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Linda Bayer

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The Gasoline Station

For Americans the automobile was love at first sight. People began buying and driving autos before there were roads to drive them on or filling stations to service them. In 1905 there were 50,000 cars in the United States, but only 13 years later the number had escalated to an astonishing 6.2 million due largely to the constantly decreasing price of Henry Ford's Model T. As the price of the Tin Lizzie approached \$300, Americans took to the road—thereby creating an overwhelming demand for highways and a market for gasoline and other auto-related services and goods. Private enterprise immediately accepted the challenge of supplying the motorist with gasoline and accessories while the federal government began work on a national system of highways following the First World War.

Petroleum had been—until the advent of the automobile—a waste product of the kerosene industry. Almost overnight it was transformed into a highly valued commodity; the immediate problem was how to package it for sale. The fuel was stored at bulk stations, usually on the edge of town, in huge overhead tanks. From there it was gravity fed into tank wagons and pulled by horses to the merchant who sold it by the bucketful. Obviously this method of filling a car

tank was messy and exceedingly dangerous. But a major breakthrough occurred about 1905 when a St. Louis man conceived the idea of equipping a hot water heater with a glass gauge and a piece of garden hose with a faucet. This contraption allowed the gasoline to be fed directly from the storage tank to the car tank. Another man refined this idea further and marketed the gas pump—a storage tank fitted with a pump attached to a self-measuring device. This primitive gas pump made possible the first stage in the development of the retail gas station which was the installation of a pump or two on the curb in front of an existing business. The automobile tank could be filled mechanically from the storage tank, and at night the pump could be locked for security. While this solution marked a definite improvement, it was still dangerous and created a traffic hazard as cars waited in line on city streets to fill up. These curbside stations were banned in most cities after 1920, and only those in rural areas continued in use.

But already an alternative filling station arrangement had evolved which consisted of a city lot supplied with gas pumps connected to underground tanks, a paved or gravel driveway, and a small shed which functioned as an office and

storehouse. These earliest stations were crude affairs and no attempt was made to beautify them because demand for the product exceeded the supply. Nevertheless, this arrangement marked the beginning of the off-street, drive-in gas station and became the prototype for all the varieties of drive-in structures that now characterize our car culture.

Once these basic components of the drive-in gas station were combined during the first decade, the only feature that changed through the years was the manner in which gasoline was marketed. During the teens the discovery of plentiful new oil fields combined with the government ordered breakup of the Standard Oil trust initiated an era of fierce competition among oil companies. No longer was it sufficient to throw up a small shed on a vacant lot; instead each company actively pursued customers by constructing an attractive station in a choice location. In their quest after an ever larger share of the market, station operators began offering additional services such as clean restrooms and free road maps; and oil companies initiated the credit card, which could be used at any station belonging to the company, to encourage customer loyalty to a specific brand.

The first structures designed and constructed specifically for the sole purpose of selling gasoline date from about 1910 while the first chain of gas stations can be dated to 1914 when Standard Oil of California built 34 stations to a standardized design and color scheme, each identified by a common sign. Filling stations began opening at the rate of more than 1000 a year so that by 1920 there were some 15,000 stations in the United States.

From the end of the nineteenth century until 1920, oil companies and retailers were concerned principally with the mechanics of storing and dispensing gasoline. As a new product it required the development of new technologies and new marketing techniques. The technical problems had been mostly solved by 1920 although further refinements in the design

of gasoline pumps continue to be introduced even today with the latest models being computerized. But after 1920 the oil companies focused on marketing techniques, a major part of which involved developing an effective architectural image for their stations that would attract and hold customers.

The influx of major oil companies and their filling stations to Huntsville can be followed through the city directories. The earliest listing for an automobile dealer and parts supplier was the Huntsville Carriage Works and Auto Garage located at the southwest corner of Clinton and Greene streets. This firm apparently had begun as a carriage works and expanded their line to handle autos when they became available; the firm also dispensed gasoline from a 200 gallon tank located behind the building. At this time there were three oil companies in town that presumably sold their gasoline from aboveground tanks at bulk stations on the edge of town. Standard Oil of Kentucky, the first national oil company to establish a distributor in the city, occupied a storage site at the southwest corner of Church and Wheeler. While Huntsville supported only one automobile dealer in 1911, it still had twelve livery and feed stables indicating that autos remained a distinct novelty on local streets.

