

FOLLOW THE *Signs* DEAN BLAZEK'S 70-YEAR SIGN JOURNEY

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Dean Blazek, 2025

"EVERBRITE"

Golden Drops
"GOOD TO THE LAST DROP"
BEER

Point
Special
BEER

Malt City
"The Finer Flavor Brew"

Bobbie Ale
ON TAP

KINGSBURY
BEER

FITGER'S
NATURAL
BEER

BRAUMEISTER
MILWAUKEE'S CHOICE
BEER

berg's
BEER

Crosby Square
Authentic Fashions in - MEN'S SHOES

Blumer's
GOLDEN GLOW BEER

Gridley
ICE CREAM

WE SERVE
Meier's
ICE CREAM

1

Early Evolution

1952-1955

BECOMING A SIGN MAN

When Dean Blazek graduated Antigo High School in 1952, he traveled to Madison and secured a good job with Wisconsin Central Airlines at Truax Field. The Midwest airline had fifteen DC-3 propeller planes in its fleet. His duties for WCA were to help refuel the planes and to clean the planes after the passengers had disembarked. After a few months he decided that he really wanted to become an airline mechanic. His fellow workers told him there was a training school, the Spartan School of Aeronautics in Oklahoma City, where he could learn the trade.

Dean told his father about his desire to become an airline mechanic. Walt Blazek, owner of Walter Blazek Distributing, was selling Blatz beer in the region around Antigo. Walt thought the plan had some merit and was considering paying the tuition for his son. But Walt also had another idea and suggested to his son that he should open his own sign business. Although Antigo was a small town, Walt's beer business had a significant amount of sign work it needed installed, and there were all the



Charlie Feil's original hand-painted sign that hung over his front porch.

other beer distributors to enlist sign work from. At that time, Milwaukee was called the brewery capital of America as most large beer companies had their headquarters there.

Joining his father in the beer distributorship might have been a natural fit and Dean had already worked part-time with some of Walt's delivery drivers. However, this career choice was discouraged by those who were already aware of the adverse health effects that working in the hospitality industry was having on his father. In his business dealings Walt needed to visit all the tavern owners who had Blatz beer on tap. Once inside the tavern it would have been considered poor form not to enjoy a beer or two with the owners. Over the years it seemed Walt had developed a rather keen liking for his own product.

Before committing to heading off to Oklahoma, Dean approached Charlie Feil of Antigo's Feil — Signs. Charlie was doing Walt's beer work at the time but was approaching retirement age. Charlie told Dean that he was only working part-time in the sign business. He suggested Dean to investigate Milwaukee sign companies where he would have a better chance to find full-time employment. That way he could get paid to learn the business. This is exactly what Dean did. He went to Milwaukee and interviewed at Everbrite Signs in North Milwaukee because it had the biggest Yellow Pages ad.

STARTING OUT AT EVERBRITE

Dear Blazek

I started working at Everbrite Electric Signs in Milwaukee in September of 1952. The business was located at 1440 North Fourth Street, just up from downtown. I was hired by Ray Etzel, who ran the service department.

At first, I went out on double calls with another worker. In this way I learned the Milwaukee city streets. My first jobs involved cleaning signs in the downtown area. We used cleaning liquids and polish and light steel wool. Then I started checking out signs that weren't working properly. These signs might have broken neon tubes, burned out transformers, burnt out bulbs, or neon crossovers that needed repainting. Other problems we encountered were short-circuits in high-tension cables inside the sign cabinets and broken electrode housings. I did this work until November, when I moved inside and joined the neon department.

The foreman of the neon department was Harry Hockerman, an elderly gentleman. I was shown how to process the neon tubes that the benders were making. There were 45 glassbenders when I started, located on the second floor of the plant.

