



San Francisco Neon

SURVIVORS AND LOST ICONS

Photographs 1976-2015

by Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan

Foreword by Tom Downs

Neon Notes by Eric Lynxwiler

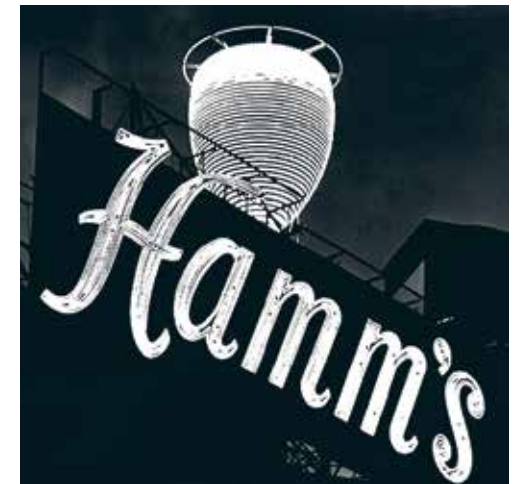
Giant Orange Press • San Francisco

© 2015 • ISBN 978-0-692-29907-4



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1550 Bryant Street, a San Francisco landmark from 1954 to 1975.
Photo from San Francisco History Center, sfpl.org



875 Geary Street

2014 AB

Foreword

Until I saw this book for the first time, I had always thought of the Ha-Ra as a cold, cranky sort of place run by Carl, a barman (now retired) well known for his grumpiness. Somehow I had failed to appreciate what a good name Ha-Ra is for a bar. It's something better than hurrah, and easier to spell. All it took for me to finally get it was Al Barna seeing it, clicking his camera's shutter, and coming back a bit later to shoot it again from the other side. This thorough flip-side effect also captures the interesting fact that, due to some faulty wiring, the sign's choked neon halfheartedly laughs at you ("Ha") if you're approaching from one direction, and waits until you have passed the place before it kicks in with the cheer ("Ra").

The photos in this book express all of the reasons why neon belongs not in museums (and certainly not in scrap metal yards) but on the roofs of buildings, above doorways, in windows, on signs extending out over sidewalks. Neon is best in context. It enhances a cityscape, keeps a city's spirits up in the wee small hours and in all kinds of weather, casts color on drab pavements, bounces crazy reflections off dark windows, draws the eye upward to where you might not otherwise be looking.

Turning the pages is like rounding corners, each new street view leading the eye towards colorful and irresistible neon. It's a book of photos of signs - but we get much more than the signs. With keen observation comes realization and a deepening appreciation.

Diving in at random, we are confronted with neon beauties we may never have noticed or duly appreciated. On one spread, two pure beauties face one another: The Balboa Cafe sign, an astonishing study of electric color tones crisscrossed by power lines and telephone poles; and its complement, the blue-hued "D's". The latter is a detail from a sign above David's Delicatessen on Geary, which is actually hidden by a low-slung awning, lit up nevertheless as a reward for the neon connoisseur leaving no stone unturned. This book will teach you to peer around or beneath every accessory slapped onto a building in recent years, where finer accouterments may lurk.

Photos can be studied at length for the clues they contain about our city's past and present. The shot of Pop's, on 24th Street, reminds me of some of my dad's old Kodachrome slides taken in San Francisco in the 1950s. The light, the muted colors, the neon martini, the bay windows, and the mesh of electrical wires in the background tell us this corner hasn't changed much in 50 or 60 years.

I'm also partial to the careful study of upper level Chinatown, a neighborhood that rewards the astute observer who frequently casts an eye towards the second and third floor of buildings, where old signs from defunct businesses hang onto brick walls like tattoos of shapely women on an old sailor's arm. Many of these signs are no longer working,



