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What ever happened to  
those little signs by the  
side of the road?

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real QUESTIONS  
real ANSWERS

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American Safety Razor now owns the famous Burma Shave name, and re-introduced the brand in 1997 for blade cartridges, handles, shaving cream and skin conditioner.

# What ever happened to those little signs by the side of the road



Over the years, our roads have changed dramatically. They've become wider, smoother, longer – and a lot more crowded. And the signs alongside them have changed too. When all we had were narrow, two-lane roads, a unique American phenomenon appeared: Burma Shave™ signs. The signs have gone the way of the ice wagon, the steam whistle and other vanished sights and sounds, but from 1926 through 1963, these little poems, on a series of white-on-red signs, captured attention and delighted people “on the road.” Let’s take a journey back in time, along the twisty, two-lane blacktop trail, to find the answer to the question: “What’s the story behind the Burma-Shave signs?”

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**WHAT WAS BURMA SHAVE,  
AND HOW DID THE ROAD SIGNS START?**

Early in this century, a Minneapolis attorney produced extra income by manufacturing a liniment he called “Burma Vita.” “Burma,” because many oils in it came from Burma and “Vita,” for life and vigor.

But even then, few people used liniment, and a druggist asked for something with more universal appeal. The next product any man could use: A brushless shaving cream. Quite an innovation in its day, and ideal for travelers: No more wet, foul-smelling, mildewed shaving brushes to pack.

They called it “Burma Shave.”

How to sell this new product? The inventor’s grandson, Leonard Odell, takes up the story: “One day on the road... Dad and my brother, Allan—who were out trying to sell Jars on Approval...saw a series of small serial signs advertising a gas station. Maybe a dozen of them—and then at the end, a sign would point in to the gas station. Al thought, every time I see one of those setups, I read every one of the signs. So why can’t you sell a product that way?”

“We bought some second-hand boards...and painted them up...The first one was: SHAVE THE MODERN WAY / FINE FOR THE SKIN / DRUGGISTS HAVE IT / BURMA SHAVE

“...We put 12 sets of signs on two highways and by the start of the year, we were getting the first repeat orders we’d ever had...In early 1926, we set up our first sign shop.”

**WHAT MADE THE SIGNS SO POPULAR?**

“What made America first notice and cherish these jaunty little signs—was their lightheartedness...These were the days when advertisers preferred long blocks of copy composed on the ‘reason why’ principle.

“In this environment, the Odells arrived with distinctive, ironic humor: HE PLAYED / A SAX / HAD NO B.O. / BUT HIS WHISKERS SCRATCHED / SO SHE LET HIM GO / BURMA SHAVE.

“At 35 mph, it took almost 3 seconds to proceed from sign to sign, or 18 seconds to march through the whole series. This was far more time and attention than a newspaper or magazine advertiser could realistically expect...it was as difficult to read just one Burma Shave sign as it was to eat one salted peanut.

“They established a controlled reading pace... The eye could not race ahead...Instead the signs concentrated attention on one sign at a time. THE BEARDED LADY / TRIED A JAR / SHE’S NOW / A FAMOUS / MOVIE STAR / BURMA-SHAVE. Or, BENEATH THIS STONE / LIES ELMER GUSH / TICKLED TO DEATH / BY HIS / SHAVING BRUSH / BURMA-SHAVE.”

**HOW MANY DIFFERENT  
BURMA SHAVE SIGNS  
WERE THERE?**

Between 1926 and 1963, 600 signs were created. And certain themes ran through them.

“One was the accept-no-substitutes theme... But where conventional advertisers [had] virtually no effect on the glazed eyes of readers, the Odells captured attention with gaiety: GIVE THE GUY / THE TOE OF YOUR BOOT / WHO TRIES / TO HAND YOU / A SUBSTITUTE / BURMA-SHAVE.

TAKE IT SLO

PAST

SCHOOLHOUSES

“Or SUBSTITUTES / WOULD IRK A SAINT /  
YOU HOPE THEY ARE / WHAT YOU KNOW /  
THEY AIN’T/ BURMA-SHAVE.

