

# Fighting Big Oil and Winning: The Rise and Fall of Harold Geiger

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## Abstract

Historical appraisal of gasoline stations has previously been limited primarily to their growing association with Big Oil in the twentieth century. Research emphasis has included: branding, architecture, place-product packaging, and the attrition of small independent operators, a withering which reached a crescendo in the 1970s. The middle ground of multiple station independent ownership in regional or metropolitan settings remains largely unexplored. Based on oral sources, this paper traces the emergence and growth of a 134 - station 'empire' of independent discount retail gasoline stations in Buffalo/Niagara Falls. Now in their late 80s, Harold Geiger and his wife Patricia bought their first Buffalo, NY gasoline station in 1967. Creative financing added three dozen stations within a decade. Thereafter, rapid expansion relied on cheap but not "Big" oil imported from Montreal. The Geiger-owned stations achieved recognition without branding, without distinctive architecture or signage, with canny location choices, impressive price competition, early adoption of self-service, and even with a foretaste of the minimart revolution. However, their near-ascendancy in the 1970s could not survive an oil crisis.

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