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Bellingham, Washington
The thought of a tombstone carver usually conjures up visions of a grim hunchback with a salt n’ pepper beard covering his etched face, cackling gleefully as he hammers out an epitaph for his latest client.

Jim Wahlstrom, a 23-year-old Western student carving at Fussner Monument Works, in Bellingham, hardly fits this image. But then Fussner’s porchful of tombstones in front of a mural of Chuckanut Drive seems out of place on State Street, also.

Wahlstrom works beneath a row of dusty basement windows, a small figure in large white overalls bent over a slab of granite. To one side of him sits an urn of ashes with its block of cement curing; to the far side of the room is the sandblasting chamber, its walls pitted and eaten away by stray particles of sand.
"I get tired of people clamming up and looking at me sideways when I tell them where I work," Wahlstrom said. "Actually I'm not in touch with the dying part of this job."

Half smiling, Wahlstrom puzzled over society's approach to death. "One family is insisting that their graves at the top of Bayview Hill lie downhill rather than in the customary easterly direction . . . because of the view.

He has unhappily decided that many of the relatives who buy the most expensive stones are compensating for their guilt. Once someone broke into the office but didn't take anything. On the floor, Wahlstrom found a fortune cookie note saying: "You understand human nature and sympathize with its weaknesses." He thinks this is a good understanding of and justification for his business.

"And I still haven't figured out if those teddy bears we carve on infants' stones are cute or morbid."

Leaning on a mahogany granite marker, he paused in his stenciling of a non-descript, stylized blossom to complain about the impersonality of his craft. "I guess you can mail order gravestones now. Last week we unwrapped a completed stone with a Montgomery Ward tag on it.

"Most of our customers choose from a catalog of 200 standardized designs and seldom ask for a special message or picture. I create maybe one original design out of 25, or ten a year."

A senior majoring in business, Wahlstrom learned the craft in his father's shop. "My father carved the stone free for that unknown boy who drowned at a Seattle rock festival last year. He explained to a newspaper he did it because he had a son roaming around the country. That was in the old days when I was footloose."

He shares his father's integrity and conscientiousness. "I want my work to do more than mark a grave; I want it to memorialize a way of life." He drew a tree and an ax for a logger's tombstone and a horse for an eight-year-old who had dreamt of becoming a cowboy. This special effort prevents the business from becoming a rip-off, he believes.

The common, two-foot by one-foot flat marker costs from $115-$185, but prices range from $40 to $4,000. The huge Warsaw red granite marker standing unbudging at the corner of the business' porch costs $3,421.

The two tombstone carvers at Fussner's work with stenciling knives and rubber patterns. They occasionally turn their sandblasting guns on a hot rod's hood or a Model-T's fender, and, with the ceiling covered with cables and tracks for the winches, they don't suffer from backstrain from lifting the heavy markers.
Carvers must be careful proofreaders, though the public doesn't seem to check carefully. A misspelled name marked one grave for a year before the family took a closer look. A widow placed flowers on a stranger's grave for five years before she found out she was five graves too far left.

A cloud of cigarette smoke hovering over his head, Wahlstrom said he may give up carving because the dust in the air is probably coating his lungs. Though he smiles at the confusion of his customers, this craftsman does indeed sympathize with their weaknesses. He's helped to personalize the American way of death.
Hoa was naked to his waist and he was barefoot, we both were, that was the way you did things. Papa-san was squatting on the wide thatched platform he used for a bed, in front of him was a wooden tray holding a glass-chimnied alcohol lamp surrounded by a half dozen small lacquer boxes and some tiny harpoon-like tools.

It was dark in the hutch, the only light came from the tray in front of Papa-san and a kerosene lamp on the table by the tea pot. I was swinging lazily in the hammock that took up the rest of the room while Hoa laid on the platform near Papa-san. The tray was between them and everything on the platform was stained brown-red except Papa-san. He was dark brown.

At a signal from Papa-san Hoa rolled to his side, tucked a hard little pillow firmly under his ear, accepted the pipe the old Montagnard offered him and sucked hard as the stuff in the pipe, held upside down over the lamp, sputtered and hissed. Hoa wasn't his real name but that was the way it came out when the natives tried to pronounce it. Hoa means flower in Vietnamese and it pleased him.

Papa-san wasn't his real name either, but we spoke no Montagnard and he didn't speak English so we communicated in sign language and called him Papa-san. We got along well that way, that was the way you did things.

