

## **The Best and the Brightest**

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A visitor to the south end of the Strip in Las Vegas sees a number of objects against the night sky: the spotlight atop the pyramid-shaped Luxor Hotel, so bright it is said to be visible from outer space; the gold block letters, each several stories high, of the MGM Grand sign; the hotel Excalibur's glowing, jewel-toned turrets.

Easy to miss in the high-voltage spectacle is a small sign at the entrance to a dark and empty tract a few blocks from the MGM. "Tropicana Mobil Park," it reads, in crisp red-and-blue neon, glowing as cheerily as it has for some 40-odd years. In a few hours, it will be gone.

At six the next morning Brian Paco Alvarez, interim curator, and Dan Romano, facilities manager, of the Neon Museum wait for the "sign guys," as Alvarez calls them, to cut down the sign. Developers, who plan to put high-end shops on the site, have donated it to the Neon Museum. Established in 1996, the museum has rescued and preserved nearly 200 vintage neon signs, most of which are stored on three acres off North Las Vegas Boulevard.

Alvarez, 31, and Romano, 44, are native Las Vegans—a minority in the nation's fastest-growing city—and they share a fondness for its unselfconscious extravagance as well as a feeling of protectiveness. Alvarez, who used to be the curator of the Liberace Museum, at the other end of the Strip, is nattily dressed on this late November day in a windsor cap and muffler. He gazes admiringly at the sign, whose neon tubes are fashioned into two-foot-high letters and mounted on a kidney-shaped box. "It's a great example of Google," he says of the part space-age, part tiki-hut design popular in the 1950s and '60s.

When the demolition crew arrives, the men approach their task unceremoniously, cranking up the crane and hooking the sign to a cable. A lanky guy with a droopy mustache straps himself into the bucket of a cherry picker. After dramatically lighting a welding torch with his cigarette, he cuts through the pylon supporting the sign, and it dangles from a hook.

Someone asks a worker, whose name is Warren Donlon, if he plans to take the sign down the Strip, the most direct but busiest route to the museum. "Hell, yeah!" he says with a grin.

A few minutes later, the sign, secured upright to a flatbed trailer, bumps out of the lot and rolls grandly past the New York, New York's Statue of Liberty; past the Bellagio's spectacular fountains with an eight-acre Lake Como replica; past Treasure Island's frigate, yawing in a miniature sea; and on past the dappled piazza of the Venetian. None of those attractions was even built when the trailer park's sign was first bolted to a pole on what was then the outskirts of town.

Probably the most eye-catching symbol of midcentury American kitsch, neon signs trace their heritage to 1910, when the French chemist Georges Claude invented the neon lamp by applying an electric discharge to a sealed tube of neon gas. Soon after Las Vegas got its first neon sign, in 1929, hotels, restaurants and casinos began trying to outshine one another. A half century ago, the city's sun-bleached motels and casinos,

dwarfed in the daytime by the sweep of the sky and the expanse of the desert, came brilliantly, cartoonishly alive after dark.

Flashing, rippling neon constructions such as the iconic pink feathers on the Flamingo Hotel and the Stardust's shimmering cluster of "stars" still light up the Vegas sky. But not for long. Though the city requires new downtown construction to include at least one element of neon, the art form's heyday is over, dimmed by tasteful coved lighting in family-friendly megaresorts and by giant video screens. Even the Stardust sign, a mix of neon and bulbs, is scheduled for demolition next year. Alvarez says up to 80 percent of Las Vegas' vintage signs will be torn down in the next two years.

Alvarez, Romano and the museum's director, Melanie Coffee, keep tabs on planned demolitions, haunting the avenues where the great old signs still blink to life. The museum has restored 11 signs and installed them in outdoor galleries: there's a 1940s Indian chief in neon headdress, a glittery cowboy on horseback and a ten-foot-tall martini glass garnished with a neon cherry—testaments to that curious Vegas mix of Wild West and casino chic.

But the museum keeps most of its finds in outdoor lots called the Boneyard. It's a maze of faded letters, some as big as houses, as well as 3-D pieces, such as the crown from the Royal Nevada Hotel, its puff of fiberglass velvet dented and drab, and a giant high-heeled shoe that once sparkled with a thousand incandescent bulbs. When the Tropicana sign arrives, Romano and Alvarez debate where to put it.

"By Aladdin's Lamp," Romano says. "To create some drama in that area."

"You could put it over by the Jackpot," says Alvarez, referring to a large sign from the Jackpot Motel, "although that might be a lot of blue."

"We could move the tam," Romano says, pointing to a Chevy-size beret in a green-and-black plaid, from the Tam O'Shanter Motel. Alvarez agrees. While a co-worker climbs gingerly onto the tam and attaches a cable, Donlon looks around the Boneyard. "I've blown up some of these signs," he says. "I set the explosives on top of the Dunes sign when they imploded the hotel." The Dunes, a landmark razed during the 1990s development boom, had a distinctive minaret-shaped sign.

Alvarez looks pained. "That sign was fully restored!" he exclaims.

"Yep," Donlon says genially. "We tipped it right over. It was cool."

"I watched that implosion with my mother," Alvarez says. "We were wearing black—we were in mourning—and my mother was crying. She said, 'Your father and I tried to rekindle our love at that hotel.'"

After the crane deposits the tam in its new spot, it hoists the Tropicana Mobil Park sign from the flatbed. The crew guides it with straps as if walking a balloon in the Macy's parade. Up close, the sign is much more imposing than it was on the avenue.

Their work done, the sign guys pull out of the lot. Romano shuts the chain-link fence and locks it. With his cellphone, Alvarez snaps a photo of the sign through the fence. He gives it a little wave. "Welcome home," he says.