

LIVINGSTON  
DOWNTOWN

Winter 1994

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Let There Be (Neon) Light!

By Nancy Kessler

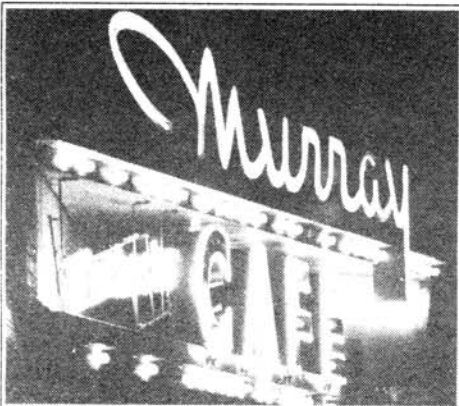
**T**is the season of lights -- trees twinkle e reindeer glow on rooftops, storefronts shine with sparkling bulbs, and streets are ablaze with the brilliance of holiday decorations.

But visit downtown Livingston any night of the year, and you may marvel at the profusion of radiance illuminating local businesses with the sensuous splendor of neon light.

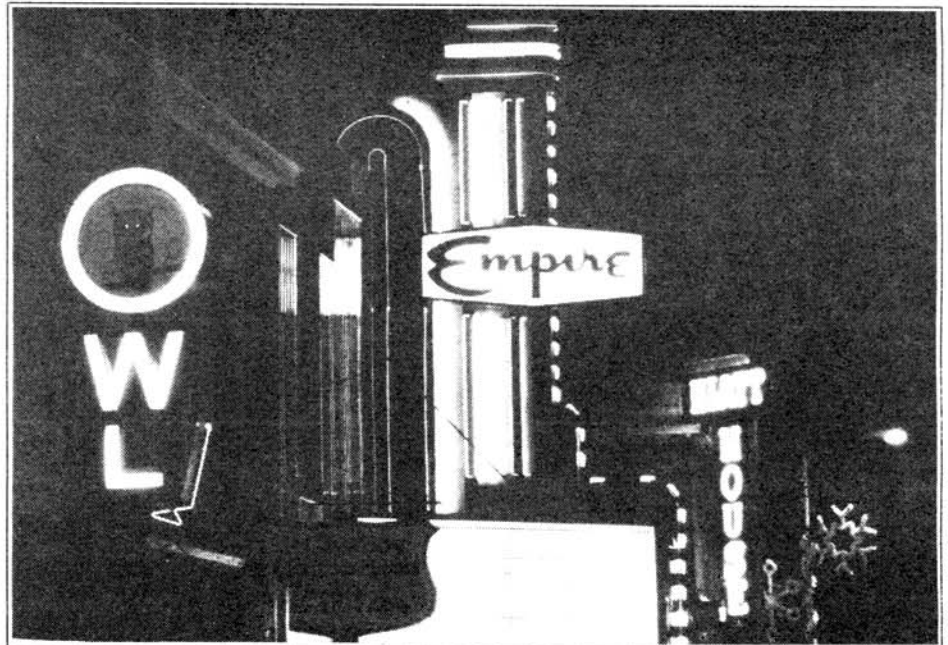
Few Main Streets in Montana are favored with as much neon opulence as our own. Livingston benefitted from the efforts of Steve Tokarski, owner of Parco Neon Sign Company and one of the premier neon artists in the state.

Tokarski began his career as a "tube-bender," as neon designers are known, in Denver back in 1935, and worked in Great Falls and Billings before buying the Livingston business in 1961. He estimates he created 50 neon signs that have glowed around town, and restored as many.

One of Tokarski's favorite local creations, "on account of its rotating," is the Martin's Cafe sign, while he likes the Livingston Bar & Grille's Art Deco style. Brekke Photography was one of the most



William M. Caldwell



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difficult signs to make, he said, because of its "real fine script lettering."

He is also the artist behind the sinuous neon of the Paradise and Yellowstone Inns, Livingston Floral's flower, and the huge Cecil's Fine Foods in Gardiner, and was responsible for renovating all the neon at the Murray Hotel and the Empire Theatre.

Now 78 years old, Tokarski said he tried to retire from the business in 1984, "but I wouldn't say a day has gone by without bending some tubes." His sons Joe and Tom are continuing the family tradition of tube bending, using computers to design new works.

Neon signs, which are made by bending purified glass tubes, filling them with neon or argon gases, fusing electrodes at both ends to carry high-voltage current through the inert gas and sealing

the tubes, were invented in Paris in 1910.

