Heinz Ketchup Bottle
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Until recently, Pittsburghers were reminded every 30 seconds of H.J. Heinz’s “57 Varieties,” as its North Side sign poured a sequence of red and white neon. Illuminating one of the world’s most popular products and dedicated in conjunction with Heinz’s 125th anniversary in 1995, the 42.5 x 32-foot sign was powered by—one believes it or not—57 amps of electricity. All of that wattage will soon have a new home, pouring atop the History Center.

The 17-foot bottle represents 800 gallons of the condiment that earned the tagline “If it’s not Heinz, it’s not ketchup.” Equal to the amount of time it takes to release one drop of the red stuff, the cycle repeats as the bottle empties into a 13 x 32-foot keystone, a logo that harkens to the company’s Pennsylvania origins.1

Local sign company AMG, whose clients include Pittsburgh International Airport and PNC, built the gigantic steel and aluminum structure. New York-based Robinson Kurtin Communications worked with Heinz staff to include the company’s corporate logo. The modern, rounded adaptation of the company’s original architectural keystone, dubbed a “smashed keystone” by some and a “bread basket” by others, is used on the back of Heinz products, on nearby Heinz Field, and on company letterhead.2

The sign, which was visible from downtown and to those traveling along Interstates 279 and 579, has outlived its original caretakers, yet it underscores the advertising acumen of company founder Henry John Heinz. Utilizing hillsides, rooftops, and even an ocean pier, Heinz was a marketing mastermind. As Eleanor Foa Dienstag, author of In Good Company: 125 Years at the Heinz Table writes, Heinz “possessed an unrivaled instinct for advertising and promotion.”3

The sign had been preceded by a pair of 30-foot steel “57s,” which Heinz installed on the plant’s roof at the turn of the last century. Until World War I, they were lit with 1,200 incandescent white bulbs. Replaced by a pair of green neon digits, they remained on view until the 1950s. Heinz also installed a neon “57” at Atlantic City’s Heinz Ocean Pier in 1898, and erected New York City’s first large electric outdoor sign at Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street two years later. In fact, Heinz strategically embedded concrete signs on hillsides near highways and railroad lines across the country. Once visible from Virginia to California, only one remains, now a historic landmark in San Francisco.

Ed Lehew, Heinz historian and steward of the company’s immense collection of signage, labels, and print ads sums up H.J. Heinz’s marketing savvy, which also included pickle pins and watch fobs: “He put advertising on everything.”4
"The thought was that it would become an iconic sign for the city," says Deb Foster, former vice president of Global Corporate Communications for Heinz, recalling the sign's design and installation. For its unveiling, Heinz orchestrated an over-the-top dedication ceremony that featured rooftop fireworks and a Gateway Clipper party for 600 employees. "The boat pulled up at dusk alongside the building. There was a giant ketchup bottle lever and CEO Tony O'Reilly pulled the switch to light the sign for the first time."

"People set up for tailgating ... and employees were given little flashlights to light up during the ceremony," continues Foster, who says that a local jazz club was asked to pause its live music during the momentous flick of the switch.1

The sign adorned Heinz's former Services Building, which is now home to the Heinz Lofts. The sign was part of a "transition agreement" made when Heinz sold brands and the building to Del Monte in 2002. "It was included in the agreement that the sign would remain up for a period of time," says Michael Mullen, Heinz's VP of Corporate Affairs.7

Gary Matson, who worked as Heinz's director of human resources notes, "Obviously they did not want to tear it down; they thought it was an important part of the city."8

Though removed in April 2007, the sign, which was donated to the History Center, will soon shine across the river in another historic Pittsburgh neighborhood: the Strip District. "It's a unique artifact," says Ned Schano, the History Center's director of communications. "It will be very visible from The Veteran's Bridge. Twelve million people pass there annually, inbound and outbound. People both inside and outside the city will recognize it and be drawn to it."9

The sign will be unveiled November 16, in conjunction with Pittsburgh's annual "Light Up Night" and a grand opening of the History Center's new-and-improved Heinz 57 exhibition, which will feature the official unveiling of the "Heinz Hitch," another way the company popularized its products across the country.10

1 H.J. Heinz Company press materials, Michael Mullen, VP of Corporate Affairs, H.J. Heinz Company.
6 Ibid.
7 Michael Mullen. Interview with the author. February 1, 2007.