



The City of Seattle

Landmarks Preservation Board

Mailing Address: PO Box 94649, Seattle WA 98124-4649

Street Address: 600 4th Avenue, 4th Floor

LPB 319/22

REPORT ON DESIGNATION

Name and Address of Property: **Elephant Car Wash Sign – the small version sign formerly located at 6th Ave. & Battery St.**

Legal Description: **N/A**

At the public meeting held on August 17, 2022 the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of Elephant Car Wash Sign (small version) as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following standard for designation of SMC 25.12.350:

- C. It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, City, state or nation.*
- D. It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or a method of construction.*
- E. It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder.*

DESCRIPTION

The Original Setting

The subject of this nomination is a large neon sign previously located at a former car business. The car wash business included a low-scale, 4,100 square foot flat roof structure on an 18,965 square foot (0.44-acre) property at the corner of Denny Way and Battery Street, between 6th and 7th Avenues. The property was located on Block W of Bells 6th Addition to the City of Seattle. Its irregular triangular shape resulted from a realignment of streets in the early 1950s following the opening of the Battery Street tunnel connection from the waterfront to Aurora Avenue N/Highway 99.

This particular location is associated with the city's mid-century auto culture as it was on a prominent street at the north-bound entry to and south-bound exit from Aurora Avenue N. The site provided optimal visibility to vehicle drivers and easy access to the car wash. The irregular, L-shaped, single story structure was placed on the site at an angle to accommodate cars entering it on the east and exiting on the southwest.² In 1967 the building was altered by builder Charles Tuttle at an estimated cost of \$10,000.³

A prominent sign was placed at the north and south corners of this site, each supported on painted steel posts. Both signs were double-sided, and both depicted the profile form of an elephant outlined with neon and detailed with neon imagery and lettering. The subject sign was located at the site's south corner. The companion sign, at the north end, was larger and rotated, and it was detailed with small sheet metal elephants at its base, and blinking lights. It also featured few words. Each sign was supported by a steel support column with a shaped extension on the rotating base.

The Elephant Sign

The subject sign has a steel framed internal structure that serves as an armature for its painted sheet metal exterior cabinet, which is 1'-0"-wide. As shown in an original sketch and current drawings, the sign measures 10'-2"-wide and 9'-10"-tall including a base to which the two feet are attached. A 6"-diameter steel pole connects the internal frame within the cabinet to a subgrade footing support.

The sign's sheet metal cabinet is painted pink and outlined, with red, white, and black lettering. On one side neon tubes outline the elephant's outer profile, and its wavy ear, jaws, smiling mouth, trunk, and tail in a deep pink color. The small pillbox hat that it wears is made with orange and pink colored neon tubes, and the elephant's eye is a light blue neon circle and its eyebrow a similar color. Green neon outlines the water squirting from its trunk, and the large cursive script on the body that reads, "Super" while smaller capitalized orange print identifies, "Elephant" and "Car Wash" above and below. Near the lower edge thinner linework notes "Open."

All of the linework and lettering are made with neon and argon-filled glass tubing, phosphorous powder, glass, aluminum, copper, patinated enamel over sheet metal with electromagnetic transformers, an animator, carbon steel and stainless steel hardware. The sign has all of the exposed neon tubing mounted to the cabinet and all other elements, such as transformers and secondary wiring, are housed within the cabinet. The neon tubes are attached to one side of the cabinet as it was originally, while the opposite side retains the original painting. The figure of the elephant is rendered in a cartoon-like manner through paint as well as neon tubing as a contour outline. The sign at the north end of the original site had some of these same features.

The car wash sign was maintained at the original location with many decades of repairs and replacement of broken tubes. Such repairs likely occurred repeatedly as neon tubes are estimated to last on average only 8 to 15 years. In ca. 1970 much of the tubing was replaced-in-kind, and the steel cabinet was repainted at least once in late 2010.⁴ In 2020 both of the elephant signs were moved from their original site after the car wash business was closed by its operator, and the site was sold by the property owner.

The subject sign is being repaired and restored by Western Neon at its studios on 4th Avenue S in south Seattle. The owner's proposed plan calls for the subject sign to be placed on a new open plaza in the Belltown/Denny Regrade neighborhood near the northeast corner of 7th Avenue and Blanchard Street, approximately two blocks to the south of the original location where it will stand as a piece of privately-owned public art. At this location it will be accompanied by an interpretive plaque.

Neon Features and Details

The recent restoration and in-kind repairs were undertaken by a skilled team of neon craftspeople at Western Neon. The sheet metal cabinet was cleaned and old and broken tubing removed. Loose paint was removed and replaced, with color chosen to match the original, and then the surface was finished with a clear protective coating. New tubes, each 15mm to 18mm (approximately ½ to ¾ ") in diameter, were

created with the support of a two-dimensional design based on an original design drawing and the physical piece.

