

## Chapter 22

### *Coca-Cola Ghost Signs*

It all started in 2011 with the restoration of a faded Coca-Cola outdoor sign in Concord, North Carolina. The sign dated back to the 1960's. It was in bad condition and partially covered. Mayor Scott Padgett wanted it restored as part of the city's revitalization program.



The mayor took his request to Coca-Cola Bottling Company Consolidated of Charlotte, and after some prodding, the nation's largest independent Coca-Cola bottler decided to get involved in the Concord project. That decision was the catalyst which convinced the company to restore over forty outdoor signs in just five years, and to make a commitment to continue the "ghost sign project". That first sign in Concord, when restored attracted considerable media and public attention, and became a landmark in the renewed downtown area.

The ghost sign project was coordinated by now retired Senior Vice President of Corporate Affairs, Lauren Steele. He realized the old signs often are an important part of the history of each town; a treasured connection to the past.

One of the largest refurbished murals is 17-feet high and over 60-feet wide located in Hinton, West Virginia. Originally painted in 1914, the sign has become part of another major downtown revitalization. Hinton boomed at the turn of the century as an important railroad and river town, but later the area suffered from a major decline in the economy. Now the Coca-Cola sign has an important community role adding to the vision of a new Hinton.



*"The Ghost Sign Team" - Lauren Steele, retired Vice President Corporate Affairs; Alison Patient, Vice President Government Affairs; Emilie Nicholls, Communications Manager; Bob Bedell, Sr. Director Government Affairs*



Before



After

Another large restored ghost sign is a two story mural brought back to life in Hendersonville, North Carolina. The "re-birth" began after Mark Ray, the owner of a downtown building, discovered an old photo showing the mural on the side of his of his business. Ray is a self proclaimed history buff, and his business "Dad's Collectibles", includes the sale of Coca-Cola memorabilia.

Coca-Cola Consolidated responded to Ray's request for restoration, and the result was two repainted murals, one on each side of his building. Ray said his customers say the murals are "like a breath of fresh air". He added, "they are not billboards, they are historic."





The age of a ghost sign often is determined by the slogan painted at the bottom. One of the first was “Relieves Fatigue”, others include: “Work Refreshed”, “The Pause That Refreshes” and “You can Trust Its Quality”.

Media attention created by a restored sign, will often result in another restoration project. Such was the case in Salisbury, North Carolina when the ghost signs project caught the attention of a group of young men who had a passion to revitalize their community's downtown area. They launched a Facebook campaign to gather support for restoring ghost signs in Salisbury. Coca-Cola Consolidated quickly got involved and moved in to refurbish two badly faded Coca-Cola signs.



Before



After

Andy Griffith would have been proud to see a piece of “Mayberry” come back to life in June 2015 when the citizens of Mount Airy, North Carolina celebrated a restored downtown Coca-Cola sign. For many Mount Airy is better known as “Mayberry R.F.D.”, as the community provided the location for the Andy Griffith TV show from 1960 to 1968.



A large crowd was on hand for the sign's ribbon cutting ceremony. Among those attending were Mayor Steve Yokeley and Barbara McMillian, the owner of the building where the sign is located.

Interest in the old sign got started in the 1980's after a building was torn down to reveal the 100 year old mural. A local resident and restoration enthusiast, Susan Ashley lead the efforts to get the sign restored, but she died in 1998 before being able to see her dream

come true.

Building owner McMillian spoke during the ceremony and praised Ashley for her work saying, “we’ve waited a long time for this. It is one of the most beautiful pieces of art we’ve seen in downtown.” The alleyway where the sign is located was renovated into a community event area, providing a location for concerts, outdoor dining and other events.

Mayor Yokeley praised the role of Coca-Cola in making the restoration possible. Coca-Cola Consolidated provided Cokes and hot dogs for the celebration.



The first bottling plant in Mount Airy began operation in 1898. Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Mount Airy was started in 1917 by W. A. Jackson and B. F. Herman. It became part of Coca-Cola Consolidated in 1974.



Another famous Coca-Cola sign also can be seen on Mount Airy's main street. It is the sign at Snappy Lunch, the popular Mayberry restaurant where Andy and Barney often enjoyed the popular pork chop sandwich.

The first restored sign is located across the street from the remodeled historic Tweetsie Railroad Depot. The East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad, called “Tweetsie” constructed the depot in 1891. The property once considered for condemnation, in 2016 had become home to the Yee-Haw Brewing Company and the Duck Taco Shop.



The unveiling ceremony for the first Coca-Cola mural took place in July 2015 at the nearby Founders Park. Guests for the event enjoyed a catered lunch and the opportunity to personalize a mini-Coke can with their name at the “Share A Coke” display.



A second Coca-Cola sign in the historic district was restored a few month later. The downtown development manager praised the restoration saying the signs help bring new attention to the historic area.

When the two signs were completed they were not immediately covered with a protective clear coat finish, which allowed the signs to fade and weather for a time, so they would better fit with the historical integrity of the area. After aging the final finish was added to the signs. Sign zoning regulations are in effect in the district.

Creating outdoor Coca-Cola signs for over fifty years allows the unique talent of sign painter Andy Thompson to be enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of people for many years to come. In 2017 at the age of 73, Andy was working his brush stroke magic for the ghost sign project of Coca-Cola Consolidated.

Thompson started painting signs for Coca-Cola Consolidated in 1958, shortly after graduating from high school in Charlotte. He retired after thirty years when outdoor signs were no longer being hand painted. But his brushes did not get packed away, as the bottling company kept him busy again as an independent contractor, working on sign projects throughout their territory.



The ghost signs project became Andy's new mission after he completed the first one in 2011 in Concord. That initial restoration was so well received that it established a new sign painting direction for both Andy and Coca-Cola Consolidated. Since then Andy has done almost all of the ghost sign restorations, and after more than a half century, he says he has painted more Coca-Cola signs than he can count. But he does have special memories of the enthusiasm in the communities where the ghost signs are brought back to life. The growing list of requests for Andy to work his sign magic should keep him busy for many years.



Tavern in Atlanta.

When Coca-Cola Consolidated needs the help of a second sign painter, they call on Jack Fralin of Roanoke. He has done a restoration in his hometown as well as another in Hendersonville. Jack also has been called upon by Coca-Cola Corporation, and in 2016 did an outside wall mural at the popular Manuels

Coca-Cola has been part of American life for over 130 years, The ghost sign restoration reflects the enduring connection between Coca-Cola and the American Experience.