

Where Are We? and Where Do We Go from Here?

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“Buildings, Signs, Statues & More”

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Neon Speaks: Festival and Symposium (A Celebration of Historic Neon Signs)

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Let's Crunch the Numbers

- **How many vintage signs are left in the country?**
- A rough count from the past 18 years from just my Signs and SCA sections: **6,672**. Of that, 1,145 signs are “gone” (most presumably scrapped, some saved by the business owners/collectors/museums). That’s 17% lost in 18 years (1% per year or 63 signs per year)
- That 6,672 number does not include:
 - Signs in other sections at my website (restaurants, movie/drive-in theatres, tire stores, etc.). I would guesstimate that if counted, there would be another 1,000 signs there
 - Signs at my blog which focuses on the rusty/crusty signs which are generally not included at my website. There are probably another 1,000 signs there
 - Signs that I haven’t shot yet. I estimate that I’ve shot about 80% of the “worthy” signs in the country. That’s another 1,300 or so
 - Signs on my list during those 18 years that were removed before I could shoot them. Maybe a few hundred

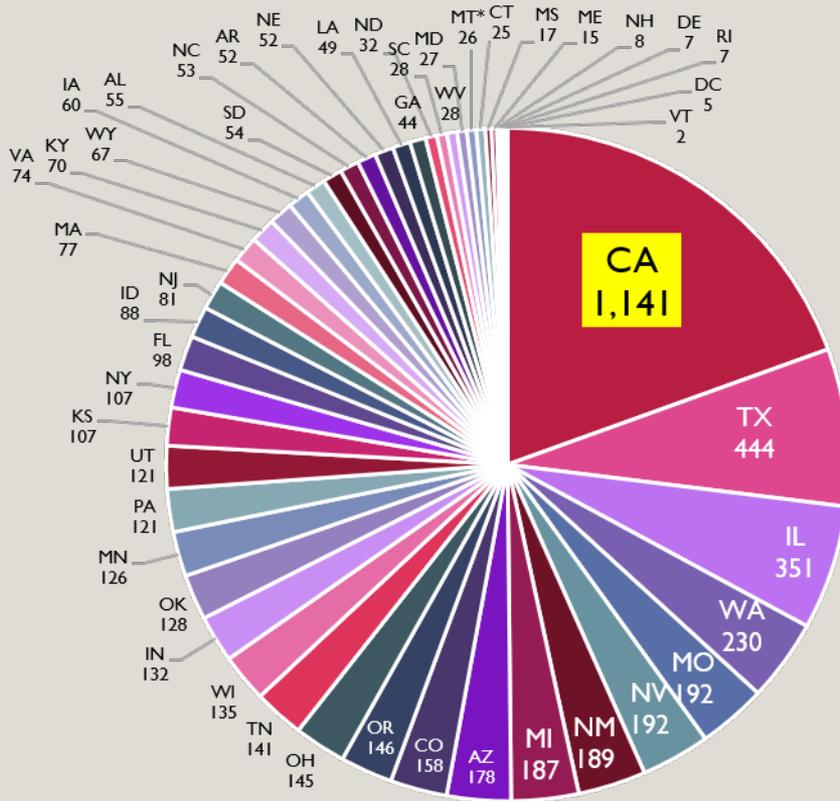


Making Sense of the Numbers

- Based on the numbers and estimates from the previous page, there are **about 10,000 vintage signs left on public display in the country** (early incandescent, neon, and plastic in any condition)
- Of the 6,672 of the signs in this “sampling”, about 85% have (or had) neon. So, that’s **at least 1,000 neon signs removed over 18 years** or at least 55 per year
- **The grim future.** If we continue to lose 55-100 neon signs per year, we stand to lose another 1,000-2,000 of them within the next 20 years (potentially, one-third of what’s left)
- Only about **100-200 signs still in place are restored** each year (which means the others continue to deteriorate)