Pier 43 1/2

2011 AB



Pier 43 1/2

2014 AB



2340 Chestnut Street

2013 AB

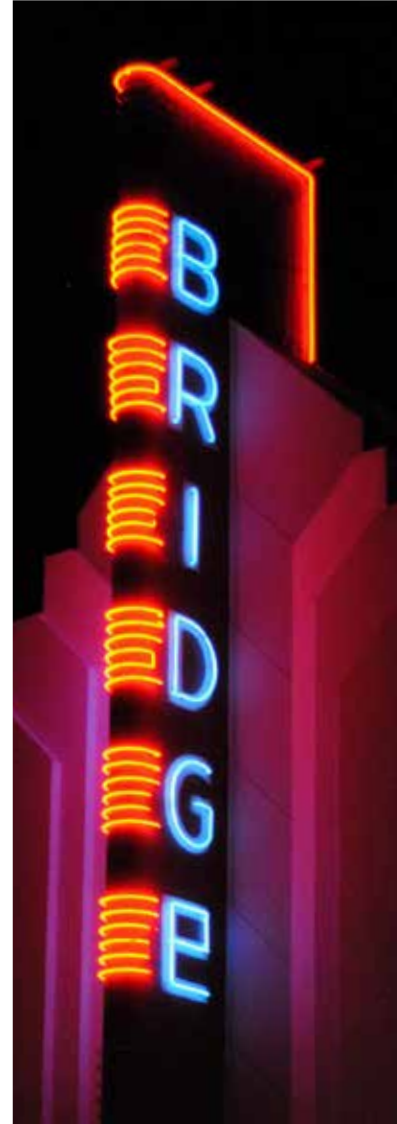


699 O'Farrell Street

2012 AB



3290 Sacramento Street 2010 AB



3010 Geary Street 2011 AB



2330 Polk Street 2011 AB



Corner Market and Annie Streets

2010 AB



3117 16th Street

2011 AB



401 Castro Street

2011 AB



2690 46th Avenue

2014 AB



Noe Street and 17th Street

2011 AB



815 Grant Avenue

2011 AB



720 and 710 Grant Avenue

2011 AB

Neon Notes



San Francisco deserves its place among the neon-illuminated cities of New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas. Its glow was once just as bright.

My memories of San Francisco in the 1980s recall dark streets punctuated by lonely bursts of neon. Sure there were still great conglomerations of light in tourist havens such as Fishermen's Wharf and North Beach, but the locals appeared to have let go of their mid-century grasp of neon signage. What remained by the time I first visited were rusted hulks of amazement in the shape of chefs, dunking donuts, smiling sea creatures and so many, oh so many martini glasses.

Many of those neon-lit businesses were trying to stand out in the busy streetscape. After WWII, the burgeoning American dream granted many small business owners the opportunity to see their names in lights and shops across the nation adopted a look-what-we-can-do attitude with visually competitive neon designs.

That glorious, glowing bubble burst by the 1970s and those distinct, mom-n-pop neon signs began to disappear. For pharmacies, fast food restaurants, hotels, and motels, it was the growth of corporate America that squeezed out the little guy and replaced creative and elegant neon with homogenous, plastic signs that could be produced cheaply and en masse. The era of the home-grown business had passed and taken those unique neon designs with it.

Like the rest of the country, San Francisco lost a wealth of amazing neon signs. Still, to retain and restore the classic neon signs that exist—and to walk under the colorful light of a neon night—is a dream worth having.

— Eric Lynxwiler 2014

841 Larkin Street, 1984. Photo by Mark Carrodus.



Endnotes

AB: Al Barna, TD: Tom Downs, RH: Randall Homan, EL: Eric Lynxwiler.

The photographs in this book, and these stories behind the signs, can be a catalyst for San Franciscans to preserve their neon landscape and the small businesses that these signs represent. Hundreds of signs were destroyed during 1970s urban redevelopment. It seems like a bit of a miracle when a 1920s Art Deco neon sign survives intact. Regrettably, there are signs that couldn't fit within the size and time limits of this book. We tried to show the inherent beauty in each sign, and tell all the stories we could find or remember. —AB and RH



Greyhound Bus Depot

Page 2 | Seventh Street

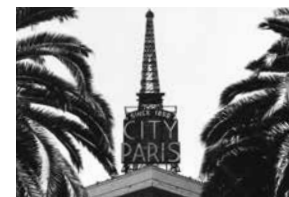
The bus depot was on Seventh Street near Market when this now-extinct sign was photographed. A similar sign can be viewed on Market Street in photos from the 1950s. —AB