Only 17 years later, the first neon sign in Montana was installed on the old Mint Bar in Great Falls.

Michael Crummett, photographer and author of *Montana Neon*, said such "line drawings in light" became successful advertising tools because they were "capable of stopping traffic and pedestrians dead in their tracks.... [T]he simple designs and intense colored light would capture a potential customer's eyes with magnetizing effect."

The first neon signs were either orange-red (from neon) or lavender-blue (from argon), but by the 1930s, the glass tubes were being tinted to radiate dark blue, bright green, ruby red and gold, or treated with phosphors to yield sensuous

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## Livingston's Eastside Residential Historic District

Between 1900 and 1910, the Northern Pacific Railroad's good fortunes overflowed into Livingston. Expansion of transportation services brought an influx of railroad workers and their families to town, most of whom moved to the Eastside, conveniently near the railroad shops located north and east of the yard. An underground walkway beneath the tracks and emerging at the timekeeper's office was constructed in 1902, providing workers a safe crossing.

Before 1907 ended, carpenters and speculators built three-quarters of the small, wood-frame houses in the district, usually two or three at a time, to rent or sell to families of modest income.

These homes, with foursquare, hipped-roof design and simple

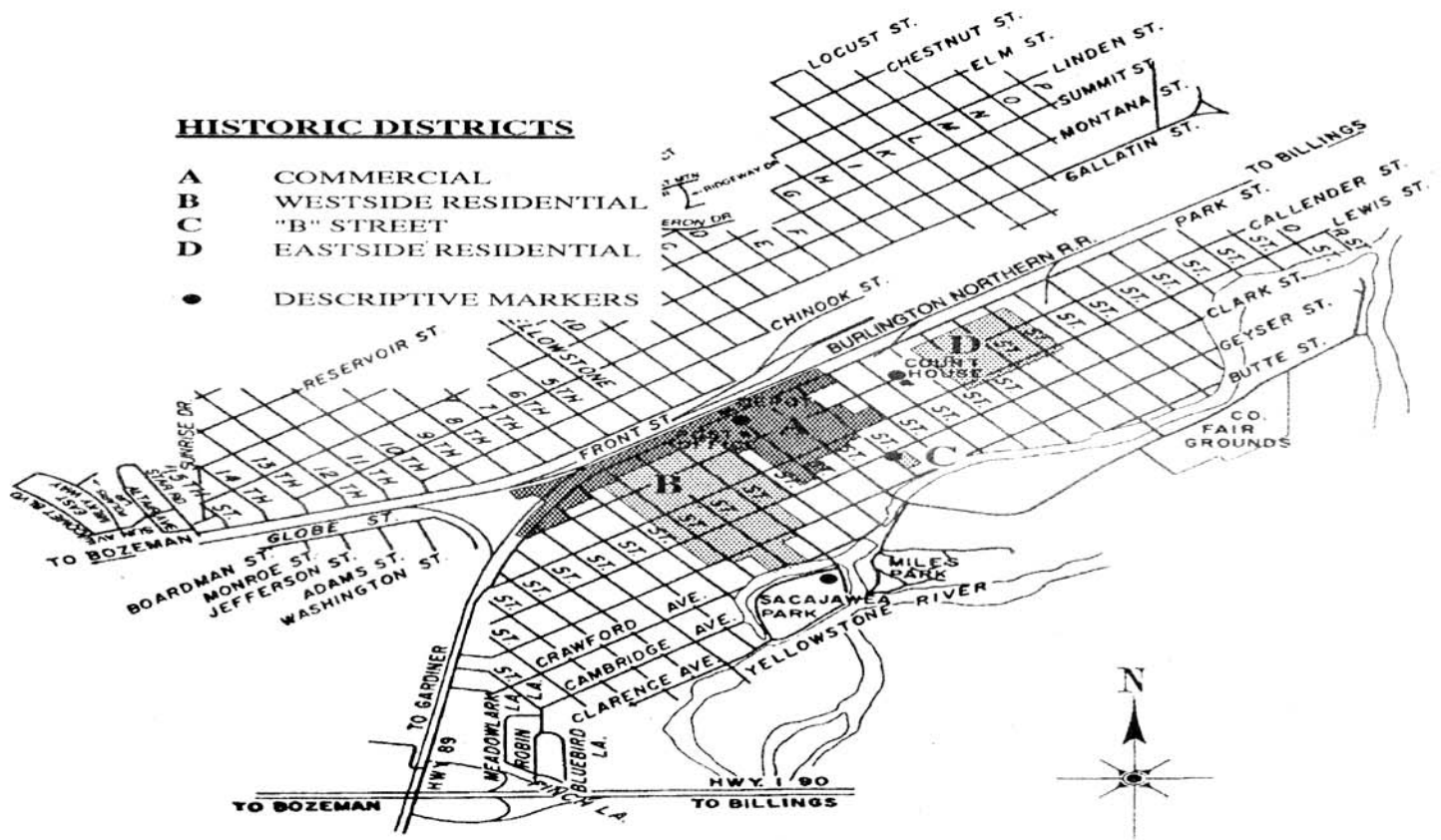
detailing, were easy to build and proved easy to expand. Large enclosed porches, side bays and rear shed-roofed additions account for wide variation in appearance, yet the repetition of this basic design unifies the district.

