

Shoot the Brute Some Burma-Shave

By Dennis Payton Knight

In the middle decades of the last century, billboards advertising tobacco, cars, bars, and other things obscured the landscapes of America. Fortunately, they gave way to Lady Bird Johnson's Beautify America campaign of the 1960's, but I do miss those unobtrusive little Burma-Shave signs that graced our highways for thirty-seven years, from 1926 to 1963.

They appeared sequentially on a series of posts, six, usually, white letters on red, just large enough for readability, spaced to create a pause between phrases for poetic effect. They were changed from time to time to keep us interested, and they always conveyed a humorous idea; for instance:

Does your husband | Misbehave | Grunt and grumble | Rant and rave | Shoot the brute some |
Burma-Shave

Most messages were, like that one, an overt pitch to peddle brushless shaving cream. But frequently you would be gently needled instead to mind your responsibilities as a driver, as in:

Her chariot | Raced 80 per | They hauled away | What had | Ben Her | Burma-Shave

Burma-Shave was introduced in Minnesota in 1925 by the Burma-Vita company, whose original product was a miracle liniment with mysterious ingredients they described as having come from the Malay Peninsula and Burma. It didn't sell well, so they added a brushless shaving cream to their offerings, keeping the exotic Burma connection.

Burma-Shave signs appeared first in 1926 near Lakeville, Minnesota, and soon sprouted all over the country; except Massachusetts, where there was too much foliage, and the desert states of New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada, which they thought lacked the necessary traffic. When Phillip Morris acquired the company in 1963, the happy little signs disappeared and the brand fell into obscurity, although you can still get it on line.

Burma-Shave type signs have been used as an effective way to set a scene in movies like *Bonnie and Clyde*, and television's *M*A*S*H*. Roger Miller wrote a song about them. An expression, "burmashaving," used in Canada, describes politicians holding signs and waving to traffic during election campaigns.

A complete listing of about 600 Burma-Shave ditties is provided in a book by Frank Rowsome titled *The Verse by the Side of the Road*. He provides it on the internet, too, where I've mined it to find these:

We've made Grandpa | Look so youthful | His pension board | Thinks | He's untruthful |
Burma-Shave

Heaven's | Latest | Neophyte | Signaled left | Then turned right | Burma-Shave

Bristles scratched | His cookie's map | That's what | Made poor | Ginger snap | Burma-Shave

If hugging | On highways | Is your sport | Trade in your car | For a davenport | Burma-Shave

The midnight ride | Of Paul | For beer | Led to a | Warmer hemisphere | Burma-Shave

And my favorite:

Don't lose | Your head | To gain a minute | You need your head | Your brains are in it | Burma-Shave