

Do You Remember?



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Before There Was a Vine Theater

“Moving pictures exhibitions” were shown in Livermore in the early 1900s at the Farmers’ Union building at the northwest corner of Livermore and Railroad Avenues. As a come-on for their annual masquerade ball in January 1902, the Foresters showed films of the battle of San Juan Hill, Niagara Falls, and the ruins of Galveston after the 1900 hurricane. Professor Bradshaw came in April 1903 and presented views of the prize fight between Jeffries and Sharkey as well as illustrated songs.

However, the first actual motion picture theater in Livermore was started by Isadore Durand on Aug. 22, 1908, in the brewery building on First Street, then owned by Dennis F. Bernal. A newspaper advertisement that fall boasted a “new flickerless

machine” and a souvenir matinee every Saturday at the nickelodeon, a new word coined from the price of admission with the Greek word for theater. Admission for children was 5 cents, adults 10 cents.

Less than three months after the theater opened, the brewery building burned down, and Durand’s hands and face were badly burned when he warned the Bernal family, sleeping on the second floor. Several city dances were given to raise money for his personal needs and also to help him restart the theater.

On Jan. 9, 1909, the Bell Theater with Isadore Durand continuing as manager and projectionist opened in the McVicar building at the southeast corner of Second and J Streets. In February the *Herald* announced that a

stage had been erected in the east end of the hall for special presentations. At the Bell on Mar. 6 and 7, Edwin Kennedy and Peter Higuera gave an exhibition of baton swinging and appeared in a farce along with Harold Brown.

A week later in March, Durand purchased a new Edison moving picture machine in San Francisco. Music to match the mood of the films was supplied by creative local pianists. Harold Brown often sang the illustrated songs that were a feature of the early films. The audience chimed in on songs like “In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree” and “Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie.” On Friday night, Oct. 10, 1913, citizens of Livermore heard “talking movies” at the Bell for the first time. The new owner/manager, Archer



First and J Streets Neazell's Drugs (Photo courtesy of John Saboarais)

M. Bowles, explained to the audience how Edison's invention, the kinetophone, worked to bring action and sound simultaneously. A newspaper reporter noted, "The only defect appeared to be that the female voices ... were indistinct, which led a cynical person at our elbow to remark that for once in history a woman had been unable to make herself heard."

In 1913 the Bell moved to the new Schenone Building on First Street. This structure had a theater kiosk in the front between two stores on the ground floor. Moviegoers walked down a long hall to the auditorium. The opening bill, with Bowles still the manager, played there on Friday, Dec. 27.

Newspaper ads in 1917 listed a different film every day. Warner Anderson and Daniel Dutro remembered that as children in the 1920s they paid 10 cents every Saturday afternoon to see "The Green Archer," a serial. In 1923 the theater had two name changes, first to the Livermore Theater, and then to the California. Judy Stanley Davies recalled the story that her grandfather,

Howard Stanley, told about pumping the pedals for the organist. He would become so interested in the film that the music would slow down until someone in the audience would yell at him, "Pump faster!"

On Aug. 23, 1931 while James B. Lima was manager, an explosion in the projection room caused a fire. The projectionist was Vince Porazzo, Lima's nephew. Lima's son, James A. Lima, wrote to the Livermore Heritage Guild about his cousin's experience. "The only entrance to the projection booth at that time was a trap door in the ceiling of the men's rest room. The morning of the fire, Vince was in the booth preparing the film for the night's showing when it caught fire. The nitrate-based film of that time burned like gunpowder, and the fire prevented Vince from getting to the trap door and exiting the booth. "He broke one of the projection porthole windows and squeezed through, dropping 10 or more feet into the loge section of the auditorium and escaped with a badly burned and bruised arm. He sounded

the alarm for the volunteer fire department and then drove to our home at 6th and M Streets to tell my father about the fire."

While the damage was being repaired, manager Lima ran films in the Sweeney Opera House. After the Schenone Building interior was rebuilt, the theater opened as the State Theater on Dec. 30, 1931. More than 1,300 people attended the two shows on opening night. On June 10, 1941, Livermore's theater franchise was purchased by West Side Theaters. That firm continued to operate in the Schenone Building until it built a separate theater building, today's Vine. At its opening on Dec. 26, 1956, the double bill was "You Can't Run Away from It," starring June Allyson and Jack Lemmon, plus the western "7th Cavalry," the story of the Little Big Horn battle, with Randolph Scott in the lead, playing on its 40-foot wide "cinemascope" screen. Local moviegoers enjoyed stereophonic sound and air conditioning for the first time.

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