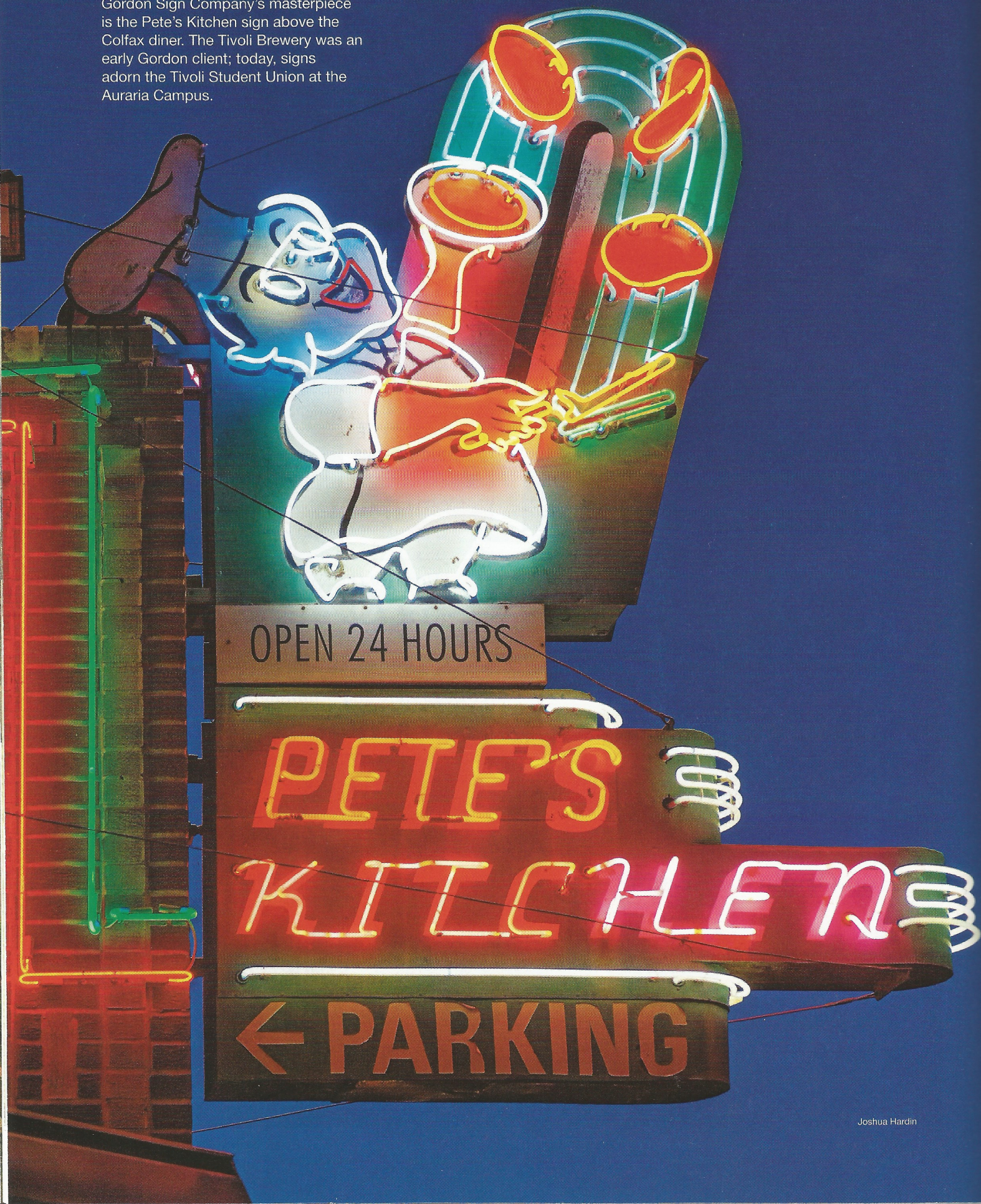


Gordon Sign Company's masterpiece is the Pete's Kitchen sign above the Colfax diner. The Tivoli Brewery was an early Gordon client; today, signs adorn the Tivoli Student Union at the Auraria Campus.



NEON

Denver's Gordon Sign Lights the Night

story by LEAH M. CHARNEY

ONE HAPPY CHEF beckons diners to Denver's East Colfax Avenue. In a never-ending loop of neon brilliance, his spatula flips pancakes over and over, 24 hours a day.

Happy Chef came to Colfax in the economic boom following World War II. Businesses wanted to be noticed with big, bright and flashy neon signs. One company – Gordon Sign – was responsible for bringing many of those landmark signs to Denver, including Happy Chef.

