



By Jennifer Baron

The Modern Café 862 Western Avenue North Side

Plenty of Pittsburgh celebrities have been worthy of tabloid attention, but only one Pittsburgh sign claims its own Facebook page, has been the victim of a hit and run, starred in a major Hollywood film, and been resurrected after a devastating New Year's Day fire.

This unparalleled Art Deco neon landmark has illuminated the corner of Western and Galveston avenues for more than six decades. Located at 862 Western Avenue in the historic Allegheny West neighborhood, the Modern Café has enjoyed a long and storied presence on Pittsburgh's North Side.

Owners and husband-wife team Irene and Dean Zotis say that the neighborhood tavern was established in 1933, fresh on the heels of the repeal of Prohibition. "My father bought it from the three original owners in 1974, and then when he retired in 1993, I bought it from him," says Irene Zotis, 55, who was raised in Dormont, the daughter of Greek immigrants, Sofia and George Bouzos.¹

When discussing the bar's massive, 800-pound sign, Zotis boasts that a large drawing of it by artist Charles Biddle even hangs in the Carnegie Museum of Art. "The sign is everything to us—nobody else has one quite like it. It's a magnet that draws people in. Everyone on the North Side knows us because of it." For a time, Art Rooney, Sr., was among

the bar's most famous local patrons.²

At 9.6 feet tall and two feet wide, the towering, double-sided sign features vivid white, uppercase lettering in both straight and angled typeface, a bright red backdrop, blue and white edging, and an eye-catching combination of horizontal and vertical beams that boldly call attention to the bar's corner entrance during both daylight and evening hours. In name and style, the sign remains one of the city's strongest examples of surviving Art Deco-era neon—bathing the corner in its signature green glow each night at dusk.

The distinctive landmark has caught the attention of more than just locals. In 1999, Hollywood came knocking when the Modern Café was part of a key scene in a major motion picture, *The Wonder Boys*, which had an all-star cast of Michael Douglas, Tobey Maguire, Robert Downey, Jr., Katie Holmes, and Frances McDormand. (Directed by Curtis Hanson, the film has further ties to town, as it was adapted from the 1995 novel by University of Pittsburgh graduate and award-winning author Michael Chabon.)

"They [the film's scouting team] found us because of the sign—it caught their attention and got them to come inside," explains Zotis. Thanks to Paramount Pictures, the retro bar received a number of interior enhancements.³

A year later, during a bitter winter day in 2000, the sign was again the site of a major series of events. As Zotis recalls, "An 18-wheeler truck came around the corner, and while making the turn,

smashed into the sign while trying to avoid a parked car."

The mishap extensively damaged the beloved beacon, which had to be dismantled to be refurbished. In describing the accident, Zotis underscores the sign's importance to the community. "It was heart-wrenching. That sign is everything to us. One of our customers actually chased the driver down, and my barmaid called me right away. The whole building shook, and they had to rope off the corner."⁴

Zotis feared the sign might lose its grandfather status, which allows it to hang above the sidewalk. Every year since 1948, the Modern's owners have paid \$41 to the City of Pittsburgh's Bureau of Building Inspection to receive a special permit to display the projecting sign. "I was afraid that if anything happened to it, we'd never get it back up because it was outlawed. The city inspectors came, and we made many trips downtown to the Historic Review Commission. Everyone wanted to see the sign go back up again."⁵

With assistance from insurance, the Zotises were able to cover the \$12,500 in repairs, which were completed by Pittsburgh-



Modern Café, 862 Western Avenue.

Photo by Carry RippeL.



Photo by Jennifer Baron.

based Shamrock Signs. Sign maker Paul Vandergraft says his company replaced neon, transformers, glass housing, and sheet metal; repaired the sign's damaged angle iron inner frame; and repainted the steel to match the original red, white, and blue palette. "The original sign had always been in great shape," adds Vandergraft, who believes it might have been fabricated by the now-defunct McBride Sign Company.⁶

Zotis is quick to point out that one authentic detail did not accurately match up with the original: "I was kind of disappointed when they brought it back because the neon was all one color. Originally, the neon on the words Modern and Café were two different colors."⁷

Reinstalled to its original position, the sign's brush with tragedy was far from over. Nine years later, on the first day of a new decade, the Modern Café was almost destroyed by a devastating fire. While the bar's interior had to undergo a complete rehabilitation, the sign fared well, with only minor dents and neon damage, later fixed by Strip District-based Seiferth Signs.

Among the archival material to perish in the tragic fire of January 1, 2009, were the Zotis' framed prints of black-and-white photographs culled from the University of

Pittsburgh's historic Pennsylvania image collections. One shot in particular shows Western Avenue in 1934, with the Modern Café's original square neon sign, a modest precursor to the enduring Art Deco landmark that today is drawing a new clientele and fans to the bustling neighborhood establishment.

While discussing the recent fire is difficult, Zotis remains positive about the Modern's metamorphosis—what she dubs a "work in progress"—which today includes launching a new lunch menu, craft beer selection, live music, trivia nights, and revamped deli.

She beams with pride when showing off a collage of photographs from *The Wonder Boys* shoot (which thankfully she displayed at home), emphasizing the power that her unique sign continues to command.

"Nobody has a sign like this. It is a work of art. I went to the History Center when it first opened with my daughter Constance on a school trip, as a PTA mom, and I saw the old Klein's Seafood sign and I said, 'Maybe my sign might be in there someday!'"⁸



Jennifer Baron is co-editor of *Pittsburgh Signs Project: 250 Signs of Western Pennsylvania* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2009) and Pop Filter Editor for Pop City Media.

¹ Irene Zotis. Interview with author, September 3, 2010.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Irene Zotis. Interview with author, September, 2010.

⁶ Paul Vandergraft. Interview with author, September 17, 2010.

⁷ Irene Zotis. Interview with author, September 13, 2010.

⁸ Ibid.