

Your Guide to Fun After Sundown

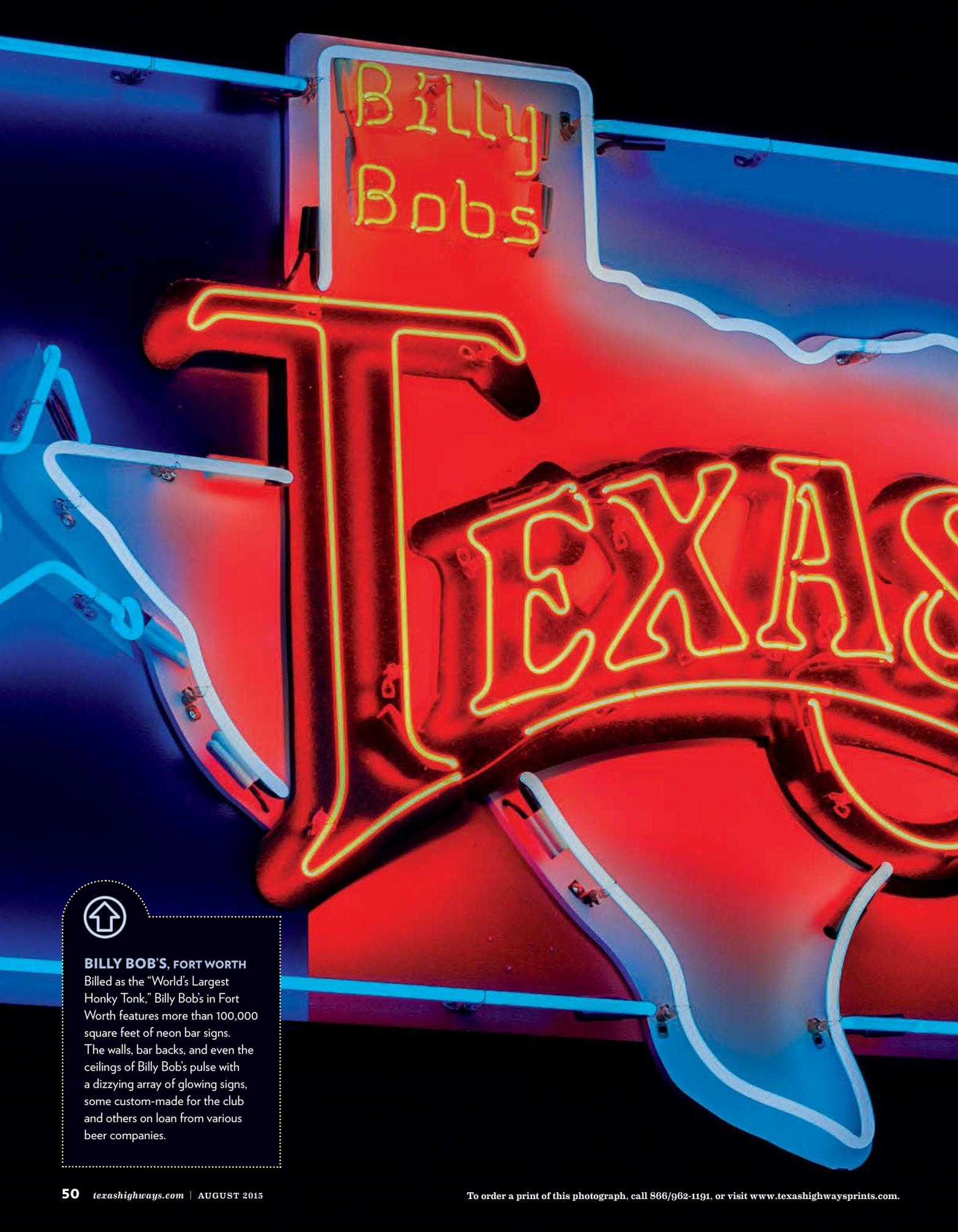
TEXAS



HIGHWAYS

The TRAVEL MAGAZINE of TEXAS *** AUGUST 2015





BILLY BOB'S, FORT WORTH

Billed as the "World's Largest Honky Tonk," Billy Bob's in Fort Worth features more than 100,000 square feet of neon bar signs.

The walls, bar backs, and even the ceilings of Billy Bob's pulse with a dizzying array of glowing signs, some custom-made for the club and others on loan from various beer companies.



