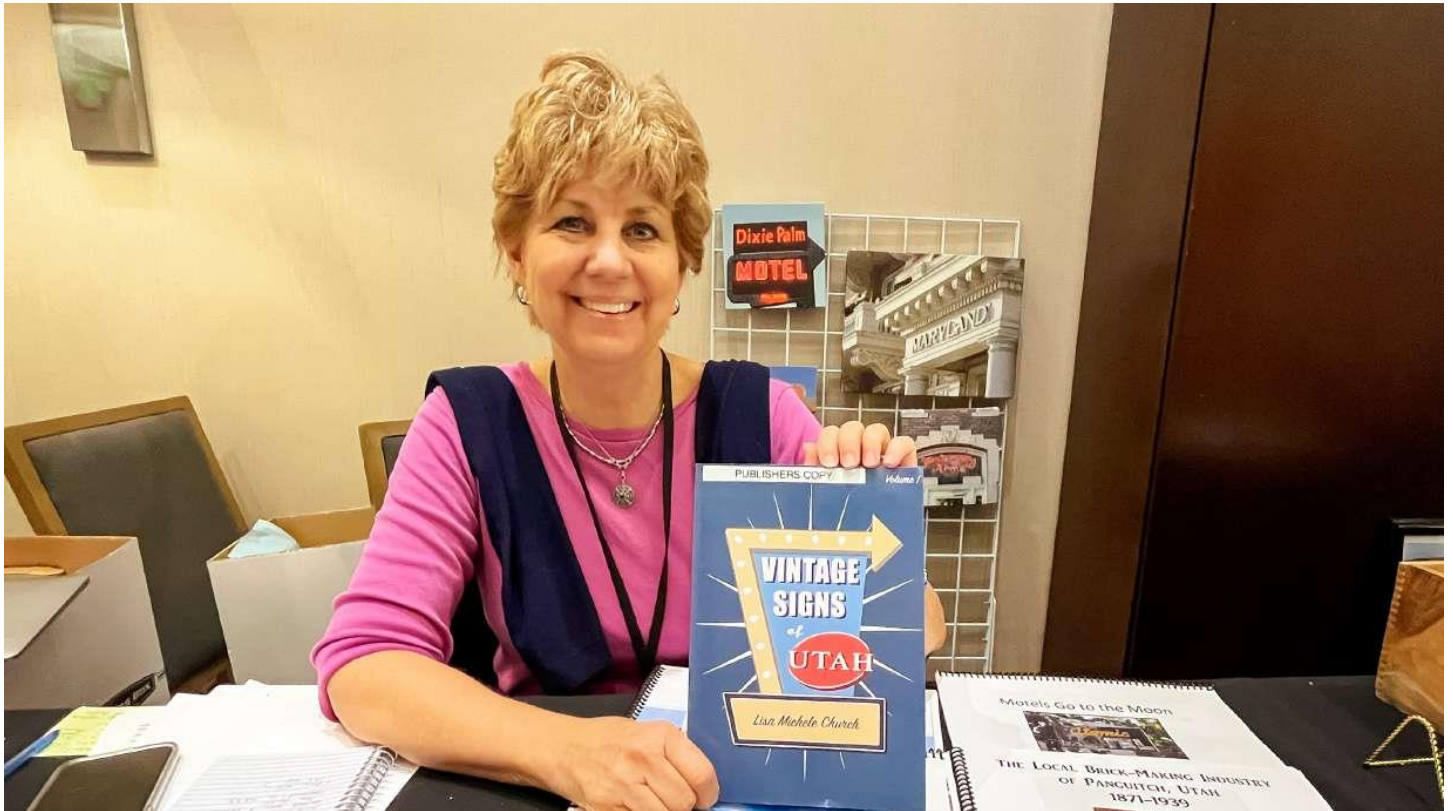


New book documents Utah history — one vintage sign at a time

By Carter Williams, KSL.com, November 25, 2022



Lisa Michele Church, author of the book "Vintage Signs of Utah," holds up a copy of the book during the Utah State Historical Society Conference on Oct. 26. The book highlights historic Utah signs that are mostly still visible today. (Carter Williams, KSL.com)

SALT LAKE CITY — Lisa Michele Church admits she never really intended on documenting history. Yet her fascination with the past coupled with the skills she's learned through her career and other hobbies have helped mold her into one of Utah's more well-known community historians.

"I wasn't formally trained but I'm a lawyer, so I love research and I'm a photographer, so I love documenting," she explains.