Working with the neon tubes that remained, and with historic photos and the design drawing, the team at Western Neon built a template – essentially a sign blueprint printed on a plotter. The template was laid out on a work table, and pieces cut from 4 foot-long tubes, heated and bent into the shapes with the template guiding the work. The tubes are clear or coated or pre-colored glass.

When working with neon, a tube bender holds sections of glass into a propane flame and, as the glass becomes supple, the bender blows through a rubber tube into the glass to help the tube retain a shape. The bender quickly comes to the template table with wood blocks to finish the shaping of the hot glass. Once a section of glass is bent into shape an electrode is welded to the ends of the tubes, and it is heated again. Through use of a high voltage machine called a bombardier any impurities in the glass are loosened by this heating process, and vacuumed out. Then a noble gas or a mix of such gasses – neon, argon, krypton, helium, and xenon – are pushed into the tube. There is a testing period, and afterwards the tubes are protected until they are attached to the cabinet, wired for electrodes, and turned on. To protect the work, the final installation and lighting of the tubes occurs on the site of the installation.⁵

In some areas of the original sign it appears that prior repairs resulted in some slippage and misalignment. (This was particularly the case where lines of water appear to spray from the elephant's trunk). To reconstruct the original Elephant Car Wash sign design, the tube bender crafted each tube piece slowly to realign the template and bring the in-kind pieces close to Bea Haverfield's original creation.

SIGNIFICANCE

A Brief History of Signs

Signs have been a means of communication since at least medieval times in Western cultures. They are expressive of their era's aesthetics and businesses needs and, when prominent and long-lasting, they "become part of community memory, even outlasting the original business."

Up through the 19th century business signs were often painted on walls or glass or rod-supported hanging and blade signs attached to the storefront exterior of a building, most often at pedestrian level and scale. There were also larger scale signs that could be seen from afar, such as the "ghost signs" painted on masonry walls, or the wall-mounted west-facing sign on the Bell Street Terminal visible from Elliott Bay that announced the Port of Seattle. The signs on a commercial building typically serves to make its presence known, and draw in customers. Use of symbols – such as those on early taverns – typically represented the business activity, and this traditional form of communication extended to the present. This is exemplified by the Post Intelligencer globe – a typical symbol for media connecting world-wide events – installed at the newspaper's former headquarters and printing plant at 6th Avenue and Wall Street in 1948.

Nighttime illumination emerged in cities and towns in the 18th century, provided by candles and gas-fueled light fixtures. The P.T. Barnum company drew customers to its circus in 1840 by building a gas-lit sign, but it was the invention of electrical lighting in the late 1800s that resulted in illuminated billboards as well as a sense of movement from blinking sequential lamps. With the advent of train and vehicular travel in the 19th and 20th centuries, signs became brighter to attract the attention of people in motion. Neon lettering identified both businesses and messages.

Meanwhile, cities such as Seattle capitalized on sources of electricity to communicate their sense of progressive growth and urbanity through the installation of street lighting. In 1909, with the completion of its Lake Union Steam Plant, this claim was made literal through the illumination in the tall windows facing onto South Lake Union, "City Light." Repetitive messaging also emerged along with letters, such as the Rainier "R" and symbols, such as the Mobile gas station winged horse or the noodle bowl to identify and brand both mass-market products or specialized retailers.

With greater urban density signs on buildings were relocated to rooftop locations as exemplified by two scaffold type signs in Seattle on former commercial bakeries – the Wonderbread bakery's tall letters on its S Jackson Street bakery (replicated), and the 130 foot-long Grandma's Cookies plant on N 34th Street in Wallingford (demolished) – as well as by the sign remaining atop the Roosevelt Hotel/Theodore Hotel in downtown Seattle (ca. 1928). Similar signs publicized commercial ventures in prominent buildings, high-rise corporate headquarters, and hotels. Others were used to identify institutions, such as the Seattle City Light sign atop its service center.

Neon and Neon Signage

Neon, from the Greek word for new, is a rare gaseous element discovered by William Ramsey and M. W. Travers in 1898 in London, where it was obtained by liquefaction of air and separated from the other gases by distillation. Neon light offers an array of colors that compounds visible light. The gas neon produces a red color, but others are made possible by the use of other noble (non-reactive) gases discovered at the end of the 19th century: argon (lavender), mercury (blue), helium (gold), krypton (green), and xenon (gray-blue) along with phosphor coating of glass tubes (green and a range of pastels), and colored glass tubing. The result is more than 150 colors, all luminous with magical effect.

