

MHS COLLECTIONS

*“Washburn A Mill as it appeared when the explosion occurred,” stereograph by William Jacoby, May 2, 1878*

DO PHOTOS RECORD ACTUAL EVENTS? Usually not, especially not disasters as they occur. Photograph collections are replete with “aftermath” photos, yet we often crave an eyewitness view of the unfolding event. In 1878 film speeds were slow, and newspaper printing presses could not handle photos. So, William H. Jacoby, a leading commercial photographer in Minneapolis from 1867 to 1887, created this image to satisfy a demand.

At 7 P.M. on May 2, flour dust ignited the most horrific explosion in the history of Minneapolis milling, “the most direful calamity which has ever befallen the City,” said the next day’s *Tribune*. The explosion, which was heard miles away in St. Paul, demolished seven mills. Eighteen men, including the entire night crew of the Washburn A Mill, were killed. People wanted to “see” the frightening event for themselves.

Jacoby’s specialty was the stereograph, a double image that becomes three-dimensional when viewed with a

stereoscope. The A Mill exploded at a time when consumers were buying dozens of stereographs of people, places, and events from all over the world to inform and entertain themselves in their parlors. Jacoby copyrighted this image within two weeks and produced a set of 18 views, mainly unaltered stereographs of the aftermath.

Here, however, Jacoby reconstructed the explosion as if seen from the Winslow House looking over the log-filled pond on the east side of the Mississippi River. By scratching and painting the negative, he created a vision of debris rising hundreds of feet into the air. Imagine the stereo viewer of 1878 sitting comfortably in the parlor, peering at this image while reading about collapsing walls, rampant fire, and lost hopes.

—BONNIE WILSON

*Bonnie Wilson is the curator of sound and visual collections at the Minnesota Historical Society.*

## Neon Billboard

*Nicollet Island, Hennepin County*

“SIGNS OFTEN BECOME SO IMPORTANT to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. . . . They no longer merely advertise. . . . They become icons.”\*

So it is with the Grain Belt beer sign on Minneapolis’s Nicollet Island, a colorful piece of pre-World War II roadside architecture that edges the Hennepin Avenue Bridge in the St. Anthony Falls Historic District. The sign was a product of the Minneapolis Brewing Company, an enterprise just upstream of Nicollet Island, formed by the merger of four breweries in 1890.

At Prohibition’s end in 1933, the financially strapped brewery reemerged into a nation gripped by the Great Depression. To increase sales, it turned to billboard advertisements, some of which won industry awards. The most prominent was this neon sign erected in 1940.

The elevated, roughly 40-by-40-foot porcelain bottle cap features incandescent lettering accented with neon

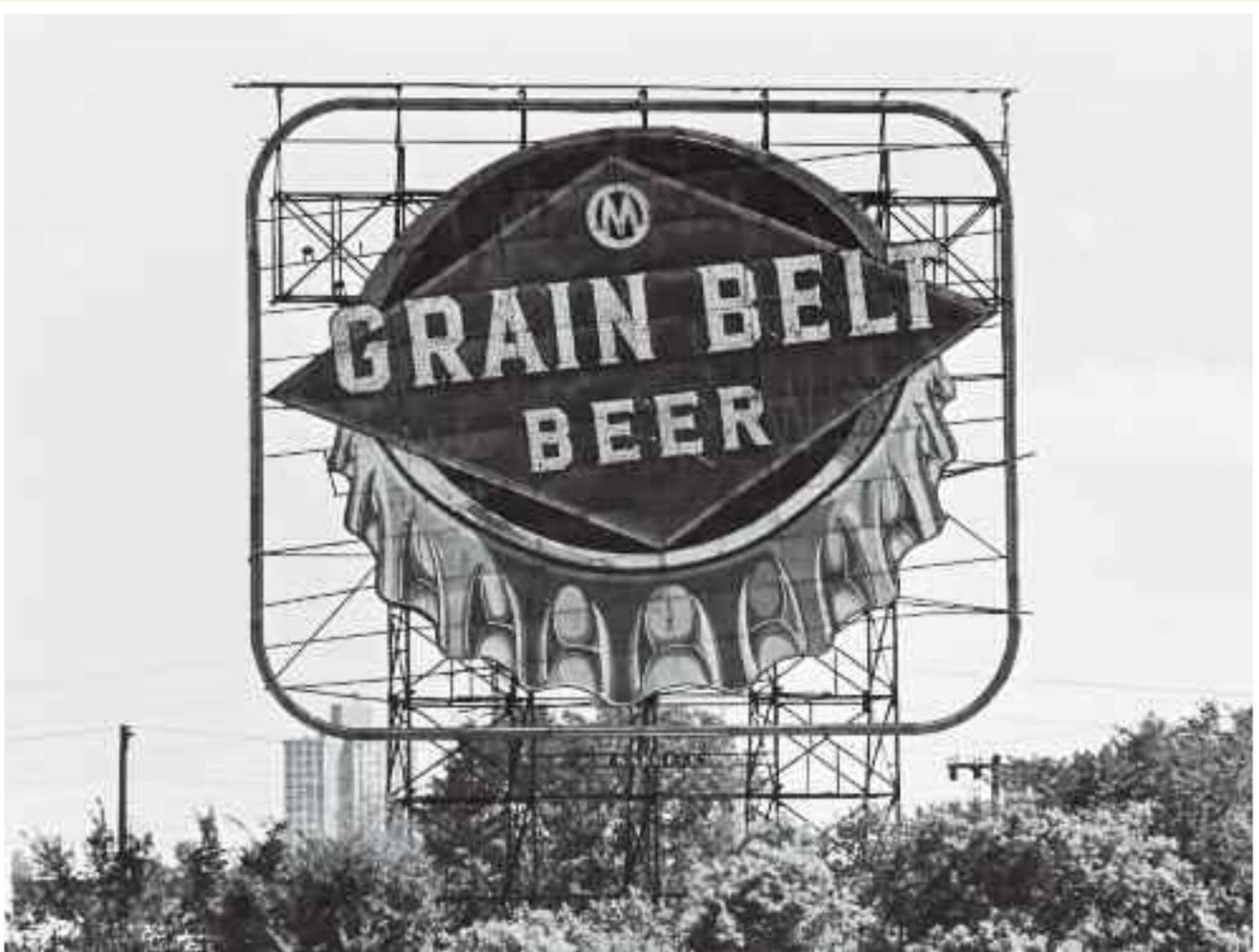
tubing. Neon, a gas that glows when electricity passes through it, first graced signs in the 1920s. Reaching their height of popularity in the 1940s, neon advertisements were soon supplanted by cheaper, more durable signs made of backlit plastic.

When Grain Belt Brewery closed in the mid-1970s, its red neon sign went dark. Possibly the only billboard of its kind left in the region, the local landmark was restored in 1989. These days it is turned on only occasionally. When this large and colorful reflection of Minneapolis’s brewing heritage is illuminated, grab your camera.

—DENIS GARDNER

*Denis Gardner is writing a book featuring many of Minnesota’s National Register properties.*

\*Sources: Michael J. Auer, “The Preservation of Historic Signs,” *Preservation Briefs* 25 (Oct. 1991): 4, 6 (quote); Michael R. Worcester, “Been A Long Time A-Brewing: A History of the Minneapolis Brewing Company, 1890–1975” (master’s thesis, St. Cloud State University, 1993), 26–27, 98–105; Martha H. Frey, “City of Minneapolis HPC Staff Report,” Feb. 1993, Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission.





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