Her passion for history helped her amass an impressive following under the handle "[Relentless History](#)" on Instagram, where she posts photos with brief stories about various pieces of history hidden in plain sight like the motels thousands pass by on a regular basis to the signs outside of businesses.

Many of these recent posts feature different signs across the state. There's the iconic Walker Center sign in downtown Salt Lake City, the vintage neon KoKoMo Club sign in Ogden and the equally stylish Dixie Bowl & Billiards sign in St. George to name a few.

Now she's compiled "Vintage Signs of Utah," a book that essentially serves as a field guide to unique and historic signs across the state. It features close to 300 captivating signs for cafes, motels, theaters and various other businesses in Utah, and the stories behind them.

The project all started from the signs that Church noticed on road trips she'd take around the Beehive State. It began about 15 years ago when she was focused on documenting Utah's old motels for another book, and she couldn't help but notice the quirky signs designed to draw motorists to their business. The same thing shifted her attention to apartment complexes throughout Salt Lake City.

Vintage signs then became her center of attention over the past few years. She'd stop and snag photos of the unique businesses signs or signs that she wanted to document before they were gone forever. Many of these businesses are old mom-and-pop shops that either still exist or at least their signs do, which inspired the idea for a book.

"I would just see these cool signs that looked like they were in disrepair and I'd be worried they would fall down or be taken down," she told KSL.com, while sitting at a booth set up at the 70th Annual Utah State Historical Society Conference last month. "So I thought, 'I better get a photograph of that.' And as soon as I started doing that, I realized how beautiful they were — and then I wanted to know who designed them, how they got built and how long they have been there."

The stories vintage signs tell

Signs are an interesting way to document Utah's history because sign companies represent some of the state's oldest local businesses. YESCO celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2020, which was the same year that Brimley Brothers Neon celebrated its 90th birthday and Rainbow Neon Sign Company turned 75, just to name a few.

Much of their work continues to literally shine over the state. Church found herself drawn to the idea of capturing this history because good signs can cross over from their original purpose as an advertisement to become a sort of community landmark.

One of her favorite signs is the bright Sands Motel sign in St. George, which dates back to the road trip boom of the 1940s and 1950s. For her, it tells the origin story of modern-day tourism in southern Utah.



The Salt Lake Costume Company sign sits in the Rainbow Neon Sign Company shop on Saturday, Dec. 21, 2019, after a recent repair job. The sign was originally built in the 1950s and became an iconic sign within the Sugar House neighborhood. (Photo: Carter Williams, KSL.com)

In some cases, signs are so popular within a community that they live on for completely new purposes. For instance, Salt Lake Costume closed in 2005 after 116 years of business; but the company's [old building in Sugar House was eventually converted into housing in 2019](#), and the company's [old neon sign was refurbished](#), allowing for the story of the old costume company to live on.

"I think (Utah's) signs are really artistic but they are also a part of our streetscape that goes into people's memories of their own town or their own time," Church said. "So when they see the signs, they really mean more than just the business or the advertising. They mean to people, 'This is where I grew up, this is familiar, this is important. This is where something important happened in my life.'"

What also makes historic signs interesting is that many of the 20th-century signs that Church features were custom-built. She'd often come across the same stories as she researched a sign: Man comes home from war, man falls in love and the couple opens a small business together. They design their own sign and they run their business for a long time.



A photo of the original Walker Bank sign taken in 1981. The tower was taken down in the 1980s before it was refurbished and returned in 2008. The building's current owners recently converted the sign from neon to LED. (Photo: Utah State History)

Her documentation also offers a window into the evolution of signs. Church leans heavily on chronicling neon signs because they are slowly disappearing, as companies turn to LED because it's viewed as a cheaper, brighter and more efficient option.

This year's [renovation of the 64-foot Walker Center Tower](#) serves as a prime example of this, as its old neon tubes were replaced with LED strips. The same happened to Salt Lake City's historic [Rio Grande building in 2019](#).

A field guide to historic signs

It's worth noting that most of the signs that Church highlights in her book still exist, at least for now. She hopes that people will use it to learn the history of a sign that they come across as they travel through Utah — and also visit the business behind the sign.

A sequel may also be in the works someday. Church said she's also looking into the idea of a similar book that tells the tales of iconic Utah signs that have since been destroyed, mainly because her audience has asked about these types of signs.

"I think that's equally important," she said. "It's very encouraging that so many people have sent me pictures of old signs."

Church's book, which went on sale for the first time in October, is available at the King's English Bookshop in Salt Lake City, [and on the bookstore's website](#).