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# Memphis Type History: Signs And Stories From Just Around The Corner



## Synopsis

Tourists and Memphians alike whizz by dozens of signs everyday. If they could speak up and tell their story to us, it would open a whole new world of insight into the history and culture of Memphis. In *Memphis Type History: Signs and Stories From Just Around the Corner*, nineteen of these everyday signs are beautifully captured by painter Rebecca Phillips. Accompanying the artwork and historical photographs is the history behind the signs, as told by the people who experienced it. Smell the fresh popcorn at the Lamar Theater, be soothed by the soulful atmosphere of Soulsville, U.S.A., and discover the scandalous history of a red neon lady. From the building with unexplained bumps in the night to the evolution of whole neighborhoods, you'll discover intriguing stories from around the corner that will make your next drive in Memphis more meaningful than you'd ever imagined.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The nature of signs is to represent something greater than themselves. In this book you will find that signs are the gateway for the stories of the businesses and the people who lived, worked, and sometimes sought safe haven, behind them. Examples like the Universal Life Insurance Company, during the time of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, assassination, or the Lorraine Motel for Stax recording artists, or even the great Sam Phillips, whose desire for creative change started Sam Phillips Recording Studio. Each chapter offers a glimpse into various slices of life across time and geography. The people who interacted with what the signs symbolize are interesting and important both socially and historically. One of the most recognizable signs in this book, the Sputnik at Joe's

Liquors, represents the creative vision of a quiet inventor, hardly known to the world, who gifted us with spectacular road signs across the country. The Sputnik also represents how a community will rally around something it loves to restore it to a former glory. While interesting, the engineering specs of the Sputnik do not tell anything about the sign's true importance because a sign is a reflection of something more important than itself. The history concerning most of these places is discovered exclusively in the stories people tell. The little slices of life, the people who accomplished so much in the businesses behind these logos, and the way these signs overlooked the city's transformation, combine to form a colorful history of Memphis. Therefore, the businesses' histories, as told by people who experienced them, tie the book together. Their stories reveal what life was like for people of all walks of life throughout several decades in Memphis. Through hours of interviews and research, we discovered that each of these places experienced changes we can all relate to: political movements, technology, and customers' whims. The signs remained even after major changes in the surrounding area or in the evolution of the business the signs represented. In some cases, like Leahy's Weekly Rentals, the signs featured here are now gone. In others, like the Chicago Pizza Factory archway, they have been recreated to express something new without forgetting the old. In the pages that follow, an intersection of art, history, and personal stories will allow an atmospheric experience of Memphis through paintings, photography, and personal stories. Passersby have whizzed by some of these signs for years without really taking a second glance. Others may already know quite a bit about these signs and their histories. Whatever the case, we hope you'll discover a little something new. Here, you will get a glimpse into what the places behind the signs once were and what they will become. By the time this book finds its way to some of you, it's likely some of these places will already be different from what we have described here. Our hope is that this book will encourage you to explore Memphis in a new way by rekindling your love for the unusual, the overlooked, and the hidden art before our eyes.

Caitlin L. Horton received a BA in International Studies and French and an MA in French at the University of Mississippi. Like the blues, she came from the Delta to make a home in Memphis. She and her husband will continue to explore the ins and outs of this uniquely gritty and endlessly interesting city.

Although I live in the UK, I travel to Memphis regularly for my job, and consider it a bit of a second residence. I probably know it well geographically as my own hometown too. I've read dozens of books on the history of this fine city but have to say that this ranks as perhaps one of the best. I

know it's a cliché, but it really was quite hard to put down once I started reading. Fun, informative - it's a truly compelling read. Full of detail and history but in a way that doesn't make it staid but keeps it fresh and interesting with not only the historical facts but the viewpoints from local residents too. This gives it a nice edge where you're not being lectured, but it makes it personal and relaxed. As they say if you want to find out about somewhere don't read a guide book - talk to the locals, and this is the next best thing! Of all the books I read on Memphis, without doubt, I've enjoyed this one the most and found it the most fun and captivating. I love the use of the illustrations (which is truly amazing) and the photos used as well. They really capture the unique essence of the city, they're not of the most glamorous sights but they show the rough around the edges beauty of the city which make it stand out from anywhere else. After spending so much time researching, plus all the trips I've made, I really thought I knew Memphis but I picked up so much new information from reading this. It's been a real schooling! If you want to know more about the people, stories and history of this fabulous city nestled on the shores of the mighty Mississippi then you can't go far wrong with this great little book. Highly recommend!

