



AD

NAUSEUM



# REAGAN OUTDOOR HAS UTAH POLITICIANS IN ITS HIP POCKET

Just about everywhere you drove, there was that someone looking at you. Wearing those hip dark glasses. Cherubic and comfortably familiar. Know this guy, it asked?

You probably did. And then you voted for him.

That's not the way it happened for Nola Duncan. Not hardly. At 62, Duncan wasn't exactly your well-heeled politician. Oh, she knew how to speak her mind and make an impression doing it. She could snap you to attention, like the English teacher she used to be—by-the-book. She didn't know that in politics, it's by the pocketbook.

There she was, maybe 10 days before the election, wading with husband and friends through her final mailing. After a huge primary win in the West Jordan City Council race, all that seemed to be left were a few hundred unstuffed envelopes to her closest constituents.

Then the phone rang. It was some young guy who said he was from Reagan Outdoor Advertising—you know, the billboard company. Well, it looked like she was going to win, he said, and they just wanted to donate to her campaign. She thought, OK, gee whiz. Sure. She hadn't even been out soliciting donations or anything. This was pretty great, especially since she felt strange asking people for money outright.

And then she got to thinking. If they give her this money, what are they going to expect if she's elected? She asked her friends and advisers. So, what's going to happen? It was all pretty matter-of-fact. Nola, they said, they'll probably lobby you.

"THIS IS OUR ONLY BUSINESS," REAGAN SAYS. "WHEN ISSUES ARISE THAT THREATEN OUR VIABILITY, WE ARE POLITICALLY PROACTIVE."

"He had made arrangements to come to my home to bring it," Duncan says of the unspeakable "it." When the doorbell rang, she rushed to answer, then just blurted out, "I have been thinking about this, and I don't want any part of it." So much for "it." The courier hadn't mentioned an amount. He hadn't even mentioned his name, for that matter. "I just panicked," Duncan says.

Panicked? About a little billboard money? Duncan didn't really know it, but she had just toe-stepped into one of the most politically charged and yet publicly prosaic industries in the country.

The prosaic side comes from the fact that billboards are, after all, just really big signs. Some are pretty funny; some just dull. There are the climbing cows with their message to "Eat More Chikin" and the St. Provo chick holding up her beer and her breasts.

The political side, however, has grown from a regulatory environment that has all but crushed the industry in some states. Not so in Utah, where outdoor advertising is not only at the table, but choosing the menu as well. If it's dying, it's going in style.

Last year, the industry nationwide hit an historical high for outdoor expenditures—\$5.3 billion, up 2 percent from the year before. It's hard to quantify that in terms of numbers of billboards. The Washington-based nonprofit group Scenic America estimates that there are some 500,000 billboards on major highways, increasing at a rate of 5,000 to 15,000 per year. Only five states now prohibit billboards; four are actually billboard-free.

Dewey Reagan will tell you his industry's dying, but don't plan any funerals yet. Reagan is president of Reagan Outdoor Advertising, and the 33-year-old son of Bill Reagan, the man who built a singularly effective political machine from a billboard company.

In fact, Reagan Outdoor Advertising is listed as the No. 10 top outdoor company in the nation by the Outdoor Advertising Association of America. Dewey Reagan makes it all sound like nothing. The top three, he says, command maybe 95 percent of the market. His little company,

BY KATHARINE BIELE [comments@slweekly.com](mailto:comments@slweekly.com)

PHOTOS BY FRED HAYES



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well, it has only about 2,000 billboards in its inventory. And don't forget, Reagan isn't the only outdoor sign company in Utah.

That's true, but it may be the only one that matters—at least to lawmakers. None of the other six companies have anywhere near the political presence of Reagan. Since 1993, Reagan Outdoor Advertising has reported \$235,441 in contributions to legislators and state political parties, both Democrat and Republican. The pervasive joke is that Utah legislators come cheap and pay off handsomely.

"We don't pay anybody off," says Dewey Reagan. "We do make political donations, and for that, I believe our industry has the ability to obtain an audience with elected officials. You don't gain influence by making contributions, but you may have affected officials who listen to you about your political problems."

