



PRESERVING THE WILDWOODS

Preserving the Architecture, History, and Culture of the Wildwoods

A Newsletter of Preserving the Wildwoods: A Community Alliance

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Letter from the President

Pary Tell, PTW President

Hi everyone,

I'd like to thank everyone who attended our annual meeting. It was exciting to see so many people who are interested in historic preservation and want to save our Wildwood treasures. We had a nice presentation put together by our Secretary, Gail Cohen, which outlined what historic preservation is and isn't, followed by a good discussion on what people can do to help preserve the history of the island.

In trying to explain to people who oppose historic preservation, thinking it means trying to go back to past times, I often find myself trying to describe the value in terms of dollars: saving an existing building is cheaper than building a new one, saving an existing building is greener, reusing materials instead of adding them to a landfill is good, historic preservation adds to economic growth, etc. But all of these reasons often don't resonate with people who can't grasp the emotional connection.

With the holidays upon us, though, I've finally found a way, I hope, to help people understand why we want to preserve the architectural, historical, and cultural legacy of the Wildwoods. I was going through things that I use over the holidays that I rarely use at other times of the year. There's the candy dish that my great grandfather gave to my mom and dad for their wedding. That cut glass bowl that belonged to my grandmother that I use for the turkey stuffing. Even a few things that were my great grandmother's. There were also a good number of things that I threw or gave away because they were too damaged or just not anything that I would ever use.

But the things that I saved are my family treasurers, linking me and my own children to our heritage. It's the same for old buildings. Some are too damaged to save, some have no value to us in this time, but there are a good many that have special meaning, that link us to the past.

Does this mean that I want to live like my grandmother or great grandmother did? Not at all. I don't want to go backwards, especially to a time when the lives of many women were prescribed by society, leaving them little freedom to choose their own path. But that doesn't mean that I want to wipe out all traces of my ancestors and especially of their stories that are a part of me today.

Likewise, we don't want to wipe out all traces of the Wildwoods that existed before now. We need to save the

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Preservation Heroes Celebrated at PTW Annual Meeting

The first annual meeting of Preserving the Wildwoods: A Community Alliance (PTW) was held at the Wildwood Historical Museum on November 11th, 2022. There was a large turnout from the community, and attendees celebrated and learned about historic preservation in the Wildwoods.

PTW's president Pary Tell provided a warm welcome. PTW board member and secretary Gail Cohen gave a presentation on how preservation is not just about buildings but also about preserving a community. Gail used many local examples found on the island and detailed what the organization has accomplished in one year. After previewing some of PTW's 2023 goals, the meeting was opened to questions from the audience which led to discussions about preservation issues on the island and what steps are needed to move the Wildwoods forward without losing its history.

The annual meeting was also a time to celebrate local presentation heroes. PTW gave awards to Mike and Tina Stetter for their preservation of the original 1904 Neoclassical Revival style architecture of the J. Thompson Baker House, Wildwood; the Russom Family for their preservation of the original 1927 Mission style architecture of 104 Nashville Road, Wildwood Crest; and Tom Gerace

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Circa in Las Vegas is a glowing example of modern neon being a trendy way to advertise. See page 2.

Letter from the President

Pary Tell, PTW President

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treasures that link us to all the great times of the past. Ladies strolling the boardwalk in their Victorian dresses and parasols, gentlemen in pinstripe suits and straw hats, downtown stores where the owners knew all the kids in town and you behaved so they wouldn't tell your parents what you were up to, nights of rock 'n' roll celebrities playing in the clubs, and always the beach with all its variations in proper attire.

We need to preserve those things that link us to that past and pass them along to our children so the memories made here won't fade into nothing. There's nothing wrong with new development, but there's no reason that it can't pay tribute to what came before, in the style of architecture and in the contributions it makes to the culture of the city. Showing respect for the past while moving toward the future is the best way to preserve the Wildwoods that we all love.

I hope you all enjoyed the holidays and are ready to start a new year with hope for the future of the Wildwoods.

Preservation Heroes Celebrated at PTW Annual Meeting

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for moving and saving the circa-1900 Queen Anne style building previously home to the Shamrock Beef & Ale, Wildwood.

In addition to providing refreshments, PTW also distributed newsletters, brochures, and copies of the Historic Houses of the Wildwoods coloring book to all guests. PTW is thankful for the great community response and interest in preservation. Stay tuned for more events open to the public in 2023.



Neon doesn't just have to be used for Doo Wop designs. Pictured above is 1980s strip mall in Phoenix, AZ that features extensive use of neon. Courtesy Dennis Pierce.

A Brief History of Neon Signs

Neon signs are an integral part of the character of the Wildwoods. The mid-century Doo Wop style that the Wildwoods are known for made heavy use of neon to add color and excitement to building designs and signs. However, the history and technology behind neon signs goes way back before the 1950s. When you are looking at one of the Wildwoods' colorful glowing neon signs, you are looking at the result of hundreds of years of discovery and experimentation.