Papa-san's hutch was in the Montagnard district of Nha Trang. Local GI's called it VC Village and damn few Americans went there, or wanted to. We did. We liked Papa-san and it was a fine place to appreciate the culture.
The best time to visit Papa-san was in the afternoon so you could get back to base, or at least a safer neighborhood, before dark. We had gotten a late start this afternoon. By the time we noticed that the sun had gone down we were too numb to care.

Hoa knew the dude was Cambodian as soon as he came in. Hoa always noticed stuff like that, he claims Cambods have square feet and you can tell every time. I don't know, I can't remember his feet.

The Cambod was drunk and delighted to find two Americans in the neighborhood. He liked Americans, and invited us in almost unintelligible English to come to his hutch. He had married a Montagnard girl that day and insisted that we attend the wedding feast.

Thinking that to follow a drunken Cambodian through VC Village at night, especially loaded on opium, would be unwise, we declined with thanks. We discovered immediately what passions such a flagrant insult can raise in an Asian breast.

The most persuasive point raised in the ensuing discussion was on the end of his knife. The blade probably wasn't more than six inches long, but my eyes bugged out to the tip of my nose when he flashed it out. It looked like a machete.

Our options were clear: we could go out and be captured by his Viet Cong unit; we could refuse to leave and be hacked to death as we tried to fight him; or we could run for it. We didn't really believe that there could be a wedding feast somewhere.

After some hurried consideration, the VC unit seemed unlikely: VC weren't dumb and they'd just send in four or five men to get us. Fighting seemed foolhardy, neither of us wanted to grapple half-naked with a knife-wielding drunk. Running barefoot two miles back to base was an open invitation to bruises, cuts, tetanus and unknown Asian horrors we didn't even want to consider. Attending a wedding feast suddenly acquired great appeal.

The Cambod was quite pleased when we agreed to go with him. Hoa and I were quite relieved when he put his knife away and we comforted ourselves thinking about how few Americans have been guests at Cambodian-Montagnard wedding feasts. After all, if you're goint to sample the culture (and we had smoked a lot of culture that afternoon) you might as well take in all you can. That's the way you do things.

We dressed slowly and followed the dude unsteadily to his hutch. The hutch was only fifty feet from Papa-san's but in that fifty feet I looked
over each shoulder ten times, peering through the
dark for the glint of gun muzzles, knives and bogy
men in general.

The hutch was the usual one-room hovel built
of scrap lumber and tin. Hoa reluctantly led the
way inside, still expecting the worst. He was
amazed to discover that the hutch really was set
for a feast.

Set on a mat in the center of the floor were
three large china dishes, one held fluffy white rice
peppered with brown meat chunks the size of dice,
the other two dishes held motley green stuff much
like the stuff you find in forgotten cottage cheese
cartons on the bottom shelves of refrigerators.
Squatting next to the food was one of the host’s
friends and the bride. It was obviously going to be
a very small affair, that’s why he added us to the
invitation list. I resigned myself to a case of
dysentery and prepared to fully enjoy the
situation.

Hoa, always the pessimist, refused to let me
enjoy myself at all. “Don’t eat anything,” he
whispered, “it may be poisoned.” I was crushed.
After surviving this long it hadn’t occurred to me
that we might still be in danger. Food doesn’t mix
well with opium anyway.

We excused ourselves from eating by convincing
our host that if we ate we would barf all over his
hutch. He accepted that without argument. We
were still obliged to drink to the bride though, and
for the occasion the proud bridegroom had
acquired a bottle of black market peach brandy.

My big brother taught me about alcohol just
before I reached puberty, using a bottle of 7-Up
and a bottle of peach brandy. He made his point so
effectively that to this day I gag on peach brandy.

I was faced with another important decision:
whether to commit suicide by refusing to toast the
bride or poison myself with his cursed brandy. I
drank.

Forty minutes later, after interminable nods,
grins, muted asides and senseless pigeon English
interchanges, we were free to go. We said
goodnight casually and sprinted wildly back to
base.

Hoa is a real estate agent in L. A. now and I’m
just another smart college punk at Western. We’ve
told scores of people about the night we were
kidnapped from the opium den, always with the
same result. No one ever believes it. Sometimes we
get together and talk about how loaded and stupid
and scared we were that night. We laugh and laugh
and laugh. That’s the way you do things.
It is 11:30 on a Sunday evening at the Rising Sun Human Relations Center. It has been a relatively quiet day for the volunteers at the large, yellow house at 301 Gladstone St., in Bellingham. A staff member is picking out a tune on a battered guitar.

