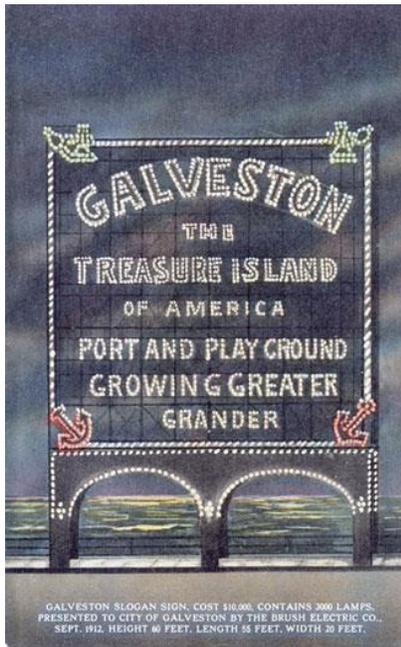


Beacon in the Dark: Galveston's Slogan Sign



For just over a decade during the early 20th century, a dramatic electric sign graced the Seawall, illuminating it at night and welcoming visitors to the Isle. The sign was the focus of an advertising campaign to make Galveston a dramatic place to be after dark.

In 1912, Brush Electric Company, in partnership with the Galveston Commercial Association, undertook an effort to make Galveston the best lighted city in the United States. The firm, which had been chartered in Galveston during December 1881, provided the first local street lighting in Texas the following year.

The company tied its own commercial success to Galveston's. In the *Galveston Daily News*, January 26, 1912, Brush advertised that it would donate a "mammoth electrical sign" to the city. The company's wish was "to tender the people of

Galveston something of its art and product that will contribute to the general welfare of Galveston." The sign's slogan would be decided in a public contest. The Commercial Association would appoint a committee to review entries and select the best slogan.

The slogan sign was part of Brush Electric Company's plan to increase the number of visitors to Galveston, reaping benefits to business and local pride. The *Galveston Daily News*, February 3, 1912, announced: "The Big Slogan Sign...is an advertising plan." Any plan to make Galveston the best lit city in the nation had better enjoy widespread community support. Brush planned to achieve this by designing electric signs for local businesses. The signs were to be works of art: during the day, they looked mundane, but at night they glowed in all their glory.

Valentine Electric Sign Company in Atlantic City, New Jersey, designed the slogan sign. A foundation of reinforced concrete supported a steel framework that held 3,000 tungsten lights. The bulbs spelled out "Galveston" (7 feet high) and "Treasure Island" and "Port and Playground, Growing, Greater, Grander" (each 4 ½ feet high). A boy, Randolph Pearson, had contributed "Treasure Island of America," whereas two adults, George H. Aronsfeld and John F. Letton, had contributed "Port and Playground" and "Growing, Greater, Grander," respectively. The slogan sign made its debut during the evening of Saturday, September 28, 1912. A huge crowd gathered before the sign at Seawall and 25th Street to watch as Mayor Lewis Fisher (1872-1945) turned on its lights. The sign figured prominently in photographs of the Seawall taken during the 'teens. It managed to weather a severe hurricane in 1915, going dark as a result, and a lesser one in 1919. Corrosion, however, was an ongoing problem because of the sign's proximity to the Gulf of Mexico. The slogan sign was finally dismantled in the spring of 1923.

During its brief existence, the slogan sign symbolized Galveston's business and tourist

aspirations. Visible to tourists at night as they drove down 25th Street towards the allure of the beach and the beachfront attractions, the sign was a symbol of civic pride. It's illuminated slogans made a bold statement to the rest of Texas and the United States about Galveston's determination to be a first-class beach resort.

The Rosenberg Library's Galveston and Texas History Center seeks donations of photographs of the slogan sign, as well as electric signs for Galveston businesses. Please contact Peggy Dillard, Special Collections Manager, at pdillard@rosenberg-library.org.

Additional:

The November 2011 *Galveston Monthly* magazine featured on its cover a painting by local Galveston artist George Lee.

"The painting is based on a mammoth 60 foot tall electric slogan sign with 3000 lamps that once stood on the Seawall at 25th Street. The brightly lit sign made its debut on September 28, 1912 and was provided by the Brush Electric Company in partnership with the Galveston Commercial Association in an effort to make Galveston the best lighted city in the United States. At the time, the company was famous for providing the first local street lighting in Texas.

"The sign managed to weather a severe hurricane in 1915 and another less severe one in 1919. Corrosion was an ongoing problem because of the sign's location on the gulf of Mexico and eventually the slogan sign was dismantled in the spring of 1923.

"George was inspired to paint this sign after a feature was run a few months ago in our local newspaper about the slogan sign. [snip]

"The only change he made for his painting from the original photo he had seen of the sign was to put in a sunset as a background and add the Model T's and people in period dress. He did this to provide the viewer with an idea of just how large the original sign was when it stood on the Seawall."

