

Future looks bright for the old neon Satellite sign

Gresham | The sign that advertised Rockwood's Satellite Restaurant and Lounge could return

By **ROBIN FRANZEN**
THE OREGONIAN

GRESHAM — After five years in storage, the old neon sign that shone for 42 years above the Satellite Restaurant and Lounge may be making a comeback in Rockwood.

Wayne Jordan, owner of the former hangout that closed in 2000, says he recently donated the sign to the Gresham Redevelopment Commission so it can be fixed up and used as a centerpiece of the city's urban renewal program.

His only request: that a placard honoring the memory of his parents, who started the Satellite in 1958, be mounted wherever the sign ends up. His father, Buford "Slim" Jordan, died in 1986, and his mother, Chris, died in May.

In recent years, the 12-by-12-foot sign, which the city had declared a historic landmark, has been stored outdoors at the Mountain View Boarding Kennels, owned by Jordan's sister in Gresham. There it has served as an instant conversation starter.



ROGER JENSEN/THE OREGONIAN

Wayne Jordan, whose parents started the Satellite Restaurant and Lounge in Rockwood in 1958, donated the landmark neon sign to the city so it can be fixed up and used in an urban renewal project. He wants it dedicated to the memory of his parents.

Futuristic in its day, the sign features Earth with three spinning neon satellites.

Jordan's father had it made in Salt Lake City shortly after the Soviet Union's Sputnik made satellites part of the national consciousness and neon was having a heyday because of the popularity of the Rat Pack in Las Vegas, he said.

The restaurant, at 18706 E. Burnside Road, was a favorite of construction workers and politicians.

"There's a lot more moss on (the sign) now, and pigeons have nested in the back of it," Jordan said. "But most of the neon is in decent shape."

Rebecca Ocken, Gresham's ur-

ban renewal manager, said the city's urban renewal agency has yet to decide what to do with the sign, which an appraiser valued at about \$3,600. One option would be as the signature element of a public plaza.

In the meantime, she expects to begin looking for an artist who can get the neon back in working order.

"So far, everyone is excited about it," she said, noting that the city has been interested in obtaining the sign for several years. "We couldn't have made a better move based on the public response."

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Satellite

OUTLOOK JUNE 21, 2000

BY ANNE ENDICOTT

of The Outlook staff

A piece of Gresham's history goes on the auction block Wednesday morning when the contents and signage of the vintage 1950s Satellite Restaurant will be sold.

The 42-year-old Rockwood landmark closed abruptly Monday, June 15, displacing employees and regular longtime customers.

Restaurant owner Wayne Jordan didn't return phone calls from *The Outlook* to discuss the closure. Several former employees expressed bitterness and anger at receiving their paychecks in front of a locked door, but none would speak on the record.

The Satellite was a step back to the future. With its neon signs and early space-age decor, seeing George Jetson at the lunch counter wouldn't have seemed out of place. The lighted globe and outside signage with its angular lettering were deemed historic landmark objects by the City of Gresham in 1987.

