

The Hollywood Sign A Beat-by-Beat Plotline

It's fitting that the Hollywood Sign, the worldwide symbol of the entertainment industry, was conceived as an outdoor ad campaign for a suburban housing development called "Hollywoodland," after all, despite the high profile of the film biz, real estate has always been Hollywood's primary economic driver. Although the Sign's appearance and purpose have evolved over the years, its basic aspirational message remains the same: *This* is a place where magic is possible, where dreams can come true. Back then, the dream was a beautiful home and lifestyle. Today, the Sign's promise is more subtle - and can only be described as the parade of images, desires and ideas conjured by the word "Hollywood."

Come explore the fascinating past and present of this icon, town, industry, and idea we call **H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D**



If you're with the media and are seeking additional press information, interviews, photographs or footage of the Hollywood Sign, please contact:

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A Time Before the Sign

Imagine a time when the only stars in Hollywood were found in the crystal-clear night skies arching over rolling hills. This was the setting for the area's native people, the Gabrielinos. Later, the Gabrielinos lived on missions for some time but reminders of their culture remain.

Before Hollywood became the world's entertainment mecca, it resembled other west frontiers – a landscape of farmers, cowboys, prospectors, bandits, and mostly undeveloped land. (All land north of Sunset Boulevard, for example, was considered useless for anything but grazing.)

With more and more Easterners drawn by the promise of sunny skies and mild, dry weather, the area's bedrock industry – real estate – soon kicked into high gear. Subdivisions begat more subdivisions, and by the end of the 19th century Hollywood was taking on the contours of a recognizable town. Thanks to Daeida Wilcox, it also had a name. In 1887, Mrs. Wilcox, wife of town founder Harvey Wilcox, met a woman on a train trip who referred to her Florida summer home, "Hollywood." She was so struck by the name that she suggested it to her husband ... and the rest is history.



Lookout Mountain Inn in Laurel Canyon (1915)



Casaba field at Sunset Blvd. and Harper St. (1918)



Testing the acoustics at the Hollywood Bowl (1921)

The Dream Factory Begins to Churn

All was quiet until 1907, when bad weather drove a small Chicago film company westward to complete a shoot. The first real studio, Nestor Film Company, soon followed from New Jersey, cranking out three pictures a week – one ‘western,’ one ‘eastern,’ and one comedy – for a grand total of \$1,200.

By 1912, word of Hollywood’s ideal film-shooting climate and landscape spread, and at least 15 independent studios could be found shooting around town. Old barns were turned into sound stages and Hollywood’s quiet time was over.

It wasn’t just sunny skies that spurred the mass film migration to Hollywood. In 1897, famed inventor and early movie mogul Thomas Edison began suing rival producers who were utilizing filmmaking-projection devices based (he felt) on his Kinetoscope technology. Many of these movie ‘pirates’ fled from New Jersey (home of the Edison Company and the original movie capital), first to Cuba, then to California – for good.



Douglas Fairbanks uses “state of the art” communication device to direct Robin Hood (1922)



Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks put the finishing touches on their studio on Santa Monica and Formosa (1922)



Sid Grauman and Norma Shearer at the Chinese Theatre (1927)

Hollywood Becomes Tinseltown

By 1915, America was officially film crazed, and Hollywood was shaping into the glamorous, sometimes surreal landscape we've come to know and love.

Hopeful actors and actresses filled the streets, dazzled by a *new* American dream – film stardom. Studios, meanwhile, sprung up like wildfires and engaged in a cutthroat battle for survival. As the industry matured, many of these independent companies merged, forming the big studios that would shape and control the industry moving forward.

By 1920, 40 million Americans were going to the movies each week. As the industry blossomed, Hollywood strove to keep pace physically. L.A. history buffs (and fans of the movie *Chinatown*) know the key to the area's explosive development during the early 20th century was the Owens Valley Aqueduct System, spearheaded by William Mulholland (who was the head engineer of the Municipal Water Department) and initially completed in 1913. The controversial – indeed violently opposed – project diverted water from the Owens River, the lifeblood of a farming community. Furious Owens Valley residents (allegedly) dynamited the L.A. Aqueduct in 1924 and, later that same year, seized control of a critical aqueduct gate, shutting off the flow of the river. These acts of sabotage continued sporadically until 1928, when the chief backer of the opposition movement, the Owens Valley Bank, collapsed.

