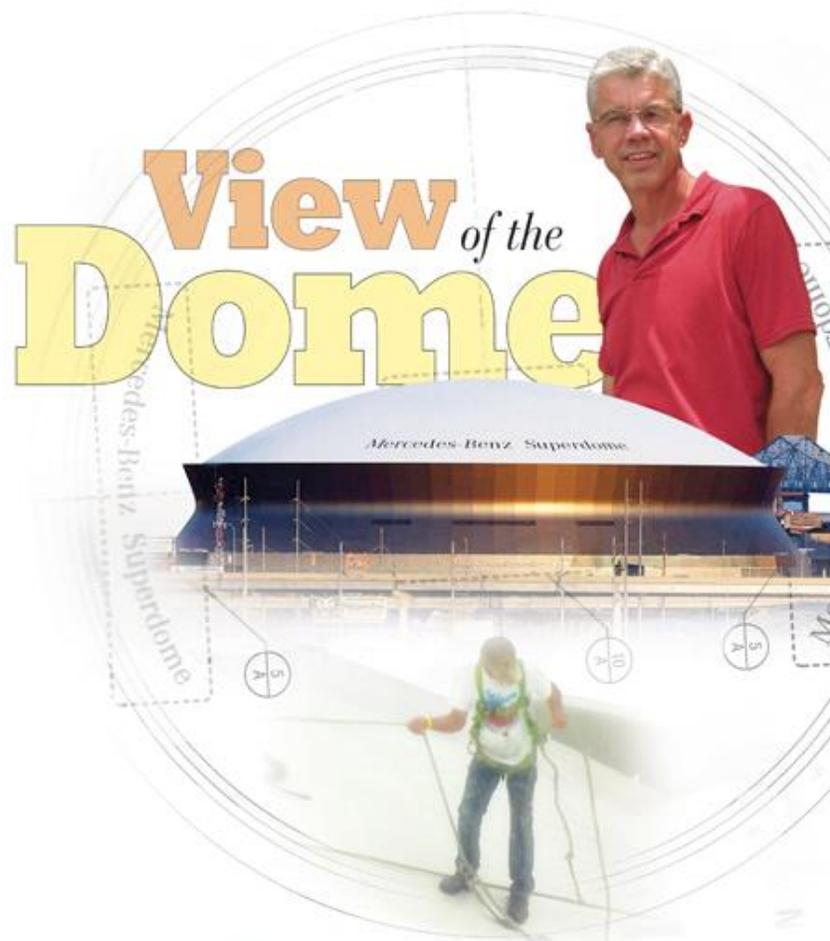


View of the Dome

By Carol Stuart

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Left, Denham sign painter Lionel Kabel is pictured against a background of blueprints for the signs he painted on the Mercedes-Benz Superdome.



At the top of the dome, Lionel Kabel cuts in a line of the Mercedes-Benz emblem. Up close, the lumpy surface that required painting instead of vinyl is apparent.

According to his own estimate, there are only five or so real sign painters left in the whole state, so it should have been no surprise to Denham Springs sign painter Lionel Kabel when he was contacted about the biggest single sign painting job around – labeling the Superdome.

“Someone called me quite a while ahead of time and asked me if I wanted to bid on it,” Kabel said. “I can’t remember exactly who they said recommended me, but I think it was John Benton.”

Even his own business, Kabel Signs, does the majority of its business making vinyl signs these days. Even giant signs are generated by computers. But some surfaces are not smooth enough to accept vinyl application and are also not suitable for affixing a premade sign, and that is true of the bumpy, curved surface of the Superdome.



On his way to the outside, Kabel snapped this photo looking down onto the floor of the Superdome.

The dome was rebuilt by Brazos Roofing Co. after Katrina at a cost of \$32 million, a figure they thought was ridiculous, Kabel said, but it was the only one made in six months and was accepted. The surface is the same orange material that is blown on for insulation, painted with a special two-part paint that has held up well, with annual pressure washing, ever since.

It was a while before Brazos called him back, Kabel said, and he was surprised to hear from them. When he got the specs he bid \$30,000 (he later learned they charged \$250,000), but when they told him he had to get it done in two weeks in time for the Final Four, he told them it was impossible.

“The letters were 19 feet tall,” Kabel said. “It would have taken me two weeks just to make the patterns. So I told them to forget it and get someone else, but they said they had a company that could make them by machine in one day, so I said OK.”

The patterns, one per letter, were hard to handle on the roof top, where the wind often reaches 40 miles per hour. The whole Brazos crew of eight men assigned to help Kabel had to hold them down while he applied them to the surface.

He drew a line 20 feet from the gutter and lined them up on it spelling out “Mercedes-Benz Superdome” twice, on opposite sides. He also laid out a 138-foot diameter Mercedes-Benz emblem at the very top of the dome.

“I didn’t have a pattern for that,” Kabel said. “I laid it out by hand with a straight edge, a pencil and a rope as a compass.”

The emblem was easier to paint because the dome was flatter at the top, but he ran into some trouble with his helpers. They didn’t speak English, so when he marked the spaces “B” for black and “W” for white, some of them got confused and started filling in the wrong side of the edges he painted, thinking the “B” stood for blanco, Spanish for white.

“I soon learned to give my orders through the foreman, who spoke perfect English, and when he told me I should give them orders I told him, ‘No. I’ll let you give them the orders and I’ll just have fun with them.’”

And so he did. He told them he could keep ahead of all eight of them painting all of the edges, and they were shocked when he did it, and even had time to help them fill in the middle.

“They tried to catch me but they never could,” Kabel said, “but they were very hard workers. I stayed in New Orleans for the whole 12 days. We couldn’t start painting until 10 in the morning because of the dew, but we got there at 8 because it took about two hours to get through the Final Four security, get up on the dome and get rigged up and in position. Then we painted until 8 at night.”

The rigging was very secure, very professional, Kabel said. The roofers had all the necessary harnesses and ropes and completely fitted them all out.

“I actually felt pretty safe and I’m not one to hang from a rope to paint a water tower,” Kabel said. “In fact, the company that made the patterns for me were dangling on a swinging stage hanging banners on nearby buildings.

“Their supervisor asked Brazos, ‘Where did you find this guy?’ There are only a couple in the state. Later he asked me if I’d be interested in traveling and doing work for them later.

“I pointed to the men dangling off that building and said, ‘You see what they’re doing? I don’t do that.’