

# TAKE TO THE ROAD

TO DISCOVER THE HISTORY AND ARTISTRY  
OF NORTH AMERICA'S DISAPPEARING NEON SIGNS.

**NEON ROAD TRIP** chronicles the North American history of the commercial neon sign with a curated collection of photography capturing the most colorful and iconic neon still surviving today. Signs in the book are located in British Columbia, Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Sixteen of the most iconic landmark signs include brief histories of how that unique sign came to be.

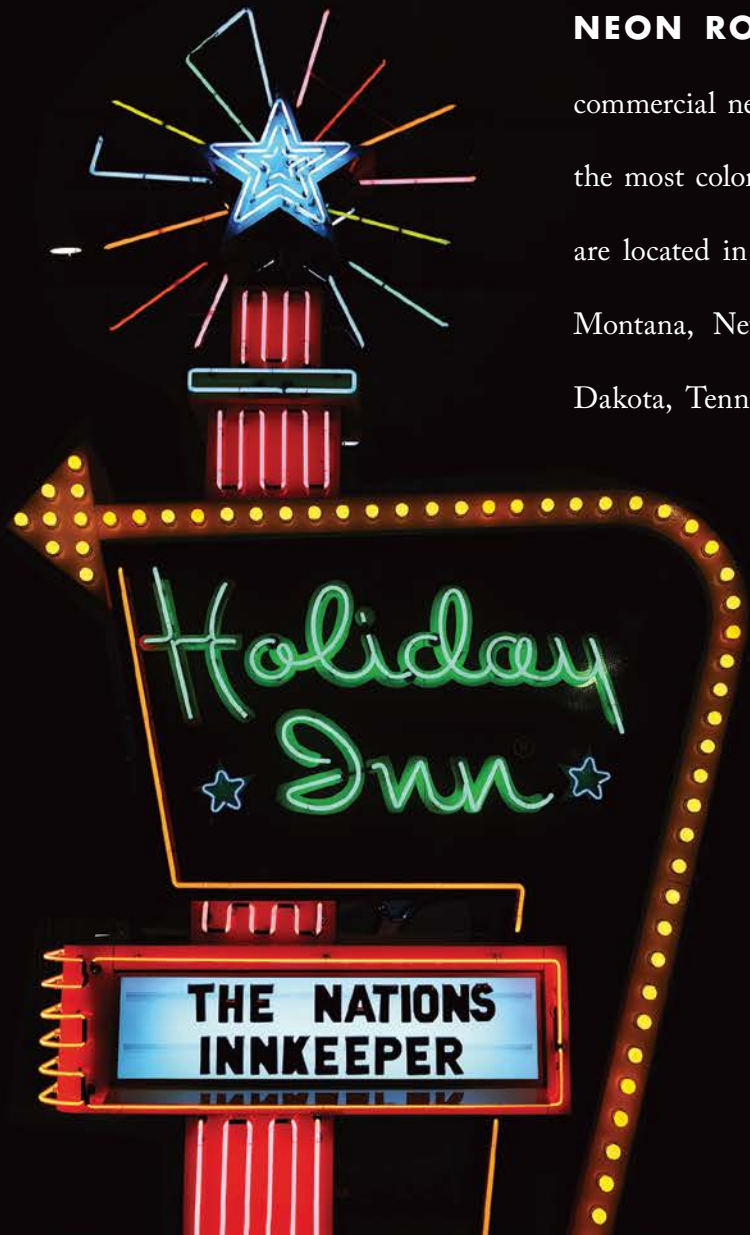
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NEON ROAD TRIP

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GIBBS  
SMITH



*Road Trip*

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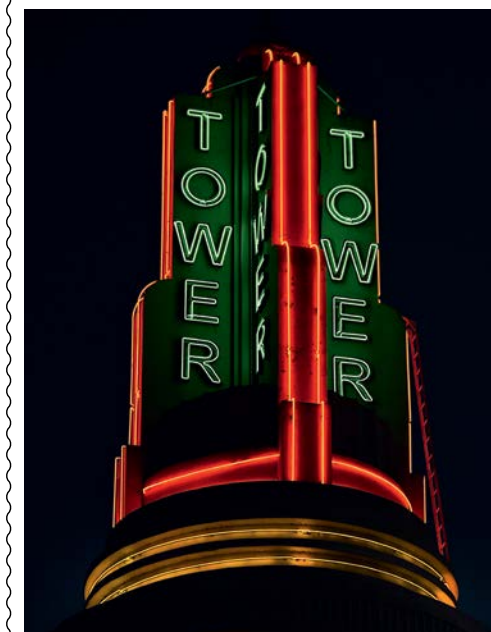
# INTRODUCTION

This neon road trip began, for me, in Sacramento in 1978 while pursuing my bachelor of fine arts in photography. Like a lot of municipalities around the country at the time, Sacramento City Council had proposed an ordinance that would restrict the use of neon lighting in exterior signage. The publicized argument against neon signs was that they were a distraction to motorists—but the real reason was the exodus of residents to the suburbs. The sudden loss of business revenue and foot traffic left most urban city centers looking vacant and run-down, and city planners across the country were desperately looking for solutions to reverse that trend.

