

# **An Oral History of Will Durham**

4<sup>th</sup> Street | Prater Way History Project

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Interviewer: Catherine Magee

A native of Reno, Will Durham is a collector of vintage neon signs from throughout Nevada and other parts of the United States. After graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno, he worked in film and commercial production in Los Angeles, and moved back to Reno in 2005. An exhibit of selected neon signs from his collection appeared at the Nevada Museum of Art from October 2012 through February 2013.

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## WILL DURHAM

Interviewed on March 29, 2012

Catherine Magee, Interviewer

*A native of Reno, Will Durham is a collector of vintage neon signs from throughout Nevada and other parts of the United States. After graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno, he worked in film and commercial production in Los Angeles, and moved back to Reno in 2005. An exhibit of selected signs from his collection appeared at the Nevada Museum of Art from October 2012 through February 2013.*

Photo by Patrick Cummings

Magee: I'm here with Will Durham inside the Nevada Discovery Museum in Reno, and today is March 29, 2012. Will, I really appreciate you talking to us about your interest in neon. First, I'd like to get a little background about you, and I was wondering if you can tell me if you grew up in Reno.

Durham: I did. I was born at St. Mary's [Hospital] in 1973. I was the only boy born that night, so I was the only blue blanket. I grew up in Reno, went to Veterans Elementary, then Vaughn Middle School down the street, and then a little bit further down and to the right, I went to Wooster High School.

Magee: Did you continue on to UNR?

Durham: I did go to UNR, and I took a break because I thought that I was interested in hotel management at UNLV. I went down for a semester and I realized that my interest in that was not through that school. So I went back to UNR and got my degree in finance.

Magee: Finance, that's interesting. Did you have any experiences in school, besides going down to UNLV, that stick out in your mind here in Reno?

Durham: Well, not so much. It wasn't my favorite time. I mean, I enjoyed it. It was okay, but they weren't my best years. I don't remember college as being the good old days. I was pretty serious about school and I was working very hard at the time, so it wasn't one of my fondest memories.

Magee: How about your professional experience? It sounds like you have a pretty diverse educational background.

Durham: Well, the reason I chose to get a degree in finance was that I always have ideas for big projects and entertainment-related projects. So the one common thread was always financing, and that was the way to make it real.

I tailored my major with permission. It was focusing on motion-picture finance. I

always was interested in the film industry. So I just decided that I was going to work on movies. I originally thought I was going to be in front of the camera, and my first experience was on a movie called *Hard Eight*, which was Paul Thomas Anderson's first movie. He later did *Boogie Nights*, and he's a very successful director, but his first movie was here [in Reno].

I was in a scene with Samuel L. Jackson right after he was nominated for an Academy Award, and I thought that that was going to be my calling. I thought it was great. I was a valet attendant at the Peppermill [Casino], and it took place at the Peppermill. I played a valet attendant at the Peppermill, so it wasn't too much of a stretch.

I thought that that was going to be it until I did—I guess they're called a cold-read audition, which was horrifying. It was just walking into a room with people who aren't very interested, with their arms crossed, and you're supposed to act out a section of the scene. It didn't go well. I changed my mind a little bit.

But I always wanted to be involved in film, so for the last ten or twelve years I've worked in film, in the art department. I've done set dressing, art direction, and props. I started out working mainly on movies, and then videos, and at the end of my film career, I worked mainly on commercials. I still work on commercials occasionally.

Then when I moved back to Reno from Los Angeles, I was thinking what I could possibly do stay that would be interesting, because the film industry is very interesting and it's challenging, it just keeps your mind moving. I wondered what I could possibly do in Reno during one of the worst economic downturns that would keep my interest. I was lucky enough to find a job at the Nevada Discovery Museum working in exhibits, which it's very similar to what I did in motion pictures, creative project management.

Magee: That's really cool. Now I want to go back to the art department. I don't think you mentioned that you had moved to L.A. Can you give me a timeline of you got into the movie at the Peppermill?

Durham: I can try. It's a little chopped up because I did a lot of film-industry work in Reno. At the time I had moved back to Las Vegas for a little while, but I was still working. The contacts that I had made were in Reno. So I would get jobs on like a commercial or a film, like the film *The Cooler*, but I was still living in Las Vegas, and I would have to come here to work. Then I moved from Las Vegas to Los Angeles three days before September 11, 2001, but I was still going back and forth, working in Reno from Los Angeles.

Then when I moved back to Reno in about 2005, I still worked in Los Angeles. So I've been commuting. I commuted back to Los Angeles, so I've never really worked in motion pictures in the city that I live. My schedule never seemed to work.

Magee: Is there a big film industry here in Nevada or in Reno?

Durham: No, not at all. There used to be a lot more. We used to get a lot of movies and there was actually commercial work for the casinos, and there was a company in town where we did some projects like toy companies and some bigger jobs. But a lot of that dried up, and a lot of the casinos started doing their commercials in-house. There really

hasn't been the number of movies coming through Reno as there was in the past. The last major movie that came through was Love Ranch, which just didn't seem to do very well. But there used to be a lot of movies coming through, and I worked on several.

Magee: Is there a business that you worked for or did people just know you by reputation to work on these movies?

Durham: Mainly just freelancing. It's interesting when you work in film, being able to trace how you've gotten the connections you have. It's fairly easy. You remember working on that, and you met someone who introduced you to that, and people like to work with people who they know will do a good job and have a good attitude. So the connections you make aren't just about knowing someone; they're about people wanting to replicate the experience they had on a previous project. Because the work is very difficult, you want to work with people who you know can come through. In the film industry, there's no margin for error. Everything has to happen as planned. So to answer your question directly, it was mainly freelance work. If you didn't work for one company, you'd have several people who you worked for and they'd call you when they get work.

Magee: That's interesting in that you can be pretty mobile with that.

Durham: Yes, but it's mainly in Los Angeles. Living in Reno and working in Los Angeles is okay because you go down for a week or two, but now I have a family. I have a wife and young daughter, and there's no way that I could be gone that much. We wouldn't want to move there because we're attached to Reno. It just wouldn't work. Occasionally I go back for a commercial, but with the amount of time I was gone, it's not right for a family.

Magee: You said that working in the museum here is actually really similar to the film industry. That isn't a connection that I would make. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Durham: Obviously it's different, because working in commercials and film, the pace is really fast and it's very short-term projects. The way you build is for short term. But basically, working in a museum, you can make the connection to working on a film. There's a lot of planning, which would be like screenwriting, and then there's a lot of pre-production. That's getting the vendors together and finalizing the plans.

It's basically working with creative people, with the outcome being a creative endeavor. In the museum it's an exhibit, and in film it's the final project, whether that's a music video or commercial. It's trying to harness different skilled people and assets into something that works for what you need, whether it's building a set that looks like a fire station or building a catapult for the museum. Does it meet the goals that you're trying to achieve, and then once you've established that it does, how do you actually make it happen? It isn't necessarily glamorous, but you just hope the end result is fun and what you had in mind. It's a trick to actually get all those creative pieces together. It takes a lot of wrangling.

A lot of times you're carrying out the ideas of other people but bringing your

sensibilities to it. So it isn't always coming up with projects from scratch. A lot of times I feel that at this museum I'll have that liberty, which is exciting to me, within the framework of what we're doing here, to be able to come up with an idea and then present it and then carry it out. That, to me, is the most exciting, to be able to start from nothing. It starts with a thought and then carries it out to something that other people can enjoy. That's the reward of this, is being able to actually carry it out, have an idea and have the means to bring it to fruition.

Magee: It sounds like it's a really good working environment.

Durham: Yes. It's challenging. There's a lot to do, because in film you generally have enough people. You work very hard but there are a lot of people. In the museum industry, you don't have as many internal resources. You're relying on outside vendors a lot more, and so it's just different in that way.

Magee: Thanks for talking about that because I just never would have made the connection.

Durham: I had to make that connection on my résumé to say why I would be a good exhibits person in a museum with no museum experience. So I needed to convey that in my résumé. I guess it works. I'm here.

