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Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society

A BIT OF NOSTALGIA - BURMA SHAVE

Many of us can remember taking a trip as a child and looking for the Burma Shave Signs along the highway. What fun we had watching for those entertaining signs—which always had a message. Like many great success stories, Burma Shave started by happenstance. The product was created by the Odell family (one of grandpa Odell's concoctions) and began as a liniment sold to folks who were ill. It wasn't doing well, so a chemist was hired and, after 300 mixtures were tried, Burma Shave, a brushless shaving cream, was born.

Marketing was a problem, so Alan Odell suggested roadside signs be erected. His father didn't like the idea, but Alan continued to push it and finally his father gave in and Alan got \$200 to try out his idea. The automobile was truly beginning to be used for road trips in 1925 when Alan's idea was tested. Second hand boards were purchased, cut into 36-inch lengths and painted. Originally the slogans did not rhyme and were arranged in groups of four. A typical slogan would read:

SHAVE THE MODERN WAY
FINE FOR THE SKIN
DRUGGISTS HAVE IT
BURMA SHAVE

About a dozen sets of signs were rapidly put up on two roads leading out of Minneapolis—the hurry driven by concern about the ground freezing in the near future. What followed was amazing. Repeat orders for Burma Shave were received from drugstores and it was found that the customers were those who travelled along the two roads where the signs had been installed. The signs continued to bring success and became more and more humorous and expanded to groups of six placed 100 paces apart. Their success created something very unique in advertising. As years passed and the roads got smoother and cars got faster, the size of the signs and the distance between them increased. The consecutive signs commanded the attention of those reading them far longer than any single sign could ever hope to do. Long journeys became more enjoyable and people became addicted to reading them. By having the rhymes build suspense until the fifth sign, Burma Shave forced those reading the signs to focus their attention on reading the full series of signs so that the message could be understood and savored like a good joke.

Eventually, the signs found their way to almost every state. The slogans were so powerful that the Burma Shave Company did not even feel the effects of the great depression. The slogans were not only funny but were probably some of the best advertising slogans ever written.

It is said that all good things must come to an end, and Burma Shave is no exception. The end to the road-side rhymes came in 1963 when the company was sold to Phillip Morris to become an operating division of American Safety Razor Products. The news media covered the demise of this American institution and a set of signs was donated to the Smithsonian Institute to preserve this wonderful part of Americana. And, to those who remember, future road trips lost a good deal of charm. ■

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