

UP FRONT

HISTORIC SIGNS

By Jennifer L. Baron

Wilson's Pharmacy

When neon signs flourished within America's built environment from the 1930s through the 1950s, it was common to see the word "DRUGS" lit up in bold, uppercase typeface on city blocks or small town main streets.

The term joined a long list of illuminated words that kept the country bathed in a

colorful wash of advertising, innovative design, and American entrepreneurial spirit. Other standards were *vacancy*, *open*, *theater*, *café*, *shoppe*, *loans*—some flashing, some rotating, or most just offering a constant glow and hum.

Neon signs of old have largely gone dark, replaced by ubiquitous plastic, bubble-style awnings and vinyl banners. Lately, however, there seems to be a resurgence of interest in old neon and neon technology as evidenced by the popularity of hit TV shows such as *Mad Men*, the recent opening of the American Sign Museum in Cincinnati, and creative blogs such as The Neon Project.

Original neon signage can sometimes be spotted at theaters, motels, and diners. Even more rare within the landscape of commercial archaeology is the mom-and-pop pharmacy, which has been replaced by big box chain stores, walk-in medical centers, and online prescription services.

Wilson's Pharmacy—standing out at the corner of one of the busiest intersections in Pittsburgh's East End—remains a shining example of the enduring relationship between independent business and neon signage.

For more than five decades Wilson's Pharmacy has been a fixture in the community—whether you call it Bloomfield or



Lawrenceville or even the Penn-Main Business District. The business is in a building that even boasts two zip codes: 15224 on Penn Avenue and 15210 on Main Street.

Located at 4101 Penn Avenue, the pharmacy is owned and operated by third-generation pharmacist Jeff Wilson, who views the shop's 4-by-12-foot neon sign as an asset. "Our sign has been here as long as I can remember," says Wilson, 58, who dates the neon marker to the early 1950s. Wilson, whose grandfather had the sign made, believes it may have been manufactured by the McBride Sign Company.¹

Recalling that a relative used to say that you "cannot go anywhere in Pittsburgh unless you cross the 40th Street Bridge," Wilson attributes much of the drug store's longevity to the high visibility location and the catchy corner sign. "A lot of people say they know us because of our sign. It probably has another 20 years of life left in it."²

The family-owned business was founded by Jeff's grandfather, Harry Wilson, in 1940, and was originally located on the other side of Main Street.

With its proximity to the former St. Francis Hospital—a longtime landmark that is now home to the 1.5-million-square-foot Children's Hospital campus—the bright white-and-gold neon of Wilson's has always been instantly recognizable to neighborhood residents, who are the majority of the store's customer base.

Housed since 1950 within the three-story brick building that once hosted an A&P grocery, the 1,200-square-foot pharmacy is staffed by 18 employees and regularly makes home deliveries. "People still tell me stories about my grandfather, [about] when they




would come in and sit at our counter to order a fountain drink or an ice cream sundae and stay all afternoon," recalls Wilson.³

Featuring a mix of cursive- and print-style—as well as uppercase and lowercase—lettering, the sign's economic yet elegant design utilizes neon to outline each word. A stylized script typeface spells the name Wilson, evocative of a signature that might be written by the resident pharmacist himself, while a modern, blocky, Art Deco-style uppercase typeface is employed for the word "DRUGS" to indicate the business within, and is repeated on the building's Main Street façade.

The sign's delicate, white-and-gold neon outline stands out against the façade's sleek black Carrara glass, a highly valuable building material popularized during the Art Deco era, making it visible from multiple vantage points.

Although Wilson appreciates the sign's craftsmanship, longevity, and design, and speaks fondly about neon signs he loved as a child, he confesses that he has considered replacing it. A conversation with Lawrenceville-based architect David Brenenberg provided a turning point for Wilson. A principal at Brenenberg Brown Group, located down the street from Wilson's, Brenenberg convinced Wilson of the sign's merit and staying power.⁴

"I am a big fan of neon signage, especially when it is something that is this old. I try to use neon in projects because it's a beautiful use of signage that's very decorative and lasts forever. I grew up in the area and have had my architectural practice here for 27 years. I always remember the Wilson's pharmacy sign being there. I talked him into keeping the sign and the glass because it's in good shape," says Brenenberg, who has designed research facilities, hotels, laboratories, and churches. "A lot of people look at old signs they grew up with and think that because they are old they need to change things or get rid of them. In some ways Jeff got past that. It's as good as new when compared to the chains and bigger stores."⁵

Brenenberg sees the neon sign as reflective of much more than light and color. "Jeff is selling family-owned helpfulness—he is selling that kind of attention and caring about the people in the neighborhood. To remove that sign would remove that history."⁶ 

¹ Jeff Wilson, owner, Wilson's Pharmacy, interview with author, March 4, 2011.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Brenenberg, principal, Brenenberg Brown Group, interview with author, March 7, 2011.

⁶ Ibid.