

ROGAL, MARIA. **SOUTH OF THE BORDER...DOWN MÉXICO WAY.**
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South of the Border Down Mexico Way



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University of Florida
Gainesville, Florida 32611
mroga1@ufl.edu
Visible Language, 34.2
Rogal, 142-161

Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, Rhode Island 02902

M A R I A R O G A L

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In the early 1950s,

the United States was in the midst of a period of tremendous economic growth. Advertising and television, capitalizing on this, invented a commodified version of the "American Dream," consisting of the (white) nuclear family with all its ecouterments: a house in suburbia equipped with modern appliances, automobile ownership and the annual family pilgrimage to the mountains or the beach. This American boom time spawned an increased emergence of motels and attractions to provide entertainment along the way or at one's destination. Beginning in the 1950s, when President Eisenhower initiated the construction of the interstate highway system to link the country together at higher speeds than ever before and promote the auto industry, South of the Border has provided an amusing, larger-than-life extended rest stop for those making their way north (to escape the heat of the south, or to return home) and south (to the beaches of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida). Seemingly in the middle of nowhere, South of the Border's presence, with its 110 foot "Pedro" sign is so large in scale and that one does not even have to stop in order to get a taste of what it is selling.⁴ In today's rush to get somewhere, most people don't stop. But those who do are in for a real treat – experiencing sensory inundation equivalent to the Disney experience – on a much more surreal and less pristine level – and there is no admission fee.

There was no larger sense of place, beyond farmland before local highways and the interstate arrived where Pedro stands today. Existing fundamentally as a response to the American automobile culture, and to the construction of the highway, South of the Border functions as a larger-than-life roadside stand – as a consumer commodity. The play on words sets the tone as humorous and playful. Yet, this alone is not enough to lure the consumer/tourist off the road – one must create a fantasy, and this fantasy is one of the exoticness of Mexico. Playing into the American desire to collect, to buy, to have, as with a religious pilgrimage, a souvenir to confirm one's visit, to the self and to others, has

become a necessity – the search supplants the real experience. To have a souvenir of one's travels is to have a reminder of the Other.⁵ SOB provides this, with wide aisled superstores such as the The Mexico Shop and The Wild West Store with their thousands of items to purchase. Serapes and sombreros, fireworks, stocks of pens and pencils, playing cards, keychains, ashtrays, snowglobes – everything imaginable, everything kitsch – emblazoned with images of Pedro – have been created for the consumer as tourist, fulfilling the adage that Americans will shop anywhere and buy anything. Here, there is something for everyone. To paraphrase Ada Louise Huxtable, author of *The Unreal America*, it is

**this union of culture and
consumerism that is a uniquely
American phenomenon.⁶**

In order to understand SOB, one has to have familiarity with the codes. In this instance, it is not those codes that one understands from living in or traveling within a country so diverse as Mexico, but rather those one learns from American popular culture and representations of Mexicans in books, stories or on the large and small screens. Postwar prosperity, and particularly an increase in mass media, created a fascination with Mexico. The exotic was played out with images of Ricky Ricardo, mambo music, the mariachi and Carmen Miranda, who became standards for how we would perceive Latinos for generations to come. These seemingly innocuous and entertaining representations supported a narrow, and somewhat comforting, belief system. They served to remind us of our rapid economic development and increasingly complex culture, through comparison with a seemingly simpler and more homogeneous society. This creates a sense of security in an often

chaotic,

changing

America.

It is the representations of Mexican-ness as seen at SOB and similar landmarks, and their use of visible language that interests me because they play a role in creating our culture as they define what it means to be Mexican/Latino. When such (vernacular) codes become repeated in culture, their power increases. Over time, these codes are rendered invisible and it is this subsequent invisibility that gives them power.



ABOVE (from left to right):
Pedro Landmark
110 foot Pedro effigy at night
(SOB postcard)

Amigo Pedro #1
at the Food Court

Amigo Pedro #2
Our American Friend

Amigo Pedro #3
at the Public Restroom

The many [re]presentations of Pedro, as both an icon and symbol, as a larger-than-life, comical caricature, symbolize our relationship to Mexico and to Mexicans. He is portrayed as a mustacheoed peasant wearing a floppy sombrero, serape and sandals and grabbing his full belly or in dress characteristic of the central region of Jalisco, origins of the charrería (Mexican rodeo) and tequila. “An American touring landmark,” it is in the charrero costume that we first see Pedro represented. As “the largest and tallest free standing sign east of Las Vegas, Pedro’s 110 foot effigy welcomes you from miles away to South of the Border.” His dominance is evident through his size and his stance, with bowed legs apart, one can literally drive a truck between them.