These discoveries occurred during the golden age of chemistry and the initial period of electrification, when physicists and inventors sought means to create electrical light, such as vapor discharge lamps. The use of neon in lamping was invented in 1898 by a French engineer and chemist Georges Claude (1870-1960). In ca. 1902 he applied an electrical discharge to a sealed glass tube of neon gas to create a lamp. He displayed the neon lighting tube in Paris in 1910, illuminated the Parisian Luna Park in 1911, and created the first neon advertisement in a 1913 sign for Cinzano vermouth. Claude patented his invention in 1915 (U.S. Patent 1,125,4760). Despite these European origins, neon signage emerged an American story when Claude's invention had its first commercial application in two neon signs his company designed and manufactured for Earl Anthon's Los Angeles Packard auto dealership in 1923. "Neon lighting quickly became a popular fixture in outdoor advertising. Visible even in daylight . . . the first neon signs [were] dubbed 'liquid fire.' "

Commercial neon signage was seen throughout North America in the mid-1920s through the 1930s in established urban areas, and it gained renewed popularity in the post-war era. The assemblage of four to eight foot-long glass tubes allowed neon to take the form of any linework – letters, script, numbers, abstract shapes, and figurative outlines in a wide variety of colors, and even moving shapes. The sign designs represented popular styles, from Art Deco and Moderne and to free-form and futuristic shapes in the 1950s and 1960s. Today these signs are recognized as part of American pop culture by artists, architects, collectors, and the general public. As critic Tom Wolfe cited their power in his description of Las Vegas in the mid-1960s:

One can look at Las Vegas from a mile away on Route 91 and see no buildings, no trees, only signs. But such signs! They tower. They revolve, they oscillate, they soar in shapes before which the existing vocabulary of art history is helpless. I can only attempt to supply names—Boomerang

Modern, Palette Curvilinear, Flash Gordon, Ming-Alert Spiral, McDonald's Hamburger Parabola, Mint Casino Elliptical, Miami Beach Kidney. Las Vegas' sign makers work so far out beyond the frontiers of conventional studio art that they have no names themselves for the forms they create.

The use of neon signs in Seattle emerged in the mid- to late-1920s. Their apparent success may be due to the city's northern location, with gray skies and long winter nights. Among the most recognized of these signs are those at the Pike Place Market at the foot of Pike Street (1928), and the aforementioned Roosevelt Hotel sign (1929). Others graced long gone restaurants, stores and bars from the period.

Neon signs inspired the work of many recognized American and European artists in the mid- to late 20th century, including Mario Merz, Bruce Nauman, Dan Flavin, Joseph Kosuth, Lili Lakich, Keith Sonnier, Chrissy, Tracey Emin and others. Following a trend in contemporary art these artists transformed an aspect of low culture, often associated with the kitsch of urban commerce, into a powerful medium of fine art. These sculptural works explore "the intersection of light, color, and space; as well as pop culture imagery, consumerism, and various themes associated with the contemporary lived environment." Neon remains a medium in fine art. With its vivid luminosity and cosmopolitan roots, it has inspired Northwest artists, such as Sally Banfill, Michael Lindenmeyer, Dylan Neuwirth, Lynn Paul Davis, Kelsey Fernkopf, and others.

Today neon and neon signs also make up historic and art collections, such as those in the Neon Museum of Las Vegas with its Neon Boneyard and collection of over 200 signs and 400 pieces; the Neon Museum, Philadelphia; Pittsburgh Glass Center; National Neon Sign Museum in the Dalles, Oregon; Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles; and the American Sign Museum in Cincinnati. In Seattle, the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) has developed a collection including the larger Elephant Car Wash sign.

Neon signs are so strongly connected with the country's historic pre- and post-war periods that they evoke strong nostalgia. Over time these signs have served as metaphors because of their strong association with the nighttime allure of the 1950s noir era, and romantic interpretations of the earlier seedy side of life of the 1930s and 1940s in novels by Nelsen Algren and Raymond Chandler, and the songs by Cole Porter, Peggy Lee, and others.¹³ Other historic signs, such as those at the car wash, provide the simple pleasure of cartoon aesthetics and provoke a humorous response. Beyond romantic nostalgia, the signs hold their own, as evocative objects from the recent past. Their nighttime illumination remains compelling in evoking visual and cultural connections.

Some view preservation of the signs in Seattle as symbolic of other historic preservation issues in the city as it has undergone dramatic change in the past two decades. As Seattle artist and Center on Contemporary Art board member Joyce Moty, notes, "Neon can be an object of aesthetic beauty or interest. It's a folk art, tied to different periods of time, documenting the history of the city."

