

An Interview

with

**Jim Draeger &
Mark Speltz**



Fill'er Up

The Glory Days of
Wisconsin Gas Stations



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What were some of the most surprising or interesting things you learned from researching and writing *Fill 'er Up*?

Mark Speltz: Initially I was surprised by how much the construction of many of these stations meant in their communities. Many stations were a source of pride when they opened, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. They often represented progress and modernity. I also learned a good trick for researching local history in an unfamiliar town. In order to get started and find out “who used to own what” and “what used to be where,” it helps to contact the oldest barber in town.

Jim Draeger: One revelation was that professional architects designed most gas stations. Architects have been responsible for designing only 4 percent of all American buildings, but surprisingly the majority of humble cottage-type or concrete block gas stations were architect-designed, pointing out the technically exacting requirements of gas station safety, planning, and engineering.

Another interesting phenomenon was the degree to which attitudes about class and gender influenced gas station designs. Today, people have no memory that gas station ladies’ rooms were once adorned with Persian rugs, oil paintings, and wicker furniture.



WHS Press Why did you decide to write a book on historic gas stations?

JD: I have always been interested in ordinary architecture. I am curious about where ideas about how to build, and what architecture should look like come from. I am most fascinated by the relationship between a building and the culture that created it. Every building is of a time and created in a place; I

have been fascinated by how those ideas play out in the everyday buildings that surround us.

I have been interested in gas stations for over 25 years, so this book has a very long genesis. It has taken me decades to tease out the many historical threads that influenced gas station design and weave a narrative that told a story of gas retailing in a compelling and interesting way.





WHS Press *Are there ways in which **Fill 'er Up** is a uniquely Wisconsin story?*

JD: Until recently, architecture was inseparable from place. Wisconsin's culture, geography, politics, and history are inextricably woven into the decisions that caused a given station to be built. Wisconsin's history of innovation and invention is reflected

in the story of gas stations, from progressivism to prefabrication. In other ways, the story of stations reflects the growing homogenization of America. Increasingly, national trends have shaped our build landscape. I think of the book as charting a continuum from individual innovation and invention, through the emergence of regional chains and brand, to a national and even global market place.



WHS Press *Were there any stations not featured in the book that you wish you could have included?*

MS: Yes, we were sad to leave out some stations that had been horribly altered. And of course, a few gems popped up here and there as the book neared publication. Just as some of the stations will disappear in coming years, we're certain that people will

let us know of other historic stations in their communities.

JD: Putting together a book that features a limited number of buildings is like having to choose which child you love the most. I regret not being able to include an eye-grabbing Colonial Revival station in West Allis and a romantic brick and stone cottage in North Freedom.





WHS Press How does the gas station reflect changes in automobile travel during this past century?

MS: The story of gas stations reflects changes in automobile travel in many ways—we see it present in the growing popularity of the auto and the incredible growth of stations, even in small towns; we see how an important segment of early automobilists, women, affected station design through powder puff rooms and restroom locations; we see additional changes as driving habits vary, road conditions improve, and

highways route travelers around and between communities.

JD: In broad cultural terms, gas stations emerged in an agrarian world where a person's immediate locality shaped their interactions, became commonplace in an industrial and capitalistic culture where corporate branding, advertising and an emerging regionalism brought regions of the country closer at the expense of local character, and today reflect our post-industrial global culture where people trade convenience at the expense of their sense of belonging.



WHS Press Do you think that people could ever have the kinds of emotional attachments to modern gas stations that they have for many of the historic ones featured in the book?

MS: I imagine some people will become attached to stations built in the last decade, but it seems the lack of personal experiences will be the difference in the long run. Young men got their first jobs at these old stations. Neighborhood kids bought candy and hung out there. The personal service and attention customers received during the glory days of these stations created fond memories. It is difficult to imagine that these connections could be matched today.

JD: Think about your experience as you gas your car today. Do you know the operator

by first name and do they know yours? Do they ask about your life, your family or mention your kids by name? Do they catch you up on the news? Do they go out of their way to provide exemplary service and woo you as a steady customer? The so-called service-industry today is increasingly a self-service industry where meaningful interactions between customer and a familiar employee have been replaced by anonymous transactions. Personal relationships have been supplanted by carefully crafted corporate branding. People are nostalgic about gas stations because of what they have to tell us about human interaction. I don't see any emotional engagement in today's stations. Their profitability is based on the removal of genuine human interaction in exchange for efficiency, convenience, and low cost.





WHS Press In what ways is the book different from the *Fill 'er Up Wisconsin Public Television* program?

MS: The documentary was an exciting project to collaborate on. All of the stations featured in the film are covered in greater detail in the book. The length of the book allowed us to feature a greater number of stations spread throughout the state and provide a thorough

history of the development of the gas station in Wisconsin and beyond.

JD: The television program is a babbling brook, fast-paced and visually exciting, while the book is a river, wide and deep. The book takes the seminal ideas of the television program and gives them more depth and meaning. It has the luxury of including more stories, more stations, and more details.



WHS Press Do you think this book will change readers' minds about the artistic and cultural worth of commercial buildings like gas stations?

MS: *Fill 'er Up* will likely be for most readers an introduction to the many styles and types of stations that once dotted Wisconsin's roadways. Learning how to recognize and identify styles and begin to understand their importance and place in history will help readers develop an appreciation for the handful of rare survivors that still stand.

JD: Without a doubt, this book will change the way that readers look at gas stations. They will see gas stations as symbols of the cultural transformations brought on by our car culture. Readers may not rush up to hug the next gas station they see, but they will no longer see them as ordinary objects. Stations will become chapters in the story of twentieth century progress and may give them pause to consider how building both reflect their values and influence their lives.



WHS Press What do you hope readers take away from *Fill 'er Up*?

MS: After enjoying the book, I hope that readers will torture their fellow passengers by identifying the different styles while traversing the state's roadways. But seriously, I hope readers will rediscover stations that have potential and reuse them in new and positive ways. The preservation of these stations cannot come too soon.

JD: I hope that readers will see that the preservation of historic architecture gives richness, meaning, and depth to our lives. Even a building as ordinary and non-descript as a gas station can tell a story that connects us to the past and allows us to understand that the world where we live our daily lives reflects the values, beliefs, and cultural forces of both past and present. I hope that readers will cherish these rare remaining historic gas stations and preserve them to share the stories of our car culture with those who come after us.