As an artist and documentary photographer, I could appreciate the simple graphic beauty and brilliant colors that are the trademark of most iconic neon signs. It seemed to me that not only were these iconic signs part of our cultural heritage, they were also an unrecognized folk art form: even the simplest signs took skill and artistic sensibility to produce,

and they were beginning to disappear. As the city council sought to eliminate these works of art, I began to photograph what I considered iconic or graphically interesting neon signage around Sacramento.

In the years that followed, my interest in



**FACING:** Gunther's Ice Cream, Sacramento, CA.  
**ABOVE:** Tower Theatre, Sacramento, CA.

neon grew and I continued to photograph both interesting and historic signs at home or abroad. A couple years ago, I visited the “Boneyard” of the Neon Museum in Las Vegas. During the tour it dawned on me how much of our neon heritage we have lost. The next evening I went out in search of the remaining neon signs—in a city that was renowned for neon—and found only a few. Back in Sacramento, I discovered most of the signs that I had photographed years earlier were gone. Thankfully, the Tower Theatre and Tower Records signs were still intact, along with Gunther's Ice Cream, the Club Raven, and the Crest Theatre.

Over the next two years, I traveled around the US and Canada searching for and documenting the remaining iconic neon signs. The process involved a lot of research and a lot of cruising around at night looking for working signs. This book is a chronicle of that trip: a curated collection of photographs that capture the most colorful and iconic neon signage in North America still surviving today.



# A BRIEF HISTORY OF NEON SIGNAGE

**B**eginning in the 1930s to about the mid-1970s, neon signs were a ubiquitous icon of the American highway and urban scene. Traveling along America's highways at night, neon signage would emerge on the horizon every few miles with the promise of food, drink, and a good night's sleep—their luminous brilliance competing with the stars to light up the sky. In small towns and big cities, practically every mom-and-pop motel or store had a neon sign out front; every movie theater had a neon marquee. Many of the signs were beautiful works of folk art, creatively designed and fabricated by skilled craftsmen.

While neon's ostentatious element made it ideal for advertising, it has more recently also attracted contemporary fine artists who realize its unique potential to blur the lines between commercial and visual art. The scientists who discovered neon in the late nineteenth century could not have imagined what fabricators and artists would do many years later, experimenting with traditional techniques in

new and inventive ways. The new generation of light benders have helped revitalize neon, taking it from an advertising tool into an accepted art form.

While working in their London laboratory in 1898, two British chemists—Sir William Ramsay and Morris William Travers—first discovered the four main gases that would later be used to produce neon signs. Not much was done to commercialize the use of krypton, neon, xenon, and argon at the time. However, in 1902,



**FACING:** Wool Growers Restaurant, Bakersfield, CA.  
**ABOVE:** Epcot, Walt Disney World, Orlando, FL.

a French engineer and inventor named Georges Claude began to produce industrial quantities of neon, a by-product of his company's air liquefaction process. At first, Claude tried to sell sealed neon tubes as an interior light source, but the color intensity scared away most customers. His first public display of a large neon light came at the Paris Motor Show in 1910. At the same time, an associate of Claude's began selling the tubes to be used in advertising, and by 1913, a large sign advertising Cinzano vermouth illuminated the Paris sky.

It took almost another decade before neon advertising was introduced in North America. Earle C. Anthony, an American businessman and philanthropist who worked in advertising and automobiles, purchased two large "Packard" signs in 1923 from Claude's company for his car dealership in Los Angeles. People came from all over just to stare at the signs, which at the time were described as "liquid fire" and were so bright they were visible in broad daylight. Shortly after, neon advertising signs began to pop up

# THE FOUR GASES

# USED IN “NEON” SIGNS



## KR KRYPTON 36

**KRYPTON** was the first of several noble gases discovered by Sir William Ramsay and Morris William Travers in May 1898. Krypton is an element with the symbol Kr and an atomic number of 36. Like the others mentioned here, it is a noble gas, odorless and colorless, but unlike neon and argon, krypton occurs only in trace amounts in our atmosphere. The name krypton comes from the Greek word *kryptos*, which means secret or hidden. When exposed to high voltage, krypton emits a greenish-yellow light. In advertising signage, krypton is most often used with painted or stained glass tubes to create an array of different colored light.

## XE XENON 54

**XENON** is an element with the symbol Xe and an atomic number of 54. The name xenon is derived from the Greek word *xenos*, which means foreign or strange. Xenon was discovered in 1898 by scientists Sir William Ramsay and Morris William Travers shortly after they discovered neon and krypton. It is a dense, colorless, and odorless noble gas. It is somewhat rare in our atmosphere and therefore moderately expensive to produce. When charged with high voltage it produces a bright lavender light. Xenon is not often used by itself in sign lighting but is more common in strobe lighting for photography.

## NE NEON 10

**NEON** is an element with the symbol Ne and has an atomic number of 10. It is a noble gas, which is inert, colorless, and odorless. The name neon was derived from the Greek word *neos*, meaning new. Neon makes up a fraction of the air we breathe, and is about two-thirds as dense as air. It is inexpensive to produce and the most commonly used gas for signs. Neon has a distinctive reddish-orange glow when used in high-voltage neon advertising. Only small amounts of the gas are needed to make a neon sign. Even though the signs use high voltages, their energy consumption is very low, making them cheap to operate.

