

# The Unspectacular Douglas Leigh

By JAMES F. FIXX

FOR anywhere from \$3,000 to \$25,000 a month, you, too, can have your name in lights on Broadway. And the man to see about it is Douglas Leigh.

Leigh, an improbably soft-spoken Alabaman who has been called King of the Spectaculars and the Lamplighter of Broadway, is responsible for some of the biggest and boldest of the animated signs that blink, bubble, and bedazzle visitors to Times Square. It is, in fact, impossible to wander through Times Square without being aware of his work, for at last count he had some fifteen examples of it there, ranging from the venerable Camel Cigarettes sign, now rounding out a quarter-century of puffing giant smoke rings over the heads of the crowd, to an intricate combination of 4,104 light bulbs, 1,026 photoelectric cells, and 200,000 miles of wiring that flashes animated cartoons from high above the street.

It's a giddy and often gaudy species of advertising, and Douglas Leigh is its undisputed master. His special bailiwick is Times Square ("If you didn't have all these passing people, you wouldn't have an audience"), where he has made



himself something of a legend among outdoor advertising men. For whether you admire his work or not, there's no denying that an element of sheer wizardry lies behind it. Who else, for example, ever

thought of putting up a sign two-thirds the length of a football field—especially one sporting a seventy-five-foot waterfall flanked by a pair of sixty-foot Pepsi-Cola bottles? And who else ever dreamed of giant coffee cups that steam invitingly, giant neon rings tossed by a clown to advertise beer, and giant bubbles to advertise soap?

The key word in each case is "giant." At their best, Leigh's signs—known in the trade as "spectaculars"—are so enormous as to overwhelm any nearby opposition. But since sheer size is scarcely enough to make even a modest splash in a business designed to attract instant attention, there must also be movement—big, bright, and compelling. And Leigh's work has size and movement aplenty. "When I plan a spectacular," he once said, "I just take cold-blooded

advantage of people's love for toys."

He is not, however, quite as cold-blooded as he might strike a casual Times Square visitor being buffeted for the first time by all the neon glitter. Indeed, he is fond of pointing out that he wears two hats, one for his work in spectaculars and the other for his efforts toward civic improvement. Wearing the second hat as president of an organization called the Broadway Association, he recently proposed to New York's Mayor Robert F. Wagner that the city sponsor construction of a 500-by-800-foot convention hall to be built between Seventh and Eighth Avenues and 41st and 43rd Streets, complete with mammoth exhibition areas, steel supports to float the entire structure thirty or forty feet above ground level, and possibly a rooftop heliport. He is also responsible for the refurbishing of the Times Tower at the south end of Times Square as a new headquarters for the Allied Chemical Corporation, and for plans to complement it with a similarly refurbished Claridge Hotel at Broadway and 44th Street.

If all this signals the beginning of a Times Square renaissance, it can't come too soon for Douglas Leigh. He is visibly pained, as we discovered when we called on him the other day, by references, however delicately phrased, to the area's honky-tonk atmosphere. "People talk about Times Square being vulgar," he said, "when what they really mean is 42nd Street between Seventh and Eighth. That's the part that's vulgar." It was no accident, therefore, that the site chosen for the proposed convention hall precisely straddles that block. "The plan," Leigh told Mayor Wagner, "would eliminate one of New York City's worst blights."

THE man behind this multifarious storm of activity on the Great White Way looks as misplaced as a clergyman at a burlesque show. Far from being the fast-talking, back-slapping, cigar-chomping supersalesman that imagination might suggest, Leigh is so quiet he has been called downright mousy, so diffident that his voice sometimes becomes almost inaudible, and so conservative in dress and manner that one observer has said he looks like "the guy you forget two minutes after meeting him at a cocktail party." At fifty-seven, even after thirty-odd years in New York, he still talks with a strong hint of his native Anniston, Alabama, a fact that inevitably disarms clients who can't quite believe that the King of the Spectaculars sounds more like a tourist than a tycoon. His office on Fifth Avenue—a thoroughfare on which spectaculars are forbidden—looks like hundreds of others, except for the gadgetry indigenous to his trade. In one room a long table is



Eastern exposure—For a Japanese firm, Leigh designed this shimmering neon spectacular in Times Square.



