

# THE BILLBOARD LOBBY

BY THOMAS C. DESMOND

I COULD tell the billboard lobby was at work. The letters that poured onto my desk were vitriolic, sarcastic and threatening.

"I suppose," read one communication, "that when a bunch of old hens get behind you softies in the Senate, you cannot and will not talk back to them because you are afraid to do so. Maybe if some of these old blisters who are after you to take billboards off the highways would stay off the roads, the highways would be more beautiful at that."

Another typical letter read: "Pass this billboard control bill and you'll never be re-elected."

One of the slyest, shrewdest pressure groups in the country was busy inciting thousands of the gullible; it aimed to preserve the ugly and often hazardous billboards which are blotching our roads.

Governors, legislators and commissioners have all been defeated by the billboard barons. When Herbert H. Lehman was governor of New York he publicly lashed out at the billboard lobby, stating: "The special interests of a single industry must give way before the unified sentiment of

the public." But the lobby was strong enough to beat his efforts to control roadside advertisements.

New York City's Park Commissioner Robert Moses, who is no lightweight in a public brawl, was decisively defeated by the billboard lobby when he fostered a constitutional amendment banning advertising signs at dangerous or scenic locations. When the battle had ended, Mr. Moses, who can hardly be called a left-winger, pleaded for a public drive that would "bring the reactionaries who control this business to their knees."

For the past sixteen years I have been fighting the billboard lobby in an effort to prevent the indiscriminate disfiguring of our roads. Year after year I have introduced bills which were killed in committee or smothered by votes on the floor. A \$150 million public-housing program I sponsored was blocked by the lobby until a billboard tax, which had been included in the bill to help finance construction, was removed. And a \$200 million postwar New York-Buffalo thruway measure was held up by the lobby until a clause barring billboards from the proposed road was deleted.

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The taunts of Ogden Nash, the more erudite pleadings of Dorothy Thompson, even the gibes of Li'l Abner, have been unavailing against the powerhouse lobby operated by the billboard industry. The Garden Clubs, Real Estate Associations, Automobile Associations and other civic groups have so far proved unable to prevent the billboard barons from plastering our roads with pleas to purchase aged-in-the-wood ale or tires that won't wear out.

Today the billboard industry, which had been paid \$500 million in the past ten years to herald the glories of its clients' products, is preparing a nationwide campaign of unprecedented size to litter our \$4 billion worth of post-war roads with bigger and more ornate signs that will hide more scenery and obstruct more intersections. The big surprise package of the industry is to be television on billboards; this will make it possible for a multitude of advertisements to appear on one sign.

## II

There are billboard lobbyists registered at some state capitols. But in every state the billboard interests are "in on the ground floor" at the capitol. In some states they hire prominent political bosses to handle their affairs. A key legislator may get a telephone call from his state party leader asking him to "Do me a personal favor, Joe; kill that billboard bill in your committee." In other states, a legislative leader may find

that his law practice is booming with cases given him by billboard concerns. In Pennsylvania, the billboard lobbyist is more subtle. He has no direct connection with the industry; instead he is an influential contact man for the petroleum interests.

The billboard propagandists set up dummy highway property organizations, bogus farm leagues, and spurious workers' groups. On a moment's notice, they can flood legislators with thousands of letters of protest from these groups.

A prominent oil concern playing catspaw for the billboard lobby, wrote to farmers, enclosing a list of members of the state legislature and thoughtfully adding a couple of stamps. "Write them," the company urged, "that you need all the cash you can get and that this is no time to take away money from your pockets. If these reformers have their way you may have to put pants on your farm animals."

Using a "front" technique similar to the Communists', the billboard lobby employs other groups to do its bidding. By using "threat and ruin" tactics with unions of carpenters, tin-smiths, electricians, painters and construction men, warning them that passage of control legislation will put members out of work, the lobby utilizes the pressure force of labor. Similarly, it has successfully lined up the brewers and oil companies on occasion.

When their efforts to secure the cooperation of the National Grange

and Farm Bureau failed, the American Highway Sign Association, one of the key organizations of the billboard lobby, started its own "farmer" organization to fight all roadside control bills. It also organized a Roadside Business and Property Conference to include tourist camps, hotels and gas stations. In Pennsylvania, when the industry was being hard hit by an organization of women called the "Pennsylvania Roadside," the lobby created a "Pennsylvania Roadside Improvement Committee" to confuse the public. In this case the courts banned the ruse.

The Highway Property Owners Association, a billboard "front," mailed 19,000 letters to farmers in five mid-Western states warning:

Certain city dwellers are trying to get laws passed to make all buildings and other structures within view of the highway conform to their ideas of scenic beauty. Our rights are going to be taken away from us. Help us defeat these bills.

