

Roanoke's Time-Honored Skyline

This "country" town is also proud of its bright lights



The neon "H" on the "H&C Coffee" sign downtown is not working. I was told that the "H" is temperamental and that it happens quite often. Actually, the "&" is out, too.

People here in Roanoke, Va., are understanding and not likely to complain about it. After all, the sign is 60 years old. Of course, it only matters at night. The rest of the time it's just a giant coffee pot silhouetted against a sunny sky. But when the sun goes down and that sky turns dark, the pot lights up and starts pouring, filling a cup with golden coffee through a neon tube. In full color, it's spectacular. The sign is a cherished showpiece here, a brilliant neon artifact of Roanoke.

If the sign were to go totally dark, I am sure the phones would be ringing at City Hall. The coffee company doesn't own the sign anymore; the company was bought out many years ago.

Now a historic landmark, it was originally put up in 1946. After being dark and neglected for a decade, the people here got together and raised \$150,000 for its restoration. It was relocated atop what was once the Shenandoah Hotel and relit in 2005.

Just beyond the coffee pot, on the next building, is another piece of Roanoke's time-honored skyline that the natives would not allow to go into disrepair and disappear. But this sign is lit with old-fashioned light bulbs. It's a red and white bottle cap with the Dr Pepper logo. Above and below the logo are the numerals 10, 2 and 4. In the 1940s, when this sign was made, the company had a promotion about "Dr Pepper Time" — "Drink a Bite to Eat at 10, 2 and 4 o'clock." When this sign had to be totally rebuilt, Dr Pepper took care of it at the urging of some local employees of the company.

Those who get the full effect of these signs, with their multi-color displays, are the evening and pre-dawn commuters and, of course, the night people. The same can be said for us, as we roll into town after dusk, from the north, on US Highway 581.



Whether it's the giant "Roanoke Star," the Dr Pepper sign or the H&C Coffee sign downtown, the proud residents of Roanoke dearly love their brightly lit skyline. It can all best be seen after the sun has set on this favorite Virginia visitors' haven.

The same vantage point on 581 provides a great view of the Roanoke Star. It's on the top of Mill Mountain, at 1,045 feet above the city. Rising almost 89 feet, it is the world's largest, freestanding, illuminated, man-made star. (It needs all those qualifiers, as there is competition out there for the claim of the world's largest star.)

On a Saturday morning in November, I was up on the mountain at the overlook where the star is located. The Mayor of Roanoke, David Bowers, was there walking his dog. He told me that the star was put up in 1949 by the merchants in town — turned on Thanksgiving eve — as a Christmas decoration. It was initially all white. "The intent was to keep it lit just during the Christmas season," he said.

Apparently, the folks in Roanoke get attached quickly to their outdoor neon and that plan did not last. So its nearly 2,000 feet of neon tubing took on perpetual life. The star is lit every night now, at least until midnight. Over the years, they have used various color combinations for the star.

Since 9/11, the star has been red, white and blue. Welcome to America's Outback. 🚗