BRIGHT LIGHTS BIG CITY



Larry Polzin is the owner of Stargazer Creations in Arvada, Colo., and has been a gold leaf/lettering artist for more than 33 years.

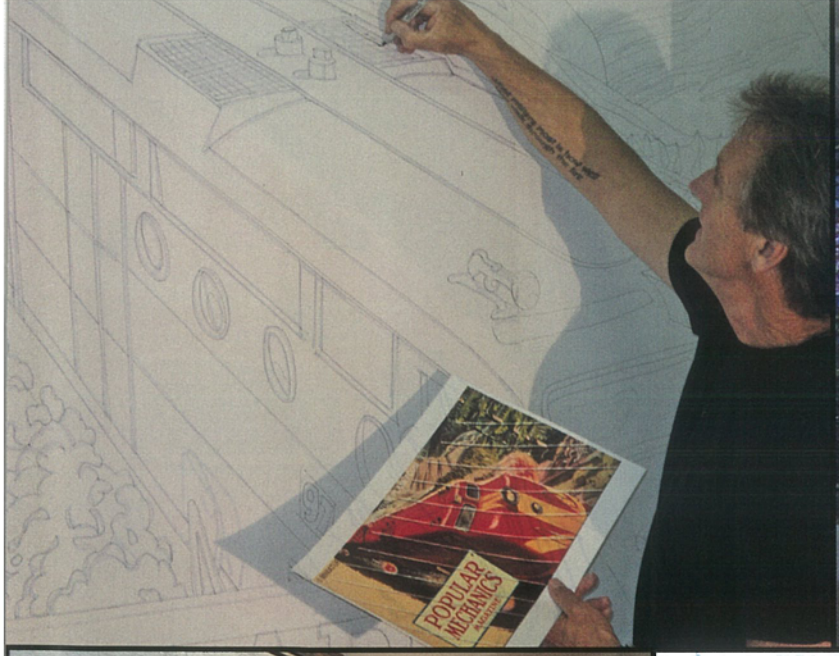
BY LARRY POLZIN

IT IS ALWAYS A PRIVILEGE to work with good people.

I got a phone call from my old running buddy, Harry Spetnagel, a while back and he wanted to know if I was interested in painting a wall mural. Harry is one of the lead designers at Gensler and Associates, and he and his crew were designing a new retail store for the Wenger Company—the Swiss Army Knife folks.

I told him of course I was interested, and pretty soon I was sitting in Harry's office picking out PMS colors for a vintage wall advertisement. My assignment was to paint the image on an exposed interior brick wall, and then distress it to match the eclectic feel of the space. With my daughter Sarah's help, the project took about three weeks start to finish and the painted wall became the focal point when













you walked through the front door. The Wenger store opened to rave reviews and went on to win a "Retail Store of the Year" award. Gensler and Associates received major press and adoration from the architectural design world, and the Boulder, Colo., store made the cover of a major SEGD publication. And even though I played a small part in the project, my name was attached and I was included in this talented design collaboration.

Fast forward six months, and I received an email from Kim Nathanson, an interior designer with the Niemitz Design Group. Kim had read the Wenger article and was wondering if I would be interested in being involved in her project in New York. She and her client were designing a hip new restaurant for a "mystery celebrity chef" and there was an assortment of interior wall signs they wanted painted and then distressed. Kim thought her project was right up my alley, and I told her I'd love to be a part of it.





A couple of months passed and my wife Donna and I were planning a trip to New York to visit our daughter, so I sent Kim an email telling her I'd be in the neighborhood. It was perfect timing—we made plans to meet, and before long I was walking through the Times Square jobsite with Kim and being introduced to Jon Bloostein.

Jon was the driving force behind the project and an amazing success story himself. He owns and operates the Heartland Brewery restaurants in NYC, as well as a couple of beer halls and a working brewery in Brooklyn that keeps his places stocked with his craft brews. His new project was being built in the space previously occupied by the New York Times, and the new three story space would have a huge bar and dining hall as well as its own onsite brewery. The site was an empty shell when we looked at it, but Jon and Kim knew how to get











things done, and things got moving fast! That whole "New York minute" saying—yeah, it's for real.

The plan was to have several vintage wall ads painted on the interior brick walls and then "aged" to add to the overall ambiance of the décor. Jon surrounds himself with a staff of hard-working, talented individuals, and after choosing the images for the walls I was sent the art files. There would be five paintings in all, with add-ons as time allowed, and the deadline for opening was rapidly approaching—I had a little over a month to get everything done. Kim and I chatted daily about the details of the job and meanwhile I booked a flight for NYC and started scrambling to get everything together.

