

Ogden River Bridge, Sign
At Washington Boulevard near 17th Street
Ogden
Weber County
Utah

HAER No. UT-62-A

HAER
UTAH
29-OGDEN,
4A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
U. S. Department of the Interior
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Denver, Colorado 80225

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: Resting on the Ogden River Bridge at Washington Boulevard near 17th Street
Ogden, Weber County, Utah

UTM: A - 12/418720/4564960
Quad: Ogden

Date of Construction: 1936

Builder: Young Electric Sign Company

Present Owner: City of Ogden

Present Use: Visitor greeting structure at north entrance to downtown Ogden. The sign is to be modified and moved to the north end of a new bridge to be constructed at this location. Projected date of change will be 1992.

Significance: The sign on the Ogden River Bridge is a decorative, steel-framed, truss-arched structure featuring neon lighted graphics. The sign was conceived and built as the result of the efforts of Ogden's prominent and colorful mayor, Harmon W. Peery. It was designed and constructed in 1936 by the Young Electric Sign Company. The sign is also a rather rare structure, in that only five road spanning signs are known to have been constructed in Utah.

Historians: Michael R. Polk, with contributions by Allen C. Roberts, Sagebrush Archaeological Consultants, Ogden, Utah, May 1991.

I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. History of Ogden River Bridge Sign

The idea to construct a civic sign on the Ogden River Bridge span was initially conceived by Ogden's Mayor, Harmon W. Peery, as part of his administration's broader efforts to promote tourism and pride in Ogden City during the Depression years. It is likely that the idea was directly related to his efforts to promote the newly-instituted Pioneer Days celebration, which began in 1935. Peery first voiced his plan for the erection of such a sign during the regular meeting of the Ogden City Board of Commissioners on September 10, 1936. Peery claimed that erection of a sign would promote Ogden at a time when it was most economically opportune for the community. He proposed to place a steel sign, lighted in neon, on the Ogden River Bridge. The name "Ogden" and the slogan "America's Fastest Growing City" would be on the sign. He recommended that bids be advertised for construction of the structure.¹ The motion was unanimously approved by the commission.

On September 17, two bids were opened from the Electrical Products Company and from the Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO), and the information referred to the mayor and to the city engineer.² At the September 21 commissioners meeting, the city engineer presented comparative results of both sign bids and established that YESCO's price was the apparent lowest bid.³ There was apparently some discussion concerning not only the price, but also the proposed location of the sign. The city attorney reported that many citizens had suggested that the sign be erected at Five Points, the northern city limits, instead of on the Ogden River Bridge. Discussion of the issue appears to have ended when Mayor Peery proposed that Pioneer Days, Inc., the city's celebration organization, be asked to pay for the erection and maintenance of the sign. This motion was unanimously approved by the commission.⁴

B. Construction Chronology

Construction of the Ogden River Bridge sign apparently proceeded soon after the decision was made to fund it in September 1936, though the project was not completed until late November. Delay in construction may have resulted, at least in part, from the fact that Peery was a candidate for governor in 1936, thus limiting the time which he could devote to this project. Nevertheless, shortly after the November election, the sign was erected and, on November 21, 1936, it was lighted.⁵

The sign was constructed by YESCO. The steel work construction was subcontracted to Roy Dundes, a one-legged steelworker from Salt Lake City. Dundes built the structure on the site from the ground up. Henry "Hank" Schutte was apparently in charge of the sign placement and installation.⁶

C. Location

The large volume of traffic which crossed the Ogden River Bridge on U.S. 89 up until about 1940 was a primary reason for placement of the welcome sign on the bridge in 1936. This was

the entrance to the city from the north, even though the city limits at that time were at Five Points, located 17 blocks to the north.

II. THE SIGN

A. Description

The sign on the Ogden River Bridge is a decorative, steel-framed, truss-arched structure supported by steel-framed towers or columns at each end and featuring neon-lighted graphics. Facing north-south and situated mid-span atop the Ogden River Bridge, the sign as advertised "OGDEN" since its construction in 1936. The sign is approximately 86 feet long, 16 feet high to the springline of the segmented archway, and about 27 feet high to the highest point at the top of the arch.⁷

The towers and archway are constructed of various sized steel angle irons, struts and plates, connected by welded and bolted gussets. The only bolted areas are the gussets which connect the arch to the towers with what appear to be 1-1/2-inch bolts applied five to a gusset; two gussets per side for each tower; for a total of four gussets per tower. In addition, there appears to be a bolted splice just to the east of the arch center. The splice is bolted at each of the four curved beam members at approximately the same location. The four corner angles of each tower, as well as the four curved beams of the arch, are constructed of 3-1/2 inch x 3-1/2 inch x 1/4-inch angle irons. The corner towers have 1/4-inch steel plate at the outside base of the north and south tower surfaces. This steel plate is welded to the corner angle irons and extends from the sidewalk level up to the first diagonal strut, a distance of approximately 1-1/2 feet. The four corner angles of the tower are laced together with a series of diagonal and horizontal struts. The horizontal struts limited to the east and west faces of the towers are of 1-1/4 inch x 1-1/4 inch x 1/8 inch angle irons. The diagonal struts on the east and west faces of the towers, set at an alternating angles, are constructed of 1-1/4 x 1-1/4 inch x 1/8 inch angle irons. In addition to the lacing struts, the towers have interior sway braces of 2-1/2 inch x 2-1/2 inch x 1/8 inch angle irons at the level of the gusset connections with the arch, and midway between the bottom gusset and the tower base.

The towers are capped by a half height section and a continuous metal cornice (probably a U channel). The north and south faces of the towers are decorated just below the cornices with a series of five metal rectangles which develop something of a chevron pattern. The towers are 4 feet to 6 feet wide at the faces and are approximately 22 feet high.

The arch is constructed of a pair of Baltimore trusses, modified to conform to the curved upper and lower beams. The trusses are constructed in the vertical plane with 2-1/2 inch x 2-1/2 inch x 1/8 inch angle iron diagonal struts, and 1-1/4 inch x 1-1/4 inch x 1/8 inch angle iron vertical struts. The paired, curved trusses of the north and south faces are laced together with horizontal 1-1/4 inch x 1-1/4 inch x 1/8 inch angle irons and 2-1/4 inch x 2-1/4 inch x 1/8 inch diagonal angle iron struts, both as central cross braces and as diagonal sway braces at the top and bottom braces of the arch. The arch contains ten repeating truss units and envelopes a length of approximately 80 feet.

Aside from the metal framework and the lettering, the only ornamentation on the Ogden sign are the modest Art Deco motifs at the tops of the two towers.

As a whole, the sign could be described as vernacular or non-descript in design or "style." However, this description does not suggest a poor quality design, as such style is typical of these signs. The graphic lettering on the archway appears intact from 1936, though the eastern portion was changed in 1952 and again in 1959. There was some discussion in the city council in the late 1940s concerning changed letter types or sizes, exactly what this meant was never determined. Major known changes that were made include the following: on the eastern portion of the south side, the letter originally read "AMERICA'S FASTEST GROWING CITY." On the eastern portion of the north face, it read "UTAH'S FASTEST GROWING CITY." On the eastern portion of the north face, it originally read "WE WELCOME YOU TO." All of these slogans were changed to "HOME OF WEBER STATE COLLEGE" on both sides in 1952. The one-foot-tall letters on the south face still read "IT PAYS TO LIVE IN" just west of the four-foot-tall "OGDEN." Similarly, the one-foot-tall letters on the west end of the north face still read "PIONEER DAYS WEEK JULY 24." All of the letters are painted white on boards which are painted black. The sign existed through the 1970s and into the 1980s as an unlighted sign. The neon lighting which consisted of marine green and red colored letters was lost, possible as early as the 1960s, due to vandalism and neglect. The sign was again lighted in July 1988, with the word "OGDEN" in white neon tubing, and the smaller, flanking letters in red neon.

B. Sign Modifications

The original sign was constructed without a background between and behind the letters. This fact was commented on by Peery shortly after the sign's erection. He noted that the addition of such a background would greatly improve its readability during the day.⁸ Peery suggested that a metal or paper background be installed. The suggestion was apparently followed, for two circa 1938-40 photographs of the sign show a solid black background behind the letters.⁹ Yet another interesting feature which these photographs reveal is a change in the lettering from the originally identified "AMERICA'S FASTEST GROWING CITY" which was apparently once on the eastern portion of the south side of the sign. The photographs reveal a change to "UTAH'S FASTEST GROWING CITY." Because of the early date of the photographs, the change must have occurred shortly after the sign's erection, perhaps prompted by criticism of the original statement.

In 1946, the city commissioners authorized a change in the wording of the sign.¹⁰ Exactly what this change was to be, and whether it was ever carried out, was not stated. Two years later, however, Mayor Peery, in response to some previous events, suggested that the city commissioners obtain bids on two proposals: "1st, to maintain the sign as is with the changeable letters. However, this type letter is not as readable as previously used. 2nd, to rearrange this sign with the large letters as previously used."¹¹

Obviously, some changes had been made to the sign since its construction. In a later entry of the commission minutes, this is especially clear when the mayor suggests that YESCO be asked to replace all of the originals and materials that they removed from the sign.¹² All of these motions were adopted by the commissioners, but it is likely that the original letters were never

replaced. Comparing old photographs from the late 1930s with those taken around 1952 shows that the earlier letters were larger and much broader than those in place since the early 1950s.

