

Sign of the Times

We may not know who put the salt in the ocean. But we've *found* the guy who put up the first Time & Temperature sign. **BY COLIN W. SARGENT**

“I was on the crew that put the first Time & Temperature sign” on the roof of the Forest City skyline, says John Roberts, owner of Jayar Neon Signs of South Portland, who’s lit up commercial Portland “since 1955. The Time & Temperature was 1965 or 1966. It was incandescent, though I’ve spent 57 years of my life working in neon. Before final assembly, it was 15 pieces, each five-by-seven feet. Each weighed 500 pounds.”

Anticipation across the city was high. “The steel workers were up on the roof of 477 Congress Street because they were adding two floors. We had to wait for them to finish, so the sign pieces sat in the yard down at Coyne Sign Co. all summer long.” It seemed like forever. “Everyone asked, when are we going to put it up?”

“We started taking it up on the roof on Armistice Day, November 11. I watched the Veteran’s Day Parade from up on the roof. We worked on the giant sign all through

the winter, until May, putting it up. The wind was always blowing from Mount Washington all across Back Bay. Sometimes it was icy cold, whipping into our faces, almost unbearable. There were three of us on the crew, sometimes four. We mounted a crane on the roof and left it there so we could put fresh light bulbs in when we needed to. We’d go up in a bosun’s chair and be pulled up to change them.”

Imagine the vertigo. Changing bulbs while swaying dizzily over the shimmering downtown, “We used to hang over the street,” with Porteous and the traffic swirling below. “Fifteen stories over the street in a bosun’s chair.”

Roberts is still creating a buzz: “I did the Great Lost Bear sign. Bull Moose. Gilbert’s Chowder House. Bayside Bowl.” ■

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