And boy, do they listen. In 1996, Rep. Marty Stephens, R-Farr West, sponsored a bill to allow sign companies to replace signs in the same spot after the widening of Interstate 15. The issue was revisited through amendment in the 2002 session by House majority leader Kevin Garn. Garn serves under Stephens, who is now Speaker of the House. Last year, Reagan Outdoor Advertising contributed \$5,000 to Stephens' reelection committee.

Sen. Al Mansell, now president of the Senate, listened in 1997, when he sponsored a bill that would leave illegal signs in place and make it difficult for cities and counties to remove them without compensating the sign company. The catch here is that cities and towns really don't have the kind of money it would take to compensate the billboard companies. Reagan characterizes the bill as an effort to save the state money, and figures that state taxpayers now won't have to fork out up to \$15 million to move some 20 signs from various roadways.

We're talking free enterprise here, and legislators like the sound of that.

This year, Garn amended some relatively benign legislation that became another onus on counties and municipalities. With the widening of I-15, noise barriers were erected and some signs had to be adjusted. Garn's amendment allows sign companies to bypass height requirements or relocate the signs near the original location.

"Our efforts are to maintain sign plants as they exist today," says Reagan. "The industry is still very much in demand. ... There's a tremendous increase in all ad revenues over the last 20 years as our society becomes more of a spectator group."

The Reagans are counting on that, partly because Reagan Outdoor Advertising is relatively small, family owned and not diversified like some other billboard companies. "This is our only business," Reagan says. "When issues arise that threaten our viability, we are politically proactive."

It was 37 years ago when Bill Reagan started out in the sign business serendipitously. He was from a small town in Ohio, and tells the story about working for an outdoor display company just across the street from his high school. It was his first job.

It wasn't supposed to be his career. His father unwittingly helped change that. A civil servant, Bill's father was transferred to Norwalk, Va., and later to Defense Depot Ogden about the time that Bill had entered Case Western University to study medicine. Well, it didn't take Bill long to discover he didn't want to be a doctor. One day, his father called and mentioned that Weber State College was a pretty good place to go, and after all, it only cost \$500 a quarter. That was all it took.

"He'd go to school in the morning, and build signs in the afternoon," says Dewey. The sign business eventually took over, and Bill built a small eight-sheet plant in Ogden. That's industry jargon for an 11-by-5-foot sign.

Salt Lake County Councilman Steve Harmsen remembers back when Bill Reagan was working out of his garage. "It's really a rags-to-riches story," says Harmsen. "He built the business up one sign at a time."

In a way, what happened was a bit more complicated than that. For years, the dominant outdoor sign company had been an Eastern concern called the Harry S. Packer Co. After World War II, a lot of local boys worked for the company. Sometime in the early '60s, Packer decided to sell his Utah interests. It was the impetus that two young men—Lamar Stringham and Roland Webb—needed to start their own company, Galaxy Sign. They took on a third partner, Barlow Briggs, but still didn't have the money to grow.

That's when they went to George Hatch, a Utah media mogul who owned a stable of outlets including television, radio, newspaper and cable. Hatch helped them buy what had been Packer's Salt Lake interests, shoot-

ing Galaxy immediately to the dominant spot in the market. Bill Reagan was still a student when he went to Galaxy looking for work, and for a time, he sold outdoor advertising in the Ogden area. Then Reagan got the bug, and decided to set out on his own. He got some leases going with a miniature-sized poster, and did fairly well. Well enough to compete on a minor level with Galaxy.

Hatch, however, was having his own problems. With his growing media holdings, he was facing the threat of antitrust lawsuits. He decided to give up the billboard business, leaving just the kind of vacuum that Reagan needed.

In 1981, Reagan convinced Galaxy to combine with his company and take on the name Reagan. He retained 80 percent of the company; Webb got 20 percent. Highly ambitious and competitive, Reagan was not the easiest guy to get along with.

Things went from bad to worse and in '87, Reagan bought out Webb. Utah Appeals Court documents reflect a long legal battle in which Webb ultimately won a dispute over the value of the buyout.

Nonetheless, Reagan had already attained control of the Utah market.

And he was soon on the map of lobbyists in the state, trying to control the market through the law. Dewey Reagan, however, thinks people misunderstand Reagan Outdoor Advertising's legendary enthusiasm for politics. Reagan Outdoor Advertising also gives thousands of dollars to charity every year.