Legendary landmark—Famous Camel sign, shown here just as its illuminated legend changes, has been blowing smoke rings in Times Square since 1941.

rigged with a trap door in its surface. When the trap door is opened, a console of switches and dials is revealed, and an operator can dim the lights and project miniature spectacles on a screen that is bathed in ultraviolet light to simulate Broadway at night. The screen and console are part of Leigh's salesmanship technique and are used to show prospective clients what their money (an average of \$6,000 or so a month for Times Square space) can buy. Another part of his technique is a consistently soft sell that lets the client himself discover all the fringe benefits of having a spectacular in Times Square—free advertising in newsreels, on picture postcards, and in movies, not to mention all those amateur snapshots that are eventually shown to Aunt Hattie back in Sioux City.

**O**RDINARILY, when Times Square space becomes available Leigh goes out in search of a client. Occasionally, however, a client simply walks in the door. Such a case occurred with the Toshiba sign at 47th Street and Broadway. "Toshiba was already the G.E. of Japan," Leigh says. "They came into this country with their radios and appliances, but they had no recognition. They knew exactly what they wanted when they came to us." The result was a flashing array of lights in the form of a volcano and rising sun.

To describe it that way, however, is to make Leigh's business sound so simple that anyone with a boxful of light bulbs could make a wild success of it. The fact is that there's an elusive genius to it all, and some of the stories Leigh tells give off an unmistakable echo of Newton under the apple tree and Archimedes in the bathtub. Back in 1941, for example, Leigh's brother, Ted, showed him a trick. Slipping the cellophane wrapper off a pack of cigarettes, Ted burned a small hole in it, blew smoke into the hole, and then gently tapped the wrapper. From out of the hole came a perfect smoke ring with

every tap. It was more than mere coincidence that the Camel sign went up in Times Square soon afterward.

Leigh's fascination with the possibilities of outdoor advertising began just after his sophomore year at the University of Florida in Gainesville when he left college to join a sign firm in Atlanta. But he soon became impatient with what he regarded as his employers' old-fashioned and unimaginative ways, and in 1930 he arrived in New York City and landed a job with the General Outdoor Advertising Company, then the country's biggest poster firm. Before long, however, he resigned that job, too, to go into business for himself. Needing capital, he sold his second-hand car. He then got an option on a signboard in the Bronx, photographed it with a Brownie camera, and painted in a sign advertising the St. Moritz Hotel. A few days later, after a talk with the manager of the St. Moritz, Leigh had made his first sale in New York. It was not long afterward that he made his first incursion into Times Square—with an idea his former employers had turned down. It was a mammoth illuminated coffee cup with steam hissing forth from holes along its rim, and he rented it to A&P for \$2,000 a month. At the ripe old age of twenty-three, Leigh had hit the big time.

In the years since, he has brought a new verve and brightness to the business of spectacles, and his work has become known far from Times Square. His company—which he operates with a handful of twenty or so people—has designed illuminated identifications in New York for the Time and Life Building, the Mutual of New York Building, the Equitable Building, and the Newsweek Building. Moreover, signs designed by Douglas Leigh, Inc., can currently be seen as far afield as Chicago (BOAC and Pepsi-Cola) and Hollywood (BOAC).

But it would be a mistake to get the impression that Leigh, for all his success, has been able to accomplish everything his restless imagination has ever

dreamed up. He has, for one thing, never succeeded in converting the tower of the Empire State Building into a giant cigarette, as he has occasionally thought of trying. Nor has he achieved one of the fondest dreams of his youth—to paint an ad for the Prudential Insurance Company ("Prudential has the strength of Gibraltar") on the rocky cliffs of Gibraltar itself.



Light work—A wall of 4,104 light bulbs forms animated cartoons.

# PUBLISHING THE CORPORATE BOOK

By WILBUR CROSS, *editorial director of Books for Business, a group of free-lance writers and editors.*

FOR some five months, the national best-seller lists have carried the name of an unusual entrant, *My Years with General Motors*, by Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. Equally prominent a few weeks back was *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, another volume by an eminent business personality, David Ogilvy, head of the advertising agency that bears his name.

