

# RALPH AND ERNIE'S ROADSIDE IGLOO

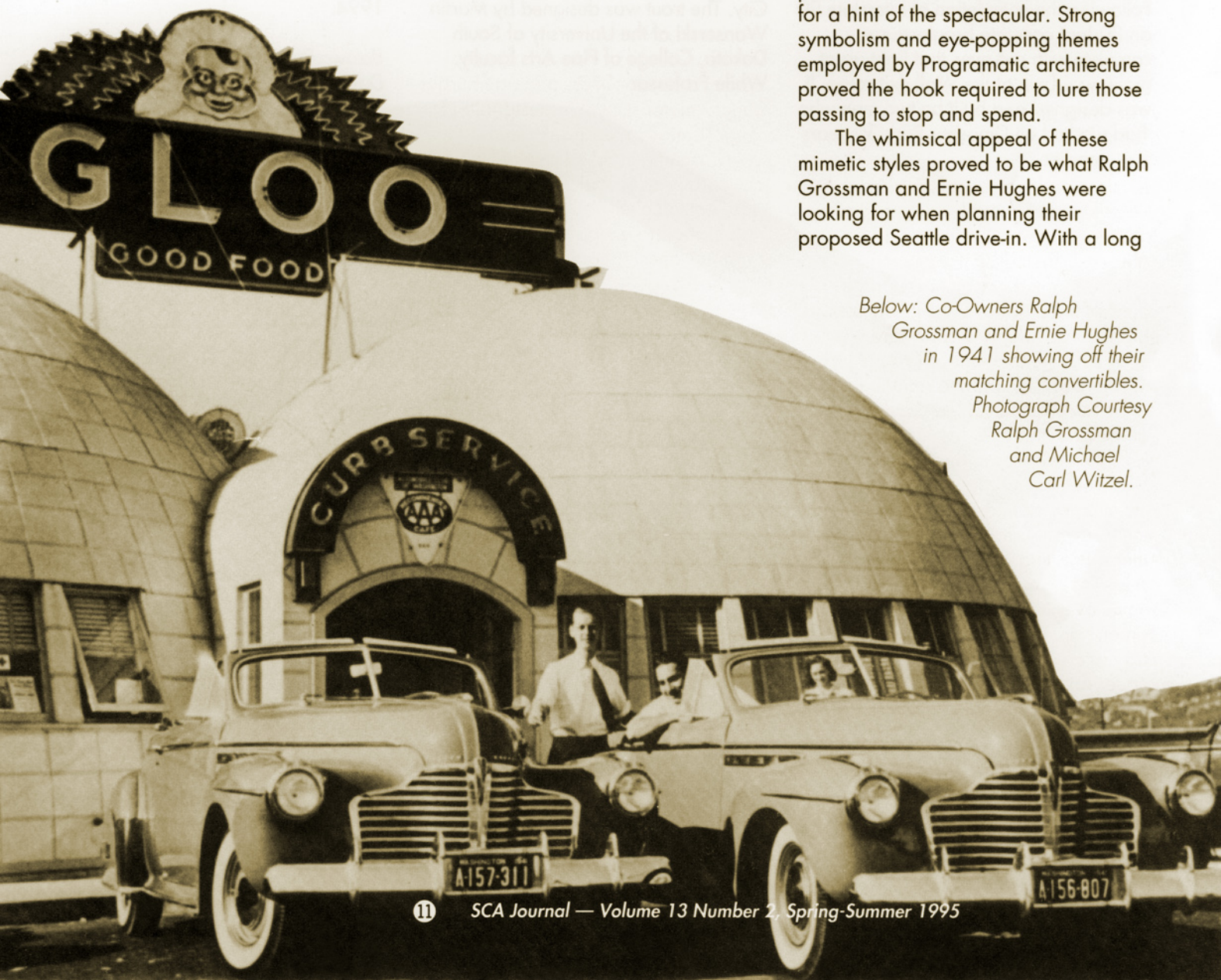
By Michael Karl Witzel

**W**hen Seattle's Igloo Drive-in opened during the forties, the American roadside was still a magical place. Numerous commercial buildings typified by out-of-scale hot dogs, gigantic root beer barrels, house-sized milk bottles, colossal vegetables, and overgrown animals adorned the highways, coast to coast. The increase in motoring brought on by better roads and the automobile's proliferation provided a surge of prospective customers. With a corresponding rise in advertising stimulus competing for attention, ordinary signs and billboards lost much of their impact.

