A Century of Signs

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Sponsored by the Cornelius O’Brien Lecture Series
Mission Statement

To celebrate the rich history of American signage through preservation and education.
Milestones: A brief history

• Founded in 1999

• Opened in April 2005 in rented space of 4500 sq. ft.

• Purchased 40,000 sq. ft. abandoned factory in October 2009

• After a $3.5 million renovation, opened at present site in June 2012 in 20,000 sq. ft.

• Currently expanding into the remaining 20,000 sq. ft.—a $5.5 million campaign
A walk through the American Sign Museum is more than a lesson in the history of signs . . .
It is a visual survey and walk through the history of America as told through the history of signs.
It’s the history of American . . .

- Design
- Technology
- Commerce and marketing
A technical introduction to the history of sign materials and fabrication techniques begins at the top of the ramp.
Photo credit: Wayne Clause
Large or small, illuminated or non-illuminated, there was a variety of materials from which the sign industry could draw from to create all types of signs.
Electric Signs in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century

- Pre-Neon or Lightbulb Era: 1900 -- late 1920s
- Heyday of Neon: Mid 1920s – late 1960s
- The Age of Plastics: Late 1940s – late 1970s
- CAD/CAM and LEDs: 1980s – present
The Modern Age of Electricity: Growth and progress is probably no more evident than in the new sign spectaculars . . . headlined by The Great White Way.
Signs could be very large. There were very few restrictions on sign size, placement or brightness at the turn-of-the-century. This would change as signs proliferated . . .
Lightbulb Era: 1900 – late 1920s
One style of lightbulb-illuminated sign created the stroke of a letter by single rows of lightbulbs
Others used glass “buttons,” which were threaded and screwed into the sign face, creating the stroke of a letter. These too were internally illuminated.
The incandescent lightbulb was only available in clear glass, so the ever-inventive sign industry developed lightbulb “caps” to fit over the clear lightbulbs and create a color palette of light.
Another style used these slump-molded opal glass letters which were pushed through a sign’s face and internally illuminated from within the sign cabinet.
Side view shows the dimensional, or embossed, glass
Theaters used changeable, lightbulb-illuminated letters on their readerboards to announce the latest attractions.
Note “L” bracket above and below the hand, and wire coming from bottom of letter, which is plugged into an outlet behind the wall.
Metal changeable letters were also used on theater marquees. They were positioned on a track against a white milk glass background face, which was internally illuminated.
World War I: A call goes out to the sign industry from President Wilson . . . but “Lightless Nights” follow, and in turn, a new awareness of the value of signs.
Despite the “Lightless Nights” setback, the sign industry got behind the war effort.
The electric sign industry rebounded in the post-war era, aided by a backlog of work and a new campaign—”Tell the World with Signs”—initiated by *Signs of the Times* magazine.
The heyday of neon: Mid 1920s – late 1960s
Neon was a significant development for the sign designer. It not only offered flexibility of shape, but eventually, a greatly expanded color palette. Nevertheless, neon’s adoption by the sign industry was gradual.
The Neon Era bridged the period between Art Deco and Mid-century Modern.
Late 1940s art deco neon sign. Shreveport, LA. Unknown manufacturer. Sometimes it’s difficult to discern between late 1930s and late 1940s design. There were basically new electric signs made during World War 11. When sign production resumed after the war, designers picked up where they left off in the late 1930s.
Early 1930s art deco neon sign. Flexlume Sign Corp., Buffalo, NY
Early 1950s neon sign. Manufactured by Gust Mitchell Signs, Pittsburgh, PA
Ovals were big in the 1950s. Notice also the lower case, “g.” Very 40-50s
Late 1950s Big Bear Grocery. Columbus, OH (unknown manufacturer)
Mid 1950s neon sign. Kansas City, MO (unknown manufacturer)
Early 1960s neon and lightbulb sign. Los Angeles, CA. (unknown manufacturer)
Not all neon was dramatic. Sometimes it took a more subtle look such as in this Art Deco salesman sample . . .
. . . or this 1950s salesman sample
WWII: The sign industry offers significant support; electric sign production comes to a halt . . .
They're painting up on Guadalcanal... Sign Shop and they're using Sherwin-Williams.
The Plastic Era: Late 1940s to late 1960s
“Plastics. That’s the future . . .”
The first plastic letters were flat, and glued onto a flat or corrugated plastic face. Vacuumforming and injection molding soon followed, offering more dramatic dimension to letters as well as sign faces. . .
The first production vacuumformed plastic sign
Plastics were not only used for outdoor signs, but for indoor, point-of-purchase, signs as well as this ad illustrates.
Lightbulbs never really went away, they just took a backseat to first neon . .
And then plastic . . .
Or even neon and plastic . . .
Nor did neon go away for that matter . . .
In the 1950s, a new “Tell the World with Signs” logo was unveiled.
The early 1960s saw the renewal of Scrap Old Signs programs across America. These public service efforts were complimented by an official Sign Week, highlighted by “sign parades.”
With the enactment of the Highway Beautification Act in 1965, coupled with urban renewal efforts, sign codes became ever more restrictive. The book *Street Graphics*, published by the American Planning Association in 1971, further promoted such restrictions. There was little concern for sign preservation and/or restoration.
Case Histories

Pledge of Allegiance

Satellite Shopland

Big Boy
Kona Lanes

Regal Boot

Speedee McDonald
I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.
• Close-up

Photo credit: Pete Phillips 1992
Slingshot is “embossed” into pants vs. a full three dimensions
1950s neon sign. Costa Mesa, CA (unknown manufacturer)
Close-ups of individual letters: In the retrofit neon version (right), the original light sockets were removed and “plugged” with metal, except for two “holes” which became opening for glass housings. In the “restored” lightbulb version, we simply removed the plugs and installed light sockets.
1963 Speedee McDonald sign. Huntsville, AL.
CAD/CAM and LEDs: 
1980s to the present, 
or . . .
The Golden Age of Sign Preservation?
Conclusion

There seems to be little information readily available to the historic preservation community on the subject of vintage signs. The American Sign Museum would like to explore ways it might fill that void and become a resource for all.
Open Wednesday through Sunday
10:00 am – 4:00 pm
www.americansignmuseum.org