He is physically stable with legs wider than shoulders, firmly planted on the ground, and therefore strong. This strength is compounded by the signification of a brightly colored costume and a mustache which communicates his strength signifying “macho.” Pedro’s face and hands are literally white, absent of color in contrast to the vibrant orange and yellow hues of his clothing. In contrast to other representations of Pedro, this skincolor is



not representative of a person of color, of the large Mexican mestizo (mix of Spanish and Indian) population. This whiteness is unmistakable to the visitor. By negating his color, a richer heritage which his dress and name aim to signify is negated. He is adorned with an ornamented sombrero – what becomes the defining icon, index and symbol of “Mexican-ness” –

it is a symbol of the charrero, similar to the cowboy in the United States.

Today a performance art, the charrería has its origins in the colonial period and formal dress still consists of a black suit, guns with ammunition belts and a wide hat. In Mexico, the charrero

were instrumental in fighting for Mexican independence and have come to symbolize the post-colonial independent state. There are mixed messages here, as Pedro and the mythical charrero are often confused with the mariachi (a musician belonging to a Mexican street band) and whose myths are played out in Mexican restaurants nightly. His sombrero, ornamented with pom poms imply vanity in their decoration and playfulness in their color and arrangement. As a metasign, this 110-foot representation of Pedro signifies tradition, honor and romance.

By far the most prolific representations of Pedro are those I will refer to as *nuestro amigo Pedro* (our friend Pedro). In these 30 foot high concrete forms, his physicality is dominant. He is smiling, and his chubby face, body and hands, which clutch his belly in an active, perhaps laughing mode – are indexical of his fullness and generosity and he becomes a substitute for all that is Mexican. This is most evident in the locating of Pedro in front of the food court, where he invites us in for traditional Mexican food: burritos, tacos and then the familiar chili dogs and hamburgers. He is situated at other important locations throughout the site: namely the public restrooms and the fireworks store. We see him often and become familiar with him during our visit.

**Nuestro amigo Pedro is
the “common man,”
from the peasant class –
his clothing belies his
simplicity, his skin color
(fleshy brown) belies
his status.**

Wearing a serape over simple white clothing, sandals and a sombrero, he is most defamiliarizing when stationed in front of the fireworks store, wrapped in a serape of the United States’ flag with stars on the rim of his sombrero. This Pedro’s skin is much lighter than the others, so white that he seems to be caucasian. I note this because it stands in contrast to the other



representations and it is this Pedro that symbolizes a direct relationship to the United States. The other two effigies look to the side, while this Pedro looks up. Has he just arrived over the border to partake in the American dream?

We welcome the food, we welcome the products, but we don't welcome the people with open arms.

Given the current politics surrounding immigrant issues and often un- or under employment of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, this read is ambiguous and confusing. Is he showing that he loves America? Is part of America?



The gigantic, colorful sombrero forms of the Sombrero Ride are SOB's equivalent to Disney's magic teacup ride – referencing the transition into a surreal fantasyland with Speedy Gonzalez, or what may be his identical cousin, as our guide. Dressed in simple peasant garb with his large sombrero and neckerchief, this playful, dancing mouse is a personification of the Mexican – of the Mexican who is happy, carefree and entertaining. Brown-skinned, one would imagine him to be a field hand on a Sunday, with his clean, and very white, shirt and pants. The mouse is, of

ABOVE (from left to right):
SOB Sombrero Ride
July 1998

Speedy Gonzalez
©A Looney Toons Cartoon
Warner Brothers



course a rodent, a pest. He is small and quick. Made friendly and familiar by Disney's most renown character, Mickey and Warner Brother's Speedy Gonzalez. Yet to call a person a mouse signifies his or her timidity and as a verb it means **"to search or move stealthily or slowly or to toy with roughly."**⁷ This mouse, acting out for the audience, is a substitute for the Mexican on display. Against a backdrop of the town square – ironically outside of the town, perspectively incorrect and based on some kind of medieval castle model – which is lively even though isolated in a desert town, the sombreros turn and carry the visitor in the same swirling pattern of the dancers in the background. The visual presentation of the "Sombrero" signage supports a semi-traditional interpretation. The baseline of the word follows the sombrero outline and signifies playfulness. Use of an ornate typeface, a deviation from the soft, rounded forms of Cooper Black or a fat face typeface is reminiscent of old westerns (television and film) – of saloon typography. Thus, the form provides visual clues as to the setting of the town and to a specific time period, when the American west was perhaps still a part of Mexico, before the west was won.

