

ACCENT

Neon work lights up man's life

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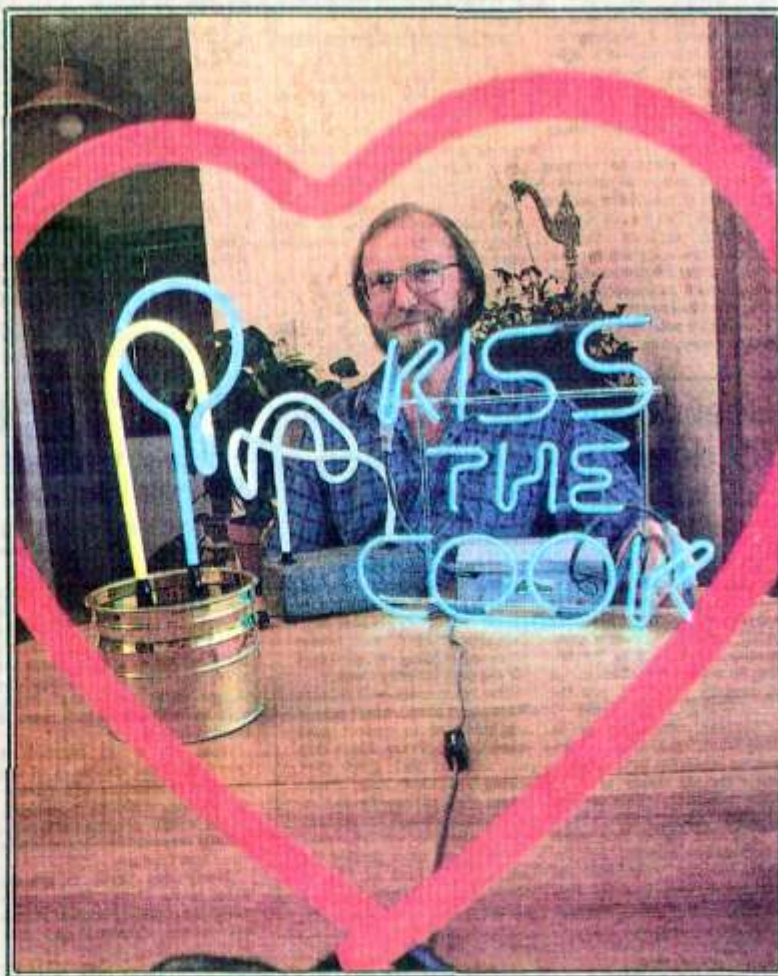
CLARK COUNTY, WASH.

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Photos by Dave Olson of The Columbian



Roger Schurman, in his neon-filled Ridgefield shop, says it will take him years to truly master the art of tube-bending.



Schurman's work includes a "Kiss the Cook" sign, a huge neon heart and "noodles" sculptures.

Signs of the times

Ridgefield man dazzles with neon

By ANGELA ALLEN
The Columbian

RIDGEFIELD — Neon's electric signature has returned to the American landscape after several decades of burial in kitsch, corny and clunky labels.

The glass that glows with gas is reviving the dazzle of '30s deco and the funkiness of '50s art forms. Bright, durable and expensive, it's turning up again in storefronts, movie marquees, interior lighting, novelty sculptures (such as lips, flamingos and cacti), name plates, museums — and yes, Clark County.

Roger Schurman, the only one-man neon operation in the county, sensed the renaissance of neon

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☐ Dazzling facts: Find out why neon signs are a gas.

and turned part of his garage into a "tube-bender's" workshop. His tidy Ridgefield shop looks like a hybrid mad scientist's home lab and magician's gas and glass palace.

Schurman has been at his craft for a little more than a year after he dropped out of construction work and invested \$3,500 in a three-month course at Portland's Neon Art and Tube Bending School.

Motivated by a now-or-never desire to run his own business, he invested another \$10,000 and made a go of Gas 'n' Glass Neon. Since then, he's blitzed the Hazel Dell area with neon designs, made countless OPEN signs for businesses, and marketed his spaghetti-like "Noodles" neon sculptures through Vancouver's Artifacts gallery and the Weary Fox in Seaside, Ore.

After a year in business he's in the black and living comfortably. But it hasn't been easy. "You burn yourself a lot and

break a lot of glass. It's not something you learn in three months. ... It takes years and years to master the craft," said Schurman, 38.

It can take as many as seven years to become accomplished at bending glass and filling it with gas for simple signs such as Premium Beer or WELCOME.