In fact, automobiles had been trickling into Huntsville for several years but only one or two at a time. It was not until the summer of 1912 that the first train car load of autos arrived—Fords naturally—and the following October the Graham Automobile Company received a Cadillac for exhibition purposes.

This situation did not last long though; by 1916 there were five automobile dealers, two garages, four major oil companies, and two filling stations, while the number of livery and feed stables had dropped to eight. There was also one auto painter, three auto repair shops, and a tire repair company. The two filling stations listed in 1916 were probably the first businesses established

in Huntsville for the retail sale of gasoline at a location separate from the wholesale yard. A Standard Oil filling station was located on West Clinton, and Gulf Oil opened a filling station on East Clinton, neither of which have survived. By 1916 the Texas Company, which later became Texaco, also had established a distributor in Huntsville which was located on the south side of West Holmes at the railroad tracks. This site apparently served for many years as both a wholesale and retail operation although the Texas Company was also very active in leasing filling station sites during the twenties and thirties at a variety of locations around Huntsville.

By 1920 Huntsville could boast of eleven car dealers and seven filling stations, one of which is still in business as the Downtown Chevron station and has the further distinction of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The year 1922 marked the appearance of the first used car dealer in Huntsville with a lot on Washington Street. An unusual station of this decade was the Wocomobile Inn which offered not only gasoline and oil but also tires and accessories, thereby becoming a forerunner of the trend that would later transform the filling station into the full service station. By the start of 1930 five major oil companies had wholesale branches in Huntsville and were distributing gasoline to a series of retail stations scattered along the major streets of town with Madison, Greene and Meridian streets proving the most popular sites.

This rapid proliferation of auto-related businesses during the 1920s reflects the growing demand for cars in Huntsville; at mid decade a local newspaper observed that potential customers were so avid to own a car that they met the incoming train at the depot and drove their new cars away before they could be delivered to the showroom. By 1925 the number of cars on the streets of Huntsville had become so great that the city council was forced to purchase eleven

traffic lights which were installed along Jefferson, Washington, and Greene streets. The first week of operation a man was stationed at each intersection to instruct the motoring public in their proper use.

This sudden enthusiasm for automobile ownership contrasts sharply with the local reception given the first gasoline buggy brought to Huntsville. The Weekly Times reminisced in 1926 about this obviously memorable event:

Just a few years ago on a bright sunshiny morning a peculiar contrivance coughed and snorted its way down Washington Street after making the circuit of the court house square and throwing some score of usually quiet and well-behaved mules into fits of hysterics while so doing.

It was immediately dubbed a Gasoline Buggy and looked upon with deep suspicion by the majority of the population of the town in addition to the mules and staid buggy horses who regarded the machine as a direct infringement upon their positions as the proper means of transportation from place to place about the county and budding little city.

In operation the new invention seemed to merit the distrust and aversion in which it was held as it gave forth a cloud of smoke and vapor, strongly suspicious of the infernal regions while emitting sounds very much like a machine gun in operation while suffering from an acute attack of asthma.

It was the first thing of the kind to make its appearance in the town and did not enjoy any great amount of popularity either then or later as the general impression was that it only awaited a favorable opportunity to blow its self and its passengers to kingdom come without providing the unfortunate and venturesome persons with any return trip ticket from the indefinite destination to which they might so unceremoniously be hastened....

Some years have passed since the sensitive feelings of Madison County mules were disturbed by the first Gasoline Buggy and the aforesaid mules have almost passed from the streets and lanes of the city, but today Huntsville has become almost a city of motors, the records of the county showing that there is about one automobile for each qualified voter of the county of Madison.

The earliest filling stations—those

having curbside pumps or off-street pumps and a primitive shed office—had been located in the downtown areas, but beginning in the 1920s oil companies started relocating in neighborhoods. They wanted corner lots, which provided easy access from two directions, on the best residential streets, and this policy was followed in Huntsville where almost every station site leased during the twenties was on a corner. Correctly predicting that these residential sites would stir neighborhood opposition, the companies consciously designed their stations to resemble small houses in an attempt to minimize their visual intrusiveness. A Huntsville example of neighborhood resistance to the construction of a filling station occurred when C. E. Baxter proposed to erect a station on the northeast corner of Gates and Madison streets in 1926. Attorney Clarence Watts, representing three nearby residents, appeared before the city council to argue that the establishment of a filling station on that site would decrease property values and otherwise prove a nuisance. However this attempt to block construction failed as the station was completed the following year.

Stations from the twenties usually consisted of just a small office and storage room and featured windows and doors of domestic scale and styling. The roof could be extended beyond the facade to form a canopy over the gas pumps, which provided some protection from the weather.

The Downtown Chevron station in Huntsville is a fine illustration of this phase of station design. Built in 1919 by Standard Oil of Kentucky, the Downtown Chevron is most certainly the oldest structure in Huntsville designed and built to sell automotive gasoline. This lot, located at the southeast corner of Clinton and Greene streets, was the type of site the oil companies favored, a corner lot on a predominantly residential street. The design of the station displays a conscious effort to blend with the residential surroundings through the use of red brick,

bungalow type windows, and a low hip-ped roof, all features characteristic of domestic architectural design of the period.

The original station consisted of just the office portion and the tiled canopy roof. Before 1930 most retail outlets were called filling stations because the services they offered were usually confined to the sale of gasoline and oil. The term service station came into use around 1930 when stations expanded to offer a fuller line of automotive services. Obviously a filling station required only a small structure while a full service station needed large specialized work areas; consequently, these first filling stations were often enlarged during the thirties with enclosed service bays such as was done with the Downtown Chevron. Apparently the first phase of this station was built to a standard company design because other stations displaying almost identical features and layout have been discovered. Its diagonal placement on the corner lot represents an early recognition of the special requirements associated with automobile travel and makes it an early example of the drive-in building form.

Each major oil company during the twenties selected a standardized style for their stations that would either blend well with the surrounding neighborhood or rely on historical associations to achieve an acceptable image. Other stations in the domestic mode include the English cottage stations of the Pure Oil Company which featured white stuccoed walls under a steep gabled roof of blue tile. Gable end chimneys, a bay window, round-topped door, and shutters further contributed to the residential appearance. This cozy domestic motif could be completed with window flower boxes and extensive landscaping. Other companies chose styles traditional in their marketing region. Stations in the Northeast quite often featured colonial touches such as fanlights, roof balustrades, cupolas, and even columns and pilasters while Spanish or mission style stations achieved popularity in



Both the Acklin Garage, above, on Meridian Street and the Downtown Chevron, below, on Clinton Street are early examples of cottage-styled filling stations. Both continue in use for auto-related businesses, but Acklin's is located in the proposed path of I-565, making its future uncertain.



California and the Southwest by combining stucco walls, red tile roofs, and arched openings.

The 1931 Huntsville city directory lists fewer than 25 filling stations, but undoubtedly there were other businesses that sold gasoline as a sideline. Two of these filling stations, in addition to the Downtown Chevron, still stand although one has been considerably altered for other uses. Acklin Garage at 801 Meridian Street was constructed in 1927 for the Texas Oil Company. Like the Downtown Chevron, Acklin's was sited diagonally on a corner lot and probably was constructed from a standard company plan since an identical station survives in Montgomery as a dry cleaners. This design also was patterned on the domestic bungalow although the front wall in this case has been opened to glass except for the corner piers.

The other extant Huntsville station that dates from the late twenties is located at the northwest corner of Madison and Williams streets. It was built in 1927 by Shelby S. Fletcher for lease to the Pan American Oil Company and illustrates yet another variation on the "filling station as cottage" theme. The cottage influence is obvious in the stuccoed exterior walls with decorative brick quoins, the steep intersecting gabled roofs, and the size and scale which approximated that of a contemporary house. Most likely the station was further domesticated when new with flowers and plants. The brick veneer that now covers the two street facades was probably added during the fifties when the building was converted into a dry cleaning business. It now houses a church congregation.

Edgar Love, a local architect, is credited with the design of this station; however its close similarity to other stations of the period suggests that his contribution may have been limited to reworking a standard company plan to fit the specific site and the architectural preferences of the community. During construction, a local newspaper referred

to this structure as a "modern drive-in station." It was probably the first full service station erected in Huntsville to have enclosed lubrication and washing floors incorporated as an integral part of the design, thereby marking a distinct departure from the small filling station. The T-shaped plan allowed service bays to the side and rear in addition to the canopy which extended beyond the front wall. Although this station continued the cottage styling while incorporating additional new functions under a continuous roof, the design of stations would undergo a radical transformation during the following decade in response to a new set of conditions within both the industry and society.