SIGNS
OF THE
PAST

A TRIBUTE TO
ICONIC VINTAGE
NEON SIGNS
OF TEXAS

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY ERIC W. POHL

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IGHT AROUND DUSK, it happens all across Texas. A couple of flickers. A buzz. And then the illumination of vibrant colors clicks on, emanating a hum as electrified gases dance within their glass conduits.

In bustling city centers, on small-town squares, and along roadways throughout the state, neon signs come to life, punctuating the jewel-blue twilight with a mesmerizing glow.

Neon signs beckon us to chow down at roadside diners, kick back with some popcorn at a vintage movie palace, or get some shuteye at a drive-in motor lodge. From perfectly preserved vintage signs to modern throwbacks crafted in a retro style, neon evokes a simpler time—a bygone era when the open road called, often just to go for a drive.

For many fans, the true stars in the world of neon are the historic signs from the 1940s through the 1960s—when artisans handcrafted some of the most eye-catching and inventive advertising ever made. This era is considered to be the golden age of roadside neon, and many of these historic



DOT COFFEE SHOP, HOUSTON

Opened in 1967 by brothers Jim, George, Tom, and Pete Pappas, Dot Coffee Shop serves scratch-made comfort favorites like chicken-fried steak, pot roast, and pecan pie 24-7 in a glorious retro diner. Its landmark neon sign is one of the most recognizable signs in southeast Houston.

HEALTH CAMP, WACO

In 1948, Jack Schaevitz began serving burgers and ice cream to pilots and other military personnel from a mobile canteen at James Connally Air Force Base in Waco. His brick-and-mortar restaurant, Health Camp, followed in 1949. More than a half-century later, Health Camp's iconic neon facade still attracts hungry locals and visitors in search of old-fashioned burgers, chili dogs, malts, and shakes.





Dot
Coffee Shop
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OVERNIGHT STAFF



Slow Simo's





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ALL
DAY
FRESH

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EL REAL TEX MEX, HOUSTON

A remnant of Houston's Art Deco past, the flamboyant neon facade of the Tower Theater building had been a Montrose neighborhood landmark since 1936. The elaborate sign was heavily damaged during Hurricane Ike in 2008 and was painstakingly redesigned in 2010 by Houston's own Sparkle Sign Company to advertise the restaurant El Real Tex-Mex.



WALGREENS, SAN ANTONIO

Walgreens' red-and-green neon signs at the corner of Houston and Navarro streets in San Antonio have been downtown icons since the drugstore opened in 1936. The original five-and-dime building was eventually razed and replaced by a larger structure, but the original neon signs were carefully restored and replaced.



relics still shine brightly today. With their timeless appeal, these fountains of light have transcended their original advertising role and have become iconic landmarks. If they have one thing in common, it's that they evoke emotion.

I can recall one of the first times I stopped to photograph neon. It was on a family trip in Marble Falls, and I was in my teens, proudly learning to operate my new SLR camera. We pulled into a laid-back roadside diner in town called the

Blue Bonnet Cafe. Making my way from the car into the restaurant, bathed in the soft electric glow of red and blue neon, I was smitten.

I was captivated by the stark juxtaposition of that simple, old-fashioned neon sign mounted against the cafe's plain white exterior.

So I stopped to take a photo. I don't recall if I had the Blue Bonnet's famous chicken-fried steak or a hamburger—much less a slice of pie—all those years ago. But I'll never forget the brilliance of that neon sign.

The story of neon, named for the Greek word *neos*, which means “new,” dates to 1898, when chemists William Ramsay and Morris Travers at University College London isolated and electrified neon gas to analyze its visual spectrum. “The blaze of crimson light from the tube told

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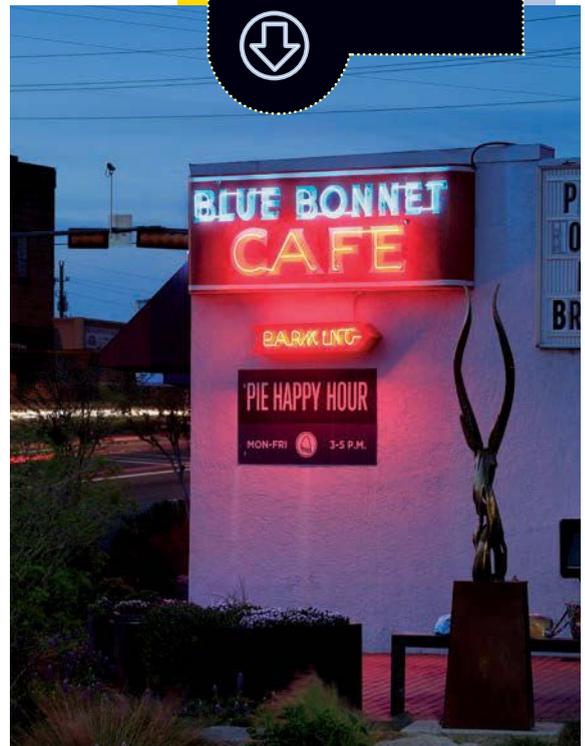
TEXAS THEATRE, SEGUIN

