these goals. Cost economies could be further realized by stripping the station of all extraneous decoration except for one or two highly visible motifs which provided the distinguishing signature. No longer did the station blend innocuously into the neighborhood; it now became a highly visible structure and every effort was directed toward creating an image that starkly contrasted with its surroundings.

Aside from a number of minor aberrations, station design between 1930 and

1960 can be characterized as having a rectangular layout and silhouette, a flat roof, at least two integrated service bays, and a large percentage of glass. Although any exterior material could be used to cover the prefab steel frame, terra cotta was popular during the thirties, to be followed by porcelain enamel and later plastic during the next two decades. All of these materials had glossy surface finishes that were easy to maintain, created a contrast with the more common wood and brick veneers of adjacent buildings, and were highly reflective. This last feature was most desirable because it facilitated night lighting of stations so that the structure itself was transformed into a continuous advertisement for the product.

Porcelain enamel could be manufactured in the vivid colors adopted by the oil companies which allowed the entire building to carry through the company image. One example is the Shell station, the body of which was a beige while the projecting pylon with sign was bright red. Many chains selected white as the basic color, a choice prompted primarily because it was the most visible and the most effective when illuminated at night.

Gas station design in Huntsville during the thirties appears to have been slow to reflect these national trends. Fewer than ten stations were opened during the decade which is reasonable considering the poor state of the local economy. Since 1900 Huntsville had been primarily dependent on the outlying textile mills for its prosperity; however as the effects of the Depression reached town, they were compounded by the growing presence of labor union activity in the mills. The result was that several of the mills permanently ceased operation during the decade while the remainder were shut down for months at a time leaving the city in a precarious situation. Construction of all kinds slowed. New gas station development was delayed because of the resulting decrease in business and because the initial expense of erecting the structures and installing the equipment was

often borne by the local property owner.

A Wofford Oil Company filling station was opened at the southwest corner of Madison and Gates streets in 1930, but this was built by the company and completed before the full impact of the Depression reached Huntsville. The station now standing on this lot appears to be the original one although when built it apparently had an L-shaped hipped roof, one leg of which extended toward Madison Street to form a canopy. The fake chimney on the north wall and the small blue tiled shed roof supported on curled metal brackets above the office appear to be vestigial cottage features. The use of brick facing was a local choice, presumably the more fashionable terra cotta was too expensive for the Huntsville market and was used only in major metropolitan centers. However this station does exhibit the integrated box shape with combined service bays and office that became common in the thirties.

Near the end of the decade a large service station was constructed downtown at the southwest corner of East Clinton and Greene streets. There had been a garage and filling station on this site previously (the Huntsville Carriage Works and Auto Garage), but in 1937 the property changed hands and the new owner leased the lot for five years to the Texas Company of Delaware on the condition that a suitable station be constructed and equipped by the lessor. This station is no longer standing, but from a contemporary newspaper photograph one can discern that considerable change had occurred in shape, size and design of the gas station since the construction of the Wofford station. The complex of office, display space, restrooms, and bays is sited along the two interior lot lines leaving the street sides accessible to autos from either street. Little evidence remains of the once popular cottage styling; in its place is a spare design with a strongly horizontal orientation emphasized by the flat roof and the three closely spaced bands of color that encircle the top of the wall. The

walls themselves are broken by large areas of plate glass, each topped by a band of stubby transoms, a modified Victorian feature retained for ventilation until the age of air conditioning. The station is painted white, and the facade is punctuated by short, truncated pilasters typical of Streamline Moderne styling. In 1942 this station was modestly advertised as "one of the South's largest recapping plants," which accounts for its increased size and demonstrates the expanded role that the filling station had assumed.

While the design of this station merely hints at the Streamline Moderne, other stations of the period were wholly designed in the style although none are known to have been built in Huntsville. The Moderne style reached its peak of popularity during the thirties and was characterized by rounded corners, flat roofs, smooth surfaces, and horizontal lines and composition. By omitting the panels of stylized relief and other purely ornamental features associated with this style, the oil companies could create station designs that gave the general feeling of being stylishly chic yet were cheap to build. The flat roofs, sleek surfaces, and clean composition provided exactly the combination of elements sought by the oil companies to produce small, neat buildings with a machined appearance. The consistent use of the company's colors and logos in conjunction with these designs had the effect of transforming the total structure into a three-dimensional sign for the product, and in the process, became the prototype for future chains of businesses catering to the car culture. In the fifties, McDonald's carried this concept to its ultimate conclusion by actually designing a sign capable of housing the preparation and sale of inexpensive hamburgers.

During the following two decades, new and renovated stations assumed the characteristics that are probably most commonly associated with gas station design: the shiny box of porcelain enamel and glass displaying a distinctive design



The Dudley Powell Texaco station, above, built in the late thirties has now been replaced by a Firestone store, the third automobile-related structure on this site. The Wofford Oil station, below, opened in 1930, later became a Pure Oil station, and now sells Union 76.



feature that immediately identifies the brand of gas being sold. Many such stations are still in operation in Huntsville.

Stations of the Chevron Oil Company display stark white walls topped with a band of deep blue which outlines both the building and the flat rectangular canopy. Phillips 66 has used a design that features a soaring V-shaped, or butterfly, canopy supported near its outermost extension by an exposed metal framework, which also carries the company sign on top.