Magee: I was wondering if you could talk about your interest in neon and how it got started.

Durham: It didn't start out as a massive preservation effort. It was much simpler than that. I remember people asked me how I originally got interested in neon, and I really needed to think back. I think I have developed a foundation. When I was a child, I had trouble sleeping. I didn't want to go to sleep, initially. I just wanted to stay up and bother my brother, and I'd ask him ridiculous questions. He was four years older, so maybe he was on a little bit of a different level. We shared a room, and eventually he moved out of our room into the basement.

So I was by myself and I didn't like that very much, so I would always do things to try and not be the last one asleep. If we were watching a movie as a family, I would leave twenty minutes early to try to get a head start going to sleep, because I just hated the idea of being the last one.

My mother always read before she'd go to bed. I knew that she'd read for at least half an hour. So if I tried to go to bed twenty minutes before the movie ended and I knew that my mom would be awake for at least another half hour, I had a little window. If I ever wasn't able to get to sleep, I could look downtown and I'd see the glow from the casinos, and with the casinos I knew that I wasn't the last one, that there were other people who were still awake.

I also remember going downtown to watch a movie—I think it was *The Electric Horseman*—in a downtown theater. Most locals didn't go downtown that much. Especially then, there was not that much to do as a family. But I remember going to the Granada and seeing *The Electric Horseman* and the lights of downtown. I remember

driving along Virginia Street and seeing this wild display of lights. From the river to the Reno Arch, each business had fifty to a hundred feet of frontage, and basically they all had the same product, so their signage was what differentiated the venues, and it was like a light circus.

That's the name of what I do now, The Light Circus. I think of it like that was; driving down Virginia Street you'd have the Mapes cowboys, you had the Primadonna girls, the Nevada Club cowboy, and just the sheer volume of lights. As a child, it's kind of ridiculous when you think about it; it has no real practical value, but it was exciting to see.

I went back and watched *The Electric Horseman* recently, because I just wanted to see it. There's a scene in there when Robert Redford rides the horse down Las Vegas Boulevard past all the casino lights, and they actually do a montage of neon signs. So I think that that may have planted the seed.

Then much later I was in Seattle, and there was a place called Ruby Montana's Pinto Pony, home furnishings for the twentieth century, and it was a great store. Whoever Ruby Montana was, she had a great eye. It was really different stuff. It was when retro was coming back. But it was really different stuff. It wasn't just your fifties' tables. It was really interesting stuff.

They had a neon sign in there from a chop-suey place, and I loved it. It was politically incorrect, but it was just so stylized—the clean illustration lines and the color—and it was beautiful. It was figural. It had the Chinese man, and it said "Chop Suey." It was the first time I realized that a sign could be separated from the building, that if the business closed, the sign could have a new life.

Then when I was back in Reno, it was such a time of change. Everything was coming down. A lot of things were closing. Parker's [Western Wear] was closing after seventy-five years, and some motels on Fourth Street. I still don't remember which was my first sign. I don't remember if it was Parker's. I think it was the Zephyr Motel, a diving swimmer. I think that was the first one.

But I didn't get it out of a preservation effort. I had a house that I shared with some roommates, and I had a really large sunroom as my room, and I turned it into a lounge. I had some naugahyde bar booths that I'd gotten, and I just thought it would be cool to have them in there. I liked vintage clothes, and I just thought that that would be really neat to have.

So once I'd gotten that sign, all these other signs were, all of a sudden, in play. The Parker's sign was coming down, Harolds Club was closing, the Nevada Club was closing, the Mapes was about to be torn down, the Holiday. Everything was happening. It was just all of a sudden that I realized that if I didn't get these, that they wouldn't exist anymore, because there was no preservation effort. The only preservation effort for the signage on Virginia Street was the Harolds Club mural. But if I didn't get these, they would be gone. So I did what I could to save them, and that's how it became a little bit more than just an interesting collectible.

Magee: You mentioned putting the Zephyr Motel sign in your room, but it sounds like you couldn't put all these other signs in your sunroom. What happened when you started collecting more?

Durham: A lot of times you don't understand how big these are. You're looking at them from the ground, and thinking, "Oh, is that ten feet?" So they're really deceiving, and so is how much they weigh.

I remember when I took the Zephyr Motel sign down, a friend of mine and I were going to just stand on the top of a pickup camper, and we had no idea how much these weighed. I remember trying to take that one down, and realized the thing probably weighed 250 pounds, and we were in a really awkward position and we almost were crushed by the sign, but we were able to get it down safely. These things are awkward and they don't store nicely.

When I was younger, I collected bottle caps and you could collect your whole life and they'd go in a few bins. But these are really difficult to store. There would be times when I just had to do whatever it took. When the Parker's sign was coming down, I didn't really get a chance to measure it. Actually, when I went to go get the sign, the sign company had already taken it down and it was already on the flatbed. I realized it was twenty-six feet long. I arranged with my next-door neighbors to store it in their yard. I mean, it was a massive sign. I have a picture of the crane setting it in their yard, and they built something to protect it.

It all happened so fast. This change was just happening. Then there'd be some that would be in storage units. I got a sign from Las Vegas that, if you stacked it all together, would be twenty-nine feet tall. That would be two storage units. I'd find people who had land and I would move some signs.

You'd have to get a bunch of friends to help you move this heavy, metal, dirty sign, with broken glass and jagged metal. You can wear out favors pretty quickly, but it was everything I had to do just to get this. They were in different places, and then I stored some at a sign company's yard. They actually threw away some of my signs, which was pretty brutal. That was heartbreaking, but, fortunately, they didn't throw any of the signs away that were just—there are certain ones that, to me, I'm so close to that I don't know if I'd ever be able to get over them being destroyed. These were nice signs, but they weren't like that for me.

Magee: Do you remember what they were?

Durham: One was the Starlite Bowl sign. To be fair, it was not the bowling pin. I had missed that. I missed that by a day. When I found out they had taken it down, it was already in a landfill. I called the landfill and had people go check, and it had already been destroyed. So this was the bowl part, which was really interesting. I don't know if it was Googie style, but it felt like that. It was interesting on its own.

The other was from the Domino Motel in Las Vegas, which is a big sign. I still have parts of it, but it was the main part that said "motel" and "heated pool," I think. But those were gone. Then one of my signs was the Buffalo Bar. Actually, some of the Harolds Club letters were damaged there. I made that decision that I needed to control where these are. I bought two diesel trailers, forty-five-foot trailers, and I put most of my signs in there. That was a while ago, and my sign collection has grown, so I don't know if they'd all fit in there. They're in different places. We're actually consolidating them now for a project, so that's nice to have them all together.

Magee: I want to get back to one thing that you said, and then go on from there. You said the Starlite Bowl sign was a Googie style. What does that mean?

Durham: Googie style is kind of fifties' diner style. It's something like the old Denny's with the slanted roofs. It's the signage that would go along with like a fifties'-style diner, like the slanted roofs of Bob's Big Boy and Denny's. It's really associated a lot with diners. I'm not an expert in Googie architecture, but I have a decent idea of what it is.

Magee: There's some of that around town.

Durham: Yes, there's a little bit left. I think Jack's Diner in Sparks, right off of Fourth. I don't know where Fourth Street quite ends, but it's right around there.

Magee: To wrap up what we were talking about before, you talked about now you've taken more control of where you store your signs, in some trailers, and it sounds like you've collected more signs than you have room for in your diesel trailers.

Durham: I have crazy things that don't fit. I have the twelve-foot leprechaun from Fitzgerald's. It's not neon, but it goes with some of the signage.

Magee: So it sounds like you collect associated things then, too, not just the neon.

Durham: It's not all neon. I collect a lot of things, but how are you going to turn down a twelve-foot-tall papier-mâché leprechaun with a big pipe? It's hard to turn down, because if I don't save it, then who will? Where's it going to go? I collect a lot of things, but my main thing is mainly neon signs—and signs with incandescent bulbs, too.