Seattle's 20th Century Auto Culture

By the time the Elephant Car Wash opened at 6th Avenue and Battery Street in 1956, the auto era in Seattle was very well established. This era began at the turn of the 20th century when mid-west manufacturers and their nationwide dealership began to sell dozens of available models following the introduction of the first automobile in Seattle in 1900. Auto ownership increased in the city from 400 to 7,500 between 1908 and 1913.¹⁶ By the latter date local dealerships included Packard, Hudson, Pierce Arrow, Chalmers, Winton, Overland as well as Ford, Buick, Cadillac, Studebaker, and others. Most of these were located in Seattle's first "auto row" that emerged on Capitol Hill on and near Broadway and Pike and Pine Streets, along with associated service and repair garages and parts businesses.

These were followed by other dealerships and auto-related buildings located along Westlake Avenue and in the Denny Triangle area in the 1920s including the Ford McKay (1922) and Pacific McKay Lincoln dealerships (1925), M. Gaudy Company dealership (1925), Durant Motor Building (1928), and Firestone Tire Building (1929). Associated supply businesses, service and repair garages affirmed the importance of automobiles in the local economy. By 1907 Standard Oil opened city's first drive-in gas station, and in 1909 there were at least eight tire stores in Seattle. By 1939 there were approximately 40 auto-related businesses along of Westlake Avenue between downtown and south Lake Union.

Meanwhile, Seattle was growing dramatically, from 80,670 residents in 1900 to 237,194 in 1910, 315,312 in 1920, and 365,583 in 1930. As its population rose and as private cars replaced horses and early mass transit, the city saw profound changes. Perhaps the most impactful of these was the number of motor vehicles. Vehicle registrations in the state increased three-fold from 60,734 in 1916 to 185,359 in 1921, by which time 11 percent of Washington residents owned a car.¹⁹ Auto ownership continued to grow rapidly through 1929, when this figure rose to nearly 25 percent. (Between 1928 and 1929 alone, more than 35,000 new vehicles were registered.) In the following year, however, with onset of the Depression fewer than 3,000 new autos were registered. The 1930s saw a rise in the number of car sales, but only used vehicles.

By the early 1940s the U.S. auto industry had largely recovered from the Depression, but its efforts were redirected to the war effort. Production dropped from 3,250,000 passenger vehicles in 1941 to fewer than 1,000 in 1945.²⁰ At the war's end it took several years for American factories to reconfigure, and the industry did not introduce new cars until 1949. Meanwhile, having a car became a necessity, with nationwide vehicle ownership rising from 20 percent in 1930 to 25 percent in 1940, 32 percent in 1950 and over 40 percent in 1960. By 1967 it reached over 50 percent.

Post-war prosperity and new highways impacted auto production and sales. With the Puget Sound's regional economy booming, construction of new dealerships and associated service centers and garages resumed. Most were built in Seattle's growing suburbs, but also in the Denny Triangle and Denny Regrade neighborhoods, such as the S.L. Savidge Dealership / Washington Talking Book & Braille Library at 202 9th Avenue (1948, designed by NBBJ). The 1950s and 1960s also saw the introduction of foreign cars dealerships in "auto row" of the Westlake corridor.

The mid-century saw additional "auto rows" in Ballard, Roosevelt Way and Lake City. As auto sales lots soon grew in size many dealerships moved to the "Aurora Speedway" and into new buildings to the north end. Like the Elephant Car Wash these businesses were drawn to highway locations. Five dealerships opened on highway 99/Aurora Avenue N between 1942 and 1967. Relocations by 1969 included Pontiac, Mercury, Dodge, Buick and other dealerships – all to the blocks between N 120th and 130th Avenues. By the 1980s, only a few of the auto dealerships remained in the center of the city, while others were its northern and southern parts, or established in Bellevue and Kirkland, north in Lynnwood, and south in Kent and Auburn.

The architectural style of the new post-war, low-rise buildings types included Streamline Moderne and big-box International Style structures. The highly glazed, object like showrooms, surrounded by sales lots, were typically announced with bold, up-scaled, eye-catching illuminated signage.

Along with the dealerships, other new auto-oriented building types emerged during the post-war period, such as drive-in restaurants. The Igloo, a diner and drive-in restaurant at the southeast corner of 6th

Avenue and Denny Way (near the future location of the car wash business), operated from two attention-grabbing domed building in 1940 to 1954. Drive-ins emerged in neighborhoods, such as Dick's on NE 45th Street and Wallingford and Broadway on Capitol Hill (ca. 1954), and both national fast-food chains and local drive-ins were built along major roads and highways. Like the Elephant Car Wash, these new auto-related businesses relied on large, neon signs to draw customers from their cars.

