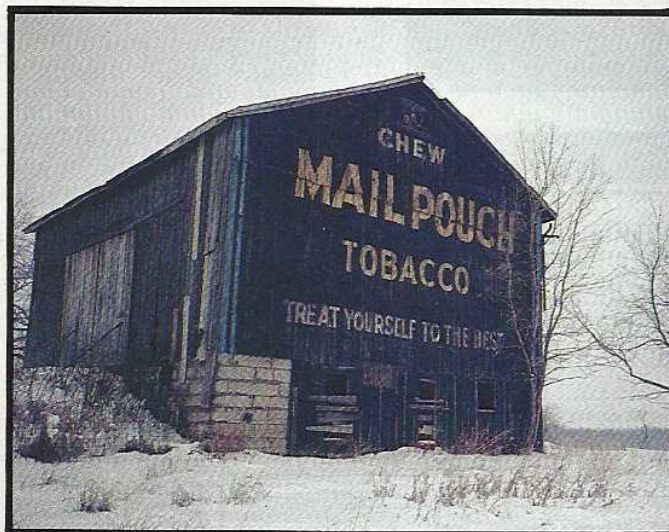
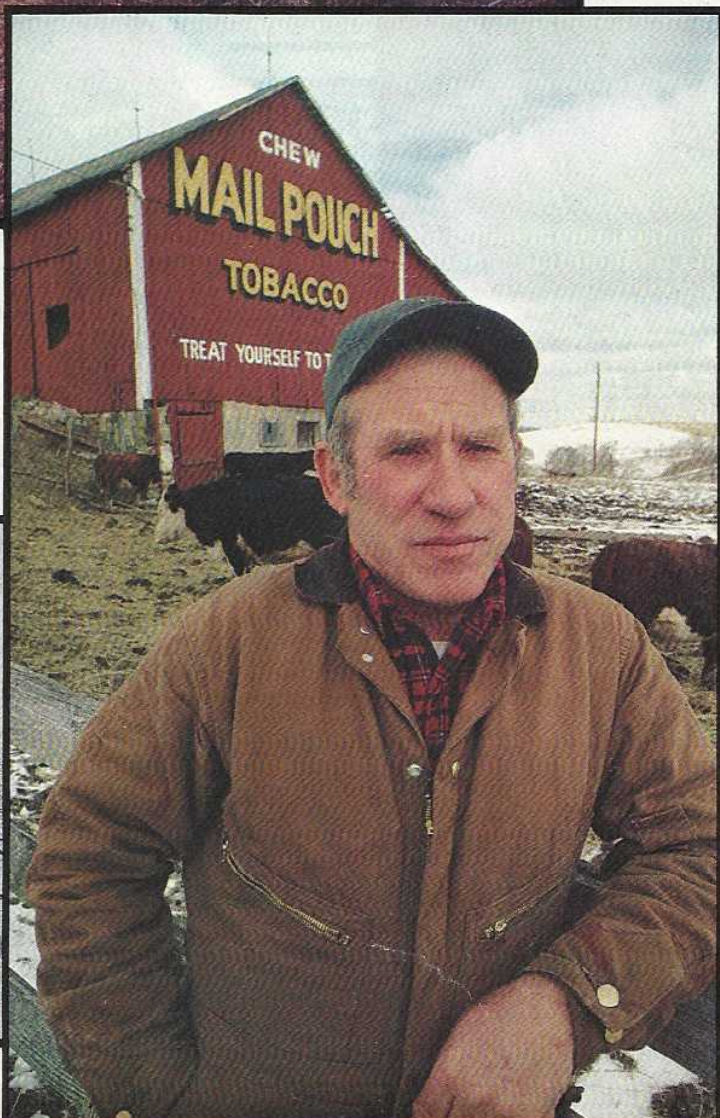