Magee: When you talk about taking down these signs, are there electrical and wiring issues? Do you know how to take care of that?

Durham: No. I've learned the hard way what not to do a few times. I have been shocked very badly a few times, and I've learned to wire a little bit. I consider these to be museum-quality artifacts, so I want them wired correctly. Some of them are animated, so it's a lot of electricity and it can be dangerous if it's done incorrectly. Occasionally I will rewire a sign, but I would only do it when it's very simple.

I was about to take down the Buffalo Bar in Sparks, and, as I said, it's hard to gauge how big a sign is from the ground. Before you take it down, you want to know where you can store it. I went on top of the building, with permission, and I decided I was just going to measure the sign. There's a ledge on the edge of the building, and I leaned over and I extended my tape down. It was kind of windy that day and it blew it into an exposed electrode. I didn't even realize what had happened. I just felt like I was shocked by a swarm of bees.

A lot of times when these sign companies maintain these signs, they don't always go all the way through the steps, like removing the old transformers or covering all the exposed electrodes. For some of them, the only thing that's going to hit them is birds. There are a lot of dead birds there. The other time, I was just using a transformer



incorrectly. It does hurt. It hurts.

Magee: So you have to disconnect the signs when you remove them from buildings?

Durham: A lot of times I use professional sign companies just because of the needs of whoever owns the building, because they would require that. So a lot of times they would make sure that the electricity is off. Obviously, I always have to make sure that before I do anything, that the electricity is off. Now I've learned more about being able to test, just to make sure that they're not hot, because it could be quite dangerous.

Magee: You mentioned the sign companies maintain these signs. Is neon still used?

Durham: Sure. A lot of times, with the main neon company in town, they would lease the signs. You'd enter into a contract where you didn't own the sign, but as long as your business was open, you'd pay a certain amount and that would ensure that the sign would be properly maintained. With a lot of the sign companies, there's a job where you drive around and check the neon and bulbs in signs at night, and keep a log of what needs to be repaired. I was thinking that would have been my ideal job at certain points because I do that anyway. I do it for free. But I was just thinking that that's such an interesting job, especially in a city like Las Vegas or Reno. I guess it would get old.

Magee: I'm having a little hard of a time wrapping my head around the idea that there would be a specialized sign created, say for a casino, that the casino doesn't own but the sign company maintains.

Durham: I think the casinos a lot of times have their own maintenance people. At the Peppermill they have a lot of neon and they have their own neon shop. Occasionally maybe they would contract out if they needed a crane, but a lot of the leasing would be on motels or just mom-and-pop places where they don't want to deal with it. They build in the cost of doing business. So it's kind of like insurance. You're thinking, okay, if this neon breaks, am I going to have to pay \$500? It's just like with any insurance. That would guarantee that someone is looking out for the sign, and when there was a problem, that it would be addressed quickly.

Magee: So they would pay to have the sign created, but then have the insurance policy. I guess I misunderstood that the sign company would create it and lease it to the building so there's some sort of payment to create the sign for your building.

Durham: Yes. If you look at how the Boneyard in Las Vegas was formed [The Neon Museum Boneyard, a collection of rescued and donated signs], a lot of those signs that ended up in the sign company's yard there—YESCO—had been leased. So when they came down, they ended up in the YESCO yard. I think they probably had a lot of space back then, because I know that the sign companies now don't like to have things in their yard long-term. That's how those signs accumulated in the Boneyard; they were the end of leases, and someone probably thought that they were worth saving, so they didn't scrap them, thankfully.

Magee: You mentioned that the signs that were damaged weren't necessarily your favorites. So it sounds like you probably have some signs that are your favorites. Can you tell me what some of those are?

Durham: Well, one is the Buffalo Bar. That sign, to me, is what makes a neon sign. The shape of it is kind of an abstract shape, and a martini glass is pouring out the shape of a buffalo head. Signs nowadays are rectangular, they're easy to make, backlit. What makes a sign expensive is the figural design work. That's complex metal work and it's not fast. So with the Buffalo Bar, I just love that sign.

I do rounds of where these signs are, to make sure that nothing's changing, and I would always drive by that sign to see if anything was changing. You hear things that are going to happen, and with that one I found out that the person to talk with was in Las Vegas. I would call this man, and he was so nice. He would always thank me for calling. He was just a great guy, and he would just say, "Well, you know, give me a call in two weeks. We'll see." Because it was going to change, it was going to close, but they didn't know when. He was just so nice to deal with. I felt good about that. I could see it when I would fly into the Reno Airport. I could see it from the air. It was just so neat. When a sign would get close, when I knew that it was close, I always seemed to just keep driving by the sign, stalking it, just watching it and also planning on how I'd get it down.

So when it was getting close to the time for that sign to come down, he told me to talk to this man in Reno—I think he was the manager—that he would be the one that I would have to make the final deal with. There's also a delicate balance of showing interest in a sign, because before they were probably going to pay to have the sign taken away, but the second someone shows interest in it, all of a sudden it seems valuable. This guy told me, "Well, you know, I don't even know what we're going to do with the sign. I think we're going to blow it up as a publicity stunt." To hear that is horrifying, but it's also such a ridiculous idea that as a publicity stunt you're going to blow up something with metal and mercury shrapnel. I think that would be hard to get approved. Nevertheless, it worked, and it scared me to the fact that I needed to preserve that sign. So I got that one.

Another one of my favorites is the Nevada Club sign. It's figural; it's the guy—I know it as Bucky Buckaroo, the figural shape and the shape of Nevada waving—designed by [Louis] Lou Heimers, and that's a porcelain sign. The older signs and the better-made signs were made out of porcelain, which is just gorgeous still, because it never ages. It's just gorgeous.

Magee: So instead of being metal like you were talking about with the buffalo, the neon is applied to porcelain?

Durham: The porcelain is on top of the metal, but it almost feels like a bathtub. When you clean it, if it isn't chipped, you can get it to look like it did when it was new. A lot of times, the best part of these signs is the patina that the paint acquires over time which makes it beautiful, and the way the paint fades and cracks, that's beautiful. But with these porcelain signs, you can make them look as they did when they were brand new, and it

still has a vintage feel just because of the material.

So those are two of my favorites. Also the Mapes signs, the Mapes cowboys, those are a great, great design, and I went through a lot to get those. There's a sign from California that I worked on for years and years and years to get, and it was a guy from Van Ness Auto. In what I do, called The Light Circus, he's the ring leader. He's a cartoon guy, and in one hand he's welcoming visitors, and then in his other hand he has his fingers crossed. So you just realize or you just think, what is he ushering me into? He's become the face of what I do. I worked for many, many, many years with different owners of the property to get that sign.

Magee: When you say "worked to get a sign," would you mind elaborating a little bit on the process?

Durham: Well, it is work because that sign is a perfect example. You have to track down the owners. Maybe it's my technique, but you have to find out who owns the building, and you have to track down the person who can give you the yes or no. So I found the owner, I called him, and he said, "Yeah, I can do that." It was the easiest ever.

I said, "Wow, that's just amazing." He just wanted to trade. I would have maybe a martini glass made. It didn't go that easy. He had to talk to his wife, and then his wife said, "Maybe we'll talk to our designer, because they're designing a new den." It ended up then that they needed to talk to a lawyer because they weren't sure if they could sell the sign from the building since they were leasing it. Then it became about the lawyer, and then they sold the business. So all that work that I'd done before was worthless, and I needed to start over with the new owner.

Working on these, it's basically letting the person know that you're the right person to have this sign and that you will respect it and that you will be a shepherd for the sign, because a lot of times these signs are family-owned. Like with Parker's, that took a lot of work because he wanted to know, "Well, why should you have the sign?" Sometimes it's working on people, asking them, "Well, can I call back?" Because you know the sign is going to come down at a certain time you hear a business is being sold. So it's just keeping up, just making sure that you don't miss it, because the worst thing ever is to drive by a building and find that the sign's gone, because you know where it is; it's probably in the scrap yard or it's just gone.