A knock on the door brings the volunteer to his feet. A teenager is supporting himself against the side of the house. He is on downers and he has taken more than he can handle.

The staff members immediately determine the dosage and how long ago the client took the drug. It isn't lethal...this time.

Two staff members walk the boy around, they talk to him, they offer him coffee, they keep him awake, and several hours later the crisis has passed.

While hypothetical, the situation described above could happen any minute at the Rising Sun. The center maintains strict confidence between the volunteers and clients.

The sign outside the house proclaims, "Rising Sun Human Relations Center" in bright, hand-painted lettering. For these volunteers, caring is much more than just a name—it's what the Rising Sun is all about.

The house itself is an unimposing-looking two story building which has been painted and decorated by the people who work there. The warmth and concern put into decorating the inside of the house seem to spring out the moment the door is opened to welcome people and their hassles.

The people inside don't have to be there. But they decided to keep the house open day and night, and man a 24-hour "hot-line."

Sun volunteers deal with all kinds of crises, from bad trips to loneliness. A volunteer doesn't try to solve a client's problem, but he does try to help the client deal with the crisis and put things back into perspective.

A small group of house volunteers also make up a unit called the "flying squad," which goes into the community to help those who can't come to the house. Flying squad member Jim DeVoe said trust, honesty and caring for people were those values most important to squad members.

"As soon as you're in that door, there's a bond between the flying squad member and the client. He knows you're there to help and it makes people come together more," Jim said.

One male volunteer and one female worker are usually at the house, on duty at all times. The flying squad also travels in male-female pairs, because some clients can relate better to one sex than they can to another, according to Jim.

"If you get a call from a chick who is in crisis and who might have trouble relating to another chick, she might feel better talking to a male," he said.

Travelling with a teammate of the opposite sex has also helped to alleviate potentially dangerous situations.

"We had one call in the middle of the night where the person was talking about murder. We went to the client's house, and he had a knife. He picked up the knife and handled it, you know, just played with it in his hand.

"I was very apprehensive about telling him to put that knife down. As it worked out, the chick I was working with at the time asked the person to put the knife down because it made her nervous," Jim recalled.

He noted the client probably related to the nervous woman better than he could have understood Jim's fear.

Before becoming a regular staff or flying squad member, all volunteers undergo an exhaustive three- to four-week training program, plus a marathon weekend session for prospective flying squad members.

Drug use and its effects are explained during the session, which relies on sensitivity exercises and group interaction to develop a sense of community among the new recruits.

Role-playing is used to simulate actual emergency
situations. A group member plays the part of a person undergoing a crisis, and one or two other trainees try to deal with the situation. Jim said some role-plays get frighteningly real.

"It's amazing how you can go into another room for maybe five or ten minutes and just think about a feeling you have or a trip you might have been on, and you can really get into it," he said.

"That's all you do, just really concentrate on it. Then, when the people come in, it's amazing how you can stay with it. You just let it go and the people who are trying to help you out of it have to work. It doesn't seem like a big act at all.

Role playing stops with the training sessions. In a tense situation, a person in trouble might catch on to any acting on the volunteer's part, making it harder to deal with the problem at hand.

"Caring when a person has a problem, and knowing I might be able to help him see something that might help him to deal with his problem is how I can help," he said.

Rising Sun volunteers can only help a person deal honestly with his problem; they can't solve it for him.

"We can only help them get through the initial thing. We always try and throw it back on their shoulders and let them work it out, because we can't," Jim said.
... Someone to Touch
Taking the can from the electric opener, I slid the chili into a pan on Monarch, our crackling wood range. Half of the pan simmered on a warm spot, while the other half scorched on a red-hot area. Monarch is being difficult again, I thought.

I moved the chili and hoped for the best as I ran out to the refrigerator on the back porch. The lettuce was frozen again; must have been cold out there last night.

A crash course in homemaking is often a nightmare for a young experienced pair of newlyweds, but few couples have a 116-year-old historical house for a classroom, as we did.

Soot from a belligerent, steaming stove peppering our meals was only one of the oddities at our home, which was the Pickett House, located on 910 Bancroft St. in Bellingham. We also had 15 landladies.

They were a group of little old ladies, the Daughters of the Pioneers of Washington State. On the first Friday of every month, they haunted the home which was built by the Confederate general who led Pickett's charge during the battle at Gettysburg.

