Up Front

Historic Signs

By Chuck Biddle

Bill’s Golfland, Belle Vernon, Pa.

Of the commercial roads in and around Pittsburgh, I have been familiar with Route 51 for as long as I can remember. In the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s, “51” teemed with signs of all shapes and sizes—from the Liberty Tunnels to Uniontown. The Echo, Colonial, and South Hills drive-ins, Johnny Garneau’s Golden Spike, Pinchera’s, The Ginny Lou Supper Club, Wesley’s Lanes, The Starlite Motel, The Blue Flame, Caesar’s Italian Restaurant, Eat n’ Park, The Theme, The Fireside, Barnhill’s, Train-O-Rama, The Lotus Garden, Revetta’s Steak House, Peasant Village, and Bill’s Golfland are just a sampling. With no two remotely alike, these glowing signs all provided a compelling invitation to pull in for a while. As a kid I thought they had been and would be around forever.

Among the number of signs listed above, only a handful continue today. Even fewer have been given new life by their owners and skilled sign makers. Happily, one that glows as brightly as ever is Bill’s Golfland in Belle Vernon. It would be hard to imagine how many patrons the sign has witnessed over five decades. The sign itself is a tribute to bold, minimal design and the power of one word in large, lit letters. According to current owner Bill Ruozzi, Safeway Signs in Donora designed and manufactured Golfland in the late 1950s. Bill estimates its original cost at a couple thousand dollars.

Recently, Signstat Signs in Jeanette completed its restoration. The end result is a beautiful example of what is possible with a desirable original structure and the will and knowledge to give it a new life. I spoke with Joel Haluck of Signstat about the details of his work. Using the original frame, he replaced the steel “skins” and painted and clear coated the letters with the aid of new drawings of the originals and a computer. New tubing was added, again according to the original design. Having removed the sign for two weeks to do the work, Joel estimates 80-100 hours of constant labor over that time to complete the job. Signstat has been in business for 17 years and has restored the ABC Motel in Ligonier and the Moose Lodge in Connellsville, and has also produced a new sign in the tradition of a steel “can” and tubing for Lucci’s in Harrison City. “Still the best way to make a neon sign,” Mr. Haluck said.

As it is with any sign of this age, there is a story that must be told to understand how it’s still doing its job after 50 years. Mr. Ruozzi and brother-in-law Jerry Franzaglio took some time to tell me about the history of the business. Before World War II, there was a driving range on the property owned by Edgar Dunn. When William Ruozzi, Sr., returned from the war, he drove a truck for the Childers Candy Company. He passed the driving range on his regular route. When the opportunity arose, he leased the driving range and opened Bill’s Golfland in 1947, eventually purchasing the property. William married Enis Ruozzi in 1948. From that time on, a variety of changes and improvements to the business led to present-day Golfland.

The driving range initially sported archery, until it became impractical due to
insurance concerns. The original stand was built in 1952, with the family living in a mobile home on the property, and then moving into a building that included the restaurant. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Bill’s was a Dari-Delite franchise. William Ruozzi, Sr., was president of the Dari-Delite Association by the late ’50s. During the franchise years, only ice cream was served. When an expanded food menu began at the restaurant, the ice cream franchise ended. Miniature golf was added in 1960. Five years later, a house for the family was built on the property.

In the mid-1980s, the Ruozzis added an enclosed deck and heat for inside dining. Currently the menu at Bill’s features sandwiches, dinners, seafood, salads, pizza, wings, and, of course—desserts. Activities and recreation include the driving range, miniature golf, deck hockey, sand volleyball, table tennis, a game room, and a golf and hockey pro shop.

When you cross the Elizabeth Bridge and drive a few miles south, 51 becomes less congested, and the hills roll gently. In the parking lot, as you face west in the evening, the tree line and horizon make it seem as if the sunset is right on top of you. All the more reason to stop in, have some ice cream, and enjoy Bill’s Golfland.

Bill’s Golfland
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