At times it gets easier once you establish a track record. There's the Boneyard in Las Vegas, but in Nevada, I'm the person who has cared for these. The more signs you get, the more it seems obvious that you're where they should go, like getting the Mapes signs or Parker's. Being able to explain that I got Parker's helped. People would say, "Oh, okay. Well, if you have that one."

Then I got an award for historic preservation, and showing my signs publically, being able to say that I have a show coming up at the Nevada Museum of Art, shows that I'm serious and that what I'm doing is, I guess, worthwhile in their eyes. It makes it easier.

A lot of times you also deal with people who are doing demolition work. A lot of times in a demolition contract, say, for instance, with Harolds Club and Nevada Club, when a company gets the demolition contract—I think they were from out of town—part of what they get is everything that they can salvage from the building. So that includes the copper, all of the salvaged metal, and other things if there are any.

When that happens, you're dealing with people who do not care about the historic value. They want to know, "What can I get from this?" So it goes back to the idea that they previously were going to scrap it for a dollar a pound, but now that I've shown interest in it, then they see blood, and they realize that I need the sign. Sometimes it's a long, difficult dance, and it doesn't always work.

Magee: Are there some sad signs that slipped through your fingers?

Durham: There have been a few. There was a sign up in the Holiday. There were a couple sad things at the Holiday Hotel. They had great neon, that whole giant wall just filled with neon.

Magee: Is this in Reno?

Durham: Yes, right here. There was a small sign that said the Holiday Bar on this corner. I drove by it every day when I'd go to UNR, and I just loved this sign. This is when they had closed and they were remodeling. I still hadn't been able to get a hold of the proper person to give me the yes or no. The secretary who I spoke with was really hard to get around, but I figured I'd just have to do it a different way. I drove by that sign all the time, and I just loved it. It was porcelain. It was clean. It wasn't big, and I just knew that I wanted that one in my lounge.

So one day I was looking at the Mapes signs, because that was around the same time, when they were about to go, and I looked across and I could see where it was. I just noticed instantly that the sign was gone. I thought, "What happened to the sign?" I researched it, because there were still some other signs on the building, but that was the one that was a manageable size and that was the one that I wanted.

I did some research and I found out that there's a man from Wisconsin who owns a converted dairy and he has all these neon signs. The way he acquires them is that there's a certain car he buys throughout the Midwest. I think it's an Opal. I'm not quite sure. But he drives them to the West Coast and he ships them, I think, to Europe. Somewhere it's a sought-after car. So he's found this business niche.

What he does, though, is he drives all around the United States, and he has this car carrier that has a crane pick on it. He would buy these neon signs. He had the truck and the crane, he could take them down. He could make deals quickly. Sounds like an interesting guy, but if he's poaching the signs in Reno—I mean, I would probably do the same thing—but that sign from the Holiday Bar, I will never see again and the people in Reno will never see it again. It's basically gone.

Magee: How did you find out it was that guy?

Durham: I'm not sure. I think I got a hold of someone at the Holiday who told me that. Now I realize that there were other people trying to do this. This brings me back to another one of my favorite signs, the Merry Wink Motel. I needed to secure this sign. This sign could not, could not disappear. So I went down and I spoke with the owner, and they had no intention of selling. They weren't going anywhere, and it was a functioning hotel. I made them a deal. I said, "Can I buy the sign, and you can keep it up as long as

you're operating? Then if you sell it, then I can take it down." So they sold me the sign. He was an attorney, so it was all legal. So that one I secured. It was still here.

Years later, there was a feature article about me and what I was doing in the Reno Gazette, and it was above the fold, so you could see it in the newspaper machines, which is kind of funny. I get this call from this guy who sounded kind of frantic, and he said, "Is this Will Durham?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Do you own the Merry Wink Motel or do you own the sign?"

I said, "Yes." Because I was actually standing in front of that sign. And he was just so upset. I found out that it was the man from Wisconsin. He had tried to get the sign, and I just was thinking I was certainly glad that I had done that. I paid the money in advance, but I'd made sure that the sign is still here. So the sign is still up today. The motel has new owners, but I'd like to keep that sign up as long as possible because it's fairly safe and people still see it. Not so much just because it's out of the way, but my goal isn't to take the signs down; it's to preserve them in any way that I can.

Magee: I never really thought that there's a neon sign poacher driving around. Well, maybe he's not a poacher.

Durham: I know. It's a scary thing. Well, I think he is. I mean, I'm sure I'd like him. I like what he's doing, but it's an immediate threat to what I'm doing, and that was scary.

With the Holiday, too, there's a sign above the valet in the Holiday Inn script. It's porcelain, this beautiful sign. I was talking to the owner to get that one. I was stalking it, as I do—not stalking, but if I have an errand or something, I think, "Oh, is that anywhere near there?" And I make it part of my route.

I drove by once and a backhoe was ripping the sign. I called and I said, "I offered to buy this. I don't understand." Luckily, there was still another sign on the river side of the property. So I did get a sign from the Holiday, but there were some real heartbreaks there that were just pretty brutal.

There have been a few others, but mainly the signs that I needed to have I got. Actually, one thing that's kind of sad, that is still a mystery, is that I made a deal with the City of Reno to trade the letters from the Harolds Club mural. They took down the pieces of the mural, but they didn't take the lettering above the mural that said "Dedicated in all humility to those who blazed the trail." They left those up there, and as part of the deal to get the Nevada Club and Harolds Club sign, I bought everything. So I took those down.

I made a deal with the city to reunite that with the mural in exchange for the Mapes signage, because the Mapes signage was just taken down and it was in the city corp yard. When we did the exchange and I went to go get the Mapes signage—in each set of Mapes letters, the M, there's two cowboys—their legs cross, their chaps cross to form the M—and all the cowboys, all four of them, because there's two sets of those letters, were gone. So this trade that I'd done with the city and that had to be approved by the Historical Resources Commission was all useless. Those cowboys, that's the signs, that's what's important, and they were just gone.

It became a big deal with the city because the Mapes was a real hot-button issue, and it was the only building in the [National Trust] eleven most endangered buildings to actually be torn down. So it was a hot-button issue. The police were involved because I

think the city thought it would get ugly if this was a final insult to the Mapes.

The next day one of the cowboys was found. It just showed up. Someone realized what had happened. They tried to tell me, they said, “Oh, it got run over by a—,” and I know it didn’t. I know that they were stolen.

Years later, maybe two years ago, I was on Craigslist and I would just occasionally just look up neon or Mapes or anything. I see this thing, and I realize it’s one of the cowboys.

In the meantime, what I had done is I had restored both sets of the Mapes cowboys and I used the small cowboy to make patterns. I just extrapolated the cowboy to make the bigger ones.

But years later, I was looking at Craigslist and I see that this is one of the signs. There’s no phone number, and so I responded to the ad, and I just said, “Please don’t sell these without hearing my generous offer.” I realized that through greed no one will sell anything without hearing a generous offer. They want to know what it is, at least.

I got a hold of the woman and I heard what it was. She had called back. We hadn’t talked. This was years later, after I made the deal with the city. So I needed to call the city, and I just happened to speak with, I think, the city attorney who remembered this. Then the person at the corp yard remembered it. Then all of a sudden it became a very big deal again. The police were involved— many different detectives. They told me to set up a place to meet this woman and that they would go out there—it was in Fernley—and she would be met by several detectives.

So I set it up, and they went and they got the sign. I guess they didn’t get any information from her. I really wish that they’d pressed where she had found it, because there are still two others missing. The large ones are still out there. I know that I’ll find them one day. You know, someone will tell me, “Oh, my uncle’s got one of those over his mantel.” I’ll get them back.

When the officer delivered it to me, he opens the trunk of his Lincoln and gets this—it was one of the smaller cowboys, so it’s maybe three feet, and it didn’t have any of the neon on it. It’s faded. He hands it to me, and seems to be thinking, “This was all the fuss?” Like, “This is what all this was about?”

