

Fowl end for a sign of era past

By Robert Preer
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Fontaine's waving neon chicken, a Boston landmark for more than a half century, may soon go the way of the dodo — and the darkened signs that once marked the Combat Zone's Naked i, Allston's Ellis the Rim Man, and the North End's European Restaurant.

Fontaine's restaurant, located on the north-bound side of VFW Parkway just south of Spring Street, is about to change hands, and the chicken will soon be out of a roost.

"The new owners will not be incorporating the chicken sign into their renovations," said William A. McDermott Jr., attorney for the investment group acquiring the restaurant.

The fate of the fowl is unknown. McDermott said that the owners have not decided what to do with the sign, one of a handful of animated neon signs left in the state, but that it would not be trashed.

David Waller, a Malden collector of roadside artifacts, is trying to acquire the sign, which was built on site in 1952, so that it can be preserved and possibly exhibited.

Although many mid-20th-century neon signs have wound up in Dumpsters, that fate is less likely today. Sign museums in Cincinnati, Las Vegas, and Philadelphia provide havens where historic signs are preserved.

An international market for classic neon signs also has developed in recent years, mainly because of the eBay Internet auction site. Large exterior signs like the one at Fontaine's can be hard to sell on eBay, though, because they are difficult to pack and ship.

Jorge Fontaine, a World War II veteran, opened the restaurant in 1946 as a Topsy's restaurant, a now-defunct chain of chicken houses. Six years later, he split from the chain and re-named the restaurant Fontaine's.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JOHN BOHN

The sale of Fontaine's restaurant will leave its landmark chicken without a roost.

Fontaine and his wife, Helen, designed the chicken sign at their kitchen table and had a local sign company build and install it in 1952.

Now in his 80s, Fontaine is selling the establishment to an investment group that plans to open a fine-dining restaurant called Vintage.

"I don't feel too good about it," Fontaine said in a telephone interview last week. "It's been my life. It's been very good to me."

Kurt Stenhouse, a member of the investment group, said the new owners are considering auctioning the sign for charity.

"It's a very special chicken," he said.

Rain and wind have taken their toll on the chicken, however, sometimes causing the cartoonish sign to malfunction, according to Rodney Poles, Fontaine's general manager. Last weekend, only the bottom half of the chicken was lit, although its wings kept flapping.

"It's a lot of work to keep it going," said Poles. "We're always putting money into it."

Waller, whose neon sign collection was exhibited at the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington last year, said the sign ideally should remain on the site, lit and beckoning to motorists.

"When signs like that are gone, you can't replace them," he said. "It's almost like losing a tooth. It's a hole in the city."

Waller said he knows of only three other animated neon signs still flashing regularly in the area: the Citgo sign in Kenmore Square, the Shell gas sign on Memorial Drive in Cambridge, and Cantina Italiana restaurant's dripping wine

bottle on Hanover Street in the North End.

Richard Gutman, a roadside historian, said he gives people directions to his home by telling them to turn right after the big chicken.

"I use it as a landmark," said Gutman. "I would be sad to see it go."

Fontaine's is a homey, neighborhood gathering place. The menu is almost all comfort food, with a heavy emphasis on chicken. Inside the establishment are numerous drawings, models, and other representations of chickens.

Shirley Arsenault, who has waited tables at Fontaine's for 25 years, said some of the regulars used to come as children. "They come from Brookline, West Roxbury, and Dedham. A lot of them say, 'When I was little, my parents used to bring me here.'"

In the 1920s, neon signs were viewed as elegant works of art, and in the 1930s through the 1950s they hit their heyday in America. But in the late 1960s and 1970s, they began to be viewed as tawdry. Municipalities across the country adopted regulations that banned large exterior neon signs.

Viewed through the lens of nostalgia, however, they look more attractive to some these days. Len Davidson, author of the 1999 book "Vintage Neon," said the public has a greater appreciation of neon signs today.

"They are really pieces of folk art," said Davidson. "This is something that is coming into people's consciousness today."

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