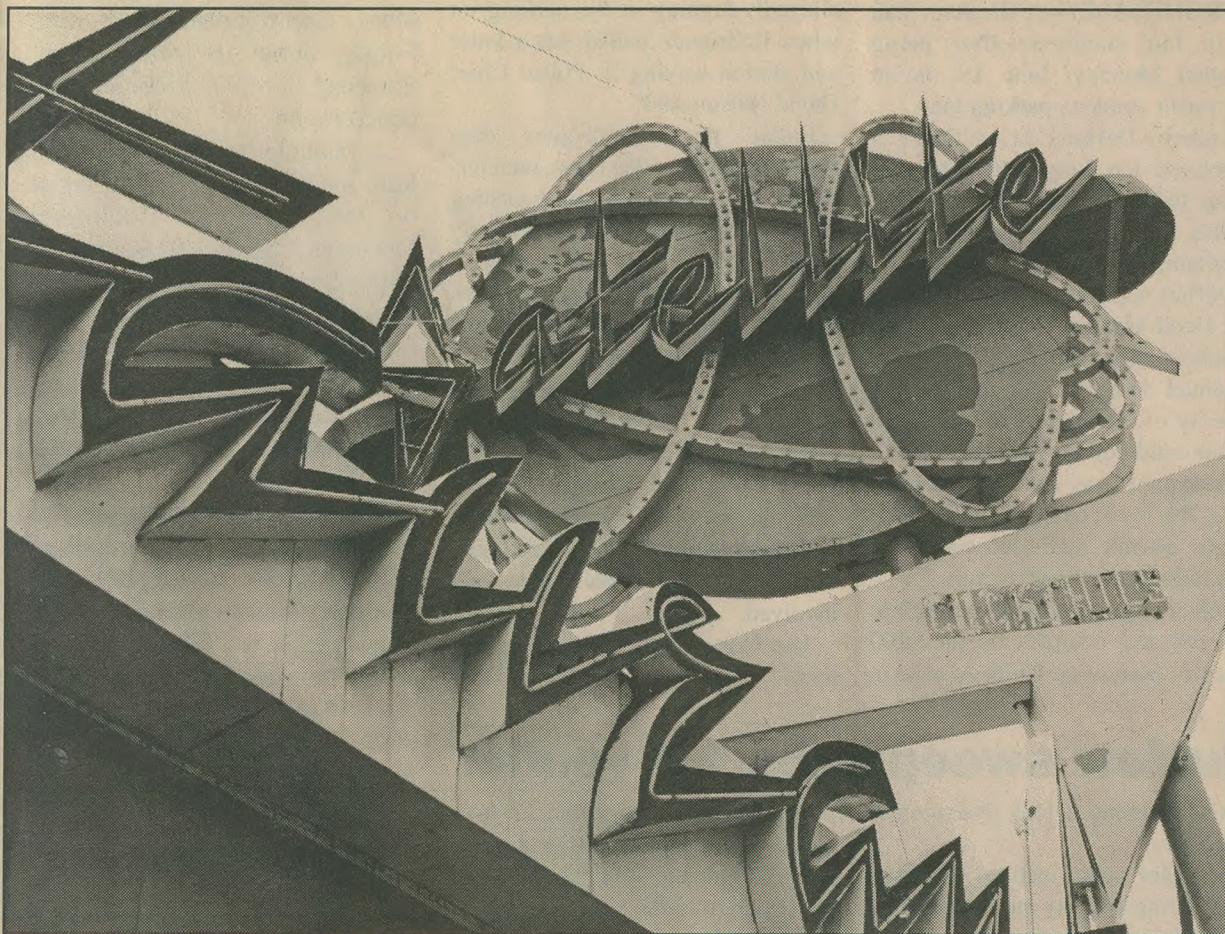
A hand-printed sign on the restaurant's main door thanks customers for their loyal patronage and blames the locked doors on an expiration of the restaurant's lease.

The one-story, oddly-shaped building on Southeast 187th Avenue between East Burnside Road and Southeast Stark Street, had been home to a beauty salon, shoe repair and barber shop, as well as the Satellite. Officials with the building's owner, Fred Meyer, wouldn't comment on future tenants.

Former employees, who asked not to be identified, said the Satellite's lease wasn't the entire problem.

Oregon State Lottery records show the Satellite's lottery contract was terminated Wednesday, June 7, following its third violation for insuffi-

Restaurant closes abruptly



CAMERON HARDY / THE OUTLOOK

The sign for the Satellite Restaurant goes on the auction block today. The Rockwood eatery closed suddenly earlier this month.

cient funds in one year. Video equipment in the lounge had been disabled Saturday, May 27, when the Satellite's electronic transfer account was unable to cover \$7,200, the state's chunk of weekly lottery sales.

The Satellite's lounge housed five video poker machines, in addition to keno and other licensed games of chance. Total lottery sales at the Satellite in 1999, after prize awards, exceeded \$550,000. Commission for the restaurant was more than \$150,000.

According to David Hooper with the Oregon State Lottery

Commission, retailers with three instances of insufficient funds in a year are subject to contract termination. The state reserves the right to terminate after two insufficient fund offenses or require the retailer to post a bond guaranteeing payment.

Hooper said that while Jordan opted not to post a bond, the commission has no reason to believe the funds won't be paid.

"The owner has assured us he will make good on this and he has in the past," Hooper said.

Some former employees have

found work at other local restaurants and lounges. Former Satellite lounge entertainers and managers, Charles and Mikki, have taken up residence at Lydia's in Rockwood.