At that time the benders were making mostly Pabst Blue Ribbon and Schlitz beer window signs. These were made from 9mm or 10mm tubing. As pumper my job was to hook the bent tubes up to the glass manifold system and using stopcocks to allow the vacuum pump to suck the air out of the tubes while I drove high voltage electricity through the glass and metal electrodes attached to each end of every tube. I did this for 8 hours a day for six or seven months and started to get bored with the mechanics of my job. I asked Harry Hockerman if I could try glassbending. He agreed to let me bend glass one hour of each shift.



Source: everbrite.com

One of the benders, Don Ditmar, showed me how to make the simple bends: the 90 degree and the double-back bends, the drop turn and rise and drop bends. After one week of this I moved on to the letter E, which was made using the bends I had been practicing. After another week of practicing, I could make a passable letter E.

Next, I was given an asbestos pattern with Pabst Blue Ribbon drawn on it so I could practice the letters in Blue Ribbon. Within a few days I was doing well enough that they could use my work as finished pieces.

While I was at Everbrite my fellow glassbenders were the Hull brothers from Antigo, Ike and Aaron (who went by the name Turk), Bill Patefield, Jr. (who was Harry Hockerman's nephew). Bill's father, Bill Sr. worked in the sheet metal shop on the first floor. Other benders I worked with were George Peterson, Mickey Brunke and Carroll Harmon. Carl Wamser, the owner of Everbrite, who had taken over from his founding father, Charley, had two of his sons working on the service trucks.

I was working for \$1.29 an hour and after several months I asked for a raise but didn't get it. I started to look around for another job that might pay better.

—Interview with Dean Blazek



Source: everbrite.com

Author's Note: This trend features heavily in the Wisconsin sign industry, as Dean would find out when he joined the sign association. Many of his fellow board members and company owners had worked with previous generations and had the next generations working with them. And if your dad or uncle worked for a sign company you stood a good chance of getting an interview to be hired.

SIGN FASCINATION

Dean had developed an interest in learning neon glassbending before the opportunity presented itself at Everbrite. In his hometown, when he was growing up, he used to watch Edgar Hull, who owned Antigo Neon, making neon signs through a basement window of the Olk's Drug Store building. Dean would watch for hours and became fascinated with the craft.

Dean did not have any photographs from the Everbrite glass room. It was forbidden to take photographs inside the building to protect any projects they were working on from other sign competitors.

During these early signage days Dean rented a room from Mrs. Rebocki on North Murray Street in North Milwaukee. He also attended Layton Art School in the evenings for figure and portrait drawing, water-color painting and lettering courses, an early introduction to sign writing.

In 1954 he left Everbrite to take a job at Artkraft near downtown Milwaukee when they had a vacancy for a designer. At Artkraft, Dean worked as one of four designers for the sign department. He would make color pencil sketches as mock-ups for the salesmen to use trying to land contracts with prospective customers. He would also make full-size layouts to have porcelain sign panels made by a porcelain plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He would draw the lettering for each design on one-inch square-lined, burlled paper, label the text color and mark all the glass housing holes and tube supports.

He stayed in the design department at Artkraft for nine months but then was moved to work as a door-to-door cold call salesman. He hated this job and did not perform well enough to keep the job.

Dean went back to Everbrite and began painting wall murals, marquees, and blade signs with Art Speakerman. Art had worked at Everbrite for several years and taught Dean many sign trade secrets.



One of the Everbrite double call service vehicles circa 1950's



L-R Young Dean Blazek and Art Speakerman on a swing stage

SWING STAGE: DEAN BLAZEK

We started painting a Schlitz billboard at Sixth and Wisconsin that had neon letters, and a twelve-foot high bottle and glass of beer. It had the tag line, "The beer that made Milwaukee famous." It was up three floors above the Avenue Super Bar. We used a swing stage—I had never set foot on one before. It was uncomfortable at first. We were on the roof and the sign was on the wall above us. We started just four or six feet above the roof so I could get used to it. After fifteen minutes I was okay, but I learned that I couldn't move much because the swing stage wasn't called that for nothing.

