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# *Sourisseau Academy*

*Smith-Layton Archive presents:*

## San Jose Signs

by Heather David

*Les Amis (The Friends)*

*May 2018*

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[59] **Downtown at Dusk** (David Collection) - San Jose was once a city aglow, wrapped in a ribbon of light and color. Every business, if it wanted to be in business, was marked by a notable sign. In the early 1900s, signs were illuminated by incandescent bulbs. By the 1930s, the word in electric sign displays was NEON. The 1930s to the late 1950s marked the golden age of neon signs. The 1960s saw the aggressive removal of roadside signs as urban and highway beautification initiatives swept the nation.



[60] **O'Brien's Candy Store, c1925** - O'Brien's Candy Store was founded in San Jose in 1868. An exterior photograph of the shop, circa 1925, advertises the house specialty – a giant soda fountain drink – covered in a cascade of incandescent bulbs. This sign was most probably animated.



[61] **O'Brien's Candy Store, c 1948** - As San Jose grew, so did the O'Brien's enterprise. By 1948, O'Brien's was marketing itself as "San Jose's Foremost Restaurant." The shop had relocated, adding dining facilities and a cocktail lounge called the "Little Room." As could be expected of such a respectable establishment, the entrance to O'Brien's was now marked by a colorful neon sign, with the family name in a bouncy mid-century script.



[62] **Hart's Billboard, c1950** - The popularity of the billboard, as an advertising medium, exploded with the post-war popularity of the automobile. San Jose was once home to numerous billboards. A few still stand around town, as reminders of a different era. Here's a Hart's department store billboard featuring Wedgewood Stoves, circa 1950.



[63] **Andy's Pet Shop, 1959** - The bright neon parrot of Andy's Pet Shop sat perched high above The Alameda for 60 years before the store's relocation. Much has changed since Andy Camilleri and his wife Geraldine went into the business of peddling pets in 1950. The beloved signage sits inside its new home, in pieces... awaiting a long-term lease, and the necessary permits to resurrect it.



[64] **The Towne Theatre** , c1959 - The Towne Theatre began its days as the Hester Theatre (1925) – San Jose's first neighborhood theater. In 1930, the Hester became the first theater in San Jose to install a sound system for the "talkies." In 1955, the theater received a facade-lift and was renamed the Towne.



[65] **D'Amico Tire Service Company** - Leonard D'Amico's Tire Service Company opened in 1946. Business was very good. In the 1950s, D'Amico added a five bay garage and two eye-catching neon signs. Today, modified versions of both signs advertise Wheel Works. The smaller sign is notable for its remarkable neon craftsmanship.



[66] **The Big “E” at Stevens Creek Emporium, 1957** - In 1957, the architectural firm Welton Becket & Associates designed the largest Emporium department store between San Francisco and Los Angeles – the Emporium at Stevens Creek Plaza. Slapped onto the side of the building was a giant red “E” – internally illuminated and outlined in neon tubing – an advertising concept first introduced in 1952. In the next decade, the Stevens Creek “E” would be joined by another “E” across town at the Emporium at Almaden Plaza.



[67] **Guaranty Savings, 1962** - Up, up, up it goes.... hoisted into the sky by a giant crane. In 1962, Guaranty Savings gets a towering roadside sign that can be viewed from miles away. Within a decade, a sign of this size and stature was unlikely to be erected – due to strict city sign ordinances.



[68] **Alpha Beta Grocery Store, c1968** - By the 1960s, neon was out and plastic was “in.” Deemed cheaper and more versatile than neon, backlit plastic signs became the norm – such as these fascia signs for Alpha Beta grocery store.



[69] **Valley Fair Monument sign** - Today's arguably forgettable monument signs – a most fitting term – dot the roadsides where neon spectacles once flashed with enthusiasm. With more and more advertising being pushed to a virtual world, there is less investment (and far less creativity) in roadside signage.



## THE SAN JOSE SIGNS PROJECT

*A Guide to the Vintage Signage of San Jose*

[70] **San Jose Signs Project Booklet cover** - Introducing The San Jose Signs Project – an Initiative to preserve historic signs in San Jose. As part of The San Jose Signs Project launch in May 2017, twenty-five San Jose signs were selected to build a one day driving tour around. Their stories were documented and a full color guide was created. It is hoped that the booklet will help educate the public as to why our signs matter.