One other gas station now standing vacant in Huntsville appears to date from the 1920s based on its architectural design; unfortunately no documentary evidence has been discovered to verify this assumption. The first mention of a station occupying the north side of West Holmes at the railroad tracks occurs in 1940, but it is unlikely that such a station would have been constructed at that late date. A more plausible explanation for this inconsistency may be found in the early marketing strategies pursued by the oil companies.

As they began looking for station sites removed from the downtown area, companies could not be certain which sites would prove financially successful for stations. Part of this uncertainty can be attributed to the lack of any precedent for marketing such a commodity and part to the rapidly fluxuating traffic patterns of the urban landscape. When automobiles first appeared there was virtually no national highway system and only a few unpaved intercity roads because late nineteenth century society had relied totally on the railroads for freight and passenger travel. As the number of automobiles in use increased, their drivers raised an enormous clamor for the construction of adequate roads; and, as this demand was met, traffic patterns shifted so that a



The Pan Am station, above, now serves as a church, while the West Holmes Street station, below, stands abandoned.





prime site for a station one year might be worthless the next when an old street was improved or a new one opened. Company officials were reluctant to make long term commitments to specific sites; instead they developed a two-fold strategy that kept their options open and their station sites mobile. Rather than buying lots, they would lease locations for short terms which permitted them to move to new sites if the first were unsatisfactory.

The second policy frequently employed was the use of pre-fabricated stations which could be quickly installed on a leased lot and could be just as quickly transported to a new location if the first one proved unprofitable. These pre-fab stations, constructed of structural steel, were available in a choice of designs, or an oil company could create a custom station for their exclusive use. Additional advantages of the pre-fab station were its low cost, which allowed a distributor to saturate a large territory with many stations, and its visual versatility, which permitted the structural frame to be veneered with that material most acceptable to each community.

Because this practice of moving filling stations was so widespread, it is entirely reasonable to assume that the West Holmes station was transferred to its present site in the late thirties from a previous location. Although this station has been considerably altered through the years, it still retains the size and configuration that has come to be associated with the early Pure Oil stations which embraced the English cottage motif described earlier.

But there is yet another feature that makes this station of exceptional interest to the historian—the existence of an exterior, unsheltered grease pit beside the building. When filling stations first began offering lubrications and car washing, the work was carried on out-of-doors. A concrete apron would be poured on which cars could be washed, but in order for the mechanic to get under the car to lubricate it, either the car had to be raised or the ground had to be lowered. A common solution, as illustrated here, was to dig a pit or trench below two metal tracks onto which the vehicle was driven. An alternative solution involved elevating the tracks above the ground and fitting them

with an access ramp. These exterior grease pits were in wide use until the mid twenties when rotary lifts operated by air compressors replaced them.

By the end of the decade, the oil companies had begun to provide enclosed bays adjoining the station office for the lubrication and washing floors. These earliest covered bays frequently carried through the architectural design of the station such as was done with the Pan American station at Madison and Williams. But after the mid thirties, bays usually took the form of rectangular, flat roofed boxes located to one side of the station. For example, when the Downtown Chevron station was enlarged by the construction of two bays, they consisted of simple brick boxes under a flat roof and had large multipaned windows set in metal sashes. The only attempt to provide continuity with the original portion of the building was the use of a brick exterior.

Many of the early leases for station sites in Huntsville required the lessor to provide the station and equipment according to plans supplied by the lessee. One such lease from 1929 reveals that the lessor was responsible for constructing one station (type N-2), a fence and a sign post, and for installing three 10 gallon gas pumps, one 1000 gallon underground tank, four 65 gallon lubricating oil tanks, an automobile lift, an air compressor, and various smaller pieces of equipment. For this the Texas Company would pay rent of \$150 per month for ten years. However the rental terms of other leases tended to be considerably lower. During the 1930s the terms were frequently computed on the quantity of gasoline sold each month.