The first part of our three-year stay at the old house, I had several angry conversations with Mrs. Clara Roach, the head landlady. By the time we left, however, I had adopted her aversion to dust and dirty dishes and she was helping me hide Harry, our forbidden cat, from the other daughters.

She really proved her friendship when she covered up for me at an open house, which was held the day after my twenty-first birthday. Gripping the back of a chair to hold up my devastated, alcohol-soaked body, I wore a meek angelic smile as Mrs. Roach introduced me as a "sweet, young child" to a crowd of over a hundred sight-seers.

Another daughter, Mrs. Rachel Carruthers, shared my irreverant opinion of Gen. George E. Pickett. She would give a mischievous wink as the other daughters told the incredulous story of Old George, complete with white kid gloves and top hat, marrying the local Haida Indian princess, named Morning Mist.

Mrs. Carruthers clucked her tongue disapprovingly at Pickett's desertion of his half-Indian son after Ms. Mist died, and after the general had gained a fine wartime record and an aristocratic Virginian wife.

But Mrs. Carruthers was also responsible for a few tense moments. I jumped out of bed one morning and threw on a bathrobe to answer the door. There stood thirty wide-eyed third graders.
with their teacher. Mrs. Carruthers had forgotten to warn me of their visit.

My hair in rollers, I stifled yawns as I told the little cherubs a jumbled tale of Pickett’s life. Old George glared down at me from his painting on the opposite wall during the whole nightmare.

As old as the Pickett house was, the daughters were constantly refurbishing the place to make it look older. Only after they had plastered and wall-papered the living room did the ladies consider that the wide, undressed lumber underneath was not only unusual, but also authentic.

Making hasty apologies to Old George, they cut a four-by-five-foot hole in the plasterboard in our private living room. We had a hard time explaining away the framed patch of bare wall. Our kinder friends said the square nails and round wormholes were quite charming.

Another cheery feature of the house was in the public living room, where Pickett Junior’s charcoal drawing of a dead girl in her coffin reposed peacefully.

The daughters wouldn’t even let poor old Monarch roar in peace. The grand old stove was retired to the stable in our backyard two weeks before we moved to a “normal” home.

An impersonal, efficient electric stove with a forgettable name took over Monarch’s post, and a squadron of baseboard heaters circled every room.

By the end of our three-year tour of duty, we had been able to intimidate Monarch with our array of electric appliances. On his generous days, he would heat up his oven to 350 degrees in less than 45 minutes.

But I suppose the housewife who moved in after me cheered Monarch’s demise, just as I rejoiced when they took out his water pipes and gave the home an electric water heater.

My new home seemed to be out of place; I missed Pickett’s sullen stare and the attention of the daughters, which included an annual basket of Thanksgiving goodies.

One year they included a can of fish balls with the other treats. Dutifully, I cooked them.

Our cat didn’t like them either.
Stealing is one of the oldest occupations known to man, and it is unlikely to be phased out by the machine age. In the United States last year, thieves made off with $1,230,759,440 in stolen property, according to the FBI. This figure doesn't include the tremendous sum thieves cost us, indirectly, in increased prices and higher taxes.

Bellingham police reports show the number of thefts is on the rise. Excluding the reported number of shoplifting and petty theft cases, last year saw over 1400 cases of burglary, car theft, and larceny (in excess of $50) in Bellingham alone. John Burley, Bellingham's assistant police chief, reports the number of burglaries was up by over 100 in 1971 from the 1970 total of 315.

Western's campus security reported the 354 thefts on campus last year represented a 52 per cent increase in thefts from 1970.

Regarding the great number of thefts, Burley maintains there is a need for people to reexamine the value they place on their liberty. "Fear of being caught is our biggest asset," he said. The brawny lawman, out of much the same mold as John Wayne, points out that once thieves stop thinking about the consequences of being caught, their conscience is the only thing keeping them from stealing. "And I don't think many of them have a conscience," he added.

Burley feels a more "loose" outlook toward morals may be contributing to the rise in thefts. He believes when morals deteriorate, society fails as well, and liberal moral attitudes could be contributing to an increase in all crime. He feels that people who buy or possess stolen objects must not see anything immoral about buying stolen property. A dollar saved is a dollar earned, right? By law, not in this case.

For the ease with which thieves get rid of stolen property is a major factor contributing to the rise of thefts. If the market could be eliminated, Burley figures the number of thefts would be greatly reduced.

