



Property Number: SRCP 1811  
LA Numbers(s): N/A  
HBI Number(s): N/A

**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION  
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

Historic Preservation Division  
La Villa Rivera  
228 East Palace Avenue  
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87503  
(505) 827-6320

**1. Name of Property:**

Other Name(s) for Property: **Neon Signs Along Route 66 in New Mexico**

**2. Location of Property:**

County: Quay, Guadalupe, Torrance, Bernalillo, Cibola, McKinley      Congressional District: 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Municipality: San Jon, Tukumcari, Santa Rosa, Moriarty, Albuquerque, Grants, Gallup      Vicinity of: N/A  
Address or Rural Location: Multiple addresses

Not for Publication: N/A Zip: Multiple

**3. Ownership of Property: (Check one or more as appropriate)**

Private:  State:  Federal:  Multiple:

Name: Multiple; list kept on file at State Historic Preservation Office

**4. Accessibility of Property:**

Open to the Public:       Not Open to the Public:       Visible from a Public Thoroughfare:

**5. Location of Legal Description for Property:**

Courthouse, Deed Registry, etc.:  
Street and Number:  
City, Town, Zip Code:

**6. Category of Property:**

District:      Buildings:      Structure: Multiple neon signs Site:  
Object: Collection:      Other (Specify):  
Historic District:

**7. Present Use of Property: (Check one or more as appropriate)**

Agricultural:       Governmental:       Museum:       Scientific:   
Commercial:       Grazing:       Park:       Transportation:   
Educational:       Industrial:       Residential:       Other (Specify): vacant  
Entertainment:       Military:       Religious:

8. **Present Condition of Property:** (Check one or more as appropriate)

Excellent:  Deteriorated:  Altered:  Moved:   
Good:  Ruins:  Unaltered:  Date Moved:   
Fair:  Unexposed:  Vandalized:

9. **Present and Original Physical Appearance of Property:** See 9-4 through 9-16

10. **Summary of Property Data:**

Significant Periods/Dates: 1940-1965

Culture/Period/Phase: N/A

Builder Architect: N/A

11. **Thematic Classification** (Check one or more as appropriate)

Archaeology- Prehistoric:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Economics:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Philosophy:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Archaeology- Historic:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Education:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Politics/ Government:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Agriculture:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Engineering:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Religion:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Architecture:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Exploration:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Science:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Art:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Industry:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sculpture:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Commerce:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Invention:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Settlement:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communications:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Landscape- Architecture:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Social/ Humanitarianism:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community- Planning:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Law:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Theater:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conservation:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Literature:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transportation:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
		Military:	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (Specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Music:	<input type="checkbox"/>		

12. **Significance of Property:** See 12-18 through 12-22

13. **Bibliographical References:** See 13-23

14. **Geographical Information:**

Map Reference: (USGS 7.5' Quad) Various

Legal Description: (Describe to the nearest 1/4 1/4 1/4 Section (10 acres))

See individual inventory forms

Acreage of Property: N/A

UTM Coordinates: See individual descriptions and inventory forms

15. **Verbal Boundary Description:**  
Each sign is bounded by a ten foot buffer.

16. **Application Submitted By:**

Name: David Kammer, Ph.D.

Date: March 31, 2002

Address: 521 Aliso Dr. NE

Albuquerque, NM Zip: 87108

Phone: (505) 266-0586

Inventory Data By: David Kammer

Date: January, 2002

Recent Photograph By: David Kammer

Date: January, 2002

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This Space for Cultural Properties Review Committee Use Only

Date Application Received: Complete:  Incomplete:

Committee Action:

State Register:

Tabled:

Date: April 5, 2002

National Register Recommendation:

Rejected:

Approved:

Committee Chairman: Dr. Estevan Rael-Galvez

Date: April 5, 2002

Comments: N/A

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 4

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**9. Property Description**

Located near the front of tourist-oriented properties situated along alignments of the former U.S. 66, neon signs are character-defining objects associated with many of the highway's motels, as well as some restaurants, curio shops and service stations dating to the mid-decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This multiple property nomination includes 27 individual or grouped neon signs dating from the late 1930s through the early 1960s. Generally setback five to 40 feet from the roadway, the vast majority of these signs are mounted to freestanding metal poles while a minority consists of rooftop, building and fascia-mounted signs. The visual effect of some of these signs is sometimes further enhanced through the use of ancillary neon tubing outlining the associated building's architectural details such as parapets or portals. The signs included within this contributing group range in height from eight feet to approximately 60 feet and in width from six feet to 35 feet. The majority of these signs represent the flat letter style of neon signage in which letters and, sometimes, artwork are painted on a metal box while a minority represent the channel letter style in which letters are in relief with the neon tubing placed within the recessed channel. In both cases the letters and images are fronted with vacuum glass tubing filled with neon or another inert gas and with metal terminals, or electrodes, at each end providing high voltage electrical power. Many of these signs also contain massed light bulbs often used in concert with neon and controlled by time switches to create animated lighting sequences. A few also contain translucent plastic panels, introduced in the early 1950s as the manufacture of sheet metal boxes was improved and plastic emerged as a durable, inexpensive mass-produced sign material. Some of the signs also reveal metal-framed plastic-faced reader boards that were attached to the original signs' posts at a later date but are clearly reversible. While some of these signs front vacant buildings and are no longer viable as commercial markers, all of them are landmarks, survivors of an era in which neon signage proliferated along the commercial strips of the highway. As such, they are familiar to residents of their communities and recognized as well by those retracing Route 66. By virtue of their integrity as to setting, location, materials, workmanship and design, they recall the golden age of travel along Route 66 and have become icons signaling the former alignments and businesses associated with that highway.

