

# THE HIGHLAND

## Marks 50th anniversary playing to empty house



THE YEAR OF THE OPENING — Pasadena Avenue (now North Figueroa Street) looked like this in 1925 when Highland Theatre celebrated grand opening near Avenue 56.

Show's sign is visible at right. Some 3000 people crowded the street for the big event.

(Photo courtesy Security Pacific Bank)

5-29-75

By Nelda Thompson

Like an old showgirl grown senile, tawdry and lonely, the Highland Theatre celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, playing to an empty house.

Where giant letter-lights in reds, greens and yellows once announced the grand opening of the "most beautiful suburban theatre west of Chicago the marquee now bears a forlorn explanation:

"Closed for Repairs."

But, there aren't any repairs going on. Just what lies ahead for the old building remains in doubt.

Nobody's casting old theatres in star roles any more. What do you do with the "Belle of 1925" now that she has lost her looks and her talents have gone out of style?

### OPENING NIGHT

It was quite a different story on that March night in 1925 when 3000 spectators crowded the street on Pasadena Avenue (now North Figueroa). Everyone wanted to get a look at Norma Shearer in person. She was starring in "Lady of the Night", the first film to ever flash across the screen at the Highland.

The old street car was halted and the avenue roped off to make room for limousines, bearing the

big names of Hollywood, who appeared in tails and white ties, satin and diamond tiaras for the grand opening.

Highland Park had come a long way from pastoral Garvanza to the floodlights and Hoop-La of Movietown.

Only a few residents will remember that it even happened. Those who do, find it difficult, even painful, to recall that the Highland box office (checking in overflow crowds at 25 cents a head and 50 cents for 'parlor chairs') was the hub of social activities during the mid-twenties.

Now its windows are cracked and its "coming attraction" boxes smudged and empty, except for angry Spiders and cockroaches. The walls of the structure that once was "the queen of architectural accomplishment" cringe under the mutilation of graffiti, writing an obscene finale to the play.

A quick look through the padlocked doors that admitted the super-great on that

opening night, show no trace of the oil painting that once provided a custom mural for the wall.

Even the popcorn stand of later days has died in its tracks.

#### DISTANT ECHOS

The sound of laughter that once greeted the antics of Harold Lloyd or the whimsical plights of Charlie Chaplin, must be echoing somewhere, or perhaps the stifled sobs of empathy for the woes of Lillian Gish and Corinne Griffiths.

There isn't any sound at all, but it's easy enough to imagine that you hear the old theatre organ that went out of style with the talkies.

Timbers trembled with "Cavaliere Rusticana" or "The Shiek of Araby", kaleidoscoping its mood to the sweet sadness of "Roses of Picary" or "A Cottage Small by a Waterfall."

There isn't any organ music, just the harsh jostle of kids-out-of-school, hooting to see if the old building will give them an echo; an ambulence, the chatter of shoppers, the whooph of a motor.

Still it's easy to Fantasize about music from way back; and ghosts sitting in those 1200 empty seats at the Highland, waiting for the show to "go on."

#### SOME WHO REMEMBER

Nostalgia buffs just won't let the old theatre die without epitaph. It was the pride of the community, especially of Mike Gore, president of West Coast Theatres,

who got his start in Highland Park and wanted to make his hometown movie house a "dream come true."

To others, it was a monument to "Flaming Youth" when America was in its twenties and they were kids.

Every time Linda Killen goes by the bleak old building today, she pauses just slightly, because she doesn't like what she sees. Now in her 80's, it was Linda Killen who gave the Highland its name, win-

ning a contest in which hundreds of residents competed.

Does Mrs. Killen remember opening night? Indeed she does. She was one of the "stars", having christened the movie house.

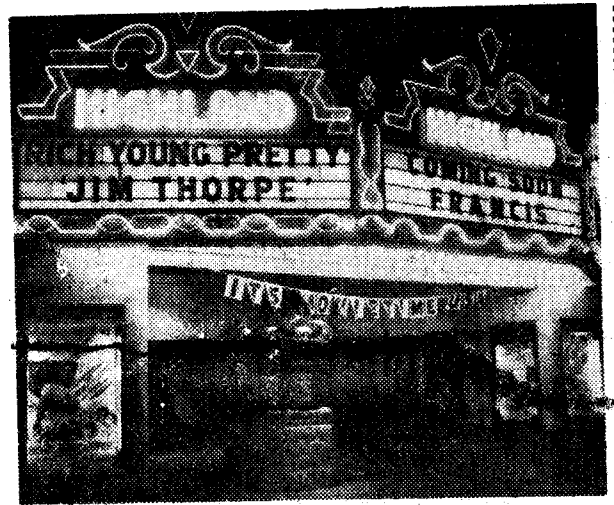
Attorney Millard Mier once handled the business affairs for Clyde Church, original owner of the property, whose heirs still hold it in trust.

Mier remembers his moppet days when, wearing knickers and whistling "Barney Google" and "Yes, We Have no Bananas", he played sand lot ball on the corner that was to become the site of the Highland Theatre.

