

HISTORIC SIGNS

By Charles Biddle

Parkwood Inn  
Greensburg, Pa.

What do Alcoa, the Pittsburgh Hilton, Clark Candy, Mural Grill, Kotula’s Cafe, WAMO, Joseph Horne, New Granada, North Pole Ice Cream, Goodman’s Jewelers, Holiday House, Blue Dell Drive-In, Fox’s Grill, Venus Diner, Danny’s Hoagies, Evergreen Hotel, and Klein’s Restaurant all have in common? They are but a few of the region’s past and present businesses whose names were once written in neon light. Yet, all of these signs (in their original form) have been lost to time and the forces of economic change.

I have photographed signs for the better part of 25 years, all the while watching the mid-20th century heyday of neon disappear. What the losses have taught me is an appreciation for those signs that have endured the twists of fate and continue to serve their purpose with timeless design and the bonus of a shared history.

So it is with the sign at Parkwood Inn. According to Greensburg historian Lou DeRose, the sign likely originated after 1958, as the business that was Lou’s Bar was sold to Parkwood Brand Foods, then to Mark and Maria Zimmerman who operated it as the Parkwood Inn. The first time I photographed it in the 1980s, the sign was

intact, but its glass, metal, and paint showed the wear and tear of everyday roadside existence. What I found attractive was its near-perfect scale—easily read from two highways (US routes 30 and 119), the casual typeface arranged vertically with two giddy cocktail glasses toasting one another, and the last and perhaps most important feature: it was completely lit! This is not to be taken for granted.

Twenty years later, while driving by, I noticed the sign had changed. Its painted surfaces were sleeker, the light uniformly brighter. I was glad to have a second chance to photograph it in such beautiful condition. The image accompanying this article is the result of that visit.

The change came after it was purchased in the mid-’90s by Nick Altieri and June, Pete, and Nick Wast. They chose the road less traveled and restored the original sign rather than replacing it. They also stayed true to the 40-year-old time-honored sauce recipe for their pizzas. The current menu at the Parkwood also features a variety of appetizers, sandwiches, full dinners, and specials.

RK Neon of Greensburg restored the sign, including the neon tubes and the motor that spins it 360 degrees. RK was founded by Rocco Kannamico in 1952; the business has

since been passed on to his daughter Carol Wolfe and her husband Larry.

Larry, who has been at the company for over 30 years, told me that RK had worked on many landmark signs in Western Pennsylvania, including the Gateway, Fulton, and Fiesta theaters in downtown Pittsburgh. In addition, the company produced neon signs for Stoney’s Beer of Smithton, Pennsylvania. I appreciated the visit to the shop and the chance to see another regional neon sign, the Wagon Wheel Restaurant, currently being restored.

Because of the combined efforts of two longtime businesses, patrons of the Parkwood Inn are treated to the best of the past and present of a thriving establishment, a rare opportunity in today’s commercial landscape of rapid turnover and reinvention. If you’re going, I highly recommend a neon lit evening on the deck.

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Charles Biddle is an artist/photographer and a native of Western Pennsylvania. He loved the neon sign at his family’s Gondolier restaurant in West Elizabeth but has never found a photo of it.



The Parkwood Inn’s restored sign spins in the twilight dusk. © 2004 Chuck Biddle.