

History Comes Alive!

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



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Hollywood And its Sign

LA's signature sign marks the "birthplace of the movies"... and a state of mind.

Photos courtesy the Herman J. Schultheis Collection and the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, Christina Rice, Acting Sr. Librarian, and from the Alive! archives

Before there was a sign, there had to be a Hollywood. That name came about in 1887. According to Daeida Wilcox, wife of town founder Harvey Wilcox, she had met a woman on a train who referred to her Florida summer home as Hollywood. Mrs. Wilcox was so enamored with the name that she suggested it to her husband, and the rest became history.

In 1923, the sign, slightly different than today, was born on Mount Lee. *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler was also a real estate developer. His new property was upscale, and to endorse it he had a sign, Hollywoodland, placed above the subdivisions. The sign was 50 feet high and 450 feet long. The sign also had 4,000 20-watt bulbs, spaced eight inches apart. The initial cost to construct it was \$21,000. The caretaker lived in a cabin behind a letter "L."

The city of Hollywood was actually adjacent to Silver Lake and Edendale districts where the first movie studios appeared. For some reason actors, cowboys and the like wanted to live in Hollywood. This was extremely upsetting to the original Hollywoodland settlers, who were straight-laced and very religious. In 1903, Hollywood had 700 residents, but by the late 1920s, it had risen to 4,000.

The Hollywood Sign in the 1930s suffered a tragic episode. With the advent of the talkies, Hollywood was inundated with young hopefuls trying to make a name for themselves. But with the stock market crash, the studios were frantically attempting to adjust to the economy and used established actors. In 1932, a young Broadway actress, Peg Entwistle, was so discouraged at not finding work that she climbed Mount Lee and up a 50-foot workman's ladder to the "H," from where she plunged to her death.

In the 1940s, America was at war. Hollywood and its sign became a

reminder in movies as to what was occurring abroad. During that early era, the Hollywoodland real estate development went belly-up. This was another casualty of the Depression. The sign, which had not been maintained in years, became the property of the City of Los Angeles in 1944. According to an unnamed computer historian, the sign had made an unheralded transition from billboard to de facto

meted due to high wartime expenditures. Along with this, for a decade from the early 1940s through the 1950s, the number of television sets found in American homes soared from 10,000 to more than 12 million.

Movie studios tried all kinds of gimmicks, i.e. widescreens, three dimensions, Technicolor, stereo sound, even free gifts. Payrolls diminished, and back

was reborn.

In 1992, the California Attorney General granted three official agencies to care for the sign: the City of L.A., which owns the sign; the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, which owns licensing rights for the sign's image; and the Hollywood Sign Trust, which repairs and provides capital improvements for the sign. Hired security was also employed.



A helicopter flies an oversized Oscar statue over the Hollywood Sign in preparation for the 60th Academy Awards presentation on April 11, 1988. Photo by Mike Mullen.

civic landmark, but salvation would have to wait until after World War II.

The postwar years caused a big change in movies and the birth of television. Due to the fear in America of Communists overrunning the country, many actors, directors, writers and producers were blacklisted. Also, movie ticket sales plum-

lots were bare and sprouted weeds.

Finally, there was a transition to television. Hollywood became the production home for TV networks from the East Coast. Soon the studios, which had been very reluctant to produce for television, were responding to the new technology of the future.

At about the same time, the Hollywood Sign was going through a major change of its own. In 1949, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce decided to upgrade and change the sign. The organization removed the last four letters – "LAND" – and repaired the remaining ones, even the toppled "H." What appeared was a cleaner and leaner sign.

By the 1960s, the sign deteriorated from bad weather and financial conditions. In 1973, Cultural Affairs made it an official monument, with Gloria Swanson officiating. The event didn't happen due to fog. In the 1970s, caricatures appeared of the sign: HOLLYWEED and later HOLLYWOOD! Hollywood was making a comeback in the 1970s. The sign served as an emblem for the great return.

In 1978, Hugh Hefner had a fundraiser at the Playboy Mansion, where letters of the sign were auctioned off at \$27,700 per letter. Other celebrities purchased individual letters. The old sign was dismantled in 1978, leaving the area without a sign for three months. By using 194 tons of concrete, steel and enamel, the sign



Mr. LA, Councilman Tom LaBonge,
Club Member.

In 2004, the sign celebrated its 80th birthday; in 2005, it received a new paint job. This sign is Mr. LA, Councilman Tom LaBonge's baby! Other people who have contributed to current upgrading of the sign beyond Hugh Hefner are: The Tiffany & Co. Foundation, Aileen Getty and Hollywood leaders and fans around the world. Other contributors have been Will Rogers, President and CEO of the Trust for Public Land; former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger; Chris Baumgart of the Hollywood Sign Trust, and Councilman Tom LaBonge, Club Member.

Long may it live!



The Hollywoodland Sign, circa 1938. In 1923, Harry Chandler's real estate development Hollywoodland was loosely bounded by Mulholland to the west, Hollyridge Drive to the east and Belden Drive to the south. The development was planned as a single-family subdivision with a "European village" character featuring a variety of Revival architectural styles including Mediterranean, English and French. The Hollywood Sign atop of Mount Lee was declared a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument in 1973. Photo by Herman J. Schultheis.