

Hollywood!

It ain't Texas, but...

by
Mike Prero



Hollywood! Is there any California landmark more famous anywhere in the world? [except, of course, the Sierra-Diablo club house] It's only a shade of its former self, but the name lives on!

Hollywood's story goes all the way back to 1883, when Kansas prohibitionist Harvey Wilcox came to Los Angeles, opened a real estate office and began to buy and subdivide nearby property. In 1886, Wilcox bought a 120-acre tract that ran from Whitley Ave. east on Sunset Blvd. to Gower; north on Gower to Hollywood Blvd., west to Vine St., north to Franklin Ave., west to Whitley, and south to Sunset. The purchase price was \$150 an acre. It was Mrs. Wilcox that came up with the name "Hollywood," after a friend's summer home in the East.

By 1900, (the Wilcox ranch having been subdivided), Hollywood already had a population of some 500. The main body of Hollywood sprawled to the south, down Hollywood Blvd—then called Prospect Ave. To the west, one could see the ocean on a clear day. Half a dozen communities lay between Hollywood and the ocean, and, like Hollywood, they were experiencing phenomenal growth. Hollywood became a city in three more years, and by 1919 the population would grow to 4,000.

And Hollywood began to add its early landmarks and notable features.

The first 40-room unit of the Hollywood Hotel was completed in 1910. As the film colony grew during ensuing years, the hotel became the social center of Hollywood.

Bad weather in Chicago during 1907 forced Col. William Selig, head of Selig Polyscope Company, to send a film company to the Southwest to film scenes for *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The California movie industry was about to begin. The Selig company eventually moved back to Chicago, but director Francis Boggs rented a vacant Chinese laundry at Eighth and Olive and built a 40-foot stage next door. There, he filmed *The Heart of a Race*, the first movie to be made completely in California. It was released on July 27, 1909.

The first Hollywood film studio was established by the Nestor Film Company of Bayonne, NJ, in 1911. The first Hollywood movie was Nestor's *The Law of the Range*, eventually shown in Hollywood's first theatre, the *Idyl Hour*, established around early 1911. The Nestor Film Company discovered it could churn out picture after picture in Hollywood with few delays from bad weather. Other companies, marveling at the process, came to Hollywood to learn the secret. Within a few months, fifteen companies were shooting in and around Hollywood.

But there was another reason besides the good weather that these film companies were flocking to southern California. In the East, movie companies were wallowing in a morass of suits, injunctions, raids and riots that had begun in 1897, when Thomas Edison started suing independent producers for patent infringement. Edison formed the Motion Picture Patents Company, which then waged one of the most vigorous battles in the history of American industrialism against these independents. The pirates fled to Florida, to Cuba, and finally to California.

In 1912, Universal Pictures [as Universal Film Manufacturing Company] was born. It then acquired the Nestor company. Cecil B. DeMille, operating out of half a Hollywood barn, shot *The Squaw Man* in 1914. Other future greats were then to be seen in Hollywood, as well—Adolph Zukor, Samuel Goldwyn, Mack Sennet, and a host of others.

From 1910 to 1920, Hollywood's population jumped 72%, from 5,000 to 36,000; nine years later, the population would reach 157,000. In 1919, four of Hollywood's most creative film practitioners created United Artists: Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks. And there were Columbia, Fox, Warner Brothers, and the list goes on. By 1920, 40 million Americans were going to the movies each week, and most of the films they saw were being produced in Hollywood by more than twenty studios.

When Grauman's Chinese Theatre was constructed in 1927, no one expected it to become one of the biggest tourist attractions in California and the most famous movie theatre in the world, but when silent screen star Norma Talmadge visited the new theatre and accidentally stepped into a sidewalk of wet cement, it was the beginning of a landmark which is seen by nearly two million visitors each year.

The Warner Brothers Theatre opened the following year. At the time, it was the largest theatre in Hollywood. It was the Hollywood Pantages, however, which was to be the largest, most original, and certainly the most ornate of Hollywood's great movie palaces, opening in 1930. Of all, it was by far the grandest. The vaulted grand lobby, the largest in Los Angeles, was flanked by twin stairways at either end and covered by the most original modern ceiling in gold and henna shades. In 1949, when RKO acquired the theatre, the Academy Awards moved in and was held there for ten years.

Movie publicists had nothing on land promoters, however, when it came to hoopla and bright lights. The

Hollywoodland subdivision syndicate created one of history's most spectacular—and lengthy—promotion campaigns, and gave the community its most conspicuous landmark. To attract attention to the subdivision's home sites, Harry Chandler, one of the builders, put up a \$21,000 sign with letters 50' high reading *HOLLYWOODLAND* on the side of Mt. Cahuenga above the tract. The thirteen-letter sign was studded with 4,000 light bulbs. At night, it could be seen for miles! In 1939, fifteen years after it was built, maintenance of the sign was discontinued. All 4,000 light bulbs were stolen, no doubt by souvenir enthusiasts. The sign was vandalized and fell into disrepair. Finally, in 1945, it and the land surrounding it was donated to the city's Recreation and Parks Department. In 1949, the parks' commission decided to tear the sign down, but later reversed itself and allowed the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce to repair the first nine letters and remove the last four. Since then, the sign has read *HOLLYWOOD*.

Although Hollywood's golden age is over [*I must be getting old; I seem to be saying that about everything!*], the undenied richness of its past is captured forever in its matchcovers. To browse through such a Hollywood collection is to recall people, places and events that are almost both mythical and magical today. Theatre covers show photos of such Hollywood film greats as Tyrone Power, Wallace Beery, Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, and so many others; Hollywood's great hotels, restaurants, night clubs, and more, are all there...on matchcovers.

If you'd like to start a Hollywood collection, it's easy enough. You can find Hollywood covers here and there, in a great variety of shapes, sizes, and manumarks. The classics, however, are to be found among your old covers, Crowns especially, since the Crown Match Co. was located in Los Angeles and was producing those renowned beauties all through the 1930s. Not too many of us have extensive Crown collections, however, so if you're really serious about this, you're going to have to do constant searching. Keep your eyes peeled and let your traders know what you're looking for. Effort is usually rewarded with success...and success in this case means Hollywood at its peak!

