

Highway Commercial Architecture: Albia, Iowa's "Dutch Mill"

By
H. Roger Grant

The coming of the automobile age drastically altered the national landscape. Better bridges appeared. New roadways, whether concrete, macadam, or brick, replaced older ones of dirt and gravel. And a new architecture emerged along these traffic arteries to serve the motorist's needs.

Until recently scant thought was paid to roadside Americana. The growing fascination with popular culture and an expanded awareness of the importance of "common-man" history, however, have triggered even scholarly interest in gas stations, car washes, eateries, signs, drive-in theaters, motels, and the like. One type of structure drawing attention is so-called "dingbat" architecture, which became popular between the two world wars when imaginative entrepreneurs sought to catch the motorist's eye as he traveled 45 or 50 m.p.h. along the nation's network of two-lane highways. This style is best described as having the shape of the product or service rendered. Examples abound—a gas station at Matador, Texas in the form of an oil derrick; a coffee-pot diner in Fort Dodge, Iowa; or a citrus

stand housed in a gigantic orange in Melbourne, Florida.

Roadside architecture, "dingbat" or not, has changed dramatically. Just as the strikingly individualistic designs of small-town railroad stations during the formative period of train travel gave way to standardized plans after the Civil War, a similar evolution occurred with highway commercial buildings. In recent decades the carbon-copy gas station with its clip-on mansard roof, for instance, replaced Chinese pagodas, neo-classical mansions, lighthouses, and windmills as a common style. Furthermore, construction of the limited-access highway with its ubiquitous service plaza, rapidly accelerated by the National Highway Act of 1956, rerouted much of the country's inter-city traffic. Because a steady flow of customers is required for economic survival, commercial structures on the sparsely travelled two-lane roads quickly fell on hard times. Many have been torn down; some have been converted to other uses; still more have been abandoned. This trend, in fact, prompted the board of the National Register of Historic Places in



An early view of the Dutch Mill, circa 1930, showing the building with all of its detail intact (courtesy of Mrs. Thomas H. Dearing).

May 1976 to add to its protection list a seashell-shaped former Shell Oil Company filling station in Winston-Salem, North Carolina—the first individual entry for a gas station on this prestigious listing of nationally-significant buildings. “When we consider the pace of modern events and the dizzying speed with which old customs and institutions give way to the new,” observed the *Winston-Salem Sentinel*, “it becomes clear that without preservation of some relatively modern

and even mundane objects, whole chapters of American social history might quickly be lost to all but memory.”

While Iowa lacked a seashell-shaped gas station, the “Dutch Mill” in Albia, the Monroe County seat, is a marvelous example of the now disappearing, highly individualistic style of early highway commercial architecture.

In 1926 Harry Gholson, a Knoxville businessman, conceived the idea of building a chain of filling stations constructed

in the form of Dutch windmills. This architectural plan may sound strange, even bizarre, in the 1970s, but then no prototype gas station existed. In the twenties, service stations were frequently just a gasoline pump in front of a blacksmith shop or auto-repair or auto-sales garage. Only with consolidation of numerous independent oil companies into larger ones during the 1930s and later did the standardized box model evolve.

The origin of Gholson's marketing concept is unknown. Perhaps his close proximity to Pella, Iowa's premier Dutch-American community, led to his design. The windmill motif for a commercial building, however, was used elsewhere. Brewery magnate August A. Busch, Sr., for example, had a Flemish-style windmill constructed in St. Louis in 1916 to house his "Bevo Mill" restaurant. By 1930, Gholson's blue and white Dutch Mill Service Company buildings dotted southern Iowa. Knoxville, Chariton, Leon, Corydon, and Albia could all claim such structures.

A local contractor, Tom Jones, constructed Albia's Dutch Mill in 1926-1927, and it opened in July 1927. Located in the eastern part of town on a narrow corridor of land between the Wabash and Minneapolis & St. Louis railroad tracks, the building, complete with a small restaurant, faced the "Harding Highway"—U.S. Route 34. Later, 12 tourist cottages were built behind the mill. This layout of a central structure containing eating and fuel facilities with adjoining sleeping quarters became relatively common by the thirties. When this format was used, frequently the developer designed the principal building to be a colorful focal point—it might be a windmill, blimp, teepee, or castle.

Harry Gholson clearly intended to have his investment catch the motorist's attention and provide first-class services at a time when similar facilities were relatively rare, at least in southern Iowa. As he said, "It is beautiful and distinguished and travelers will long remember it...." Gholson's advertising motto became: "Your roadside castle—eat, sleep, bathe, and refresh." Even the town boosted the Dutch Mill. The *Monroe County News* on the eve of the mill's opening reported: "It will be an added incentive for tourists to choose the Harding Highway"—thus, of course, bringing dollars to the Albia economy.

Promoter Gholson's design had additional advantages. Although flashy, it was highly practical. By having living quarters in the floors above the office-lunch counter-restrooms, an attendant would be "on call" 24 hours a day. An occupied building, moreover, meant lower fire-insurance premiums, always an expensive item in the over-all operating costs of gas stations. And by providing housing, the company could offer a special financial incentive to attract and to keep a dependable employee. Personnel must have also appreciated the pavilion that partially covered the pump area; the discomforts of outside work in rain and snow were lessened.

After a gala grand opening on Saturday, July 16, 1927, when patrons received "FREE...a souvenir flashlight suitable for car and pocket use with each five gallons purchased or more," the Dutch Mill continued to serve the public with petroleum products and eating facilities until 1954. In the interim Gholson sold the property, the tourist cabins were closed, and the brands of gasoline changed—Quikstartin, Pure, and Texaco.

Yet, the structure survived. Like scores of former stations, Albia's Dutch Mill was converted to another use. In this case it became a private dwelling; understandable since two of the three floors had been initially designed for that purpose. The windmill arms have long since disappeared, as have the pavilion and pumps; there is little to reveal the building's original function to the uniformed observer. As with so many abandoned filling station-tourist cabin complexes, the highway itself has been relocated. Today travelers crossing the Hawkeye State on U.S. 34 miss the Dutch Mill by several miles. They lack an opportunity to view the tangible remains of an earlier and largely forgotten era of inter-city highway travel. □

Note on Sources

Useful material on highway commercial architecture is found in Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (London: The Penguin Press, 1971); John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz, "Ugly is Beautiful: The Main Street School of Architecture, An Interview with Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown," *The Atlantic*, May 1973, Vol. 231, No. 5, 33-43; and Peter H. Smith, "Commercial Archeology: The View from Route 1," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Boston, Mass., October 11, 1975.

Albia newspapers covered various details of the Dutch Mill; see especially the *Monroe County News* (Albia), July 14, 1927. Also, my special thanks for both factual data and photographic assistance to my mother, Mrs. Thomas H. Dearing of Albia, and to Mildred Doyle of Albia.



The Mill as it appears today, considerably altered from its original form. Aluminum siding has been installed over the original stucco on the second and third floors and the arms and railings have been removed (courtesy of the author).