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NOVEMBER 2011



**RESURRECTING NEON:
LET THERE BE LIGHTS**
**TURNING BACK THE PAGES
OF ARIZONA HIGHWAYS**

Apache Drive-In, Globe

Glimmer of Hope

Looking back, it's hard to believe that the vibrant neon signs of the '40s, '50s and '60s were replaced by mass-produced, backlit plastic eyesores. But they were, to the point of near extinction. Fortunately, the losses have fueled attempts to save what's left, and the flickering radiance of neon is making a comeback. It's early, but there *are* signs of life.

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERENCE MOORE





Although it has a retro feel, the neon cowboy at Tucson's El Corral is a new addition to the Western-themed steakhouse.

For 50 years she dove from nearly 80 feet high, making a shallow blue splash at the bottom. In her turquoise bathing suit, her hair as perfect as her form, the diving lady repeated her performance 360 times per hour, 365 days a year. That is, until she plunged to the pavement in a pounding rain. It seemed unlikely she would survive.

Mesa Police surrounded the diving lady with yellow tape. Her loss felt like a crime.

The Starlite Motel's animated neon sign survived the opening of Interstate 10, the advent of LED, even the paving of the pool the diving lady once advertised. But as the years rolled by and the weather took its toll, it was only a matter of time. She eventually succumbed to a storm on October 5, 2010.

A welding point from a previous repair failed against the wind. The impact shattered the diving lady's neon tubes and dented her corroded head and hands. It looked like the end of an era. Then a couple of historic preservationists intervened.

Reporters covered every update on the diving lady's condition. The Society for Commercial Archaeology placed her at the top of its endangered roadside places list, dedicating \$250 toward her restoration. Fans sent money along with grief-stricken notes. Businesses offered labor and materials. The diving lady made more than 250 friends on Facebook.

Mesa's outpouring of support followed earlier events in Texas and Missouri, where neon fans in those states rallied to save other storm-topped signs. Yet even as the diving lady was being repaired, another landmark sign just down the street was quietly taken down and hauled away.

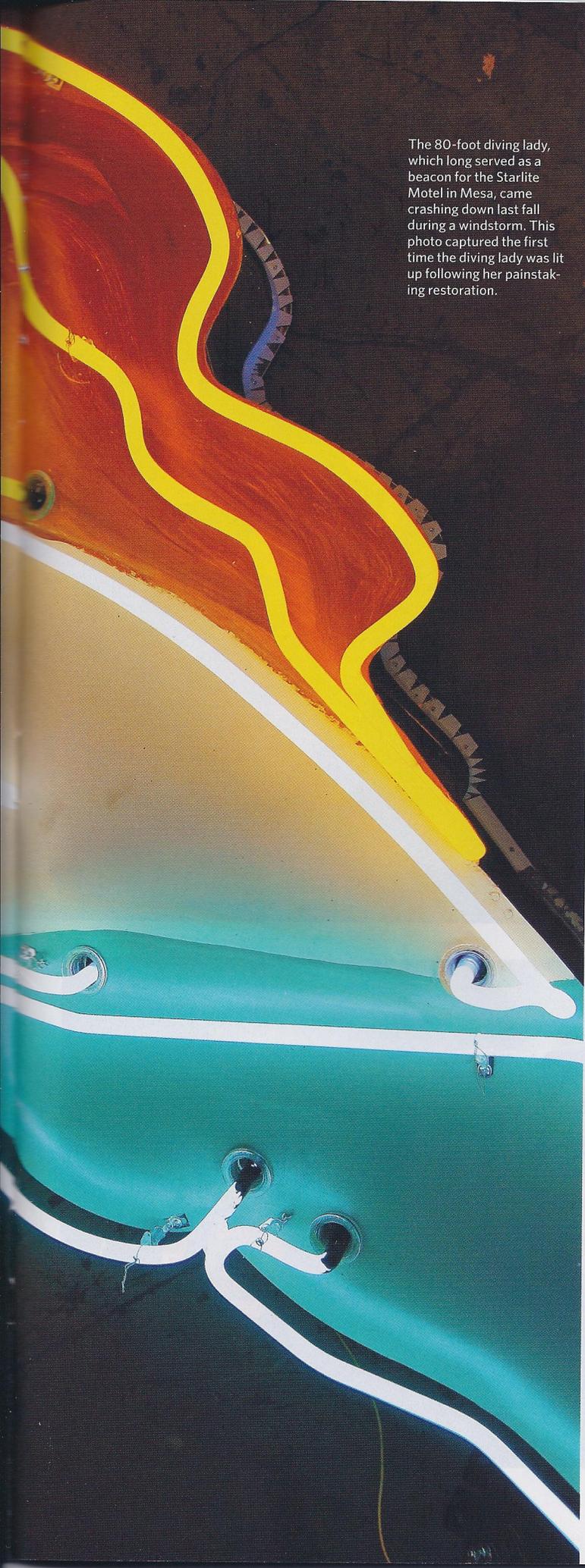
Admired for their artistry, their exuberance and, sometimes, even their downright gaudiness, vintage neon signs have been disappearing. The reasons are as old as commerce. Owners change, businesses evolve, new technologies replace old. Restrictive sign codes passed in many cities prevent their repair and restoration, forcing owners to tear signs down or let them rust until they fall.

