

SIGN OF SR'S PAST: FLAMINGO'S NEON BIRD RETURNED TO PERCH

Published on May 8, 1997

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The ``Big Bird'' that beckoned a generation of working Santa Rosans to come and unwind reclaimed its perch Wednesday in front of the Flamingo Resort, nearly 20 years after being pushed into retirement.

But the 9-foot pink flamingo will remain under wraps atop his 85-foot pedestal until May 17, when the landmark resort once again sets the neon sign aglow with 110 volts of electricity during a ceremonial, 40th-anniversary bash starting at 5:30 p.m.

``It's fun to see something like this in our history come back. It's like bringing back an old Cadillac,'' said Kenn Foote of Concept Development in Santa Rosa, who has overseen the \$40,000 sign project.

Work crews equipped with a 180-foot crane spent the entire day loosening the old turntable from the top of the towering sign and installing a new motor that will enable the signature pink bird to eventually resume his nightly onelegged, circular dance at Fourth Street and Farmers Lane.

It was a dirty job. Mechanics had to scrape out a mound of rusted, crumbling parts mingled with 40 years worth of pigeon droppings before the new works could be put in.

The hubbub in the hotel parking lot drew a steady stream of gawkers, most eager to once again see the bird light up the eastside skyline.

``We wanted to see it -- to say we were there when it came back

up," said Inga Torok, a longtime Santa Rosan, who scurried over from her Farmer's Lane insurance office. ``It's old and it's new at the same time."

The actual hoisting occurred at about 6 p.m., when a crane lifted three men and the flamingo to the top of the sign. The men, including neon expert Rich Wells who designed the sign, spent more than an hour locking and bolting the bird and making sure he would not fall on passers-by. By 8, the flamingo, wrapped in a bright blue tarp, stood alone on his perch with the pink hotel lights ablaze below.

The sign vanished into local lore in the late 1970s when new owner Werner Ehret set about refurbishing the tarnished garden resort - once the place to see and be seen after the sun went down in Santa Rosa.

Construction workers at the time made the mistake of removing the signature pink flamingo from atop his tower, nullifying the ``grandfather clause" that allowed it to remain despite new regulations outlawing signs taller than 15 feet.

But public tastes have a way of turning. Like 100-percent polyester, the bird, once a symbol of glamor, in 20 years seasoned from campy to classic.

Hotel heir **Pierre Ehret**, overseeing yet another renaissance of the resort, got wind from city hall insiders that it might be a politically favorable time to resurrect the old bird.

He applied to have the sign declared an historic landmark, thereby exempting it from the sign laws. City officials complied in February, paving the way not only to welcome back the flamingo, but to let it revolve once again.

``You could be a few miles away but you could see that big bird and knew you were on the track of the Flamingo," said Isabel Taylor, 78, who worked the front check-in desk back when the hotel opened in June 1957. ``It was sad when the old one went down. They should have left the bird up there. It was part of the hotel."

The old bird had been disassembled years ago. But Foote said he was able to track down the original glass tubing from a San Francisco collector. He made a pattern from which Wells cloned a new flamingo out of 80 feet of glass and a rustproof aluminum cabinet.

“It looks identical to the original, even down the color,” said Wells, who as a journeyman signmaker back in the 1950s, had a small hand in painting and wiring the first flamingo.

The sign will be the star attraction of next week's party, which for a few old-timers will conjure up memories of the glory days when the Flamingo was the hub of Santa Rosa's after-hours life, and power-brokers, such as Hugh Coddington, would sweep into the lounge and hold court from the best booth in the room.

“It's a solid thing that reminds us of a solid time,” said local artist and designer Richard Bagel, who has an aesthetic appreciation for the old exposed neon. “I don't think it's just for kitsch. It reminds us of old Santa Rosa -- a more conservative and more elegant time.”

PHOTO: 2 color by Mark Aronoff/Press Democrat 1: Landmark back on top of SR hotel

John Schmidt checks the rotation of the newly refurbished pink flamingo, which was being mounted on top of the Flamingo Hotel in Santa Rosa on Wednesday. (teaser ran A1)

2: Robert Cook steps off the hotel sign after the wrapped flamingo was hoisted Wednesday.

Infobox: RETURN OF THE PINK FLAMINGO