

Duncan Wilkie Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Sign Career Summary:

I have been actively involved in making signs all my working life. I've never worked in any other trade or profession. I am no less passionate now, than I ever was, about creating lettering and designs. I continue to learn new techniques and improve old ones.

My interest in lettering started in grade 8. The Speedball Book, a pen and some nibs were my first introduction to the art of lettering. From a high school part-time job making signs with Murray MacDonald in 1972 in Flin Flon, Manitoba, to my present 5500 sq. ft. facility in Edmonton, Alberta, it's been a non-stop sign making career for me.

I've worked in most aspects of the sign industry. From 4 years of strictly sign design to all phases of electrical, sandblasted and commercial sign making, to running my own shop. As well as a grade 12 diploma, I am a graduate of the Commercial Signwriting program at NAIT in 1973 and I have a Certificate of Business Management from the University of Alberta, Faculty of Extension.

Laurie, my wife of over 30, years has never been far away. She has worked full-time as our office administrator for 20 years. In that time she's also painted, cut, screened and done whatever it took to help us build our business. We take pleasure in seeing the results of our hard work at the shop every day. Our adult children, Scott and Jennifer, however, are our greatest source of joy. They have embarked on careers not related to signs, and that's okay. My parents had no connection to signs or business either.

I have been a long-time resident of Letterville.com and involved with the uksignboards.com. I'm active in Letterhead Chat where I'm know as "signdog". I subscribe to several sign publications and have attended many trade shows and workshop sessions. Through information gathered from this network, I heard of the Letterhead movement and I attended my first Letterhead Meet in Banff. I was a little nervous, to say the least. I hadn't picked up a brush in years and didn't even bring them with me. It was such a thrill meeting the folks face to face that I'd seen in the sign magazines and online. Seeing them create their magic right in front of my eyes and being so willing to share openly their knowledge was such an inspiration to me. Years and many meets later, I was thrilled to be involved in hosting the Living Sky Letterheads Meet in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada, in 2007. I saw first-hand the sacrifice and hard work that goes into hosting a successful Letterhead meet. I'm truly grateful for all those folks that have made such sacrifices over the years.

A more Detailed history:

In 1972, I enrolled in the Commercial Signwriting (Now Sign Arts Program) at the Northern Alberta Institute of Alberta (NAIT) in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Upon graduating, I found an introductory position in a local sign shop. I worked there at Commercial Signs for 3 years. Wishing to expand my knowledge and experience, I obtained an 8 month temporary contract working for the Alberta Government Forestry sign shop. When the contract was up, I moved on to work for John MacDonald at Creative Advertising. John was a pioneer at Sandblasted Cedar

signs in the mid 70's.

One winter there was a work slowdown, and I seized the opportunity to visit a long time correspondent in Ocala, Florida. Jesse Tamblingson owned ABC Signs there. He put me up and I helped him out for a month in his shop. It was such a thrill for a kid from Alberta to be lettering outside in January in shirt sleeves. When I returned home, work was still very slow at Creative Advertising, but I received a message that Blanchett Neon was trying to reach me. They were at the start of a huge signage contract for the brand new Kingsway Garden Mall. Soon I was working in the painting department there, cutting paintmask and learning to spray paint. When the contract was finished a year later, they let a lot of the new guys go for lack of work. Happily, the shop foreman wanted to keep me at least at arm's length. Because of my lettering background, I was moved into the Art Department "temporarily" till the shop got busy again... I really enjoyed the designing, rendering and blueprinting aspects of the Art Department, and I stayed there for four years.

During my time at Blanchett Neon I met and married Laurie, my wife of 31 years now. We had our first child, Scott, and bought our own home. Meanwhile, I was still the only "Sign Painter" in a shop of 20 signmakers, so management would have me doing some hand lettering and screen printing after hours. Then they gave me other work for their customers directly and soon I had an easel set up in the basement at home. I then took over the garage and soon I was giving 2 months notice to my employer. Thankfully, they supported me and I struck out on my own. I struggled about 5 years to support a mortgage, a wife and two babies out of my garage and basement shop. An opportunity arose, and with the support of my parents, I bought a ½ interest in Commercial Signs, the company I had originally started with. We had a staff of 9 and my partner and I really got the company rolling. About 2 years into it, my partner told me he wanted to be bought out and move on. Laurie had been working in the company full time by then and we decided that we would take the plunge and buy out all the shares. A few years later we moved to our present location where we've been for over 16 years. We have had numerous staff and technology changes over the years and I'm really enjoying our current size. We have a staff of 4 people full-time and 1 part time. Our main focus is Architectural Signage, but we also run Comsign Distribution from the same facility. For the past 5 years we have been the sole Canadian distributor of Standoff Systems mounting hardware and display components. We use a lot of the components in the signs and displays we fabricate, and everyday we ship parts all across the country to sign shops, display companies, glass and millwork businesses.

Currently we are focused on creating custom architectural signage, but we enjoy the variety in being a full service Commercial sign shop too. We have a well equipped shop with CNC router, digital imaging equipment, screen printing facilities, spray booth and a fully equipped carpentry shop. Along with building the Distribution business, I am taking the time to do more signs incorporating some of the more traditional techniques and designs. Although digital printing of graphics continues to expand and dominate the market, there is a growing market for quality, well-designed more traditional signs too. I intend to carry on producing traditional signs well after I retire from the mainstream sign industry. I have one font named Garner in honor of my early mentor George Garner in Flin Flon, Manitoba. It is distributed by Letterhead Fonts.com. I have another one in development and look forward to creating more. I'm excited about being featured in SignCraft Magazine, and I continue to really enjoy Letterhead meets and sharing my experience with others.