The initial inspiration for neon signs goes back to 1675 when French astronomer Jean Picard noticed a small glow of light coming from mercury in a barometer tube when it was shaken. The cause for this light was not understood at the time, but others would soon start building on this initial discovery. In the 1700s, famous Philadelphian Ben Franklin's discoveries in electricity—along with Michael Faraday's work in the early 1800s with harnessing electricity—laid the groundwork for electricity eventually being used to power lights of all different types.

Then, in 1857, German physicist Julius Plücker and glass blower Heinrich Geissler found a way of partially filling a glass tube with a range of gasses that produced different colors when connected to a high voltage electric supply. Neon gas was not known at the time, but this new type of light became known as a Geissler tube. While very similar to neon signs, Geissler tubes weren't ready for the rigors of commercial use and were viewed more as novelty items.

Critical to the production/creation of neon signs was the discovery of neon gas, which occurred in 1898 by William Ramsey and Morris Travers. Next, the French physicist Georges Claude brought everything together in the early 1900s with his innovations in mass producing neon gas. With a reliable supply of neon gas, he started using neon in his version of the Geissler tube. Claude then improved the technology used in the tubes so they produced a reliable glow instead of sputtering. With these final innovations, neon signs could be used for commercial purposes instead of being just a novelty.

By 1910, Claude was presenting his neon lights to the public in Paris and had formed a company that became the early patent holder on neon sign technology. Claude's company was responsible for introducing neon signs to America in the 1920s. Soon after, neon signs exploded in popularity throughout the United States, becoming a symbol of progress and modern industry.

Neon signs' popularity dipped around World War II due to the war, but in the booming 1950s, neon was revived again with the Doo Wop style of design in architecture. Large, garish neon signs were used to draw customers into restaurants, commercial businesses, and motels. Towns like Las Vegas and the Wildwood became defined by their use of neon signs.

Sadly, as tastes changed in the 1960s, the use of neon signs started to decline as they were replaced with plastic signs and fluorescent lights. Today neon signs are con-

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The Griffin classic V... is brand... developm... trendy and h... keeping in c... the commun... Dennis

Neon Lights Up Economic Success

Charles Rollins

Preservation is not just about buildings. With the loss of many mid-century motels, we also lose the unique signage that gives the Wildwoods their visual flair. Even when a Doo Wop motel was spared demolition by converting to condos, the former motel's distinctive sign is still lost. And as new businesses open up, many times they choose not to use neon or flashy signs.

While we may think that there's nothing that can be done to stop the loss of Wildwood's glitzy signs, there are many examples from other cities that have successfully continued growing while also keeping their identity. A good example can be found in how Las Vegas experienced economic success and a revitalized downtown by using ordinances to encourage neon/illuminated signage.

Las Vegas has many similarities with Wildwood. Both cities have a large number of Doo Wop era buildings and are famous for neon and flashy signs. But where Wildwood has had a confused relationship with its Doo Wop past, Las Vegas provides an alternative approach, moving into the future while also keeping the mid-century aesthetics of its past in place. Comparing the growth and success of the two cities over the last 50 years, it appears that the Las Vegas approach has been a more successful path towards being developer friendly and bringing economic success.

After the boom years of the 1950s and 60s, both cities' downtowns experienced economic downturns at the end of the 20th century. While both have attempted redevelopment projects to return their downtowns to thriving destinations, Wildwood is still attempting redevelopment projects along Pacific Avenue, and it remains to be seen if Pacific Avenue can get out of its economic slump.

Las Vegas Boulevard running from the Strip to Downtown is the main thoroughfare through Las Vegas's tourist areas and catchy signs are an integral part of this byway's aesthetic. Compared to Wildwood, Downtown Las Vegas has been revitalized into a thriving economic corridor that is once again a viable alternative to the Strip with not only existing hotels/casinos but also many new restaurants and bars. A critical part of that revitalization was designating Las Vegas Boulevard as a historic byway and embracing distinctive neon signs in this historic district to give visitors a sense of place.

There are three main steps that have helped Las Vegas move forward into economic success while also keeping dazzling signs as an integral part of its identity.

First, the city has ordinances in place to encourage the use of distinctive signs. An ordinance covering the historic byway connecting the Strip to Downtown specifies that for any development in this special district, at least "75% of the total sign surface areas for that development must consist of illuminated signage, in the form of neon signs, animated signs, or a combination thereof." This ordinance indicates that the community expects developers to respect the history of the area by using the type of signs Las Vegas is known for. The effect of the Las Vegas ordinance also trickles down to other parts of the city where even businesses off the historic byway embrace the neon aesthetic for their new signs. Compare this to Wildwood where some developers have used a fun, eye-catching approach (Wawa and Mudhen), but other more generic developments feel like they could be designed for anywhere in the USA rather than the Wildwoods.