The first thing I did once I received the artwork was determine what colors of paint I would need. After calling several paint stores in NYC, it seemed unrealis-



tic to try and purchase the paint once I got there. I contacted my local supplier, Midwest Sign Supply, gave them my list of paint and had them ship everything directly to the jobsite. This step saved me a lot of time, money and mental anguish, and everything would be boxed up and ready to go once I got there.

The next step was to make paper pounce patterns for each of the murals. I received files for four of the five images—

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colored artwork and a line art/wire frame version that had been posterized in Adobe Illustrator. The fifth mural was the cover of an old *Popular Mechanics* magazine featuring a train racing through a very detailed countryside. There was so much detail that their designer tossed it back at me and wished me good luck. I told Kim our only option was to do it "old school" and headed to my light table.

I laid a clear acetate transparency over the magazine cover and with my trusty technical pen I created my own line art. Every detail needed to be outlined and broken down into graphic shapes, simplifying the complicated artwork.

A couple of hours later I was heading over to Gator Graphics with my transparency and art files. Gator is owned by my friends Jimbo and Dani, and is my go-to source for large-format graphics and printing. While Danielle was pen plotting my posterized paper patterns I was busy projecting the train art and tracing all the details. A couple of hours and cold beers later I was heading home with my five paper patterns, looking for a victim or volunteer to perforate them for me. Donna came to my rescue and eight hours later they were boxed up and ready.

It was finally go time and I headed to Denver International Airport with a tiny suitcase and a very large trunk full of brushes and painting supplies. I tend to pack the kitchen sink on jobs like this. I'd only been to NYC a couple of times but I knew finding anything I didn't have would be a challenge. My ace in the hole was my daughter Jessica, who lived in Brooklyn and knew her way around and would be working with me on the project.

I checked into my hotel and walked the two blocks to the jobsite, right into the heart of Times Square. Even though it was 8 p.m., the place was a bee hive of activity. Jon and his guys were still onsite and as we walked the site I noticed the newly bricked walls had not been mortared yet. The crew got right on it the next day as Jessie and I strolled around town, and it was a real treat since I worked the next 32 days straight without a break.

Before I left Denver I had been told several horror stories about potential "tension" between union and non-union workers. I was a bit concerned and finally called Jon who assured me there would be no problems. And he was right—the union guys turned out to be some of the best folks I've ever worked with. They pretty much adopted us, helping us at every turn and making sure we had everything we needed.

The first stage of the project went relatively smooth. Since the brick was new and a dark reddish brown color, we used white pounce powder on our pat-



terns and then painted the image areas with a fast-drying acrylic primer. Then we'd re-pounce the patterns with black charcoal powder and begin adding color. Even though the final distressing step would eliminate a lot of details we kept everything tight.

The site was hot and dusty with major construction happening just a few feet away from our paint work, and every morning we'd have to blow the dirt out of our paint cans. But we were making good progress and soon the first four paintings were done. The next step was distressing—both in word and deed. The product I used for the aging step was a solvent-based matte clear that was an industry standard for years but is no longer available. The paint manufacturer actually re-formulated four gallons of it for me, and I shipped the last one in existence to NYC specifically for this project.

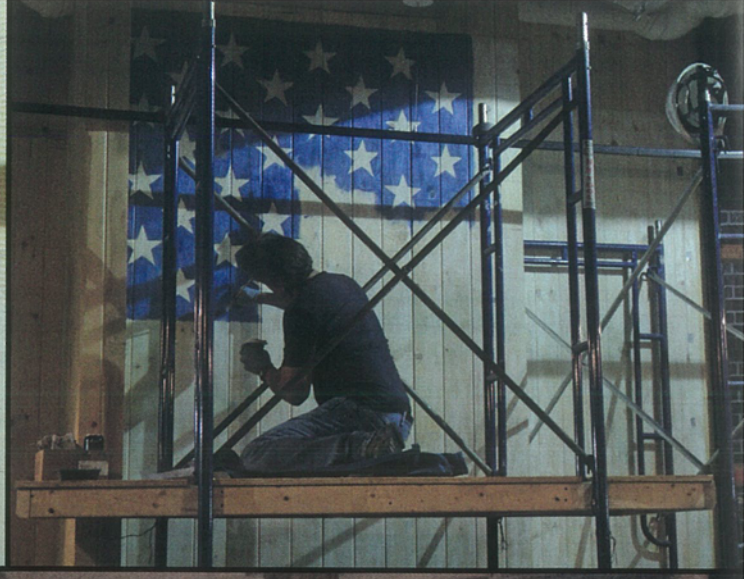
Problem was—we couldn't find it. After several fruitless pursuits, our GC finally located it at another construction project just two doors down. No harm, no foul, and soon I was elbow deep in the stuff. The technique I used was to mix a washed out white and a dirty brown "glaze," and then it was rag on/rag off until the entire surface was coated. The lighter glaze would be stomped over the dark areas and the darker over the light to give an aged look, and when the product dried it went almost dead flat. Time consuming but very effective, and the old time advertisements faded into the background, just like we had hoped.