Leland Hotel

Page 3 | 1315 Polk Street

The Leland Hotel has survived fire and attempts to gentrify lower Polk Street. The blade sign is extant, but the street-level sign shown here was destroyed by fire. This photo was taken on Halloween night during the annual parade on Polk. —RH



City of Paris

Page 4 | 150 Stockton Street

A Parisian-style department store that was famous for French linen and wine imported via the store's private ship that docked on the Embarcadero. The intricate and elegant neon Eiffel Tower neon sign loomed high above Union Square. It was removed and probably destroyed in the 1970s. This location is now the Neiman Marcus store. —RH



Chez Paree

Page 5 | 115 Mason Street

This giant dancing leg perched above Mason Street, then vanished sometime in the 1980s. The Art Deco marquee is still in place. A similar dancing leg can be seen in vintage photos of Pacific Street in the old International Settlement. —AB



The Jerry & Johnny

Page 6 | 81 Third Street

Legendary bar for news reporters from the nearby Chronicle. Co-owner Jerry Hansen worked at Breens bar on the corner, until he saved up enough money to open his own place with partner Johnny O'Hanlon. —RH



Quiet Through Tunnel

Page 7 | Above Stockton Street below California Street

This sign no longer lights up and it seems to have lost its authority. It used to shine like an orange beacon at the north portal of the Stockton Street tunnel. —RH



View Alcatraz

Page 8 | Pier 43 1/2

Alcatraz is indeed on view just beyond this sign. It is owned by the Red and White ferry fleet. A quintessential photo-op for tourists, it is also well-loved by locals. The lettering is a unique example of typography and perspective. —RH



Sunset Shoe Repair

Page 10 | 621 Irving Street

Once it seemed that every neighborhood in San Francisco had a neon shoe repair sign in the shape of a giant shoe hovering over the sidewalk. Now there are only three extant shoes, and the neon is gone



John's Grill

Page 12 | 63 Ellis Street

Fictitious character Sam Spade ate dinner at John's Grill in the Maltese Falcon novel. It is still in the same location as in the novel, next door to the Flood Building where author Dashiell Hammett worked as a young man. The restaurant retains a 1930s charm and is popular with locals, cinephiles, and carnivores. —RH



Cookie's

Page 14 | Kearny and Clay Streets

This long-gone watering hole for lawyers was located between North Beach and the old Hall of Justice on Portsmouth Square. The dark blue terrazzo glass front creates an illusion of day-for-night. The proprietor, Cookie Piccetti, is the man smoking a cigar. —RH



Nite Cap

Page 17 | 699 O'Farrell Street

This blue moon looks like an add-on to the tilting letters that spell Nite Cap, a well-loved cocktail lounge in the heart of the Tenderloin District. The long-time owner is gone, but the new owners reopened with the neon sign restored. —RH



Balboa Theatre

Page 19 | 3630 Balboa Street

This neighborhood icon of the Richmond district was saved by the San Francisco Neighborhood Theater Foundation. CinemaSF manages both the Balboa and the Vogue Theatre on Sacramento Street. —RH



Alhambra Theatre

Page 20 | 2330 Polk Street

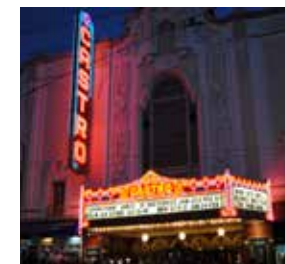
Another astounding theatre in the Moorish Revival style by architect Timothy Pflueger lights up northern Polk Street. This movie palace was re-born as an exercise gym. Many interior details are preserved. —RH



Palace Hotel

Page 21 | Market and Annie Streets

This impressive sky sign has a twin above the Palace Hotel entrance on New Montgomery Street. Nearby is the neon-clad Palace Garage in Stevenson Alley. —AB



Castro Theatre

Page 22 | 429 Castro Street

Designed by renowned architect Timothy Pflueger, The Castro sign was restored to its former brilliance by Neon Works for the Harvey Milk biopic. An inspired new touch by the restoration team was the single blue lettering which flashes solid for a second before the speller mechanism flashes the original red letters. —RH



