

# THE ROLE OF HISTORIC SIGNS AS A MEANS OF REVITALIZING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE



*A survey of projects across America*

**National Signage & Research Educational Conference**

**October 12, 2015 – Oklahoma City, OK**

# AMERICAN SIGN MUSEUM: A BRIEF HISTORY

Founded in March 1999

Opened in 4500 sq. ft. space in  
April 2005

Purchased 40,000 sq. ft.  
building in the Fall of 2009

Grand opening of present  
home in June 2012



# Mission Statement

“To celebrate the rich history of American signage through preservation and education.”

## Vision

“The American Sign Museum is the premier resource for preserving historic signs and promoting the contributions the sign industry makes to commerce, culture and the American landscape.”





Approximately 5100 objects in collection

More than 20,000 visitors in 2014

Projected 26,000 visitors in 2015

## STATE OF THE MUSEUM



# A GROWING TREND

There has been a marked increase across America in the number of projects involving sign preservation and restoration.



Some of these projects involve single signs; others involve a number of signs in a specific downtown area, or possibly along an entire street stretching for miles across a city or state.

Some are privately funded; some are publicly-funded, but many are a hybrid of both private and public funding. The projects vary a great deal, but all are united in the effort to preserve vintage signs.

# SUPPORTING MEDIA

- Antique Roadshow, American Pickers
- Antique sign auctions; ebay
- Roadside Americana websites
- Vintage sign-specific websites
- TV and newspapers
- Social media
- Museums – public and private

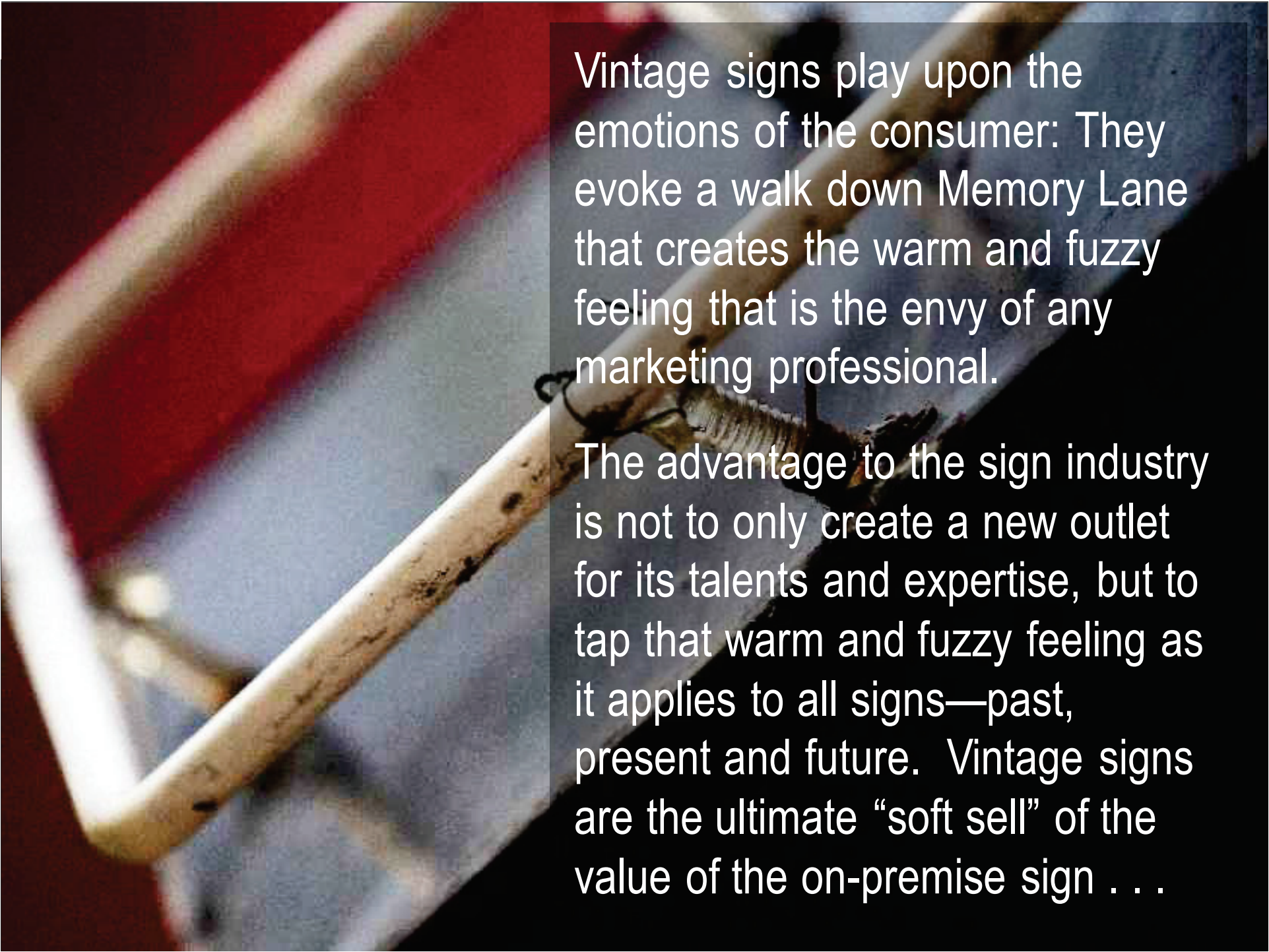
# BUT WHY PRESERVE VINTAGE OR HISTORIC SIGNS?

