

HISTORIC SIGNS

By Ed Reis

Westinghouse W's North Side, Pittsburgh

For decades starting in the late 1960s, an intriguing Westinghouse sign blinked to Pittsburghers from atop the Westinghouse Supply Company (WESCO) building on the North Side, right across the Allegheny River from the Golden Triangle. Westinghouse touted it as the largest sign in the country.

Was it bigger than the Hollywood sign? Bigger than the Alcoa sign on Mount Washington overlooking Pittsburgh? Well, not really. Westinghouse said it was the largest sign in the country that didn't have a word in its makeup. Instead, the sign featured nine of the Westinghouse trademark: a W within a circle. Each trademark was 17½ feet high. Trademarks strung together, the sign measured 200 feet long.

The decision to create a sign without words was made based on the tremendous recognition the trademark enjoyed. This particular Westinghouse trademark was the company's eighth, introduced in 1960; seven years later, surveys showed 77 percent of people across the country identified it as the Westinghouse trademark. An amazing 97 percent of Pittsburghers recognized it.

The sign was lit up in 1967 with neon tubing—in official “Westinghouse Blue”—that if straightened and stretched would extend the length of 10 football fields.

The sign was divided into 10 sections: the top and bottom of the enclosing circle, the four diagonal strokes of the W, the three dots above the W, and the bar below, meaning that the entire sign had 90 individual elements to light in a vast array of sequences. That is, a bar could be lighted in the first trademark, and then the bar in the second, and so on. Then perhaps one of the three dots above the W, then the second dot, and the third dot and so on. When all 90 elements were lighted, the entire sign would blink on and off a few times, go blank, and then a new sequence would start.

There was a common perception, encouraged by Westinghouse Corporation,



The History Center's Westinghouse Historian Ed Reis holds a model railroad-scale version of the Westinghouse sign.

UP FRONT


Assembling the sign in June 1967. HC L&A, MSP 424, B 9, F 17.





that the sign's 90 elements could be lit in an infinite number of sequences and that no sequence was ever repeated. The perception persists but it is the stuff of "urban legend." Its actual programmed sequences, controlled by a Westinghouse P-50 computer at first, used only a subset of the mathematical possibilities. That didn't stop some CMU students and other ambitious mathematicians from calculating answers like 26.3 trillion possible sequences. Someone came up with 1.486 quintoquadrogintillion!

Surprisingly, there were actually four such signs: one each in Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Cleveland, and New York City. However, only the Pittsburgh sign had nine Westinghouse trademarks; the other signs had three—still with a significant number of mathematical sequence possibilities.

The WESCO building was vacated in 1998 and razed in 2002 to make way for PNC Park. An attempt was made to save at least one Circle-W unit for display at the History Center but the components were in very poor condition and the sign literally fell apart; nothing could be saved. The Westinghouse sign, a fixture on Pittsburgh's skyline for more than 40 years, vanished into the shadows of time. 

Ed Reis is the Westinghouse historian at the Heinz History Center.