Still, the water flowed (usually), and Hollywood flourished. During the 20s, a whimsical skyline of movie set-inspired hotels and apartments rose along the big boulevards. The more prestigious

addresses, including the opulent Garden Court Apartments, Chateau Elysee and Garden of Allah Villas, were imbued with the glamour of the stars that called them home. The rise of the film aristocracy also meant suave new restaurants and nightclubs up and down Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards. Extravagant movie palaces completed the iconic Hollywood landscape.



RKO Studios (1931)



William Mulholland speaking at dedication of Hollywood Lake & Dam (1925)

A Sign Is Born – 1923

Hollywood, which by now represented not just a city, but also an industry, a lifestyle and, increasingly, an aspiration, was officially coronated when the “Hollywoodland” sign was erected in 1923.

Built by Los Angeles Times publisher Harry Chandler as an epic \$21,000 billboard for his upscale Hollywoodland real estate development, the Sign soon took on the role of giant marquee for a city that was constantly announcing its own gala premiere.

The “billboard” was massive. Each of the original 13 letters was 30 feet wide and 50 feet tall, constructed of 3x9’ metal squares rigged together by an intricate frame of scaffolding, pipes, wires and telephone poles – all of which had to be dragged up Mt. Lee on dirt paths.

Few realize that a giant white dot (35 feet in diameter, with 20-watt lights on the perimeter) was constructed below the Sign to catch the eye. The Sign itself featured 4,000 20-watt bulbs, spaced 8 inches apart. At night the Sign blinked into the Hollywood night – first “Holly” then “wood” and finally “land,” punctuated by a giant period. The effect was truly spectacular, particularly for pre-Vegas sensibilities.

Originally intended to last just a year and a half, the Sign has endured more than eight decades – and is still going strong.



Dedication of the sign (1923)



Brand new Hollywoodland homes (1925)



Building an “O” (1923)

Sound and the Crash

The advent of synchronized sound sent the picture industry reeling, as the big studios frantically re-tooled and acting careers were ruined – and made – overnight. Still, the “talkies” took movie mania to new heights, and Hollywood was booming in 1929 when the stock market crashed. Although the studios, which rely heavily on speculative capital, were hit hard initially, the Depression meant even bigger business as Americans flocked to theaters for ever more lavish, escapist productions.

The “Hollywood Sign Girl”

The element of sound promised new opportunities for vocally trained stage actors. Unfortunately, most of the thousands of would-be stars and starlets who flocked to Hollywood were met with cold rejection.

In 1932, Peg Entwistle, a New York stage actress, became the symbol of the dark side of the Hollywood dream. Emboldened by her Broadway success, the ambitious young actress soon set her sights on the silver screen. She packed her bags for Hollywood and moved in with her uncle on Beachwood Drive – virtually in the shadow of the Hollywood Sign.

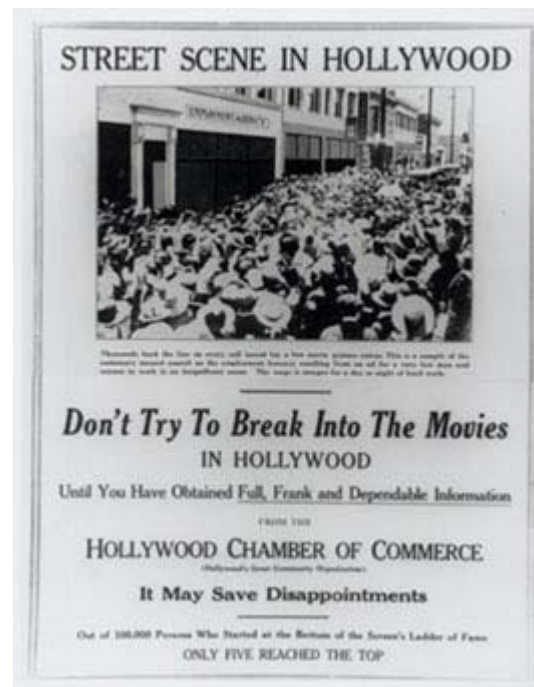
Unfortunately, Peg failed to make a splash, and she spent most of the brutally hot summer of '32 hanging around her uncle's house, waiting for a phone call that never came. Finally, on the evening of September 18th, Peg told her uncle that she was going to meet some friends at a nearby drug store – but this was a sad lie. She instead made the arduous hike up the canyon hill to the Hollywood Sign, her one-time beacon of hope but now a symbol of failure and rejection. She climbed 50 feet up a workman's ladder to the top of the “H” and plunged to her death. Peg Entwistle – dubbed by tabloids as the

“The Hollywood Sign Girl” – was only 24 years old.

In a cruel twist of irony, a letter to Peg arrived the day after her death from the Beverly Hills Playhouse. She was offered the lead role in a play ... about a woman driven to suicide.