Citgo also utilizes white exterior panels but accents them with adjoining bands of red and orange, the company colors. A flat rectangular canopy is again present, but the defining feature here is a skyline motif created by the partial extension of the wall separating the office and service bays, which carries the Citgo sign well above the station. By making the main plane of this pylon perpendicular to the street, the sign is easily identified at a distance by traffic approaching from either direction.

Shell stations used a similar device but flared the sides of the panel as it rose above the roofline so that it was widest at the top where the Shell insignia was placed. These Shell stations could be further distinguished by their beige primary color trimmed along the bottom with a ribbon of bright red and by the small, flat eaves that projected above the office.

Most of these stations dating from the forties and fifties did not have canopies when they were constructed, although many stations have added them since 1960. Canopies have gone in and out of fashion during the evolution of gas station design, although they always retained a certain degree of popularity and use in the southern states to provide relief from the sun. Some station owners were once convinced that many women drivers were reluctant to drive beneath them and consequently abandoned their use on that ground. In the last twenty years the canopy has again come into vogue, partly because it provides an ideal field for

advertising.

By the sixties, the design of gas stations, as well as their general overall appearance, had become the target of widespread derision and hostility. Public opposition to gas stations, which the oil companies had worked so hard to avoid in the twenties, finally became an issue the companies could no longer avoid. One example will suffice to illustrate the low regard in which stations had come to be held; John Kenneth Galbraith attacked the gasoline service station as

the most repellent piece of architecture of the past two thousand years. There are far more of them than are needed. Usually they are filthy. Their merchandise is hideously packaged and garishly displayed. They are uncontrollably addicted to great strings of ragged little flags. Protecting them is an ominous coalition of small businessmen and large. The stations should be excluded entirely from most streets and highways. Where allowed, they should be franchised to limit the number, and there should be stern requirements as to architecture, appearance, and general reticence.

This general low esteem, combined with increasing local opposition to the construction of new stations on lucrative sites, forced the petroleum industry to reassess station design. Before long a new type of station, referred to as a "blend-in," appeared. Its most common form was the ranch-style copied after the ranch houses of California which combined natural materials in earth colors with gently sloping roofs and extensive overhanging eaves. Shell introduced the first of these stations in California in 1960. They have since spread throughout the rest of the country, and in Huntsville, Standard, Exxon, and Shell have constructed numerous such stations. Coinciding with this movement was a return to the use of extensive landscaping around the station as a further means of softening its intrusive qualities and appeasing the neighbors.

Other oil companies adopted similar solutions to mitigate public opposition.



Three decades of Shell station design which typify the national trends:



top, nineteen-fifties; middle, nineteen-sixties; bottom, late nineteen-seventies.



Texaco added a mansard roof to their stations in the mid sixties and introduced a stone facade (usually of plastic). Sunoco returned once again to the early American theme by the addition of a traditional hip-ped or gabled roof, cupola, reduced window size, and the use of brick, in place of enamel or plastic, for exterior cladding.

Regardless of the exact means selected to achieve an improved image, the result was that during the sixties the oil companies had reverted to building stations that relied for their composition and surface materials on the contemporary housing industry. After a three decade experiment with the creation of a unique building type in which functional requirements were given modern industrial solutions, the major oil companies returned to their policy of the twenties which adapted existing building types to their specific purposes. The "station as house" returned and was dressed in the materials of residential construction such as brick, stone and natural wood.

However, this historical progression typifies only the activities of the major oil retailers. The independents—the local jobbers and the regional distributors—handled station design in a different manner, one that reflected their own special approach to selling gasoline. Their marketing policy depended on selling only gasoline and oil, and perhaps some candy and cigarettes, at reduced prices. To do so, they refused to offer automobile accessories, repair services, credit card sales, or the other promotional tactics favored by the national brand dealers. Consequently they had no need for a fancy structure; a station large enough to house an attendant, a few sundry items, and the restrooms was sufficient and resulted in the filling station as "small box" of which there are a multitude of variations. The earliest stations of these retailers often displayed above-ground storage tanks on the lot, although these are seldom seen anymore. Still commonly encountered, however, are the series of advertising billboards that

delineate the rear of the station lot and the "strings of ragged little flags." These stations often are fondly remembered—at least by children—for their propensity to display lines hung with velvet paintings of The Last Supper, chenille bedspreads emblazoned with peacocks, and inflated plastic toys. As with the major oil retailers, these stations sometimes added a flamboyant canopy to further elicit motorist response.

The most recent phase of gas station design was prompted by changes within the petroleum industry, in this case by a shortage of gasoline and the resultant escalation of prices. Within the last decade the most important factor in retailing has become price competition. In an effort to reduce overhead to its lowest level, the major companies have begun producing stations that consist essentially of an enormous canopy with a small cage attached for the attendant and his cash register. A shelter for restrooms and vending machines may be located off to one side of the lot as an independent structure. Gone are the sale and installation of tires, batteries and other accessories; gone also are minor repair services; and finally, gone is the man to pump gas and clean windshields. The driver must perform all services himself and then pay the cashier.

Ironically this latest development completes the cycle back to the stations of the first decade which were nothing more than a modest shed and some gas pumps. A concurrent development is the proliferation of establishments composed of several pumps combined with a quick stop food store. This station is, of course, nothing but an updated version of the earliest stations where an already existing businessman, often the grocer, placed a pump on the curb as an extra added service for his customers.

This outline of gas station design and marketing techniques describes a complete cycle beginning with curbside and shed stations, progressing through the cottage stage to reach an apex during the

fifties with the porcelain box, then returning to the station as house, and ending where it all started with the stripped filling and curbside stations of today.

What will come next is impossible to say, but it will be directly influenced by conditions within the petroleum industry and by the attitudes and habits of the motoring public. The only thing that can be stated with certainty is that rapid changes in design and retailing will continue to occur.

Those industries that are directly dependent on the driving public for their

business are the most adaptive and most quick to respond to alterations in their product, their clientele, and their environment. The relatively small size of their structures allows these businesses to remain fluid and immediately responsive to the slightest shift in conditions. This feature is the very essence of the franchise and chain highway business, and explains why the study of this segment of our built environment must be documented and recorded as it occurs: by tomorrow it may be only a memory or a vacant lot.



#### COVER PHOTO

Looking west along Clinton Avenue about 1926. Although the automobile has obviously become the dominant form of transportation, the horse has not entirely disappeared. A curbside pump is just visible on the left, and the new traffic lights are prominently displayed.

#### PHOTO CREDITS

Huntsville Public Library: cover and pages 19 (top), 24, 28, 35 (top), and 36.  
El Rose Motel postcard courtesy of Patricia Ryan.  
All other photographs by Linda Bayer.



# The Motel

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It took very little time for the first car owners to discover the pleasures of motoring, not just across town, but to the next state and even to the far coast. Growing numbers of tourists were undeterred by impassable highways or by a singular lack of accommodations for sleeping and eating.

They embraced these new challenges as a grand adventure and in the process created a new recreation—motor camping. Before 1920 auto travelers making long trips had two alternatives for board and lodging; they could stay in hotels or they could camp by the roadside. The first option was frequently rejected which meant that camping became the increasingly popular choice of early autoists.

There were a host of reasons why city center hotels were unacceptable to the motoring public. These mostly nineteenth century hotels had been built to serve travelers who arrived by train; consequently they were located either near the depot or in the heart of the downtown. In either case they provided no convenient parking and required the motorist to drive through congested traffic on unfamiliar streets to reach them. After a hard day's drive over unpaved roads, few drivers were in any mood to search out the local hotels, and the prospect of having to

navigate a plush lobby in their disheveled condition further deterred tired motorists.

They also objected to hotels because they found them to be old, dirty and crowded. The majority of the hotels had been constructed during the second half of the nineteenth century as the railroad network was being built across the country, and apparently, few had been well maintained or renovated since. Reports of contemporary travelers were unanimous in complaining of filthy, stuffy rooms of shabby appearance with inoperative plumbing.

Furthermore, the hotels had been designed for and catered to an almost exclusively male clientele who did not expect more than a small room with bed. Consequently hotels provided little in the way of private amenities and much in public facilities such as lobbies, meeting and dining rooms, smoking areas, and so forth, most of which were off-limits to women. The majority of early touring groups tended to be families who naturally felt very out-of-place in these surroundings. This traditional clientele also had an ill effect on the hotel dining room where the chef was accustomed to serving meals composed almost entirely of red meat and starch, a diet objected to by female travelers, especially since it was reported to be

abominably prepared and served. If one stayed at a hotel, one was expected to eat in the dining room as meals were included in the bill and there existed few alternatives.

Early motorists also complained at length that the service they received from hotel employees was nothing short of rude. Automobile travel before 1920 was in an open vehicle over unpaved, either muddy or dusty, roads and required much tire changing and on-site repairing. It was definitely not clean and motorists quickly adopted informal dress, often khakis, as appropriate garb. Consequently when they pulled up at the hotel entrance, tourists looked anything but respectable by contemporary standards. Bellhops and clerks wanted nothing to do with them, although they still expected their tip. And the dress code required by the hotels, black tie for dinner, meant that motorists had to carry two sets of clothes so that they could change every night.

And finally motorists objected to the enforced scheduling that a hotel stay dictated. Travelers were forced to accommodate their day of touring to fit the arbitrary hours of the hotel dining room. This often meant that they got a late start and had to stop early. The rigid schedule permitted no time to dawdle at a particularly pleasant site. When staying at hotels, the motorist had to make the next town in time to get a room and clean up for dinner because there was no place to stay between towns.

One reason so many people abandoned the trains and took to the highways was so they could make their own schedules and routes. They were enamored of the idea of having the personal freedom to come and go when they pleased and where they pleased. The city hotels with their rigid schedules, outmoded dress codes, bad food, and inhospitable atmosphere and service effectively convinced hordes of Americans to try camping as a preferable alternative.

As campers they could stop along the road and set up camp to suit their own

whims. They could dress in a casual manner and did not have to worry about grooming. They purchased fresh produce and milk from local farmers and prepared simple food at their campsites. They became gypsies of the road, thumbing their noses at lingering Victorian dictates. They lived out-of-doors and forgot, if only briefly, about their regimented daily lives at home. And they could visit those sections of the country not traversed by the railroads: the entire country was at last at their disposal.

For a short time auto camping worked well, so well that more and more people tried it. Before long its very popularity began to create serious problems. There were too many campers; they were littering the countryside, damaging private property, and taking food without permission. The farmers, who at first had welcomed them hospitably, became irate and forbid campers the use of their land. Barbed wire and no trespassing signs went up.

At this point a solution appeared, the free municipal auto camp. Although the prototype constructed in Denver in 1915 offered 800 campsites spread over 160 acres and a three-story clubhouse, the majority of such camps were much simpler and smaller. The typical small town camp consisted of 10 to 15 acres and might supply safe water, privies, electric lights, a central kitchen, cold showers, or a laundry room with washboards and tubs.

The municipal camp successfully separated the tourists from the increasingly hostile natives and succeeded in protecting the countryside from the ravages of hungry campers. However it offered advantages to the local community as well. Merchants believed that the tourists would spend money at local stores during their visit in return for free camping, and the Chamber of Commerce expected to gain valuable good publicity for their town by word of mouth. Some communities even hoped that tourists, after a brief stay, would be so taken with the town that they would decide to settle there per-

manently.

These camps were usually sponsored by local civic clubs, often in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce which, at that time, was generally responsible for the community's tourism program. With an estimated 9 million persons auto camping in 1921, every town on a major route was anxious to capture its share of touring campers. At the start of the decade, the touring population was composed predominantly of middle and upper class families, those who could afford to purchase an automobile. These people were upstanding, gainfully employed members of their community who could afford to stay at hotels but chose not to. They had firm ties to school, church, and other societal groups but opted to abandon them temporarily to become highway vagabonds, just as backpackers today, equipped with the most expensive gear, seek an alternative to the restrictions and pressures of daily life. This first generation of campers was viewed as a very desirable segment of society.

Huntsville in 1920 was a prosperous town of over 20,000 persons (including the outlying mill villages) that was eager to improve its prospects by capturing a share of this presumably lucrative tourist trade. The previous year the Chamber of Commerce, which spearheaded civic drives to attract industry and tourism, had published an impressive 27-page booklet extolling the town's great past progress and its unexcelled future opportunities for industrial expansion and increased settlement. Entitled "Happy Hustling Huntsville," this publication also made a strong appeal to prospective tourists by providing detailed highway guides for driving to nearby cities. In the day before the free highway map, each local Chamber or auto club would publish written descriptions of the best routes out of town. The following excerpt from Huntsville's 1919 guide reveals in vivid detail the conditions of highway travel at that period.

## AUTO ROUTE: HUNTSVILLE TO FLORENCE 68 Miles

Via Athens, Rogersville and Killen. Gravel, stone and dirt roads, most of which are in poor shape. This is a section of the Mussel Shoals Highway.

### Mileage

- 0 HUNTSVILLE, Washington & Holmes Sts. Go west on Holmes St. Cross R.R. at 0.4. 9.9 Fork; keep left with poles. 13.0 Four-corners; straight thru. Cross small ford 15.3. Avoid left hand road 23.0 keeping ahead on dirt road.  
LEFT AT 23.0 IS ROUTE TO DECATUR.
- 24.1 Four-corners; turn left onto West Washington St. Cross R.R. 24.2.
- 24.4 ATHENS, Washington and Jefferson Sts., court house in square on right. Straight thru (west) on Washington St. Cross long iron bridge over Elk River 39.5.
- 43.5 ROGERSVILLE, Four-corners. Straight thru. 48.2 Three corners, bear left with travel. Cross long iron bridge 48.3, curving left and right with road immediately beyond. Thru four corners 49.7, passing store on right. Cross long iron bridge 51.3.
- 53.7 CENTER STAR. Straight thru. Avoid right-hand road 57.4.
- 58.3 KILLEN. Three-corners. Bear slightly left. Cross long iron bridge 60.5. Cross RRs. 66.6-66.8-66.9. End of road 67. Turn right. 67.2. Left hand road; turn left with travel into East Tennessee St. Cross trolley 67.6.
- 68.0 FLORENCE. Tennessee and Court Sts., court house in square on left.

At Florence call on M. T. Jacobs, executive secretary of the Florence Chamber of Commerce for logs and correct highway information.

In 1919 the local Chamber of Commerce estimated that 250 touring cars passed through Huntsville daily. Although the town was able to offer accommodations in the new (1915) Twickenham Hotel, the civic leaders announced

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“...one of the unique aspects of the modern American highway is that it has now become the place where we spend more and more of our leisure. It plays the role which Main Street or the Park or the Courthouse Square used to play in the free time of our pedestrian predecessors: the place where we go to enjoy ourselves and spend our leisure hours. Never was the lure of the open road so powerful, so irresistible as now; for merely to be on a highway, entirely without a destination in view, is to many of every class and age a source of unending pleasure.”

J. B. Jackson, 1956.



in early 1921 their intention of establishing a municipal tourist camp to be in operation that spring. The site selected was roughly where Huntsville Hospital now stands, which would be located along the main north-south road through Huntsville. The sponsors of this project, which included the Chamber and the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, planned to install sanitary fixtures and electric lights for the use of touring campers. Information on this campground is scarce, but it was apparently closed by 1924—as were many other municipal camps across the country.

The free municipal camps had a very brief life as serious problems developed almost immediately. The spectacular increase in automobile registrations during the early twenties—from 4.6 million in 1917 to 19.2 million in 1926—indicates that cars were no longer the exclusive privilege of the well-to-do, and an active trade in used cars also began during this period which brought autos within the means of many blue collar employees and even of some migrant workers.