The American Sign Museum is presently conducting research on 33 different sign restoration projects it has discovered through Google search from May 2014 through July 2015. At least seven others have been identified since our survey was e-mailed in July. There are undoubtedly more such projects.

Initial findings show that whether the project is a multi-sign effort spread over a six-block area or a single sign for a now defunct business, the initial energy to save and restore the sign is emotional.

The positive economic impact on the surrounding area is implied, but difficult to assess.





Vintage signs play upon the emotions of the consumer: They evoke a walk down Memory Lane that creates the warm and fuzzy feeling that is the envy of any marketing professional.

The advantage to the sign industry is not to only create a new outlet for its talents and expertise, but to tap that warm and fuzzy feeling as it applies to all signs—past, present and future. Vintage signs are the ultimate “soft sell” of the value of the on-premise sign . . .

# ASM RESEARCH

- Identify projects
- Define and categorize projects
  - 1) Single signs – private funding
  - 2) Single signs – public and/or private funding
  - 3) Multi-sign projects
  - 4) Theater marquees
  - 5) Painted walls and barns
  - 6) Miscellaneous
- Create a database of those involved
- Create e-mail survey; follow-up questions
- Analyze data

# KEY PROJECTS: MULTI-SIGN

Route 66 – New Mexico

Gasoline Alley – Oklahoma City, OK

Tucson, AZ

Rapid City, SD

Calgary, AB

Edmonton, AB

Colfax Avenue – Denver, CO

Doo Wop – Wildwood, NJ

Vancouver, BC



**Scope:** Historic Preservation Office identifies and notifies owners of blighted neon signs. City covers 75% of cost of repair; owner covers 25% . Owner must consent to maintain sign for 10 years.

**Number of signs:** 2 to date

**Allocation:** \$125,000 in 2013

**Timeframe:** Ongoing



**TUCSON, AZ**

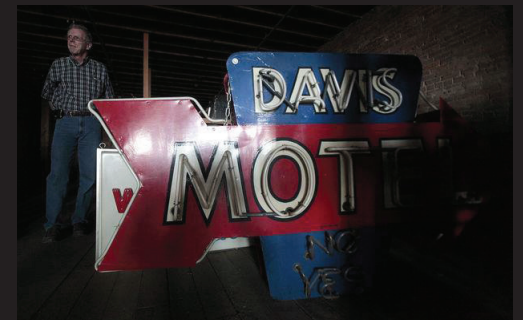
**Scope:** Began with restoration of South Dakota Stockgrowers Assn. sign in 2000, funded by Modern Woodmen of America Insurance with labor and materials donated by Rosenbaum Signs and Outdoor Advertising. Paul Swedlund, former local attorney now living in Denver, began saving other threatened signs and warehousing them in 2005. He is now looking for a home for seven of the local signs he has saved and restored.