We did many more painting jobs with the swing stage. Schlitz Brewery was Everbrite's best customer at the time and maintained all of Schlitz's signs; some were located at 35th and Viaduct; 12th and the Viaduct; 5th and Juneau, and a couple on the north side at the brewery.

We replaced lamps and painted many theatre marquees including the Riverside Theater, the Warner, Towne, Wisconsin and Princess Theaters, to name a few.

—Interview with Dean Blazek



Dean's first work vehicle. Notice the sign on the driver's side panel is held on by suction cups. He could remove this and the ladders when he used the vehicle for socializing.

2 Northern Advertising: The Early Years

NORTHERN ADVERTISING ON VIRGINIA STREET

In March 1955 Dean came back to Antigo to start his own sign business called Northern Advertising. His initial sign shop was in his parent's basement on Virginia Street. His work consisted mostly of sign written privilege panels for beer signs. He had a 1954 Chevy sedan with ladders tied to a roof rack and a sign written panel that he had hand lettered.

The first sign he put up was a double-sided painted LIQUOR sign with a red neon letter and an arrow made by Edgar Hull from Antigo Neon. Edgar had a boom truck and helped him install it on a building on 5th Avenue in Antigo's Peaceful Valley between Comer's Hardware and Glown's Department Store.

The first few years were lean for Dean's fledgling sign business. He had acquired many skills in Milwaukee that benefited running his own sign company, such as layout and design, sign writing, drawing mock-ups for client proposals, installing

and maintaining signs and bending neon signs. But he found there were just not enough businesses to keep him busy full time. And like many people starting a new business, he didn't charge enough for his work.

Then in 1955 Dean erected his first highway billboard, a wooden structure he assembled on the south side of Antigo for Kasson's Supper Club and Motel. This was the start of his billboard business, and the monthly rental income would become more and more important to his survival.



Original client proposal drawing: arrow, sign details and date written in light pencil, 1955



Dean and Polly as a young couple

Dean married Polly Fletcher in June of 1956, and they lived in an apartment above Antigo Candy on Fifth Avenue in Antigo. Their first child, Mark, was born in April 1957 and they bought a house at 122 Lincoln Street, a few blocks away, soon after. There was enough room in this home for Dean to have a studio where he could work on sign mock-ups and artistic renditions.

Polly's paycheck as a Registered Nurse at the Antigo Memorial Hospital became a vital asset in keeping food on the table and clothes on her growing family. Her hard work at her job and in the home was essential to keep the bills paid between the slow times for the sign business.

Also, in 1956 with a loan from Walt, Dean bought a work truck for \$1700, a black Ford F-150. The following year he purchased a Medco T-boom and mounted it on the F-150 Ford and could finally hang his own beer signs.

Walt provided a steady stream of plastic and fluorescent Blatz beer signs for local taverns that carried his Blatz beer. Dean would sign write the lower privilege panels in his shop and slide them into the pole signs when they were erected. He also put up signs for Ed Vavrushka who distributed Pabst and Old Style beer and Norb Listle, the Schlitz's beer agent. Norb's nephew Clete Listle had the Miller and Hamm's distributorship through Antigo Beverage.

All these beers were brewed in Milwaukee and competition between tavern owners and distributors saw a boom period where the beer companies provided free signs to their loyal customers to gain influence.

It bears mentioning that in a small rural town of Antigo with a population of just over 10,000 residents there were as many as 27 taverns within a ten-mile radius.



Now that's more like a sign vehicle... If you look carefully there appears to be clear neon units in the back tray underneath the boom. I believe they are BLATZ letters.





On this page: The Red Owl Food Store sign shown as day and night shots. It came from Wabeno and Dean paid \$500 to add to his sign collection. The original maker is not known.

Opposite page: A similar Red Owl sign in Rhinelander that had porcelain faces made in Cincinnati then Dean installed this sign himself. A few years later the customer asked to have neon added to it, which Dean bent and installed.



