



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### When polar bears overlooked North Washington Street

*Alexandria Times, March 14, 2013*

Image: Frozen Custard stand, 901 N. Washington St. Photo, Office of Historic Alexandria.

The curious sculpture of a waving polar bear seen in front of the Hot Shoppes in last week's column was actually one of a pair that stood at 901 N. Washington St. from 1939 until 1963. Herbert Beck, a Washington businessman, built a small chain of frozen custard emporiums in the late 1930s and maintained locations in and around the nation's capital, including Alexandria and Silver Spring.

Beck's ice cream stands were identical, as seen in this photograph, and built in a style that would later be heralded in the 1977 book, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, by renowned Philadelphia architect Robert Venturi with his wife and partner, Denise Scott Brown. Venturi and Scott Brown eschewed the homogenization of the American roadside landscape and banality of modern architecture during the '60s and '70s.



They called attention to the vibrancy of two earlier, but unnamed, architectural forms designed to attract the attention of speeding motorists, which they called the "duck" and the "decorated shed." The duck style, named for New York's famous Big Duck, referred to any building whose form mimicked its product, such as the Long Island poultry shop shaped like a duck or the Lexington, Ky., drugstore shaped like a mortar and pestle. The decorated shed referred to a basic box-like structure enhanced with wild, often shocking finishes or elements to promote its contents, such as Beck's frozen custard shops.

Each of Beck's square igloos, also known as "The Polar Bear," was a basic one-story structure, covered in white stucco and embedded with shards of broken mirror to give the impression of shimmering ice. Cement icicles were fixed atop the rooftop and hung precariously from the shed roof over the walk-up window.

But certainly the most prominent features were two flared walls that projected outward from the front facade, forming circular pedestals for the life-size, friendly polar bears that beckoned passers-by to the arctic.

*"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical*



**Office of Historic Alexandria  
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*images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*