By the 1970s, streets like Colfax were ablaze in light. But the neon trend began to fade when community leaders and planning boards saw neon as too tacky, too commercial.

Many of the neon tubes went dark, then eventually came down under the groan of restrictive sign codes in Denver, Lakewood and other Front Range communities. The 1950s-era Happy Chef at The Kitchen (now Pete's Kitchen) could stay up, but the animated pancakes had to go.

In 2018, Pete's Restaurants applied for and received zoning approval to reanimate Happy Chef's neon spatula and flapjacks. With the flip of a switch, after 50 years, Happy Chef was back at work.

WHEN HARRY GORDON started painting signs by hand in 1904, he had no way of knowing his Denver company would exist into the 21st century – much less become the oldest sign company in America.



University of Colorado Denver



University of Denver



Joshua Hardin

Company founder Harry Gordon migrated from Lithuania to Denver where he established a storefront, pictured circa 1905. A sign for Flesher Hinton Music remains on Denver's Tennyson Street, though the music store moved to Wheat Ridge in 2015.

From the wayfinding at Red Rocks Park & Amphitheatre, to maps along Denver's 16th Street Mall, to the electric signage perched above I-25 showcasing Outlets at Castle Rock tenants, Gordon Sign has created some of Colorado's most recognizable signs. Gordon also has created signs for businesses, sports arenas, shopping malls and local monuments across the U.S. and world. The farthest-flung Gordon-made sign hangs atop an Ace Hardware in Micronesia.

Harry Gordon's sons, Edward and Leonard, bolstered the trend toward neon and lighted signs. Initially, they added neon to old signs Harry and others had painted. The sons took over and helped the company grow from a small business to the legendary company it is today. Ownership has passed down outside the family since the 1980s.

In one of their savviest moves, Edward and Leonard began offering leases so businesses could rent, repair and repurpose their signs without the higher overhead costs associated with buying a new sign every few years. Business owners got a budget-friendly option, and Gordon Sign earned long-term customers.

Gordon Sign still owns about 100 signs in metro Denver, which likely saved many from the dumpster. When someone buys a business or building with one of these signs, they have the option of buying the sign outright or having it refurbished and refaced.

Many opt to keep the artful signs, such as Flesher Hinton Music, which opened in an old movie theater on Tennyson Street in northwest Denver in 1951. Though the Flesher family relocated the business to Wheat Ridge in 2015, the sign bearing its name and a music note stayed behind.

FERAL, a local outdoor gear supplier with locations in Denver and Idaho Springs, has taken over the space. The sign is one of the few things that remains



Shawn T. Moore/U.S. Department of Labor

U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta and Gordon Sign Company CEO Max Fulton toured the Denver facility in 2017. Gordon signs are found at Applejack Wine & Spirits, The Cherry Cricket and the Satire Lounge.

unchanged while the Tennyson streetscape dramatically transforms.

Steve Youel started in the permits department at Gordon Sign in 1970, shortly before Denver passed its complicated sign code. He quickly became the go-to guy for navigating – or circumnavigating – the bureaucratic intricacies of municipal codes.

One such work-around that Youel orchestrated involved a White Spot diner in downtown Denver. Roof-top signs were not allowed in Denver, so Youel came up with an idea to drill a hole in the building and drop a steel pipe down to secure it into the ground. Technically, it wasn't a roof sign; it was a ground sign that just happened to go up through the roof. Though the White Spot diners are long gone, the not-quite-roof sign and building both endure as a Sam's No. 3 restaurant at 1500 Curtis St.

Sign preservation brings comfort to many locals who see Denver changing rapidly. Though Denver doesn't have a neon museum, Gordon Sign would like



Shawn T. Moore/U.S. Department of Labor

to change that, especially as buildings with signs are demolished to make way for new construction.

Gordon Sign is slowly building up its collection for a museum, including the sign from Colonial Manor, a classic mid-century motel that was torn down to make way for CDOT's Central 70 Project. A museum would ensure these works of art are preserved, even if their original businesses are gone.

But not all signs belong in a museum – like those remaining right where they've hung for decades. It's a testament to the

craftsmanship and design that so many Gordon signs persist in their original home, like Happy Chef hanging in front of Pete's Kitchen. That Pete's Kitchen isn't a pancake shop – it's a Greek restaurant and all-night diner – doesn't matter, because the sign is part of the identity and culture of Colfax now.

