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FEATURED

## Ruppel signs off: Local display maker retires after 71 years in business

By Jordan Gass-Poore New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung  
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Harvey Ruppel shows off his grandfather's book of ideas that he used for his own signs on Wednesday.

KATHRYN PARKER | Herald-Zeitung

The big book of ideas that once belonged to local store owner Harvey Ruppel's Australian grandfather is falling apart.

Unbeknownst to his grandfather, who died before Ruppel's father was born, this book, with pages of images depicting nature and ornate lettering, served as the impetus for Ruppel Signs in New Braunfels.

Much like this book, found in the home of Ruppel's grandmother, the fate of Ruppel Signs may be left to history when it is sold after opening at its current location in 1946.

But people should not let the "for sale" sign fool them. There is still life left in the walls of this steel, aluminum and concrete structure.

Ruppel's father, Bill "Rusty" Ruppel began the business in 1942 in his home garage off Academy Street, where the sound of Harvey's sliding trumpet could be heard and the first drops of paint stained his hands.

About three years later, Rusty Ruppel spent around \$1,900 to build a place large enough so that he and his family could more easily create signs for such companies as General Electric and Humble Oil, which later merged with Standard Oil to form Exxon.

Ruppel, 80, remembered dipping brushes into paint buckets to fill in the large letters his father had outlined for signs under the structure's curved aluminum roof after business hours and during summer vacations in high school.

Harvey Ruppel carried the trade of his father and grandfather with him after he graduated from New Braunfels High School in 1951, where his father worked for eight years as an art teacher.

Ruppel's wife, Mildred Ruppel, said his father was a "very talented" artist.

That same year, Harvey Ruppel joined the U.S. Army painting signs and drawing cartoons for two years on a base in Oklahoma.

When Ruppel returned to New Braunfels, he became owner of Ruppel Signs, a promotion that did not affect his still-humble attitude.

"When I took it over I never really painted signs before," Harvey Ruppel said.

The success of Ruppel's and his family's hard work may have come in the form of 2,000 silk-screened signs for the former local H. Dittlinger Roller Mills Company. Each small sign was created using rubber blades that pushed the ink onto a polyester material.

In the book "Hill Country Backroads: Showing the Way in Comal County, author Laurie E. Jasinski writes that in the late 1940s and 1950s, a local resident and an American Legion Post commissioned work from Rusty Ruppel for "perhaps \$1 for each newly painted sign," which would be close to the equivalent of \$10 today.

Some may see Ruppel's work as being more than signs, but pieces of art that allow people to take a glimpse into the past.

His steady hand has graced the sides of milk trucks, from the days when bottles were delivered door-to-door, as well as the meeting points of grassy plains and asphalt, advertising former roadside attractions like Aquarena Springs Amusement Park in San Marcos.

Although it may be true that everything must come to an end, Ruppel still has photos of his work in wooden boxes and his grandfather's big book of ideas.

"A lot of stuff in here's antiques... including me," Ruppel said.

And the smell of paint still lingers inside the now unmarked Ruppel Signs. The three men with various shaped heads still tip their hats on the side of local High-Brehm Hats and Western Wear.

"Businesses come-and-go like people," said Mildred Ruppel.