



For Immediate Release

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The American Sign Museum restores the Holiday Inn Great Sign to full brilliance

Cincinnati, OH – The American Sign Museum recently restored its 1950's Holiday Inn sign. Known as the Great Sign, it was once an icon of the American road trip—a true design landmark that dotted the nation's highways and bi-ways, designed to draw road-weary travelers. The Museum's Great Sign is likely the only remaining authentic, full-sized exterior sign. Replicas of this classic sign can be found at the Henry Ford Museum and the Pink Palace in Memphis, but no others are known to exist. The restoration included a complete recreation of the starburst topper section. The new topper will allow guests to experience how the sign was meant to be seen, and continue the Museum's efforts in preserving the rich history of American signage.

The Museum acquired the Great Sign in 2002 from the Young Electric Sign Company (YESCO) of Las Vegas. However, the sign only had two of its three sections—the base and the body; the star section that sat atop had been missing for years. The Museum's Founder, Tod Swormstedt, long dreamed of restoring the sign to its full glory.

"There are a number of significant American icons that epitomize the post WWII era of the 1950s. The Speedee McDonald's arch, Howard Johnson's, and of course, the Holiday Inn Great Sign. Kemmons Wilson—Holiday Inn founder—told me in an interview in 1998 that he took a cue from the neon and chasing lightbulb illumination of the theater marquees of the previous two decades for his sign; but it was the towering star that made it the beacon in the night it was. So, of course, we had to have the tower and star."

Such a restoration project is a huge and expensive undertaking. It was not until 2019 when the project got a kickoff from Mike Conway, the Executive Vice President of Business Development & Acquisitions at Pyramid Global Hospitality who started his career with a Holiday Inn franchisee. Conway coordinated an independent fundraiser page to commission a new star.

"I wanted to see the Holiday Inn Great Sign restored to honor its heritage and to save an American Icon. I also wanted to highlight one of the most striking utilizations of neon and incandescent lighting which welcomed millions of travelers throughout its history," says Conway. Over 32 individuals across the country made contributions to support the restoration.

Plans for the star section were developed based on designs made by Cummings & Co, the original manufacturer of the Great Sign. Allen Industries of Toledo, OH created the metal base and star frame. Neonworks of Cincinnati created the neon tubing and wired the new section. Finally, Atlantic Sign Company installed the completed section.

The first Holiday Inn opened in 1952 in Memphis, TN. The chain grew rapidly from 50 locations in 1958 to 1,000 by 1968. The growth was reflected in the company's marketing through taglines like "Your host from coast to coast" and "The Nation's Innkeeper." Each Great Sign required 836 feet of neon, 31 transformers, 450 lightbulbs, and weighed about 14,000lbs. The sign and all of its related branding were officially retired in 1982 when the company updated to plastic signs, which were more cost effective to install and maintain. The sign companies contracted to install the new signs were also required to destroy the Great Sign upon taking it down resulting in few examples of the actual sign remaining.

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About the American Sign Museum

The American Sign Museum covers more than 100 years of American sign history and displays more than 700 signs and artifacts, making it the most comprehensive museum of its kind. With a mission to educate the community about the history of the sign industry and its significant contribution to commerce and the American landscape, the Museum is organized to preserve, archive and display a historical collection of signs in their many types and forms.

The building features 19,000+ square feet of exhibit space, 28-foot ceilings able to accommodate sizable outdoor signs, a working neon shop, flexible event space, and an extensive archive of books, photos and documents reflecting the art, craft and history of signmaking.

For more information about the American Sign Museum, please visit americansignmuseum.org. The American Sign Museum is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation.