



Rick Clawson in front of his store



Lake View Brewing Co., Buffalo, New York (operated 1885-1920). This is a transfer lithograph, dating to 1900.

Reverse On Glass Advertising Old Art Form Survives In California

Reverse glass signs -
Beautiful, but fragile signs
popular with early brewers

By Michael Logan

It hits you as soon as you open the door. This store is not like any other you've visited. You are surrounded by beautiful glass signs of every variety. Vibrant colors and textures leap out at you. Signs of different shapes and sizes adorn the walls from floor to ceiling. Many are old, some are new. It's hard to tell the difference even with a sharp eye.

The store with the unbelievable decor is in Wilmington, California, and it houses two business owned by Rick Clawson. One, the Esoteric Sign Supply, is a retail specialty sign and painter's supply store. The other is the Fine Gold Sign Company, an outlet for Rick's artistic expression.

On a previous visit to the Esoteric Sign Supply, I asked Rick about one of the signs on the wall that I'd never noticed. It was about two feet square, in black with silver and gold leaf letters and accents advertising Pratt and Lambert Paint and Varnishes. In flawless mint condition, the sign had an obvious turn of the century appearance. Since every sign in his store has an interesting story, I asked Rick about this one.

The sign had been brought to the shop for restoration. When the customer returned to pick it up, Rick brought out two identical pristine signs. He asked the customer to decide which was his restored original and which a faithful reproduction. The customer was baffled until Rick pointed out his small signature at the bottom of the reproduction. If you're got the time Rick has the stories.

Visitors to Esoteric Sign Supply are usually greeted by the knowledgeable and ever-gracious supply department manager, Lola Grey. She has been with Rick for 15 years and oversees an incredibly diverse collection of sign painter's supplies. Every tool and material used to create or restore a reserve glass sign can be found. Gold and silver leaf of every karat and type, paints, varnishes, exotic brushes, abalone, mother of pearl, glass cutters, nippers (edge

Paul Reising
Brewing Co.,
New Albany,
Indiana
(operated 1847-
1915).

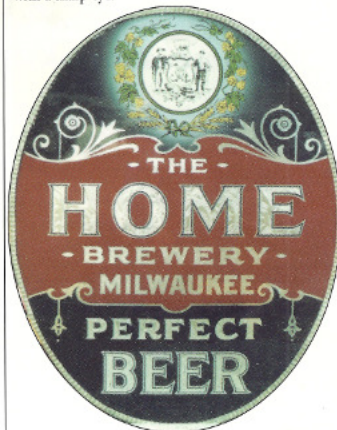


scallopers), glues, acids (for embossing), books and videos all share space with a display of original antique painters' supply containers. They have whatever you want for a specialty painting project, and both Rick and Lola are happy to share their knowledge with customers.

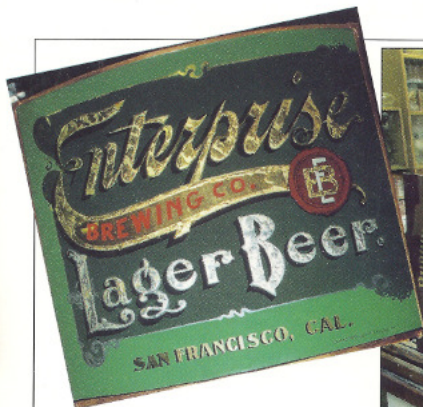
A visit to the store is no time to be in a hurry. When I visit, I'm like a kid in the candy store. Rick always has the very latest gadget or paint coating, with foolproof instructions for you. I'm constantly amazed at Rick's wealth of knowledge and his eagerness to share it with his customers. Whether it's gilding (applying gold leaf) or painting a simple sign, Rick will patiently walk you through the process and that friendly help comes with no added charge.

Behind that store is Rick's other business, The Fine Gold Sign Company. Several rooms serve as workshops for all types of sign painting and restoration. It is here where damaged glass signs come from around the world, and leave with a face lift and a new lease on life.

Rick's business began with his love of gilding over 20 years ago. He started doing window gold leaf lettering for banks and offices, and has never stopped. The next time you pass by a Home Savings of America Bank building check out those large three-



Home Brewing Co., Milwaukee, Wisconsin (operated only in 1912). A pair of these convex signs were found in mud under a house.