In the last half of the 20th century auto culture in Washington state continued to grow, along with its increased population, as represented by the following data:

Date	Population	Registrations
1950	40,339,077	751,586
1960	61,671,390	1,112,113
1970	89,243,557	1,618,603
1980	121,600,843	2,293,521
1990	133,700,497	2,950,847

Increased residential density in its center and more mass transit has impacted one aspect of auto culture, but only in the last few years. Seattle, which had more auto registrations per person than all but one other major American city, saw this number drop in 2021.

The Elephant Car Wash Business

In 1951 a new car wash opened in Seattle at 2763 4th Avenue S at the corner of Lander Street in south Seattle. Several years later, the same company announced its new facility at the north end of the Denny Regrade neighborhood, close to the "auto row" that had emerged along Westlake Avenue and the Denny Triangle area. The brothers' plan was summarized in a local newspaper article in early November 1956:

An automobile-washing station is under construction at Seventh Avenue and Battery Street for the A.D.E. Corp., Seattle, headed by Eldon Anderson. The station, to be known as the Super Car-Wash, will contain equipment designed by Anderson, for which he has applied for patents. It was designed by Donald Earl Roberts, architects, and is being built by H.E. Forsman, contractor. The site was leased by A.D.E. from the Scott Building Corp., owner. Al Clise of Charles F. Clise, Inc., represented the owner, and Maxine Johnson of Vincent D. Miller, Inc., represented the lessee.

Eldon Anderson and his wife, Virginia, initially established the business in 1951. Theirs was the first automatic car wash in Washington state, with a "hands-free" machine that advanced automobiles safely and use of specialized equipment, such as plastic bristle brushes. The company's initial Five Minute Car Wash location was at 2743 4th Avenue S, a street that served as an extension of the Pacific Highway, and the primary vehicular entry to the city. The business soon grew under the partnership of Eldon and his brothers. With the prominence of its "world-famous rotating elephant," installed in 1956 at their 616 Battery Street location, it soon became known as the Elephant Car Wash. In 1963 the Anderson brothers opened a third facility on downtown Tacoma's Pacific Avenue. Through the following decades the A.D.E. company expanded the business to a local chain of "hands-free" car washing and auto detailing stations.

In 1959 Eldon and Archie Anderson operated the business, serving as the company's president and vice president, respectively. That year they remodeled and added onto the 4th Avenue S property with a design by Seattle architects Jerry Gropp and Ed Barr. The project involved new fencing and siding, an enlargement of the structure and new finishes. By that date, the business was known as Auto-Matic Wash,

Inc.28 In April 1967 the brothers undertook \$10,000 in alterations to their 616 Battery Street location with builder Charles Tuttle according to a building permit.

The local business grew to become part of the region's vernacular auto culture, along with Sunday family drives, drive-in theaters, and drive-in restaurants. In 1982 the two Elephant Carwash locations, along with other members of the International Carwash Association/National Carwash Council, offered free car washes to customers in advance of the July 4th holiday, as a patriotic "Happy Birthday America" event. The Battery Street station manager noted, "Who knows with car washes all over the U.S. taking part in this patriotic event maybe we'll even make the Guinness Book of World Records for the most cars washed in a day."

The Andersons sold the two Seattle carwash properties to its current owner, Bob Haney later in 1982, and he went on to expand the company, even in the face of increased competition from other similar businesses as well as coin-operated, do it-yourself washing bays. Oil companies and service stations also offering automated car washes, often free to customers, along with spaces for sale of convenience foods, auto accessories and auto part and accessories. In 1984 the twelfth Brown Bear Carwash opened in Redmond, a \$1,000,000 investment by its local owner, Vic Oderman of Car Wash Enterprises, Inc. Oderman, who had started with a service station and hand car washing business in 1962, then operated the largest car wash business in the region. The businesses proved to be good investments: by 1984 estimated station equipment costs ranged from \$18,000 to \$150,000, and annual profit margins 5 to 10 percent.

The car wash industry played a part in the ever growing car culture of post war America. The International Car Wash Association (ICW) estimates that by 1984 there were 22,000 car wash stations throughout the U.S. Locally there were approximately 70 tunnel-type automated car wash washes businesses, with an additional 70 throughout the state. Of these, the Elephant Carwash at 6th and Battery Street was reportedly the largest single operation in the region, handling up to 1,000 cars each day with full-service cleaning rather than exterior washing only. By that date the station sold fuel, beverages, snacks, auto accessories, and shoeshine services in addition to its signature automated washing and hand detailing, under the direction of its location manager, Ann Simmons, and 39 full and part-time employees. By that time the elephant had become an iconic symbol that branded the business.

During the period from 1994 to 2019 the professional car wash market increased from 48 percent to 77 percent of the market. Most of the car wash locations in the U.S. are owned and operated by small to medium size independent companies. (Those with more than four stations represent only 15 percent of all locations while large companies only 2 percent.)