"There's a misconception about the amount of influence that Reagan Outdoor Advertising possesses in that, when we get involved politically, it's on issues that threaten the viability of the business—it's not to try to create a competitive advantage," he says.

Staying alive. That's what it's all about. Doug Snarr had never thought of the business that way. He'd always thought of it a little like art.

Back in the '60s and '70s, it was Snarr, not Reagan, who was known as the Billboard King of Utah. A farm boy from Idaho Falls, Snarr started painting signs for a local five-and-dime store. He loved art, studied it, studied journalism and went into advertising. But he fell into sign work as kind of a means to an end—a way to make a living and marry the girl he'd fallen in love with.

In 1965, Snarr was 30 years old and already owned a \$3 million business with 100 employees. It was time to sit back and relax, for him and his wife to take their first extended vacation ever. They'd always wanted to go to Palm Springs, and that's where they were headed when they stopped off in Vegas and turned on the TV.

There, they heard reports of another love story, of sorts. President Lyndon B. Johnson was giving his wife, Lady Bird, a birthday present. A big birthday present. It was called the Highway Beautification Act.

Doug Snarr was sick. The vacation was cancelled. Lady Bird's present meant the tearing down of all signs on federal interstates and primary roads by July 1, 1970. To Snarr, it meant bankruptcy. In fact, his bank immediately called due a \$900,000 note and offered no hope for the future.

Snarr decided to fight on the most unfamiliar of turfs—Washington, D.C. Maybe it was the audacity of it all that persuaded his bankers to hold



"I believed in the concept of highway beautification," Snarr says. But the moral thing to do, he felt, would be to improve the environment without stealing anyone's property. That's what the government was going to do—steal his property.



# Slogan-Squelching

By KATHARINE BIELE

"Bring 'em Young" "Wife, Wife, Wife, Husband." "Why Just Have One?"

Dewey Reagan does not think this is funny. At all. On the other hand, Brighton Ski Resort and Wasatch Beers laughed—all the way to the bank. Yes, those are some of Utah's culturally quirky billboard ads that either engender intense disgust or hearty guffaws—depending on where you are on the scale of self-immolation.

Reagan Outdoor Advertising refused the billboard ads, saying they were not tasteful, even if the beer is. "It's very easy for an observer to say you're being subjective in the application of your policy," says Reagan, president of the outdoor sign company. But he's the one who applies that policy, and that's the way it is. Reagan Outdoor Advertising doesn't like provocative stuff and will not accept ads which "specifically make fun of religious groups or figureheads or individuals or use acts or devices that are illegal to promote a product or service."

Muff Ferro knows this pretty well. She's worked for big ad agencies and on national campaigns, but over the last six months, she and her husband began working on their own, in Cardon-Ferro Creative. One of their first clients was InterNet Properties, a real estate firm that concentrates on downtown Salt Lake City.

"The first thing we recommended to them was a strategy that they sell downtown instead of selling themselves," Ferro says. "It's pretty hard to differentiate one brokerage from another."

So, they decided to give it a try. There wasn't a lot of money to spend on big billboards, so they got a few smaller ones throughout the downtown area. And then they tried to come up with something creative. Something people would remember, like the polygamy thing.

"There's more opportunity downtown. Even the pigeons know that," said one.

And another: "It's easier to make money downtown. Just ask a meter maid."

But the one that really pushed people's buttons was this: "The best place to do business is downtown. Even the panhandlers know that."

It was interesting to hear the feedback, Ferro says. Some people thought it was derogatory to panhandlers. She argues that panhandlers have to make a living, just like everyone else. The meter maid sign got responses from people who thought it was degrading to women.

"For better or worse, it got people's attention," Ferro says. "It's been an interesting little social experience."

Part of that experience was dealing with the billboard company. There were a couple of slogans Reagan nixed, like, "You'll perform better downtown. Even the Tabernacle Choir knows that."

"They've become so hypersensitive, they won't have anything relating to the LDS church," she says.

Ferro came up with another whose timing was, well, unfortunate. "The best place to do business is downtown. That's why we have all the big, tall buildings." Ferro didn't think of the connection to the Sept. 11, 2001 tragedy until Reagan came back to her. "At least for the time being, there's an association with danger," she says.