**The formal qualities signify
the link between two cultures,
a mutual heritage.**

The use of language is critical to framing of South of the Border as a uniquely American landmark, created for the tourist consumer, with no direct linkage to the real thing. No one will ever imagine it to be the real Mexico because there is little to no Spanish visible or spoken here. On billboards approaching, one reads **"English Spoken Here! (Sortal)"** and **"Sommtheeng Deeferentl!"** The first referring perhaps to the local southern accent or vernacular and the latter an obvious and derogatory reference to stereotypical Latino accents, a la Cheech and Chong, Speedy Gonzalez or Ricky Ricardo.



The hundreds of billboards dotting the landscape provide us with an introduction to this unique place. Set in the typefaces Hobo or Cooper Black, they are reminiscent of carnivals and sideshows with its round terminals, uneven stroke weight and overall bulbous quality. One would not describe either as a typeface which could ever lend elegance, a sense of history or tradition to any word it renders visible. There is no mistaking its playful and postmodern syntax.

Already elaborate, letterforms are embellished with pattern and color, thus creating a dominance of syntax over semantic value, marking each character in order to render it defamiliarizing. Several examples demonstrate how form is altered to achieve

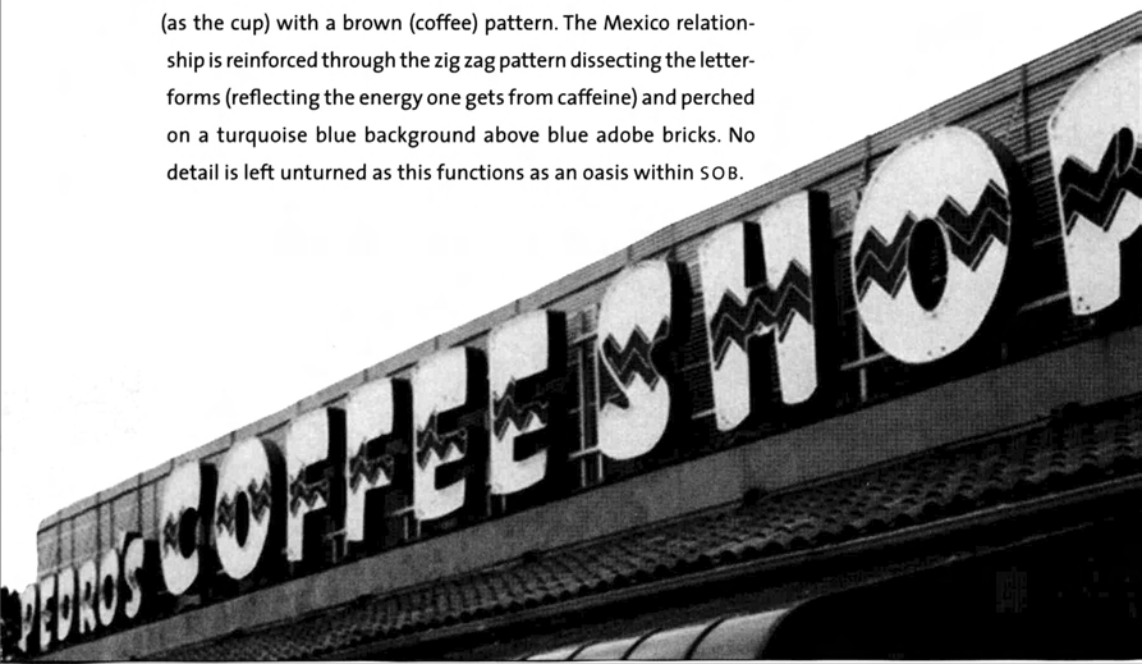
ABOVE (from left to right):
80 Miles (from the South)
I-95 Billboard, July 1998

92 Miles (from the South)
I-95 Billboard, July

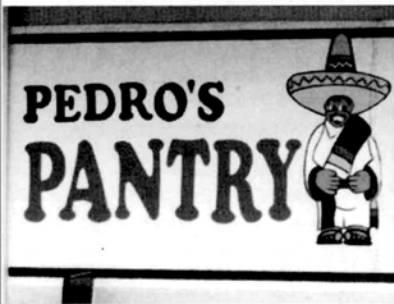
BELOW
SOB Pedro's Coffee Shop
White letters with brown pattern
on turquoise blue ground

"Mexican-ness."