In early 2020, the ICW undertook a study to quantify the size of the American car wash industry. It identified a total of nearly 62,700 locations, with more than 16,000 self-serve stations, approximately 17,500 conveyor types, and 29,000 in-bay automatic or roll-over car wash stations. In addition, in Europe there were an estimated 69,000 locations and in Australia 1,950. This same study identified trends, among them that in America and Europe drivers preferred to have their cars washed rather than doing it themselves. Retail sales in 2020 totaled approximately \$15 billion, and the industry employed more than 220,000 full time workers and an additional 15,000 within vendors providing equipment and chemical sales and services.

In March 2020, the Denny Regrade Elephant Carwash was closed temporarily in response to pandemic lockdown orders. The business closed permanently late that year, a victim of both the loss of revenue

during the pandemic and high operation costs in the rapidly developing neighborhood. As the owner explained in a local newspaper article, “The cost of maintaining operations of the Elephant Super Car Wash on Denny and Battery are very high . . . Downtown property taxes and monthly leases have increased to the point that the car wash is no longer able to cover those expenses and pay our employees at the minimum wage that the city of Seattle requires.” As the article further noted, “The carwash, which pays taxes on the site, has seen its bill rise 31% since 2017, from \$129,510 to \$169,242 . . . [The carwash] lot is appraised at nearly \$20 million, or \$1,050 per square foot, according to the assessor’s data, making it one of the highest-value empty lots in the city.”

The Anderson brothers reportedly sold the last of their three original Elephant Car Wash stations, the one in Tacoma, in the 1980s. Presently there are fourteen Elephant Car Wash facilities located in eleven south Puget Sound communities – Auburn, Boney Lake, Covington, Federal Way (two locations), Gig Harbor, Lacey, Maple Valley, Olympia, Puyallup (three locations), Sumner, and one recent operation in Bellevue.³⁴ The business established and led by Bob Haney, who purchased the car wash locations from the Andersons, remains a family-owned and operated company with more than a dozen locations in the Puget Sound area.” The elephant sign, used originally in 1951, remains at these other locations.

According to recent job opening notices, the current hourly wage paid to detailers by the Elephant Car Wash in several King County locations is set at \$13.69. This detail and the industry’s employment data raise an important feature about the local business and the carwash industry as a whole: its role as an employer in the social realm of labor history. Traditionally the Elephant CarWash business engaged workers from diverse walks of life for the cleaning and washing of cars. Employment ads from the 1970s to the present day call for able-bodied people with a strong work ethic.

Archie Anderson’s family members confirm this approach to hiring: the brothers often sought workers from local shelters or missions. Employees included the transients – the homeless and recently released – as well as local residents, women as well as men, and people of all races and ethnicity. While the Elephant Car Wash had regular employees, it paid these workers on a daily basis, allowing them to address their immediate livelihood needs regardless of what might be transitory residence or other barriers to typical employment. At the same time, by employing day labor, the process was beneficial for the business by providing flexibility in response to its labor needs.

The Original Owners – Eldon, Archie, and Dean Anderson

Three brothers – Eldon, Archie, and Dean Anderson – opened the Elephant Carwash business under their company name, A.D. & E. Corp in the early 1950s. The local roots of these three men begin in the early 20th century when their family came west. Their parents, Anker Morris Anderson and Emillie Katrina Christensen, married in Minnesota in 1907. By 1908 they were living in Western Washington with their first son, Milton. Both Anker and Emillie were born in Minnesota; his family having emigrated from Norway and her family from Denmark. They were farmers, aided on the farm by five sons and one daughter all born between 1908 and 1923. Members of both of their families would come west and settle in Western Washington over the coming years and spread throughout Western Washington, the Anker Anderson family settled in Oak Harbor in 1912.

Eldon Hadley Anderson (1910 – 1999) was the couple’s second child. He grew to be a mechanically minded young man, and worked as a steam shovel operator in the building of the Deception Pass Bridge. During World War II he was employed at Boeing as a supervisor in the metal stamping shop.

Eldon developed some of the first mechanical car wash technology. Before the 1950s car washing was done with men pushing the car through a tunnel or with a winch and pulley. The winch and pulley worked well enough until a customer stepped on the brakes. In 1956 Eldon Anderson received a patent for a “vehicle drier nozzle with a self-positioning mount,” and he applied for another patent in 1958 for an “automobile guiding device.” His 1960 patented device remains in use today to vehicle guide tires of assorted sizes onto a moving conveyor belt.