“And quite naturally...man/woman relationships:  
TO GET / AWAY / FROM HAIRY APES / LADIES JUMP  
/ FROM FIRE ESCAPES / BURMA-SHAVE.

“...And one that we didn’t use, THE OTHER  
WOMAN / IN HIS LIFE / SAID “GO BACK HOME” /  
AND SCRATCH YOUR WIFE / BURMA SHAVE.

“...And in 1934: HE HAD THE RING / HE HAD  
THE FLAT / BUT SHE FELT HIS CHIN / AND THAT /  
WAS THAT / BURMA-SHAVE.

“...Public service was one of the major themes:  
KEEP WELL / TO THE RIGHT / OF THE  
ONCOMING CAR / GET YOUR CLOSE SHAVES  
/ FROM OUR HALF-POUND JAR / BURMA SHAVE.

“...said Leonard Odell, ‘Dad felt we’d grown to be a part  
of the US roadside so that we had a duty to do whatever we  
could about the mounting accident rate...and if people  
could remember our little verses, they might be better  
than routine...safety advice.’ Burma Shave earned the  
reputation of being helpful as well as cheerful. HARDLY  
A DRIVER / IS NOW ALIVE / WHO PASSED / ON  
HILLS / AT 75 / BURMA SHAVE.

“Or: WHEN YOU DRIVE / IF CAUTION  
CEASES / YOU ARE APT / TO REST /  
IN PIECES / BURMA-SHAVE.

“And (our favorite) AT SCHOOL  
ZONES / HEED INSTRUCTIONS / PROTECT  
/ OUR LITTLE / TAX DEDUCTIONS /  
BURMA SHAVE.

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LET THE LITTLE

SHAVERS GROW

Burma-Shave™

## WHY DID THE SIGNS DISAPPEAR?

“Time passed...People were driving too fast to read...  
Superhighways...excluded the signs...Growth and  
expansion of...other mediums, such as radio and tv...

“On February 7, 1963, the company was sold...and  
became...American Safety Razor Products...The Odells  
entered retirement along with their signs.”

In 1964, some of the signs were given to the  
Smithsonian, ironically echoing one of the early ones:  
SHAVING BRUSHES / YOU’LL SOON SEE ‘EM / ON  
THE SHELF / IN SOME / MUSEUM / BURMA-SHAVE.

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Burma Shave signs are gone. But they live on  
in thousands of memories. As Frank Rowsome concludes, you might  
be driving on a two lane road with the sun warm and the sky blue  
and then along come these signs:*

IF YOU / DON’T KNOW / WHOSE SIGNS THESE ARE /  
YOU CAN’T HAVE DRIVEN / VERY FAR / BURMA SHAVE. 

## An Experience With The Little Red Signs

“A single red sign stuck in the road’s shoulder at a crazy angle whizzed by;  
in white letters, it read: LISTEN, BIRDS. My father lit another Lucky and  
leaned forward on the alert, peering through the bug-spattered windshield.

THESE SIGNS COST MONEY. The second red-and-white announcement  
flashed by, followed quickly by the third: SO ROOST AWHILE.

The old man flicked his match out the side window, his neck craning  
in anticipation of the snapper. We drove on. And on. Had some crummy,  
rotten fiend stolen the punch line?

But finally it came, half hidden next to a gnarled oak tree at the far end  
of a long, sweeping curve: BUT DON’T GET FUNNY.

I didn’t get it. But then, I didn’t get much of anything in those days.

A few yards farther on, the sponsor’s name flashed by: BURMA SHAVE.  
Up front, the old man cackled appreciatively; his favorite form of reading,  
next to the Chicago Herald-American sports section, was Burma Shave signs.  
He could recite them like a Shakespearean scholar quoting first folios. He  
had just added another gem to his repertoire. In the months to come, it would  
be referred to over and over, complete to location, time of day and pertinent  
weather information.

From: *Wanda Hickey’s Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters* by Jean Shepherd

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