Well, you can't blame them for trying.

"When you repress something, then you create a bigger issue and it becomes a mockery," she says. And so it goes.

Reagan Outdoor Advertising these days doesn't even get much credit for the clever ones they've come up with on their own.

Dewey Reagan still likes one they created a decade ago saying that billboards attract people like flies. It had a bunch of mannequins stuck to the face of the board. He's also pretty proud of the Alma Richards billboards, the ones that were actually a market awareness survey to see if you knew he was Utah's first Olympic gold medalist.

They were cute. But they wouldn't make Jay Leno's show. **CW**

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It's one of those things that makes political power play possible. And one of the things that will keep any signs from coming down.

"I would like to have enough capacity to be able to accommodate all advertisers at any point in time," says Dewey Reagan. "There's no question that this is a highly regulated industry, but in the ideal world, we'd have the ability to have enough signs in terms of numbers and geographical locations."

took down their billboards. As always, it was the money that had been lacking, and with a change from the Democratic LBJ to the Republican Nixon administration, it seemed unlikely that any would be allocated.

"My fight was for property rights," says Snarr. "The original bill outlawed signs for all highways with federal money—47,000 miles of federal highways, and 220,000 miles of the primary system; it was a total outlaw of signs."

To make his point, Snarr decided he'd have to sacrifice more than six years out of his life. He'd have to abandon his business altogether. That way he'd have credibility; people would believe him when he said he supported beautification and wanted only just compensation.

That it took him six years was testament to the tangle of bureaucracy and the political agendas in Washington. Snarr stood up against the system, even when his livelihood was threatened. Finally, in 1995, his efforts paid off as 840,596 outdoor signs were removed from scenic and rural America. One of his, in Utah, was the first.

"The attitude now is that there's a compromise, that you can limit the number of billboards," says Snarr. "In Utah, that's not quite the case. There's more of a proliferation of signs in commercially zoned areas. It's more up to local politicians to start to remove them and pay compensation, but there's not the money. ... Now we're in areas that are beyond the feds, and there's a huge conundrum right there."

When is enough enough? The hopefully facetious Billboard Liberation Front "states emphatically and for all time herein that to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular billboard for each citizen."

When billboard companies scream about free enterprise, critics decry a lack of freedom to choose what they see. Someone's always treading on someone else's territory.

But the billboard companies are a lot more focused than most of their detractors. First, they're apolitical, even as they manipulate the political machines. If most of the money flows to Republicans in Utah, it's only because there are more of them around. Reagan Outdoor Advertising has given heavily to Democratic election committees as well as to Democratic candidates.

Just like Nola Duncan, candidates are always being courted. To what end? You might remember two hapless Salt Lake County candidates who tried to make billboard payoffs an issue. One was Karen Crompton and the other Mike Reberg. The two were running for County Commission in 1998 with a call to repeal the county's then-new and more liberal sign ordinance.

They even got personal about the billboard deal. The Republican Party had said it bought \$50,000 worth of space from Reagan to give to candidates. Reagan called it a simple business transaction. Meanwhile, it seemed that Mark Shurtleff was the main beneficiary of the billboard space, and the Democratic candidates cried foul. In fact, they called the whole thing an attempt at money-laundering.

Reagan Outdoor Advertising didn't like the allegations at all, especially since Reberg had once been an employee. The company threatened to sue him, and people started to talk about some grudge Reberg had against his old employer.

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off, to let him try the impossible and even to advance him \$12,000 for a wardrobe that would become legendary in the halls of Congress. *Time Magazine* called Snarr "a catalyst in iguana boots," and that was the least of it. Purple wool suits and colorful ties made sure no one would miss him coming.

It took six years of personal lobbying in the nation's capital to achieve his goal. And ironically, the goal was not to preserve his business. Snarr was a deeply moral man with a unique sense of destiny, but he was nonetheless a fighter. And what he came up with was something that would give just about everyone what they wanted—some day.

"I believed in the concept of highway beautification," Snarr says. But the moral thing to do, he felt, would be to improve the environment without stealing anyone's property. That's what the government was going to do—steal his property.

