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Shining a New Light on City's Neon

From Gritty Bars to Candy Stores, Author Captures Fading Scenes

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA



Thomas E. Rinaldi

Neon sign at Eighth Avenue near Times Square

For photographs that seem to blink and zap in his new book "New York Neon," Thomas E. Rinaldi ventured across the city with a camera and an eye for old signs. In each of the five boroughs, he shot bars, candy shops, pizzerias, funeral parlors —anywhere with the kind of signs that commune with bygone times. Along with pictures, the 33-year-old Mr. Rinaldi collected stories and historical accounts of neon, which electrified New York with a mystical, modern sense of wonder near the start of the 20th century before taking on a nostalgic status of its own.

By the glow of a old sign at Old Town Bar in Union Square, over a bowl of chicken and rice soup, Mr. Rinaldi spoke with The Wall Street Journal about the lingering allure of neon, its place on the face of the city and signs of change all around.

You conceived of your project before you moved to the city from upstate. What was its origin?

I was not a stranger to New York. I had come here a lot throughout my life, and there were landmarks that I had known as far back as I could remember. Their disappearance was becoming



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Cassandra Giraldo for The Wall Street Journal
Thomas E. Rinaldi at the Old Town Tavern

conspicuous. They were disappearing at a noticeable, if not alarming, rate—noticeable was the objective way to put it, but alarming was how I felt about it. So it seemed like if I wanted to photograph them, it was time to do it now.

What signs do you remember from childhood?

Dublin House [a bar on West 79th Street] was the first, going past it as a kid and seeing it flashing in the car. Thank god it's still there. It's been there since 1933. That one and others that have been around forever are amazing: They're veterans of the World War II blackout. They seem so ephemeral, so improbable. There was one I loved for an appliance store in the Bronx. I remember thinking it looked kind of

dated; even as a kid you could tell. You didn't need to be a student of design or architecture to know that it was a product of a different time.



Thomas E. Rinaldi
Nathan's Famous in Coney Island

For the book you focused on signs from mom-and-pop places. Why?

One of things that is most exciting about these signs is that the places they're associated with are great and, in general, an endangered species. If a place has a sign like this, it's kind of guaranteed that it will be a cool, old place that has been around for a long time and gives a sense of what a particular neighborhood was really like. I was drawn to those kinds of places before they became part of an epidemic of disappearing acts.

Why have so many gone away?

They're significantly higher-maintenance than the kids of signs that succeeded them. But there are some signs that need, miraculously, almost

no maintenance. I called the owner of Eddie's Sweet Shop in Forest Hills, Queens, to ask who did the maintenance on their sign, and he said, "What do you mean?" They've apparently owned the place since the 1960s, and it's never needed any work. Then there are other signs that are constantly going out. It was hard to photograph some of them because every time I would go out, they would be off again. Some are a little finicky.

What causes them to go out?

Since I'm not a professional I only did a disservice to the truths of maintenance, but I made an attempt. The science is a little tricky. It's all about electrons being excited and buzzing around and flying all over the place—that's what is giving off the light.

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Real- York

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Odd-even gas rationing will end in New York City Saturday morning, now that more than 85% of gas stations in the five boroughs are operating, Mayor Michael Bloomberg said Friday.



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Some signs, recently, were damaged in Hurricane Sandy.

There were two that I know of. One was a big lobster over the City Island Lobster House. A crumpled-up 30-foot-high neon lobster makes for a sad sight. But the one that was really sad to me was the Shore Theater in Coney Island. It was mangled and blasted apart.

What happened to neon signs during the WWII blackout that you cited?



Thomas E. Rinaldi

Edward D. Lynch Funeral Home in Queens

There are photos of the city all black during the dim-out. Some of the big arched windows in the Reading Room at the New York Public Library had blackout paint on them. At Penn Station, with its big skylights, they would paint out the big windows so they could keep the lights on inside but not be visible to aircraft. The Times Square signs were all turned off. They took measures like that throughout the city.

After the war they took on a different tinge.

Part of the fascination with neon is that it has a dark side too. There's a grittiness to it. In film noir, it's associated with seedy business and urban vice. When Times Square developed a reputation as a seedy

place in the '60s, '70s and '80s, there was a tie-in there. The history of neon is very much seasoned by its relationship with New York City. It makes up the aesthetic of the streetscape, what a city really is.

What did you learn as you communed with so many signs?

For me the hardest thing to reconcile was having a reverence for these things out of a nostalgic sentiment, but at the same time, in many towns around the country, neon signs were actually illegal because people felt that they would break up historic sentiment. The signs themselves once were new, and if the landscape had frozen then, we wouldn't have the signs in the first place. It forced me to think a great deal about what makes historic things historic. What's the value of "authenticity"? The signs are a sign of how difficult it is to achieve a balance between new and old, order and disorder.

A version of this article appeared November 24, 2012, on page A20 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Shining a New Light on City's Neon.

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