Up Front

Historic Signs

By Jennifer Lynne Baron

Charm Beauty Shoppe
3000 West Liberty Avenue,
Dormont

If you lived in Pittsburgh’s South Hills in 1938 and had $3.25 to spend on a haircut, you may have chosen to spend it at Charm Beauty Shoppe in Dormont.

Located at 3000 West Liberty Avenue, Charm announced its grand opening on August 12, 1938, in local newspaper the Liberty Ledger.1

“It was the newest thing at the time. There were no other salons around. It was like opening the first McDonald’s in town,” says John Catanzaro, 72, discussing the earliest days of his parents’ popular beauty salon.2

For more than seven decades, Charm’s massive Art Deco façade sign has captured the attention of some 12,000 motorists and pedestrians that pass it daily, commuting from downtown Pittsburgh to the South Hills suburbs.

Anchored by a 47-by-20-foot Carrara glass façade, which wraps around the corner property, the structure is one of only two signs of its kind in Dormont. A second Carrara glass façade graces the Suburban Room a few blocks north at 3113 West Liberty. Muriel Moreland, who runs Dormont Historical Society, says that those types of glass facades were atypical for the borough’s two commercial districts. “That one is so unusual, which is why it stands out so much.”3

The Art Deco façade, manufactured and installed by Pittsburgh Plate Glass in 1938, features 12-foot panels of Carrara glass and an ivory and maroon palette. Stylized uppercase lettering, decorative striping and stars, and glass block—a popular building material of the time—create a streamlined exterior that reflects the curvilinear Art Deco architectural...
elements found on the salon’s door, ceiling, baseboards, and furnishings.

“Structural pigmented glass—known by its trade names Vitrolite, Sani Onyx and Carrara—helped define modern architecture from the 1920s to the 1940s,” writes Rosemary Thornton in *Structural Pigmented Glass*. “Glittering movie palaces, streamlined downtown storefronts, public restrooms, even modest residential kitchens were covered with the sleek, glass tile. It was the perfect marriage of new technology to human imagination. This new building material was heralded as the last word in sanitation and cleanliness. At first, it was recommended for use in hospitals, doctors’ offices and laboratories because it could not be damaged by acids or chemicals. It soon became a popular material for countertops in confectionaries, bars, bakeries and butcher shops because it was durable and easy to clean. Its versatility and availability in vivid colors such as fire engine red, burgundy and maroon made it a natural for theaters and restaurants built during the Art Deco period.”

In 1937 Catanzaro’s parents, Essie and Patrick, purchased and renovated the building, which previously housed a barbershop and tin manufacturer. They ran Charm until John Catanzaro took over the business in 1958. Catanzaro, who grew up in Dormont and cleaned the salon as a teenager, says that his parents likely worked with a fabricator from Pittsburgh Plate Glass on the sign’s design. The sign’s elegant look matched its services within, and provided eye-catching advertising along the bustling commercial block, which also housed real estate firms, taverns, and a police station.

The entrepreneurial-minded couple, who honed their styling skills downtown at Jenkin’s Arcade and Kauffman’s, worked ’round the clock at the bustling salon, which was open from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. six days a week. Regarding the origin of the salon’s catchy name, Catanzaro says, "Charm was a word that just clicked." In 1968, during a state highway expansion project, Charm’s stunning Carrara glass was damaged when road crews drilled in front of the shop. Catanzaro has replaced original maroon lettering and neon with salvaged, black Carrara glass, and restored glass block. “You cannot find Carrara glass anymore. It’s so hard to match the exact colors and so expensive,” explains Catanzaro. “Each panel would cost $300 to remake.”

In addition to the façade along West Liberty, from 1938 until 1978 the salon also featured a bright neon sign that announced "Beauty Shoppe" in cursive lettering above the shop’s door, which welcomed patrons at the corner of the avenues.

Longtime Dormont resident and artist Karen Larson, who took her daughter to Charm in the 1980s, underscores the façade’s presence. “I was excited to go to that particular salon because of the Art Deco look of the building and the Carrara glass. I have always loved the façade, and wondered if it could be restored.”

The site even inspired former *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* music critic Ed Masley to name his music group Charm School Confidential after—and pose for publicity photos in front of—the landmark sign.

Jennifer Baron is co-editor of *Pittsburgh Signs Project: 250 Signs of Western Pennsylvania* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2009) and Pop Filter Editor for Pop City Media.

1. The Liberty Ledger, August 12, 1938.
5. Catanzaro interview.
6. Ibid.