This development had a two-fold impact on the municipal camps. First, because so many families were taking advantage of the camps, the camps became crowded, noisy, and regimented. They turned into congested tent cities. Camping ceased to provide an escape from the hassles of city life because all of the annoyances were being transported to the campgrounds.

The second problem occurred when people who could not afford to stay at hotels began camping. During the twenties a whole population of permanent vagabonds emerged, people who had no homes, no jobs, and little money. They took advantage of the free lodging offered by the municipal camps and only moved on when threatened by local officials. These undesirables filled the camps thereby discouraging the more affluent campers who began looking for other ways to spend their leisure time.

The camps were beset by other disap-

pointments. Originally the merchants and civic leaders had supported the camp idea as a way to build increased retail trade; but they found that even the most affluent campers showed little inclination to spend money while on vacation. Even more serious were the health problems. Although one reason for opening the camps had been to assure a safe water supply, state health officials soon discovered that the sanitary conditions in at least half of the camps were unsafe. The drinking water was polluted and wastes were not being disposed of properly. Health officials demanded that the camps be improved or closed.

Local governments, already discouraged by how little the camps had met their grand expectations, were averse to spending yet more money on them. A few towns imposed a small fee, usually 50¢, as a means of both deterring undesirable campers and collecting money with which to upgrade the facility. Some cities instituted a registration for campers, and others imposed a time limit on the length of individual stays.

None of these steps were really successful, and the imposition of a fee opened the field of campground operation to private enterprise. Several cities escaped the camp business by simply turning their camps over to private operators who were free to set fees and establish regulations. Los Angeles pioneered the private campground concept by opening thirty of them in 1925. The private campground could attract the paying tourist with ever more luxurious facilities, and it was not long before some began offering crude cabins so that the tourist could leave his tent at home.

When small cabins replaced tent sites, the complex became known as a cabin camp. Probably the first opened in Douglas, Arizona, in 1913, although cabin camps did not become widespread until the late twenties when the municipal camps had disappeared. Advances in lodging facilities for motorists were generally pioneered in the West where the

hotels were the worst and the weather was the most conducive to year-round touring.

The earliest cabins had been constructed either to make touring practical during the rainy season or to upgrade conditions at destination camps where travelers could be expected to stay a week or longer. Camp owners soon realized that the cabins were popular with tourists even during good weather because they permitted less arduous touring if there were no tent to set up and take down each day. Camp owners were happy to oblige because they realized they could charge more for these improved accommodations.

The earliest cabins, in effect the start of the motel industry, were truly crude affairs being not much more than frame tents with dirt floors. The tourist was still expected to supply his own bedding and furnishings. But as it became apparent that travelers would pay for increased amenities, beds, benches, a table, and maybe a hot plate began to be supplied. The cabin itself gradually became more substantial, and they started to appear even at through camps where motorists normally stayed only one night en route to their destination. As the quality of the cabins and furnishings improved, the camps began to attract those travelers who had resisted the camping impulse and continued to patronize hotels. This influx of an affluent, comfort-conscious clientele spurred further improvements in early motel design, which gradually led to the cottage court.

The Huntsville city directories do not list any motels prior to 1943. The fact that Huntsville could offer three modern twentieth century hotels (one of which, the Russel Erskine, had a basement garage) may have contributed to the late appearance of local motels. And although the city leaders were eager to build a tourism trade, the town was not ideally located for it.

The cabin camps have virtually vanished except for a few obscure ex-

amples. This author had the dubious pleasure of patronizing one of these survivors several summers past in an area so remote that it will never attract a Holiday Inn. This camp was opened in 1935 although the cabins predate it by an indeterminate number of years as they were constructed originally for use in the surrounding gold mines. After the mines were closed, the vacant cabins were moved to the site of a natural hot spring to be rented to hunters and fishermen.

The camp now consists of eight small cabins lined up in groups of four along either side of a dirt road that bisects the camp. At one end is a small toilet facility and beyond it the clubhouse which contains the restaurant, a pool table, a selection of candy and cold drinks, the one telephone, and a 50-gallon barrel on its side which serves as the mail box. Two gas pumps are adjacent to the clubhouse. Behind this complex is the bathroom which contains three sunken concrete-walled tubs of very hot water, which are filled and drained once each day.

Each cabin is a rectangular frame building, roughly 8 by 12 feet, with a gabled, shingled roof and chimney for the wood stove used to heat the interior. The only ventilation is supplied by the unscreened door and one small window so that the interior is dark even on the sunniest day. The walls are painted dark green—probably in 1935—and the furnishings consist of a cast iron double bed, one straight chair, a fold-down wooden table, the wood stove and fuel box, and a single bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. A picnic table is provided beside each cabin. Barrels along the road in front of each cabin are used to burn trash each morning. The only vegetation is a few trees so that in dry weather everything is covered with a layer of dust stirred up by the vehicles passing along the dirt road.

Although this cabin camp was established after the period of their peak popularity, it typifies the type of accommodations that were provided in the late



twenties.

