



HELMSCENES

Illuminations From the Furniture City



By Dianna Stampfler

The concept—a framed, backlit image—is simple. Yet, Helmscenes become much more than the sum of their parts once plugged in and switched on. Beloved by collectors today as ambiance-creating décor, Helmscenes transport their viewers to scenes near and far—and serve as physical reminders of the years in the mid-twentieth century when they were produced in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Above: The author's personal Helmscene collection. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

During the 1950s and 1960s, countless cottages, homes, recreation rooms, and bars were decorated with unique pieces of art known as Helmscene Illuminated Pictures. Though only manufactured for a mere nine years in Grand Rapids by Helms Products Inc., the quaint displays continue to shine for those who appreciate their collectible value.

Laurence Cleven Helms was born on April 8, 1908, in Morley, Michigan, the oldest of four children of Chancy and Hazel (Smith) Helms. After graduating from high school, Helms became a mechanic in his father's Sand Lake garage before spreading his wings as an independent salesperson dealing in a variety of products. During World War II, he established and operated the American Aircraft Trade School in Grand Rapids, where individuals trained for work in defense factories.

An aspiring entrepreneur, Helms took \$17 of his own money and \$500 he borrowed to establish the Helms Industrial Development Company in 1944. Operating out of 427 Bond Avenue NW in Grand Rapids, the company manufactured and sold replacement chromium-plated bumpers, grilles, and grille guards to auto distributors and dealers.

By 1948, the company operated out of eight plants around the city, employing approximately 100 people and producing 7,000 units per week—a value of about \$3 million annually. The following November, the Penn-Ohio Company—a New York-based investment firm—offered a cash buyout for the entire operation. It was an offer Helms could not refuse.

With a hefty bank balance and plenty of time on his hands, Helms was not idle for long. A chance



The original Helms Industrial Development Company building in Grand Rapids. (Photo courtesy of Dan Murdock.)

visit to a St. Joseph, Michigan, restaurant left an indelible mark on him and led to his next venture. Helms quickly bought back one of his former factory buildings at 100 Lexington Avenue, rented a building next door, and formed Helms Products Inc. By early February 1950, he began his “experimental project” of producing illuminated pictures, which he called “Helmscenes,” based on a similar decoration he had seen hanging on the wall of that St. Joseph eatery.

Grand Rapids has long been regarded as one of the world's leading industrial cities. It is known as the “Furniture City” due to the high number of producers in the area. During the mid-twentieth century, Helmscenes were a unique, colorful addition to that thriving industry.

While Helms did not invent the concept of illuminated pictures, he certainly did advance the quality and design. He became the first and only manufacturer in Michigan—and one of only four in the country—to utilize a process called collotype, invented by Alphonse Poitevin in 1855. That unique, gelatin-based photographic process imprints a picture on both sides of a sheet of translucent Vinylite plastic sheeting, which, when illuminated with a 15- or 20-watt

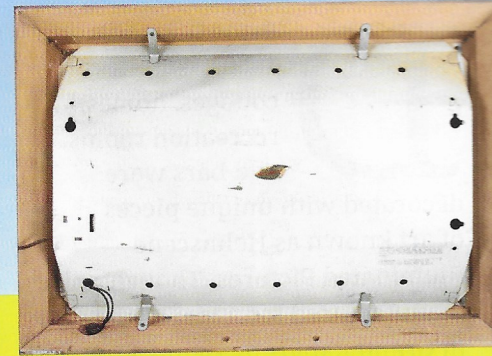
bulb from behind, gives it an “oil painting” look.

Helms solicited color slides from photographers around the country; sent them to be processed in Chicago, Illinois; and then assembled each Helmscene unit in his Grand Rapids facility with frames sourced from a third party. After he outfitted each Helmscene with an electrical plug, a strategically placed fluorescent or incandescent bulb to create an even distribution of light, and a patented spring system to hold the entire thing together, he sent them to distributors, furniture stores, TV stores, gift shops, and other retail outlets at a wholesale cost to be resold for a “modest price” of about \$29—approximately \$330 today.

The Helmscene Heyday

It did not take long for the enterprise to outgrow the Lexington Avenue plant, but Helms had a bigger vision for his expanding company. He had amassed 31 acres in Plainfield Township—north of Grand Rapids—and had at one time planned to construct a large factory there for his automotive grille company. In 1952, he broke ground for an Art Deco-style building for his Helmscene “industrial showplace.”

The cost to build the factory was reported at anywhere between



Above: Helmscene No. 71, "The Last Supper," before (left) and after illumination (center). The light from behind the image adds intimacy and drama to the scene. Above right: The lesser-viewed side of a Helmscene—the back. (Photos courtesy of the Grand Rapids Public Museum.)

\$200,000 and \$1 million, depending on the source. A March 11, 1952, article in *The Grand Rapids Press* noted, "Shortages in structural steel have resulted in a building design using curved wood trusses that will eliminate the need for many posts and provide more open area for manufacturing."