In Pedro's Coffee Shop the letter is treated as a cup of coffee, white (as the cup) with a brown (coffee) pattern. The Mexico relationship is reinforced through the zig zag pattern dissecting the letterforms (reflecting the energy one gets from caffeine) and perched on a turquoise blue background above blue adobe bricks. No detail is left unturned as this functions as an oasis within SOB.



Other signage reveals the "Mexican-ness" of food such as the chili dog, taco and burrito. The first two embellished with a linear pattern in orange and yellow, reminiscent of 70's drag racing typography and evoking speed or fast food. Multiple symbols such as these code the message and create a complex and self-reinforcing system of its own.



ABOVE
SOB Pedro's Pantry
Handpainted Store Sign

There is a visual language evident in the choice of fat face type-faces and selected formal characteristics used to communicate what is Mexican. Letterforms are constructed with uneven stroke weights and round terminals, some are hand-lettered or derived from saloon typography and many words are set on uneven or curved base-lines. The oft-repeated zig zag pattern is abstracted from one of many patterns found in traditional Latin American, but not particularly Mexican, textiles. This visual language signifies playfulness, tradition and a lack of sophistication.

BELOW
SOB Food Court
Chili Dog and Tacos – orange
type on yellow ground

It sets up our perception of the Mexican.



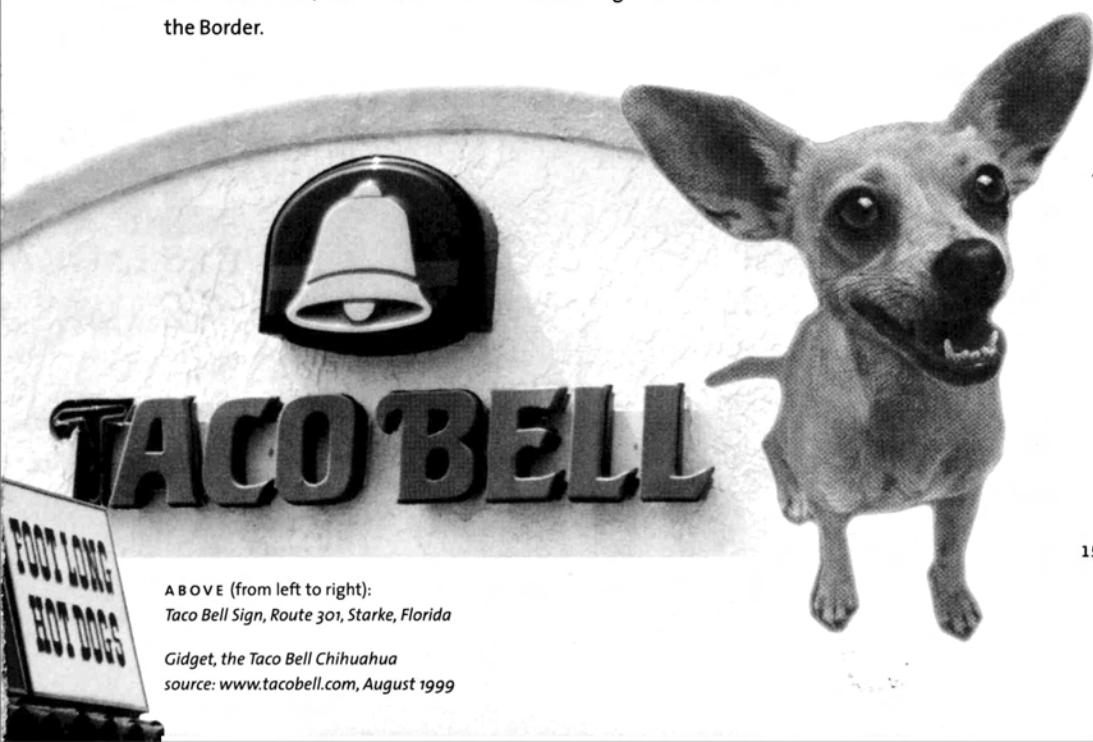
It is only recently that Latin culture has become ultra-hip in America – perhaps due to Ricky Martin or Salma Hayek, but most surely because of the influence of Gidget, the Taco Bell Chihuahua, who, in under 10 pounds is perhaps the most powerful symbol of Mexico and Latin America. Admittedly, what could be funnier, or more hip, than a smooth talking urban(e) dog? Yo quiero Taco Bell. The advertising campaign (1998–99) created by TBWA Chiat/Day has made Taco Bell one of the best known fast food restaurant chains in the United States. Visions of revolution inspired by a history most American youth can only guess at –