The striking neon Texas sign and vertical chase-light marquee of the 1931 Texas Theatre in Seguin beautifully complements the modestly ornamental brick facade. The theater still features period fixtures like handmade mica lamps and hand-painted murals. In 1996, it was acquired by The Seguin Conservation Society and carefully restored and expanded. It reopened in 2011.



BLUE BONNET CAFE, MARBLE FALLS

Famous for its classic diner fare and “pie happy hour,” the Blue Bonnet Cafe has been a Marble Falls institution since 1929. The current location on US 281 dates to 1946, and its neon sign gleams in classic 1940s red and blue.



its own story, and it was a sight to dwell upon and never to forget ... for nothing in the world gave a glow such as we had seen,” Travers later said of the experience.

In 1910, French inventor Georges Claude filed his patent for neon lighting and soon figured out how to bend these tubes to form shapes and letters. By the late 1920s and 1930s, neon had become a common signage medium. And then came the era of the automobile and the American interstate. By the 1940s and 1950s, many families owned automobiles for the first time. Post-war prosperity meant that they had the means to travel, and roadside businesses began to devise eye-catching neon designs to attract customers.

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On the roadways, these architectural wonders—kaleidoscopes of advertising with moving parts and oscillating colors—were becoming an unmistakable part of the American landscape. Over the following decades, though, neon was gradually supplanted by less-expensive plastic signage—often colored sheets of plastic illuminated by fluorescent lights—which dominates American advertising today.



MAGNOLIA HOTEL, DALLAS

For 40 years beginning in 1934, a red neon Pegasus—the mascot of the Magnolia Oil company—slowly turned on a metal base on top of the 29-story building that now houses downtown Dallas' Magnolia Hotel. The original Pegasus now draws attention to the Omni Dallas Hotel, and this reproduction, which was made in 1999 and restored in 2013, graces the Magnolia.





SOUTH CONGRESS AVENUE, AUSTIN

You haven't truly experienced Austin unless you've sauntered up Austin's funky neon-heavy South Congress Avenue. With landmarks like the 1938 Austin Motel sign, 1957 Continental Club sign, and others, this bustling strip could be called the neon capital of Texas.



**TEEPEE MOTEL,
WHARTON**

Opened in 1942, the TeePee Motel's roadside rooms and neon Indian-chief sign greeted guests passing through Wharton for nearly 40 years. By the 1980s, the motel had fallen into disrepair, but in 2004 received a new lease on life when lottery-winners Barbara and Bryon Woods purchased the TeePee and restored it. It reopened for business in 2006.



**RIVER OAKS
THEATRE, HOUSTON**

The grand, V-shaped neon marquee of Houston's River Oaks Theatre has been a beacon in the city's upscale River Oaks neighborhood since the theater opened in 1939. Originally built with one screen, it now has three, and usually offers independent, art-house, and foreign films.

Yet, amid the tangle of digital LED billboards and backlit chain-store signs, neon's legacy continues as historians step in to preserve it. In Austin along Congress Avenue, in downtown Fort Worth and San Antonio, in southeast and central Houston, and in many hidden corners of the state from El Paso to Seguin, neon gleams.

Neon has also become a form of highly prized pop art. Collectors from all over the world covet not only historic pieces, but also collect the modern works of such neon artists as Todd Sanders of Roadhouse Relics and Evan Voyles of The Neon Jungle, both in Austin.

Here, I've assembled a photographic homage to some of my favorite neon signs and Texas icons of neon. You'll find everything from showy historic relics to simple classic designs, and even legendary places where the abundance of neon has become a visual wonder in itself. I hope these neon icons will all be around for years to come, remaining a part of the American experience. ★

"Photographing and delving into the history of these iconic roadside treasures was a truly amazing experience," says Eric W. Pohl, a Dripping Springs-based photographer and writer. "Hopefully, they'll continue to shine brightly for future generations."



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