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Despite their differences as to size, artistic composition and message, all of the contributing signs share common characteristics as to their components and their technology of construction and installation. Best described as luminous tube lighting, neon signs consist of vacuum glass tubes fitted at each end with a metal terminal, or electrode, and then filled with a small amount of rare gas, most often neon but occasionally argon. When charged with a high voltage electrical power introduced from the electrodes, neon produces a clear intense red and argon a grayish blue that can be made a more intense blue with the additional use of mercury. Additional colors are achieved through the coloring of the luminous glass tube. The tubing itself represented the craft of bending glass into whatever forms the signage required, pumping it with the necessary rare gas, and then sealing it by melting one tip of the tube. Properly done, periodically maintained exterior neon signs along the highway could last as long as 30 years barring hailstorms, vandalism, or vehicular accidents that sometimes marked their history along Route 66. Many of the still functioning signs included in this nomination reflect the efforts of their owners to maintain them and refurbish them as necessary.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 5

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Common also to all of these signs was the technology of construction and installation. Neon tubes were generally affixed to metal. Most often they were attached to a sheet metal box on which illuminated details such as letters or figures were painted onto the metal with the box providing housing for the wiring and electrodes as well as the two sides necessary for a double-faced sign. The glass tubing was then attached to the electrodes at holes punched through the sheet metal. Less frequently, a silicate glass was fired onto the metal, creating a porcelain, or vitreous, enamel coating over which the tubing was placed. In many instances the letters and figures painted on the sheet metal were flat; in other instances the edges of the letters or figures were raised, creating channels in which the neon tubing was placed. While the latter channel letter technique offered the advantage of concentrating the tube's light, thus producing greater visibility, its flat horizontal surfaces tended to retain moisture, making the metal more susceptible to rusting, which, no doubt, accounts for the relatively low number of historic channel letter signs (Hinckley).



Fig. 1: Alamitos Motel Sign, Grants. "Los Alamitos" employs a flat surface style; "motel" employs channel letters.

Exterior neon signs are classified as to their type of mounting. Along Route 66, the remaining historic signs reflect the pole, vertical, rooftop and fascia techniques of mounting signs. The majority of these signs are pole signs with bracket mounts to steel posts. They predominate along the automobile-oriented sections of the highway's commercial strips while signs projecting vertically and attached to building walls or affixed to fascias generally appear along downtown business district sections such as along Central Avenue in downtown

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 6

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Albuquerque and Railroad Avenue (now Route 66 Boulevard) in downtown Gallup. Only a small number of rooftop signs appear along the highway.

Typically, pole signs are mounted to one or more steel poles with welded metal brackets holding the sheet metal sign boxes. Smaller signs are sometimes cantilevered from a single pole while larger signs are generally placed between two or more widely spaced supports. The six-foot wide Sands Motel sign in Moriarty (ca. 1955) illustrates the former technique, while the 33-foot wide Rio Pecos Truck Terminal sign in Santa Rosa (ca. 1955) illustrates the latter. The height of the signs also varies, ranging from the 10-foot high Western Motel sign (ca. 1954) in San Jon to the tower-like sign of the Premier Motel (ca. 1949) in Albuquerque, rising more than 60 feet. Historic photographs and postcards of pre-World War II commercial strips along Route 66 indicate a relative uniformity to the height signs, especially in the smaller towns where the highway remained a two-lane road until the widened in the early 1950s. With more traffic moving at higher speeds many business owners sought to enhance their signage, either replacing them or raising their height. In the late 1950s, for example, the Blue Swallow Motel in Tucumcari installed a larger sign. Using both a steel pole and the rooftop of the motel office as the two supports framing the sign, the new sign created a slight canopy under which prospective lodgers might park while registering. In contrast, the Premier Motel more than doubled the height of its sign by adding another unit to its already installed steel support pole around 1960. Drawing from precedents appearing along the commercial strip in Las Vegas, these raised signs, sometimes employing plastic elements as well, reflected what one veteran sign maker describes as a "constant struggle to outdo your neighbor" (Gonzalez).

The pole-mounted signs also reflect common siting practices. Given their automobile oriented function, most are located within 20 feet of the roadway yet sited as to remove them from the pathway of the stream of vehicles entering and exiting the property. Thus in the case of signs marking restaurants, where parking lots were likely to become congested, the sign was often at the front corner of the lot as in the case sign for the former Club Café in Santa Rosa. While the majority of signs are attached to steel support poles that simply rise out of the ground or asphalt pavement, in some cases, particularly in instances where the sign is located near the front center of the property, the base of the sign's poles receives additional protection. This protection often assumes the form of a concrete block or railroad tie footing, sometimes serving as a planter. The sign fronting the former Ranch House Café (ca. 1954) in Tucumcari, for instance, emanates from a three feet high concrete block planter while scored stucco-coated buttressed support piers serve as brackets framing the scripted neon lettering of the La Puerta Motel sign (1952) in Albuquerque.

In general, the siting of motel signs reflects an effort to include the sign as an integral part of the composition of the buildings on the property. Signs are often located near the office. Thus, a motel with a U-plan or an L-plan and an office located in a freestanding building at the front of the courtyard, such as the Westward Ho Motel in Albuquerque (1948), generally has its sign near the office building, often in the center of the property. In contrast, motels in which the office is an integral part of the motel building may have their signs fronting either side of the property or serving as a centerpiece of the courtyard. The El Coronado Motel sign (ca. 1949) in Gallup, for instance, is located at the sidewalk at the southeast corner of the property (with the office at the rear center) while El Vado Motel sign (ca. 1937) in Albuquerque stands alone at the front of the courtyard formed by the U-plan of the motel complex.

