

Ray Remembers

Tommy Lee and the Hollywoodland Sign

Today, images of the Hollywood Sign are synonymous with the entertainment capital. It is the crown jewel of a somewhat tarnished community. But, back in 1923, when the Hollywoodland sign was first erected, it was an entirely different story. It was considered an ecological outrage; an affront to the beauty of small-town Hollywood. Garish commercialism had intruded on an otherwise pristine hill top.

Pioneer Los Angeles developers Moses H. Sherman and Eli P. Clark acquired the 640 acres which comprised the Hollywoodland tract on July 8, 1905 for \$10,000. Sherman and Clark's claim to fame rested in their founding of the Balloon Route, the Los Angeles Pacific Company. This was the electric railway that provided public transit services for the western portion of Los Angeles County before the coming of the Red Cars. They made their money buying vast tracts of land, building railway lines to the property, subdividing and then reselling parcels at enormous profit.

In 1922, a syndicate to develop the North Beachwood area was formed consisting of Sherman and the Los Angeles Times' Harry Chandler along with S. H. Woodruff and Tracy E. Shoultz. The first tract of the new subdivision was recorded on May 15, 1923. To publicize the tract, a large sign was erected on the south face of Mount Hollywood with fifty foot tall utility poles as anchors and sheet metal letters reading "Hollywoodland." It was illuminated at night using 8-watt

Here's an aerial shot of Mount Hollywood/Lee's summit circa 1940. The pool with its diving board are visible at center. I hiked up the face of this hill on the morning of December 7, 1941. When my dad and I arrived at the summit, we were told that the Army had conscripted the facility. That made no sense. An hour later when we arrived back at Beachwood Village, Roy Davis, proprietor of the pharmacy, told us that NBC had announced that Pearl Harbor had just been bombed. The Army would set up anti-aircraft guns atop the ridge adjacent to the roadway on the left side of the image.