The losses have fueled attempts to save what remains, with neon lovers storing signs in backyards hoping for a brighter future. Now neon is seeing new light. Once viewed only as part of a property, signs, themselves, can now be designated historic. Neon tours and museums draw crowds in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and neon auctions bring big bucks.



Larry Graham (right), the owner of Graham's Neon Electric Sign Specialists in Mesa, and Scott Houston worked to restore the diving lady to its former glory.

For 50 years she dove from nearly 80 feet high, making a shallow blue splash at the bottom. In her turquoise bathing suit, her hair as perfect as her form, the diving lady repeated her performance 360 times per hour, 365 days a year.



The 80-foot diving lady, which long served as a beacon for the Starlite Motel in Mesa, came crashing down last fall during a windstorm. This photo captured the first time the diving lady was lit up following her painstaking restoration.

Still, saving neon is not easy. Repairs are expensive and a dwindling number of artisans have the know-how. But neon signs can rally communities. Recognizing this, cities from St. Louis to West Hollywood have restored neon signs along Historic Route 66 with support and funding from the National Park Service. In Arizona, neon is breathing new life into neighborhoods in decline.

Today, we associate neon with mid-20th century America, but a French chemist displayed the first neon tubes at the Paris Expo in 1910, and the first commercial neon sign advertised a barbershop on the Champs-Élysées.

In this country, neon was fueled by a growing car culture, so it's fitting that a Los Angeles auto dealer installed the country's first neon signs in 1923. The two blue-and-orange Packard signs reportedly stopped traffic on Wilshire Boulevard. By the end of the decade, neon lit up Times Square and Las Vegas.

Meanwhile, cars were changing the country. As the town square gave way to growth along the highways, sign makers molded neon into an infinite variety of shapes and letters, and put them in motion.

In Arizona, motels with names like The Frontier, La Siesta and the Hacienda sprouted up along Historic Route 66 in the north, and on U.S. routes 80, 89 and 60 through Tucson, Mesa and Phoenix. Sporting neon images of teepees, dancing Indians and bucking horses, neon signs promised the mythical experience of the golden age of the Western.

"The best neon was in the late '40s and '50s," says Phoenix Historic Preservation Officer Barbara Stocklin. "It's part of the story of what was happening on Grand Avenue and Van Buren [in Phoenix], where the city was spreading out. So when you're on Van Buren and there are 15 hotels, how do you get attention? You have the bigger, flashier sign."

Despite a brief resurgence of interest, by the 1970s, neon was in decline. Flashing arrows gave way to an understated aesthetic. Mass-produced backlit plastic signs became cheaper to install and maintain. In the '80s and '90s, towns and cities across the country passed sign ordinances that made many neon signs nonconforming. Though grandfathered in, they couldn't be taken down for repairs and reinstalled without being brought into code.

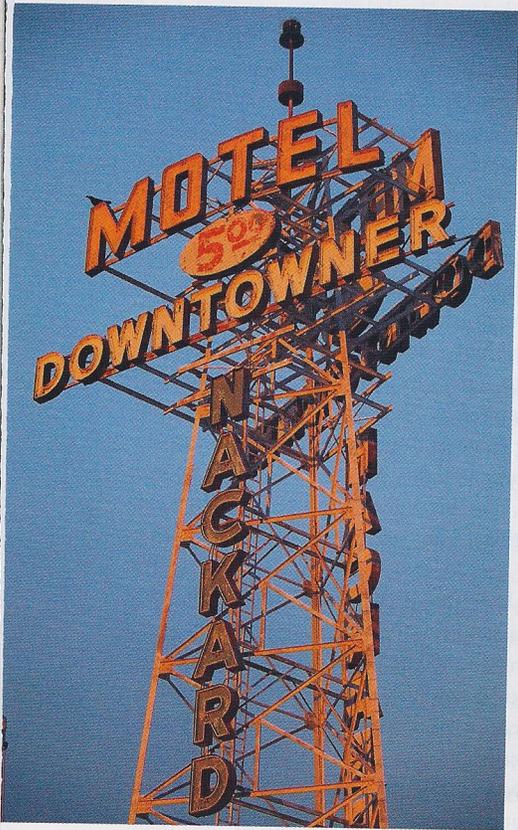
The Starlite Motel's diving lady perfectly illustrates the phenomenon. In Mesa, animated neon has been illegal since the mid-1990s. At 78 feet tall, she rises 66 feet over the maximum height allowed.