**Number of signs:** 8

**Cost:** unknown

**Timeframe:** Ongoing

**RAPID CITY, SD**



**Scope:** Largely through the efforts of Alison Karim-McSwiney, Executive Director of the International Avenue BRZ, the disappearing signs primarily along International Avenue corridor have come to the attention of all, including the City of Calgary -- particularly the Calgary Heritage Authority. Karim-McSwiney continues to save threatened signs.

**Number of signs:** Ongoing

**Cost:** NA

**Timeframe:** Documentation began in 2009. Signs continue to be saved and warehoused.



**CALGARY, AB**



**Scope:** Edmonton's efforts to preserve its neon heritage began in 2002, also with the rescue of a single sign by a single individual interested in the city's heritage. Over the next seven years, more signs were saved and warehoused by the individual until the idea of a museum was born. The Alberta Sign Assn. was then approached about the possibility of restoring the signs gratis. In 2011, the Edmonton Business Council got involved and selected eight signs, which were then given to eight ASA members to restore. The following year, an outdoor venue was selected and by 2014, the eight restored signs were installed. A half dozen more signs are in various stages of restoration and will be added to the outdoor gallery.

**Number of signs:** Potential of 30

**Cost:** \$1000 per sign; majority of restoration and installation costs donated by ASA members.

**Timeframe:** First stage completed February 2014; more signs slated for restoration and installation.

# EDMONTON, AB

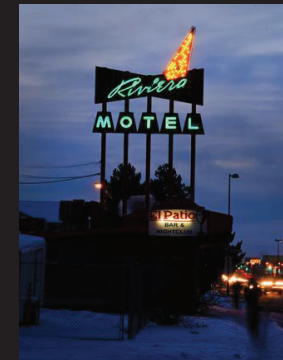


**Scope:** Twelve mid-century neon signs along Denver's historic Colfax Avenue were placed on Colorado Preservation Inc.'s list of endangered places in 2014. Once known as "the Gateway to the Rockies, Colfax was the major east-west thoroughfare preceding the construction of I-70. Although the listing of these signs does not guarantee their restoration or even continued existence, it is the first step in the process to attract financial support---both public and private—to preserve these icons.

**Number of signs:** Ongoing

**Cost:** NA

**Timeframe:** Ongoing



**COLFAX AVENUE – DENVER, CO**

**Scope:** The Doo Wop Preservation League was actually created in the 1997, but until recently, had very limited success in preserving the hundreds of Doo Wop motel and restaurant signs that characterized this South Jersey beachtown area. Noted architect Steve Izenour (deceased) of Venturi Scott Brown and Associates documented the incredibly intact 1950s and 60s examples of this Jersey version of Googie in the late 1990s and became known as the “great validator.” Local tubebender Fred Musso saved and has been storing more than a dozen signs over the last decade. The State of New Jersey has recognized the immediate Wildwood Crest area as the “Wildwoods Shore Resort Historic District,” but adjacent areas including North Wildwood and Wildwood are also rich in Doo Wop signage. New high-rise construction in the Wildwood area is the first of its kind in the US to enforce Doo Wop design guidelines. Tourism is the major driver in the renewed efforts to preserve Doo Wop.

**Number of signs:** An estimated 75-85

**Cost:** NA

**Timeframe:** Ongoing



## DOO WOP – WILDWOOD, NJ



## OTHER KEY PROJECTS: SINGLE SIGN

- Mobil Pegasus – Dallas, TX
- Yoken's Restaurant – Portsmouth, NH
- Pillsbury Flour – Minneapolis, MN
- Mercury Cleaners – Sacramento, CA
- Orpheum Theatre – Madison, WI
- Star Theater – Oceanside, CA

**Scope:** The Mobil Pegasus was the highest point on the Dallas skyline until taken down in 1999, rusted and in a total state of disrepair. A new Pegasus was fabricated and installed at a cost of \$600,000 and the 1934 original sign squirreled away by the city. Then in 2011, Jeremy McKane and June Mattingly, daughter of the owner of Textlite, which had built the sign, sought the whereabouts of the original Pegasus. After months of searching, the sign was found and restored through the financial support of Matthews Southwest, a private developer.