**perpetuate the myth of the
Latin American renegade spirit.**

A triumph over adversity.

**The subordinate becoming
the dominant.**

I point this out because in looking at the popularity and influence of Taco Bell ads, one finds similarities with design at South of the Border.



ABOVE (from left to right):
Taco Bell Sign, Route 301, Starke, Florida

Gidget, the Taco Bell Chihuahua
source: www.tacobell.com, August 1999

SOB is an example of how, “every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense.”⁸ An analysis of SOB does not depend on the sequential ordering of codes. Rather, it is dependent on the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole.

It provides a foundation for studying how Mexicans, and Latin Americans, are represented in American culture, how meaning is assigned and reinforced.

And this language we find at SOB has become standard, a part of the American vernacular. It is a constructed identity used to signify “Mexico” and does not take into consideration the rich and diverse culture that exists at the real south of the border and beyond. Its equivalent is perhaps to represent every American as a cowboy (specifically male because in almost every case, the representation of the Mexican is male – only rare instances portray females). All visual communication reflects the power structure found in the larger culture and South of the Border and related material culture signify outdated stereotypes. The



ABOVE (from left to right):
Burrito Brothers Taco Company
Environmental Signage
Gainesville, Florida

Mi Tierra
Matchbook Cover
San Antonio, Texas (1999)

Las Margaritas: Authentic Mexican Food
Environmental Signage
Gainesville, Florida

real South of the Border is closer to Roberto Rodriguez's 1993 film *MARIACHI* about a musician mistaken for a drug lord in a dusty Mexican small town.

Mexican sociologist Alberto Ruy-Sanchez writes "One interesting aspect of cultural relations today is how developed countries like the United States continue making specific demands on countries like Mexico. This demand implies conforming to their idea of what constitutes the Other country.

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, multiethnic and multicultural – and increasingly less definable as one specific and linear culture – more and more Americans want to believe in a Mexico of one rigidly defined culture, instead of a complex plurality.

... For their own purposes they would rather see a primitive list of core values. What they want the Other to be, and in this case, the ideal other is *le bon sauvage*. Increasingly, more and more Americans interested in Mexico want it to have the very unity of being and the solid identity they feel themselves are permanently losing."⁹ Whether or not one agrees with Ruy-Sanchez, our commodification of Mexican culture is exploitation of the Other's" identity. It is this metalanguage, this myth system, one in which we do not decode the signs – except at a cursory "level – and are not involved in the process, that makes it utterly powerful precisely because it seems so natural.

In the end, we have commodified our ideologies.

TA'S
T
Food



Maria Rogal is faculty at the University of Florida where she teaches graphic design. She spent her formative years traveling internationally and has lived in Laos, Peru and Liberia. Before beginning her career in graphic design, she studied political science and history and worked in the international development field. Rogal is particularly interested in the study of history, theory and the intersection of design and culture. For fun, she collects ephemera and takes photos on the road.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Frank Sinatra (South of the Border, recorded 1953)

"South of the Border" transcribed from the song as sung by Frank Sinatra:

*South of the border
Down Mexico way
That's where I fell in love when the stars above came out to play
And now as I wonder
My thoughts ever stray South of the border ... down Mexico way*

*She was a picture in old Spanish lace
Just for a tender while I kissed the smile upon her face
'cause it was fiesta and we were so gay
South of the border ... Mexico way*

*Then she sighed as she whispered mañana
Never dreaming that we were parting
And I lied as I whispered mañana
'cause our tomorrow never came*

*South of the border ... I jumped back one day
There in a veil of white by the candlelight she knelt to pray
Mission bells told me that I mustn't stay
South of the border ... Mexico way*

*The mission bells told me, ding dong, that I must not stay
Stay south of the border ... down Mexico way
Ay Ay Ay Ay ... Ay Ay Ay Ay ...*

2 BILLBOARDS

Everything old is new again!
Never a Dull Moment!
Jest half an hour!
English Spoken Here! (Sortal)
Fort Pedro/Fireworks Capital of the U. S.
Etymologically Correck!
Pedro's Weather Report!
Chili Today/Hot Tamale Mexico Shops~ Direct Imports
Pedro's Law: Bring Cash!
Sommtheeng Deeferent!
Howdy, Pardner!
Top Banana!
Just Say YO!