But, actually, that set of signs has been shown at the Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles. It’s been out at the Western Folklife Center in Elko. It’s shown already at the Nevada Museum of Art. It may not look like much in its form, but it was actually pretty important to me. I’m glad that I have it. Still looking for those other two. That’s one of those things that I think about, “Where are they?”

Magee: What is the city corp yard?

Durham: It’s just where the city has a lot of their property, like old signs and other city property. It’s out near the river on Kietzke.

Magee: With the Mapes, the little cowboy, did you end up restoring the neon, having new neon put on?

Durham: Yes.

Magee: So that’s something that you do with signs.

Durham: No, I don't.

Magee: You have it done.

Durham: Yes.

Magee: Do you have neon workers? I wasn't certain how prevalent that is anymore.

Durham: Well, it's certainly declining. Neons are being replaced by LED. There are still some people who are doing neon and putting it on buildings, like the new restaurant Campo. Their signs are neon and they're beautiful. They have a little neon pig that they turn on when they're butchering, because they butcher in the restaurant. So you can tell when they're butchering.

There are still some stylish restaurants and people who understand that neon really is cool. They still use it, but it's certainly gone down. I've had some bad experiences with sign companies and people in town, but right now I have a man who I like. He does good work. So hopefully we'll be able to use him.

Magee: It seems like it's really specialized.

Durham: It is. It's something I thought about learning, but people tell you that it's going to take seven to ten years to get really good. I just don't have the time to dedicate to it. I wish I did. Maybe I will later.

Magee: Do you have signs from any other places? Are you a neon poacher in other states? [laughs]

Durham: What a horrible thing to say. But, yes, I am.

Magee: Do you collect signs in other places?

Durham: Yes. I have signs from all over Nevada. I have signs from Las Vegas. I have a sign from Las Vegas from the El Cholo Café. It's one of the oldest Mexican restaurants in the state, which is pretty neat. It's an interesting story about getting that one too.

Magee: Let's go for it.

Durham: All right. Well, it's right on Las Vegas Boulevard, and that's the sign that I mentioned that's twenty-nine-feet tall altogether. It's two tower pieces that say "café," ten feet each. The C-A is ten feet, and the F-E is ten feet, and then there's a blade, a long sign, that says "El Cholo." Then on top of that there's a cactus and a man sleeping against it with a sombrero. It's a really fifties'-style imagery.

It was right on Las Vegas Boulevard in an area of the city that they call "the naked city," and it's kind of a rougher area. It sat right in between a peep show called Showgirl Video and an Elvis wedding chapel. I just wonder, that guy in that sign, what did he see in his

time? It may have been the wedding chapel that Britney Spears was married in, I'm not sure. It was just a strange part of the city.

So I did my research and I found out who owned it. I made a phone call to Rose Whiteside [phonetic]. I got a hold of her and we were speaking, and I explained what I was doing. She sounded like she was pretty old. She heard me out and she said, "Well, it sounds very good, but you'll have to talk to my mother about this."

So I said, "Okay. I'd be glad to."

They said, "Well, you'll have to come meet us because she's blind now and she's pretty deaf."

So I went to meet them, and Rose senior, she was a real character. She was pretty blind and she didn't hear well, so basically everything I said, her daughter had to yell to her. I think she was in her nineties but she hadn't lost anything mentally. She was just so sharp. It was really neat because she told me she used to be a Hardy Girl, and then how she'd met her husband. So I think that she really liked the company. We talked and we had really great conversations.

I went back probably five times. I think she decided to sell me the sign early on, but I went back about five times and it was nice to see a woman in her nineties still being able to flirt. She was still just so sharp. It was really great. Eventually she sold me the sign and I took it down.

A lot of times I'll have contact with the sign company, and it's always scary because it's expensive. So I try to go and figure out the sign and how I'd take it down. That area of Las Vegas is, like I said, a kind of seedy area. A lot of prostitutes are in that area. I got there very early in the morning, probably six in the morning, and I didn't realize until then that that's a popular time for prostitutes. So I'm just standing looking at this sign, and this prostitute walks past and says, "What are you looking at?"

I said, "Oh, I'm looking at the sign."

"Why?"

I said, "Oh, I think it's beautiful." She just looked at me like I was insane. I said, "I collect these. It's beautiful." I said, "Have you ever collected anything?"

She said, "Yeah, stuffed monkeys."

I said, "Oh, like Curious George?"

She said, "I hate Curious George," and she stormed off, and that was the end of that conversation. You always meet some interesting people taking these signs down.

Magee: I'm sure you just have zillions of these stories.

Durham: I do want to do a book, and I want to include all these stories because every sign has a different story—there is no story just like, "Oh, I got that sign." With every sign, there's a story for how I acquired it. In retrospect, it's fun. A lot of times those experiences are difficult and challenging.

Magee: It sounds like there's a huge size range for these signs.

Durham: Definitely.

Magee: What is your biggest sign?



Durham: Well, I have the Harolds Club letters and they're seven feet in diameter. So those are seven times seven. Jammed close together, they're about fifty feet, forty-nine feet long. Then the Sky Room sign is very thick.

Magee: That's from the Mapes, right?

Durham: Yes. It's just really heavy. There's the steel construction, and then also the sign maintenance people leaving all the fifty-pound transformers in there that have died over the years, and the pigeon droppings. For that sign, I took out probably seven hundred pounds of pigeon droppings and old transformers, and that sign still probably weighs a thousand pounds. There is a huge range in the sizes. It's always nice to get one that's a manageable size, but that's rare. It's rare that I can carry a sign by myself, and don't need help.

Magee: I guess when you get a sign, you have to bring flatbed trucks, or how do you move these things around?

Durham: Well, it all depends. There's a sign that I'm getting now or that I'm looking at now, and this has to do with that.

Magee: What's the sign?

Durham: It's from the Sahara in Las Vegas. This is an example of what it takes. I'm in the process of this one right now. I don't know how it will turn out. I'm glad I can explain this now because it maybe gets lost once the sign is resolved either way. I got it or I didn't.

But now that sign is in play. So the Sahara closed last year, and they did an auction where they sold off just about everything there. They donated one of the signs to the Boneyard in Las Vegas. I called and I asked if there were any signs left, and they said there weren't any, but I drove through Las Vegas a few weeks ago and I saw that there was still a set of those letters. The font is just beautiful. They're a combination of bulbs and neon, which is my favorite. That club is so iconic. The Beatles stayed there. The Sahara put on concerts. I think part of Ocean's 11 was featured there. Frank Sinatra, everyone, there's so much history at the Sahara that I think it's very important to have a set of these letters to fill out my collection. I have Las Vegas signs, but this enriches my collection. If I do a museum or anything, it lets me talk about Las Vegas and its influence. That's the importance of the signs. That sets the stakes higher.

Now, I needed to start, and so I found out who owned the property. It's this entertainment group that has a lot of nightclubs in Los Angeles. I got a hold of the person after a while, and she didn't seem really receptive right off the bat, but she said, "Just email me." So I emailed her this write-up of who I am, what I'm doing, and now with some of the things I've done it's a little easier. So I sent it to her.

I get an email back that just says, "We'll donate the signs to you, but you need to have a sign company take them down." Simple. Simple horrifies me because I know it's not going to be simple. I'm in Reno and so I can't do some of my research on the actual

sign. I'd seen it at night, what it would take to get it down. So then I start contacting the sign companies, and I get these ridiculous bids to take them down. I mean, so ridiculous.

Then I start figuring out, okay, does this mean that I can't get them? How do I make this happen? I start doing the math and I can't afford that. That's too much; I can't afford that. Do I let these signs go? I need to make this decision on how can I do this, and then if I do get them, how do I physically get them to Reno? These letters are maybe ten feet high, five or six feet wide. How do I physically get them here? How do I get them down? Because I need to get a regular licensed, bonded sign company to take them down.