Creative refreshment stand operators learned that in order to stand out among the cacophony of images, this new class of visual excitement had to be employed. Inducing motorists to pilot vehicles from the roadbed called for a hint of the spectacular. Strong symbolism and eye-popping themes employed by Programatic architecture proved the hook required to lure those passing to stop and spend.

The whimsical appeal of these mimetic styles proved to be what Ralph Grossman and Ernie Hughes were looking for when planning their proposed Seattle drive-in. With a long

*Below: Co-Owners Ralph Grossman and Ernie Hughes in 1941 showing off their matching convertibles. Photograph Courtesy Ralph Grossman and Michael Carl Witzel.*



list of prospective building designs ruled out by both as "ordinary," Hughes suggested the eatery be shaped in the form of an igloo. Acknowledged by both as a stroke of genius, the partners soon raised the extra capital required to commence construction. On what seemed like an appropriate date to begin work on a building planning to masquerade, construction crews broke ground on Halloween day, 1940.

Enticed by the promise of generous tips and salary, Seattle's most attractive girls were persuaded to try their luck as tray-girls. A bevy of beautiful women clad in abbreviated skirts and high boots proved to be the perfect magnet to interrupt the flow of traffic on Denny Way. Aggressively recruited from the pool of underpaid usherettes employed at local movie theaters, the majority welcomed the change to serving car customers. Wages were better and they could become part of the real-life movie as seen through the motorists' windshield.

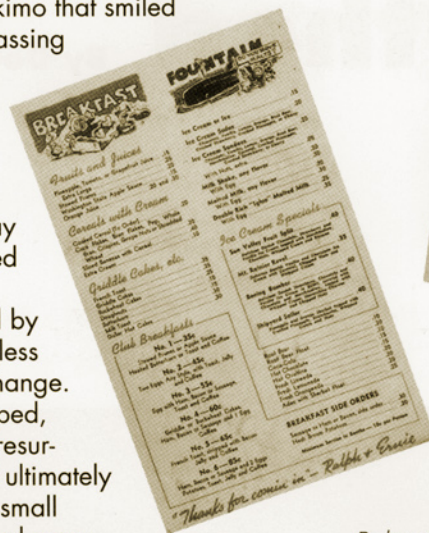
Every night, a new featurette played out in the Igloo's parking lot. Music piped to speakers provided the opening soundtrack for the production, as bright spot-lights illuminated the domes. Directed by the commotion to drive on in, cars of all makes and models lined up for a front row seat. Right on cue, food orders were delivered ... in perfect time. Carhops had the right moves and the right lines.

A close-up revealed young lovers of the day enjoying fast-food and passionate kisses in the front seat. Dissolving to the rear bench, youngsters were showcased slurping up milkshakes—a drip-drop lost here and there. Panning left, a cameo from mom and dad... married couples renewing vows over a double-malted and sack of onion-rings. Zooming in on a serving tray attached to a car window, deluxe cheeseburgers could be seen stacked high with all the trimmings. Wonderful sights, sounds, and smells—all part of the Igloo's script, written specifically for the customer's satisfaction.

Unfortunately, the Igloo's sparkling domes ended up being cut from the

closing reel. Years ago, their final fate was sealed by the business of economics and perceived aesthetics. In the quest for profits, they succumbed swiftly to the wrecker's ball with nary a complaint from the public. The engaging little Eskimo that smiled upon the passing traffic and shone its colorful palette of neon onto the roadway was silenced forever—demolished by the thoughtless forces of change.

Revamped, regraded, resurfaced, and ultimately resold, the small patch of land once bustling with short-skirted carhops, chromed automobiles, and hamburger-hungry motorists was redesignated for more significant usage. Within a few years, an uncontrolled glut of franchised burger factories took up positions all over Seattle. The days of Ralph and Ernie's grilled "Husky Burgers" and ice-cold "Boeing Bombers" had ended abruptly. Progress—in the form of an automobile repair shop catering to motor vehicles imported from overseas—had usurped the



Above: Igloo Menu Circa 1943. Photo Courtesy Ralph Grossman.

Below: The Igloo Drive-In Circa 1940 Denny Way Seattle, WA.

Igloo's rightful place along the American roadside.

"Seattle's Roadside Igloo" is an excerpt from Mike Witzel's new book, *The American Drive-In, History and Folklore of the Drive-In Restaurant in American Car Culture*, available from Motorbooks at 1-800-826-6600 or autographed from the author at 316-687-5887.