Although the extant 1920s Huntsville stations all fall within the cottage style, this approach to station design was not universal. Another popular method of creating a respectable station involved the introduction of historical architectural styles in a modified form. Obviously a community could not object to a gas station that looked like a miniature replica of the state capitol or the city hall. Probably

the prize for the most blatant attempt to transform the gas station into a temple of civic pride must go to those stations designed as copies of circular Greek temples. The most spectacular of these was a station built in Philadelphia by the Atlantic Refining Company which was an enlargement of the Temple of Lysicrates surrounded by an Ionic colonnade. The architect apparently thought of this creation as a temple to the goddess of internal combustion.

However the most memorable stations were those designed to capture the attention of the motoring public through shock or humor. These stations were usually constructed by independent dealers with each design being unique. Some of the more popular themes exploited were Indian wigwams, Chinese pagodas, airplanes, giant gas pumps, windmills, and mosques.

The lack of any precedent for a commercial building type designed to attract a clientele speeding quickly past in an automobile opened the field to a rash of experiments. The aim of the designer was to create a building that would intrigue the motorist enough to stop and buy goods or services. In their quest to devise an architecture of communication, designers were often attracted to literal or symbolic statements. Food establishments made the greatest use of such devices by offering ice cream in igloos, barbeque in pig-shaped buildings and so forth. But gasoline merchandisers also were responsible for some of the more outlandish constructions that lined our highways during the period between 1920 and 1935. The literal approach favored gas stations built in the shape of gigantic gasoline pumps or emergency oil cans. One series of stations for the Shell Oil Company consisted of large replicas of seashells formed of concrete and set on end.

More frequently though an unrelated object was pressed into service for its symbolic associations which, combined with its eye appeal, created an unforgettable



roadside sight. Lindberg's historic flight across the Atlantic in 1927 made the airplane a highly topical object charged with high-spirited, patriotic feelings. Numerous station owners discovered that a quite serviceable structure could be fashioned from a small plane by using the fuselage as the office and one wing as a canopy over the pumps. Later owners were content to merely place an airplane on the roof of an otherwise unnotable station. In either case the sight of an airplane sitting along the highway definitely attracted attention and subtly symbolized sophisticated, high speed travel.

Another popular theme was based on the Indian wigwam which was believed to summon up the romance of nomadic travel as well as make reference to our own native history. Wigwam villages experienced a brief popularity, particularly in the Southeast for gas station-motel combinations with the station and motel

office in a large wigwam surrounded by a semicircle of smaller wigwam-cabins. The traveler who spent the night in one of these villages could imagine himself braving frontier hardships to explore the countryside while participating vicariously in a recreation of history.

The traditional forms of almost every culture and historical period were modified for use as filling station designs. In these cases the exotic and the unexpected were capitalized on to evoke the romance and mystery of travel, thereby elevating a Sunday drive to the status of a special event. The Chinese pagoda was an especially felicitous form with which to conjure up visions of faraway, exotic lands while producing a building that was totally distinctive. The most fascinating and probably one of the largest of the Chinese gas stations was erected in Mobile, Alabama, in 1926. It displays a blue tiled roof—complete with curled eaves—which extends to form three



parallel canopies, each supported at the front by a single post and massive brackets. Spindework panels along the tops of the windows and an ornately carved spire atop the main roof transform this complex into a true fantasy environment for the mundane sale of gasoline and oil.

The Hat and Boots station in Seattle is a uniquely personal expression of vernacular design as well as an amazing structural feat. The glass office is sheltered under a large red concrete cowboy hat having an extensive cantilevered brim, while the restrooms are housed in a pair of decorated cowboy boots—the blue one for boys and the yellow one for girls. A small free-standing cactus contains electrical outlets and water taps. Truly the wild west survives in south Seattle.

Perhaps the award for the most outrageous station design must go to Mammy's Cupboard located south of Natchez, Mississippi. Constructed during

the 1940s as a combination Shell station and sandwich counter, Mammy's stands 28 feet tall and has a tin torso above a billowing red skirt fabricated of brick.

Unfortunately these imaginative, vernacular stations remained a minor sub-category of roadside architecture. Very few were constructed after 1940, and many of the best earlier examples have already disappeared. Beginning about 1930, the oil companies embarked on a program of producing even more standardized station designs than they had used during the first decade and a half.