Recognizing that yet another new business venture was at hand, Helms also formed the Helms Construction Company in May of that year. As president, he managed the building of the massive production facility that would house his growing enterprise. Once complete, the 300-by-250-foot building boasted an 80,000-square-foot manufacturing plant; a 100-by-50-foot, air-conditioned wing with offices, color laboratories, a display room, and storage space; and a loading dock to accommodate four

60-foot trailers. An open house was held on Saturday, December 20, 1952, at 3757 Plainfield Avenue NE.

In May 1953, Helms, along with his brother, Travis, and Martin Browney—who appears to have worked in the grille business with the Helms brothers—filed for a patent for their "Transparency Viewer" unit. "With our invention, a framed picture is provided, illuminated at the back with the light passing, either directly or by reflection, through the transparency, presenting the picture far better than the ordinary picture," read their application. The document went on to describe not only the fashion in which the pictures were illuminated but also how the frame, spring clips, mounting, and other specifications came together to create a Helmscene.

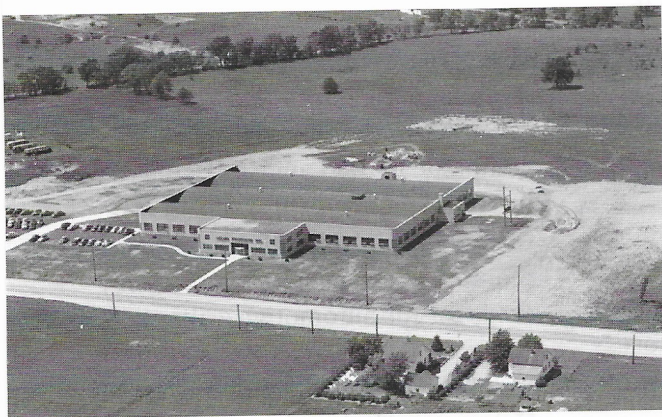
Over the years, 35 salesmen traveled the country selling Helmscenes to 14,000 dealers under the direction of sales manager and World War II veteran John Sjogren. Back home, 140 people worked in the new factory where all aspects of the operation had been brought in house. At that time, Helms Products produced 1,000

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pictures daily, with an annual volume valued at \$2.5 million. It is estimated that more than a million Helmscenes were manufactured between 1950 and 1959, with the colorful pictures being shipped as far as South America and the Hawaiian Islands.

There were more than 50 distinct and interchangeable images to choose from—primarily natural landscapes, along with a few religious scenes—with six frame styles of metal, plastic, and wood. Among the Michigan prints were images of Tahquamenon Falls, a view of Glen Lake and Sleeping Bear Point from Miller Hill, and two deer jumping over a downed log. Smaller table lights, three-legged TV lamps, and lampshades were also manufactured, although in smaller quantities.



The Helms Products Inc. building on Plainfield Avenue NE in Grand Rapids. (Photo courtesy of the Grand Rapids History Center, Grand Rapids Public Library.)

Helms also branched out to produce Helmswirl Vertical Draperies and a line of mid-century modern “occasional tables,” which were introduced in January 1956 to complement the illuminated pictures. Available in 17 designs and two finishes, the tables were produced by the company at a rate of about 200 tables per day.

Going Dark

In May 1957, Helms was elevated to chairman of the board after serving as the company’s president since its founding. Yet, just two years later, the 48-year-old was ready to change his business path once again. A five-day advertisement ran in the *Battle Creek Enquirer* in April 1959, listing \$100,000 worth of machinery being sold by Helms Products Inc. Less than two weeks later, news broke that Woodlin Metal Products Co.—one of the largest suppliers of windows and ventilating equipment for the mobile-home industry—of Marshall, Michigan, had purchased Helms Products. All the existing inventory and equipment used to produce the company’s home accessories were shipped off to Woodlin’s factory.

That latest business deal left Helms with even more money, an empty building, and, once again, spare time. He began working immediately to transform the space into the Helms Shopping Center, which would become home to Michigan’s first Miracle Mart and a Meijer supermarket. “The joint venture represents an investment of more than \$1,000,000 in remodeling, fixtures, parking facilities and merchandise,” read an article published in *The Grand Rapids Press* on August 10, 1959, the day before both stores opened.

Over time, the shopping center expanded to accommodate four

businesses, including a relocated Finer’s Drug Store, a restaurant, and the addition of a five-bay automotive service center at Miracle Mart. When Miracle Mart filed bankruptcy and closed in 1967, Helms diverted his attention from land development to retail operations, opening the Helms Department Store, complete with an appliance center in the former drugstore space. Other tenants of the building at that time included Meijer, First Lady Coiffures, and Golden Eight Ball.