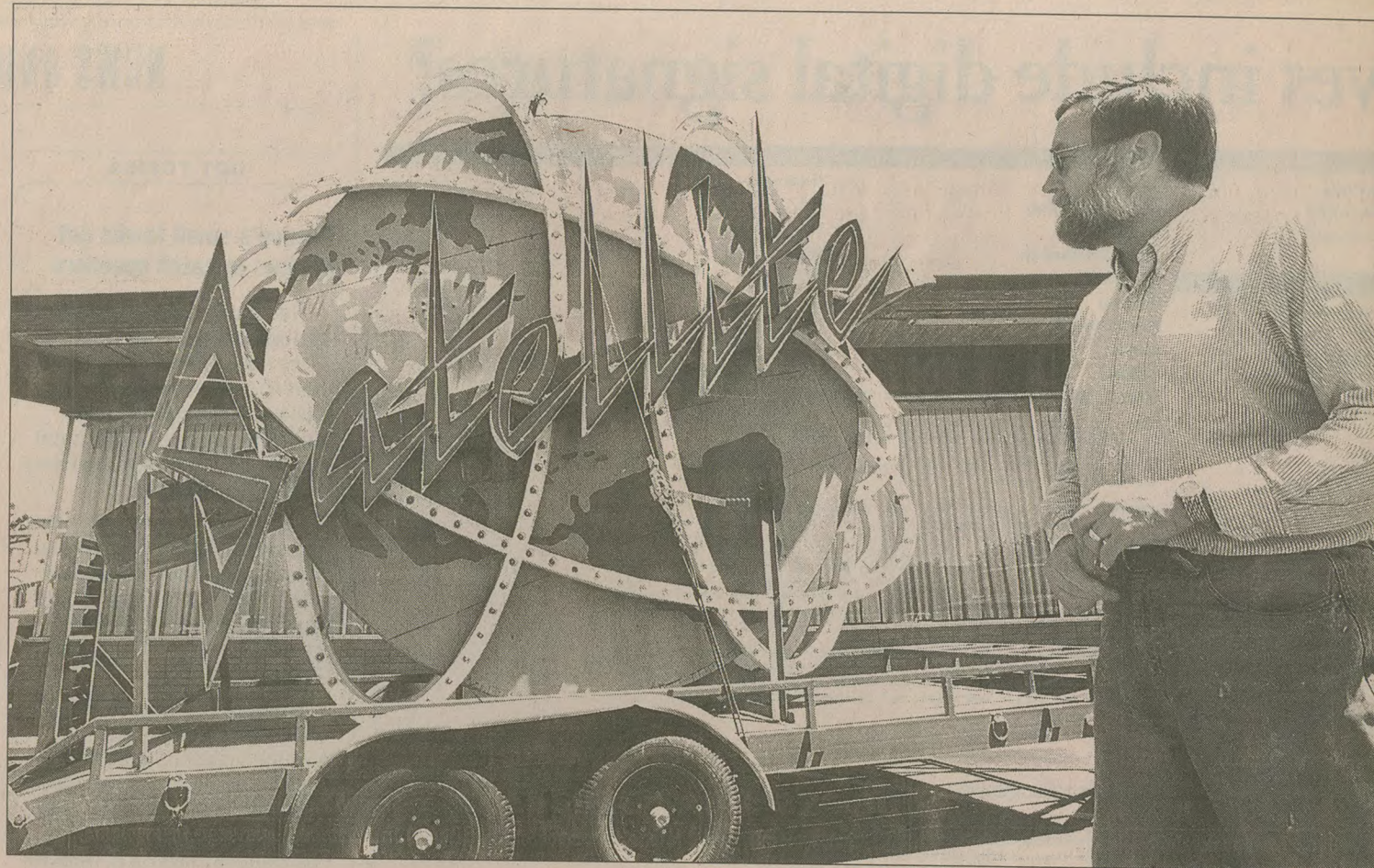
Portland-based Cox Auctions will be overseeing liquidation of the Satellite's machinery, equipment and contents beginning at 11 a.m. Wednesday, June 21. Preview for interested buyers opens at 10 a.m.

Anne Endicott can be reached at GOutlook@aol.com or by calling 492-5116.

Landmark heads to storage

Owner Wayne Jordan checks on the Satellite Restaurant's signature decoration as it's loaded onto a trailer Tuesday. The Rockwood-area restaurant, known for its 1950s-era look, closed earlier this month after Fred Meyer said it would not renew the building's long-term lease. Jordan hopes to reopen within a few years near Northeast 181st Avenue and Halsey Street. Gresham declared the globe a historic landmark and has talked to Jordan about mounting it near a Tri-Met plaza at 186th Street. Otherwise, it will relocate to the roof of Jordan's next restaurant. In the meantime, it will stay in a barn south of Gresham.