By this time automobiles were no longer a novelty but had become an indispensable part of American life; a growing system of highways made intercity and even cross-country individual travel a reality; and the major oil companies were maturing into marketing giants. However the Depression presented them with a new problem: unemployment and low salaries curtailed the ability



Above, Mobile's Chinese station; below, Mammy's Cupboard in Natchez.



of most Americans to travel freely. As the sales of gasoline and oil declined, the distributors looked for new products and services to offer and for new methods of marketing them. One result was that stations began handling tires, batteries and accessories in addition to taking on a wide range of auto repairs that had previously been conducted by local garages. This considerable addition to the line of stock carried by the stations required both expanded display areas and storage space, while extensive repair services further increased the need for large enclosed work bays. These demands were met by altering the shape of the filling station to that of a large rectangular box having the bays, office, restrooms, and storage areas totally integrated under a single roof.

Accompanying this change in function was a corresponding change in company attitude towards the role of station design. The strained economy of the depression years encouraged the oil companies to abandon their policy of appeasing community demands by building attractive stations and replaced it with a hard sell policy. Company officials, anxious to build customer loyalty while expanding their sales territory, adopted standardized designs that would be immediately recognizable and totally associated with their specific brand. This decision was reinforced by each company's desire to further increase sales by saturating their region with numerous stations. The standardized, prefabricated station provided the least expensive method of meeting these goals. Cost economies could be further realized by stripping the station of all extraneous decoration except for one or two highly visible motifs which provided the distinguishing signature. No longer did the station blend innocuously into the neighborhood; it now became a highly visible structure and every effort was directed toward creating an image that starkly contrasted with its surroundings.

Aside from a number of minor aberrations, station design between 1930 and

1960 can be characterized as having a rectangular layout and silhouette, a flat roof, at least two integrated service bays, and a large percentage of glass. Although any exterior material could be used to cover the prefab steel frame, terra cotta was popular during the thirties, to be followed by porcelain enamel and later plastic during the next two decades. All of these materials had glossy surface finishes that were easy to maintain, created a contrast with the more common wood and brick veneers of adjacent buildings, and were highly reflective. This last feature was most desirable because it facilitated night lighting of stations so that the structure itself was transformed into a continuous advertisement for the product.

Porcelain enamel could be manufactured in the vivid colors adopted by the oil companies which allowed the entire building to carry through the company image. One example is the Shell station, the body of which was a beige while the projecting pylon with sign was bright red. Many chains selected white as the basic color, a choice prompted primarily because it was the most visible and the most effective when illuminated at night.

Gas station design in Huntsville during the thirties appears to have been slow to reflect these national trends. Fewer than ten stations were opened during the decade which is reasonable considering the poor state of the local economy. Since 1900 Huntsville had been primarily dependent on the outlying textile mills for its prosperity; however as the effects of the Depression reached town, they were compounded by the growing presence of labor union activity in the mills. The result was that several of the mills permanently ceased operation during the decade while the remainder were shut down for months at a time leaving the city in a precarious situation. Construction of all kinds slowed. New gas station development was delayed because of the resulting decrease in business and because the initial expense of erecting the structures and installing the equipment was

often borne by the local property owner.

A Wofford Oil Company filling station was opened at the southwest corner of Madison and Gates streets in 1930, but this was built by the company and completed before the full impact of the Depression reached Huntsville. The station now standing on this lot appears to be the original one although when built it apparently had an L-shaped hipped roof, one leg of which extended toward Madison Street to form a canopy. The fake chimney on the north wall and the small blue tiled shed roof supported on curled metal brackets above the office appear to be vestigial cottage features. The use of brick facing was a local choice, presumably the more fashionable terra cotta was too expensive for the Huntsville market and was used only in major metropolitan centers. However this station does exhibit the integrated box shape with combined service bays and office that became common in the thirties.

Near the end of the decade a large service station was constructed downtown at the southwest corner of East Clinton and Greene streets. There had been a garage and filling station on this site previously (the Huntsville Carriage Works and Auto Garage), but in 1937 the property changed hands and the new owner leased the lot for five years to the Texas Company of Delaware on the condition that a suitable station be constructed and equipped by the lessor. This station is no longer standing, but from a contemporary newspaper photograph one can discern that considerable change had occurred in shape, size and design of the gas station since the construction of the Wofford station. The complex of office, display space, restrooms, and bays is sited along the two interior lot lines leaving the street sides accessible to autos from either street. Little evidence remains of the once popular cottage styling; in its place is a spare design with a strongly horizontal orientation emphasized by the flat roof and the three closely spaced bands of color that encircle the top of the wall. The

walls themselves are broken by large areas of plate glass, each topped by a band of stubby transoms, a modified Victorian feature retained for ventilation until the age of air conditioning. The station is painted white, and the facade is punctuated by short, truncated pilasters typical of Streamline Moderne styling. In 1942 this station was modestly advertised as "one of the South's largest recapping plants," which accounts for its increased size and demonstrates the expanded role that the filling station had assumed.