Now there's this constant dialogue in my head. I think, is this worth it? Then I think, yes, it is. But then I think, how do I actually make this happen? I'm having conversations with these sign people, explaining what I'm doing, trying to get it to a number that's realistic. Then I'm trying to figure out transportation. Can I coordinate transportation this way and this way, and then where do I put them? It's a really scary time because I need to have these out of there in the next few weeks. There's this time constraint.

I need to figure this out. I can't spend too much to get these. I need to figure out a way to get the sign company closer to where I am, and then to be able to figure out transportation. How do I get someone to help me get them in the truck? How do I get my tools there? There are just so many things to actually make this work, and it's scary because there's a chance that I won't—I mean, someone else could come along in the meantime and they'd sell them the sign.

There's this pressure on me, and I don't know how this is going to work out. It seems like the sign company I'm dealing with now is in the mood to help me, but I'm nervous because I don't know what's going to happen. It's exciting because if I can pull this off, it's something historically significant and it makes my collection that much more interesting. But the dice are being cast right now, so we'll see how it goes. It's exciting, but it can go wrong, too. I can put all this effort in and I can lose the signs.

Magee: It sounds like you always have, what you call it, you have some signs in play.

Durham: Yes.

Magee: You had your eye on the Sahara. Are there any signs that you have your eye on right now that aren't in play?

Durham: Definitely. I basically know of nearly every piece of vintage neon in Nevada. I've done tours where I've gone through Ely and Wells and Elko, Battle Mountain, Winnemucca. I pretty much know all the vintage neon that's out there. I actually found out about another one fairly recently in Overton, Nevada. I'd never heard of Overton. It's a cool fish, and I didn't even realize that existed. I'm aware of most of the neon that's still up, for sure.

A lot of times, in my head, I'll have to figure out is that worth preserving, is that too big? The tree from the Ponderosa Hotel in Reno was gorgeous but it was massive. There was talk of preserving it, but it is huge. It's so big that I don't know. I couldn't have done anything with it. I thought it'd be cool if every year they decorated it for Christmas as kind of a city tree. That one I couldn't save.

But there certainly are some that I look for. A lot of times I'll just drive around Reno. I have these routes where the obvious neon is. There's Fourth Street, you know. I have a route that's mainly Fourth Street but it's also Second Street. There's still some good stuff there, and Virginia Street, obviously. There are the signs that I definitely would like to have, like The Sandman on Fourth Street, obviously. That one's amazing. Actually, a crazy person just shot at the Sandman Motel a few months ago, and I was wondering if he hit the sign and I was worried. But then I thought it would add a little history. The Sandman, that one would be amazing. The Pony Express, obviously, that one's so amazing. The Sands script. The El Rey. I think Rancho Sierra. The City Center.

Magee: Everybody's Inn.

Durham: The Everybody's Inn, the Ho Hum Motel, Zephyr Bar, if that ever changed. Then there are also some that I'm working on. The Heart of Town and the Golden West, those are across from Circus Circus, those are neat. The Thunderbird is an amazing sign, but that one's so big, too. It's almost like what could I do with that? What is it? Twenty-foot tall. It might even be bigger than that. There's the flame on the Lamplighter. It's the one right on Fourth. Then there's the Time Zone Motel, I think that one's neat. The Morris Hotel. There's just so much. The Farris Motel. There's some good stuff out there.

I've chronicled everything that's still out there, and I always watch to make sure that it doesn't go. I lost something a few months ago, the Spot Bar in Sparks. It was a gorgeous sign. It was just really simple. Then a Mexican bar came in and they painted it over. But I just realized that I could restore it. I can take that paint off and get it back to the Spot Bar. I drove by a few months ago and it was gone, and the people who had taken it down scrapped it. So what did they get? Twenty dollars, thirty dollars, probably. So that's a loss.

Magee: You've mentioned a couple times your big collections and maybe an idea for a museum. Have you thought much about doing a neon museum, and if you did, would you do it here in Reno or some other place?

Durham: I've thought a lot about that, the viability of it, and I've learned a lot working in a museum now, how museums work and how they're funded. But then also I've thought that this would be a great show forever, and I've thought that it'd be great if the Nevada Museum of Art would show just a piece at a time. The Western Folklife Center or Meg Glaser up there, who's always been a fan of what I do—not what I do, but just of neon—she appreciated it. I've had signs up there that they have during the poetry gathering and in the Western Folklife Center building. I've displayed that way.

Last year I decided something has to happen with this. I need to do something. I need to push this. I decided what I was going to do is a pop-up museum and just find a spot, because there was a lot of vacant real estate, commercial real estate, the cool stuff downtown, and just do a temporary museum during Hot August Nights. Then I started thinking of the season. You know the tourist season, from Memorial Day weekend you have special events all the way through almost October with Street Vibrations.

I started modeling how much I thought it would cost, how much I could make, and I thought that it would work. I made a deal with a property downtown that had a lot

of commercial real estate, and it was a project that looked dead that needed help selling condos. It was a big company with headquarters all over, in Chicago, Los Angeles. So I called them and I pitched it as a marketing thing for them, and said that I thought it would be great to have something really alive in there. In exchange for that—because, obviously they're trying to sell condominiums, nice, new condominiums, but all of their commercial space was vacant—I pitched this as a marketing thing for them, and they agreed to do it. I was so excited.

I went to work, and I took time off work, a lot of time off work. I started refurbishing the signs. I started contacting press. This thing was going to happen. I was a part of Artown. I made a deal with the Nevada Museum of Art. They would have a sign in their lobby, and on the day that we would open, I was going to give a lecture and we'd all walk down to the opening. The opening was going to be a charity event for the Food Bank. I had this all lined up, and it was going to be this big event. I did the Nevada Magazine, News & Review, RGJ [Reno Gazette-Journal]. I was going to be in the Sacramento Bee. This was going to be a big deal, because Reno is different during the summer. There are so many tours and Hot August Nights. I was positioned perfectly.

Magee: Was it last summer you were talking about?

Durham: Yes, it was last summer. Then the company that had promised me the space didn't come through. I had spent all this money. I had really put myself out there. I hadn't worked and I had spent all this money, and also my name. I'd told all these people that this was going to happen and it didn't. That was really embarrassing. I had to call the charity, Food Bank, and say it was not going to happen, and then Artown and explain that, yes, I know that I was featured several times in their catalog, which is hard to do, but the show wouldn't happen. These were really hard phone calls to make.

It was one of those times where—a lot of times when I do this I think, why do I do this? Why do I do this? Then there are times when I light a new sign, and think, "Oh, okay." But it was one of those times when I thought, really, this is too hard. It was just very stressful and I'd spent a lot, and I was just in a really bad spot. It's one of those times when I thought, I don't know why I do this. So I put it away.

Then Ann Wolfe from the Nevada Museum of Art, who's always been supportive of me—I'd shown her my trailers years before—called me and asked if I wanted to do the feature show at the Nevada Museum of Art in the fall of 2012, October 2012 through February 2013, and of course I wanted to. It was great, because this also changes the collection to what I had wanted it to be.

I've had many offers from people who wanted to use the signs, like the Aces Ballpark. They wanted to use one, but they wanted it to break up some cinderblock, and there'd be advertising. So I've turned down a lot of projects, "Oh, that's not going to work." It was also supposed to be on the West Street Market. They wanted to use one to put on the back side of a parking garage. This stuff, to me, is art, and it's not going to decorate a parking garage or break up cinderblock. I feel that this is true artwork and it's worth saving.

So to have it at the Nevada Museum of Art in their feature gallery, I think it's a risk to them, in that people might think, "Oh, it's a history thing." But to treat it as art, that's the way I feel about it, so I'm really happy that it's going to be there and take that

next step.

As far as where else I think it could be shown, I think that there could be a museum here. The Boneyard in Las Vegas is so successful, and it is nothing like what I want to do. I have enough signs to rival, in the quality of my signs, to rival the Boneyard, and what I want to do is I want to bring them inside and make it a true museum exhibit, and that's not what they have in Las Vegas. I've thought of different ways to make it fresh.