The media started calling his idea the "Snarr Plan." What it did was authorize funds in a pilot project to compensate sign owners, state by state, as they





Dewey Reagan, far right, says he's a private person who won't stand for a *City Weekly* photo. But apparently, he's not too private to party with former Congressman Merrill Cook and Bill Orton in 1998. Bill Reagan and Camille Cook are at left.

Both Reberg and Crompton lost. And requests for new sign locations increased dramatically after the election.

Former Commissioner Brent Overton had it right. He once said that every time billboards become an election issue, the pro-billboard candidates win.

Take the case of Allan Hardman, for instance. Hardman was a Salt Lake City councilman who took a hard stance against billboards. His opponent, a young activist named Deeda Seed, hadn't taken a stand. Maybe she didn't see it as an issue. At any rate, Reagan Outdoor Advertising put money in her campaign to help defeat Hardman.

"If you take a stand against them on a zoning issue, you just know that you're giving your opponent a chunk of change and what do you get in return? Zero," says a long-time political insider who asked for cover against Reagan Outdoor Advertising's wrath. "No one goes out and votes for an anti-billboard candidate."

That's the irony of it all. If the public cares, it does so fleetingly. There are usually more compelling reasons than billboard proliferation to vote for or against a candidate.

It's just hard to figure how deeply the public cares about this issue. There are plenty of dueling polls that show, well, exactly what their proponents want them to. Reagan's 1993 Dan Jones poll discovered that most people are indifferent to the number of signs out there, but actually like billboard advertising. On the other hand, a 1997 *Salt Lake Tribune* poll showed 57 percent of residents wanting more billboard restriction. Well, which is it?

Maybe it's so common now that people can't imagine life without billboards.

"You can switch off/smash/shoot/hack or in other ways avoid television, computers and radio," writes the Billboard Liberation Front. "You are not compelled to buy magazines or subscribe to newspapers. You can sic your Rotweiler on door-to-door salesman. Of all the types of media used to disseminate the Ad, there is only one which is entirely inescapable to all but the bedrid-

den shut-in or the Thoreauian misanthrope. We speak, of course of the billboard. Along with its lesser cousins, advertising posters and bullet outdoor graphics, the billboard is ubiquitous and inescapable to anyone who moves through our world. Everyone knows the billboard; the billboard is in everyone's mind.

But the billboard companies aren't taking anything for granted. Besides stoking the coffers of friendly candidates, they have a few other tactics. It's a given these days that cities are the spoilers in the mix. Municipalities like Salt Lake City tend to have very restrictive sign ordinances. When one comes down, it doesn't go back up.

So, when a sign company sees a marketing possibility, it jumps. "The strategy is to go in and open it up," says one source familiar with the market. "Then, they load up in a place, get as many signs in as possible until someone comes in and shuts them down." By then, the billboard companies have secured grand-fathering leases which allow their signs to stay up.

Real estate is a big part of the game plan, too. Most outdoor signs start out on leased property. Someone owns a spot or corner where the sign company wants to put a billboard. They secure a lease for several years, but also add a clause that gives them an option to buy if the property goes up for sale.

Then, if the landowner wants to sell to a developer during the period of the lease, the billboard company actually controls the fate of the property. More often than not, the sign company then can secure a perpetual lease.

"And the little landowner didn't have a clue what was going on," the industry source says.

Dewey Reagan looks at his efforts as good business. "It's beneficial to business owners and the general public," he says. "People use billboards to find and advertise goods and services."

So where will all of this lead? LBJ is long dead, and that "dying industry" he targeted seems to be hanging right in there. By day, you can almost hear the death rattle. By night, the industry's just as strong and hungry as ever.

Reagan talks about holding the line, keeping what Reagan Outdoor Advertising has in inventory. But he also sees a future of promise. It was beamed into homes around the world a few weeks ago. Just look at Salt Lake, the Olympic city, from the freeway. Spectacular. Impressive. Different. Olympic athletes draped over the tallest buildings, skating, lugging like giants in a fantastic Greek myth.

"That's computer-generated vinyl," says Reagan. "On buildings and walls, they will become the advertising displays of the future."

And you thought billboards blared their messages. This will take billboards to new heights. It has in many cities. Literally. **EW**

