Blue Flame Restaurant
Clairton, Pa.

The restaurant's towering flame-topped sign leans toward the four-lane, beckoning drivers who might otherwise think the Blue Flame is just another place to get a meal along a now-generic highway. The Blue Flame is more than just a pretty sign though: it's the intersection of family-run and big business.

In 1956, when Clairton native Les George was building a restaurant along State Route 51 in Jefferson Hills (a borough adjacent to the city of Clairton), Columbia Gas offered him an irresistible deal—if Les erected a sign advertising the company's services, they would give him special financing on heating and cooling. The result was an enormous blue and white neon sign that advertised the gas company through a creative name for the new mom and pop place.

The sign's white uppercase letters, in a classic Tiki font, are set against an angular blue backdrop. Beneath that, vacuum-formed plastic has a cursive "Restaurant" nestled in red. The 30-by-20-foot "Blue Flame" words glow fiery orange-red, while a pole-mounted animated flame evokes the blue hue of natural gas. The sign also originally nodded to a novel service the gas company was promoting: "We are now air-conditioned."
“Gas companies were trying to get into the air conditioning business commercially,” recalls Al George, who purchased the Blue Flame from his brother Les in 1979. Al’s wife Kathy, who began working at the Blue Flame in the 1970s, concurs: “In the 1950s, there was a lot of competition between electric and gas for businesses and homes.... Homes went up with huge advertising that they were all-electric. At that time, [the restaurant] settled on a deal that we would use nothing but gas.... I’m not aware of any other businesses that at the time were entirely gas.”

Route 51 was a main artery south from Pittsburgh to Uniontown but with little or only small-scale development. “It was pretty much a dark highway back then,” says Kathy, “and it lit up that portion. The neon sign was unique—there was nothing else there but farms.” The restaurant drew travelers as well as employees from the Westinghouse plant in Jefferson Hills. The plant closed long ago and traffic moves faster, but the Blue Flame maintains a steady clientele. George says, “In the 1970s, our biggest draw was Clairton Works. As the mills died out, we’ve pulled from further away—Uniontown and Pittsburgh.”

With an original dining capacity of 30, the Blue Flame has been remodeled five times and now seats 235. In the 1980s, a Columbia Gas employee gave the owners another sign, a blue plastic anthropomorphized flame that now hangs above the entrance, pointing to its namesake. The neon sign was enlarged 30 years ago after a motorist struck its base.

The Blue Flame’s neon is lit nightly from 6 p.m. till 2 a.m. The sign has been documented by film crews and newspapers, not to mention being an excellent photo-op: “I have a photograph of Governor Thornberg standing under the sign when the road was in bad shape,” boasts Al. Then he bustles off to greet the lunch rush.

**Blue Flame Restaurant**
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1 Al George, interview with the author. November 3, 2007. He was born in Clairton in 1933.
2 Kathy George, interview with the author, November 2, 2007.
3 Ibid.
4 Al George, interview.
5 Ibid.