Enterprise Brewing Co., San Francisco, California (operated 1873-1920). This corner glue chip and gold sign is from 1890-1900. Photo to right is Rick's work room he calls the "operating table."



dimensional shield logos in bright gold. You guessed it! Rick did 'em by hand with 23-karat gold leaf.

Rick's interest in reverse on glass signs started when he acquired one of the small signs many years ago. Upon close examination, he noticed that gold leaf provided the sparkle in the main lettering. That motivated him to research the history of this art form and the methods and materials used. When records were incomplete or missing, he experimented and often reinvented tools, techniques and materials to exactly duplicate the original forms. Through years of trial and error, Rick can now perfectly restore, duplicate or create any kind of reverse glass sign.

These signs are painted on the reverse or back side, then sealed in because the reverse side is different from the front and accepts paint more readily. The front of the glass becomes a protective layer through which the art is viewed. Thus, a reverse on glass sign. Glass was such a rare commodity prior to the 1860s that very little was used for advertising. By the 1880s, increased glass production lowered costs and reverse glass advertising became popular. These signs were hand painted in very limited numbers, and the brewing industry was a major clients of glass art studios.

Breweriana collectors put these signs at the top of the lists for desirability and value for two reasons. The beauty of the signs and the fact that they were produced in such small quantities. Many reverse on glass signs are one-of-a-kind. Their fragile nature has also reduced the number of survivors and many individual specimens are the only known ones in existence today. These two factors quite naturally affect the value of these signs. It is common for some in fine condition to fetch four figures, and others have a value of \$20,000 or more! So do be careful should ever handle one.

Other than researching a brewery and its art, Rick suggests a couple of ways to roughly date these glass signs. A period (dot) at the end of a sentence generally dates before 1900 when this practice all but stopped. A flowing "tail" from the last (or

sometimes first) letter of the brand name usually indicates 1910 or after. Prohibition, the Great Depression, and the costly nature of production, pretty much put an end to this fabulous form of advertising in the 1920s.

Rick offers the following advice to collectors. As with all collectibles, condition is everything in value. A pristine piece commands top dollar while the same piece with a shatter in the glass is only a fraction of the value. Rick does have the means, however, to obscure a clean break in glass. Counterfeits are out there and, unlike any Rick would do, they are not signed by the artist. Some appear authentic, right down to being made on old wavy, imperfect glass. It takes a savvy collector, or an artist like Rick to know the difference. Rick is often asked to travel and examine a piece before it is purchased

"If you are thinking about doing restoration to your own sign, forget it unless you are well experienced in this field."

If you are thinking about doing restoration to your own sign, forget it unless you are well experienced in this field. "It's too easy to botch the job," Rick says. He's seen too many home repairs that escalate the price of his restorations. Always keep your eye open for any kind of glass even some with no paint. In one corner of Rick's office hangs an oval convex glass sign, with no paint, mounted onto a rough wood square board. A close inspection reveals dried flowers inside the glass. An even closer look reveals stripped glue chip lettered, "Humboldt Brew." We can only imagine what this used to look like before someone decided to turn this into a groovy art and crafts project. So keep looking, reverse on glass signs are still out there in basements, garages, flea markets, antique stores, and barns.

As the accompany photos show, it is a treat to be invited "behind the scenes" to view such wonderful

signs. The supply in Rick's shop is always rotating as signs undergo transformation and make way for new "patients." Some of the signs belong to Rick because prospective customers decided to sell "as is" once they found out the cost of restoration. Quality restoration is not cheap! These signs were originally painstakingly hand painted and the same holds true for restoration. There are no short cuts to a faithful restoration.

Breweriana collectors owe Rick a debt of gratitude for his unwavering devotion to reviving a lost art form. These old signs - even those still in excellent condition - will someday begin to slowly self destruct. It is the nature of old brittle paints and old glass that actually never stops moving. Rick recalls flying home with a sign that was in near perfect condition at the time of purchase. It had been stored for decades in an almost sealed environment. He unpacked the sign in his shop and discovered that some of the original paint exploded off the glass while at high altitudes. It's reassuring to know that there is a doctor in the house.



California Brewing Co., San Francisco, California (operated 1892-1915). This is a 1903 convex glue chip and gold reverse on glass sign.