

HISTORIC SIGNS

By Elizabeth Pagel-Hogan

Ghost Signs of Tarentum

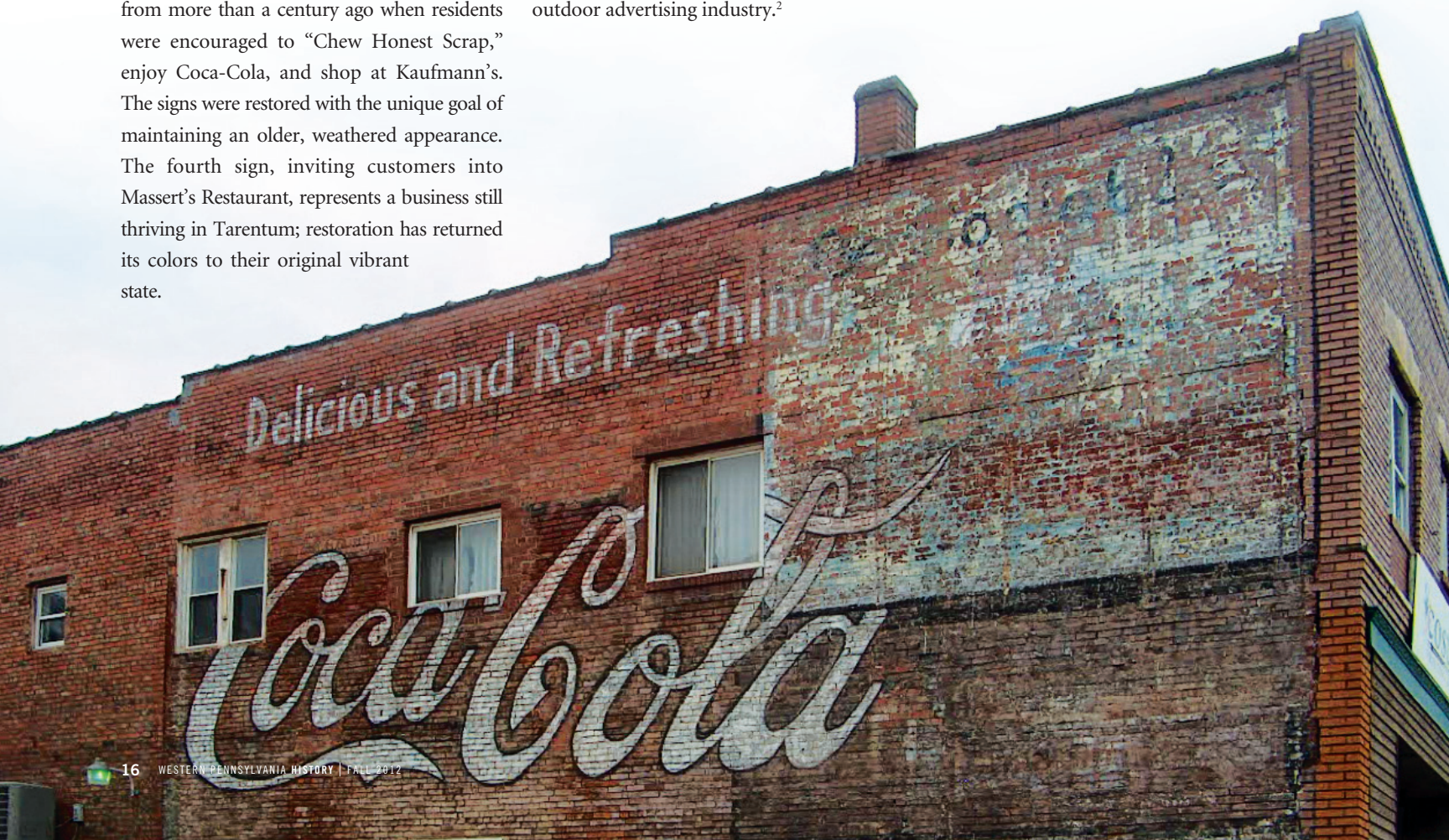
It's rumored that some of Tarentum's historic buildings are haunted, and visitors and residents can convene with the spirits during ghost walks each October. But the old industrial town, about 20 miles northeast of Pittsburgh on the Allegheny River, boasts other "ghosts" too. Four "ghost signs" open a doorway to the Tarentum of old, reminding citizens of their borough's long history. Ghost signs are old, hand-painted advertisements or signs painted on buildings.