Peg Entwistle, the "Hollywood Sign Girl" (1932)



Chamber of Commerce Advertisement (1921)

Hollywood Goes to War

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, Hollywood mobilized to become a full-time war industry. Studio trucks transported troops instead of movie sets. Stars like Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart and Victor Mature quickly enlisted. And patriotic fare dominated the silver screens. The War also had a more subtle effect on moviemaking and creative choices. Out of physical necessity – rationing, travel limitations, etc. – spare psychodramas and the age of Film Noir replaced the costly extravaganzas of years past.

As the War progressed, Hollywood drew together as a close-knit community. Returning soldiers swelled the local population – outnumbering civilians 10 to 1 downtown – and Hollywood pulled together to feed, shelter and entertain them. Soldiers slept in parks and theater lobbies until ‘Mom’ Lehr’s Hollywood Guild and Canteen began offering them beds and ‘three squares’ a day. On average, 800 servicemen stayed with ‘Mom’ on weekdays, 1200 on weekends.

The similar-sounding Hollywood Canteen catered to 2,000 servicemen a night, offering free food and drinks as well as the era’s top big bands and an endless parade of Hollywood’s biggest stars. It’s estimated that 6,000 radio and screen entertainers volunteered to serve and entertain the troops at the Canteen during the War.

By the early 40s, the Hollywoodland real estate development went bust – a casualty of the Depression. The Sign, which hadn’t been maintained in years, quietly became property of the city in 1944. The Sign had made an unheralded transition from billboard to de facto civic landmark, but salvation would have to wait until after the War.



Mickey Rooney at Hollywood Guild Canteen (1943)



Anne "Mom" Lehr and some of her servicemen guests at the Hollywood Guild Canteen (1943)

A Sign of the Times – The Postwar Years

The film industry's high profile made it vulnerable in the postwar climate of anti-liberal hysteria. By the early 50s, 400 actors, writers, directors and producers were blacklisted – and paranoia prevailed.

By 1948, box office receipts plummeted 45% from wartime highs. The culprit: Television. From '41 to '51 the number of TV sets in American homes skyrocketed from 10,000 to more than 12 million. Studios slashed payrolls, back lots sprouted weeds, and sound stages went dark. Filmmakers and distributors responded with a series of gimmicks: wider screens, 3-D, Technicolor, stereo sound, even free dishes.

With characteristic resilience, Hollywood soon managed a successful transition to the small screen. TV companies flocked westward and snatched up old studios and lots, and by 1950 more sound stages were producing television than movies.

Around this same time, the Hollywood Sign was undergoing a major transition of its own. In 1949, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce finally came to the rescue of the ailing Sign, removing the letters that spelled "LAND" and repairing the rest, including the recently toppled "H." As the century hit the halfway mark, a leaner, cleaner Sign was reintroduced in its now-iconic form.



The "ollywoodland" sign (1949)



By 1950, Hollywood was the TV capital of the world - KCEA- ABC TV on Vine St. (1953)

The Sign It Is a'Changin' – Turbulence and Decay

During the 1960s, Hollywood suffered through a mass exodus of residents to the suburban San Fernando Valley. Even more distressing was the flight of film power centers to the Valley and other less cramped environs. By 1970, Paramount was the only studio left in town.

In the void left by this civic and business flight – and against a backdrop looser obscenity laws, redefining what could be shown in movie theaters – Hollywood became overrun with adult theaters, and the 'adult' culture they ushered in: massage parlors, porn shows, adult bookstores, etc. Crime soared, and the town's storied boulevards were ravaged by the urban decay that marked most U.S. cities during the period.

Meanwhile, by the end of the turbulent 60s it didn't take a Weatherman to know what the elements had done to the Sign. Hollywood's once-proud emblem now served as a glaring badge of dis-honor – rusted, dilapidated, soon to literally crumble under its own weight.

In 1973, the City of Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board gave the Sign official landmark status (Monument #111), but the ensuing ceremony, hosted by silent film star Gloria Swanson, was blanketed in a thick fog, ruining the event. It was a portent of dark days ahead – for the city, and especially the Sign. During the 70s – as Hollywood continued to decline – the top of the "D" and the entire third "O" toppled down Mt. Lee, and an arsonist set fire to the bottom of the second "L."

Adding insult to injury, pranksters altered the Sign's letters to read "Hollyweed" in 1973 (advocating looser marijuana laws) then later, to "Holywood", commemorating a visit from Pope John Paul II in 1987.



