

A Town's Sign of Its Times

It's not as ornate as the Taj Mahal. It's not as old as the Great Wall of China. Still, the Hollywood Sign perched on the hills over Los Angeles has become a "wonder" of the world. It calls up images of fame, fortune, and golden opportunity. And for people all around the world it has come to stand for the glamour of the movies.

The town of Hollywood, though, existed long before the movies. It certainly existed before the sign that represents it. But the town's rise, fall, and eventual rebirth, its growth from a scrub desert to an entertainment capital, is best reflected in the Sign that bears its name.

The Before Time

The first human residents in the region were the Gabrielino Indians. We know this because in 1769 a Spanish priest recorded the information. They lived in brush huts scattered throughout the canyons. Then the Spanish came in greater numbers and established the town of Los Angeles. The Gabrielinos vanished with hardly a trace. "Cahuenga" is the native name for the region's "little hills." It is one of the few reminders that the Gabrielinos existed.

Mexico controlled all of California, both its territory and its resources, until the war of 1847. It was Mexican culture that influenced the region's initial growth. However, when the United States defeated Mexico things changed. The original landowners lost their vast estates to farmers from the East. Wood frame houses with porches and windmills replaced the adobe shelters. The landscape took on a new look.



An 1895 Hollywood panorama.

Even with the flood of settlers, Hollywood remained frontier territory for the rest of the 19th century. It had pioneers, cowboys, and even the occasional bandit. One of its more colorful inhabitants was a man named "Greek George." He arrived in the Cahuenga Valley with a herd of camels he imported from Turkey. When the Mexican War broke out, George simply let the camels loose. They roamed free throughout the Hollywood Hills until about 1900.

In 1897, the residents established the first post office at the Sackett Hotel. Hollywood formally became a town. But it was far from the glamorous city we think of today. Liquor was prohibited, except when purchased by a medical prescription. Bicycles were outlawed on the sidewalks. And horses, cattle, and mules could not be driven through the streets in herds of more than 200. Herds of more than 2,000 hogs or sheep were banned entirely, unless they were attended by a "competent man."

Still, change was in the works. Real estate developers tempted Easterners with promises of plenty of sun, wide streets, and homes that looked like palaces. Railroads crisscrossed the valley, making travel quick and easy. Hotels, schools, churches, and lavish houses sprung up like the weeds they replaced. And in 1907, the first “film people” arrived, a small film company originally from Chicago.

By 1911 the first real studio, the Nestor Film Company, took up permanent residence. They produced three complete pictures -- one western, one eastern, and one comedy -- each week. And they made them each for a mere \$1200! Budgets were tight and each scene had to be matched to the number of feet of film available. That meant the actors had to rehearse again and again, timing their delivery literally to the second. Even so, word of Hollywood’s film-friendly climate spread. Almost overnight a large numbers of New York movie people began to come.

By 1913, Hollywood was in the midst of a major transformation. The population boomed, and film replaced farm. In fact, studios had to share space in Hollywood barns with assorted livestock. Cows and horses and pigs served double duty, “acting” in many westerns. Film giants, such as Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith, built the foundations of the Big Studios that would rule Hollywood for decades to come. Real banks and businesses stood in for their fictional equivalents in film hold-ups. Streets were roped off periodically for staged car crashes.

The realities of early film production were less than glamorous, though. For example, DeMille had to wear galoshes every time the horses were watered because the run-off seeped into his office. But by 1916 Hollywood’s promise lured many determined and eager stars from all over the globe.

Birth of a Sign

1918 marked the beginning of yet a new era. The west coast’s film capital moved to Hollywood from Santa Barbara. The population continued to soar -- from an initial 5,000 in 1910 to 36,000 in 1920. New movie palaces such as Grauman’s Chinese Theater, “glamour” addresses, clubs, and high-rise skylines quickly changed the landscape. For all their high-profile stunts and “thinking big,” though, the movie promoters met their match in the new breed of real estate developers.