While these primitive cabins sound less than attractive today, they offered those features that distinguished motel from hotel design and that were responsible for the tremendous growth of the motel industry following the Second World War. First, tourist camps were located at the edge of town along the major through highways rather than in the center of downtown so they were easy to locate and reach. Because this outlying land was cheaper and because most early tourist camps were operated as family businesses, rates remained considerably below those of the hotels. Free parking was conveniently located at the front door of each cabin. And finally, tourist camps were informal: dusty motorists did not have to undergo public scrutiny while passing through a formal lobby; they did not have to cope with desk clerks or tip bellboys; and they did not have to dress up because the arrangement of individual cabins allowed privacy of movement. Camps had the further advantage of offering fresh air and a homelike ambience

inside the cabins because (unlike hotel rooms) they were usually decorated or furnished by a woman.

The next step in the evolution of the motel involved the transformation of the cabin camp into the cottage court. The drive to upgrade the cabins resulted in larger, more substantial structures that were winterized for year-round use. Operators made a conscious effort to attract middle class tourists by offering units that resembled the contemporary suburban housing of cottages and bungalows. In 1937 the trade organization of the motel industry admonished operators to stress luxury rather than economy. Their advice to provide tiled baths, carpeting, twin beds with good mattresses, air conditioning, and swimming pools indicates just how much progress had been achieved during the thirties.

A curious footnote is that the construction and home furnishings industries quickly discovered the sales value of having their products featured in motels. A great many people were first introduced to such new products as flush toilets, air

conditioning, wall-to-wall carpeting, interspring mattresses, and vinyl flooring while staying at motels. The manufacturers were confident that once consumers had experienced these goods they would buy them for their own homes.

At the same time that the term cottage came to replace cabin, court replaced camp and reflected the common arrangement of cottages in either a U- or L-shape. This configuration created a public space in the center of the cottages, which was often landscaped, but because it was out-of-doors, it retained an informal, casual atmosphere that appealed to the paying guests.

An amenity that became popular after 1930 was the private garage attached to each cottage. Tourists appreciated this feature for security reasons but also because they were still protective of their cars. Court operators recognized that garages decreased the number of units that could be constructed on a piece of land, but client preference forced the courts to retain garages until after World War II when escalating land prices and construction costs provided an excuse to eliminate them.

During the 1920s cottages or cabins had been treated as separate units with open space between them. This arrangement continued into the thirties although these units were often larger because of the attached garages. It was not until the forties that the continuous motel became common with the units attached to each other to create one long structure. These first connected cottage courts maintained the appearance of separate units by retaining the individual rooflines. If garages were still present, the facade would alternate living units with garage openings, each unit visually distinct by its roofline. This arrangement was not only convenient for the guest but provided far greater privacy than was possible once motel rooms became separated by nothing more than a thin wall.

This privacy was particularly appreciated by unmarried couples who

created problems for the motel industry. The "bounce-on-the-bed" trade was quite profitable since the same room could be rented more than once a day, and as a rule, these customers caused no trouble. However they provided a target for attack by those groups anxious to discredit the motel industry, principally the national association of hotel owners which viewed the motels as unfair competition. In a particularly notorious article written by J. Edgar Hoover in 1940, he labeled tourist courts as "dens of vice and corruption" haunted by nomadic prostitutes, hardened criminals, white slavers, and promiscuous college students. Such vicious attacks were prompted by the growing popularity of motels with the traveling middle class.

Huntsville opened its first tourist courts during the early forties with two motels located on Meridian Street north of Oakwood Avenue. Meridian at this time was the major road out of Huntsville to the north and was designated as U. S. Route 241, making it an obvious location for motels. The Maple Grove Tourist Camp and the Paradise Tourist Court were both in operation by 1943, and the first of these is still open although the second has disappeared. The changing terminology for tourist facilities can be followed by examining the listings for Maple Grove. In 1943 it was a tourist camp; four years later it was called Maple Grove Tourist Cottages; and by 1953 it had become the Maple Grove Motel, the name it still carries.

The Maple Grove Motel has a single driveway off Meridian which makes a full circle creating a grassy courtyard in the middle. Two rows of units placed perpendicular to the street face each other across this exterior public space. The office and manager's home are located in a brick house at the far end of the courtyard facing the street so that the whole complex now forms a U-shape. However the two rows of units were built at different times and consequently reflect subtle changes in motel design. The northern group of



Maple Grove Motel illustrating two early phases of motel design.



seven units is actually broken into two sets, one of three and the other of four rooms. These units are typical of 1940s tourist court design having garages alternating with rooms in a continuous facade. Each brick cottage is identified by an individual gabled roof, and these are connected by the flat roofs that cover the garages. Further continuity is provided by an unbroken roof which runs across the facade below the gable ends to provide protection for guests while passing from the cottage to the car.

The southern row of units is of frame construction, without garages, and patrons park parallel at their front doors. These units are more integrated although there still exist minor variations in the roofline as the gabled roof (with ridge running parallel to the facade) shifts elevation slightly every unit or two. Each doorway is marked by a small curved hood.

A third Huntsville tourist court constructed during the late forties was the Monte Plaza on the west side of Whitesburg Drive between Longwood and Marshcutz. Although this motel is no longer standing, a photograph of it reveals an attractive complex of adjoining units, without garages, under a low gabled roof. Great care was obviously taken to create a home-like atmosphere for this motel. The units are staggered in groups of two which breaks the roofline and imparts variety to the facade. The roof extends beyond the front wall to create a sheltered walkway in front of the rooms while paired windows provide plenty of light and ventilation. There is no parking at the door because the front area has been planted with grass and bushes while trellises along the walkway unite the landscape and building.

