

SOUTH SUBURBS

The iconic Cudahy Arby's hat sign has been saved from the scrapyards



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Joe Rieland, who operates Redefined & Co. which makes furniture and, more recently, restores vintage signs, purchased the chopped up Arby's ten-gallon hat sign from a scrapyards. The sign is in pieces and sadly some are missing. *Submitted*

The famous ten-gallon Arby's hat sign in Cudahy was chopped up, placed in a dumpster and sent to a scrapyards after the longtime business [closed on Halloween](#).

Before the beloved monument of the restaurant that "has the meats" was ground up like beef, the owner of the scrapyards decided to save the sign.

Joe Rieland of West Allis helps to save lives in his day job as a clinical and technical advisor for [Organ Recovery Systems](#), a transplant medicine company that specializes in the profusion of livers and kidneys between organ donors and recipients.

This time he was saving local history.

"The sign is saved," Rieland said. "It's not going to get scrapped."

On the side, Rieland brings new life to furniture and, more recently, vintage signs through his company Redefined & Co. based in the [Milwaukee Makerspace in St. Francis](#). He heard about the closure of the Cudahy Arby's through a friend but didn't have time to try to obtain the sign right away.

"The sign is gigantic and for me, I have this thing where if it's a pain in the ass I really don't want to deal with it right now," he said. "But ultimately, I ended up getting thrown into this pain in the ass because I can't let something as cool as this go away. I couldn't say no."

He eventually got in contact with the scrapyards, which he declined to name, and made a deal on the ten-gallon treasure.

"I'm not sure that he was supposed to sell it," Rieland said. "He was more than willing to work with me on it. He saw the historic value in it, he saw the cool side of it."



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The iconic ten-gallon hat sign at the Cudahy Arby's was seen in a dumpster shortly after the business closed. Submitted By Noah Skowronski

"Marketing and branding departments don't want other people to get their hands on (signs) because then it's out of their control," Rieland said, declining to share what he paid for the piecemeal sign.

"Obviously I'm sure he made some money off of me," he said with a chuckle.

Some pieces of the Cudahy Arby's sign are still missing

About a quarter of the sign has gone missing.

"I got everything that was there and available," Rieland said, comparing constructing the sign to a jigsaw puzzle.

Many companies require their signs to be destroyed, and "technically speaking it was completely scrapped," Rieland said, since the sign was in a dumpster and delivered to a scrapping company.

Rieland guessed someone took pieces of the sign before it had been moved to the scrapyards.

"If anybody had borrowed or taken pieces out from the dumpster I would purchase them ... to complete the sign," Rieland said. "No judgment would be on (them), I would not be mad at the person."

He said he can be reached through his website, www.redefinedandco.com.

Even if nobody turns over the missing portions, Rieland thinks he has enough to rebuild one complete side, which would be suitable for a collector to place on a big barn.

Rieland grew up going to Arby's on Highway 100 and National Avenue.

"Grandma would take us kids there because she had coupons," he said, recalling he and his brother liked getting the potato cakes. "I've always liked Arby's."

Vintage sign restoration has become a hobby for Rieland

Rieland started his restoration business by building furniture for himself to put in his then-downtown apartment. Friends saw what he'd built and asked for something similar.

"It kind of blew up and expanded," he said.

Now an LLC, Rieland said he could probably live off his furniture and restoration business. However, he doesn't think he'd be happy because he really loves his full-time job and said his boss allows him time to do both.

Lately Rieland has gotten involved in refurbishing signs. Partnering with [Bauer Sign & Lighting in New Berlin](#), Rieland does all the metal work out of his fabrication shop. Thus far he's recovered a vintage hotel sign from Mequon and an old used car lot sign out of Racine.

Rieland is looking for more signs to purchase or restore and is trying to get one out



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of a farm field. If anyone has one they want fixed up or sell outright, he said they can reach him through his website.

What will happen to the old Cudahy Arby's sign?

As for the Arby's sign, it's the largest he's had and is in very rough condition.

Rieland said his goal for the moment is to dismantle the sign the rest of the way and store it. He hopes to one day find a home for it.

"I'll do what I can to keep it local," he said. "I can't keep everything. Really, ultimately, my goal was to save it and keep it from getting scrapped out."

Rieland said exorbitant maintenance or restoration costs is one reason many corporations don't see the value in preserving vintage signs.

Contact Erik S. Hanley at erik.hanley@jrn.com. Like his [Facebook page](#) and follow him on Twitter at [@ES_Hanley](#).

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