I grew up in Memphis, and spent many years as a youngster working for my Dad's construction business. We worked all over Memphis, and so I drove past many of these signs for years. One of my earliest memories is looking out the window of my parents' Volvo and seeing "Sputnik", a very memorable version of a type of sign called a "rotosphere" (as the authors inform us). I was mesmerized by this sign as a child, but it was broken in those early memories--it didn't spin or light up back then. Only many years later did I see it post-restoration--and what a sight! Learning how it actually works and what it took to restore it was very interesting--although I found myself longing for more technical detail on that one point! All of that to say that I looked forward to reading this book because I have many of my own memories associated with a lot of these signs. I drove by the giant skate and the "Roller Skate for Health" sign for years, and my mom bought stamps from Advance Rubber Stamp for the family business. So I knew my history with a lot of these prominent landmarks, but I didn't know the history of each one. This book educated me on the history and origins of these distinctive signs, and more than just relating the manufacturer and original purchaser, the book tells about the people, era, and neighborhood that go along with each one. The style of writing is akin to a feature piece in a newspaper, with a section, or chapter, for each sign. Each section can stand on its own, which makes this the kind of book you can read in spurts rather

than in one committed study. It is not the dry narrative of the historian; it is more like walking into a conversation between a group of old timers who really know the history of their home town. However, and perhaps simply due to the fact that this is written and not spoken, the book lacks some of the magic of a real conversation. Like the reporting you would read in a newspaper, the author is somewhat detached from the subject matter. That may be because the text is often moving from one quotation to the next without a real binding narrative for any one sign, or for the book as a whole. That is the only reason I give this four stars instead of five--I think the writing could be more engaging. But that is a slight tarnish on an otherwise shining example of local history. This book adds color to Memphis and its history you won't find in many other places. The paintings and photographs of each landmark really help tell the story (in fact I found myself wishing for more photos showing different angles and eras for each sign). I hope if you end up with a copy of this book that you enjoy it as I did--and maybe even start looking around your own home town a little closer for gems like these in Memphis.

I was excited, yet anxious, about this book being published. At the age of 63 and being a native memphian, I was hoping the author, Caitlin Horton, would be able to capture the true renaissance of this great city of Memphis. She did not disappoint! I love it! This book has captured not only historical topic, but all of the fun, beauty and incredible artistic talent that has ALWAYS been the heartbeat of Memphis. Rebecca Phillips is a perfect example of this talent through the paintings of signs illustrated in the book. Through the author and artist, you can't help but be drawn-in to the creative spirit of this great city! If you're not from Memphis, or have never visited, you'll be planning a trip soon! I would highly recommend this book to young and old!

Memphis Type History offers the reader a pictorial and biographical tour of Memphis Landmarks. The artwork draws the readers attention and the personal stories keep you turning the pages. It is so refreshing to be privileged to the real-life stories beyond the factual, historical research offered in other publications. To take a glimpse back to what once was makes my town even more endearing. Memphis Type History now has my family and me looking at our city from a different perspective. Not only has our appreciation for the past chronicled in the book expanded, but also we are finding ourselves on our own scavenger hunt of sorts to find the stories behind the signs and buildings we have looked at everyday, but not truly seen.

I am reading this book now and really enjoying it. I am not from Memphis but it makes me wish I

could do a walking tour of all the sites and signs - and I will do that when I visit this summer. There's a handy map near the end of the book. I am Caitlin's mother-in-law so might be some biased but think anyone interested in Memphis would enjoy.

Having lived in Memphis for about 5 years, I was pretty familiar with the signs and some of their history, so most of the details in the book resonated with me and in some cases triggered memories long dormant. What is special about this book is that it creates a meaningful cultural and emotional context that both supplements and enhances the beautiful artwork. Whether you have ever lived in Memphis or you are merely familiar with the area (or you are just a vintage sign fan), you cannot help but be touched by some of the narratives associated with these iconic signs.

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