



Photos by Barbara Elmore



CALDWELL COUNTY

SIGN LANGUAGE

George Kalisek has trouble recalling the exact spelling of "barbecue" because he finished that sign when he was 13. Now past 50, he laughs as he tries to remember how he spelled "barbecue."

These days, the sign-maker responsible for colorful images showing cows, sharks, watermelons and killer whales on Luling's downtown streets thinks more about characters than words. His cheerful custom designs on wood decorate about a dozen pump jacks from one end of the oil town to another.

So how does this veteran sign-maker get the idea to design a shark chasing a small fish, or a gap-toothed boy eating a slice of watermelon? The first thing he has to consider is that the sign will be mounted on a beam. Then he thinks about the up-and-down motion of the pump. Thus the cow on a Pierce Street pump jack never tires of jumping over the moon, and the shark on South Magnolia never gets its fill of the smaller fish.

A local shop owner in Luling, Judy Hoffmeister of Tips Toes & Bows, first brought Kalisek's work to Luling when she hired him to make a sign for her shop 21 years ago. "It was a great big bow and I kept it for years until it faded," she said. Now it hangs on the inside.

She was on the board of the Luling Chamber of Commerce when the group first started talking about signs. She mentioned his work, and Kalisek met with the group. Since 2000, he has not only decorated the pump jacks but made more than 100 Christmas signs for Luling businesses, traveling from his home in Moulton every six weeks to make a delivery to a warehouse where the signs are stored.

Kalisek began creating signs full time in 1980 after working the family farm and making heels for boots on an assembly line.

At night, he created yard art and basic signs. One day he decided it was time to quit his job. Soon, people started requesting more yard items, and the more he made, the more he sold. Now he makes about 3,000 pieces of yard decor a year, as well as business signs.

"I don't think I will ever retire. I will just slow down," Kalisek says. "My dream, should I become independently wealthy, is to decorate the entire block where my shop is in Moulton."

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