Archie Wallace Harvey Anderson (1916 – 2001) was the third Anderson child. In a recent interview with his living children – Lana, Carmen, and Adrian, and Eldon’s son-in-law, Richard Fromme – Archie was described as one who would jump into the tunnel and start washing cars on a busy day. For many years of their partnership Eldon and Densmore “Dean” Goodwin Anderson (1918 – 2009), were silent partners while Archie ran the business, working mostly out of the “4th South” location. But he put a lot of miles on his car working between the Tacoma and Battery street locations.

The three brothers undertook complementary roles in the business. Eldon started the whole thing, and Archie ran it, while “Dean” Goodwin Anderson often returned to farming on Whidbey Island where he raised poultry, livestock, and horses. Archie’s children remember Dean as a great jokester, and one who could fix anything at the car washes.

While they went into business together as A.D.& E. Corp, the three brothers also did business later under the names Kar Laundry, Inc., Auto-Matic Wash Inc., and Ancon Corp. They made major decisions together and respected each other’s contributions. They were known for hosting business meetings at another Seattle institution, the Dog House restaurant and bar at 7th and Bell.

The business operates today under different ownership, but it continues to follow the workplace traditions and business goals set originally by the Anderson brothers:

The Elephant Car Wash’s rotating pink elephant is as much a Seattle landmark as its neighbor, the Space Needle. Established in 1951, we are proud to be a Puget Sound tradition, offering exceptional full-service car washes to generations of loyal customers. Through the years we’ve seen celebrities, politicians, foreign diplomats, and past United States Presidents (complete with full security detail!) visit. We’re privileged to have some of the Northwest’s leading companies, city, state, and federal officials, military, and media outlets as clients . . . Our customers know the Pink Elephant icon is a symbol of outstanding car wash service, at a rate far less than the cost of a full-detail.

Seattle’s Post War Aspirational Development

The Andersons brothers opened their business with keen insight into the growing post-war market for auto services. They chose the Denny Regrade location for their second car wash due to its close proximity to SR 99, Aurora Avenue, and the Bell Street Tunnel, as well as the many auto dealerships and associated businesses nearby in the South Lake Union and Denny Triangle area “auto rows”.

State Route 99 had extended the Pacific Highway, which linked the western states from the Canadian to Mexican borders. One of 15 primary highways in the state authorized in the 1920s, it originally ran through Seattle on 4th and 6th Avenues up through the 1940s to meet the Aurora/George Washington Memorial Bridge, built in 1932. (North of the bridge it was long known as the “Aurora Speedway.”)

In response to increased vehicle ownership and travel the federal highway act provided additional funding for highways, and raised design standards in 1944. After World War II the Washington State Legislature authorized limited-access highways with higher speeds and additional safety designs in 1947. To address SR99, the state's most heavily used highway, new rights-of-way were acquired to widen Aurora Avenue N, and the Alaska Way Viaduct and Battery Street tunnel were built in 1950-1954.⁴⁵

Critical to the planning and design of the Alaska Way Viaduct was its bypass routing, intended to move most of the highway traffic past rather than into the city center. This effort included the Battery Street Tunnel, a 2,134 foot-long subway extension from the Viaduct and 1st Avenue that ended below Denny Way and 7th Avenue. By the time it opened in mid-1954, Aurora Avenue had been widened further to allow for an exit from the highway to Denny Way and an entry onto it from Battery Street. Construction of surface fans and vents for the tunnel cut through the block bordered by 6th and 7th Avenues and Battery and Wall streets, resulting in a new 60 foot-wide city right-of-way, and leaving two small triangular shaped lots.

The new right-of-way became a roadbed while the lots remained in private ownership by the Clise company. Construction of the Elephant Car Wash followed in 1956. The location was optimal for the business, in proximity to other nearby auto-related businesses, but also for visibility and traffic.

Expansion of the highway system, planning for the interstate, and planning for a major exhibition at the civic center (the later Seattle World's Fair of 1962), were all part of Seattle's growing sense of self. The expression of Northwest Regional architecture from the mid-century is an important and long-lasting legacy from this post-war period. But it was not the only one: a unique vernacular cityscape was also emerging. As Leonard Garfield, Executive Director of MOHAI, notes the use of neon signage coincided with the city's aspirational period of urbanization: "Neon coincided quite literally with Seattle's coming of age . . . neon (signage) was a visual way of signifying that this was a place of sophistication, this was a 24-hour place, this was a place that had bright lights and big stores and exciting activity . . . the development of neon as a feature of the Seattle skyline really [aligns] with Seattle's own self-consciousness as an important place."

The Original Sign Designer, Beatrice Haverfield

Beatrice Haverfield (1913 – 1996) was one of Seattle's preeminent commercial sign designers, and the creator of the Elephant Car Wash sign design. She was born in Seattle to Finnish immigrants. Her mother was a chef at the Olympic Hotel, while her father, August Kiva, worked at the Seattle Gas Light Company at Gas Works Park. Recognized as a girl for her artistic talent she graduated from Franklin High School in the 1930s. She married a fellow student, Elden Filer, and the two soon started a sign business in Seattle, with Bea serving as the designer and her husband as the fabricator. During World War II Elden served in the military and Bea worked for Boeing in south Seattle.

