Turillo's Steak House

Many a traveler on the Lincoln Highway has stopped in Jennerstown, Pennsylvania, drawn by the sign at Turillo's Steak House. This third-generation family business offers fine steaks and salads and sports the town's oldest functioning neon sign, lit for 41 years and counting.

Located at 1618 W. Pitt Street/U.S. 30 in the heart of a town home to 716 people and one traffic light, Turillo's represents a fading breed of roadside steak houses that were once aglow with neon cows, arrows, and flames. Nestled within the Laurel Highlands 58 miles east of Pittsburgh, the town is named for Edward Jenner, the English physician who developed the smallpox vaccine. In 1957, Sam Turillo purchased The Hi Way Cafe from his father, remodeled the property, and incorporated it as Turillo's Steak House. He removed the building's Art Deco façade of beige and royal blue Vitrolite glass, added a vestibule and decorative stonework, and in 1966, installed the existing red and green neon sign.

A composite of geometric and organic shapes, the sign employs a vibrant palette, visual cues, and multiple typeface styles to attract motorists. The martini glass sits tilted at the top, and the rest of the sign's green, red, orange, white, and blue paint is lit by pink and white neon. Blocky uppercase letters announce the Turillo name, while a stylized Art Deco typeface (unusual for the 1960s) advertises the “steak house” and “bar” within. The sign is punctuated by a red arrow pointing to the restaurant entrance. As Lisa Mahar explains in her book, American Signs: Form and Meaning Along Route 66, “Large arrows were popular additions to signs, since they served both as expressive components that enticed and directed customers.”

Weyant Signs, once located in neighboring Stoystown, originally oversaw the sign's upkeep, then Lavely Signs of Johnstown (whose label still graces the sign) completed repairs until Lamar Advertising Company took over. In 2005, the sign received a new coat of paint. “We have the neon serviced every two years,” says Sutton, who notes that storms damage the neon and transformers.

Sutton sees the sign's glow as unique along the stretch of Route 30 through town. “I don't think there are other neon signs here anymore. The Laurel Motel hasn't been lit up in years.” Turillo's neon doesn't stop with its main sign, a simple “EAT” resides on the restaurant's side. There used to be more: rows

Pat and Sam Turillo are still regulars at the steak house now run by their children. Jennifer Baron
of neon tubing once traced Turillo's periphery, further animating its exterior, but they are now gone, believed to have caused a fire in the late '60s.

Life-long resident Teressa Stoughton Marafino says, "When I see other neon in the world, I realize that we have a really cool one here in Jennerstown." Marafino, who has chaired the Lincoln Highway Heritage Corridor and runs the Mountain Playhouse and Green Gables Restaurant on Route 985, hopes it can stay forever. "It's a wonderful piece of nostalgia that the Turillo family has preserved. I know I'm home when I'm coming from Pittsburgh and I see the sign."  

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Correction: In the Spring issue, the location of the Garden Theater was transposed. It is at 10-14 W. North Avenue, just down from Federal Street. The theater closed in April 2007 with hope that it can be restored and reopened.

1 http://www.jennerstownboro.com/OurBoro.asp
3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
8 Ibid.