A few two-story, gable-roofed residences add visual interest while the Norwegian Lutheran Church (now American Lutheran) constructed in 1905 provides architectural focus for the neighborhood. Many Scandinavian and Italian families settled here, bringing strong ethnic identities to the district, which is designated as the area lying along Callender and Lewis streets between "F" and "H" streets.

Today, the entire Eastside continues to be a neighborhood of hard-working families, intermixed with new homeowners willing to renovate their older houses in the heart of this former railroad town.

### HISTORIC DISTRICTS

- A COMMERCIAL
- B WESTSIDE RESIDENTIAL
- C "B" STREET
- D EASTSIDE RESIDENTIAL
- DESCRIPTIVE MARKERS



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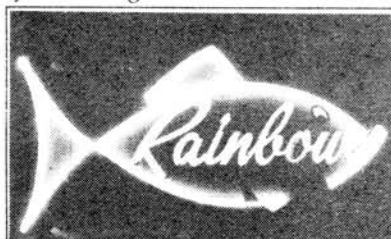
## NEON!

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pastels, Crummett wrote.

Neon became so popular in Big Sky Country that designers set up shop in every major city in the state, and a Montana-born organization of neon artists has grown into the World Neon Associates.

But the medium fell out of favor in the late 1960s, said Crummett, and was often replaced by fluorescent lights in plastic molding. In fact, many of Tokarski's local works were removed, including the back bar lighting at the Guest House, the palm trees inside John's IGA, and one of his first signs to light up the Livingston night, for Trower Pharmacy, installed in 1936.



William M. Caldwell

Fortunately, Tokarski said, neon enjoyed a resurgence in popularity about 10 years ago, and now more elaborate designs are making light waves all the time.

"In spite of the fact that Montana has lost many of its glorious neon creations over the years," said Crummett, "there still remains a sparkling, state-wide collection. [It] is the light by which Montanans envisioned their dreams. Neon has always been something more than just gas, glass and voltage... Line, color and brilliance become provocative masterpieces of liquid fire. And it is exciting to know that Montana neon is still joyfully ablaze."

# Keeping Up Appearances

The appearance of any downtown is the result of an evolutionary process in which buildings either stay the same, are altered, or are completely replaced. This process is continuous and inevitable, but its success or failure depends on how sensitive any changes made are to the existing framework of buildings.

A typical Main Street facade, as that found in Livingston, inherently exhibits some basic qualities resulting from its architectural style, as well as its construction materials and composition.

Sensitive change accepts these facade qualities and builds on them. The result then is a harmonious blending of

new design elements within the existing facade.

Insensitive change, on the other hand, ignores and often eliminates the design qualities of the original building, and creates an unnecessary clash between old and new.

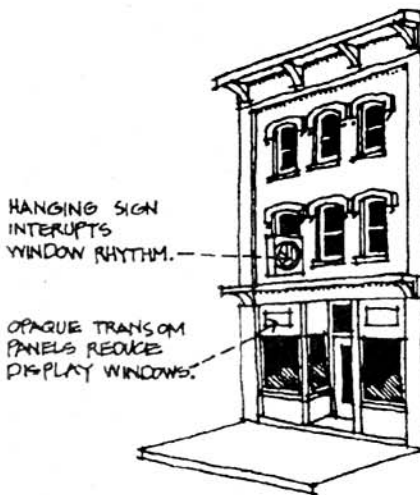
Changes can be made gradually, but they have a cumulative effect on a building's appearance. While some alterations are hardly noticeable, change upon change over the years can completely ignore or destroy the original facade.

The series of drawings presented below show how a typical individual building facade might have been changed over time.