Few people realize the severity of the penalties for possession of stolen property. The offender will have gotten off easy if the stolen property is only confiscated and he is not subject to legal prosecution.

One student who had purchased stolen property, commented about any misgivings he may have had. "It bothered me for a while, but then I figured, if I didn't buy it, someone else would."

Some of the reasons people steal are just as ambiguous. One grifter who had stolen money out of a vending machine said, "I needed the money. It was the quickest way to get it." Another just shrugged his shoulders and said, "I thought I could get away with it."

Obviously, not all thieves started a life of crime because their divorced mother couldn't handle the father image and her drinking problem at the same time. Motivations are possibly the most difficult aspect of human behavior to explore and understand.

Mike Smith's parents weren't divorced. He has no grudge against society. His attitudes are not unlike those of many other college students. Mike Smith is a thief, not professionally, but as it suits his mood.
In the company of friends, he is considered an excellent conversationalist. There is nothing grim or distasteful in his appearance. If one is to notice anything peculiar in his manner, it is a lack of inhibition and a zany sense of humor.

Smith views his criminal activities as adventures. He remarked that he enjoys planning a caper as much as pulling it off. It could be said that he thrives on the danger of being caught. He added: “Fear of being caught doesn’t keep anyone from stealing. Nobody is going to steal if he expects to be caught.” He maintains nobody goes into a theft with negative attitudes.

Smith is currently under indictment for second degree burglary. He believes that his successful escapades made him increasingly more daring, until greed overwhelmed his judgment and he went back for a second load of merchandise—where the police arrested him.

Smith is not bitter about his apprehension, only slightly indignant about the circumstances of his arrest. He said: “To be a successful thief, you have to be born a thief. Some guys just don’t get caught.”

It seems reasonable to say that most people know the difference between right and wrong. People just don’t always do the right thing. Psychologically, all people strive to be consistent and logical in their thought patterns. When a person entertains thoughts which are inconsistent with his pre-set ideas, he makes an effort to iron out the wrinkles.

For example, if a person believes it is wrong to steal, yet is impressed by, and sympathetic toward, D. B. Cooper, the alleged skyjacker who parachuted to safety with $200,000, he may justify his feelings by considering Cooper’s case as different and not to be classified with common theft.

Such may be a reason why people steal. In the thief’s own mind, he is an exception to the rule.

Individuals take pride in exhibiting their talents and poise. Theft is an area which is open to anyone who cannot book their talents into a more constructive showcase.

Stealing, like any other job, takes some type of talent. It’s not impossible that people turn to theft as an element which expresses their daring and sense of adventure. One doesn’t have to be a kleptomaniac to get a kick out of ripping something off.

People are also motivated to steal by witnessing or hearing of successful thefts by others. For some, grifting is a learned experience acquired by mixing with other thieves. Smith noted casually, “I don’t think I know a single person who hasn’t stolen something.”

It is a misconception that most thieves are social rejects who are paying society back in some type of vengeful
retaliation. John Sutherland’s book *The Professional Thief*, a description of the stealing profession by an ex-grifter, states that such a notion is absurd. Sutherland’s research says that professional thieves “...rejoice in the welfare of the public, for it is from society that the thief makes his living.”

With the rising number of thefts reported each year, grifters are becoming more and more commonplace. Before too long, it could become a social norm.

It’s a fact of life. Thieves exist and always will. There is little chance that the profession will die out from lack of profits. Maybe a thief doesn’t get a gold watch for twenty-five years in the same vocation, but the salary is excellent, judging from the number of unsolved cases, once an individual is ready to drop his amateur status and turn pro.

On the other hand, the job turnover is high and benefits are low. You may never be fired, but there’s an excellent chance for a five- to 20-year lay-off. Few survive to retire.

There is nothing glamorous about stealing. Al Mundy is slick; John Doe, who rips off your stereo, is considered something less. Butch Cassidy had style; the guy who stole your car had a full tank of gas at his disposal.

What can be done to eliminate the problem? Society will never be able to end the trend by acting after the crime has been committed. The answer must lie somewhere inside the mind of each individual before the crime.

It isn’t human nature to steal.
With Relish

You can't miss it as you come down the hill past the YMCA to the intersection of Holly and State. Just down the street, right past the empty lot, is The Sign.

It's painted right on the side of the building, over the weathered brick. "Indoor Sun Shoppe" it reads across the top, and below, two bluebirds meet in a circle. They don't paint signs like that any more. Like signs painted on barns, it's a lost art.