Another group acting as a transmission belt for the billboard lobby wrote all advertisers who rent sign space: "Over the week-end you must contact your assemblyman and senator. If roads are impassable, phone: and have a telegram waiting for them on Monday."

The billboard lobby shrewdly puts many legislators in its debt by giving them free sign space during election time. To sell itself to the public, the industry donates space to charitable and civic causes. Ironically, the billboard concerns are most generous in

donating space to safety campaigns although, according to an official survey just completed in New York state, there are at least 1521 billboards whose location makes them traffic hazards.

The lobby is savage with legislators who oppose it. It subsidizes opposition to the lawmaker, fomenting political trouble in his home district, donates sign space to his opponents and sends agents into his district to spread rumors among his constituents. However, when a control bill seems to have a fair chance of passage, despite all the lobby's efforts, it dusts off its old "code of ethics." Members of the sign industry pledge to refrain from posting signs which may be objectionable to the public. They coyly pass hints to the proper state administrative official concerning the publicity he will get when he announces he has got the industry to agree to tear down offending signs. Women's organizations and civic groups are disarmed by this move and slacken their drive. The voluntary agreement gets a few headlines, and then as months pass by, is forgotten. The legislature has adjourned. The signs remain.

The Bucks County Association in Pennsylvania agreed to work with the outdoor advertising interests on a "voluntary clean-up." The Association had to report later that not a single objectionable sign was removed; that more, as a matter of fact, had gone up.

But some advances are being made

against the lobby. In Philadelphia a number of leading hotels have agreed to discontinue all outdoor signs after their present contracts have expired. A Blot-of-the-Month campaign, undertaken by various women's groups to announce the worst offending billboards, has hit the lobby in a tender spot. Periodic boycotts sponsored by irate civic groups, pledged not to buy products advertised on offending signposts, have caused some damage. But the lobby counters this attack by reselling the space vacated by a concern to the firm's strongest competitor. General Motors and the Socony Vacuum Oil Co. cooperated by removing their road signs, only to find the locations snapped up by rival firms.

### III

The billboard lobby is not a single organization but a network of tightly coordinated companies, trade organizations and key individual executives. The industry's overlords may use one group to spearhead their drive in a certain state and a completely different outfit in a neighboring state.

The chief publicist for the billboard lobby is the Outdoor Advertising Association of America, the industry's trade organization. Its public relations, publicity and legislative activities stretch from its Chicago headquarters in all directions across the nation, and are capable of influencing Chambers of Commerce, trade associations, veterans groups, YMCAs, religious and welfare associations, po-

litical parties, legislators, party bosses and highway commissioners. In New York state alone an ambitious program was drawn up which called for influencing editorial writers and using public forums, lunch clubs and various lecturers to further their interests. Radio programs, contests, motion pictures — all the high-powered flimflam of a skilled propaganda machine — are listed on a schedule of activities.

The OAAA, however, is overshadowed by a few companies whose executives are the real strategists of the industry and who in reality determine its policies. So tightly-knit is the industry and so mysterious is its intricate system of interlocking directorates and subsidiaries that not even the big advertising agencies and advertisers know much about it. One of the leading advertising trade journals recently commented: "Probably less is known about the medium [billboards] than about any other — even by advertisers and agencies which use it extensively."

A goliath corporation called the General Outdoor Advertising Company, is one of the bulwarks of the lobby. By itself it handles one fourth of the industry's national income. Organized in 1925, it has since gobbled up twenty-one concerns and today holds a tight grip on the industry's major markets in 28 states. In addition, it owns large blocks of stock in at least six other major billposting firms. At the head of the concern is Burnett W. Robbins, its aggressive \$75,000-a-year president.

Another powerful figure in this organization is Kerwin H. Fulton, founder and director of GOA, and also the head of Outdoor Advertising Inc., which calls itself a "research and promotion" outfit. OAI represents 65 per cent of the industry. GOA owns 70 per cent of the stock in this concern but magnanimously limits itself to a 30 per cent voting strength. Its activities are financed by a 5 per cent levy on its members' national billings, which gives it a multi-million dollar "war chest." Mr. Fulton was a welcome figure in certain Washington circles during the war, for as the director of the industry's war activities he could arrange for the display of recruiting and other patriotic advertisements on the nation's highways at a moment's notice. Actually the industry's war service consisted mainly in persuading national advertisers to foot the bills for the signposts. The billboard space contributed by the industry itself was relatively trivial.

Another of the industry's key magnates is white-haired George Kleiser, the powerful board chairman of Foster & Kleiser, which rates second among the nation's billboard concerns. Kleiser's firm, centered in San Francisco, is the biggest signposting outfit on the West Coast; it has had a great deal of experience in trying to block billboard control legislation.