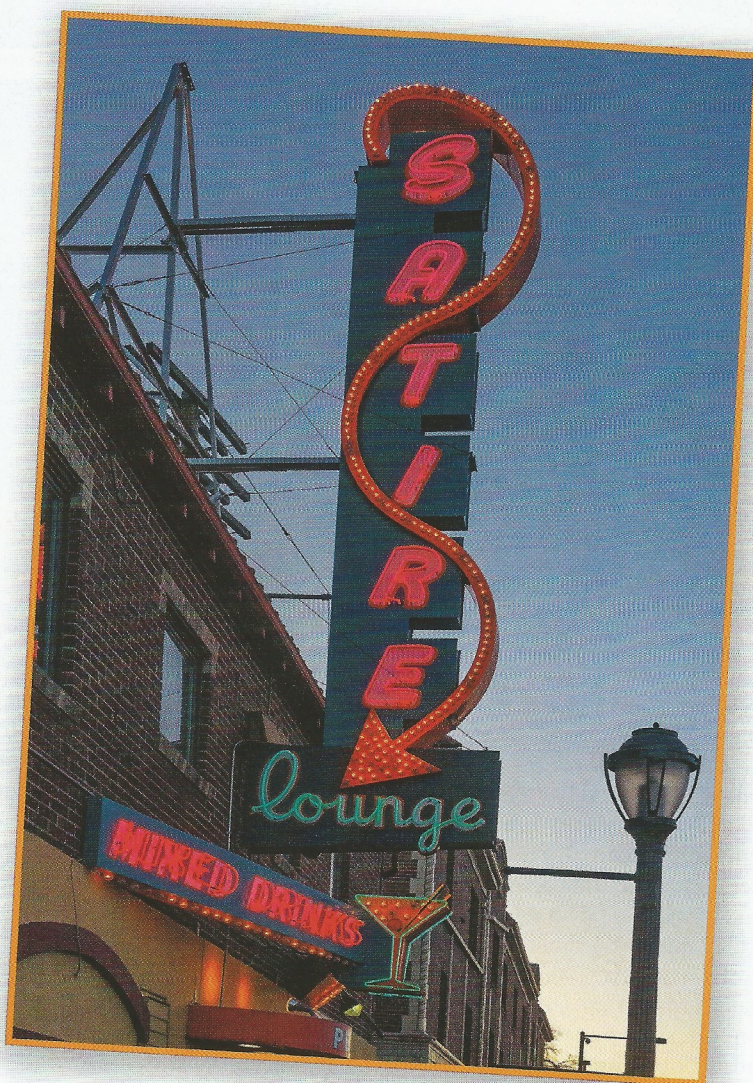
"That sign is now iconic and a piece of art, rather than a sign for the business," said Max Fulton, who runs Gordon Sign's as its CEO.

A piece of art that once again is cheerfully flipping pancakes for all to see.

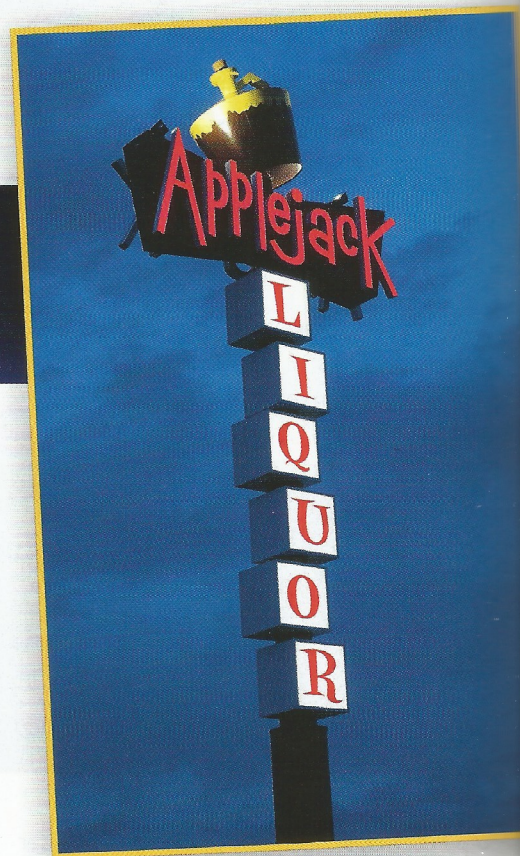
SEE THE

Light

Though some of Gordon Sign's most well-loved or best-remembered signs are lost to changing codes, closed businesses and new trends, you can still spot the following signs today.