Except this sign was painted this summer, and soon a barn sign will be turning up just outside Lynden to the north. It's the return of a lost art, a genuine revival of the sign style that prevailed before the advent of plastic and neon.

The craftsmen behind this advertising renaissance call themselves Cheezeburger Sign Company. They can be found, when not out painting, in their workshop between the taco shop and the bookstore in the Fairhaven District.

The barn sign, for the Lynden roller rink, will be their largest project to date. Bill Lynch, half of the Cheezeburger, described the work involved:

"First you have to put up the scaffolding for it. Then you block out everything in white, in this one it will just be the shape of the panel and the letters. Then you put on the primer.

"Next you lay in the colors, the background colors first. Then the letters. All the outlines and shading are done last."

Bruce Hale is the other half of the Cheezeburger. He brings professional experience to the firm, having been an apprentice sign painter in Seattle two years before joining Bill in Bellingham.

Cheezeburger designs evolve from the customer's needs and the freedom he allows them. They were allowed considerable leeway for the Indoor Sun Shoppe sign.

"We got the idea by doing a rough sketch and passing it back and forth," Bill explained. A tape recorder kept the shop full of music. Their two dogs, Leonardo and Fanny, slept in the corner.

"Bruce would make a change and I would make a change and pass it back to him and he'd
make another change and pretty soon there were a couple of birds there."

Bill is the trained commercial artist of the duo. In addition to four community colleges, he’s studied at the University of Washington and the Burley Art School.

Both are 26, only two days apart. And they are both Virgos. It seemed to Bill that most sign painters were Virgos but he wasn’t sure why.

Barn signs aren’t the only lost art Cheezburger is trying to revive. They’re into tattooing. The last tattoo artist north of San Francisco, who lives in Vancouver, B.C., recently had a stroke and lost his memory. Bill and Bruce are trying to get his equipment.

However, Bill wasn’t too optimistic about their project. “I think there’s going to be complications—licenses and health department regulations—and we might have to do something special to dispense Novacaine and stuff.”

Bill admitted they didn’t know very much about tattooing aside from the design viewpoint but they hoped to learn.

Tattoos are coming back. “Just like flame jobs on cars. Before long people will be going back to building hot rods.” Bill gazed nostalgically at the far wall. A solemn brown curtain covered the wall. It once hung in the old Orpheum Theater in Seattle.

“We’ve been asked to do a couple of flame jobs on cars.” He shrugged.

The Indoor Sun Shoppe sign is their best advertisement. It brought them the barn job near Lynden, and a couple of signs in Canada, weather and time permitting. The Sun Shoppe sign may be their best displayed work but they feel they have other comparable signs in town. Dick’s Tavern and the Fairhaven Tavern are two examples.

The Indoor Sun Shoppe involves a pictorial, something they’re not usually called upon to paint. They’ll be doing another pictorial for the Fairhaven Tavern, though, a seascape seen through a porthole. Another wall will look like an old ship’s bulkhead, complete with rivets and rust.
Cheezeburger has been in town only six months. Bellingham provides better opportunities than Seattle, according to Bill. The people are friendlier and there is less rush here.

"People are starting to leave neon and plastic and look in this direction," Bruce observed. "People are beginning to catch on."

"We've got a lot of ideas that we're trying to sell people on, not so much for the money but mainly just for the chance. We want to paint barns and walls. That's the reason I got into this whole trip. I want to paint large art objects out in the streets instead of painting little canvasses and hanging them on walls. It's fun to paint large."

"I'd like to paint graphics in tunnels," Bruce continued. "It would be nice if it could be done without any advertising. I'd like to paint art objects on barns and walls and in vacant spaces without any reference to the advertiser or maybe 'this work donated by such-and-such firm.'"

Rather than intensifying competition, Cheezeburger fills its own niche in the local sign business. "Our competitors are our friends," Bruce termed the relationship. "If we have a problem, like how to paint on a certain kind of surface, we can go down to one of the local sign companies and ask for advice. There's too much work for the established sign companies to handle. They work primarily in neon and plastic and leave the custom signs to Cheezeburger.

Bruce and Bill were waiting for the weather to clear so they could get started on their barn sign. They estimated it would take four days for them to paint it. In the meantime they had several other jobs, including painting a truck for the Sun Shoppe.

Why Cheezeburger?

"Millions of people like cheeseburgers," Bill replied.