The kingpins of the industry in New England are Edward C. Donnelly and his brother John, who operate the John Donnelly & Sons

Company of Boston. John is president of the recently formed Standard Outdoor Advertising Inc., which represents 27 concerns, including most of the leading ones, but excluding GOA and Mr. Kleiser's concern. This new corporation is also laying plans for extensive "research and promotion." Its members cover 1626 localities in the United States, and SOA describes itself modestly as a "closely coordinated network."

This intricate organization of lobbies and lobbyists operated by the industry works with special precision in the Southern and Western states, in New York, New Jersey, Illinois, Michigan and Massachusetts. The peculiar machinations of the billboard groups have aroused the interest, if not the admiration, of the Antitrust Division of the United States Department of Justice, which recently informed me that its Midwest Office is launching an official investigation.

#### IV

In New York state the industry refrains from registering any of its lobbyists under the state's lobbyist-registration law, because they do not attend public hearings or openly pursue their interests at the capitol; instead, most of them pull the strings from offices in New York City.

In Massachusetts, a timid billboard-control law has been on the statute books for years but the Department of Public Works has been less than zealous in its enforcement. Some time ago several civic groups demanded

revisions in the law. A committee of legislators was appointed to study the problem. Interestingly enough, they invited John Donnelly & Co. and other billboard concerns to testify at the public hearings, but "forgot," and for a time refused, to invite advocates of billboard control, until the matter threatened to blow up into a front-page story.

The testimony was far from dull. A selectman of North Reading, Massachusetts, disclosed that evidence sent by the town to the Public Works Department had been mysteriously "lost" by the officials. The Massachusetts Civic League also stated that 84 photographs which had been taken of illegal billboards had also been "lost" by the Department. An official of Brookline, Massachusetts, declared that when the locality ruled billboards out of the community, the Department overruled the ordinance. One town official complained that his community had to wait four years before receiving an answer to a letter of complaint it had sent the state enforcement agency.

After mulling over the testimony of the civic groups and the counter-claims of the billboard lobby, the law-makers commended the industry as a "high-minded group" and asserted that the "necessity for reaching people outdoors is unquestionable." To assuage the feelings of the civic organizations, it proposed that a new agency with the impressive title of Billboard Authority be set up to enforce the law. The legislature hastily

complied. Mr. Donnelly reported to his colleagues that there was no need to worry. He was right. The enforcement job in the Authority was turned over to the same man who had handled it in the Public Works Department.

Housewives in Pennsylvania have borne the brunt of the battle in that state, and by carrying on a year-round program of publicity, exposure, pressure and boycotts, they have succeeded in holding the signpost men within reasonable limits. However, the billboard lobby has fared worst in Vermont, whose canny farmers have proved less gullible than their Massachusetts and New York neighbors. A pitchfork brigade, with the Grange and Farm Bureau in the forefront, succeeded in tearing down most of the ugly signboards. There are only about 300 big billboards left in the entire state.

This year the billboard magnates expect advertisers to pour an all-time record sum of \$100 million into their coffers, and while no one knows for certain how much of this revenue will be spent for lobbying, the sum is unquestionably more than adequate to meet their needs.

What most women's clubs and civic groups seek is not the elimination of the industry, but regulations which would require the signpost concerns to erect their billboards only at locations where they are not hazards and where they will not hide scenic views.

In New York state we want to ban

them from the new \$200 million New York-to-Buffalo thruway. We want to require that billboards be placed at least 500 feet from state parks and at least 150 feet from highway intersections. Finally, we want to outlaw signs in series, which keep the motorist's eyes off the road for several seconds, and are responsible for many accidents.

An Air Force Colonel wrote to me from Germany that when his men commented on the beauty of the German countryside, he told them that "the only difference is in the absence of billboards." And he added: "Any movement to regulate them in

America is going to have my support — and I mean financial support, too." Dozens of veterans, of all ranks, have written to me in a similar vein.

But at its recent annual convention, the billboard industry was gleefully told that in the next three to five years it would be able to sell more signposts than it had in the past twenty years. The billboard concerns are prepared for the biggest boom in their history. This means that our roads will be cluttered as never before with dangerous, scenery-destroying billboards — unless our citizens decide to do something about the billboard lobby.

## SUMMER

*BY ETHEL BARNETT DE VITO*

Summer that enters like a girl, unsure,  
Slim as a willow, shy as April rain,  
Becomes before the moon is new again,  
A golden goddess, certain of her lure.  
And everywhere she steps, her magic breaks:  
Grasses and flowers spring beneath her feet,  
The full-leaved boughs dip low to brush her cheek,  
The world sleeps as she sleeps, wakes when she wakes.

But even as her spell grows, it is done,  
And suddenly when days wing to a close,  
She is a bent old woman, full of sun,  
Content to dream her days away, or doze,  
Uncaring of the trembling of the leaves  
When the first unbridled wind blows by the eaves —