**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION  
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

**FORM A  
Revised 08/20/01**

**CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Property Name:**

**Section: 9 Page: 7**

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Less common among the historic neon signs associated with automobile tourism along Route 66 are vertical signs mounted to buildings, fascia and rooftop mounted signs. Generally characteristic of building signage in commercial business districts, where fewer businesses catered specifically to motorists, building mounted and fascia signs appear on the facades of older buildings that served automobile tourists along the downtown commercial strips in Albuquerque and Gallup. The Lexington Hotel's sign (ca. 1940) in Gallup, projecting from the second story façade and rising above the building's parapet, reflects efforts to attract both pedestrian and automobile clientele. In contrast, the neon sign extending along the fascia above the entry of the El Rancho Hotel (1937), also in Gallup, represents a motif more commonly associated with commercial building facades transferred to a hotel catering primarily to motorists. Appearing infrequently along Route 66 were rooftop signs, few of which remain today. Some rooftop signs with their vertical mounted sheet metal boxes, such as the Franciscan Motel sign (ca. 1955) in Grants, resemble small billboards mounted with guy wires. Others, such as the Paradise Motel sign (ca. 1958) in Tucumcari, employ channel letters individually mounted on metal scaffolding atop a two-story hipped roof. This technique of freestanding letters, also evident in the freestanding neon script of the roof mounted sign at the Premier Motel in Albuquerque, permitted sign makers to employ larger letters visible at a greater distance while diminishing the threat of wind damage often caused by the wind's sail effect normally exerted on large metal boxes.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 8

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Figure 2: Lexington Hotel Sign, Gallup, with vertical mounting

The vast majority of the neon signs that lined Route 66 during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century no longer remain. Many have been demolished along with the commercial properties to which they gave notice. Others stand derelict much like the buildings in back of them. Others disappeared as businesses changed names and opted for standardized signs indicating the new business housed in the older building. Others have been incorporated into newer plastic signs, their earlier elements only discernable amidst the translucent plastic reader boxes by the punched electrical holes that remain in the earlier sheet metal portions of the overall sign. Still others in Albuquerque and Gallup have been removed as part of those cities' efforts to regulate the commercial strip through sign ordinances.

Those remaining signs are readily discernable to both local residents and the increasing numbers of tourists seeking remaining evidence of the single highway most represented in the American popular culture of motor

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 9

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travel a half century ago. As much as the buildings standing behind them, in some instances removed even as the sign remains, these objects recall automobile tourism along Route 66. The signs included within this nomination represent some of the best remaining examples of the siting, workmanship, design and materials found in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century neon sign art along Route 66.

**Registration Requirements**

Because the neon signs located along Route 66 were contributed substantially to defining the visual character of the commercial strip from their introduction in the 1930s until the early 1960s when translucent plastic signage displaced them, signs eligible for register listing must retain their integrity as to setting and location along the highway. They must be associated with the historic theme of automobile tourism treated in the Multiple Property listing to the National Register of Historic Places, "The Rise of Automobile Tourism along Route 66 in New Mexico." They must also retain sufficient character-defining elements associated with neon sign production during the period of significance 1935-1965 as discussed above in the description of the types and styles of neon signs appearing along Route 66 commercial strips. In those instances in which alterations to the original signs have occurred, such as the addition of reader boxes to the signs' support poles, those additions must generally be reversible. Only in those exceptional instances in which the neon elements of the sign illustrate an outstanding example of the neon signmaker's art or the signs are recognized as a local landmark are neon signs with the plastic surface of the sign greater than 50% considered eligible.

**List of Contributing Properties**

The properties listed and briefly described below are all located along alignments of Route 66 that crossed New Mexico after 1937. All of these signs were constructed prior to 1965 although, in some cases, later additions may have been added to the basic sign. The list is arranged geographically, reflecting an east to west progression across the highway. The street names reflect the local designation for the former U.S. 66. UTM coordinates are listed for each property.

1. **Western Motel Sign** (1954), 219 W. Main Ave., San Jon. Approximately 10 feet high and six feet wide, the pole-mounted sign rests on two metal posts. Using a flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words "Western Motel." The last remaining neon sign in San Jon, its setting in an open field at the southeast corner of the now vacant Western Motel buildings renders it a strikingly singular object along the roadside.  
UTM Zone 13 E 652175 N 3885796
2. **Lasso Motel Sign** (ca. 1947), 1401 E. Route 66 Boulevard., Tucumcari. Approximately 20 feet high and 12 feet wide, the sign rests on two metal poles. Using a flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words "Lasso," surrounded by a neon lasso, "Motel" and "camping" with a downward turned arrow illuminated by parallel rows of light bulbs. Set approximately 20 feet from the roadside, the sign is located just west of the former motel's office. A plastic faced sign box for RCA color television was attached to the original sign but is reversible. The lasso neon motif combined with the animated bulbs of the arrow once made this a lively sign along Tucumcari's commercial strip.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 10

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UTM Zone 13 E617581 N 3892671

3. **Blue Swallow Motel Sign** (ca. 1958), 815 E. Route 66 Boulevard., Tucumcari. Approximately 20 feet high and 21 feet wide, the sign rests on a metal pole with a brick base and on the flat roof of the motel office. Using a flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words "Blue Swallow Motel," "100% Refrigerated Air," "Vacancy," "TV," and "Budget Prices." An animated neon blue swallow tops the sign, and a painted sign is attached to the base of the post. Set near the roadside in front of the office and manager's residence building, the sign was designed by sign maker Scott Ackerman and motel owner Lillian Redman in the late 1950s shortly after Redman acquired the property. With neon trim and additional swallows on the motel building's façade, the signage has become a nationally recognized icon along Route 66. The property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