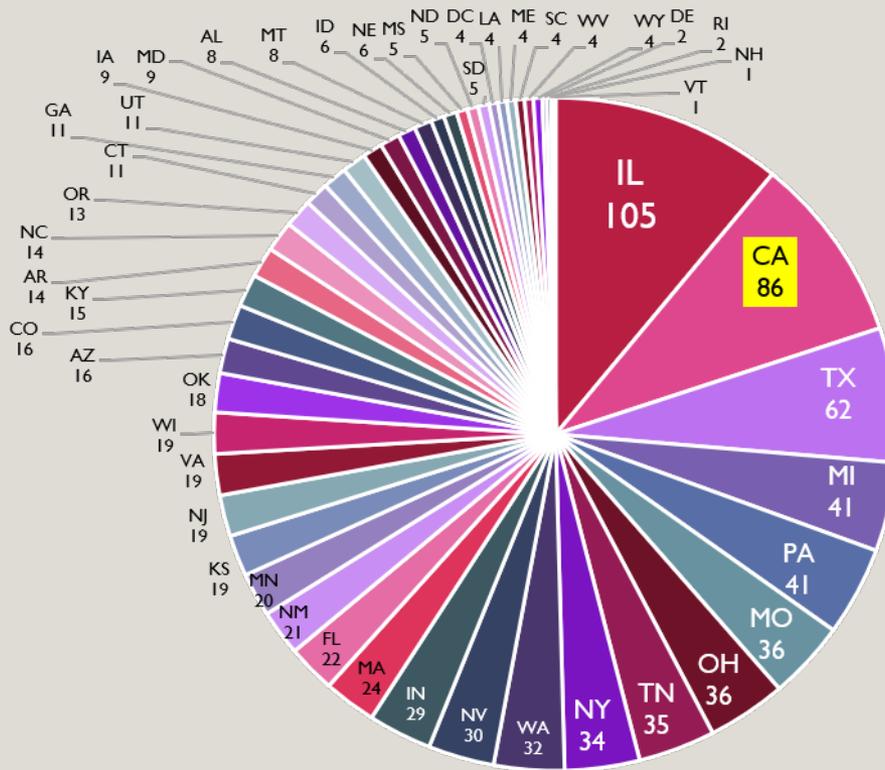
Where Are these Signs?



- **California** has more surviving vintage signs than any other state
- **Texas**, with a similar-sized land mass but with a smaller population, comes in 2nd with less than half the amount of signs as California
- **Illinois** has about 100 fewer signs than Texas
- **Washington, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, and Michigan** are about tied with about 200 vintage signs left



