

Socorro's "Owl" Gets a Facelift

One of Our Town's Famous Icons



You have probably noticed the famous "Owl Cigar" landmark, on Manzanares Street, getting a facelift. Ken Hines, a professional sign painter, restores such historic painted signs, and has given our Owl a fresh coat of paint to preserve the historic hand-painted advertisement. There's plenty of history behind that sign.

There have been numerous short articles about our Owl Cigar sign and when it was painted – citing everything from around 1900 to the 1930s Depression era. A look at the history of Owl Cigars answers when this iconic advertisement likely first appeared in Socorro – and why.

Owl Cigar Company

Throughout much of the 1800s, cigars were regional brands and hand-rolled locally by small manufacturers or tobacco stores. One of these was a cigar manufacturer in Queens, NY, started in 1861 by John Straiton and Frederick Storm. The Straiton & Storm Co. grew into one of the largest cigar manufacturers in the U.S., becoming a national brand. When the company was reorganized as the Owl Cigar Company in 1890, they produced 1,500,000 cigars per week - all hand rolled by over 1,500 employees - "rollers" as they were called.

To grow their national market beyond New York, they launched the now legendary program of painting their advertising, "Owl Cigar - Just 5 cents," on buildings across the country. Beginning around 1880, the signs were usually painted by a crew of two, called "wall dogs," and paid \$5-10 per sign. Most crews completed one sign per day. It is not known how many tens of thousands of signs were painted across America. Few records survive.

Most signs were painted on barns, to be easily seen by passengers on passing trains, or on the sides of multi-story buildings to be seen by the early motorists and downtown traffic.

The advertising campaign was very successful, keeping the five cent Owl Cigar the most popular cigar in America. In fact, maybe too popular. In 1904, for example, a company in Ft. Worth, TX began marketing cigars under the "Owl Club Brand," which was quickly challenged in court. A restraining order was issued, preventing any use of the name "Owl" except by the Owl Cigar Company.

To keep up with demand, the company was one of the first to replace the thousands of workers hand rolling cigars with automatic machinery in 1918.

Run of Bad Luck

Machine made cigars did not go over well at first with cigar smokers, who believed the only good cigar was a hand-rolled cigar. Competitors attacked Owl's machine made cigars as being inferior, packed too tight, bad aroma, and a bad smoke. They even criticized that "the ash doesn't look right." Sales began to slump.

If that unforeseen disaster wasn't bad enough, then came the 1920s and Prohibition. Newspapers were filled with images of the mobsters, bootleggers and the smoke filled speak-easy crowds – all smoking cigars. Soon, it seemed if you smoked a cigar, you were a dirty little mobster. This seriously damaged the reputation of cigars, and a boost for cigarettes, as people wanted to change their image.

White Owl Cigars

To counteract the negative stigma of machine made cigars, and the dirty mobster image, the Owl Cigar Company changed their name to "White Owl" to give their cigars a more "clean" image. Surprisingly, the slightly new name and image worked well. Sales began to recover.

Then came the 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression. In 1929 alone, 375 cigar companies, making the more expensive hand-rolled



Al Capone (Chicago)



Fred Burke, St. Valentine's Day massacre triggerman



Carlos Gambino (Cosa Nostra)

cigars, closed their doors. Sales were dismal.

The new White Owl Cigar Co. jumped on the bandwagon. With tens of thousands of Owl Cigar signs across the nation, all saying "Just 5¢," they lowered their price back to five cents (from 3 for 20 cents), exploiting the fact their quality machine made cigars could be produced cheaper.

Continuing to address the dirty mobster image, they hired squeaky clean notables, such as George and Gracie Burns, and Babe Ruth, for their advertising campaigns. Sales quickly climbed. By the mid-1930s, the old Owl Cigars, now the White Owl Cigars, were again on top.

Ghost Signs

From about 1880–1920s, advertisements were painted on barns and buildings by hand in vivid colors. The most prolific of these signs was that of the Straiton & Storm Owl Cigar brand, known by their iconic owl on every display. Bull Durham, Crown Flour and Coca-Cola were among others that used hand-painted building signs to promote their products.

These once colorful signs have been left to the elements and have faded over time. Many are now long gone; only a few survive. Today, these surviving iconic signs of yesteryear are called "ghost signs" for two reasons. First, the faded signs on masonry walls seem to appear and disappear with the changing light like an apparition. Secondly, many of these signs were covered up with new building construction. Years later, when these buildings were razed, these long forgotten advertisements on a nearby building suddenly came into view like ghosts from the past.

This was the case recently in Ft. Collins, CO when several old buildings were razed for a parking lot, revealing the adjoining building was adorned with several hand painted advertisements. One is a Straiton & Storm Owl Cigar sign, very similar to the one in Socorro. See photos below.

There are websites where enthusiasts place photos of the handful of surviving signs still in existence. Socorro's Owl Cigar and Bull Durham signs always makes the list for their well preserved appearance. Many are so faded, photography is difficult. Not so

Surviving Owls Elsewhere . . .



Pittsburg, Pennsylvania



Aurora, Nebraska



New Kensington, PA

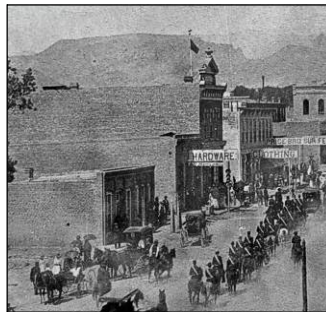


Fort Collins, Colorado

with Socorro's signs. They are well photographed.

So When Was It Painted?

There seems to be no definitive date of when the Owl Cigar signs were painted on the Knights of Pythias building in Socorro. However, using SCHS photos, and the previous company history, a general date can be determined.



K of P building, built 1883-1886. SCHS photo when bottom floor was the identified as 1890 with no Owl Cigar sign.



SCHS photo circa. 1913 when bottom floor was the telephone company. Owl Cigar sign is present.

We know the K&P building was erected between 1883 and 1886. One SCHS photo, dated "circa. 1890," shows no painted signage on the K&P building. The photo also shows a military train passing along Manzanara Street. Fort Craig was closed in 1887, suggesting the photo may be nearer to 1887.

The second SCHS photo is dated 1913, when the newly established phone company offices were on the ground floor of the K&P building. The Owl Cigar sign on the west side of the building is clearly seen, and presumably on the east side as well.

The Owl Cigar company began their painted sign campaign about 1880. The name "Straiton & Storm" was dropped by mid-1890s when reorganized as the Owl Cigar Company. Thus, it appears the Owl Cigar signs were painted on the K&P building somewhere between 1887 and the early 1890s. This is long before the 1930s Depression era "barn storer" painters that some sources cite as the original painting, though this may be the source of an earlier face lift.

Socorro's Owl Cigar icon is at least 120 years old. Thanks to Holm Bursum III, who owns the building and paid for the restoration, hopefully it will survive another 100 years.