The 1950s were a boom period for motel construction both nationally and in Huntsville. The federal interstate highway program was begun in 1956, and it opened unlimited new territory for motels while making obsolete many older courts when through traffic was moved to

a new highway. And the 1954 tax code further encouraged new construction of motels while limiting their life expectancy thereby creating a cycle of short term ownerships marked by repeated renovations.

In Huntsville local expansion contributed to an increase in motel construction. The reactivation of Redstone Arsenal and the relocation of the German rocket scientists to the city initiated a period of spectacular growth. Everything was in short supply including motels and housing. Old roads were improved and new ones built. With the opening of Memorial Parkway in 1955, the motels along Meridian and Whitesburg lost their prime locations. In 1953 there were nine motels in town, six of which were located on Meridian Street; all of these early motels were small, locally owned businesses. But when motel construction started along the Parkway and Governors Drive, these new motels were frequently part of large national chains.

As might be expected, the motel industry underwent drastic alterations during this decade. One design change, which first appeared in the late forties, resulted in the creation of the motor court. The motor court evolved naturally from the cottage court and was distinguished by a single, unbroken roofline that totally integrated all the rooms into one large structure. Motor courts were single story buildings, usually with the office and perhaps a small public area or coffee shop located at the end nearest the road. Another change dating from this period was the widespread acceptance of the word motel; although it had been in use for years, motel did not become common terminology until the fifties.

The El Rose Motel on Meridian Street appears to be the first true motor court in Huntsville. Although now vacant and badly vandalized, the El Rose illustrates this period of motel design with its L-shaped building sited with the long leg perpendicular to the street. The single roofline unites the flat repetitive facade of



The Monte Plaza Motel, above, and the El Rose Motel, below.





doorways and windows. The interior of the L is paved so that parking can be at the room. The office on the street end is marked by large panes of glass, and the sign still stands although it has been painted over.

Motel construction in Huntsville during the early fifties continued the tradition of mom-and-pop businesses on sites along Meridian Street. Some were fairly primitive such as the Wake Robin Motel which advertised "Comfort without Extravagance." Other motels along Meridian were the Huntsville (now the Bentley) and the Skyline. The Bon Air Motel also dates from this period and continues in operation today although its time may be limited as it is scheduled for demolition when I-565 is built.

Other local examples of the motor court, these dating from the middle of the decade, were the Goldenrod Motor Lodge on South Parkway and the Charron Motel on North Parkway. These were both L-shaped brick structures of almost identical design having a circular driveway and parking at the door. Neither apparently offered additional amenities such as a coffee shop or swimming pool.

By the mid fifties the next phase in the evolution of the motel had already appeared—the motor inn. Compared with the motor courts, these inns were larger and more luxurious. Motor inns usually consisted of a complex of two-story structures arranged to create a center courtyard with swimming pool. They had a

greatly expanded amount of interior public space, often including a lobby, coffee shop, bar, dining room, and meeting rooms. Guest rooms were spacious and furnished with two double beds, a television, and a dressing area separate from the bath and toilet. Air conditioning became standard. The number of guest rooms doubled as they were now placed back-to-back with the utilities housed in a central core between them so that half the rooms faced onto the courtyard while the other half faced away. Naturally parking at the door was no longer possible for most of the rooms, and paved lots were provided around the perimeter of the complex.

Buildings on this scale eliminated the small businessman who could neither finance nor manage such an operation. The motel industry was transformed during the fifties by the entrance of giant national chains, which quickly dominated the business. Holiday Inn, Downtowner, Howard Johnson, Quality, Ramada, Rodeway, and Sheraton all had their start as franchise motel chains during the fifties and early sixties. Suddenly motel design began to exhibit those characteristics associated with highway businesses. Standardized designs and colors were used for all the motels of each chain whether they were located in Maine or Oregon. Large garish neon signs were placed along the highway, and room furnishings were purchased by the carload. The motel chains aimed for immediate motorist recognition



as had the gas stations before them.

Standardization also assured the tourist of the quality of accommodations he would find when traveling in an unfamiliar region. Previously the custom had been to inspect a motel room before agreeing to rent it, but this practice ceased with chains because the traveler knew exactly what to expect after having stayed

once. Brand identity became as important to the motel industry as it was to the gasoline industry.

Because Huntsville at mid decade had a rapidly expanding population and market as well as a new parkway, the city began to attract motel chains. The first was Holiday Inn which constructed a motor inn on the west side of South

Parkway. The company later built a second inn across the Parkway from the first, even later yet abandoned both, and in the last decade, constructed a third motel, this time on University Drive. Motel construction boomed during the fifties, increasing from five motels in 1951 to 24 in 1961. Another ten motels were added by 1966 including a Sheraton and a Howard Johnson.

The most recent phase—but assuredly not the last—of motel design is the highway hotel. As the name implies, the motel has finally come full cycle by recreating the hotel. These complexes, typified by the Hilton in downtown Huntsville, are composed of multiple floors reached by interior elevators from a large, formal lobby featuring a hotel-style registration desk. Parking is relegated to a lot behind the building or to a parking garage, and the tourist no longer has private access to his room. Public spaces once again make up a large portion of the interior, taking the form of cocktail lounges, multiple restaurants, conference facilities, and gift shops. Swimming pools are a must. And finally as with the local Hilton, highway hotels are not necessarily located on the highway anymore as many have moved back downtown.

