



NC State Alumni Magazine: "Historic Markers"

Written By: Carole Tanzer Miller

December 4, 2017

~~~~~

As an "eighth-generation Charlottean," Christopher Lawing bristles when people say his hometown "has no history."

Sure, he's seen scores of old buildings disappear over the years as gleaming towers have remade the skyline, but Lawing also grew up hearing family stories about the rise of North Carolina's largest city.

"I had these two perspectives of Charlotte history being torn down and having these personal stories of family and their memories of the history that happened here," says Lawing, a 2015 NC State graduate with a degree in industrial design. "I could see both sides of the coin, and I wanted to prove that we had a history and still do if you just look around."

He offers that proof in his first book, "Charlotte: The Signs of the Times." Subtitled "A History Told Through the Queen City's Classic Roadside Signage," the 160-page coffee table book is an outgrowth of a project Lawing began as a high school junior.

It features more than 100 photographs of signs that Lawing considers local landmarks or emblems of classic cool. They include the larger-than-life red-and-white neon at South 21 drive-in, which draws diners with its electric promise of "curb service," and the seven blue letters that identify a tan brick building as a "Sunbeam" bread store.

It also features also one of Lawing's favorites: [Ratcliffe's Flowers](#). It's a story in itself, and Lawing delights in its telling.

Though Ratcliffe's boasted the city's oldest neon sign, by midcentury it was one of many along bustling Tryon Street. Business owners decided they looked cluttered and tacky and agreed to take them all down. But florist Louis Ratcliffe Jr. dug in.

"He said 'I'm not doing that. Y'all aren't taking my sign away,' " Lawing relates. "He was the one holdout of old-style signage, and it has survived to this day. ... It's such an example of

Charlotte's resilient history. It's a piece of art now." The red, green and white neon now hangs in an uptown park called The Green.

Though he didn't set out to do a book, Lawing quickly realized he was gathering more than mere fodder for history presentations to local audiences.

A self-employed graphic designer, his hand has been in every aspect of the project from shooting photos and finding out about the buildings to picking a printer and setting up a [website for sales](#).

In a nod to history, he shot the photos on old-fashioned Kodak slide film -- and had it developed at a local shop. Lawing says his images have better color, clarity and quality than would have been possible digitally in 2010, when he began.

The first printing of 1,000 copies arrived on his doorstep in early October, days before Lawing's 25th birthday. The book is for sale on his [website](#) and at four locations in Charlotte, including a [local history museum](#). He's also selling a line of notecards and considering other spinoff products.

He's happy with the way his hometown homage has turned out.

"We may not have as many old buildings as Raleigh does," Lawing says, "But we still have historic pockets. You just have to peer around a couple more places to see them."

~~~