To complicate matters, little information about the process is available. In neon's glory days during the '30s and '40s, there were about 5,000 craftsmen bending tubes. Now, nationwide, only about 500 people have the skills and knowledge to make a handsome sign that will endure years of use.

With the lack of resources, setting up his shop often meant winging it. "When I first started, I had two or three questions every day," Schurman said. And often, he had to find the answers

himself by experimenting.

Not all of Schurman's efforts have paid off. In February, he tried to market some \$200 pink and red neon hearts for Valentine's Day through florist shops. The shops weren't interested, either because of the high price or the slightly late timing.

But plenty of his custom work has sold. A number of area businesses have Schurman's simple electric designs hanging in their storefronts, including Pyramid Ales in Kalama, Larson's Cleaners in Hazel Dell, Village Optical (a pair of round spectacles) and Diane's Second Glance, a used clothing store.

Schurman and Second Glance owner Diane Fribbs collaborated on the giant green neon hanger with "Diane's" inscribed in purple within the hanger. "He thought I was a genius for having the hanger, and I thought he was a

genius for doing what he did," said Fribbs.

Neon is expensive, partly because it takes so much time. A seemingly simple four-letter OPEN sign, which Schurman can almost do in his sleep, takes about three hours. A more complex eight-letter sign can take an entire week, especially if perfectionism is a goal. "I'll throw the glass out if I don't have a good bend. It's important to have a good reputation. You don't want to start out with complaints about glass breaking," said Schurman.

Linda Shelton, who markets Schurman's \$200 neon "Noodles" through her Artifacts gallery, is impressed with Schurman's work. "He pays attention to every detail."

And just imagine lighting up your bathroom with a perfectly twisted tube of neon.

Lengthy process turns out neon signs

By ANGELA ALLEN
The Columbian

Those bright and brilliant neon signs burning all night in the windows of the dry cleaners, the optometrist and the wine shop are complicated, time-consuming pieces of work. Not only is everything done by hand, but the work takes patience, calmness and a high-frustration quotient.

Anyone but a master craftsman will break a lot of glass before the bend is perfect.

To begin, the artist draws an exact pattern, or kind of blueprint, of the design. The bender then twists glass tubes, which have been heated over a flame, to correspond to the design. Electrodes are then fused to either end of the tube.

Moving over to a kind of giant glasswork lab, the artist or technician cleanses the tube of impuri-

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☐ Neon man: Ridgefield's Roger Schurman reshapes his life.

Glowing facts about neon's sizzle

Neon has illuminated the American horizon since the early 1920s, most abundantly in the desert city of Las Vegas. Writer and art critic Tom Wolfe says neon signs have made Las Vegas one of the world's only architecturally unified cities.

BRIGHT: Neon signs sizzled so brightly the U.S. government ordered them turned off during

World War II. German submarine captains might find the coast too easily.

DURABLE: The first permanent neon sign in the United States, advertising a Packard dealership, still glows in Los Angeles. It was installed in 1923.

EYE-CATCHING: In 1937, blue, pink and green neon decorated the Eiffel Tower, in cele-

bration of an international exhibition.

EXPENSIVE: In the 1980s, designer Michael Hayden received \$1 million for his 800-foot-long neon sculpture that stretches along the ceiling of the United Airlines concourse at Chicago's O'Hare Airport.

— Angela Allen

ties by "bombarding" it with enough volts of electricity to electrocute a sentenced criminal. A vacuum pump then removes the impurities.

Now the pretty part starts. An inert gas, usually neon, which is red, or argon (lavender), is pumped into the tube and sealed. (Think of all the neon beer signs. Most of them are blue and red.)

After an aging and reinforcing process, the artist can paint areas of the tubing to block out light. For

example, maybe not all of a letter should be red, so black paint is used to block out parts of it.

A transformer is attached to the piece and the electricity causes the gas to glow. Though transformers are getting smaller, it is rare to see a neon sign without wires sprouting from it. High-frequency radio waves are now being used to light up the gas, using smaller and lighter solid-state transformers, but this high-tech technique is more costly.

Artists achieve various colors by adding mercury to argon (to get brilliant blue); or by using different colors of tubing. The combination of gas and glass makes the different shades.

In neon's heyday in the '30s and '40s, glass tubing was available in exotic colors, such as ruby red, midnight blue and uranium green. Clark County artist Roger Schurman has hoarded some of this antique tubing to use when he becomes confident enough of his bending skills.

Most tubing costs about \$12 to \$15 a foot, but the antique variety is far more precious. (It's hard to put a price on this breakable gold because of its scarcity.) You can bet you'll pay dearly for it if you want it in your sign.