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How the giant Genesee Beer sign in Auburn was saved (and relit)

Published: Saturday, August 13, 2011, 6:10 AM Updated: Saturday, August 13, 2011, 11:19 AM



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The Genesee Beer sign in downtown Auburn will be lit up on Aug. 13 for the first time in 40 years.

Auburn, NY -- For years, the cost to maintain the giant Genesee Beer sign that looms over downtown Auburn included one case of Genny Cream Ale each month.

Rochester-based **Genesee Brewing Co.** regularly sent the beer to Nicholas Speno Jr., owner of the music store on whose roof the sign was placed. That, plus the annual rent of \$1,500, meant the sign continued to be a landmark for motorists heading to or through downtown Auburn, as it has for nearly 60 years.

Three years ago, it almost disappeared. The brewery, which has had several ownership changes in recent years, seemed ready to stop paying rent and let the sign come down.

But after a campaign led by Speno, who died last year, and his son, Mike Speno, the sign is not only staying put, it's undergone a \$60,000 restoration, paid for by the brewery.

On Saturday, as part of Auburn's annual Founders Day celebration, the renovated sign will be lit up for the first time since the mid-1970s. State-of-the-art LED lights have been installed to replace the original neon tubes.

Lighting the sign

Genesee Brewing Co. and distributor B.E. Wright are hosting a "Genesee Lights the Night" celebration starting at 7 p.m. Aug. 13. It's in Market Street Park in downtown Auburn, and features music and specials on Genesee Beer, Genesee Cream Ale and Genny Light. The sign will be lit at 9 p.m.

The sign, 26 feet high and 48 feet wide, found its place atop the six-story building then called Auburn Music Center at 3 E. Genesee St. in 1952. The store later became Speno Music.

"It's such a major part of Auburn, a landmark that everyone knows, it would have been a shame to see it go," Mike Speno said. "I feel really good this happened, and just wish my father was here to see it."

"The brewery came scouting locations for a sign and my grandfather (Nicholas Speno Sr.) agreed to it," Mike Speno

said. "It's really something out of the golden age of 1950's advertising."

The sign was lit up at night until the mid-1970s, when that decade's "energy crisis" made the cost of powering the neon tubing out of reach. The tubes were removed, and the sign was painted Genesee's signature red and white.

Even without the lights, the sign was prominent. But Mike Speno said that wasn't always the case.

Urban renewal — and the building of the Routes 5 and 20 "arterial" through Auburn — knocked down many of the taller buildings in the area in the 1970s. In their absence, Speno said, the Genesee Beer sign really stood out.

It's 85 feet from the ground to the top of the sign.

It was good for the Speno family's business.

"Nobody ever had trouble finding us — we're right under the Genesee Beer sign," Speno said. "Any way you turn, from Route 34, North Street, the arterial — look up at the skyline and you see the sign."

When they thought Genesee might give up on the sign, the Spenos put together packets of information that included old news stories, videotaped testimonials and other evidence that Auburnians felt a keen tie to the sign. They worked on the project with the Auburn Business Improvement District.

Eventually, the message was heard at Genesee headquarters, especially after a company called North American Breweries took control of the Rochester brewery in 2009.

"We were hearing from people asking what we were going to do with the sign, why aren't we getting it fixed," said Lisa Texido, brand manager for Genesee beers. "So we said, 'We have to keep that sign.'"

"The support from the Auburn community was phenomenal."

It coincided with Genesee's decision to emphasize the newly hip "retro" nature of the Genesee brand — and with the brewery's mission to highlight its historic place in Upstate New York's beer culture.

"We're always hearing from people around here who say this is the beer my uncles drank, or this was my father's favorite beer," Texido said. "It's great that this sign is right here in our backyard. It's our way of saying 'Genesee is back.'"

The only similar sign sits atop the Genesee brewery itself — though that one reads "Genesee Beer & Ale." That one has been restored and relit, too.

The Auburn sign will be run on a timer that will turn it on at dusk each night and off at dawn.

Mike Speno said he's not much of a beer drinker himself, but his father — like so many other Upstate New Yorkers —

loved Genesee Cream Ale.

"It's really perfect here," Speno said of the sign. "It's a blue collar beer and this was always a blue collar town. It belongs here."

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