*Although his visage seems to belie it, Harley Warrick (right) isn't talking tongue-in-cheek when he claims to be the last Mail Pouch barn painter—the suspicious bulge is a huge “chaw” of his sponsor's famous product. But the familiar advertisements won't go the way of Burma Shave signs. Harley's looking for an apprentice to continue the tradition of artwork seen on bovine abodes across the country, such as the above example just outside of Pittsburgh and the one below in southwestern New York.*



# The Spittin' Image

*Last in a Line of Barn Artists, Harley Warrick Plugs What He Chews.*

BY HENRY JOSEPH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAX HELLWEG

**E**ACH EVENING when Harley Warrick grabs his old paint and rides off into the sunset, he's proud to have made yet another mark on society. "At least I've let someone know I'm here," says the 55-year-old Belmont, Ohio, man.

Harley's job is to paint the famous Mail Pouch tobacco ads on the broad sides of barns all over the East. The off-the-wall profession is *not* overcrowded. In fact, claims Harley, "I'm the only man left who does what I do for a living."

Ever since the late 19th century, traveling crews have traversed America to create barn ads for Mail Pouch and other advertisers. "At that time," notes Harley, "there wasn't such a thing as billboards, so everybody painted on barns. But then when all the other companies changed over to billboards, Mail Pouch became unique because it didn't."

During the Depression, Mail Pouch's ad campaign flourished because farmers had little money to spend on property improvements. "It was the only way some of 'em could ever get their barns painted," says Harley. In addition, farmers in choice locales were awarded a small yearly stipend.

Today, people still clamor to have the Mail Pouch ad grace their barns, but now some of them pay Harley for the privilege. "If someone out of the way requests a sign which would have no advertising value for Mail Pouch, he has to pay for it himself if he still wants it," says Harley, who needs two years just to fill the orders he already has. Doctors, lawyers and ad execs who own country property are his biggest customers.

Harley takes the demand for his services in stride. "It's just a job—the same damn thing I did for 20 years while nobody paid attention to me. I'm not doing anything different; it's other people who've changed. They want to go back a bit, and the way things are today, maybe they'd better."

The only thing that has changed, complains the painter, is that the outdoor posters he creates don't stick around as long as those of his predecessors. "It's because you can't buy a decent brush or paint any more," says Harley. "They've improved the stuff so much it isn't worth a darn anymore. Everything is mass-produced; there's no craftsmen proud of their work."

Harley is a bit difficult to understand at first, since he speaks with his mouth packed to full capacity with his sponsor's product. But his tales are the earthy, zesty sort which only come with 35 years of living along the open road.

"I walked into this old guy's door in West Virginia one time, and he yelled at me to come on in. But when I did I found myself staring into a double-barreled shotgun, and boy, did them barrels look big! Turned out he'd recently been robbed three or four times. Anyway, he's kind of palsied up and shaking there with his fingers cocking the hammer back until finally he says to me, 'Everything's all right.' Well, I look at him and say, 'No, everything ain't all right, and it won't be until that shotgun's pointed away from my head.'"

The actual process of painting a barn takes four hours for a single side blocked out in black or red. The only time Harley was ever bored was when the Smithsonian Institution asked

him to paint a barn on the *inside* of a wall at the World's Fair in Montreal a few years back as part of a performing arts exhibition. "Every time I'd get it painted up, they'd cover it again," grumbles Harley. "I must have painted the same wall 20 times."

Harley tries to limit his barn painting to Ohio and its neighboring states these days, although he does fly all over the country when an antique buff is willing to pay all his expenses. He's also recently begun to handcraft mail boxes and birdhouses which contain the Mail Pouch ad on two sides. "I can sell every one I make," he says. "The problem is getting the time to paint them all."

Another problem is that Harley doesn't want the Mail Pouch tradition to pass away with him. Currently he is searching for an apprentice to take over when he retires. Dozens of young men have applied, but Harley has rejected them all as unsuitable.

"I want someone who's in it for the love instead of the money," he says. ☺

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