I also think that another opportunity would be a traveling show, because I have signs from all over—you asked where I have signs from, and I didn't quite finish that—I have signs from Los Angeles, the Bay Area, I have a sign from Tijuana. I do have a collection that's broad enough to not feel like, "Oh, it's just Reno neon." With the signs I have, I've wanted to make the collection broad enough that it could be seen by people who have an interest beyond Nevada.

I see it as a real possibility of this being a traveling show. Neon is actually popular right now in the art circuit, so I think that it'd be neat to have a show packaged to travel, get a whole bunch of new eyeballs seeing these signs.

Magee: You can do both, I guess. You could have your base museum here and also a traveling show.

Durham: I think so, yes. In the meantime, if I was to develop a neon museum, they could be traveling in the meantime or it could be going on simultaneously. Having the show at the Nevada Museum of Art is going to take it to a different level, where the way people would look at it would be not as just some old signs; these are pieces of art. They've shown in a major museum. We'll just see how it goes. I've always seen them that way, so we'll see if other people see them as I do.

Magee: Has MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] ever done a neon show?

Durham: Well, there's the Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles. They have a dedicated museum. They're doing a great job, and they've been doing it forever. I see some of their signs, and, think, "Oh, man, I wish I had that." Then I look at some of the dates that they started doing it, preserving these signs, and it was right around the time I was born. So these guys are the pioneers. They're doing a great job there. They have a new place in Glendale.

As far as the Museum of Modern Art, I'm sure they've had neon featured. I've been going to a lot of museums lately, in Washington, D.C. and everywhere, and it seems like oftentimes neon pieces are incorporated.

Magee: In conjunction with your interests in neon and the museum in Reno and what different people have wanted to use it for, you've talked about your interest in the old motels along Fourth Street. Have you thought of any buildings in the Fourth Street area or have you thought, if you did have a museum here, where you might want to position it? Downtown, or have you envisioned it in any particular space? I was just wondering what it needs to be for you.

Durham: It has to have the right feel. I feel that the most logical and probably the best location would be in downtown Reno. I love Reno and I think it has real potential. I think that to get out of the depression it's in now that it's going to take some forward-thinking entrepreneurs. I don't necessarily know that it will come from the city.

I think that if you look at what's happening at Midtown, there's a section on Virginia Street from California Avenue to around Mt. Rose Street where so many exciting things are happening. That's amazing to see. I love that, because actually the Discovery Museum is part of Midtown. That's just exciting to see.

There are a lot of good things happening on Fourth Street, like the Lincoln Lounge and Louis' [Basque Corner] being redone. There are some good things happening on Fourth Street, so I feel like it would be a natural on or right around Fourth Street.

There are several buildings I've looked at, because I think, where could this work? There's the Flanigan Building, which is just amazing. It's that exposed brick and I think it's big enough and it has a side yard that would be good. Then there's another building, I think it's the old RESCO Building. I think that building is amazing. I've liked the building I think even before I liked neon. There are so many things you could do. That has a massive lower area that could be a museum. It could also be a café. It could be mixed-use. Then there's a tower behind it. I thought that that could work.

There's the train building out in Sparks. I know Sparks is—but this building is just amazing. It's exposed brick and massive windows. I always thought that that would be an amazing building if it was a mixed-use space. If it was lofts and restaurants, and a neon museum could certainly be an anchor there.

I would prefer to be in Reno, but it depends. I mean, so far the City of Reno hasn't been real interested in it, but you just never know. Especially I think things may change after this show. We'll see.

There are those buildings. Also, if you look at the Bowling Stadium, which doesn't necessarily have the right feel, but the location is great, close to the ball field and right near the train station. There's a portion of the building that hasn't been developed. It's right next to the train tracks, and it has massive ceilings of maybe thirty feet, and it's already plumbed for a fire, already has the sprinklers. I just think that that could be great—not the building, but the location is great. I approached the city about that and I haven't heard anything.

I also thought a good idea would be to pair it with the Automobile Museum, that it's just a natural fit. I think that kind of a synergy created by the two would be great, not that I would always want the neon museum to be joined that way—it's powerful enough to stand alone. You could do a certain mix, but people thought of the idea of mixing the signs in within the museum, and I think that the power is as a collection, to see them as a collection indoors.

A lot of people talk about it how it would be great if we had them on a median on Fourth Street, and I would never do that just because of how easily they could be destroyed. One drunk driver and they're gone. But also I've seen that done in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and it's kind of neat, but they get lost a little bit. I see them displayed in a different way.

On Fourth Street, there's also the old Reno Brewery, the brick building, that would certainly be neat. Some people wanted to do a House of Blues type of business maybe

ten, twelve years ago, and they wanted to use my neon. I thought that that was a pretty neat building. It never happened, but I could still see my collection there.

Fourth Street really has that feel. I think that Fourth Street really can come up. There are some people who have taken chances. The old Firehouse building has been redone. I think that there's still enough cool architecture on Fourth Street that I think that's the next area where there will be a renaissance. Then there are the places that have always been there, like Big Ed's. It's got that gritty feel that I think can turn into something neat. Maybe it's the neon museum that's the catalyst.

Magee: Besides getting a neon museum on Fourth Street, part of this interview is funded by the RTC because they're looking at doing some work on the corridor, and you talked about a museum and different things. You really like the feel of Fourth Street. What are your hopes for that?

Durham: It's interesting, because the development of Midtown has happened in spite of what was formally planned. The recent planning was for it to become higher density with unlimited heights, but that isn't what's happening there. What's happening there is that small entrepreneurs are taking buildings that had been neglected and turning them into something really cool. I see that sort of thing on Fourth Street. I see that possible, like with the fire station. There are definitely some obstacles. The motels along there, they have amazing signs, but they really are depressing horrible places. It's just depressing.

I think there would have to be something that would mitigate that, like someone coming in and buying The Sandman and turning it into a retro motel, which I think could be amazing. A lot of times it's just restaurants, it's coffee shops. I mean, a lot of Midtown, the resurgence of Midtown, was that the Hub Coffee Shop came in, in a tiny little building, but it was stylish and cool. The guy took a chance and it just went from there.

With Fourth Street, that's happening closer to the ballpark, and that's an opportunity, but it's going to be restaurants and I think it's going to be someone else taking a chance on doing a restaurant and then copycats following them. I think bike lanes always make things more accessible, and parking. It's got to feel safe. I was not a fan of the lighting that was put out there. I think it's still like that; it's that really awful light, halogen. I don't know if it's halogen. I think it's more like a fluorescent. But it's an uncomfortable light. I like that they lit it, that's important, but I just think the feel of the light was actually off-putting. It may have been safer, but it didn't have the right feel.

If you look at an area like in San Diego, like the Gaslamp District, that was an area that was completely transformed, and a lot of it had to do with the infrastructure and the lights, and it just gave it that feel. I don't know exactly what it will take on Fourth, but there's enough authentic architecture that we still have the chance to make it have that feel.

In the cities on the West Coast like Portland and Seattle and San Francisco, there's modern, but then there's enough of the old to keep it authentic. I think there could be modern buildings on Fourth Street, and as long as it's mixed in with the old brick, I think it could have the right feel.

Magee: Before we conclude the interview, because we've been talking for about an hour and a half, I just wanted to ask you if there are any points we didn't touch on or things that you'd like to add that maybe we got sidetracked in conversation.

Durham: Just that I've been able to do this a lot of times with help of friends and family. My father's been a great help. He helped me move the plumes from the Flamingo and helped me move the leprechaun—that's the thing. I could just call my dad and say, "Hey, are you going to be busy in an hour? I need some help."

"What do you need?"

"I need help moving the leprechaun," and of course he understands what that means.

It's been difficult to preserve all this, but I've been able to do it with a lot of help from friends, and being able to have friends come in and help me move the signs, and also a really understanding wife, too. When I was going to do the show last summer, we were refurbishing the signs in our basement and garage, so she didn't have her garage for what turned out to be six months because a lot was happening there. She's very patient. I understand that this is kind of a ridiculous hobby, and that it's worthwhile to me, but she's understanding and she knows that it's worthwhile.