UTM Zone 13 E616943 N 3892664

4. **La Cita Restaurant Signs** (ca. 1960), 812 S. First St., Tucumcari. Approximately 30 feet high and 15 feet wide, the sign comprises the stucco-coated upper portion of the building's conical shaped main entry and represents a sombrero. Using a flat letter style, the sign outlines a sombrero and contains the neon-lit words "La Cita" with a painted message below the hat's brim. It is approximately 30 feet high and 15 feet wide. Set approximately 20 feet from the roadside, the entry sign is located adjacent to a parking lot just south of the former Route 66. A second contributing sign consisting of sheet metal, also with a sombrero shape and with the neon-lit word "La Cita" and "Mexican Foods," framed by light bulbs is pole mounted and located at the roadside of NM 209 approximately 70 feet south of its junction with the former Route 66. Approximately 25 feet high and six feet wide the sign also has a plastic faced reader board below the original sign that is reversible.

UTM Zone 13 E616164 N 3892600

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 11

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Fig. 3: La Cita Café, Tucumcari with entry and pole-mounted signs

5. **Ranch House Cafe Sign** (ca. 1954), 1009 W. Route 66 Boulevard., Tucumcari. Approximately 20 feet high and nine feet wide, two metal poles set in a concrete block planter support the sign. Using a flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words “Ranch House Cafe,” and “Mexican Food” with an arrow illuminated by multiple rows of light bulbs pointing to the now vacant building. Set approximately 20 feet from the roadside, the sign is distinctive for the creative use of its metal posts to simulate a saguaro cactus, a plant not found in New Mexico or along any section of Route 66 but nevertheless broadly popularized throughout the Southwest.  
UTM Zone 13 E614958 N 3892636
6. **Paradise Motel Signs** (ca. 1960), W. Route 66 Boulevard., Tucumcari. Rising approximately 20 feet high above the second story roof denoting the manager’s residence, the two rooftop signs are attached to a trussed metal pole scaffold. Using a channel letter style, the signs contain the neon-lit words “Paradise” facing east and “Paradise Motel” facing west. The signs are distinctive as the only freestanding channel style rooftop signs remaining along Route 66 in New Mexico. The pole-mounted sign located at the northwest corner of the property is non-contributing.  
UTM Zone 13 E612798 N 3891691
7. **La Mesa Motel Sign** (ca. 1950), E. Will Rogers Drive, Santa Rosa. Approximately 20 feet high and 12 feet wide, the signs rest on two metal poles set in a masonry planter with cholla cactus. Using a flat letter style, the sign contains the neon-lit words “La Mesa Motel” set on a metal box shaped like arrow turning toward the

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 12

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motel. A reversible reader box is attached to the support posts below the original sign. Typical of many motels with an L-plan, the sign is located in the large open space fronting the motel and set 20 feet from the roadway. UTM Zone 13 E531201 N 3866953

8. **Rio Pecos Ranch Truck Terminal Sign** (ca. 1955), E. Will Rogers Drive, Santa Rosa. Approximately 30 feet high and 33 feet wide, the sign rests on two metal poles flanking a service area between two of the former truck and service station's gasoline pump islands. Using a flat painted style, the neon portion of the sign contains the roadway depicted below the tractor trailer, the truck's wheels and an oversized representation of the driver with an animated waving arm. Typical of many signs created in the mid-1950s, the trailer portion of the truck is a large translucent plastic box containing the name of the former business. Despite this proportionally large use of plastic, the enormity of the sign, its playful use of animation, and its widespread recognition as an icon along Route 66 make this an especially notable example of neon signage along Santa Rosa's commercial strip.

UTM Zone 13 E530972 N 3866351



Fig. 4: Rio Pecos Truck Terminal Sign, Santa Rosa, extending over driveway between pump islands

9. **Sun 'n Sand Motel Sign** (ca. 1960), E. Will Rogers Drive, Santa Rosa. Approximately 40 feet high and 21 feet wide, the sign is mounted on two metal poles. Using the channel letter style, the neon portion of the sign contains the words "Sun 'n Sand" and "Motel" with the former set within a large Zia sun at the top of the sign.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 13

---

The sign is located approximately 10feet from the roadway in a broad valley at the northeast corner of the motel property. An early example of the use of higher sign poles that would become common in the 1970s, the height of the sign may represent the original owner's efforts to compensate for the incline on which the property is located, giving the sign greater visibility to motorists descending into the valley along Route 66 from both east and west.

UTM Zone 13 E529338 N 3866683

10. **Club Cafe Signs** (ca. 1950), Will Rogers Drive, Santa Rosa. An example of double signage, the lower, earlier sign is approximately 20 feet high and nine feet wide, while the larger sign is approximately 35 feet high and 24 feet wide. The former is mounted on two metal poles and the latter on four metal poles. Using the flat letter style the former contains the neon-lit words "Club Café" with an arrow below and the word "Parking" below the arrow. The latter employs the channel letter style with the neon portion of the sign containing the words "Club Cafe." The signs are located approximately 10feet from the roadway at the southeast corner of property and mark the former Club Café, well known along Route 66 for its use of numerous non-neon billboards depicting a smiling round-faced man.

UTM Zone 13 E530972 N 3866351

11. **Sands Motel Sign** (ca. 1955), Route 66, Moriarty. Approximately 20 feet high and 10 feet wide, the signs is mounted on a single metal pole. Using the channel letter style, the neon portion of the sign contains the words "Sands Motel" and "No Vacancy." The sign is located approximately 30feet from the roadway within a small courtyard that fronts the building housing the office and manager's residence. The sign is one of the last remaining historic neon signs in Moriarty.