When preservation architect Ron Peters visited the Starlite in the wake of the storm, the owners were getting quotes to haul the sign away. Repair estimates were \$60,000 to \$65,000, 10 times the original cost of the sign and far beyond the reach of a small motel.

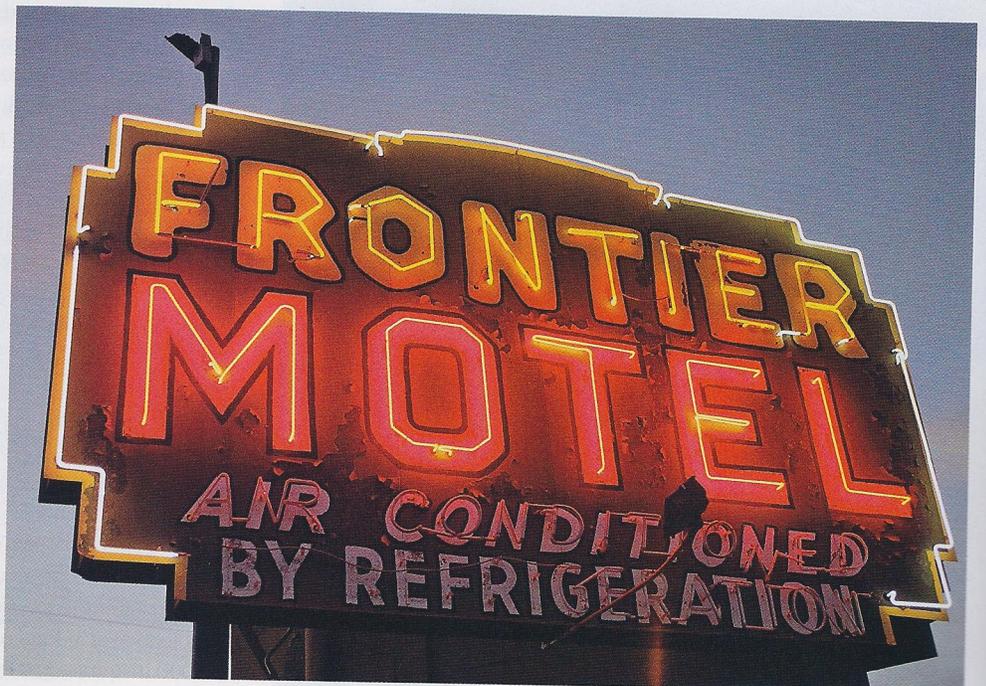
Peters offered to put together a group to take on the project. He and Victor Linoff had been discussing plans to form the Mesa Preservation Foundation. Their original intent was to save the Buckhorn Baths after the death of its owner, but the diving lady's plunge jolted the group into action.

"We came together and said, 'You know, this has really got to be a priority because they're going to haul it away,'" Peters says.

Recognizing the sign's importance, city officials supported a code variance, and the area's councilman raised the funds to pay for it. By April, the foundation raised half the cost of restoration through a combination of in-kind contributions and cash, including the Starlite's \$10,000 insurance settlement. Their plan was to list the sign on the



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT: Just one of many retro motels in Tucson, the Tucson Inn continues to light up the night with its colorful neon sign. Located next door to the Tucson Inn, the Frontier Motel is another relic from a bygone era. The Motel Downtowner in Flagstaff once lured tired drivers off Historic Route 66 with its \$5-a-night room rates.





National Register of Historic Places, place it under a conservation easement and reinstall it by the first anniversary of the storm.

In April, the first of three restored diving lady panels stretched across the display window of a former salon space at Fiesta Mall in Mesa to encourage donations. Peters and Linoff arranged interpretive panels on easels and imagined bigger possibilities.

They talked about some sort of designation for Mesa's Main Street and its remaining neon. A driving guide could include neon signs in Tempe and Phoenix. A museum exhibit could place historic postcards of neon signs on a map.

"That would be really neat, and that's something the foundation could do," Peters says. "But it takes time and money to put it together. We've got so many things on the burner we'll never get to all of them."

