**History of the Coke Sign**

The Allies had won World War I. The twenties were roaring ever louder. America was electrified.

Coca-Cola was still relatively new, but already it was blazing its way toward becoming an American icon. There were troubles in the business, though, between Coke and the companies that bottled and delivered the product. Coca-Cola wanted more money for its proprietary syrup to manage the risk of spiking sugar prices. The bottlers wouldn’t budge. Finally, in 1922, there was a breakthrough: both sides realized that they could safeguard their profits if they put aside their differences and team up to improve their marketing. Soon, they weren’t just selling a beverage anymore. They were building a brand, an emblem of American identity in a booming peacetime economy.

Coca-Cola and its partners dramatically expanded their advertising so that, before long, everyone would come to recognize the fizzy drink in the shapely bottle. An important part of their promotions was to introduce the use of neon signs—a technological innovation that had appeared in Paris in 1913, plugging Cinzano Vermouth and the Paris Opera.

Bringing a flicker of the City of Lights to a post-WWI America, Coca-Cola and its bottlers first built their neon signs where crowds gathered: Times Square in New York, San Francisco’s South-of-Market District, and Margaret Mitchell Square in Atlanta, where the company originated and remains today.

Neon signs were expensive to make and maintain, so there weren’t many of them, Ted Ryan tells us. As Coke’s official historian—a job held by only four people ever— Ryan has chronicled the story of the world’s No. 1 sparkling beverage for twenty years.

Perhaps one reason that neon signs have become so cherished is that they are almost as rare as they are captivating. Appropriately, Coca-Cola called its bright neon signs “spectaculars.”

“They were there to catch the eye. They were there to keep interest,” says Ryan. “They did.”

In Baton Rouge, one still does. It has been flickering over Third and Florida Streets since shortly after the end of World War II. The familiar neon sign was brought here by Baton Rouge Coca-Cola Bottling Co., a business begun by Thomas Daigre in 1906.

Operating downtown in a small building located at the corner of Europe and St. Louis Streets, Daigre’s first production line bottled six Cokes per minute. A wagon pulled by a single horse delivered the beverage to the 12,000 people who called Baton Rouge home in those days. Later, for soldiers who’d returned to the city from World War II, the company’s luminous neon Coca-Cola sign would become a reassuring reminder that they were finally home. In fall of 1951, Baton Rouge Coca-Cola Bottling placed the sign in a prominent location above Liggett’s Drug Company on Third Street. The permit to erect the electric billboard, issued to Airlite Neon Company, documents a cost of $4,000 for the job—a considerable sum in those days, and a good indication of the sign’s importance to the Baton Rouge bottler’s marketing strategy.

The sign blinked “Pause, Refresh,” which derives from one of the most famous advertising slogans in Coca-Cola’s history. “The Pause That Refreshes” first appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1929.

The aging electric sign stayed lit overhead until, finally, Hurricane Andrew’s winds blew out the neon lights altogether in 1992. The community recognized that an important relic of city history had been lost, but nearly ten years passed before interest in restoring the sign found the support it needed. In 2002, Entergy, Baton Rouge Coca-Cola, the Downtown Development District, the Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge, and the Downtown Merchants Association collaborated to restore the antique electric billboard. Jones Electric Signs of Denham Springs was paid $28,000 to replace the old transponders and to pump fresh neon gas into the glass tubing. This was no ordinary undertaking. Outdated neon signs are typically removed or converted to LED lighting. It is presumed that Baton Rouge’s neon Coca-Cola sign is among only two or three like it remaining in the world.

Last year, some of the same partners came together to ensure the Coca-Cola sign continues to light up downtown. The sign was transferred to the Baton Rouge Area Foundation; Coke and Entergy have agreed to maintain and power it in a downtown that is becoming more vibrant now than it was in the 1950s.

“These old neon signs create special memories because they attract your attention and create affection,” Ted Ryan says. “Those signs have a place in our heart.”