#### OPEN AIR SHOWS

He also tells of the earlier days of entertainment history in the Highlands when an open-air theatre was held at the corner of Avenue 58 and Pasadena (Figuroa) Avenue. Folding chairs were set up for the drama-goers, and removed at the end of the show. It was here that early residents

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24 YEARS AGO — Highland Theatre was still going strong in 1951 when Burt Lancaster starred in "Jim Thorpe, All American".



HIGHLAND TODAY — Martin Carman of Highland Park, who did a variety of jobs at the Highland as a young boy 50 years ago, looks at the "Closed for Repairs" sign on the marquee.



SHE NAMED THE THEATRE — Linda Killen of Highland Park, now in her 80s, won a contest in 1925 that gave Highland Theatre its name.

# Highland Theatre now plays to empty house

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listened to concerts or CHITAQUA acts on a summer evening.

Later the Sunbeam Theatre opened just across the street. Also a West Coast Theatre, it closed shortly after the opening of the Highland just blocks down the street.

The Sunbeam building, which later became the home of Northeast Newspapers until 1972) has also joined the haunted movie-house parade, standing idle and embarrassed that no one knows what to do with old theatres.

**MYRON SLAGLE**  
Myron Slagle is personally acquainted with both of the has-beens, having first served as projectionist at the Sunbeam and moving to the Highland.

Through the silent days of Norma Talmadge, Ronald Coleman, Vilma Bankely, Clara Bow, Rudolph Valentino and hundreds of other stellar performers, he was in introducing celluloid to the theatre-goers.

Slagle continued into the "Talkies", the lean depression days and the wartime blackouts, just recently retiring. In keeping with the life he led, he stays just as close as he can to his old projection booth, living in rooms above the Highland remaining there even after the theatre died.

**MARTIN CARMAN**  
But, of all those who want to put in a good word for the old Highland, probably the most enthusiastic is Martin Carman, a local civic and church worker, who grew up in the Highlands and

HIGHLAND PARK'S MOST BRILLIANT EVENT!  
Don't Fail To Attend The  
**GALA FESTIVE OPENING**  
Of The Beautiful New  
**WEST COAST HIGHLAND THEATRE**  
Avenue 58 and Pasadena Avenue.  
**Thursday, March 5th**  
DOORS OPEN 6.30 P. M. TWO DE LUXE PERFORMANCES 100 P. M. AND 8.30 P. M.

**Personal Appearances of Famous Stars!**  
Amidst Myriads of Dazzling Lights! Lighted  
METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PRESENTS  
"Lady of the Night" With A Real  
Special Star  
**Norma Shearer**  
A HARRY RAYT PRODUCTION  
5 -- Big Time Acts Vaudeville -- 5

**GALA OPENING PROGRAM**  
I Overture  
West Coast Historical Seminars  
II Pictorial News Events  
Selected by the Management  
III Felix "Felix Follows the Swail"  
IV 5 Acts De Luxe Vaudeville  
V METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER  
Present  
"Lady of the Night"  
A Harry Rayt Production  
With Norma Shearer  
Directed by George Fitz

**Scale of Prices**  
Evening Shows (Standard and Superior Seats)  
Children 25c  
General Admission 50c  
Boxes 1.00  
Matinee and Saturday (Standard Seats)  
Children 25c  
General Admission 50c  
Boxes 1.00

**Advertisement Announces Opening**  
This advertisement in 1925 issue of Highland Park News-Herald tells of the grand opening of Highland Theater on March 5 of that year.

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trumpet while mounted on a beautiful white horse. The painting of this masterpiece was done in the center of the rear wall of the foyer where it would immediately catch the eye of the patrons upon entering," (later hidden by the refreshment center).  
"The interior three-way lighting of the theatre enhanced greatly the beauty of all its embellishments, the artistic ceiling over the stage and orchestra pit; two shields on each side of the wall; the long series of graceful arches at the ceiling, along both sides of the walls; the pictures in the background of the organ

was told. 'We'll get you in and save you a seat.'  
"Well, I was at the Highland at 6 and some 3000 people were already in line for tickets. The maximum seating capacity was a little over 1500. I waited patiently for an hour and became tense until they arrived at 8. By this time, it was too late to save a seat. So, they told me to go on in, go through the mezzanine, up to the balcony. I stood up by the last row next to the projection booth. The stage seemed small from there. Monty Blue was the master of ceremonies. Ralph Osborne was at the keyboard of the mighty Wurlitzer organ. I stood

made of obscure white glass mounted in black metal.  
He was presented with a problem when Lily Damita in the "Yellow Lily" was going up in lights. He ran out of "L's". And, the resourcefulness he used in getting around the dilemma, won him a job offer. He used upside down-sevens.  
For his quick thinking he was offered the job of assistant manager, but his Christian parents would not allow him to accept.  
"To compensate, they gave me a dress shirt and a necktie for Christmas," he recalls with a smile.  
"One of my most exciting jobs was assisting back stage during the performances

"Lady of the Night" starring Norma Shearer was the featured bill, and a personal appearance by the famous actress was featured.