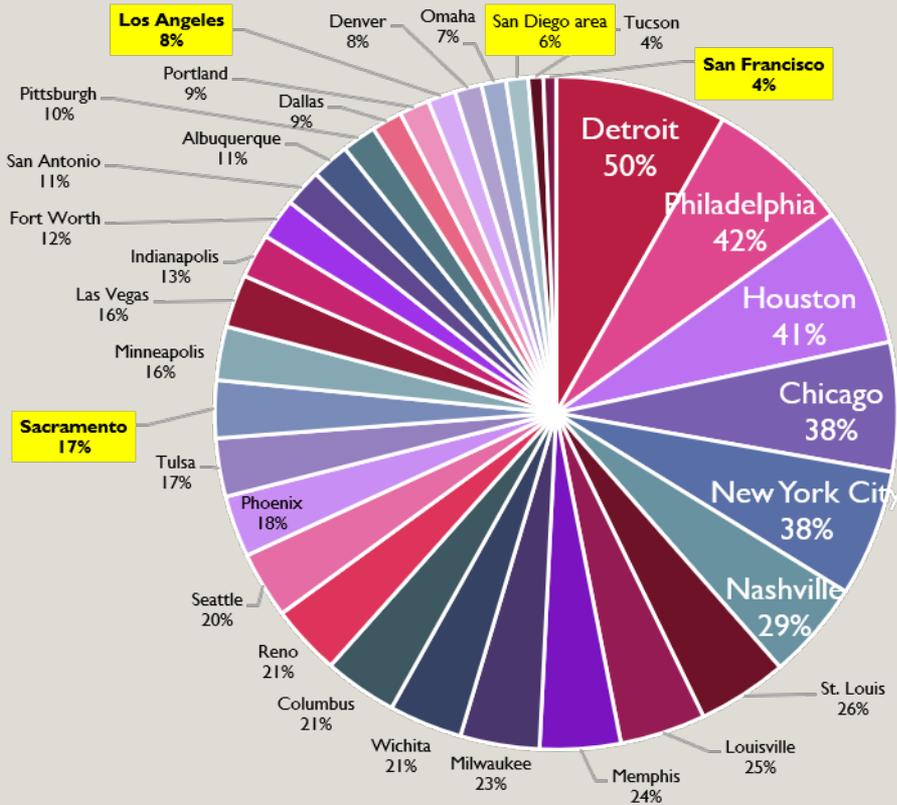
Sign Losses by State



- **Illinois** has lost more signs than any other state
- **California** and **Texas** come in 2nd and 3rd but when you consider land mass, it's not that bad
- **Michigan, Pennsylvania, Missouri, Ohio, Tennessee,** and **New York** have similar square miles (and proportional losses)
- When you consider state size, number of vintage signs there originally, **losses nationwide have been fairly consistent (non-regional)**



The Biggest Losers (by City)



■ The six hardest hit cities

- Detroit (50%)
- Philadelphia (42%)
- Houston (41%)
- Chicago (38%)
- New York City (38%)
- Nashville (29%)

■ California cities have held up relatively well

- Sacramento (17%)
- Los Angeles (8%)
- San Diego area (6%)
- San Francisco (4%)



Is Staying in Place the Best Thing?

Buffalo, NY

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



Another Heartbreak

St. Joseph, MO

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



... and Another

Spokane, WA

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



The Backlit Plastic Replacement Trend

Lake George NY

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



More Neon Replaced with Plastic

Minneapolis, MN

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



Another Backlit Adaptation

Beltsville, MD

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



...and One More

Avon, CT

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



Beyond Refacing/Defacing

Alsip, IL [originally the Pink Cloud Motel]



photo credit: RobbyVirus



Another Trend: Complete Replacement with Plastic and Digital Displays

Cheyenne, WY

Before:



After:



photo credit: Google Street View



Rescued and Rehomed Signs

▪ Sign Museums

- **The Big Three:** the American Sign Museum (Cincinnati), the Museum of Neon Art (MONA, Los Angeles), The Neon Museum (Las Vegas)
- **In the Works:** The National Neon Sign Museum (The Dalles, OR; opening later this year); still in the planning stages: Billboard Museum (Bethany, OK); Will Durham's collection (Reno, NV)

▪ Local Museum Collections

- Kern County Museum (displayed; Bakersfield); Big Fresno Fair (displayed), Center for Sacramento History (displayed & storage), Morse Museum of American Art (storage; Winter Park, FL); Historic Preservation Alliance of Wichita (storage; Wichita, KS); Johnson County Museum (Shawnee, KS); Yakima Valley Museum (Yakima, WA); Museum of Vancouver (Vancouver, BC)

▪ Public Displays

- Old Town Saginaw parking lot (Saginaw, MI); Pueblo Neon Alley (Pueblo, CO); Neon Art Walk (Tucson, AZ); Pomeroy City Walk (Pomeroy, WA); Terry's Turf Club (Cincinnati, OH); Grandma's Saloon (Duluth, MN); Doo Wop Experience (Wildwood, NJ); Carpet Gallery (Poplar Bluff, MO); Wilson's General Store & Café (Evansville, IN); Yesterday's Sign Park and Northern Advertising (Antigo, WI); Neon Sign Museum (Edmonton, AB)
- **In the Works:** Route 66 neon sign park (St. Robert, MO); sign park (Casa Grande, AZ)