A most striking change to the sign wording was carried out in 1952, when students from Weber College asked the council to include the name Weber College on the Ogden River Bridge sign. Weber College agreed to finance the change.¹³ The matter was taken under advisement by the commissioners. In a February 21, 1952, meeting, the city council unanimously approved changing the sign to include "Ogden, Home of Weber College" or a similar slogan.¹⁴

No records have since been found that indicate any addition changes were made. However, comparisons of old photographs show that by the 1960s the Weber College portion of the sign had again been changed, undoubtedly to reflect the college's changed status in 1959 from a junior college to a four year institution. It was probably in that year that the sign was changed to "HOME OF WEBER STATE COLLEGE," the slogan which still remains on the sign today.

After this change, interest in the sign appears to have languished for a period of time, until 1981 when its deteriorating condition was brought to the attention of the city council. By 1982, it had become apparent that some type of restoration was necessary to maintain the Ogden sign. At this time, the city manager offered two alternatives for restoration, one involving restoration of the neon tubing and the other involved the removal of electrical elements from the sign and maintaining it as an unlighted sign. Due to the excessive cost of restoration, the recommendation to remove the electrical components and maintain it as an unlighted sign was approved by the council.¹⁵

In 1985, the Ogden City Council addressed a memorandum from the community relations coordinator concerning alternatives for refurbishing the Ogden sign. The four alternatives presented were: 1) replacing the entire sign, 2) relighting and repainting the sign, 3) repainting the sign, or 4) removing the sign altogether. Following much discussion, the council voted to repaint the sign as a temporary measure.¹⁶

In 1987, the city council, possibly in reaction to intentions of the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) to replace the Ogden River Bridge and remove the sign, again took up the problems of the Ogden sign. A memorandum from the Department of Public Works, which had investigated lighting of the sign at the request of the city council, presented two alternatives for restoration. First, to outline each letter in the sign with neon tubing; or second, place neon light fixtures under the wording of the sign and form the letters on new sheet metal panels from white scotch light reflective material. After much discussion, the council approved a plan to outline each letter of the sign with tube neon lights, a project estimated to cost \$8,000.¹⁷ Final bid on replacement of the lighting was \$8,200, including one year's maintenance. Annual maintenance costs beyond that time were to be \$1,000 per year. The company chose to complete the work was Intermountain Electric Signs, Inc. of Ogden.¹⁸

At the October 15, 1987, Ogden City Council meeting the Department of Public Works requested direction from the council concerning relighting of the sign.¹⁹ Apparently, the original sign

contained a marine green color double neon tubing on the large letters in the word OGDEN and single red neon tubing on the small letters. Marine green neon was no longer available. White neon for the large letters and red for the small ones was suggested as the alternative. This suggestion was unanimously approved by the council.

By July 1988, the neon Ogden sign had been refurbished. It was relighted on July 19, accompanied by a ceremony held in the middle of the bridge to commemorate the occasion.²⁰

C. Ownership and Future

The Ogden River Bridge sign was constructed by a private organization known as Pioneer Days, Inc., under an agreement with the city of Ogden. The organization never had an interest in owning the sign, which has belonged to the city of Ogden since it was constructed in 1936.

Final disposition of the sign underwent extensive study by both the Utah Department of Transportation and the city of Ogden during 1989 and 1990. After considering the possibilities of destroying the structure or moving it to one of over 20 different locations in Ogden, it was finally agreed that the structure's upright steel supports would be modified to accommodate the wider roadway and relocated to the north end of the new Ogden River Bridge on Washington Boulevard.

III. BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

A. Engineering and Design

The idea for this sign and its primary promoter and fundraiser was Mayor Harmon Peery of Ogden. Instructions concerning the content and approximate nature of the sign were passed to the successful contractor, YESCO. No other information could be obtain concerning the design origins of the sign.

B. Contractor

The sign was constructed by the Young Electric Sign Company. This company was founded in Ogden, Utah, by Thomas Young in 1920, under the name of Thomas Young Sign Company. Shortly thereafter, the name was changed to the Young Electric Sign Company, or YESCO, and has grown to become a nationally prominent sign company, with offices across the United States.²¹ Its corporate headquarters is now in Salt Lake City, where Michael Young, grandson of the founder and president of YESCO, directs company affairs.