## AR ARGON 18

**ARGON** is an element with the symbol Ar and the atomic number of 18. Like neon, argon is an inert, colorless, and odorless gas. It is the third most abundant gas in our atmosphere. The name argon is derived from the Greek word *argos*, meaning lazy—it was named that because of its chemical inertness. Argon produces a faint blue-green light. Typically a small amount of mercury, which creates an ultraviolet light, is added to argon to produce a stronger and more vibrant blue. An array of other colors can be created from this combination by coating the inside of the tube with phosphors paint. In colder climates, helium is sometimes added to help heat the gas.

## TOWER RECORDS

Clayton Solomon opened Tower Cut-Rate Drugs next to the Tower Theatre in Sacramento in 1940. His son, Russ, worked in the store making soda drinks, stocking shelves, and sweeping floors. At sixteen, Russ began selling used jukebox records in the back of the store.

In 1949, Zeon Electrical Products designed and installed a “Kids Dancin’ on a Record” neon sign on the Tower Drugs building. The sign had a *Happy Days*-esque, rock-around-the-clock feel to it, with two kids shown dancing atop a 45 record. The animated sign made it appear as if the kids’ legs were moving, and the music bars in the background flashed.

In 1960, Russ Solomon opened his own record store across town on Watt Avenue and named it Tower Records after his father’s drug store. Eight years later, he opened a store in San Francisco and another store in Los Angeles three years after that. At its peak, Tower Records

would become the largest record store chain in the world, with nearly two hundred stores in eighteen countries, ultimately changing the record industry forever.

In the late ’70s, Sacramento passed laws restricting neon signage and outlawing animated neon signs. Even though the Tower Drugs sign was exempt, possibly due to its charm and historic status, it was eventually taken down and stored on the roof of the building. During the 1990s, the sign was restored and once again installed on the building of the original Tower Drugs store, above what is now the Tower Cafe.

Within a decade, with the advent of digital recordings and the emergence of online music, the writing was on the wall for Tower Records. In 2006, the music finally stopped, but the “Kids Dancing on a Record” neon sign remains and is now officially a Sacramento landmark.

FACING: Tower Records, Sacramento, CA.





# DIVERS, MERMAIDS & LADIES

**W**omen have been a popular depiction on vintage neon signs for well over half a century: whether diving off the high board, lounging in a cocktail glass, or twirling a baton, large-scale neon signs employed the feminine allure to attract customers. Beginning in the 1950s, diving ladies lit up the entrances of hotels and motels to advertise a swimming pool. Mermaids became a popular representation for seafood and chowder houses, while perky neon waitresses in front of diners indicated burgers and shakes were on the menu.

**FACING:** Vegas Vickie, Las Vegas, NV.



## THE DIVING LADIES

**B**eginning in the 1950s, motels and hotels with swimming pools featured diving lady neon signs indicating there was a pool on the premises. It is believed that the first diving lady neon sign was built in 1950 for the Virginia Court Motel in Meridian, Mississippi, after a pool was installed. The piece was fabricated by the Gaddis Sign Company as a stand-alone sign located near the pool.

At their peak, there were hundreds of diving ladies sculpted from neon throughout the US. Today there may be less than a dozen truly vintage diving ladies left.

Who was the inspiration for the diving lady neon signs? Many people think it was Esther Williams—a well-known movie star in the 1940s and '50s, renowned for her swimming ability. But the more plausible inspiration was the logo for Jantzen swimwear which, by 1925, had already become an internationally recognized brand. When the Jantzen Diving Girl first appeared in advertisements beginning in 1920, she wore a red suit and red bathing cap. By the 1940s, the cap was gone and she wore a strapless red suit.

The most iconic diving lady neon sign stands in front of the Starlite Motel in Mesa, Arizona. When the sign was originally built, it was seventy feet tall

and was the tallest structure in Mesa at the time. The sign is animated: every ten seconds a neon blonde lady in a green one piece suit takes a three-part dive from her perch into a small pool of blue water. On October 5, 2010, during a severe storm, the sign toppled and crashed into the parking lot below. All the neon tubing broke and most of the sheet metal was a wrinkled mess. The owner did not intend to rebuild the sign and was planning to sell what remained of it as scrap. However, donations soon came pouring in from all across the country to restore the sign. Restoration was done by Graham's Neon and took two and a half years to complete. The project cost \$125,000, but in the end almost

90 percent of the diving lady's original material was repaired and reused in the restoration.

On April 2, 2013, right at dusk, the fully restored "Diving Lady" resumed her three-part dive.

**FACING:** Diving Lady, Starlite Motel, Mesa, AZ. **BELOW:** Diving Lady, Museum of Neon Art, Glendale, CA ([www.neonmona.org](http://www.neonmona.org)).







**ABOVE:** True Blue Tattoo, Austin, TX. **RIGHT:** Club Raven, Sacramento, CA. **FACING:** Swan Dive, Austin, TX.



