

A CASE FOR SELF-PRESERVATION, BOB'S PLACE

Seasons come and go. We are born and age. All is change. Everything is in process. Just for that we seek continuity, something at least more enduring than ourselves. Although buildings are built and come down too, they seem

a half acre at Colorado Boulevard and East Alameda Avenue in Glendale, Colorado, just across the street from the Denver city boundary. John Gilmour, known as Bob, made it his, his home and business for the fifty-four

years from 1929 to 1983, and thereby ours.

Bob's boyhood paralleled the frantic change in the city outside his home. Denver was a boom town when Bob was born March 13, 1903, in the unincorporated eastside area known as Cowntown for the many dairies supplying Denver's burgeoning population. It was 134,000 in 1900, more than slightly doubled by 1920, and by then was well on its way to becoming the commercial center for an agricultural and tourist hinterland. Bob's father owned the Cottage Home Dairy in Cowntown. Life was good. Bob spent a short time in the Navy and then worked on the Burlington Northern Railroad. But, in 1928 in Nebraska, he lost his right arm when he fell from a moving train. Only three years before, drought stalled the Denver area's economy.

Bob's adulthood continued paralleling the Denver area's development. His father had sold the dairy in 1928 and welcomed Bob back to one acre on which to start a business, a gas station, convenient to his disability. Bob



Glendale, Colorado. The barren horizon and unpaved road in the foreground of this early view confirms Bob's Place as a pioneer structure in Cowntown. Photo: courtesy of Gilmour family.

more permanent than we. Landmark buildings are rooted in this profound need. By the grand ones we prove society's development, and by the lesser ones we measure our own mortality. Recall the civic debates about the neighborhood school, for example, whose preservation hung on endless testimonies of those who remembered their grade school years or the inner city department store which for some rekindled their excited first visit as a tiny child. Now they lament its impending destruction as if their own threatened demise. We invest ourselves in buildings. They are hallowed. Sentimental, but no less true.

A rare combination of public timepiece and private statement is Bob's Place, a house and gas station on



Glendale, Colorado. Bob's trademark signs bedeck the station roof in this view probably taken just after their registration in 1946. Also, note the dormer of the Gilmour home just behind the station. Photo: courtesy of Gilmour family.



Glendale, Colorado. Bob, a Shriner, poses with his mule Folks. Bob's gimmickry included snapshots for customers of their children riding Folks. Photo: courtesy of Gilmour family.

agreed and a simple brick station of cube and canopy form with a low-pitched, pyramidal roof was built in 1929. Amidst the Denver area economy hit earlier by regional problems and suffering in a national depression in the 1930s, Bob nevertheless earned a decent living by servicing the automobile. The promise was good. Denver vehicle registration had increased twofold in the 1920s so that, on the eve of the Depression, Denverites registered more than 60,000 vehicles. Business was sufficient for Bob to add a grease rack to the filling station in the 1930s. The Gilmours thrived. Bob and his wife raised a family of five in the house next door. Bob had found his place.

Slow-paced subsistence, however, ended when Denver's economy began a long, meteoric rise in the 1940s. World War II triggered it with resumed demand for local products and the influx of military personnel to bases just in and just outside the city. Leaders spurred an even more incredible post-war boom which contrasted sharply with the slow development of the twenties and thirties and dramatized Denver's reputation for economic extremes. The post-war boom was marked, for example, by population increase, including annexation of many communities, and the sudden appearance downtown of towering skyscrapers. The historian Lyle Dorsett aptly characterized Denver in the period as Vertical City.

Bob Gilmour contributed to the businessman's ethos which energized Vertical City. Perhaps influenced by the Denver area's long tradition in advertising the Rocky Mountain vacationland to tourists, Bob mobilized his own imagery for his small business. In

December 1946, he first registered a Colorado trademark renewed throughout his life: "Howdy Folks, Bob's Place, A Bob Cat For Service." Superficially, it first reflected Bob's faith in the limitless benefits of the post-war boom and their achievement by advertising hustle. Ambivalence lay beneath the advertising, however. The symbols Bob chose to affirm the future were animals after all, not the source of energy for the high-tech tomorrow. A wildcat symbolized speed in the trademark. Bob added, but did not register, a mule he named Folks to personify his greeting from the Old West, Howdy Folks.

"HOWDY FOLKS"

REG. TRADE MARK



TRADE MARK

BOB'S PLACE

A BOB CAT FOR SERVICE

300 SO. COLO. BLVD.

Denver, Colorado

Bob's trademark was rendered in this design to rubber-stamp business documents. The claim to location in Denver dates the stamp before the incorporation of Glendale in 1952. Photo: courtesy of Gilmour family.

The conservative side of Bob's advertising emerged more clearly as the post-war boom accelerated. Bob began advertising for the future by emphasizing the past with additional slogans. One, "Welcome to Cowtown Where The West Remains," was hung on a sign over the station door. Two other signs carried another message most succinctly declared in the sign on the house fence: "Say Howdy! And Be a Drug Store Cowboy." By it, Bob attacked the hypocrisy of those who pretended an identity by aping its outward manners, like cowboy lingo mouthed by dandies, according to a daughter.

Perhaps Bob was encouraged by his neighborhood. Realizing the cost of utilities was higher within Denver than was possible from its own municipality, the citizens of Cowtown incorporated as Glendale in 1952 and thereby averted Denver's post-war annexation of many nearby communities fostered by the growth advocates. Glendale stood apart, just as Bob's Place. Today, Glendale is an approximately 640-acre enclave in Denver and promotes the nickname Cowtown for its historical associations.

By the mid-1970s, the controversy of growth versus stability dominated life in metropolitan Denver. On the political level the voices for planned development first successfully challenged the champions of the post-war boom. On the popular level Bob's Place became a symbol of security in a time of great change. A 1976 feature in the *Sunday Denver Post* was entitled "Bob's Place a Snug Gas Oasis in Sea of Neon and Cars." Old-fashioned virtues in Bob's Place seemed confirmed in a quote from a customer who regularly drove two miles just to trade at a station like those of his childhood and in Bob's ethics by his refusal to retire despite the incredible real estate value of his place. (It was estimated at one million dollars.) An unusual article was substituted for a simple obituary in the *Denver Post* when Bob died on April 13, 1983; it acknowledged Bob's Place was security for the thousands who daily passed it by. Congresswoman Pat Schroeder also concurred privately to the grieving family, according to a daughter.

Thus, Bob's Place has become more than Bob's. It is a reference for continuity, a kind of landmark. But, now it is empty, awaiting sale, possibly threatened by unsympathetic use or demolition. It deserves preservation instead—for us all.

—K.A.S.