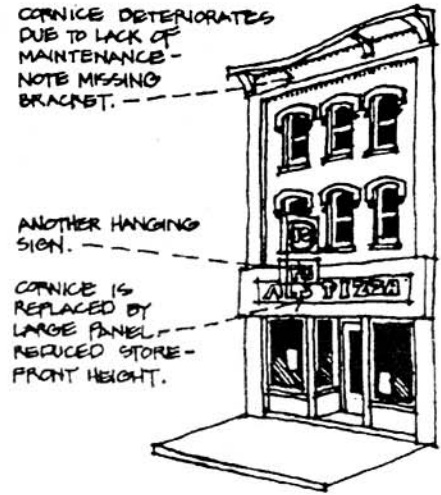
1. THE ORIGINAL FACADE—  
THE VISUAL RESOURCE



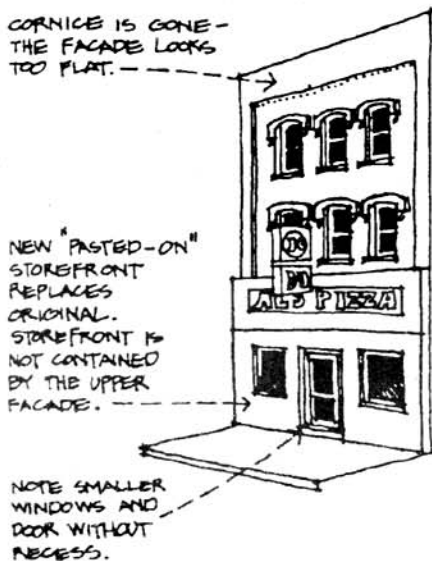
2. MINOR FACADE CHANGE



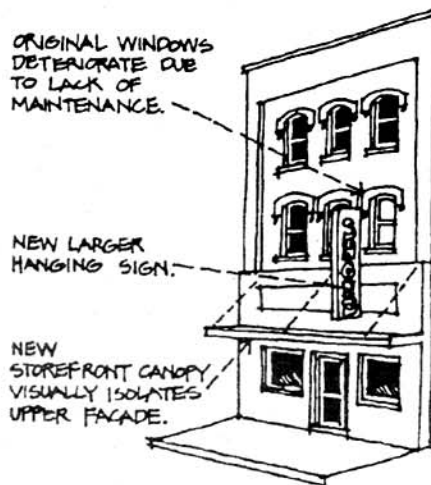
3. MORE MINOR FACADE CHANGE



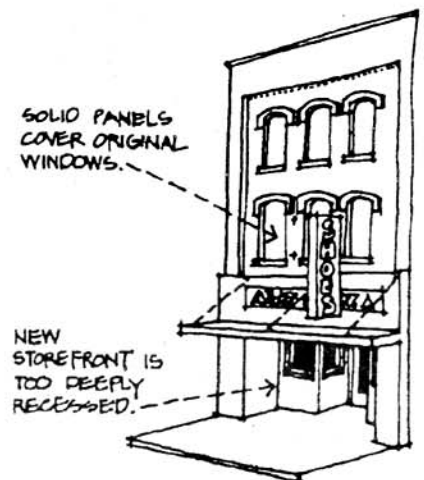
4. STOREFRONT REMODELING—  
THE FACADE LOOKS CUT IN HALF.



5. MORE STOREFRONT CHANGE



6. ANOTHER STOREFRONT REMODELING

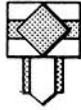


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### *This Holiday Season in Livingston*

- Nov. 18 & 19 ..... Holiday Bazaar at the Depot Center
- Nov. 25 ..... 3rd Annual Holiday of the Arts Gallery Walk 5 - 9 p.m.
- Dec. 2 ..... Christmas Tree Lighting, Depot Center
- Dec. 3 ..... Christmas Stroll, Downtown 12:30 - 6:30 p.m.  
Christmas Fair, Park County Fairgrounds
- Dec. 7 ..... Hospice Tree of Life, Courthouse, 5:30 p.m.
- Dec. 16 ..... Deadline to enter Home & Business Decorating Contest  
Chamber of Commerce
- Dec. 17 ..... Christmas Ball, Depot Center
- Dec. 23 - Jan. 2 ..... Livingston School District Christmas Vacation
- Dec. 24 ..... Last Day to Spend Christmas Cash

Many Downtown Merchants will be extending their evening hours, watch for advertisements.

"Christmas Cash" is available again this year. Livingston's lending institutions are offering loans at zero interest for 10 months. Upon completing the application, the lending institution will give the borrower vouchers, which can then be used at 52 Livingston businesses. There is a \$25.00 processing fee, and participants can borrow from \$300 - \$1,000. See American Bank, First National Park Bank, Livingston Federal Credit Union, or Montana Bank for more information.

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