UTM Zone 13 404365 N 3873843

12. **La Puerta Lodge Sign** (1949), 9700 Central Avenue SE, Albuquerque. Approximately 20 feet high and 18 feet wide, the sign is mounted between two buttressed, rusticated stucco-coated posts. Using the flat letter style, the neon portion of the sign contains the words "La Puerta" and "No Vacancy," with the words "Color TV" added. The sign is located approximately 15feet from the roadside and fronts a courtyard between the building housing the office and manager's residence and the I-plan of the motel units. The rusticated buttresses outlined in neon and framing the sign for the motel, a National Register property, are unique along Route 66.

UTM Zone 13 359620 N 3881600

13. **Bow and Arrow Lodge Sign** (ca.1950), 8300 Central Avenue SE, Albuquerque. Approximately 35 feet high and 8 feet wide, the sign is mounted on a single metal pole. Using the flat letter style, the neon portion of the sign contains the words "Bow and Arrow" and "No Vacancy" as well as a series of downward pointing animated arrows. The word "Lodge" extends vertically below the neon letters in translucent plastic boxes but is reversible. The sign is located approximately 10feet from the roadside and fronts an informal courtyard between the two buildings of the motel's parallel I-plan.

UTM Zone 13 358337 N 3882158

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 14

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14. **Premier Motel Signs** (ca.1941, 1960), 3822 Central Avenue SE, Albuquerque. The motel offers an unusual instance of triple neon signage. Two pole-mounted signs are located adjacent to the sidewalk at the northeast corner of the property. The lower, earlier sign is approximately 20 feet high and nine feet wide, while the larger sign is approximately 60 feet high and three feet wide. The former is mounted on two metal posts and the latter on a single metal post. Using the flat letter style the former contains the neon-lit words "Premier Motel" and "Sorry No Vacancy" mounted on a red metal box. Using channel style letters, the word "Motel" is spelled along a downward series of polychromatic circles and capped by a six-pointed animated neon form. Together, the two signs offer a good example of how signage evolved from the 1940 to the 1960s as owners began to add taller signs to achieve greater visibility. A third, rooftop style sign is located above the motel office portion of the building and is unusual in its use of free standing neon script signaling the motel's name.  
UTM Zone 13 354076 N 3882802
15. **Aztec Motel Sign** (ca. 1958), 3821 Central Avenue NE, Albuquerque. Approximately 35 feet high and nine feet wide, the sign is mounted on a single metal post that rises through the small porch fronting the motel office at the sidewalk. Using the flat letter style, the sign's neon elements include the words "Aztec Motel" and "vacancy" with a double-lined neon arrow pointing downward toward the entry to the office. Guy wires and brackets brace the cantilevered portion of the sign. A small translucent reader board that is reversible has been added below the neon portion of the sign. In the late 1950s this sign replaced an earlier sign for this National Register property that is the oldest motel along Central Avenue in Albuquerque.  
UTM Zone 13 345050 N 3882840
16. **Nob Hill Motel Sign** (1955), 3712 Central Avenue SE, Albuquerque. Approximately 24 feet high and 10 feet wide, the sign is mounted on a single metal pole adjacent to the sidewalk at the northwest corner of the property. Using the flat letter style, the sign's neon elements include the words "Nob Hill Motel" and "Vacancy" with a circular neon arrow arcing upward toward the motel. The sign dates to the 1955 when the property's name changed from Modern Auto Court to the Nob Hill Motel. The property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and its neon sign extends eastward the zone of neon signage that has recently been installed as a part of the revitalization of the Nob Hill commercial area.  
UTM Zone 13 353930 N 3882780
17. **El Don Motel Sign** (1955), 2222 Central Avenue SW, Albuquerque. Approximately 35 feet high and nine feet wide, the sign is mounted on two metal pole set in a brick planter adjacent to the sidewalk. It is located in the center of the property at the west end of the second story deck extending over the porte cochere marking the motel office. Using the flat letter style, the sign's neon elements include the words "El Don," set within a lasso, "Motel" and "Vacancy" with neon depicting a cowboy, or *vaquero*, tossing a lasso entirely outlined with light bulbs. Dating to 1955, when the name of the original Zip-In Court was changed to El Don Motel, the sign has recently been refurbished.  
UTM Zone 13 347452 N 3884693
18. **El Vado Motel Sign** (ca. 1950), 2500 Central Avenue SW, Albuquerque. Approximately 20 feet high and seven feet wide, the sign is mounted on a single metal pole set in a small circular cactus garden adjacent to the

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 15

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sidewalk and in front of the courtyard formed by the U-plan of the motel. Using a flat letter style, the sign's neon elements include the words "El Vado Motel," and "No Vacancy." Most notable in the sign announcing this National Register-listed property is the circular form topping the sign depicting a warrior's head surrounded by polychromatic arcs outlined in neon. A reader board that is reversible has been added below the neon portion of the sign.

UTM Zone 13 347170 N 3884560

19. **Westward Ho Motel Sign** (1946), 7500 Central Avenue SW, Albuquerque. Approximately 25 feet high and 15 feet wide, the sign is mounted on a single metal pole adjacent to the roadway in front of the building housing the motel office and manager's residence. Using a flat letter style, the sign's neon elements include the words "Westward Ho Motel," and "No Vacancy." One of the oldest examples of neon signage along Route 66, the sign is similar to the Ranch House Café sign in Tucumcari in that the saguaro cactus motif of the sign post plays upon a popular, though inaccurate along Route 66, stereotype of the Southwest.