**Number of signs:** 1

**Cost:** \$200,000

**Timeframe:** Relit May 2015



# MOBIL PEGASUS – DALLAS, TX

**Scope:** Another single sign restoration, Yoken's Restaurant was a much less dramatic restoration than the Mobil Pegasus. But the community support that prompted the saving of this local landmark was no less enthusiastic. In this case, the longtime restaurant had closed down and its building demolished, and the sign sat, covered by a tarp until citizens and two local businesses, united to restore the sign. None of this could have happened without the approval of the Portsmouth Zoning Board of Adjustment.

**Number of signs:** 1

**Cost:** unknown.

**Timeframe:** May 2015



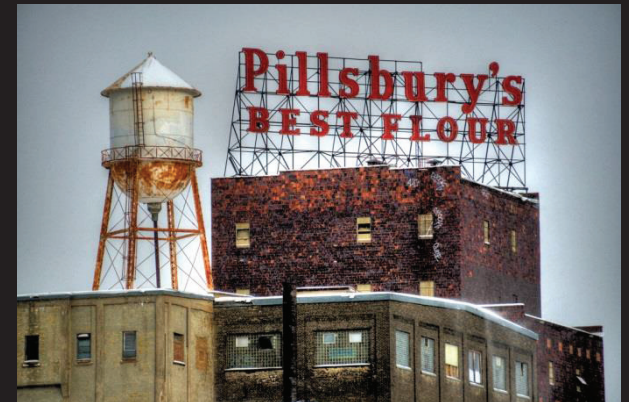
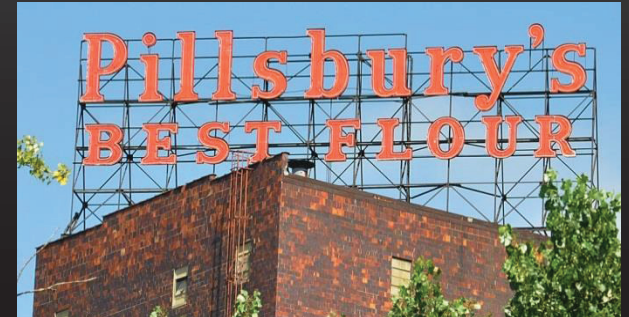
# YOKEN'S RESTAURANT – PORTSMOUTH, NH

**Scope:** The Pillsbury Flour sign is one of three historic landmarks located in the St. Anthony Falls Historic District of Minneapolis. Its preservation and restoration was a joint project of the City of Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission and the local Lawrence Sign Company. The Plymouth, MN-based developer, Dominion, had purchased the former flour mill and repurposed it as artist loft space. The sign was originally installed in 1940, according to city records, and had remained lit until 2010. Lawrence determined the majority of the sign was restorable, but replaced the original neon with LED lighting, while maintaining the neon illumination “look.”

**Number of signs:** 1

**Cost:** unknown.

**Timeframe:** Relit in the summer of 2014



# PILLSBURY'S – MINNEAPOLIS, MN



**Scope:** When this Sacramento landmark neon sign was threatened, the local Capital Area Development Authority stepped up to the plate, representing the first time the state agency got involved with saving a sign. The 1947 local icon was first threatened when the Department of General Services determined the building was to be torn down for environmental clean-up. CADA found a new home for the local cleaners across the street and sought to move the sign with the business. The sign had originally been on a one-way street, so the flashing arrow was animated on only one side. In the new location, the sign's unlit back side would now be facing traffic, so the sign was re-engineered to flash on both sides.

**Number of signs:** 1

**Cost:** unknown.

**Timeframe:** Relit June 26, 2014



# MERCURY CLEANERS – SACRAMENTO, CA

**Scope:** Theater marquees are a special brand of sign restoration projects, and there are many. The 1926 Orpheum Theatre and its marquee had been in disrepair for many years, until local developers purchased the property and sought to restore all to its former glory. Although some public money was granted by the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation, the bulk of the \$200,000 renovation of the marquee was funded by the developer. Approval of the developer's plans to restore the entire theatre by the city Landmarks Commission was paramount to the project. The 1926 theatre is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**Number of signs:** 1