While the design of this station merely hints at the Streamline Moderne, other stations of the period were wholly designed in the style although none are known to have been built in Huntsville. The Moderne style reached its peak of popularity during the thirties and was characterized by rounded corners, flat roofs, smooth surfaces, and horizontal lines and composition. By omitting the panels of stylized relief and other purely ornamental features associated with this style, the oil companies could create station designs that gave the general feeling of being stylishly chic yet were cheap to build. The flat roofs, sleek surfaces, and clean composition provided exactly the combination of elements sought by the oil companies to produce small, neat buildings with a machined appearance. The consistent use of the company's colors and logos in conjunction with these designs had the effect of transforming the total structure into a three-dimensional sign for the product, and in the process, became the prototype for future chains of businesses catering to the car culture. In the fifties, McDonald's carried this concept to its ultimate conclusion by actually designing a sign capable of housing the preparation and sale of inexpensive hamburgers.

During the following two decades, new and renovated stations assumed the characteristics that are probably most commonly associated with gas station design: the shiny box of porcelain enamel and glass displaying a distinctive design



The Dudley Powell Texaco station, above, built in the late thirties has now been replaced by a Firestone store, the third automobile-related structure on this site. The Wofford Oil station, below, opened in 1930, later became a Pure Oil station, and now sells Union 76.



feature that immediately identifies the brand of gas being sold. Many such stations are still in operation in Huntsville.

Stations of the Chevron Oil Company display stark white walls topped with a band of deep blue which outlines both the building and the flat rectangular canopy. Phillips 66 has used a design that features a soaring V-shaped, or butterfly, canopy supported near its outermost extension by an exposed metal framework, which also carries the company sign on top.

Citgo also utilizes white exterior panels but accents them with adjoining bands of red and orange, the company colors. A flat rectangular canopy is again present, but the defining feature here is a skyline motif created by the partial extension of the wall separating the office and service bays, which carries the Citgo sign well above the station. By making the main plane of this pylon perpendicular to the street, the sign is easily identified at a distance by traffic approaching from either direction.

Shell stations used a similar device but flared the sides of the panel as it rose above the roofline so that it was widest at the top where the Shell insignia was placed. These Shell stations could be further distinguished by their beige primary color trimmed along the bottom with a ribbon of bright red and by the small, flat eaves that projected above the office.

Most of these stations dating from the forties and fifties did not have canopies when they were constructed, although many stations have added them since 1960. Canopies have gone in and out of fashion during the evolution of gas station design, although they always retained a certain degree of popularity and use in the southern states to provide relief from the sun. Some station owners were once convinced that many women drivers were reluctant to drive beneath them and consequently abandoned their use on that ground. In the last twenty years the canopy has again come into vogue, partly because it provides an ideal field for

advertising.

By the sixties, the design of gas stations, as well as their general overall appearance, had become the target of widespread derision and hostility. Public opposition to gas stations, which the oil companies had worked so hard to avoid in the twenties, finally became an issue the companies could no longer avoid. One example will suffice to illustrate the low regard in which stations had come to be held; John Kenneth Galbraith attacked the gasoline service station as

the most repellent piece of architecture of the past two thousand years. There are far more of them than are needed. Usually they are filthy. Their merchandise is hideously packaged and garishly displayed. They are uncontrollably addicted to great strings of ragged little flags. Protecting them is an ominous coalition of small businessmen and large. The stations should be excluded entirely from most streets and highways. Where allowed, they should be franchised to limit the number, and there should be stern requirements as to architecture, appearance, and general reticence.

This general low esteem, combined with increasing local opposition to the construction of new stations on lucrative sites, forced the petroleum industry to reassess station design. Before long a new type of station, referred to as a "blend-in," appeared. Its most common form was the ranch-style copied after the ranch houses of California which combined natural materials in earth colors with gently sloping roofs and extensive overhanging eaves. Shell introduced the first of these stations in California in 1960. They have since spread throughout the rest of the country, and in Huntsville, Standard, Exxon, and Shell have constructed numerous such stations. Coinciding with this movement was a return to the use of extensive landscaping around the station as a further means of softening its intrusive qualities and appeasing the neighbors.