UTM Zone 13 343316 N 3882803

20. **Franciscan Lodge Signs** (ca. 1953), 1101 E. Santa Fe Boulevard, Grants. The Franciscan Lodge offers a relatively rare example of double neon signage incorporating two distinct types of signs. A sign mounted on three metal posts is located in the northeast courtyard of the double L-plan motel and is approximately 30 feet high and 39 feet wide. Using the flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words "Franciscan Lodge" topped by the smaller lettered "Your home on the road." A second rooftop mounted sign is approximately nine feet high and nine feet wide and is located above the hipped roof of the office and secured with guy wires. Also using the flat letter style, the sign contains neon-lit words "Franciscan Lodge," "No Vacancy," and "Office," with "TV" on a panel that was added to the original sign. An arrow with two arcs and illuminated by sequentially animated light bulbs points downward toward the office door.

UTM Zone 13 241578 N 3892474

21. **Uranium Cafe Sign** (ca. 1950), 519 W. Santa Fe Boulevard, Grants. The sign is mounted to a single metal post located along the sidewalk at the northwest corner of the building. It is approximately 22 feet high and nine feet wide and is cantilevered over the sidewalk. Using the flat letter style, it contains the neon-lit words "Uranium Café." Other neon-lit elements include a series of arrows pointing to the building below the name and a grouping of arced lines topped by small circles atop the sign. The sign dates to the original name of the café. Which changed over time before its current restoration. The words "home cooking" below the neon arrows have been inserted in portion of the sign that has been changed over time.

UTM Zone 13 239977 N 3893516

22. **Los Alamos Motel Sign** (ca. 1955), 1324 W. Santa Fe Boulevard, Grants. The sign is attached to two metal poles set back 20 feet from the roadside in the middle of a courtyard formed by the wide U plan of the now demolished motel building. It is approximately 25 feet high and 12 feet wide and is cantilevered toward the roadway. The sign is unusual in that it employs both flat and channel letter styles with "Los Alamos" and "No Vacancy" reflecting the former and "Motel" the latter. A wrought iron bracing between the two support poles incorporates a Zia sun motif.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 9 Page: 16

---

UTM Zone 13 239114 N 3893334

23. **Blue Spruce Lodge Sign** (ca. 1950), 1115 E. 66 Boulevard, Gallup. This pole-mounted sign employs a single metal pole painted to effect the trunk of a spruce tree. Located in a small railroad-lined planter at the sidewalk in the middle of a courtyard with a U-plan, the sign is approximately 28 feet high and nine feet wide and has the form of a spruce tree. Using a flat letter style, the sign contains the neon-lit words "Blue Spruce Lodge," "Steam Heat," and "No Vacancy." Attached below the tree bough portion of the sign is a neon-lit "AAA" sign and a reader board that is reversible. A popular landmark along Route 66, the sign is included as an inset in the early postcards published for the motel.

UTM Zone 12 706248 N 3934006

24. **El Rancho Hotel Signs** (ca. 1937), 1000 E. 66 Boulevard, Gallup. While the El Rancho Hotel and Motel complex includes numerous signs, two neon signs are historic and date to around the completion of the hotel building in 1937. These signs include the rooftop-mounted sign "Hotel El Rancho" and the fascia-mounted sign "Charm of Yesterday...Convenience of Tomorrow." The former, mounted on the second story porch at the main entry is a billboard type sign approximately eight feet high and 12 feet wide and employs both flat and channel letter styles. A single line of light bulbs frames the channel letter style words "El Rancho." The latter sign is approximately a foot high and 40 feet wide and employs flat lettering along the fascia beneath the cornice molding of the two story portal at the main entry. A landmark along Route 66, the hotel is listed in the National Register. Early photographs of the hotel indicate that the rooftop-mounted sign that now faces Route 66 was previously mounted in approximately the same location but perpendicular to the highway.

UTM Zone 12 706580 N 3933960

25. **El Coronado Motel Sign** (ca. 1949), 823 E. 66 Boulevard, Gallup. This sign is mounted on a single metal pole located at the southeast corner of the property and cantilevered over the sidewalk. The sign is approximately 42 feet high and six feet wide. Using a flat letter style, the sign contains the neon-lit words "El Coronado" across the top, "Motel" down the sign's vertical element, and "No Vacancy" below. Neon forms a Zia sun figure at the very top of the sign. A reversible small reader box has been attached to the lower portion of the metal post.

UTM Zone 12 705766 N 3934050

26. **Lexington Hotel Sign** (ca. 1948), 408 W. 66 Boulevard, Gallup. The lower portion of this vertical sign is mounted with brackets to an iron pole attached to the upper story of the hotel's façade while the upper portion of the sign is further secured by guy wires and scaffolding located on the roof. The sign is approximately 15 feet high and six feet wide. Using a flat letter style, the sign contains the neon-lit words "Lexington Hotel" in the upper portion of the sign and "Lexington Hotel" and "No Vacancy" in the lower portion. The redundancy may reflect the later addition of the upper portion of the sign as the hotel sought greater visibility to motorists. The sign is one of a few remaining examples of historic vertical neon signage related to automobile tourism along Route 66

UTM Zone 12 704680 N 3933540

**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION  
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

**FORM A  
Revised 08/20/01**

**CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Property Name:**

**Section: 9 Page: 17**

---

27. **Paramount Cafe Sign** (ca. 1947), 904 W. 66 Boulevard, Gallup. This sign is mounted to two metal poles located approximately 10 feet from the southern boundary of the property along Coal Ave. The sign is approximately 35 feet high and 15 feet wide. Using a flat letter style, the sign contains the neon-lit words "Paramount Cafe" across the top with an arrow pointing downward. Sheet metal inserted in the triangles between the metal trussing supporting the poles includes the words "This Is It, Good Food." A plastic faced sign at the north end of the property is non-contributing.  
UTM Zone 12 703924 N 3933336

