

## THE SIGN MAKER

A sign maker's business in Prairieville rose and fell with an erratic pulse. With seemingly boundless ambition, Delbert Crowley made the move from back east to this harbinger of western life in the great expansion. His skills with a brush provided a modest income in Philadelphia, but Delbert wanted more. He quickly found out that he would have to broaden his business offerings to the people in the small town of Prairieville. So, he learned to work stone with a chisel, to set type for printing, and, oddly, master the craft of an undertaker.

Despite the unusual mix of trades, Delbert found his new knowledge and skills all seemed to mesh quite nicely. In what would seem to be an obvious observation, the liquors served in the two local saloons fostered many a subsequent gunfight. This, of course, provided a steady source of income for headstones and prefatory work. His first love remained, though, with the creation of signs.

A small town in the west provided some unusual business at times, especially compared to big city life back east. To fully understand what this

means, you should probably see some examples. Thus, I give you these selections from The Sign Maker's business array.

Prairieville Methodist Church welcomed everybody into their community. Due to the nature of certain of the town's citizens, the church felt they should establish certain rules of decorum for those entering the church. Prominently displayed over the entrance to Prairieville Methodist Church, you would find this rather elegantly painted sign:

*No cussing, No smoking, No chewing, No spitting, No drinking, No gambling, No rioting*

One day the sheriff came into Delbert's establishment and ordered twenty-five wanted posters. Seeing as how the mayor had requested this to be a priority, Delbert dropped everything else and went to work on the order. With the ink barely dry, the sheriff gathered up the posters and began nailing them up all over town.

*Wanted: Dead or Alive*

*A reward of \$5,000.00 is offered for the capture of Roscoe Bedford. Wanted for running off with the mayor's wife.*

Reportedly, several of the wanted posters had a postscript (not in the original print job by Delbert) added to the bottom of the poster.

*Don't you think Roscoe has suffered enough already? Ha. Ha.*

Several weeks later, the sheriff ordered two signs, one for the east end of town and one for the west end of town. They read:

*Attention: Wendell Haines*

*When you robbed the bank last Friday, you dropped your pocket watch. You can pick it up at the Sheriff's office anytime.*

The first job that utilized all of Delbert's skills at one time came from the Calhoun family on Cedar Ridge, just out of town. They recently lost their son and contracted with Delbert to handle the funeral, print up a memorial brochure, make a headstone, and build four signs. They spaced the four signs out along the trail leading up to the cemetery.

*Billy was an unruly child.*

*Grew into an outlaw wild.*

*Failed to heed the Almighty's will.*

*Now he's arestin under Boot Hill.*

Delbert built up such a solid reputation that he received requests similar to the above from all over the region. Of course, most of the region consisted of towns even smaller than Prairieville. None of them had anyone with the same talents as the Sign Maker of Prairieville.

The town of Candlestick contracted with Delbert to build a sign for the train depot. They wanted

it to say, “Welcome to Candlestick. Population 346”. The oddity of Candlestick was the volatile nature of its population. Births and deaths occurred so rapidly that Delbert had to change the population number six times before he got finished with the sign. Once the sign took its place on the side of the depot door, Delbert had to make a trip there every other day to change the number. One day, he got tired of riding up there all the time, so he came up with an idea. He made up small signs with twenty numbers up and twenty numbers down from the latest population. Then he gave those to the station master at the depot. Whenever the number of people changed, the station master could just rehang the small sign with the correct number. Eventually, Delbert had to create more small signs when the numbers fell beyond what he had originally done, but it saved him a lot of riding.

Late one spring afternoon, as he got ready to close shop, a rather mysterious looking man came into the store. The man told Delbert that he had come highly recommended as a sign maker, and, so,

he would like to place an order. Delbert received one-hundred dollars cash up front to build one-hundred signs. Each sign comprised the same message, "Sunday, May 13. Look up into the eastern sky at 9:00 o'clock in the morning." Delbert received instructions to place them around all the towns in the prairie area. The man left no name other than the single letter "M" nor did he reveal what there would be to see in the sky at that time.

Naturally, once Delbert started placing the signs around, it created quite a stir. People's imaginations started running wild. What could it be? Reverend Miller from the Methodist church asked Delbert a lot of questions, especially about the man who placed the order for the signs. Delbert told him everything he knew. Reverend Miller contacted all the other ministers of the churches across the prairie, and they unanimously gave a sermon on the Sunday before on the wisdom of always being prepared. They couldn't rule out the possibility of the second coming of Jesus.

When the day finally arrived, everybody from the churches to the saloons to the farmers stood outside watching the eastern sky. At exactly 9:00 o'clock, something began appearing just over the ridge that bounded the eastern side of the prairie.

First, it came as one object and then almost the entire eastern sky became filled with ... hot air balloons. Most of the people stood in awe, as they had never seen such a thing before. Kids and dogs ran wild with excitement. The ministers felt a little let down, but then they figured they should give a sermon like the Sunday before on a regular basis, anyway. As it turned out, that historic day eventually turned into an annual event, as hot air ballooners came from all over the country to take part in a festival.

An eerie fog moved into Prairieville one fall evening, something that rarely occurred at that time of day. Delbert could barely see anything out his window. He decided to just go back to what he was doing, carving a headstone. Suddenly, multiple shots rang out. A woman screamed, "My daughter's been shot." Several of the townsfolk eventually found the woman and carried the young girl over to the doc's. The motive for the wild shooting never became known. The doc said the young girl would be okay. It was just a glancing wound.

Joshua, a friend of Delbert and one of the people who helped with the girl got to thinking later. This all happened right in front of Delbert's shop. It seemed unusual that Delbert hadn't come out. He was usually one of the first to offer aid in such situations. The man slowly made his way through the fog over to Delbert's shop. As he got closer, he could see the light coming from an oil lamp. A few more steps and he noticed an odd web-like pattern of light on the window. When he reached the window, he discovered a bullet had shattered the glass. He rushed to the sign maker's door and ran inside. He found Delbert slumped over the headstone he had been working on. A bullet had entered his head and killed him.

The sheriff and some men carried Delbert's body over to the doc's where he would stay until an undertaker from one of the other towns could make it over the next day. Joshua went back over to Delbert's shop to see if anything needed to be done. He walked over to the headstone and saw a small puddle of blood on the stone. He read what Delbert had carved on the stone. It said, "Here lies a man who loved God. Little el". Joshua wondered who Delbert had made the headstone for. About a month later, Joshua found Delbert's client.



In one of those strange twists of fate, the headstone that Delbert was working on was his own. Joshua and some of Delbert's other friends took the headstone out to the cemetery and placed it on Delbert's grave. A year later, a traveling stone craftsman checked into the Prairieville Hotel. Calvin Thomas, the owner of the hotel, got to talking with him and asked him if he did stone carving. When the man said yes, Calvin offered to allow the man to stay for free if he would finish a small project. The next day, Calvin and the man went to Delbert's grave and the stone craftsman finished the headstone.

“Here lies a man who loved God. Little else matters.”