Three of the four signs represent Tarentum from more than a century ago when residents were encouraged to "Chew Honest Scrap," enjoy Coca-Cola, and shop at Kaufmann's. The signs were restored with the unique goal of maintaining an older, weathered appearance. The fourth sign, inviting customers into Massert's Restaurant, represents a business still thriving in Tarentum; restoration has returned its colors to their original vibrant state.

The intriguing Honest Scrap sign is on the side of the Carl Garrett and Son building on Canal Street (formerly Fifth Avenue). Local historian Charles "Skip" Culleiton, author of *Tarentum: Then and Now* and a lifetime resident of Tarentum, believes the sign might have been painted in 1909 when there was an empty lot next to the building.¹

The original sign, 50 feet long and 40 feet high, was the work of Thomas Cusack and Company. Cusack was an orphaned Irish immigrant from Chicago who pioneered the outdoor advertising industry.²

Early 20th-century Tarentum bustled with industries including glass factories, paper mills, iron and steel mills, and a cigar factory.³ European immigrants and African Americans from the South settled in Tarentum, seeking a better life and a fair day's wage, and the town's population blossomed to more than 7,000.⁴ Because Canal Street ran parallel to the railroad tracks, the sign would have been visible to railway passengers traveling to Pittsburgh.





New buildings hid the sign until the early 2000s. When the owners of Carl Garrett and Son razed adjacent buildings to make a parking lot, they discovered the hidden sign.

“It was pretty neat,” recalled Skip Garrett, “like uncovering a treasure. Honest Scrap was made up of the scraps from Mail Pouch. The local guys who worked on the salt mines in the area couldn’t afford Mail Pouch, so that’s what they chewed.”⁵ Members of the Mail Pouch Tobacco Club and other ghost sign admirers still travel to Tarentum to photograph one of the best versions of an Honest Scrap sign.

The nearby Coca-Cola sign, approximately 50 feet long and 35 feet high, has covered the side of the Costello Printing building on Fifth Avenue for a century. Culleiton’s research revealed that this building was Sparks Department Store from 1913 to 1937 and Star Confectionary from 1936 to 56, but the sign’s exact age is unknown.⁶

“We bought the building 30 years ago and it was faint but clearly visible,” said Tom Costello, owner of Costello Printing.⁷

Facing the Coca-Cola sign, and likely about the same age, is the Kaufmann’s Department Store sign on the side of Valley Credit Union, also on Fifth Avenue. About the same size as the Coca-Cola sign, it invites shoppers to “The Big Store.” Culleiton

remembered taking the train in the 1940s as a child with his aunt to downtown Pittsburgh to shop there.

Faded and dim, the Honest Scrap, Coca-Cola, and Kaufmann’s signs were the first ghost signs in Tarentum to undergo restoration, a project funded by Allegheny Together and completed by local artist Bob Ziller in 2010.

Ziller painted the signs to retain an antiquated look. “When they are painted to look new, there is something kind of jarring or incongruous,” Ziller explained. The original lead-based paint no longer exists, so Ziller used a new Behr paint with primer added. He applied a light coat for an “old” look and did not coat the signs so they would wear.

Massert’s Restaurant boasts the only sign completely restored to its original look. Located on Sixth Avenue in what was known as the Smith Building, which had housed a savings & trust and a bakery, Massert’s became a restaurant in 1945 and continues to serve hungry customers.⁸

Ziller’s efforts had the support of the community and the borough, which loaned him a boom truck. The Garretts did research and found the Honest Scrap logo on a picture of a tobacco tin, a find that aided Ziller in his restoration work. “People seemed to really enjoy it. Sometimes I would be painting and

there would be half a dozen people on their lunch break watching me. A nice event for the community,” Ziller recalled.

Borough Manager Bill Rossey credits the start of the ghost sign restoration project to Mara Dowdy, program director of Downtown First. Dowdy identified available grants and selected the four signs for the 2010 project.

There are more messages from the past waiting to be uncovered in Tarentum. “While the borough was scraping the paint off a 100-year-old building,” said Rossey, “we uncovered a new sign!”⁹

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¹ Charles Culleiton, interview with author, May 21, 2012.

² “Business: Cusack.” *Time*, October 6, 1924.

³ Tarentum Borough Comprehensive Plan, <http://www.tarentumboro.com/>, Downloads, Comprehensive Plan.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Skip Garrett, interview with author, May 20, 2012.

⁶ Culleiton, interview with author, May 23, 2012.

⁷ Tom Costello, interview with author, May 20, 2012.

⁸ Culleiton, interview with author, May 23, 2012.

⁹ William Rossey, interview with author, May 20, 2012.