Second, the city of Las Vegas works with the nonprofit Neon Museum and a neon sign company to restore classic neon signs from Las Vegas's past and install them as public art along Las Vegas Boulevard. Both Wildwood and Las Vegas have lost many classic motels and businesses from the past. While Wildwood throws much of its history into the dumpster, the city of Las Vegas purchases these unused signs for restoration. The restored signs beautify a famous roadway and also celebrate the city's past, creating more pride in the community. Driving on Surf Avenue, imagine if we could still see classic signs from the Wildwoods' past alongside new condos. Would that lessen the sting of seeing a once vibrant roadway now turned into a sea of generic buildings?

Third, once government and nonprofits have worked together to build up a strong sense of pride in your history, the last piece is developers who embrace the history of a community when building new projects. In Las Vegas, a notable example of this respect for history is the \$1 billion-

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A Brief History of Neon Signs

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sidered historic, and there are several museums dedicated to collecting, preserving, and maintaining commercial neon art. A few notable ones are The Neon Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada; the Museum of Neon Art in Glendale, California; and the National Neon Sign Museum in Dalles, Oregon.

Unlike mass-produced, off-the-shelf signs made today, the process to make a neon sign involves mastering techniques that require an experienced and skilled craftsman. Luckily Wildwood has two businesses that produce and repair neon signs: A.B.S. Sign Co at 3008 Park Blvd and Ultra Neon at 3109 Pacific Avenue. Next time you patronize a Wildwoods business with a neon sign, let them know that you appreciate them keeping a historic craft alive. And to any businesses in need of a new sign, consider a newly created neon sign to keep a connection with the wonderful glowing past of the Wildwoods.



n looks like Vegas, but it new. New ent can be hip while also character with nity. Courtesy s Pierce

Keep in Touch!

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Get Involved!

It takes a team to create change. To meet our team and learn about Preserving the Wildwoods, visit <https://www.preservingthewildwoods.com/get-involved>.

Neon Lights Up Economic Success

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plus Circa Resort and Casino, which is the first new casino built Downtown in decades. The Circa's design respects the past, and the entrance has a massive flashy-style sign that fits right in with the rest of the signs along Fremont Street. Compare this approach to Wildwood where new development uses a more generic and neutral approach with no attempt to make any references to Wildwood's rich history. In fact, while developers in Las Vegas are proud of their city's design heritage, it feels that Wildwood views its history as something to move away from or forget.

Las Vegas demonstrates how a city can continue to develop and modernize while also not sacrificing its identity. Here in the Wildwoods, we do not have to sit back and watch our local character be destroyed as developers do as they please. Homeowners already have plenty of ordinances they need to adhere to when it comes to their houses. The intention of ordinances is for the greater good of the community so there aren't eyesores such

as garbage or broken cars stored on lots. Is it too much to ask that developers also have ordinances so their buildings are also not eyesores and instead bring pride to the area by matching the feel and design of the Wildwoods?

Las Vegas and many other cities have shown that we have a variety of tools at our disposal to help us preserve the type of town we want to live in and visit. When the local government sets ordinances that specify design guidelines and also works to preserve memorable parts of the city's past, this inspires developers to make their projects match the local area. The new development maintains a connection to the past and keeps residents and tourists happy with a sense of place maintained.

With the Wildwoods as one of the premier examples of neon sign design, the island would be well served to implement Las Vegas's approach with neon sign ordinances so the Wildwoods can create economic success while keeping their visual identity alive.

Tours and Fun From the Society for Commercial Archeology

We are honored to have Michael Hirsch on our Advisory Committee. Michael is also the President of The Society For Commercial Archeology (SCA). Founded in 1977, the SCA promotes, celebrates, preserves, and acknowledges the unique historical significance of the 20th century commercial-built environment and cultural landscapes of North America. This includes roadside icons like filling stations, tourist courts, neon signs, and diners utilizing mid-century architecture (Doo Wop) to celebrate the time when a road trip in America was a journey of discovery.

The SCA hosts online events featuring experts in roadside-related topics, researches and shares stories

of roadside ephemera, calls attention to roadside places



in danger of being lost, and just has lots of fun through organizing road trips, tours, and conferences. They are holding their 46th annual conference and tours, Amused in Allegheny, on May 31 through June 3, 2023, in Erie, Pennsylvania. The opening reception will be a Victorian Princess cruise on Lake Erie. The three-level paddlewheel will glide by Erie's eclectic bayfront and Presque Isle, an impressive ecological preserve. Check out the conference details at their website <https://sca-roadside.org>

or better yet, support and join this wonderful organization.

Photo Courtesy Dennis Pierce



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