

SIGNS OF TIMES

A short history of the Hollywood sign

From prehistoric saber-toothed tigers... to vanished Gabrielino Indians, from Mexican land-owners... to frontier camels, there was plenty of life in them thar' hills long before the Hollywood Sign was a twinkle in anybody's eye. A ranch named Hollywood gave its name to a curiously straight-laced new town in 1897. That same year, Thomas Edison unwittingly set the stage for Hollywood's future. In 1907, the first "film people" arrived and soon thereafter the first studio, Nestor Film Company, made its debut. Cecil B. DeMille and would-be starlets were not far behind.

By the 20s, Hollywood had truly come into its own. With 40 million Americans going to the movies every week, Hollywood captured the imagination of an entire nation with mega-stars, mega-studios, movie palaces, and infamous night spots. In 1923, in the midst of this frenzy of glamour and greed, the Hollywood Sign was born. Conceived as a real estate ad, the massive sign quickly became a famous town's most famous landmark.

Change came fast and furious -- to the world, the entertainment industry, and the Sign -- in the period from the late 20s to the mid-40s. Sound revolutionized the movies; with the advent of talkies, careers were made and broken overnight. Radio also took Hollywood by storm. When the Depression hit, the film industry did better than most, peddling escape to a weary nation. But the Sign was in decline. The Second World War turned the entertainment industry into a war industry. In 1949, wind blew the Sign's "H" down. Critics complained that the Sign's dilapidated state was a symbol of Hollywood's demise. Caught up in the McCarthy trials, and caught unaware by TV mania, Hollywood still managed to save the Sign. In subsequent years, Hollywood embraced TV. The town continued to change, as seedy 'adult' shops and theaters spread, most of the major studios moved out, and the recording industry moved in. Through it all, the Sign endured and in 1973, it gained official landmark status.

Despite landmark status, the Sign suffered further indignities. In 1976, some pranksters altered the Sign to read "HOLLYWEED," applauding looser marijuana laws. After the top of the "D" fell down, the first "O" disintegrated, the third "O" toppled down the mountain and an arsonist set fire to the bottom of the second "L," the Chamber agreed that a "Save the Sign" campaign was needed. It needed a complete rebuilding, carrying a \$250,000 price tag. Sometimes the Sign seemed cursed: a 1973 gala with silent star Gloria Swanson was blanketed in fog the night of the fundraiser and failed. In 1977, Fleetwood Mac pledged a charity concert, but local residents prevented it. And in 1978, to celebrate Hollywood's redevelopment, the Hollywood Sign is lit for the televised ceremony.

Finally, luck changed. Hugh Hefner opened up the Playboy Mansion for the Sign, netting thousands. Letter donors representing the entire entertainment industry 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 of 1978, work on the sequel could begin. For 3 months, Hollywood had no Sign.

When the new version was unveiled at Hollywood's 75th anniversary (before a live TV audience of 60 million) our star was readier than ever for its close-up. 194 tons of concrete later, with enamel letters and steel frames firmly in place Hollywood's favored symbol was poised and protected for the next millennium. In 1984, the Hollywood Sign was lit for two weeks in honor of the Olympic games held in Los Angeles. And in 1995, the Hollywood sign got a new paint job as a gift from Dutch Boy Paints. The Sign was "unveiled" at a ceremony MC'd by the queen of face-lifts - Phyllis Diller. Unfortunately, a thick fog set in and many press cameras could not see the drapes pulled off the Sign.