



A Garden Glows in Mesa

The Neon Garden revives Mesa's illumined past.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

Once upon a time, downtown Mesa glowed from the dazzling light of colorful glowing signs with bold designs. Hundreds of neon signs lined Main Street, beckoning travelers into motels, restaurants, retail establishments, and bars. Yet by the late 20th century, in Mesa and cities across the country, the signs became obsolete, left to rust and peel in the harsh elements, forgotten in warehouses, or even scrapped.

But in recent years, a resurgence in midcentury style and symbols of Americana has brought about renewed interest in neon signage, and now, thanks to a collaboration between the city and the Mesa Preservation Foundation, Main Street's illuminated artworks are lighting up the skyline once again.

The Neon Garden opened in mid-2025. The open-air showcase is part of Mesa's downtown community event space The Post, a thoughtful reimagining of a historical 1936 landmark that once served as the city's first post office.

Mesa-based Sierra Signs & Services was responsible for returning the classic fixtures to their original beauty.

"The signs were kept in a graveyard," says Sierra Signs owner Teri Davis. "We sanded them, repainted them, and brought them back to life." Some signs required the addition of new structural components, such as steel poles, to comply with modern engineering standards.

"We tried to keep everything as original as possible," Davis says. That includes keeping the neon instead of using modern LED lights. While neon gasses are

not harmful to the environment, contrary to popular belief, the signs do use more power than LED lights. As such, the Garden is only illuminated during events.

Five vintage signs from iconic Mesa businesses decorate the Neon Garden.

Bill Johnson's Big Apple: Topped with the image of a Texas longhorn, the western-themed restaurant sign created by Bill and Gene Johnson stood on Main Street from 1977 until 2018, when it was donated to the Mesa Preservation Foundation.

Watson's Flowers: Thirty feet tall and showcasing colorful pink blooms, this classic sign created by legendary local sign maker Paul Millett, stood at the West Main Street flower shop from the late 1950s until it collapsed during a 2014 windstorm.

Dairy Queen: Mesa's first franchise of the famous soft-serve ice cream chain opened on Main Street in 1949. This iconic porcelain enamel neon sign, manufactured by Leroy Signs in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, remained atop the building until the restaurant closed in 2018.

Smiley Ford: The car manufacturer's iconic blue oval was likely installed around 1960 when Smiley-Berge Motors moved to Main Street.



Frontier Motel: By the 1950s, there were more than 50 motels along Main Street, one of which was the Frontier Motel. Featuring a U-shaped layout with a parking lot in the center, the motel hosted winter visitors for extended stays. Its sign likely dates to the origin of the property.

In addition to the restored vintage pieces, the Neon Garden also features a replica of one of Mesa's most iconic and well-known signs: the legendary Diving Lady. Built in 1960 by neon artist Paul Millett and signmaker Stanley Russon, the 60-foot sign promoted a swimming pool at the Starlite Motel. Destroyed by a storm in 2010, it was rebuilt in 2013. The smaller replica at the Neon Garden commemorates what is the last remaining animated neon sign in the Phoenix metropolitan area. A contemporary neon name sign that rises from the roof of The Post adds to the collection.

"When the sun sets and those signs light up, it's magical," says Marc Heirshberg, director of Parks, Recreation, and Commercial Facilities for the City of Mesa. "It's a unique environment that's just really neat to see."

He adds, "The Post and the Neon Garden pay homage to the roots of our history with a respectful reuse and presentation of the signs. They create a distinctive gathering space that's a reflection of the community's commitment to honoring our past while building toward our future." 🌿