ROSS WILLIAM HAMILTON
THE OREGONIAN



Regular customers like being seen as friends

by BARBARA BROWER
of The Outlook staff

When do a pair of aces beat a full house?

When the house is the Satellite Restaurant and the two aces are waitresses Deborah Lee and Alice Polivka.

"This business is very competitive. Alice and Debbie are my edge," says Mary Harris, manager of the Rockwood restaurant for the past 34 years.

The pair of ace waitresses that give the landmark restaurant a pat hand work different shifts but have the same philosophy about what it takes to be a good waitress.

"Our customers love it when we are interested in them. And that's easy because most of the customers here are regulars. They become like family — a part of my life," says Lee, a pretty woman of 30 with long red hair.

"The regulars are the backbone that keeps this place going. They don't come in to see a grouch, they come in to enjoy themselves. And to hear me call them one of my pet names," she says with a giggle that causes Alice to join in the joke.

"Sweetie," "Hun," "Babe," "Brat," and "Ornery," are pet labels for some of Lee's regulars.

"They love it," she says. "I love to tease them and they eat it up. And they give it right back, believe me. Especially my counter customers."

She began working at the Sputnik-era restaurant more than 15 years ago as a bus girl. During the following 18 months, Lee was groomed in the fine art of waitressing by Polivka before she became the youngest waitress to work there.

It takes a special person, Polivka says, to be a waitress and to do it well. She should know. Before coming to work at the Satellite 19 years ago, the Sandy resident served meals at the Mallard Restaurant, where Don's Restaurant is now on North Main Avenue in Gresham.

When the Gresham diner burned, Polivka planned to do all those things around her home she had put off doing. Within a couple of weeks, she was asked to help out at the Satellite for a few weeks.

"I came here to help for three weeks and ended up staying for 19 years," laughs Polivka, a healthy woman in her 50s.

"I've been here so many years, and I like it here so well, that it seems like a second home to me. This is a good house to work for," she says.

She enjoys the relaxed atmosphere of swing shifts. Polivka knows which customers would rather sit in a booth or at the counter. She memorizes what dressing her customers like on their salads and whether they would prefer soup with or without crackers.

"Everyone loves to be greeted by their name when they come in. And

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— Deborah Lee

they want to know the food is the same and fixed the way they are used to. I get attached to my customers each in their own certain way," Polivka says.

"I wait for them to feel free to talk about what's happening in their lives. Everybody has problems and needs someone to listen now and then. And they are thrilled when I remember to ask about this and that the next time they come in," she says.

Lee enjoys the fast pace of the morning shift and the simplicity of serving breakfast.

"There's no soup or salad. People want their coffee and their hot cakes or omelet and they're ready to go on the day," Lee says.

Both good-natured women can serve up more than meals. They have learned to dole out as much teasing and practical joking as they have received.

"Walt and George would regularly tape our tips to the counter or attach a string to them and pull it away when we go to pick it up," Lee recalls.

Another teasing customer, an avid fisherman, had a good laugh upon

discovering gummy worms cooked into his pancakes. He was convinced he had consumed fishing worms.

"He deserved that. The whole place was laughing," Lee says.

Polivka laughs heartily as she recalls that the gummy-worm customer got off easily compared to the customer who found phony plastic cockroaches in between his hot cakes.

"I even had a customer who usually glued his coffee cup to the counter. It's all part of the fun. We work hard, but we have some good times and fun, too," Polivka says.

Both women also have customers who come into the eatery just to see them.

"They come in just to see their gals," Harris says. "I think if they left, their customers would go with them."

"When Alice took off work to have surgery, the place was devastated. Some of her regulars didn't even come in. People wanted to know how she was doing constantly. I literally hung a notice on the wall so I wouldn't have to keep repeating myself," she says.

When asked to describe the perfect employee, the long-time manager simply points to her waitresses and says, "You're looking at them."

"They have near perfect attendance, they are well-liked by their customers who always come first, they are honest, they get along with fellow workers and I would feel comfortable leaving one of them in charge," she says.

"Communication is a skill you have to have to be a good waitress. These gals treat people as individuals. They make friends of their customers."