Actually, this is something I've forgotten that illustrates that. We have a new daughter, Eleanor Grace Durham. She's a little over thirteen months right now. Last year I was doing some research on Vegas Vic, and that's such a great sign. Then there was the sign that was across the street, the other cowboy that waved, the one that you see with the atomic plume in the background. It's that iconic picture. I was doing some research on Vegas Vic, and on Flickr someone had written that the man that designed Vegas Vic was still alive. I thought, how is that possible? I mean, it was put up in, I think, the early fifties. I always pictured that the man who designed it was an older man at the time, maybe someone like Norman Rockwell with a pipe, designing this great illustration.

I read about this man named Pat Denner, and that he was not only still alive, but still working in Salt Lake City in the shop that he'd always had, and he was still in there. I just thought, could this be possible?

I did a little bit more research and he was also known for designing the first Colonel Sanders. The Colonel Sanders you see, that's his design. So that and Vegas Vic, which is arguably the most iconic neon sign ever, it was just amazing.

I tracked him down and I ended up speaking with his niece. She said that he was still alive. The shop had closed, but he still painted at home. When I spoke with Pat on the phone, it was great. He told me that he was actually one of the first street artists—that's another thing that I photograph—and that he used to do portraits on the train cars way back in the forties.

He said that I could come down and interview him. My daughter, at the time, was about six months old. I felt like I really needed to do this. I really wanted to meet this man, but I also had a newborn baby and that was pretty difficult. I told my wife that I had this opportunity, and she told me, "You have to go." I thought that that was certainly understanding, because it's an opportunity that I felt I needed to do.

So I went and I got to meet Pat, and it was great. He had started to slow down a bit, but he was still pretty sharp. It was just great to see all his artwork. His house was like a gallery. He could copy any style. He was just an amazing artist. I got to meet him.



Along the way, I was excited because I also got to drive through Nevada. I timed my trip where I could drive through at night and see the Owl Club in Battle Mountain and I could see the City Center in Elko, and all these great signs.

Then when I was coming back to Reno, I drove past Wendover Will, which is another one of his iconic cowboy signs. I had wanted to have him do a Reno Red, and that was one of the reasons why I was going there, to have him design a sign that would be like Reno's Vegas Vic. Unfortunately, he was not doing much artwork when I got there. I missed that window, but it was still great to meet him.

When I drove home, I got to drive past Wendover Will under a really dramatic sky, and the clouds opened up a section right in back of Wendover Will, and it was perfect. I had just met the man who had designed this amazing sign, and it was a great cap to the trip. He died a few months later. It was such a nice thing to be able to meet him. That goes back to having an understanding wife and that's how I'm able to do this, because it doesn't make sense. It's not logical, but it's just something I have to do.

Magee: It's a passion.

Durham: It is. It isn't something I necessarily want to do; it's something I have to do. I couldn't not do it.

Magee: Well, I think we're all going to benefit from that.

Durham: I hope people enjoy the show, and hopefully someday there'll be a museum. I think it's something that can appeal to so many people. It's like Christmas all year. The visual, the bright lights, it's beautiful.

Magee: Well, can you think of any other things we didn't get to cover that you'd like to mention? I think that's amazing with Pat Denner.

Durham: Just to be able to have met him. I think that if I do write a book, that he's certainly someone who was—he's important to me. I'd like to pass on his contribution to neon history.

I just have so many stories of taking the stuff down—I could go on forever. I have a sign from Las Cuatro Reinas in Tijuana. The lengths I would go to to get these signs. I went with a friend and I saw this sign that's Las Cuatro Reinas, and it's a woman in a wine glass. I don't know if it was an old brothel or bar. I don't know what it was at the time. So I tracked down the owner, which is even harder in Mexico, but I found the owner. He agreed to sell it to me, and so I was going to go get it. This is when I lived in Los Angeles.

I get a call from my friend's sister, who had been translating, and she said, "They had to take the sign down, so it's just sitting in the alley. You need to come get it soon." I'm just thinking, okay, there's this sign with all this delicate glass in downtown Tijuana, and it's going to be destroyed. If I don't have the glass, I don't know how to make the pattern. How do I know exactly what it was? I just realized I need to go down there. This is not long after 9/11, so going over the border and coming back over the border is tense.

I got to Tijuana at night, and all I had—I don't know why I didn't have a better

tool—I had a miniature Leatherman. It was almost like a toy. My entire goal was just to get the glass off there. So I go down to the sign, and it's in this dark alley in Tijuana. I'm there and I'm taking the glass off, there's the smell of urine, and I'm just seeing the people looking at me like I'm crazy. I'm taking the glass off so carefully so that it doesn't break, in this box. I'm just thinking, why am I here? What am I doing? You know, Tijuana is a very dangerous place, especially at night by myself. Why am I doing this? What drives me to do this?

Then I have to walk through Tijuana at night two miles, carrying this giant box of glass. I hadn't even really thought of the logistics of how I'm going to get this over the border. This is an unusual thing, this glass filled with gas. As I'm going through the border, I'm thinking, what do I say? I imagined I was going to get hung up.

I put the box on the conveyor belt and they didn't say a word. They didn't say one word about it, so I was just able to get over the border with no problem. That was just the glass.

Then I needed to come back and get the sign, actually. So I told a friend of mine I was going to do it, and he said he had a truck. He said, "Oh, I'll go with you."

I rented a trailer. We were driving down to Tijuana from L.A., and it was during the worst fires ever in San Diego. I mean, the sky was literally dark brown, and some of the on-ramps, the vegetation on the on-ramps for the freeway, were burning. It felt like we were driving into hell. It was the worst air quality. I wanted to make it like a military operation. We'd get there, I knew exactly where the sign was, because I knew we were going to get attention, especially putting a sign in that has a naked woman in a martini glass or a champagne glass.

We got the sign. We lifted it in, strapped it in, got back in line to cross the border within probably ten to fifteen minutes. We were waiting. We were almost over the border. The Federales were coming through, and they saw that we had a U-Haul trailer. I think that they know. They know how to fleece people. So they realized that you're not allowed to take the U-Haul trailers in there. It's against U-Haul's policy.

The guy asked for the paperwork for the U-Haul trailer. We just realized we're about to get fleeced. Okay, I don't even care. I have eighty dollars in my pocket. I'm going to give them that and whatever my friend had. He sees the paperwork and he said, "Oh, big problems."

I realized that if they confiscate the trailer, I've already violated the rules, so I'm going to owe thousands of dollars for this trailer. I'm just trying to get to the point where we pay him off. He said, "No, no, no. There's big problems. We need to go to the station."

Then my friend just happens to say, "We have insurance on the trailer." He shows him, and the guy just looks at it and hands it back, and he goes, "Whew," kind of brushes his brow and then just walks off. That was it. We were just waiting to be fleeced. We ended up not even paying anything. It worked out, and the sign is now in Reno. I don't know if that will make the museum show. We'll have to see. We'll see how brave they are. But it's definitely one that went through great lengths to get here.

Magee: I can't wait to see this museum show.

Durham: I think it's going to be fun. Now we're in the process of getting all the signs

together and deciding what should make the show. I've got some tough decisions, but I think we definitely have enough to do a great show.

Magee: Well, everybody can go and appreciate neon the same way you do, I think, when they see the show.

Durham: You don't have to really know anything about the history of neon or the history of these buildings to enjoy it. It's kind of an insult to say it's accessible, but it's something that people can enjoy on so many different levels. If you know the history, you might remember the Nevada Club or Harolds Club. And if you don't, you can just enjoy the artwork, because there are so many different craftsman and artists who worked on these. You can enjoy the illustration, you can enjoy the metal work, the tube benders, just the colors. There's a lot that appeals.

Magee: Well, thank you for sharing your interest in neon, and I'm so glad it's going to be in the show.

Durham: Of course. Thank you for taking interest in what I'm doing.