

YOU HAVE TO BE ALMOST 86 YEARS OLD TO REMEMBER THIS

by John H. Vargo

When I was 8 or 9 years old my mother and father would gather up my brother and I, load us in our model A Ford sedan and drive us to Danbury, Ct. On the way there would be a series of signs that read, Every shaver / Now can snore / Six more minutes / Than before / By using / Burma-Shave!



these signs were spaced at least 600 feet apart along the road, and my brother and I would yell out what was on each sign as it came into view. The one who saw the sign first would yell out the words first.

This drove my mother and father crazy but they could not shut us up, it was our entertainment for the trip.

Burma-Shave was introduced in 1925 by the Burma-Vita company in Minneapolis owned by Clinton Odell. The company's original product was a liniment made of ingredients described as having come "from the Malay Peninsula and Burma" (hence its name). Sales were sparse, and the company sought to expand sales by introducing a product with wider appeal.

The result was the Burma-Shave brand of brushless shaving cream and its supporting advertising program. Sales increased.



Ford Model A

At its peak, Burma-Shave was the second-highest-selling brushless shaving cream in the US. These roadside advertisements were perfect for US Highways prior to the nationwide Highway improvements made under the Eisenhower Administration. Once

the automobile speeds increased, the signs lost their effectiveness.

At their height of popularity there were thousands of these signs strung out along U. S. Highways. A unique part of our past that we will never see again.

On U.S. Route 66.

Burma-Shave sign series first appeared on U.S. Highway 65 near Lakeville, Minnesota, in 1926, and remained a major advertising component until 1963 in most of the contiguous United States. The first series read: Cheer up, face – the war is over! Burma-Shave.[2] The exceptions were Nevada (deemed to have insufficient road traffic), and Massachusetts (eliminated due to that state's high land rentals and roadside foliage). Typically, six consecutive small signs would be posted along the edge of highways, spaced for sequential reading by passing motorists. The last sign was almost always the name of the product. The signs were originally produced in two color combinations: red-and-white and orange-and-black, though the latter was eliminated after a few years. A special white-on-blue set of signs was developed for South Dakota, which restricted the color red on roadside signs to official warning notices.

This use of a series of small signs, each of which bore part of a commercial message, was a successful approach to highway advertising during the early years of highway travel, drawing the attention of passing motorists who were curious to learn the punchline.[3] As the Interstate system expanded in the late 1950s and vehicle speeds increased, it became more difficult to attract motorists' attention with small signs. When the company was acquired by Philip Morris, the signs were discontinued on advice of counsel.[4]

Some of the signs featured safety messages about speeding instead of advertisements.

Examples of Burma-Shave advertisements are at The House on the Rock in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Re-creations of Burma-Shave sign sets also appear on Arizona State Highway 66, part of the original U.S. Route 66, between Ash Fork, Arizona, and Kingman, Arizona, (though they were not installed there by Burma-Shave during its original campaigns) and on Old U.S. Highway 30 near Ogden, Iowa. Other examples are displayed at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan,

the Interstate 44 in Missouri rest area between Rolla and Springfield (which has old Route 66 building picnic structures), the Forney Transportation Museum in Denver, Colorado and the Virginia Museum of Transportation in Roanoke, Virginia

The complete list of the 600 or so known sets of signs is listed in Sunday Drives [5] and in the last part of The Verse by the Side of the Road.[6] The content of the earliest signs is lost, but it is believed that the first recorded signs, for 1927 and soon after, are close to the originals. The first ones were prosaic advertisements. Generally the signs were printed with all capital letters. The style shown below is for readability:

As early as 1928, the writers were displaying a puckish sense of humor:

Takes the "H" out of shave / Makes it save / Saves complexion / Saves time and money / No brush – no lather / Burma-Shave In 1929, the prosaic ads began to be replaced by actual verses on four signs, with the fifth sign merely a filler for the sixth:

•Every shaver / Now can snore / Six more minutes / Than before / By using / Burma-Shave

•Your shaving brush / Has had its day / So why not / Shave the modern way / With / Burma-Shave

Previously there were only two to four sets of signs per year. 1930 saw major growth in the company, and 19 sets of signs were produced. The writers recycled a previous joke. They continued to ridicule the "old" style of shaving. And they began to appeal to the wives as well:

•Cheer up face / The war is past / The "H" is out / Of shave / At last / Burma-Shave

•Shaving brushes / You'll soon see 'em / On the shelf / In some / Museum / Burma-Shave

•Does your husband / Misbehave / Grunt and grumble / Rant and rave / Shoot the brute some / Burma-Shave

In 1931, the writers began to reveal a "cringe factor" side to their creativity, which would increase over time:

•No matter / How you slice it / It's still your face / Be humane / Use / Burma-Shave

In 1932, the company recognized the popularity of the signs with a self-referencing gimmick:

•Free / Illustrated / Jingle book / In every / Package / Burma-Shave

•A shave / That's real / No cuts to heal / A soothing / Velvet after-feel / Burma-Shave. Messages began to increase in 1939, as these examples show. (The first of the four is a parody of "Paul Revere's Ride" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.)

•Hardly a driver / Is now alive / Who passed / On hills At 75 / Burma-Shave

•Past / Schoolhouses / Take it slow / Let the little / Shavers grow / Burma-Shave

•If you dislike / Big traffic fines / Slow down / Till you Can read these signs / Burma-Shave

•Don't take / a curve / at 60 per. / We hate to lose / a customer / Burma-Shave

In 1939 and subsequent years, demise of the signs was foreshadowed, as busy roadways approaching larger cities featured shortened versions of the slogans on one, two, or three signs — the exact count is not recorded. The puns include a play on the Maxwell House Coffee slogan, standard puns, and yet another reference to the "H" joke:

•Good to the last stop

•Covers a multitude of chins

•Takes the "H" out of shaving

The war years found the company recycling a lot of their old signs, with new ones mostly focusing on World War II propaganda:

•Let's make Hitler / And Hirohito / Feel as bad / as Old Benito / Buy War Bonds / Burma-Shave

•Slap / The Jap / With / Iron / Scrap / Burma-Shave

A 1944 advertisement in Life magazine ran:

TOUGH-WHISKERED YANKS / IN HEAVY TANKS HAVE JAWS AS SMOOTH / AS GUYS IN BANKS

1963 was the last year for the signs, most of which were repeats.

