

OKLAHOMA-MISSOURI SIGN LANGUAGE

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All of us at one time or another have seen bizarre spelling or language used in signs or notices put up by individuals, organizations or businesses. I would like to share with you some that I've met with in certain fringe-of-the-Ozarks areas of Oklahoma and Missouri.

Let's begin with a multiple-choice quiz. If you're driving along on Interstate 57 in extreme southeast Missouri (near the bootheel part of that state, where a very severe earthquake occurred in the early 1800s), you'll see signs urging you to stop in at Reeves' Boomland. Which of these things would you expect Reeves' Boomland to be?

- * a real estate agency anxious to sell property that surely will prove to have a rapid increase in value
- * a hunting preserve (this is near a major north-south migratory flyway for ducks and geese)
- * a music store specializing in drums and other loud equipment for rock groups
- * a hallowed site which commemorates the fighting and gunfire of a Civil War battle
- * a tract of land where you can still see some of the devastating effects of the early 19th-century earthquake

Well, in fact, Reeves' Boomland offers many different things to customers, but it is none of the above. You can buy pottery, gasoline, knick-knacks, ice-cream, souvenirs, groceries, yard ornaments and western wear, to name but a few of the available items, but Mr. Reeves named his establishment for one of his best-selling products: things that go boom (fireworks) which in Missouri can legally be sold to the public.

One opportunity Boomland offers to the public is "The Largest Collection of Elvis Presley Automobiles Anywhere in the World". Yes, they have a museum in which are reverentially housed and displayed three of the Rock King's personal limousines. Near the entrance to the museum the church-like atmosphere is enhanced by a sign which admonishes "Positively No Profanity Aloud". Upon seeing this, I inadvertently let go with a commonly-heard oath, but, obediently, muttered it under my breath.

In a southeast Missouri city, I noticed a huge transport truck coming slowly into town along the main street. From a distance I could see that it had SEX printed in very large neat letters on

on the sides. My first reaction was that its voluminous cargo space was needed for all the X-rated porno movie cassettes needed to supply a gluttonous home-video market in the area. But, as it came closer, I could read "When You Crave Bananas" in smaller letters underneath the SEX. This confused matters quite a bit, so I anxiously waited for the truck to approach even closer. There, written in the smallest letters of all, was the legend "South Eastern X-press". Surely this is a very rare example of a company's advertising its name in very small type, but in this instance it turned out to be very eye-catching and attention-getting and, judging from my experience, not easily forgotten. Presumably the bananas part indicated that it is a company specializing in transporting fresh produce, but no doubt any Freudians who see the juxtaposition of SEX and bananas will have a field day.

In a store in another part of Missouri, a young clerk was busily arranging a display of products that protect your car in different seasons of the year. He had proudly put up a hand-lettered sign that read "In Winter, You Winterize, So Summarize Your Car Now". Following his sign to the letter, I walked up and said "Well, it's a slow starter, and it rattles a lot, but mostly it runs OK." It was fortunate that I wasn't in too big a hurry, for it took me some time to explain everything to him. And, when I finally was feeling quite pleased at how well our spelling session had succeeded, he came up with "You know what? Somebody else told me it should be spelled with an E, so I looked it up in a dictionary, and it's got an A. S-u-m-m-e-r-i-z-e ain't a word in the dictionary." Who could argue with that logic? I certainly didn't try.

Oklahoma City has an affluent suburb named Nichols Hills. Recently the town fathers passed a law which states that no older pick-up trucks (or other unattractive ancient vehicles) will be allowed out in the open in their community after 6 PM. Shortly after this law was enacted, I found it necessary to visit Oklahoma City in a dilapidated eighteen-year-old van, a vehicle guaranteed to cause a catatonic seizure among the Forest Hills suburbanites. I was detained longer than expected in Oklahoma City, so it was past the 6 PM "carfew" when I made my return trip through Forest Hills. Holding my breath nervously, I did my best to assume a low profile - not an easy task in a rattly old van. In the middle of town I passed a sign informing me that I was passing Bumpass Park. The incongruity of finding this earthy name in such a ritzy suburb caused me to double up with laughter for most of the rest of my trip home. I guess even if they had stopped me for violating their law (and "bumped" my rear into jail overnight), I'd still have felt that it was worth it, considering the laughs that sign gave me.

Of course, one doesn't need to head for the open road to locate signs that amuse; it's possible to run into such things in your neighborhood grocery. One local supermarket often attracts my patronage just because of the capricious spelling of its meat and fresh vegetable sign makers. Do you suppose this might be a deli-

berate ploy to draw in customers? Here are some gleanings, collected over the space of several years, of assorted mislabelings from this market and a few other stores in these parts:

Naval Oranges	Enchilottas	Lasonya
Rapsberries	WanTon Rappers	Polish Saucege
Hot Peepers	Fresh Tornup Greens	Dustilled Water
Black-Eye Pees	Pissa Pie	Brussels Spouts
Bib Lettuce	Rootabaggas	Bermuter Onions
Golden Carats	English Muffings	Fresh Barbercue
Bolonga	Tartillas	Black l Peas
Gooda Cheese	Fresh Coal Slaw	Bermudder Onions
Mantaray Jack Cheese	Briskcut of Beef	Fresh Roasted Peanots
	Necktarines	

I'm especially glad I was in one store on the day the meat department had chitlings for sale, as the hand-printed sign announcing them had what should have been the initial C curved around underneath, for all the world like an S. Was it really intended as such by the store, or merely an emendation by a graffito artist? I certainly wasn't about to ask the management, and run the risk of not being able to add that sign to my collection! I wonder whether the sign may have scared off any customers from taking advantage of the special that day.

Of all the signs I've seen while traveling through this part of the country, the one that intrigued me the most was posted in the window of a roadside eatery on State Highway 33 in rural eastern Oklahoma. It read "Open 7 AM to 8 PM Breakfast Served Anytime". It was in the early afternoon, and I felt I could use a bite to eat; anyway, the paradox of the sign was simply too much to pass by, so I swung the car around and stopped in for a snack. As I was gnawing away at the food (the meat was a bit tough), the question of how to resolve the paradox kept gnawing back. As I paid the bill I decided to seek the answer from the ultimate source: the proprietress herself. She was a forceful and hefty individual, not at all inclined to waste words; obviously, she would resolve my dilemma with clear unsullied grass-roots Oklahoman logic. So I asked "I notice your sign out in front says 'Breakfast Served Anytime'. If I came by and knocked on your door at, say, three o'clock in the morning, could I get something then?" Apparently this was a question that had never arisen before, for she gave me a strange look and paused; clearly, the software in her brain was busily computing the answer for me. I waited eagerly for the result, and in about two thousand milliseconds (I seemed to have counted them all!) I had it, in just two decisively succinct words: "Yeah - clobbered!".