Joshua Hardin (all)



Pete's Kitchen

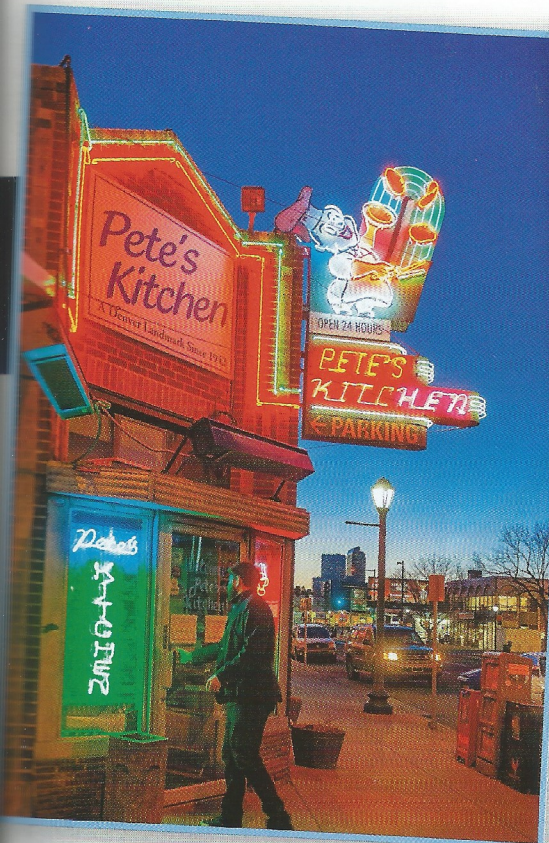
1962 E. Colfax Ave., Denver

A favorite among Gordon Sign employees and Denverites alike, this articulating neon sign is the company's most iconic. After the code changes in the 1970s, the sign was adjusted so that all four pancakes remained constantly lit, rather than flashing as originally built. In 2018, the lights of the pancakes and spatula returned to blink at intervals to create the illusion that Happy Chef is flipping a pancake.

Satire Lounge

1920 E. Colfax Ave., Denver

The Satire Lounge, known as "The Satire," shares a few things with its neighbor, Pete's Kitchen. Both neon signs date back to 1955, both are part of the cultural identity of East Colfax, both share the same current owners, and both were allowed to resume their animation in 2018 after almost a half-century. This is one of Richard Gordon's favorite signs that still remains: "'The Satire' was a clever sign for its time, with the swirl



that comes down with the Satire going vertically double-faced. It was an artistic, pleasing image.”

Applejack Wine & Spirits

3320 Youngfield St., Wheat Ridge

This midcentury modern sign, erected in the Applewood neighborhood abutting Interstate 70 near Highway 58, towers tall enough to entice travelers heading into or out of the mountains. The sign is a combination of mediums: A huge maroon and yellow jug is perched atop “Applejack” spelled out in white letters that glow with red neon at night; white lightboxes reading “LIQUOR” in red text stair-step vertically down the pole. Rumor has it the jug can hold wine and was passed around during a recent sign refurbishment.

Fox Theater Walsenburg

715 Main St., Walsenburg

This theater opened as an independent movie house in 1917 before becoming part of the Fox Theatre chain. It has come full circle now as a community resource

and independent cinema showing current and classic films. The neon sign was installed in 1941 and has undergone recent restoration to light up the night for a new generation of moviegoers.

Mount Lindo Cemetery

5928 S. Turkey Creek Rd., Morrison

This mountaintop setting is so peaceful, it's no wonder many have selected it as their final resting place since the cemetery opened in the early 1960s. The neon cross affixed to the east side of the mountain is the largest in the United States and visible for more than 70 miles. Though the cross itself is inaccessible, it's best seen heading west on 285 from Denver while heading to another of Morrison's quirky attractions and Mount Lindo's neighbor: Tiny Town.

The Cherry Cricket

2641 E. 2nd Ave., Denver

Dedicated readers recognize this sign from *Colorado Life's* July/August 2019 issue. The neon bearing “Cherry Cricket” was constructed in

the mid-1950s. The top piece that spells out “DUFFY'S” was added when Bernard Duffy bought the place in the 1960s. Though Duffy sold the bar in 1972, his name remained ensconced in bold neon, which rotates 'round and 'round and glows green at night.

Riviera Motel

9100 E. Colfax Ave., Aurora

A callback to the glory days of automobile travel and newfound American mobility, in its heyday the Riviera Motel was one of the nicest motels along U.S. 40. While the neighborhood and times have changed since then, the original sign remains to signal that early era. One of Steve Youel's favorites, the futuristic Googie-style roofline of the motel office is echoed in the golden fin of neon rising out of the sign's bow-tie body. 🍀

Visit gordonsign.com for a tour of gems along West Colfax and Lakewood's 40 West Arts District.