Whenever you're onsite someplace, the one thing you can always depend on is change, and the next phase took on a life of its own. The task at hand was to paint and distress a very large American flag on a newly clad rough cedar wall. Sounded simple back in Denver, but when I got onsite everything changed. First, the area I was to paint was about 20' up in the air over an open stairwell—the main thoroughfare for every worker in the building to get between floors.

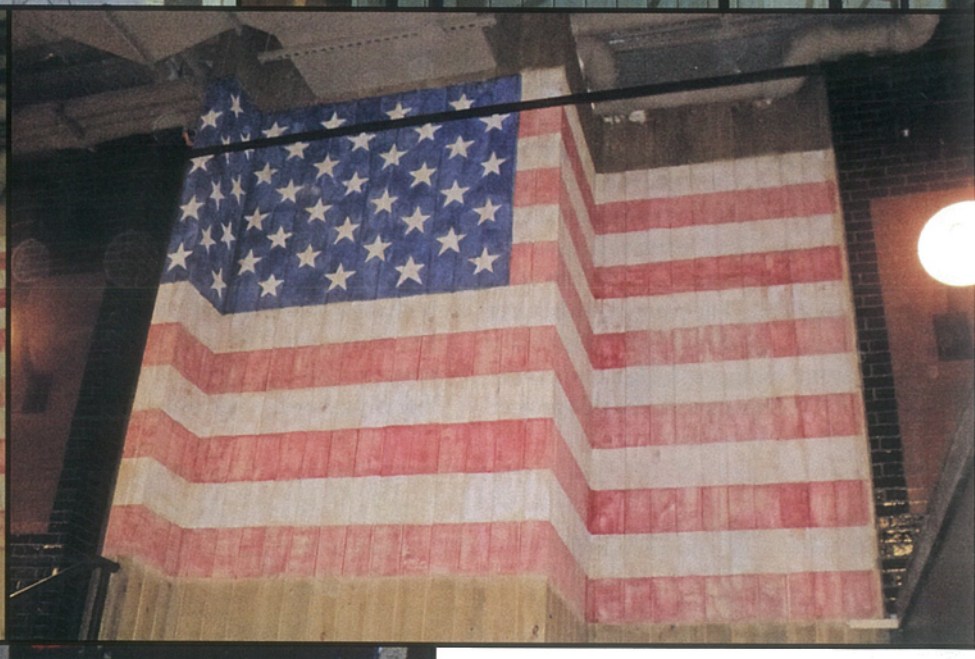
Next, the wall was not flat but articulated and stair stepped back three feet, which would require a custom scaffold to be built to access the area. The wood the wall was clad in was rough cedar, great for distressing but brand, spanking new and had not been stained or sealed. Finally, the overall size of the flag had almost doubled, so the pattern I brought was too small and would need to be redone. So, as my new pal Carmine singlehandedly constructed a scaffold of monumental proportions, I was on my hands and knees redrawing my pattern and hand perforating 50 stars with my trusty pounce wheel. The scaffold was