▪ Event Spaces

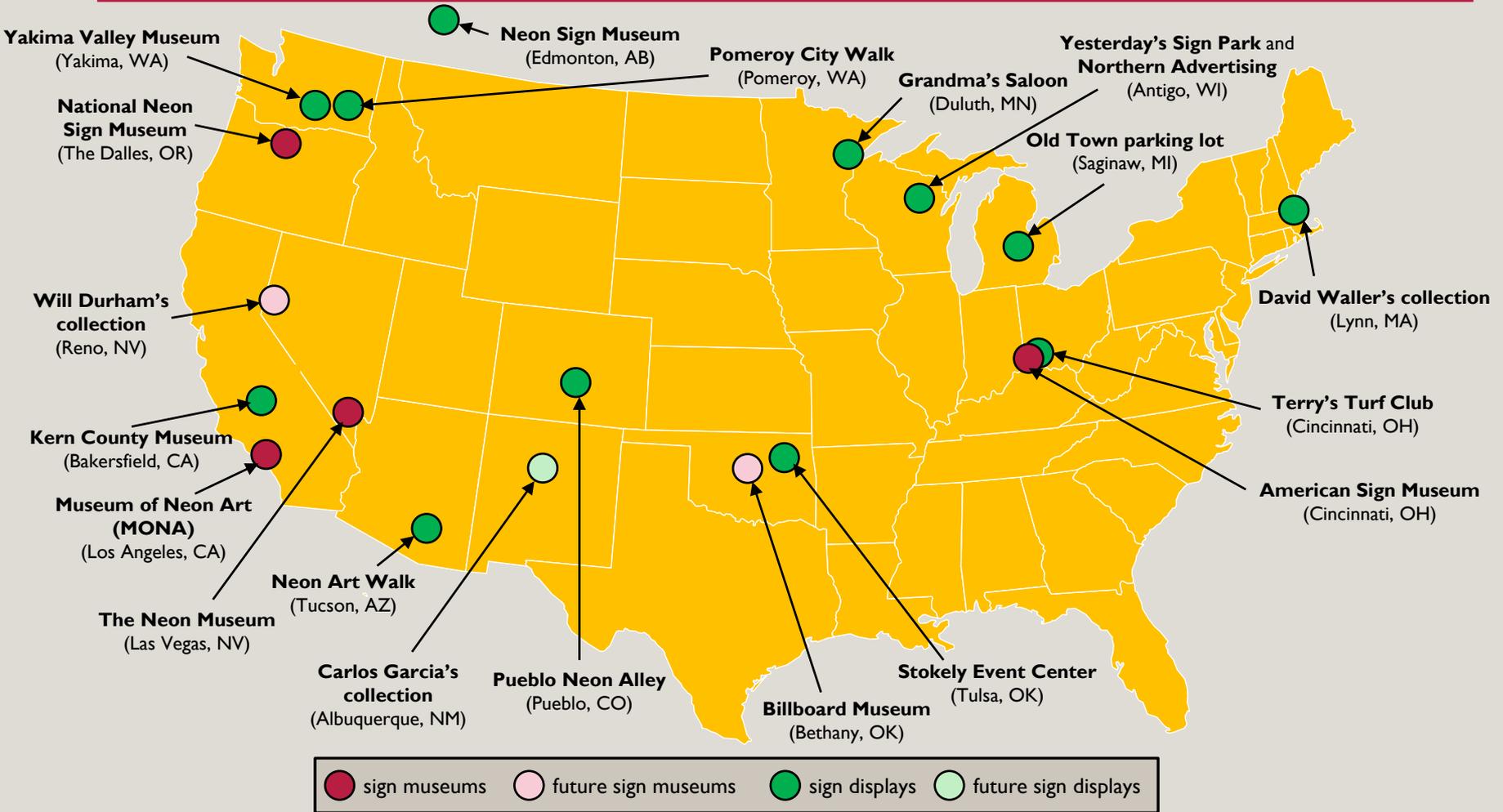
- Stokely Event Center (Tulsa, OK)
- **In the Works:** private collection in Albuquerque, NM

▪ Private Collections

- Antique Warehouse (St. Louis, MO); Signs of Our Times (Boise, ID)
- **Sign shops:** CNI Signmakers (Fresno, CA); Ace Sign Company (Springfield, IL)

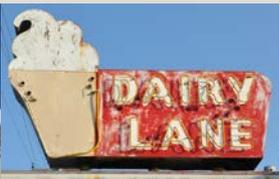


Sign Museums and Displays



What Can We Do?

