

Onion Grove Mercantile

All signs point to beauty



Leslie Klipsch

Jen Walters VanOort is the creative force behind Onion Grove Mercantile, a vintage sign-painting business that has customers worldwide.

BY LESLIE KLIPSCH

As she was looking through decades-old editions of the small-town Iowa newspaper in preparation for her town's sesquicentennial, artist and history buff Jen Walters VanOort was struck by the style and beauty of the advertisements that she found within the aged pages.

Inspired by the font style, shape, size and composition of the vintage ads printed in *The Clarence Sun*, she went to work decorating the walls of a local restaurant she had been commissioned to paint. The results were met by instant delight, and her vintage fresh sign-painting business, Onion Grove Mercantile, took off. She now sells her everyday, commissioned and commercial hand-painted signs to admirers from the Quad-Cities to Australia, Texas to England, and everywhere in-between.

Much of Ms. Walters VanOort's work is done through custom order, but a few of her signature pieces are for the masses to enjoy. For instance, when her home was featured on a local home tour, she felt she needed something big and graphic in her living room.

"I like food and I like to garden, so I painted the shape of Iowa with a heart marking where we live, writing 'Locally Grown' in an interesting

font,” she said of the origin of one of her most popular designs. “People saw it and started asking for it to hang in their nurseries. By now I’ve done the ‘Locally Grown’ sign for children’s rooms in over a dozen states.”

Not only are Ms. Walters VanOort’s signs beautiful visually, but her work comes at virtually no cost to the environment, something that more and more people are thinking about these days. Almost all of the materials needed to create the signs — from the barn wood to the paint to the cardboard used for shipping — are culled from recycled material.

Another of Onion Grove Mercantile’s popular signs was designed specifically for military families.

“A friend first commissioned a sign for her military family as they were preparing to move to Germany. The husband served in Iraq and Afghanistan and the family has been stationed all over,” explained the benevolent artist. “I really wanted to design something that represented their service to our country and that could be easily added to when the next relocation came.”

Since featuring the design on her website, other families have commissioned their own versions. Ms. Walters VanOort is happy to accommodate and then donates her fee to The Fisher House, an organization that provides soldiers with a “home away from home” while being hospitalized. Such talent and character is certainly a clear outward sign pointing to the heart that goes into her work.

Ms. Walters VanOort’s favorite

“I love the work I’ve done for Miss Effie’s Flower Farm in Donahue, Iowa,” she says. The proprietor of the farm (who was featured in the July issue of *The Gold Book*) has allowed Ms. Walters VanOort creative freedom in her custom small business signage and the artist loves the liberty



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of being able to design the shapes, wording and colors. A close second, she says, is a sign that hangs outside of a small business called Le Ti Da in Tipton, Iowa.

My favorite

Always one for whimsy, I love the sign that Ms. Walters VanOort originally designed for her own home. The half-moon-shaped sign complements the playfulness of the words: “Always be yourself, unless you can be a unicorn, then always be a unicorn.” Painted in poppy pinks, bright blues and cheerful greens, the artist has re-created this spirited sign for several people after she posted it online and received immediate interest.

Why you should check out Onion Grove Mercantile

Ms. Walters VanOort’s work is special not only for its artistry but also for the meaning each piece can hold. A sign is a graphic cue that directs the viewer to a sense of place and perhaps even belonging. Whether it’s nailed to the front of your home, hanging in your child’s room or secured in your garden or on your deck, a customized sign can be a sweet visual reminder of where you are and what you know to be true.

Where you should go

Onion Grove Mercantile is based in Clarence, Iowa, which is approximately 45 miles northwest of the Quad-Cities. However, you will find photographs of



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Ms. Walters VanOort’s work, as well as comprehensive ordering information, at oniongrovemercantile.com and on Facebook. Onion Grove Mercantile also offers online retail on Etsy.com. Custom orders for the holidays must be placed by Nov. 30.

Each month in The Gold Standard, Leslie Klipsch, a freelance writer and editor based in Davenport, shines a spotlight on the gems of the Quad-Cities area — for Gold Book readers. She enjoys reading, cooking, spending time with her husband and three young children and exploring all that the Quad-Cities has to offer.