The movement, begun in the teens, to find an alternative to the city center hotel that would satisfy the needs of the new motoring public has at last culminated in the re-creation of the hotel itself. But this is not the last word; changes will continue. Already Homotel is spreading throughout Texas and Arizona. The Homotel offers suites, rather than rooms, that are reached directly from an interior atrium, and each suite is furnished for home-style living with a fully equipped galley kitchen and a separate bedroom. The increasingly luxurious and expensive accommodations offered by motel chains during the last two decades have spurred a movement towards more spartan accommodations aimed at the economy-minded. One of the leaders of this reaction has been Motel 6 which offers clean but simple rooms without excess amenities at a price well below that available elsewhere. And finally, there has been a resurgence during the last decade of campground facilities for those eager to tour at the lowest possible cost.

As with the petroleum industry, the motel industry will continue to reevaluate the demands and habits of the traveling public and restructure its facilities to meet these constantly varying conditions.



# Preservation

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The automobile is European by birth, American by adoption....The transformation of the automobile from a luxury for the few to a convenience for the many was definitely an American achievement, and from it flowed economic and social consequences of almost incalculable magnitude. The American automobile industry has grown into the largest manufacturing operation in the world...and American life is organized predominantly on the basis of the universal availability of motor transportation.

John Rae, in the opening paragraph of "The American Automobile," states the case succinctly: American culture and society of the twentieth century cannot be understood or evaluated without placing the automobile squarely in the middle of such considerations. For this reason, future generations of architectural historians will undoubtedly regard auto-generated structures as among the most important artifacts of our age. It would be a shame if we were so short-sighted that we failed to preserve and document this significant segment of our built environment.

It has been almost fifty years since Henry Russell Hitchcock, the preeminent architectural historian, wrote: "The combination of strict functionalism and bold symbolism in the best roadside stands provides, perhaps, the most encouraging

sign for the architecture of the mid-twentieth century." Yet for the most part we still ignore these structures when evaluating the contemporary architectural scene. We have become too accustomed to judging architecture on the basis of whether it is pretty or ugly and concluding that the latter is not important or relevant, is beyond the limits of serious consideration, or is, perhaps, not even architecture. Decades of concentrating on beautiful, pretentious mansions and architect-designed public buildings have blinded us to the value of those structures that fail to arouse our aesthetic wonder.

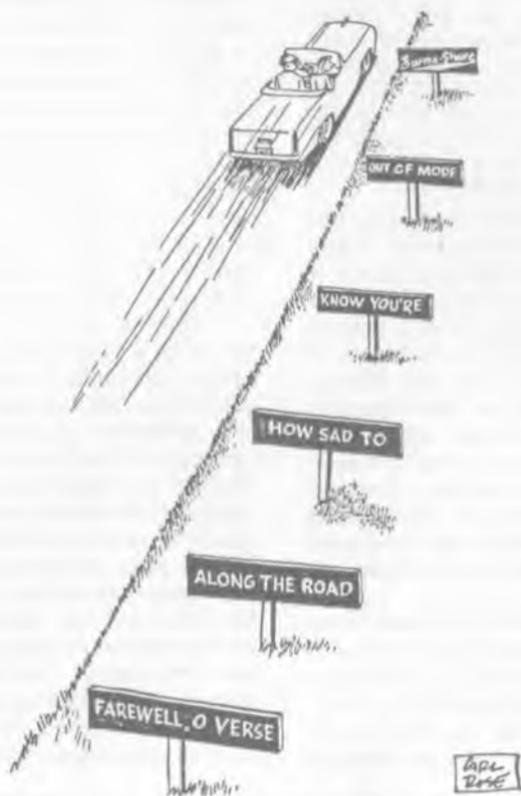
Whether the forms of roadside architecture are currently perceived as good, bad, or indifferent is beside the point. The point is that all three need to be recorded and understood as comprising a significant part of the American experience. A study of the history of architecture, when examined within the context of the society that produced it, reveals that the buildings of each place and period reflect the taste, technology and culture of their times, and that the surviving remnants acquire for later generations an added importance for this very reason. They can supply information, both architectural and societal, that is not revealed by written documents or even photographic records.

As Daniel Vieyra observed: "A realistic preservationist must recognize that this century's commercial architecture reflects modern culture as much as older buildings typify yesteryear's. The gas station, itself the premier drive-in building, has a history and rich design heritage of its own; as a significant part of the built environment, it is worthy of preservation."

If we are to succeed in preserving representative examples of this portion of twentieth century life, we must act quickly. As discussed above, roadside architecture has a very limited life span, and already many of the best early structures have succumbed to the pressures of modern life. Curbside gas stations, cabin camps and cottage courts, and the first generation of McDonald's have virtually disappeared from American highways.

These represent specific phases of design that are vanishing; more serious still is the demise of the drive-in movie, an entire form of roadside architecture that will soon be extinct. The structures of previous centuries usually had the luxury of continuing in use until their heritage became obvious. The buildings of our roadsides are not so fortunate; within a lifetime, they are created, refined, and discarded.

In the case of roadside architecture, we cannot depend on our children and grandchildren to appreciate and preserve the buildings we have erected. We must take that responsibility ourselves—perhaps on faith. Only then will our children and grandchildren have the opportunity to evaluate what we have built. I suspect they will be enchanted by it.





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