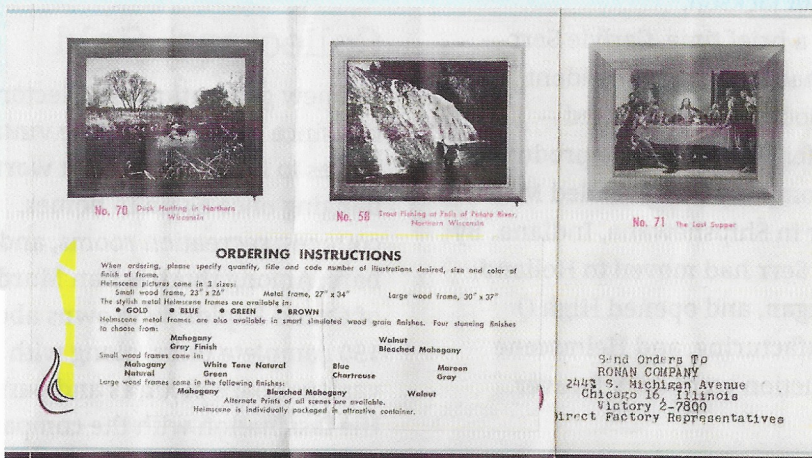
That venture was also short-lived for Helms—whether by his choice is not known. In April 1970, he sold the Plainfield Avenue property—including the acreage, 100,000-square-foot main building, and 10,000-square-foot manufacturing facility in the rear—

to Meijer. The West Michigan-based grocery giant immediately went to work converting the entire store into one of its Thrifty Acres department stores, which opened on November 3 that year. Meijer still operates a store at 3757 Plainfield Avenue SE, in a \$6 million building that was dedicated in April 2008. The old 1950s building was demolished.

As for Woodlin Metal, the company—a division of the Muskegon Motor Specialties Co.—ceased Michigan operations on February 12, 1960, sending its window production to Texas and putting its picture and table division up for sale. With the closing, 100 people lost their jobs, and weeks later, the office and factory equipment were put up for auction.



This Helmscene Illuminated Pictures brochure promises “magnificent, rich full color” on every illustration. (Photos courtesy of Dan Murdock.)



The April 27, 1960, issue of the *Battle Creek Enquirer* reported that Frank Binder, owner and operator of the Detroit-based Sun-Lite Manufacturing Co., purchased the buildings and 7.5 acres of land from Woodlin for \$108,000 at a public auction. Interestingly, another article ran in the same paper on November 3, 1961, noting that “Fabricators, Inc., formerly of Lapeer, has announced the purchase of the old Woodlin Metal property on Marshall Avenue from Muskegon Motor Specialties Corp. of Jackson.”

For a brief time, Carlyle Serr—who had been vice-president at Woodlin when it closed—transferred Helmscene production to a company he ran called Modern Décor in Shipshewana, Indiana. By 1963, Serr had moved to Holland, Michigan, and opened High Q Manufacturing, and Helmscene production went dark forever.

A Helmscene depicting Glen Lake near Sleeping Bear Dunes. (Photo courtesy of Tom Wilson & Christine Byron.)



Collectors' Gold

A new generation of collectors has since discovered those vintage pieces to be a shining light worth hanging once again in homes, cottages, recreation rooms, and bars. Among those is Dan Murdock of Grand Rapids, who owns about 150 complete units, along with various spare pictures and parts. His fascination with the company began during childhood when his family would drive along Plainfield Avenue at night as a large color wheel projected rotating hues of red, green, yellow, and blue on the white Helms building.

Murdock acquired his first illuminated picture in the late 1980s and, over the years, became known as the “Helmscene Man”—even coordinating an exhibit of his pieces at the Dynamite Gallery near downtown Grand Rapids from December 2001 to January 2002. In the late 1990s, Murdock also acquired a large leather-bound folder directly from Travis Helms full of product-order forms, advertisements, news clippings, photographs, and other items related to both Helmsscenes and the Helms Industrial Development Company. At some point, Murdock says he will likely donate those

historical items to the Grand Rapids Public Library.

So, if a picture is worth a thousand words, what is the value of an illuminated Helmscene picture? Sellers at antique shops, estate sales, and online sites such as eBay are asking—and getting—top dollar for the rarer images. It is not uncommon for collectors to drop \$250 or more for even the smaller desk lamps because of their limited availability.

Laurence Helms died in August 1987 at the age of 79 and is buried alongside his family at Blythefield Memory Gardens in Belmont, Michigan. He and his wife, Velma, had two children—son Corlane and daughter Lavonda. A Scoutmaster, organizer of the Helms Clowns Baseball Team, and member of several local organizations, Helms is remembered for bringing light to his community—and to mid-century living spaces across the United States.

Dianna Stampfler is the president of Promote Michigan and the administrator of the Helmscene Collectors group on Facebook. She proudly has four Helmsscenes hanging in her office.

A newspaper advertisement for the Helmscene Tri-Lite lamp. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, *Chronicling America*.)