3 Hall, Edward T. 1959. *The Silent Language*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications.

4 <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/971026SCDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.
As a roadside attraction, SOB with its 110 foot Pedro and plenitude of Sombraero signage implies the fantastic and the exotic. However, the image purveyed – one of good, clean fun – does not represent the complexities evident in the culture from which it appropriates – Mexican or Latin American. Its origins seem quite simple. According to Roadside America, an online guide to roadside attractions, "Alan Schafer [SOB's founder] began his rise to roadside immortality in 1950 with a simple beer stand. When building supplies began being delivered to "Schafer Project: South of the [North Carolina] Border," a neon light went on in his head.

5 Ammidown, Margot. "Edens, Underworlds and Shrines: Florida's Small Tourist Attractions." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*. Florida Theme Issue #23, 1998. Miami: The Wolfsonian Institution, Florida International University, 243. "As society became more secularized, travel was still propelled by the desire to be transported, perhaps more physically than spiritually, from the mundane to a state of wonder. . . . a relatively mundane activity such as a family road trip might inspire associations with a pilgrimage – especially if the destination is paradise." Today, paradise is not an end result but a rest stop along the way.

6 Huxtable, Ada Louise. *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion*. NY: The New Press, 95.

7 Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition.
Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 761.

8 Hawkes, Terrace. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen, 125.

9 Ruy-Sanchez, Alberto. "Approaches to the Problem of Mexican Identity."
Robert L. Earle and John D. Wirth, editors.
Identities in North America: The Search for Community.
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 44.

PARALLEL TEXTS

SOUTH OF THE BORDER HEESTORY

In 1950, Pedro, hitchhiking down U.S. 301, on his way back to Mexico got lost. Arriving at a place called Hamer, SC almost starving, he stopped at a farm, scrounged some bread and cheese and went back to the road to catch a ride. A hungry Yankee saw him, hit the brakes and offered him \$5 for the sandwich. Pedro immediately decided that at \$5 for a nickel's worth of cheese and a slice of bread, this was the place for him!

So Pedro bought a wheel of cheese, 3 loaves of bread, borrowed a tobacco crate, and set up business by the road. Sadly, no one stopped.

Desperate, Pedro grabbed a board off an old barn and wrote on it: Sanweech \$5. The Yankees still kept whizzing by. A day later, the bread getting stale, Pedro changed the sign: Sanweech \$1. Six or eight people stopped. Pedro was in business. Soon, he changed the sign again: Sanweech 50c. Business boomed! Pedro sent for his brother Pancho. They added another crate, and wrote two more signs, reading Sanweech 10c. They were mobbed!

In the Mad Rush, Pancho was run over by a New York Cab Driver who had no insurance. Pedro decided Queek, he better get off the road.

Off the road, not so many Yankees pulled in to buy the Sanweech. So, Pedro put up more signs, and more, and more. And Pedro leev happily ever seence! Hope you are the same.

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/971026SCDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.

BILLBOARDS

For years, SOB has been criticized for apparent insensitivity when it came to portrayal of Mexicans in its advertising. In 1993, the Mexican Embassy complained about the billboards in a letter to Schafer. Schafer fired off a reply that suggested the embassy consider the \$1.5 million in merchandise he imports from Mexico each year.

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/971026SCDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.

According to an article in the Raleigh News and Observer, 83-year old SOB owner Alan Schafer said "We have to communicate with the present generation - these baby boomers do not have a sense of humor." The billboards, which increase in density as one approaches Dillon, will continue to be the focus of SOB's \$40M advertising budget. They get 8 million people a year to pull off and gas up, buy fireworks or "dirty old man" gifts, or ear steak in a building shaped like a sombrero.

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/971026SCDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.

ILLUSTRATIONS

All photographs of South of the Border taken on location by the author in July 1998 unless otherwise noted.

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