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 12 Page: 18

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**12. Significance of Property**

From the first commercial neon sign that appeared in the United States in 1924, a fascia mounted Packard sign in Los Angeles, neon signage was closely associated with the American commercial strip. With the designation of the federal highway system in 1926 and the growing popularity of automobile tourism and the roadside businesses it spawned, by the late 1930s neon signs emerged as an indelible feature along the nation's network of highways. Combining the creativity of the sign maker's art with the delicate craft of bending and shaping glass tubes and then pumping them with inert gases, neon signage became an integral part of a commercial roadside cultural landscape defined during the middle third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nowhere was this more apparent in New Mexico than along U.S. 66, the federal road that emerged as the state's major east-west highway. All of the larger communities through which it passed by the late 1930s experienced the development of commercial strips illuminated by neon signs. The vast unlit spaces surrounding these communities rendered their polychromatic flashing strips even more striking for those driving them at sunset and into the night, seeking the services their roadside businesses offered. While the mid-1950s brought the introduction of translucent plastic signs and later decades brought the introduction of illuminated reader boards as neon virtually disappeared as a roadside advertising medium, the early neon signs that have survived stand as reminders of the earlier travel experience along Route 66. Some continue to function as integral elements of viable roadside businesses while others stand derelict. Regardless of their current condition, both community members and passersby retracing Route 66 now regard many of these signs as local landmarks. Their association with the commercial roadside's early history along Route 66 has made these remaining signs indispensable character-defining objects of that cultural landscape.

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The neon sign that Packard dealer Earle C. Anthony purchased from inventor Georges Claude in Paris in 1923 and displayed on the façade of his dealership in Los Angeles a year later marked the arrival of commercial neon signs in the United States. America's embrace of the new electrical sign technology occurred a decade after Claude had completed his first commercial signs for a barbershop and for Cinzano in Paris. Seeking to find an inexpensive means of producing oxygen for hospital use and oxyacetylene welding, he found that rare gases, especially neon, derived from the Greek for "new gas," were leftover and sought to find a use for them. Determining that he could seal neon in glass tubing and then bombard it with electricity to produce an intense red color, he saw the potential for marketing this new product as illuminated signage. As Claude began to manufacture signs for many of the city's public places, enhancing its sobriquet "the City of Lights," he also patented his invention for long-life electrodes and, during the 1920s, tried to use his monopoly to license franchises throughout the world (Stern 1979: 24-28). Infringements, often occurring as a result of skilled employees changing jobs, however, resulted in the proliferation of neon sign making, and by 1927 when Charles Lindbergh used the clearly visible neon lights of Le Bourget Field to complete his trans-Atlantic flight, neon signs were becoming widespread throughout the nation's larger cities.

While striking for its ability to bring brilliancy to the night sky as it illuminated commercial buildings not only with playful designs but with polychromatic lines accenting their architectural details, neon signage by no means represented the first effort by merchants to catch the attention of prospective customers. Building facades and storefront windows had become a "blatant thicket of commercial messages" since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Liebs

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 12 Page: 19

---

1985:41). This competition for customers' eyes had accelerated by the end of the century as electricity not only created the possibility for using incandescent bulbs to illuminate signs but increased the speed of movement and reaction time to signs with the advent of electric trolleys. In the absence of zoning laws and other legal restrictions, merchants began to compete, seeking a visual predominance as a means to broadcast their products. Soon oversized illuminated billboards, buildings outlined with light bulbs, and animated signs driven by electric timers led to what J.B. Jackson termed a "total and dramatic" transformation of the cultural landscape associated with commercial districts (in Liebs 1985:43).

As the private automobile and motor touring grew in popularity during the late 1920s and 1930s, neon signs proliferated. This was especially true in 1933, the year following the expiration of Claude's patent for long-life electrodes. That year, the repeal of prohibition encouraged neon signage at bars and nightclubs, and the success of the elaborate neon signs that filled the night sky at the Chicago Century of Progress Exhibition of 1933-34 introduced the broader public to the visual delights of neon. At first restricted to the larger cities, in part, because of the difficulty in shipping the fragile gas-filled tubes, neon signs became more widespread as more sign makers mastered the skill of bending and pumping glass tubing.

Even as Hollywood producer Busby Berkeley closed his musical extravaganza, "The Gold Diggers of 1933," with a revue in which the dancers played neon-outlined violins, the Last Ever Neon Sign Co. had begun manufacturing signs in Albuquerque. City directories show that by the 1940s and through the early 1960s at least three, and sometimes as many as six, companies offered neon sign making services in Albuquerque. Among them was Electrical Products Consolidated QRS, which began in 1939 and became Electrical Products of New Mexico by 1949 and, by the late 1980s, Zeon Signs, the major exterior neon sign company in New Mexico today. During the late 1940s, neon sign makers appeared in other communities along Route 66 with General Sign and Sheet Metal Service, later the Ace Sign Company in Tucumcari, creating many of the commercial signs along the highway not only in Tucumcari but in San Jon and Santa Rosa as well.