These independent achievements are significant in the world of communications because they represent a milestone: the maturing of the corporate book into something more than an expensive, cloth-bound promotion piece. When you look them square in the eye, regardless of the fact that they were independently published rather than subsidized by a corporate sponsor, these are business books. They tell the stories of executives and business procedures and marketing successes in a boldly competitive world. As an editor remarked about the Sloan work, "It is one of the most important books on American business to be published in the last decade. . . ."

In the field of biography, there are numerous cases of corporate books that have gained wide public acceptance or sound critical acclaim. One example was *A Foot in the Door*, by Alfred C. Fuller, sponsored by the Fuller Brush Company and published by McGraw-Hill. One secret of the book's popularity, says the publisher, is that co-author Hartzell Spence—an adept and prolific writer in the corporate field—"brought a great deal of narrative skill to Mr. Fuller's fascinating career."

One of the liveliest recent corporate autobiographies is *Vice President in Charge of Revolution*, by Murray D. Lincoln, as told to David Karp. Mr. Lincoln, as president of Nationwide Insurance and a pioneer in the American cooperative movement, could hardly miss touching off sparks when he stated his theme: 'I've suggested that we have a 'vice president in charge of revolution'. . . . His job would be to stir up everything and everybody, to criticize and challenge everything being done—objectives, methods, programs, results. . . .' *Saturday Review* gave the book a favorable review, as did *The Christian*

*Science Monitor* and *The New Yorker*.

If these books, along with others from the business world that have attracted public attention recently, have any message to tell us it is this: people will read an industrial story if it is told convincingly, stimulating, and forcefully. If some books can be geared to general acceptance, it is realistic to expect that others can be aimed at influencing more limited audiences: groups of readers in specific fields or with known interests.

An example of such a specialized work, sponsored by Standard Oil of New Jersey, is *Oil for the World*, written to provide a "non-technical and brief, but comprehensive book on oil." A modest paperback, it has run through three editions since its original release by Harper in 1950 and has been published in seven languages.

In completely different fields, company-sponsored paperbacks have enjoyed widespread success. Popular Library, for example, has published such titles as: *The World of Mr. Sheraton*, written by Ernest Henderson for Sheraton Hotels, with a reprint order alone of 250,000 copies; *Easy-To-Do Hair Styles*, by Alice Richardson, a how-to book for Tip-Top Products that has reached the quarter-million mark; and *How to Choose and Use Power Tools*, by Harry Walton for Black & Decker.

BOOKS that represent sound financial and creative investments for the sponsor do not necessarily have to be epics or best-sellers, nor do they have to appear under the imprint of a well-known publishing house. Many effective corporate books have been distributed in limited quantity (1,000 to 3,000 copies), published by small firms or even local

printers. One such example is *An Enduring Heritage*, a picture-and-text profile of the engineering firm Parsons, Brinckerhoff, Quade & Douglas. Although only about 2,000 copies were distributed, to acquaint a limited audience with the wide range of the firm's engineering qualifications, hundreds of letters of commendation were received from all over the world.

Regrettably, for each company book that communicates effectively there are dozens that lay fat corporate eggs. Why are some books singularly successful while others never fulfil their original promise?

ONE answer lies in the plain fact that few corporate executives are qualified in the procedures for planning, writing, and editing a full-length work. Even the public relations director, generally the most knowledgeable staff member in matters of printed communication, is unlikely to be an experienced book editor. Furthermore, book projects characteristically fall in marginal areas of responsibility, sometimes referred to as "do-it-over-the-weekend" assignments. Another common executive approach, going out and searching for a good writer, is no more the solution than locating a proficient chemist would be to the over-all problem of trying to develop and market a new product in the cosmetics field.

The corporate book must be recognized as a major undertaking from the start. Like any other new venture, it calls for sophisticated planning, professional consultation, and the teamwork of a number of creative specialists. Most book projects start off on the wrong foot because of faulty concept. This concept is more than simply the decision that a book is needed. It requires a careful examination of the motive, the audience, the timing, the theme, and the type of vehicle that promises to carry the message with the greatest conviction. At this point, four fundamental questions must be answered by the sponsor:

- 1) Why should a book be published at all?
- 2) What is the audience at which the work will be aimed?
- 3) What reaction is desired from the readers?
- 4) Is the objective clearly defined?

If the sponsor cannot put the answers

