

## A History of the Dallas Pegasus, on Top of the Magnolia Hotel

By June Mattingly

In 1934, the original porcelain enamel and neon Pegasus sign was installed on the roof of the Magnolia Building. The 29-story building, built in 1922, was located at the northeast corner of Akard and Commerce Streets. It was this city's first skyscraper, as well as the tallest building in Texas, the tallest building west of the Mississippi, and taller than anything in Europe.

The original Pegasus, the logo of the Magnolia Oil Company, was completed in six weeks in the Dallas plant of Texlite, Inc. The sign was produced to welcome oilmen attending the American Petroleum Institute's first annual meeting in November 1934. Although it was never intended to be a permanent structure, Pegasus still flies above the Magnolia Building.

The "Flying Red Horse," as it was referred to by Dallas residents, became a landmark immediately. Standing majestically 450 feet above street the Dallas icon was visible 75 miles away on a clear night. Pilots reported catching sight of it 60 miles south in Hillsboro, and some claimed to see it from as far away as Waco.



Most North Texans of a certain age can remember driving into Dallas at night while the children watched to see who would be the first to spot the "Flying Red Horse."

Constructed of two identical horses spaced 14 feet apart, each horse measures 40 feet in length by 32 feet in height. A quarter of a mile of red neon tubing lights outlines the details on both



sides of the silhouette. The two horses were installed to revolve on top of a 50-foot metal tower shaped to resemble an oil derrick. When referring to the two horses back to back, Harold Wineburgh, the owner of the Texlite sign company would say "Dallas doesn't want to be known as a one horse town."

Texlite Inc., designed, manufactured and installed the first Pegasus. The business was located at 3305 Manor Way, one block south of Lemmon Avenue in close proximity of Love Field and the Coca Cola plant. The Pegasus was installed although consulting engineers felt it was hazardous and impractical to place a sign of

this size, much less a revolving one, where a strong wind blew most of the time. Despite the treacherous height of the job site and the improvisational nature of the project, construction proceeded on schedule. Five days before the completion date a fire broke out in the Texlite plant and a quarter of a mile of the imported neon tubing was destroyed in the fire. To replace it, a makeshift neon department made the tubing from scratch. Parts of the construction were hauled up in the elevators to the penthouse to hand through the windows to the roof. The Pegasus was installed in time for the Petroleum convention.

Each horse was baked in one piece in a huge kiln that was also big enough to produce parts of B-29 wings during World War II. A three-horse power motor turned the 15-ton structure one revolution every 40 seconds. When the wind gusts were over 30 miles an hour a braking system made everything stop and 22- thousand volt transformers kept the neon glowing.

Although neon signage is considered quintessentially American, a Frenchman introduced the first neon sign in Paris around 1910. Starting in the 30s, neon lighting quickly became popular in outdoor advertising because of its visibility even in daylight. Texlite brought neon and porcelain enamel to Texas. Its main business was manufacturing and shipping porcelain enamel and neon signs for service station signs worldwide. Customers included Magnolia Oil, Standard Oil, Gulf, Chevron, Gulf, Esso (now Exxon) and Texaco.

Wineburgh invented the name “Texlite” after he moved his family from New York City to Highland Park in the late 30s, seeing the potential of living in this dynamic city. By 1949 Texlite had moved into its 135,000 square foot plant where almost 500 people worked and there were sales offices in principal cities in the U.S. In the 1950s porcelain enamel became the sheathing of choice for architectural exterior panels in top quality commercial building applications. It was impervious to the elements and graffiti. Texlite was responsible for the panels for downtown Dallas’ Southland Life Center and the second remodeling of Love Field Airport (demolished) among many others.

When the Magnolia Company merged with Socony Mobil in 1959, the Pegasus became the symbol of the new Mobil Oil Company. The City of Dallas conferred the status of “Landmark Sign” to the Pegasus in 1973 and in 1976 it became the property of the City of Dallas. The Pegasus is now part of the City of Dallas Public Art collection ExxonMobil Corporation continues to use the winged mythological Pegasus as their corporate logo.



Over the years the horses’ porcelain-coated steel panels became rusted and pitted and would not survive being remounted. The rotating base rusted and the worn support braces caused the sign to sway in the wind and the neon tubing that formerly

glowed red in the night sky was broken. It was impossible to restore the old sign so it was removed in 1999 and a new sign built at a cost of \$600,000 donated by private and corporate sponsors.

A gigantic crane was placed on the roof and with the help of a helicopter to disassemble the horses. The original panels were used as templates and fired using the same finishing processes. Since there are no facilities with the capability to make each horse in one piece the new ones are in sections. Galvanized steel was used instead of prime steel to prevent rusting for the next 100 years. A computer controlled weather station was installed on the roof to provide information on wind speed and direction. Two Dallas companies, American Porcelain Enamel and Casteel Associates, worked with specialists, engineers and computer programmers to get the new Pegasus up and running. Extra sets of neon were made for future repair and a new hydraulic revolving system was installed.

The symbolic icon was installed in time for New Year's Eve 2000 when the unveiling was broadcast on national television channels; in the new millennium the symbol of Dallas was "aglow" again. The Pegasus was flying high again after its initial ascent to glory. Dallas celebrated the new millennium with the lighting of the new Pegasus and 45,000 people in downtown Dallas witnessed the event.

A big horse requires a city with a big heart to keep it running. Its efforts received enthusiast support from Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson and Dallas' First Lady Matrice Ellis-Kirk and the Mayor Ron Kirk. Original contributors to the Pegasus Project included the Mobil Corporation, the Magnolia Hotel Corporation, Southwestern Bell, D Magazine, the Hobitzelle Foundation, the City of Dallas and the Eugene McDermott Foundation.

Even though the Flying Red Horse is surrounded by taller structures it is still possible to catch a wonderful view of its red glow while strolling in downtown, admiring the views from new buildings like the Omni Hotel and Museum Tower or by car where Interstates 30 and 35 merge and split apart. It symbolizes Dallas as the Empire State building does for New York and the Eiffel Tower does for Paris.

The new Pegasus requires continuous maintenance to keep it flying. The Dallas Foundation's *Keep the Pegasus Flying Fund* receives money to preserve the Pegasus and contributions can be made to: <http://www.dallasfoundation.org/tabid/270/Default.aspx>

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