This epic prank belies the conventional wisdom that marijuana stifles initiative (1973)



The sign in despair (1973)

A Sign is Re-Born

By the late 1970s, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce determined that the Sign required a complete rebuilding – carrying a price tag of a quarter million dollars. Thankfully, some of showbiz's biggest names came to the rescue. In '77, Fleetwood Mac pledged a charity concert, but local residents prevented it. The next year, however, Hugh Hefner hosted a gala fundraiser at the Playboy Mansion, where individual Sign letters were ceremonially 'auctioned' off at \$27,700 per letter. The effort to preserve the Sign brought together an odd mix of celebrity sponsors: Glam-rocker Alice Cooper 'bought' an "O" (in honor of Groucho Marx), while singing cowboy Gene Autry sponsored an "L" and Andy Williams sponsored the "W."

Thanks to the help of these and other donors, the Sign was poised for its overhaul. The old Sign was scrapped in August '78 – yes, for three lonely months Hollywood had no Sign – and 194 tons of concrete, enamel and steel later, the Sign was re-born, poised and polished for a new millennium.

A Hollywood Comeback

The Sign's rebirth was only successful in a Hollywood revitalization effort that continues to this day. In 1980, a \$90 million federal grant enabled Hollywood to launch a slew of redevelopment projects. In '89, Disney Studios began a museum-grade rehabilitation of the El Capitan Theater. Ten years later, part of the Egyptian was restored to its glory. The Roosevelt Hotel and Pantages Theater all received well-deserved makeovers during the last decades of the millennium. In short, Hollywood was moving forward, in part by wisely reinvesting in the monuments of its past.

The Sign Ushers in the Millennium ...

In a spellbinding display of lights and megawatts special effects, the nine 45-foot letters of the Hollywood Sign were spectacularly lit, one by one, as L.A. counted down to the 21st Century. During global Millennium TV coverage, the Sign was featured alongside the Eiffel Tower, Times Square, and the Great Pyramids of Egypt. The erstwhile real estate billboard had taken its place among the world's most revered landmarks.



Hugh Hefner comes to the rescue (1978)



On a clear day you can see...the Hollywood Sign.
Restored to glory (1979)

The Hollywood Sign Today

Hollywood's civic restoration, which began in the 1970s, picked up steam in the ensuing decades, fueled by a growing reverence for what the industry had come to represent worldwide. The Sign has always served as a barometer for the community; and as Hollywood re-blossomed, so too did the Sign, which benefited from a range of new preservation efforts.

In 1992, the California Attorney General granted distinct legal rights and responsibilities to three official agencies – the City of Los Angeles (which owns the land the Sign stands on), the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce (which owns the licensing rights for the Sign's image), and the Hollywood Sign Trust (formed to maintain, repair and provide capital improvements to the Sign for the benefit of the public – with the larger mission of helping to preserve Hollywood's standing as the worldwide center of motion pictures and cinema arts).

Thanks to the Trust's efforts, the Sign got a fresh new paint job in 1995, courtesy of Dutch Boy Paints, during a ceremony hosted, appropriately enough, by Phyllis Diller (the 'queen of face-lifts'). On December 31, 1999, the Sign was the site of the West Coast's highest-profile "Y2K" celebration, ringing in the new millennium with a dazzling display of lights and special effects. The Sign was featured alongside the Eiffel Tower, the Great Pyramids of Egypt, and New York's Times Square during global millennium countdown TV coverage ... The erstwhile real estate billboard continued its place among the world's most revered landmarks.

In 2000 the Hollywood Sign Trust hired Panasonic to install a state-of-the-art security system comprised of a vast closed circuit surveillance network, and Internet-based surveillance (which can viewed live on this very website). The system, which is monitored 24/7 to protect the Sign and its neighbors from unwanted visitors and the danger of fire, was upgraded with new technologies in 2005.

In 2004 the Sign celebrated its 80th birthday at a gala celebration hosted by movie musical legend Esther Williams (another remarkably preserved octogenarian). The 'birthday party' was held during the opening ceremonies for the AFIFest – which was sponsored in part by the Trust. In mid-2005, the Sign 'goes into makeup' once again, and will receive another new sparkling white paint job.

Poised and polished for this millennium, the Hollywood Sign continues to inspire moviemakers and fans around the world, while playing a vital role in keeping the town it helped put on the map at the center of the global entertainment industry. Through the years – from its splashy real estate billboard roots, to its long neglect and decay, to its current status as a revered international landmark – the Sign has emerged more symbolically powerful than ever, conjuring an ever-expanding parade of images, desires and ideas with just nine simple letters:

H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D