In 1923 the Hollywoodland Real Estate Group began one of history’s biggest, well-known, and longest-lived ads. The original idea was to promote a prime piece of property in the wooded hills overlooking the downtown Los Angeles area. The company spent \$21,000 to erect an enormous sign right on the side of Mt. Cahuenga. It originally read “Hollywoodland,” with the period as a giant white dot. Each of the 13 letters stood 30 feet wide and 50 feet tall. They were constructed of 3 x 9 metal squares, all held up by an intricate frame of scaffolding, pipes, wires and telephone poles.

The Sign featured 4,000 20-watt bulbs, all spaced 8 inches apart. At night they would blink one after the other -- first “Holly,” then “wood,” then “land,” with the dot below having its own flashing moment. The Sign was so bright it was visible from 25 miles away. It put Hollywood on the map. It was supposed to last just a year and a half. However, the Sign has survived, in one form or another, for over 78 years.



The Sign's dedication ceremony in 1923.

The Decay . . .

By the late 1920s, Hollywood began to change again. Sound forever transformed the movies – Warner Bros.' 1927 film “The Jazz Singer” with Al Jolson was the first sound picture (and won the first Oscar -- see sidebar). Careers were made and broken overnight. Actors discovered that previously unheard accents and speech difficulties worked against them. And the new medium of radio took the town by storm.

Hollywood was doing a booming business when tragedy struck. In 1929, the stock market crashed. It began the lean years of the Great Depression. Money was scarce. Resources were scarcer. Yet the film industry managed to do better than most other industries. Now, more than ever, people wanted to find some way to escape the harsh world around them. What little extra money they had, they spent on movies. They loved the fluff and fantasy they saw on the screen. The Hollywood Sign, though, was not so fortunate. It quickly fell prey to the times.

Fantasy and reality clashed harshly when an actress by the name of Lillian Millicent “Peg” Entwistle, decided to further her career in the glitter of Hollywood. She was a graduate of the world-famous Theater Guild and a “name” on Broadway. Like many others, she headed out west to make her fortune. The movies, though, did not embrace her. She saw the Hollywood Sign not as a symbol of hope, but as a symbol of the industry that had rejected her. In September 1932, she climbed to the top of the 50-foot “H” and jumped to her death.

Shortly afterwards the Sign's developers went bankrupt. By 1939 maintenance came to a complete halt. All 4,000 bulbs were stolen. Gaping holes appeared in the letters because of vandalism and the weather. The once-shining letters began to disappear. The area's residents complained that “Loose Signs ... Sink Neighborhoods.” They argued that the Sign should be removed. Like the town and the world around it, depression and chaos ruled. In 1944, the developer sold the last 450 acres of its land, which included the Sign, to the city. There it sat and waited for someone to rescue it.

. . . and Neglect

The Sign declined further when, in 1949, wind blew the large “H” down. Critics claimed the Sign’s run-down state was a further symbol of Hollywood’s fall. They wanted it removed.

Hollywood itself fared no better. The movie industry’s high profile made it vulnerable to anti-liberal attacks. Senator Joseph McCarthy rounded up 19 prominent writers, directors and actors. He claimed that they were Communist sympathizers and that they were producing subversive films. Ten of these victims were sent to jail. By the early 50s, 400 Hollywood writers, actors and directors were “blacklisted.” They couldn’t find work and no one would help. Fear and distrust ruled.

In addition, from 1946-1951 the number of TV sets in American homes jumped from 10,000 to more than 12 million. That forced the studios to cut their payrolls. Back lots sprouted weeds and sound stages went black. Film producers scrambled for ways to bring moviegoers back to the theaters. They came up with wide screens, 3-D, Technicolor, stereo sound -- even free dishes. Nothing worked.

To make matters even worse, residents began to leave the city for the suburbs in large numbers. They preferred malls and multiplexes to the glamour theaters. Hollywood itself began a decline. It seemed to hit rock bottom when, in the mid-60s, a series of obscenity rulings changed what could be shown at a movie theater. The town filled up with “adult” theaters. Sex on the screen brought other “adult” businesses -- massage parlors, specialty bookstores, and porn shows.

In 1949, the Chamber of Commerce removed the letters that spelled “LAND” and repaired the rest. In 1973 the Cultural Heritage Board gave the Sign Landmark status. It was too late. The damage had been done. Like the town around it, the glitter had been replaced by squalor.