Early in its history, the company was responsible for the design and construction of two of only five known street spanning municipal signs ever created in Utah. These signs are also the only two still in existence. In 1928, the Ogden-based company built a sign for the city of Brigham which was placed over Main Street in that town. The sign, lighted by 350 electric globes, was said to be the first of its kind in the Intermountain West.²² Eight years later, personnel from

the same company office in Ogden constructed the massive sign, with its unique neon lettering, on the Ogden River Bridge. According to D. W. "Red" McCarthy, a construction worker for YESCO on the sign replacement project, the steel work for the Ogden sign was subcontracted to Roy Dundes of Salt Lake City.

YESCO is a widely known sign builder and has been for 71 years. The fact that this company designed and constructed the unique Ogden River Bridge sign, as well as the equally exceptional Brigham sign in nearby Brigham City, from the company's original Ogden office, serves to enhance the historic value of both of these signs.

IV. ENDNOTES

- 1 Ogden City Commission, 1936 Minute Book, p. 165.
- 2 Ogden City Commission, 1936 Minute Book, p. 175.
- 3 Ibid., p. 179.
- 4 The Ogden Standard Examiner, September 22, 1936, p. 16.
- 5 The Ogden Standard Examiner, November 21, 1936, p. 10.
- 6 D. W. "Red" McCarthy of Ogden, who worked on the sign installation crew, personal communication, 1989.
- 7 The sign is portrayed in four large format photographs and two photographic copies of ca. 1940 and 1953 photographs which are included as part of this documentation.
- 8 These photographs are located in the Ogden River Bridge Project file at the Utah Department of Transportation, District 1 Headquarters, Ogden.
- 9 The Ogden Standard Examiner, November 23, 1936, p. 12.
- 10 Ogden City Commission, 1946 Minute Book, p. 701.
- 11 Ibid., 1948 Minute Book, pp. 164-165.
- 12 Ibid., p. 190.
- 13 Ogden City Council, 1952 Minute Book, p. 321.
- 14 Ogden City Council, 1952 Minute Book, p. 330.
- 15 Ibid., 1982 Minute Book, p. 318.

- 16 Ibid., 1985 Minute Book, p. 85.
- 17 Ibid., 1987 Minute Book, pp. 203-204.
- 18 Ibid., p. 329.
- 19 Ibid., p. 235.
- 20 The Ogden Standard Examiner, July 20, 1933, p. 3C.
- 21 Michael Young, personal communication, 1991.
- 22 The Box Elder News, September 14, 1928, p. 1.

V. **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

A. **Newspapers:**

Box Elder News. "Brigham's Huge Sign Dedicated," September 14, 1928, p. 1, col. 2.

Ogden Standard Examiner. "Sign Referred to Show Firm," September 22, 1936, p. 16, col. 3.

_____, "Current will be Turned Tonight into Large City Sign Across River Bridge,"
November 21, 1936, p. 10, col. 2.

_____, "New Sign Needs Background for Daytime Results," November 23, 1936, p.
12, col. 6.

Peterson, Mark. Ogden Standard Examiner. "Neon Ogden Sign Relighted," July 20, 1988,
p. 3C.

B. **Documents and Reports:**

Ogden City Commission Minute Book. September 10, 1936, p. 165.

_____. September 17, 1936, p. 175.

_____. September 21, 1936, p. 179.

_____. December 3, 1946, p. 701.

_____. March 23, 1948, pp. 164-165.

_____. April 6, 1948, p. 190.

Ogden City Council Minute Book. February 16, 1952, p. 321.

_____. February 21, 1952, p. 330.

_____. June 24, 1982, p. 318.

_____. July 18, 1985, p. 85.

_____. September 24, 1987, pp. 203-204.

_____. October 15, 1987, p. 235.

_____. January 7, 1988, p. 329.

Utah Department of Transportation. Inspection File for Ogden River Bridge. Structures Division, Utah Department of Transportation, District One, Ogden.