Rudy Gonzalez, a veteran sign maker in Tucumcari who began his career in 1954, recalls that Jim Hill arrived in Tucumcari in the early 1950s, purchased the Ace Sign Company, and during the next several years manufactured many of the motel and café signs, including the Blue Swallow Motel, La Cita Café, and Ranch House Café signs, that continue to line the former highway (Gonzalez). Describing Hill as an "all around good sign painter, designer and artist," he recalls that Hill employed both a neon bender and a sheet metal man to create the signs. Subscribing to the sign making trade journal, *Signs of the Times*, Hill stayed abreast of changing styles in signage, including the acquisition in 1954 of a Pittsburgh seaming machine capable of bending sheet metal more easily. Simplifying and strengthening the construction of the corners of metal sign boxes also permitted the introduction of translucent plastic panels. First appearing in Tucumcari in the large box portion of the Palomino Motel sign, the Pittsburgh seam at once made sign making easier but also signaled the industry's widespread shift from neon to plastic. Asserting that neon signs are readily identifiable as to their maker by the design layout, Gonzalez notes that Hill frequently incorporated lines of light bulbs controlled by time switches to animate directional arrows on many of his signs.

**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION  
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

**FORM A  
Revised 08/20/01**

**CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Property Name:**

**Section: 12 Page: 20**

---

Electrical Products of New Mexico created many of the signs that appear along Route 66 both in Albuquerque and westward through Grants and Gallup. As tax codes changed in the 1970s and many roadside businesses opted to lease signs rather than own them, the Hinkley Sign Company acquired many of the newer neon signs in Grants and Gallup and continues to service and manufacture neon signs in Gallup today. Recalling the earlier decades of neon sign making in Gallup, Jay Hinkley notes that Electrical Products of New Mexico would send an artist/salesman, Harold Buell, to Grants and Gallup and that Buell often discussed signing concepts with prospective customers, retired to his automobile to sketch them, and returned within 30 minutes with a design that then became the basis for the neon sign the company manufactured. Both veteran sign makers agree that by the mid-1960s the competition to outdo one's neighbors along Route 66 led to raising the height of signs along the highway. This phenomenon is helpful in dating some signs and remains in evidence where two sets of pole mounted signs with varying heights appear such as at the former Club Café in Santa Rosa or the Premier Motel in Albuquerque.

Old photographs and postcards depicting commercial strips along Route 66 in New Mexico indicate how pervasive neon signage was during the 1940s and 1950s. Early images of the El Rancho Hotel in Gallup reveal that the neon sign lining the building's fascia as well as the rooftop mounted sign appeared shortly after the hotel's completion in 1937. Photographs in *Albuquerque Progress* in 1949 indicate that the La Puerta Motel sign accompanied the completion of the motel building. Similarly, linen type postcards published shortly after the Blue Spruce Motel in Gallup and the Westward Ho Motel in Albuquerque opened depict the signs that continue to serve these businesses today. In some instances, bird's eye photos inserted as part of the postcard's visual composition specifically emphasize the motel sign. Implicit in this technique is a recognition that a readily identifiable sign played an essential role in drawing customers — that it offered a symbol that would signal to the motorist that he had arrived at his destination. In effect, from the outset these neon signs functioned as icons, easily identifiable images distinctly associated with a particular business along the commercial strip.

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 12 Page: 21



Fig. 5: Westward Ho Motel sign, Albuquerque, with vertical pole as saguaro cactus

As such, many of the businesses used regional names, using neon-illuminated imagery to evoke the Southwest. Thus, a Spanish cowboy, or *vaquero*, at the El Don Motel, a sombrero at La Cita Café, a polychromatic head dress at the El Vado Motel, or even the geographically inaccurate saguaro cacti at the Ranch House Café and Westward Ho Motel served to place the business it symbolized in the Southwest, conveying a popularized sense of place as part of the effort to attract motorists. So, too, did many of the businesses' names outlined in neon block letters or script such as the Aztec Motel, the Uranium Café, and La Mesa Motel. Combining a variety of regional images and names and broadcasting them through a neon medium, these signs became an essential component of a mid-century cultural landscape comprised of small businesses. Relying to a great degree on eye-catching signage, each tried to establish a unique identity that would enable it to flourish along Route 66 prior to the widespread development of franchises and chains. In contrast, the mass-produced neon signs used to identify the service stations of the large oil companies were less distinctive, and most have disappeared as the norms for signage changed.

With the introduction of plastic into sign manufacturing in the mid-1950s, neon signage fell into disfavor. The less expensive, easier to maintain, readily malleable plastic signs and the reader boards that followed gradually eclipsed neon. In some instances, the change in materials resulted in a compromise as plastic sign boxes were welded to the metal poles that still held neon elements. In other instances where businesses sought to emulate the Great Sign approach to signage inspired by the success of the Holiday Inn chain as well as the Las Vegas strip, the neon signage was completely removed. So, too, were some signs that fell victim to city signage ordinances during the 1970s when neon was perceived as visual blight along the commercial strip. Few of those signs survived even in storage yards until renewed interest in neon in recent decades resulted in some individuals' effort to save, if not refurbish, those that remain. Today, as a renewed interest in neon signage and its historic role along the

**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION  
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

**FORM A  
Revised 08/20/01**

**CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Property Name:**

**Section: 12 Page: 22**

---

commercial roadside has resulted in the creation of new neon signs, there is also a growing effort to recognize and preserve those neon signs associated with automobile tourism along Route 66 a half century ago. As communities seek to identify their historic role along Route 66, they recognize that these objects contribute to the historic cultural landscape of their earlier commercial strip and that preserving them contributes to preserving that historic identity.

APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION  
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES

FORM A  
Revised 08/20/01

CONTINUATION SHEET

Property Name:

Section: 13 Page: 23

---

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**APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION  
NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

**FORM A  
Revised 08/20/01**

**CONTINUATION SHEET**

**Property Name:**

**Section: Photo Page: 24**

---

**Photographs**

Neon Signs Along Route 66 in New Mexico

Statewide

David Kammer

2002

See individual inventory forms