

ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK NEON SIGNS BY GEORGE FRANCK

While North Park has a handful of marvelous neon signs, it is surprising that there aren't more of these historic signs remaining in our community. Construction and remodeling of commercial buildings in North Park hit its peak during the years starting during the depression and continuing through the post-World War II building boom. The popularity of neon signs peaked during this same period, from the mid-1930s until the dominance of backlit signage in the 1960s.

History of Neon: Neon is derived from the Greek word “neos,” meaning “new gas.” Neon light can be documented back to 1675, when French astronomer Jean Picard noted that mercury in a sealed barometric tube emitted a faint glow. Another Frenchman, George Claude, created the first neon light in 1855 by applying an electrical charge to neon gas enclosed in a “geissler” tube.

The first neon lamp became available in 1902, but neon tubes were quite fragile and therefore difficult to ship. Local production of neon signs exploded when the patent for neon lighting expired in 1932.

Pekin Café: North Park's most elaborately detailed neon sign advertises a Chinese restaurant located just west of the North Park Theatre. The building was originally built as a furniture store in 1921; the *Cho Book You Restaurant* opened here in 1931. Following the repeal of prohibition, the restaurant emerged as a dinner house with dancing. To advertise this evolution, the restaurant's name was changed to the *Pekin Café* and the façade was modified in 1935 with the addition of this early example of neon signage.

Wink's Shoe Repair: Located on the Chito's Shoe Repair storefront at 2911 University Avenue, this animated neon sign was originally designed in 1949 for *Wink's Shoe Repair Shop* on Broadway in downtown San Diego. Wink's and this North Park shoe shop became part of the 30-store American Shoe Repair chain during the 1950s, with the owner moving the sign to North Park in 1960. On this neon can sign, an elf hammers on a shoe, with his arm and hammer moving into three positions. As the hammer strikes the shoe, neon sparks fly into the elf's eye, causing him to *Wink*. This sign has been designated as a San Diego Historical Resource.

North Park Sign: Purchased with money raised by the North Park community's business group and its women's auxiliary, the North Park sign was first suspended over the intersection of 30th Street and University Avenue in 1935. The initial sign was about the same size as the current one, but it had straight edges and its original color is not known. As with both later versions, the community name was spelled with neon letters and the sign was outlined with neon tubes. The sign was lowered after the removal of the streetcar wires and fabricated in the current scalloped shape sometime prior to 1958. The suspended sign was removed for repair in 1967, but was never returned. In 1993, the current sign was placed on a column in the median of University Avenue, just west of 30th Street.



Other Central Area Signs: A number of neon signs remain just off of University Avenue. Most notably, the *Stern's Gym* sign identifies the second-floor gym that Leo Stern opened on Granada Street in 1948. This sign was in use when Steve Reeves (the movies' "Hercules"), Lou Ferrigno (television's "Incredible Hulk") and now-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger worked out there. A second neon sign on the same brick building identifies the *New Life Chinese Laundry*. Founded in 1961, the *New Life* is believed to be the oldest Chinese laundry still operating in San Diego. To the north of University Avenue, a neon sign locates the *FLT-Sunset Temple* on the Kansas Street side of *Odd Fellows (IOOF) Hall*, located behind the *Claire de Lune* coffee shop.



El Cajon Boulevard Signs: Increasing automobile use after World War II encouraged the development of a suburban commercial corridor along the Boulevard, with off-street parking lots and neon signage. The streamline *Rudford's Restaurant* storefront is topped with its name in neon script. Farther west at the up-scale *Imig Hotel*, now the Lafayette, the location of the *Red Fox Room Restaurant* is advertised in capital neon letters. Although it is located just to the west of North Park, no list of El Cajon Boulevard neon signs would be complete without noting *Frank the Trainman's* neon locomotive. Although Frank's store was redeveloped, his wonderful sign remains on the replacement office building at Park and El Cajon Boulevard.

Looking for "Historic" Neon Signs in North Park: Neon signage is having a revival, with new signs indicating "open" showing up in retail stores and offices. The History Committee is looking for the older neon signs in North Park. If you've found one of these older signs, please let us know. Send the location and description of neon signs to: info@northparkhistory.org