Changing Luck

Change did not come immediately, either to Hollywood or to the Sign. In fact, even with its Landmark status, the Sign suffered. In 1976, for example, someone changed the Sign to read “HOLLYWEED.” It was an attempt to encourage looser marijuana laws. Then the top of the “D” fell down, the first “O” broke apart, and the third “O” toppled down the mountain. Soon after, an arsonist set fire to the bottom of the second “L.” Even after the Chamber launched a “Save the Sign” campaign, efforts to help it still seemed cursed. A 1973 gala with silent star Gloria Swanson failed when a heavy fog settled in. A 1977 charity concert with Fleetwood Mac fell through after local residents protested.

Interestingly enough, it was Hugh Hefner who made the difference. He opened up the Playboy Mansion to help raise money. Letter “donors” came forward. Alice Cooper bought the “O” in honor of Groucho Marx. Gene Autry bought an “L,” and Andy Williams bought the “W.” In August 1978, there was enough money to begin to restore the Sign. It took three months, and 194 tons of concrete, enamel letters, and steel frames to finish. The new Sign was unveiled at Hollywood’s 75th anniversary. Sixty million people watched the live ceremony on television.

The Sign's face-lift ignited a widespread rebirth throughout Hollywood. Historic theaters and hotels received multi-million dollar makeovers. By 1980, a \$90 million grant from the federal government allowed the city itself to begin improvements. Trains returned. And when the Olympic Games came to Los Angeles in 1984, the Hollywood Sign was illuminated for two weeks. It drew visitors and television viewers from around the globe.

Hollywood began to "go global" in the early 1980s. At the same time, the costs of film production soared. The movie industry fixed its eye even more on the bottom line. It began to depend not only on box office receipts, but also on profits from foreign sales, television, videos, and product spin-offs. More and more films were shot overseas and on location elsewhere in the United States. In reality, Hollywood became the "movie capital" in name only.

Still, the Hollywood Sign stands as a symbol of the magic of movies and the town most famous for bringing them to life. In 1995 property owners formed the Hollywood Business District. Their efforts at security, street cleaning, and marketing reduced crime by 50 percent during its first 180 days of operation. Its success has brought a new wave of posh hotels, theaters, eateries, and shopping.

It's an ending that could only be made in Hollywood.



The Envelope Please...

The Academy Awards are also known as the Oscars. They are one of the most recognizable parts of Hollywood and the movie industry. Every year millions of people around the world watch the telecast with bated breath. Who will win the major prize? What most people don't know, though, is how the nominees are selected. Who votes to nominate the films and the actors in the first place? And who decides which ones will ultimately win?

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) was established in 1927. That was the period when the first "talking pictures" were being made. The Academy designed the awards as a way to recognize the "best" representatives in each category of movie making. They also wanted to encourage higher levels of quality in all production areas.

Originally composed of only 36 members, the AMPAS is a professional organization. Its ranks have grown now to over 6,000. Membership is by invitation only. It is determined solely by the Board of Governors. The Academy includes 13 branches: Actors, Art Directors, Cinematographers, Directors, Executives, Film Editors, Musicians, Producers, Public Relations, Short Film and Feature Animators, Sound Recordists and Editors, Visual Effects Artists and Writers. The representatives from each of the areas must measure up to the Academy's (and the industry's) high standard. That standard might include an entire body of work, an Academy Award nomination, or some other award.

The Academy mails Oscar nomination ballots to its members in January. The firm of PricewaterhouseCoopers reveals the results during the first part of February. Then final ballots are mailed out early in March. Members are given two weeks to cast their vote from among the nominees and return them to the company. No one except for two partners of the firm knows the results until the envelopes are opened on stage during the live Awards Presentation in March.

Up to five nominations are allowed in each category. However, only members of the Academy within that specific branch can vote. For instance, only Academy members within the acting branch can vote for the Best Acting Oscars. Only directors can vote for the Best Director Oscar. This is true for all categories except for Best Picture. In this category all voting Academy members can nominate the films. Final winners in each category are also determined by a full membership vote.