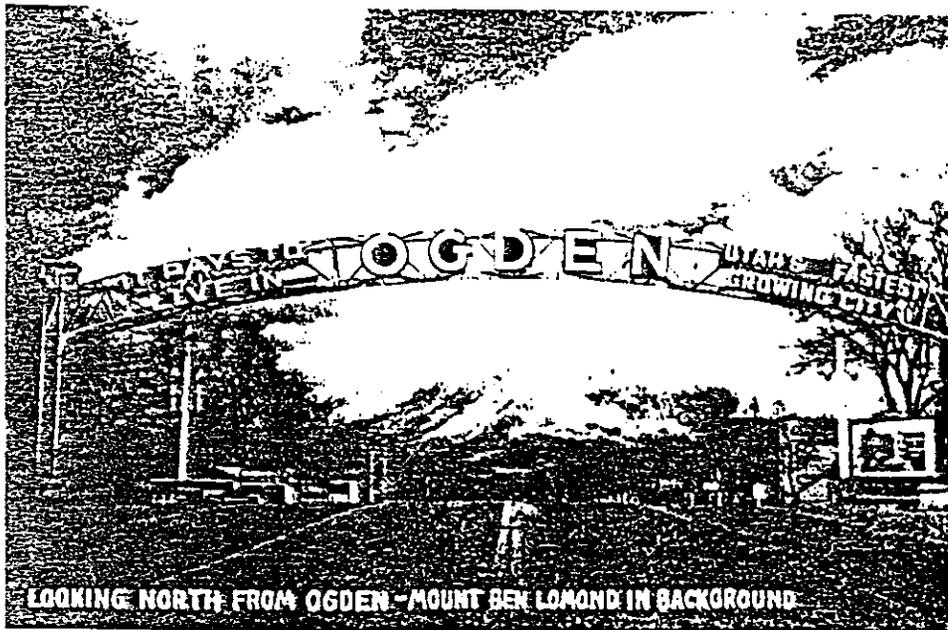
C. Personal Communications:

McCarthy, D. W. "Red." 1989. [This was a telephone conversation between the author and Mr. McCarthy who worked on the Ogden sign installation crew.]

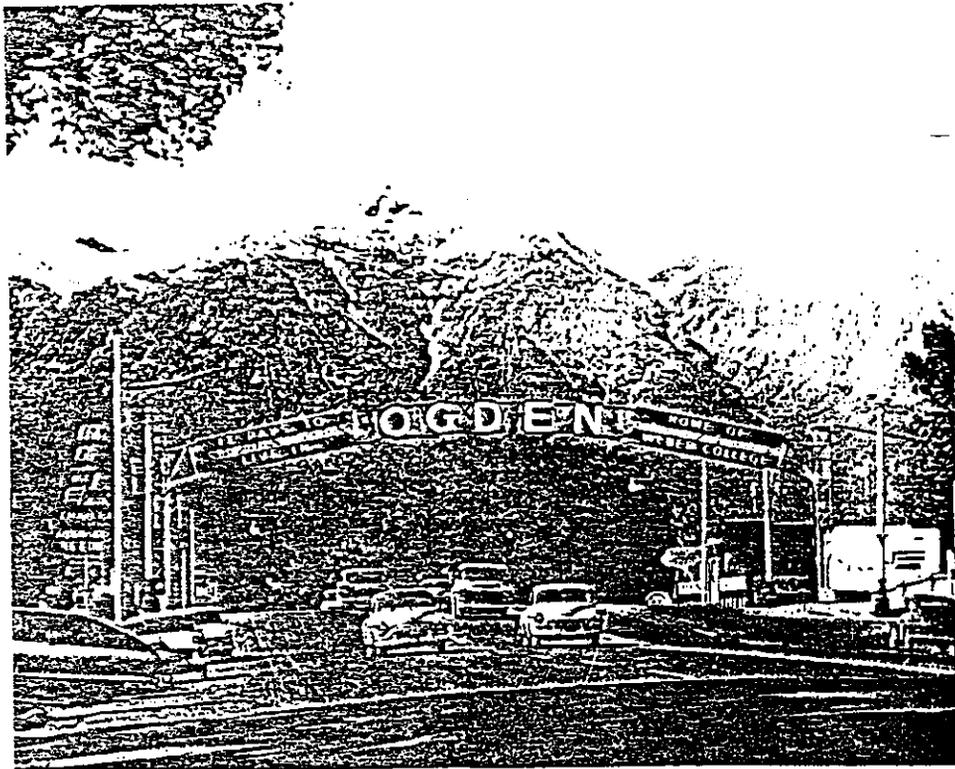
Young, Michael. 1991. [This was a telephone conversation between the author and Mr. Young who is president of Young Electric Sign Company and grandson of its founder, Thomas Young.]

D. Drawings:

Ogden City. "Steel Bridge over Ogden River at Washington Avenue, 1890." Drawing No. 3182. Traced by A. H. Shaw, February 13, 1924. Ogden City Engineering Department, Ogden, Utah. [The "*At Washington Avenue, 1890*" is crossed out and "*Moved to Wall Avenue*" is penciled in.]



Photographic copy of photograph (ca. 1940, original print in possession of Ogden Union Station Museum, Ogden, Utah). Ogden River Bridge, view to north.



Photographic copy of photograph (ca. 1953, original print in possession of Ogden Union Station Museum, Ogden, Utah). Ogden River Bridge, view to north.