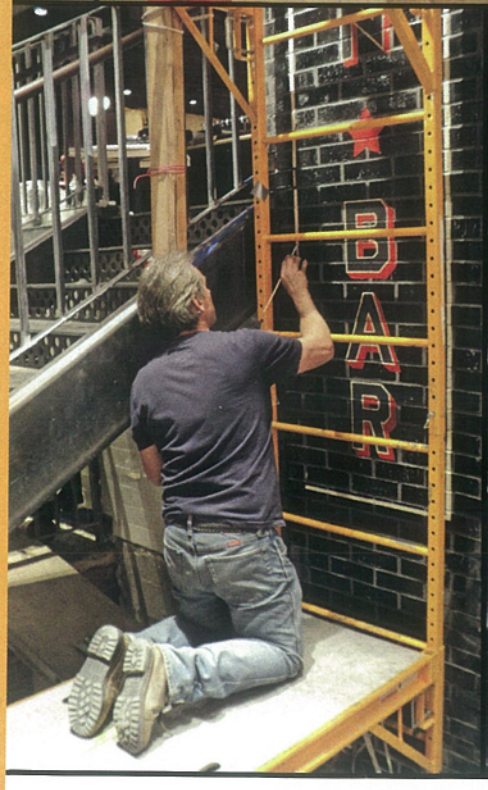


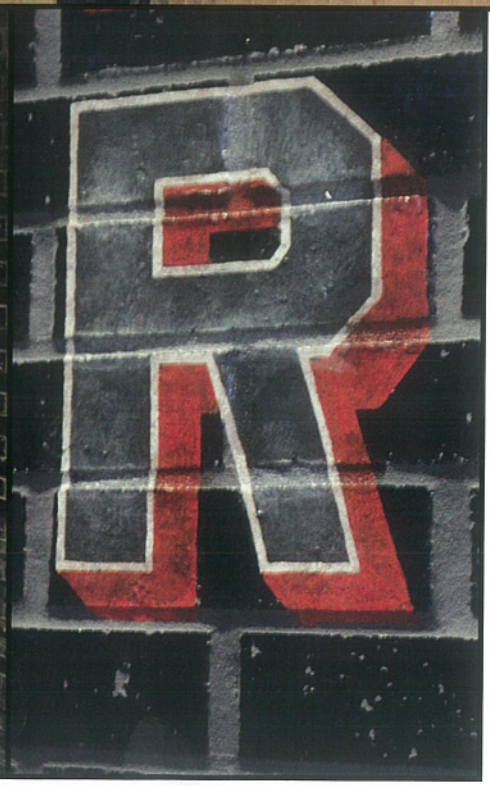












rock solid, Carmine helped me pounce my new pattern and the painting began. I applied the red and blue paint directly over the rough wood and it soaked in nicely giving it a convincing "aged" look.

Then I used water based primer for my white and dry brushed the stars and stripes. Everything looked pretty good, except the "old" flag on "new" wood wasn't going to fly. Jon solved the dilemma by directing me to stain the entire wall to accentuate the painting. This was one tough solution, as the scaffolding had already been removed and the only way to access the wall now was with a 40' extension ladder set up in the basement and reaching up to the 2nd floor ceiling. I climbed aboard and began the painstakingly slow process of staining every square foot of the wall, and 12 hours later I was still on that darn ladder when the "mystery chef" walked in.

The restaurant was being built by Jon for Mr. Guy Fiere, the celebrity chef with the "Diners, Drive Ins and Dives" series on cable TV. Guy and Co. were doing their initial walk through and he was kind enough to yell his "looks good" up to me as he passed by. Oddly enough, he gave daughter Jessica a big hug as he held her hand and told her in detail what an excellent job she was doing—go figure…

We were running out of time when Jon asked me to do some more lettering. The brick walls needed some embellishment and he wanted me to paint some catch phrases associated with Guy and his hit show. Unfortunately, the bulk of it was more than I could accomplish before I left, and so while I was busy making another handmade pounce pattern for "kitchen & bar," Jon had an associate installing vinyl copy directly onto the brick. I had mixed emotions as I watched the vinyl crew struggling with their torches and stiff bristle brushes, having been a wall dog for the last 30 years. I hated losing the work and really thought a paint brush would do a better job. But I did get a little personal satisfaction—I was finishing the outline on the painted letters when one of the vinyl guys asked me how I got my letters to lay down so nicely? I told him it was paint and I had hand lettered it onto the brick, and he did not believe me. He didn't know there were still guys like me who could still do that—score one for the dinosaur.

The jobsite now had a name—"Guy's American Kitchen and Bar," and it had been transformed into a showpiece in just a matter of weeks. Kim, Jon and the crew were unstoppable—there was never a question of would they make it. When a problem came up, a solution was found and everyone moved forward. The pressure was high but I never saw any meltdowns. These were hard working folks, taking care of business and getting things done, and I was proud to be one of them.

I finally said goodbye to New York and my new friends. Jon and Kim were already busy on another project—they had actually been building a second venue while Guy's was coming together.



There was promise of more work to come, and I invited Carmine, Emilio and several of my new union buddies to come visit colorful Colorado. Jessica and I said goodbye, and I left a trunk full of 1 Shot in her tiny Brooklyn apartment, just in case. Jess went to the grand opening party and told me it was off the charts. She told me Mr. Fiere was quite the charmer—go figure. **SDG**



Jessica and Guy Fiere at the grand opening.