Union Square

Pg Location

12 John's Grill, 63 Ellis Street

68 Tad's Steakhouse, 120 Powell Street

134 [Marquard's, 167 Powell Street](#)

78 [Mason O'Farrell Garage, 325 Mason Street](#)

13 Hotel Stratford, 242 Powell Street

4 [City of Paris Department Store, 150 Stockton Street](#)

122 Britex Fabrics, 146 Geary Street

124 Sear's Fine Foods, 439 Powell Street

87 Chancellor Hotel, 433 Powell Street

56 [Starlight Room, 450 Powell Street](#)

88 Pizza by the Slice, Bella Lucca, 418 Geary Street

65 David's Delicatessen, 474 Geary Street

122 Curran Theatre, 445 Geary Street

132 Clift Hotel, 495 Geary Street



Black = Sign exists and neon is illuminated at night

Red = Sign exists but neon tubes are missing or need repair

Blue = Extinct or removed sign



Van Ness and Polk Gulch

Pg Location

20 Alhambra Theatre, 2330 Polk Street

69 Van Ness Launderette, 2352 Van Ness Avenue

162 OFFICE, Inn on Broadway, 2201 Van Ness Avenue

123 [Deovlet and Sons, 1660 Pine Street](#)

3 [Leland Hotel, 1315 Polk Street](#)

89 Victor's, 1411 Polk Street

117 Mayes Oyster House, 1233 Polk Street

106 [Ellis Brooks Chevrolet, 1395 Van Ness Avenue](#)

84 Tommy's Joynt, 1101 Geary Boulevard

83 [Neon Clock, British Motor Cars, 999 Van Ness Avenue](#)

144 [First Aid, Polk Street and Ivy Alley](#)



West Portal

Pg Location

100 Philosophers Club, 824 Ulloa Street

108 Manor Coffee Shop, 321 West Portal Avenue





Giant Orange Press • San Francisco

*San Francisco Neon:
Survivors and Lost Icons*
by Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan

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www.giantorangepress.com
www.neonbook.xyz

Art direction and book design:
Randall Ann Homan

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

First Edition 2014
LCCN 2014953865
ISBN 978-0-692-29907-4



978-0-692-29907-4

Praise for *San Francisco Neon*

I have to confess that I have long envied San Francisco for its especially rich concentration of colorful and inventive neon-bedecked storefronts. San Francisco Neon captures the magic of these signs into a single glowing portfolio that will provide a lasting record of these important but endangered cultural landmarks".

— Thomas E. Rinaldi, author of *New York Neon* (W. W. Norton)

Just when you thought you knew everything about San Francisco, along comes Al Barna's and Randall Ann Homan's book, San Francisco Neon With beautiful photography, paging through is like strolling down the streets of a familiar city with a new vantage point. You'll never look at San Francisco streets in quite the same way again. If just one of these neon survivors gets saved from demolition, this book is a huge success.

— Andrew Danish, co-author of *Palm Springs Weekend* (Chronicle Books)

For some, a neon sign is a quick burst of color in their peripheral vision. For others, it is art. For me, a neon sign has a larger significance. It is an important place marker in our collective history. The beautiful photographs in San Francisco Neon are pleasing to the eye but they also awaken my San Francisco pride. What would a drive across the Golden Gate Bridge be without the neon clock at the toll plaza? How attractive would the 500 Club be with a backlit plastic sign? When a neon sign disappears, not only is the visual landscape a whole lot duller, there's one less bookmark in our unique story.

— Heather M. David, author of *Mid-Century by the Bay* (CalMod Books)

This wonderful book offers a uniquely atmospheric tour of a world that is rapidly disappearing. It's at once a gift to designers and a souvenir of the colorful night world of the City by the Bay. Some of the photographs have a cinematic quality, or inspire film noir reveries, with vibrant signs that beckon, warm and welcoming, to denizens of the night. One half expects to see Hopper's Nighthawks illuminated in the glow. Tighter shots focus on whimsical details and the inventive compositions of the signs themselves. The photographers know San Francisco well, and deserve praise for capturing these charming and often remarkable signs with such affection and care.

— Richard Sala