Other oil companies adopted similar solutions to mitigate public opposition.



Three decades of Shell station design which typify the national trends:



top, nineteen-fifties; middle, nineteen-sixties; bottom, late nineteen-seventies.



Texaco added a mansard roof to their stations in the mid sixties and introduced a stone facade (usually of plastic). Sunoco returned once again to the early American theme by the addition of a traditional hip-ped or gabled roof, cupola, reduced window size, and the use of brick, in place of enamel or plastic, for exterior cladding.

Regardless of the exact means selected to achieve an improved image, the result was that during the sixties the oil companies had reverted to building stations that relied for their composition and surface materials on the contemporary housing industry. After a three decade experiment with the creation of a unique building type in which functional requirements were given modern industrial solutions, the major oil companies returned to their policy of the twenties which adapted existing building types to their specific purposes. The "station as house" returned and was dressed in the materials of residential construction such as brick, stone and natural wood.

However, this historical progression typifies only the activities of the major oil retailers. The independents—the local jobbers and the regional distributors—handled station design in a different manner, one that reflected their own special approach to selling gasoline. Their marketing policy depended on selling only gasoline and oil, and perhaps some candy and cigarettes, at reduced prices. To do so, they refused to offer automobile accessories, repair services, credit card sales, or the other promotional tactics favored by the national brand dealers. Consequently they had no need for a fancy structure; a station large enough to house an attendant, a few sundry items, and the restrooms was sufficient and resulted in the filling station as "small box" of which there are a multitude of variations. The earliest stations of these retailers often displayed above-ground storage tanks on the lot, although these are seldom seen anymore. Still commonly encountered, however, are the series of advertising billboards that

delineate the rear of the station lot and the "strings of ragged little flags." These stations often are fondly remembered—at least by children—for their propensity to display lines hung with velvet paintings of The Last Supper, chenille bedspreads emblazoned with peacocks, and inflated plastic toys. As with the major oil retailers, these stations sometimes added a flamboyant canopy to further elicit motorist response.

The most recent phase of gas station design was prompted by changes within the petroleum industry, in this case by a shortage of gasoline and the resultant escalation of prices. Within the last decade the most important factor in retailing has become price competition. In an effort to reduce overhead to its lowest level, the major companies have begun producing stations that consist essentially of an enormous canopy with a small cage attached for the attendant and his cash register. A shelter for restrooms and vending machines may be located off to one side of the lot as an independent structure. Gone are the sale and installation of tires, batteries and other accessories; gone also are minor repair services; and finally, gone is the man to pump gas and clean windshields. The driver must perform all services himself and then pay the cashier.

Ironically this latest development completes the cycle back to the stations of the first decade which were nothing more than a modest shed and some gas pumps. A concurrent development is the proliferation of establishments composed of several pumps combined with a quick stop food store. This station is, of course, nothing but an updated version of the earliest stations where an already existing businessman, often the grocer, placed a pump on the curb as an extra added service for his customers.

This outline of gas station design and marketing techniques describes a complete cycle beginning with curbside and shed stations, progressing through the cottage stage to reach an apex during the

fifties with the porcelain box, then returning to the station as house, and ending where it all started with the stripped filling and curbside stations of today.

What will come next is impossible to say, but it will be directly influenced by conditions within the petroleum industry and by the attitudes and habits of the motoring public. The only thing that can be stated with certainty is that rapid changes in design and retailing will continue to occur.

Those industries that are directly dependent on the driving public for their

business are the most adaptive and most quick to respond to alterations in their product, their clientele, and their environment. The relatively small size of their structures allows these businesses to remain fluid and immediately responsive to the slightest shift in conditions. This feature is the very essence of the franchise and chain highway business, and explains why the study of this segment of our built environment must be documented and recorded as it occurs: by tomorrow it may be only a memory or a vacant lot.



COVER PHOTO

Looking west along Clinton Avenue about 1926. Although the automobile has obviously become the dominant form of transportation, the horse has not entirely disappeared. A curbside pump is just visible on the left, and the new traffic lights are prominently displayed.

PHOTO CREDITS

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