After the war, the couple resumed their business. They soon joined another local company, Campbell Neon in ca 1946, where Beatrice became one of the lead designers. Among her early works was a neon sign for Ivar Haglund's waterfront café on Pier 54, which read in her stylish cursive script, "Ivar's". She also created a boomerang-shaped design for the Chubby and Tubby retail store on Rainier Avenue S, and the original Rainier "R" that overlooked south Seattle. She was responsible also for a neon sign at the Hat n' Boots gas station at its original E Marginal Way location, a large sign on Highway 99 for the Sunny Jim preserves plant on Airport Way S, and many others.

Beatrice continued to work in the 1950s despite her divorce from Elden and marriage to Robert Haverfield, a local cabinet maker, and the birth of the first of their four children. She created the signature cursive sign for Dick's new drive-in on NE 45th Street in Seattle's Wallingford neighborhood in 1954, and the iconic signs for the Elephant Car Wash in 1956.

While the concept of an elephant is attributed to Archie Anderson, and the image of a pachyderm with a spraying trunk is credited to local design firm, Tube Art Inc., Beatrice developed the design and added her own flourishes, including the four smaller elephants at the base of the north end sign which represented each of her own four children. This neon sign also rotated and featured hundreds of blinking lights. She designed the original Cinerama sign at the Paramount Theater in 1956, and she also helped design the first sign for the Cinerama theater on 4th Avenue.

Beatrice's design career ended abruptly in the late-1960s after she was injured in a car accident and lost some of her acute vision. She left Campbell Neon in 1968, although her daughter, Barbara, continued to work with the company. In late 1968 her husband, Robert Haverfield, died. In 1969 she began working again, initially as a secretary at South Seattle Community College where she eventually became a faculty member in the horticulture program. During this period, she also emerged as a local anti-war activist.

Beatrice Haverfield died in 1996 at the age of 83. Her artistic legacy continued, however, in the highly visible neon signs that represent the transformation of Seattle from a provincial blue collar city to a prominent Pacific coast metropolis. Her artistic talents are recognized in local publications and presentations, and in an exhibit at the Edmonds Historical Museum in 2020-2021.

Campbell Neon and Other Seattle Sign Makers

Campbell Neon, a local Seattle manufacturer, was responsible for the design and fabrication of the Elephant Car Wash sign in 1956. The company was founded in 1924 by Vernon Campbell.

Vern Campbell (1907-2008) was born in Walhalla, North Dakota to Archibald and Beatrice Campbell, the eldest of four children. His family immigrated to Canada where Vern grew up in Saskatchewan and Alberta before returning to the United States in 1924. He and his father established Campbell Neon in Seattle, one of the first local sign companies in the city to use neon. The business was responsible for some of the city's most memorable signs, including some at the Pike Place Market, Ray's Boathouse, the Doghouse Restaurant, Hat 'n Boot gas station, Ivar's central waterfront restaurant and Dick's Drive-In. Many of these well-known signs were designed by Beatrice Haverfield as an employee at Campbell Neon.

Vern Campbell later turned to contracting with a partner, Halton Molvik, and built houses and many apartment buildings throughout Seattle. He remained active in this contracting business until his death in 2008. His other interests included skating: he was active in the Seattle Skating Club and was a National Figure Skating judge for over 50 years.

Other post-war neon sign makers in the city included the Meyer Sign Company, owned by Bill Kline, established in 1947, and Tube Art, which later became the Tube Art Group.

An informal survey and a self-guided tour of neon signage in Seattle in 1987 cited the elephant car wash signs as well as older signs for the Varsity, Neptune, Broadway, and Guild 45th cinemas, the bucking horse sign at the Buckaroo Tavern in Fremont, along with newer signs at F.X. McRory's Restaurant in Pioneer Square, Roxy Music in the University District, Alderwood and Oak Tree Cinemas, and the Kirkland Roaster and Ale House in Kirkland. The installation and required periodic maintenance of these and other neon

signs has helped retain the number of local sign manufacturers and studios. In 1985 Western Neon was founded, and by the late 1980s two other commercial neon artist studios were established in Seattle, Neo Neon and Neon Beach. Many of those who work in the field of neon cite Seattle, with its gray skies and long dark nights, as having more neon signs than any other city in the U.S. with exception of Las Vegas and Los Angeles.

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The features of the Landmark to be preserved include: The sign.

Issued: August 29, 2022



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