**Cost:** estimated \$40,000-50,000

**Timeframe:** Approval granted for marquee restoration in July 2015



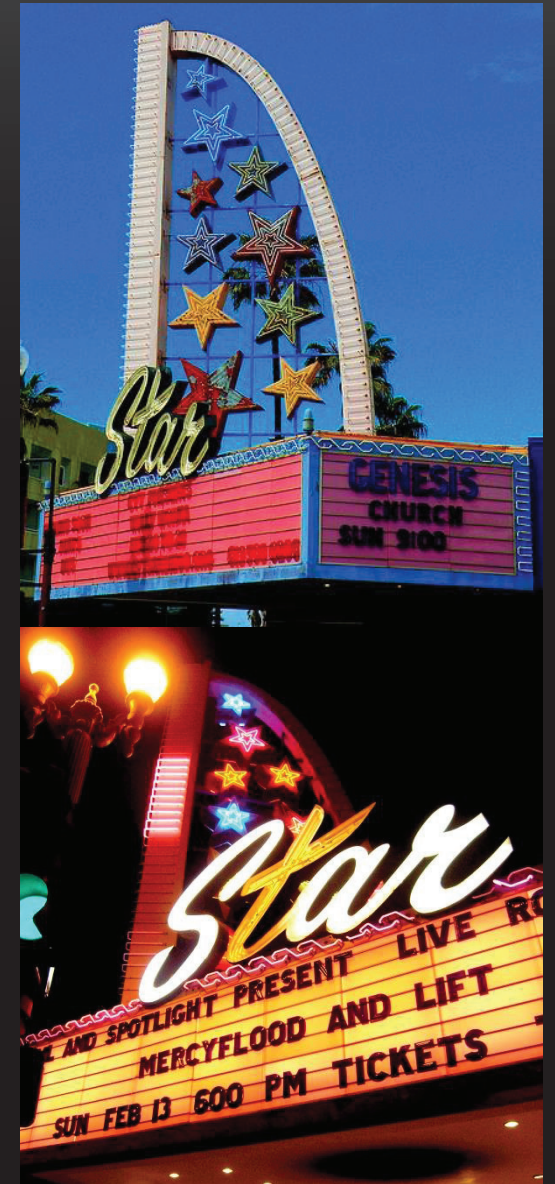
# ORPHEUM THEATRE— MADISON, WI

**Scope:** The Star Theater Company purchased the building in 2000, but didn't begin fundraising for the theater marquee until 2013. The 1956 theater proper had undergone restoration in the early 1990s, earning the local Orchid Award for Interior Design and Historic Preservation. Several sign companies had submitted proposals replacing the original neon with LEDs, but the theater's board of directors were unanimous in stipulating that the sign remain neon-illuminated. The 48-ft. tall sign is the largest and oldest working neon marquee in San Diego County.

**Number of signs:** 1

**Cost:** \$100,000

**Timeframe:** Relit July 3, 2015



**STAR THEATRE— OCEANSIDE, CA**

# SUMMARY

- The critical mass of sign restoration projects identified over the last 18 months clearly indicates a trend. For the most part, the projects are lead by the private sector—often an individual, but soon evolving into a local grassroots effort. The relevant local landmarks commission, preservation office and/or cultural heritage agency joins in, providing moral and even occasionally financial support. Sometimes the city at-large steps in, and offers matching funds, but more often, a local business or sympathetic private funder donates the majority of the restoration costs. Sign companies from the local, regional or state/province often are solicited to donate some or all of the restoration and installation needs. In all cases, however, the cooperation and support of the local authorities is paramount to sign restoration efforts.



## SUMMARY *CONTINUED*

- Through its research, the American Sign Museum is seeking to determine the “criteria for success” for sign restoration projects. It is unlikely that a “one size fits all” strategy can be formulated, but certainly there will be a list of general do’s and don’ts that can be identified.
- Our goal is to provide a forum for those who have undertaken sign restoration projects to compare notes. Ultimately, the museum wants to create a community for those involved in sign restoration—whether past, present or future. Perhaps even a “best practices” handbook can be created.
- With that in mind, the museum is interested in hosting a Sign Preservation and Restoration Conference as early as the Fall of 2016.