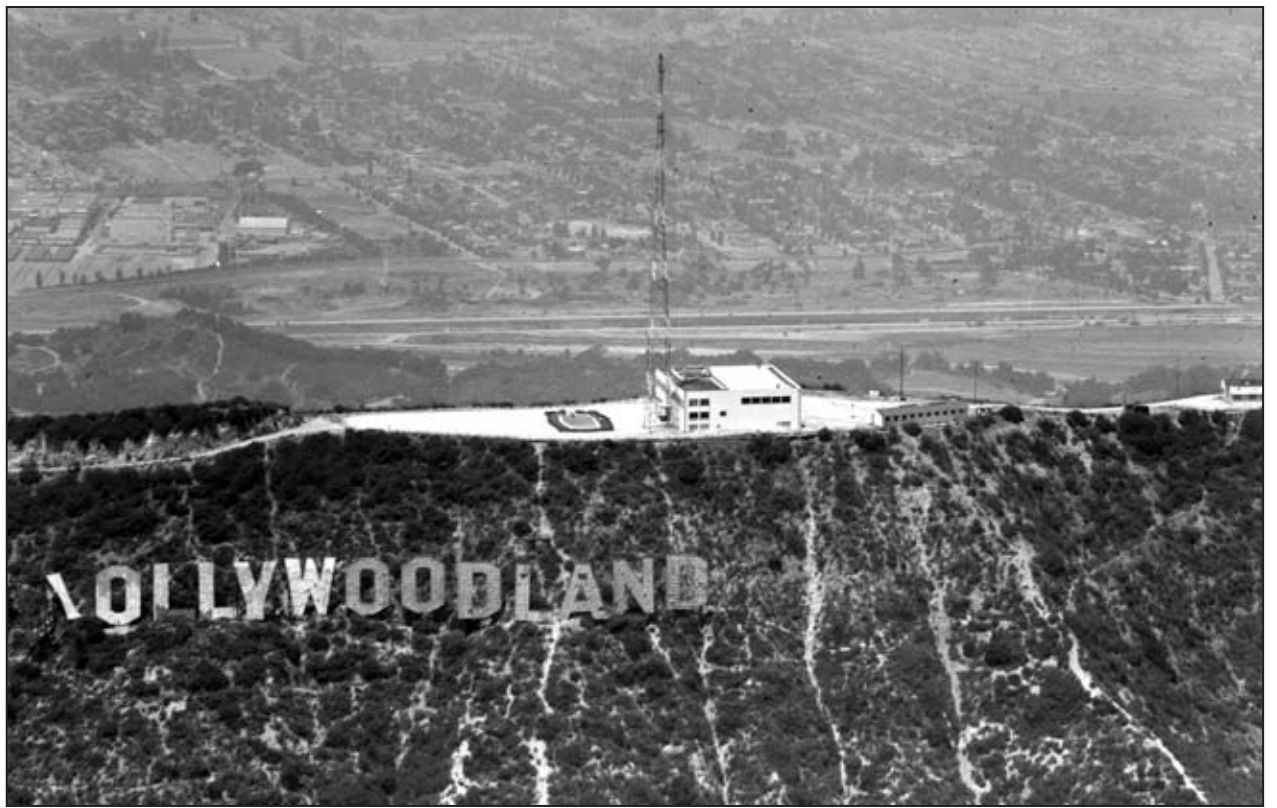


Photo courtesy of: Negative Collection Of Raphael F. Long.

electric bulbs mounted on 18 inch centers through the face of the sign. The sign could be seen alternatively flashing HOLLYWOODLAND on and off followed by HOLLY, WOOD and LAND in that order. Directly below the sign was a dot which was also illuminated. A small shack behind the letter "Y" provided storage for materials used to repair the sign. Contrary to popular lore, the caretaker, Albert Kothe, did not reside in this shack. The tract company provided him with a small house at Hollyridge and Beachwood

Drives adjacent to a storage building used for road maintenance. Both the house and storage building have since been removed.

Additionally, Albert had the unenviable task of replacing the light bulbs on all thirteen letters of the sign plus the "dot" midway down the mountain. He would hang himself from a bosun's chair on each letter with a canvas sack containing replacement bulbs.

The depression of the 1930's brought housing construction to a halt. There was no longer a need to light the sign at night. In 1939, "Big Ed" Long and Albert stripped the copper wiring from the sign's thirteen letters and sold it for scrap. Albert was a colorful old salt who would regale anyone willing to listen with his tales of "comin' round da Horn und der vind jammer." When not repairing the sign or grading miles of fire roads in the tract (with a horse drawn grader), Albert drove the Hollywoodland Bus. This vehicle was not to be confused with an institution of a similar name operated by the Pacific

Electric Railway. His "bus" was a 1928 Model "A" Ford "Woodie" station wagon which provided transportation for tract residents from the Beachwood Village up to their homes. Unfortunately, one night Albert, after being grossly over-served, drove the venerable vehicle off the cliff behind the "H", demolishing it in the process. Luckily Albert, in his inebriated condition, was rendered immune to the consequences suffered by the Ford.

The hilltop above the sign was acquired by Keystone Films entrepreneur Mack Sennett. He planned to construct a mansion of monumental proportions, but before he could do so, Sennett fell on hard times due to the advent of talking films and changing tastes which ended the public's desire for his 2 reel comedic films.

Tommy Lee, son of prominent car dealer and broadcast entrepreneur Don Lee, would become the next player on the mountain top. Tommy owned a local Cadillac dealership and radio station KHJ, the Mutual Broadcasting outlet in Los Angeles. He also owned a

considerable chunk of Mutual.

Lee obtained an amateur radio license from the FCC with the call letters W6XAO. He installed his transmitter on the top floor of his Cadillac agency at Seventh and Bixel Streets. He started experimenting with transmitting images using Frequency Modulation signals which, unlike AM radio, must travel line of sight to the receiver. This soon proved to be a serious limitation. He needed a high platform from which to broadcast. Mount Hollywood was almost the highest point in Los Angeles and that was the site where he wanted to set up his transmitter.

With his fortunes in decline, Sennett sold the mountain top to Lee. The structure above the present day sign, along with the transmitter tower, was built by Lee for his television enterprise. Just to the west of the building, he constructed a swimming pool. Lee had planned to resurrect Mack Sennett's "Bathing Beauties" as a component of his entertainment package to be televised from the site. Since he now owned the hilltop, he renamed it Mount Lee.

Tommy and playboy Howard Hughes attended the same military academy together. Howard acquired Cahuenga Peak which is really a westward extension of Mount Hollywood/Lee. Betty Jane York, Tommy's pal for many years, told me that one evening they were approached by Howard. He wanted to construct a large home on Cahuenga Peak. His problem was that he didn't have road access and wanted to use the road that Tommy had constructed to access his transmitter. Tommy said "No" and that was the end of that friendship. The two never spoke again. Howard never built his home which was probably intended for one of his captive mistresses. The topography simply wouldn't permit construction of an access road.

W6XAO broadcast for the first time on December 23, 1931. The station retained its amateur status until the end of World War Two. Lee then re-licensed it with the call letters KTSL for Thomas S.

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