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
cigars, closed their doors. Sales were dismal.

The new White Owl Cigar Co. jumped on the bandwagon. With tens of thousands of Owl Cigars 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 squeky 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 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.

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 Manzanares 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 stormer” 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.

**Surviving Owls Elsewhere . . .**