No place says neon like Historic Route 66, so it's not surprising that, nationally, neon restoration has been concentrated along that storied road. Associations in Missouri, Oklahoma and the city of West Hollywood in California have made restoring neon signs a priority. Many did so with matching grants from the National Park Service's Route 66 Corridor Preservation Office.

In Arizona, a few Route 66 businesses have restored their neon

signs, but mostly without National Park Service funding. Though the Route 66 Association in Arizona has applied for grants every year through the program, only two have been for neon. The first was in 2002, for the Frontier Motel in Truxton. Recently, it applied for a grant for the Route 66 Motel sign in Kingman.

Sharlene Fouser, a grant-funded employee, says the association has been more concerned with saving buildings.

"For a while, we were losing a property a month," she says. "If we don't have the building, the neon is a moot point."

Yet in some communities, neon has sparked enthusiasm for preservation and redevelopment.

"The focus of our office is not really neon, but we really like when neon projects come up," says John Murphey, a cultural resources specialist for the National Park Service. "They have a lot of return for their money. People will get off the Interstate to look at a neon sign, spend more time in town and maybe spend some money as well."

Murphey worked for the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office in 2002 when the New Mexico Route 66 Association facilitated Park Service grants to restore nine neon signs in Albuquerque, and saw a big impact.

"I think to put it in the context of economic development is really important," says Johnnie Meier, who headed the effort. "The owners were inspired to make further investment in their property. The city had renewed pride in their heritage. Other businesses looked at all the attention and they wanted neon."

Tucson is banking on that kind of excitement to revitalize one of its historic highways. Drachman, Oracle Road and present-day Miracle Mile once constituted the main route through Tucson on U.S. routes 80 and 89, collectively known as the "Miracle Mile Strip." But the area fell into

decline after Interstate 10 redirected the route's traffic.

City planner Rebecca Roupp says a grassroots revitalization effort began in the area about four years ago.

"The mid-20th century Miracle Mile was all there, and wonderful motor courts, many of them operating as motels," she says. "We didn't need to reinvent the area. We could build on what it had."

Part of what it had was some of the city's best neon.

Independently, as part of a one percent for arts program, artist Dirk Arnold built a large neon saguaro on Oracle at Drachman. He chose neon as a nod to the road's heritage, adding the words "Miracle Mile" on one side and "Tucson" on the other.

"That got people incredibly excited," Roupp says. "It shows how important small things are that you can see very quickly."

A comprehensive plan to preserve the city's historic neon spun off from the revitalization effort. The city began work to nominate the district for the National Register of Historic Places and revise Tucson's sign code.

"I was hearing from all sides that [neon] was becoming a real preservation issue," says Historic Preservation Officer Jonathan Mabry. "Our community was losing these signs at a rapid rate because the owners were tearing them down. People were coming in from out of town, buying these signs and taking them out of the community."

At press time, a proposed ordinance was headed for the Tucson mayor and council. It allows for the restoration of designated historic signs, which would not count against a business' sign allowance.

That should help, for example, the owners of the Pueblo Hotel, now a law office. "Out front is a beautiful sign from the hotel days of 'the diving girl,'" Mabry says. "It still says 'Pueblo Hotel, swimming pool, refrigerated air,' that sort of thing. All the neon is broken off, but it's a community landmark that everyone wants restored.

"Under this sign code, the owners could come in with a plan for restoring it, get the designation and, for the first time ever, be able to put the name of their law firm on the business."

The proposed sign code also allows for relocation of historic neon signs in areas where there is an existing density. By allowing reuse,

Mabry hopes to stem the loss to out-of-state buyers.

It will also allow the Tucson Historic Preservation Foundation to proceed with plans for a neon art walk. Four restored neon signs were expected to be installed along the historic Miracle Mile last summer. Publication of a driving guide of the city's best neon, paid for by an Arizona Humanities Council grant, was planned in conjunction with the opening.

Mabry admits that the process took time and thought. "There's a lot of sensitivity to tweaking the sign code," he says. But he believes the carefully crafted definition of qualifying signs will prevent abuse.

"It's a feel-good initiative," he says. "Once people understand it, they say, 'Oh yeah, I love those signs. We ought to find a way to save them.'" ■

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Sunland Motel in East
Mesa on U.S. Route 60.
The New Windsor Hotel
in downtown Phoenix.
The 30-foot Miracle Mile
sign was erected in 2010
as an homage to Tucson's
past. The Ghost Ranch
Lodge & Restaurant in
Tucson is now housing
for seniors.