- **Share the Love.** Let business owners know how much you love their signs. Give them your contact information and develop a friendship with them. Bring them coffee or call them on their birthday. Stay in touch and have them reach out to you if they are considering removing, altering, or restoring their sign. Keep in mind that collectors are doing the same things and making offers to acquire the signs. Tell the owner how important the sign is to the community and tourists and what an asset it is to his or her business.
- **Find Friends and Be Proactive.** Develop a local or regional sign community. Find like-minded people that are interested in documenting and protecting signs. Produce a local guide with histories and significance of each sign as well as maps for walking or driving tours. These are great ways of providing information for the public, tourists, historical organizations, and city officials. This information might be useful to establish the signs as local landmarks and make them eligible for restoration funding.



What Can We Do? (cont'd)

- **Restoring & Fundraising.** If the owner is considering restoring the sign, you might want to discuss preserving the sign's patina and historic value. Perhaps you can help with getting estimates from sign shops. Find out what the city's policy is about removing signs for restoration and what's involved in getting permission to remove/reinstall if needed. Are city matching grants available? You might be able to help with fundraising. Many signs have been restored with organized on-line and media campaigns. Community events such as bake sales, car washes, and concerts should not be underestimated as ways to create public awareness and raise money. With doggedness and luck, donors and sponsors can often be found. TV and print coverage can reach a nationwide internet audience. A well-publicized, on-line fundraising website such as GoFundMe or KickStarter can be an important tool.
- **Uh-oh, It's Closed!** When a business closes or is about to close, try to find out what the plan is for the sign. Is it landmarked? Will the business or building owner be taking it down or auctioning it off? Will the next tenant be allowed or encouraged to adapt the sign? If a sign is at immediate risk of being removed and destroyed, contact local museums, historical organizations, and sign shops. Post the information at Facebook groups (local and sign-focused). Can the sign be stored at a museum, sign shop, or local business until a place is found to display it locally or a home can be found?

By becoming a self-appointed guardian of signs, you may be able to save a few from the scrap heap.



A Few Recent Restorations

Tuscaloosa, AL



photo credit: Jay Patel

Los Angeles, CA



New Orleans, LA



Hugo, CO



photo credit: Mark Stein

Vancouver, BC



photo credit: John Allison

Willowbrook, IL



Oklahoma City, OK



A Few More Recent Restorations

Philadelphia, PA

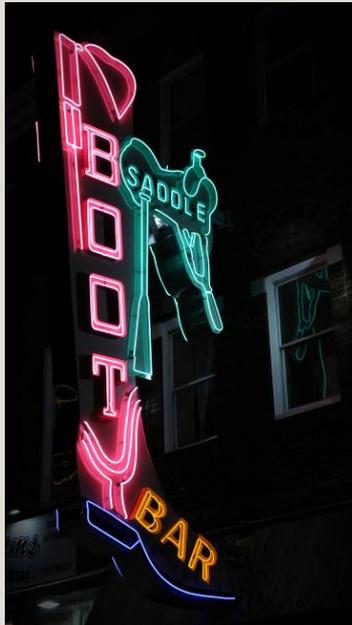


photo credit: Dave Christopher

Salt Lake City, UT



photo credit: David Brimley

Glasgow, MT



photo credit: Sam Knode

Minneapolis, MN



San Francisco, CA

photo credit: Thomas Hawk



Pocatello, ID



Two More

Joplin, MO [reinstalled last week]



Tucson, AZ [restoration soon]



Closing Thoughts

Joplin, MO [removed 2013]



Midvale, UT

