

# THE SAGA OF THE SIGN

THE RISE, RUIN AND RESTORATION  
OF HOLLYWOOD'S BIGGEST NAME

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PRESENTED BY THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN TRUST



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It's more than just nine white letters spelling out a city's name; it's a universal metaphor for the place, industry, lifestyle and aspiration we all know as H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D. Today it stands as one of the world's most well known monuments, but behind the Sign is a fascinating story mirroring the saga of Hollywood itself—a story of soaring ambition, crumbling decadence, and constant reinvention.

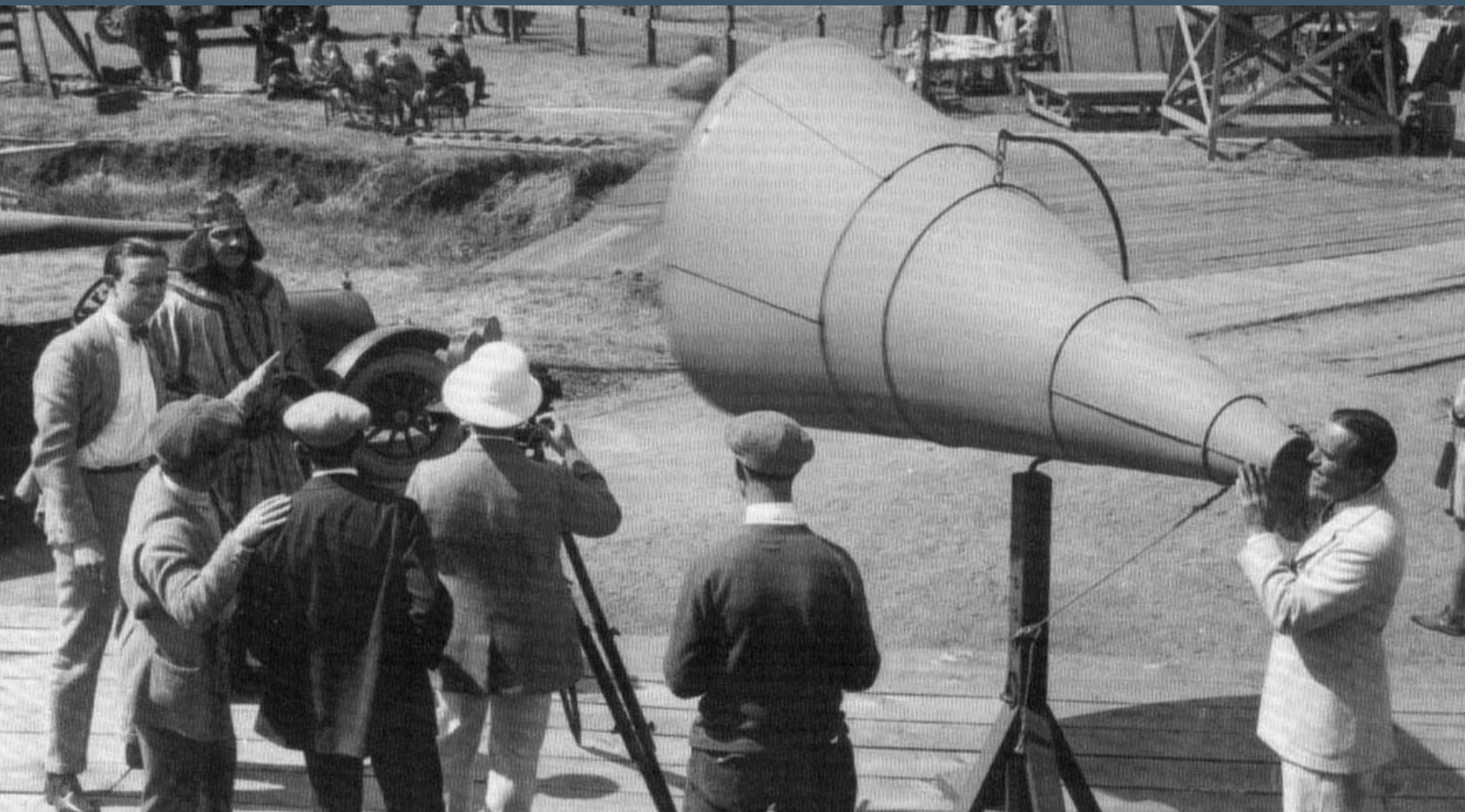


# THE TIME BEFORE THE SIGN

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*Before Hollywood became the world's entertainment mecca, it was home to native people, cowboys, farmers and bandits.*

Centuries ago, the only stars in Hollywood were in the crystal-clear night skies arching over rolling hills, where the area's native people, Gabrielinos, lived. And before Hollywood became the world's entertainment mecca, it resembled other frontiers in the west—a landscape of farmers, cowboys, prospectors, bandits on mostly undeveloped land. In the 1800s, easterners began to settle in the area, drawn by the promise of sunny skies and mild, dry weather, and real estate kicked into high gear. By the end of the 19th century, Hollywood, named by the wife of its founder Harvey Wilcox, had become a recognizable town.





*By 1915, America was officially film crazed and Hollywood was shaping into into a glamorous destination.*

## **HOLLYWOOD BECOMES TINSELTOWN: 1907–1915**

The film industry was born in 1907, when bad weather drove a small Chicago film company westward to complete a shoot. More filmmakers followed, and by 1912, at least 15 independent studios were making movies around town.

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.

The rise of the film industry—and its aristocracy—also meant suave new restaurants and nightclubs opened up and down Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards. Extravagant movie palaces completed the iconic Hollywood landscape.

By 1920, 40 million Americans were going to the movies each week. Hollywood, which had become a lifestyle and, increasingly, an aspiration, was officially crowned when the “Hollywood land” Sign was erected in 1923. The epic \$21,000 billboard for an upscale Hollywoodland real estate development took on the role of giant marquee for a city that was constantly announcing its own gala premiere.



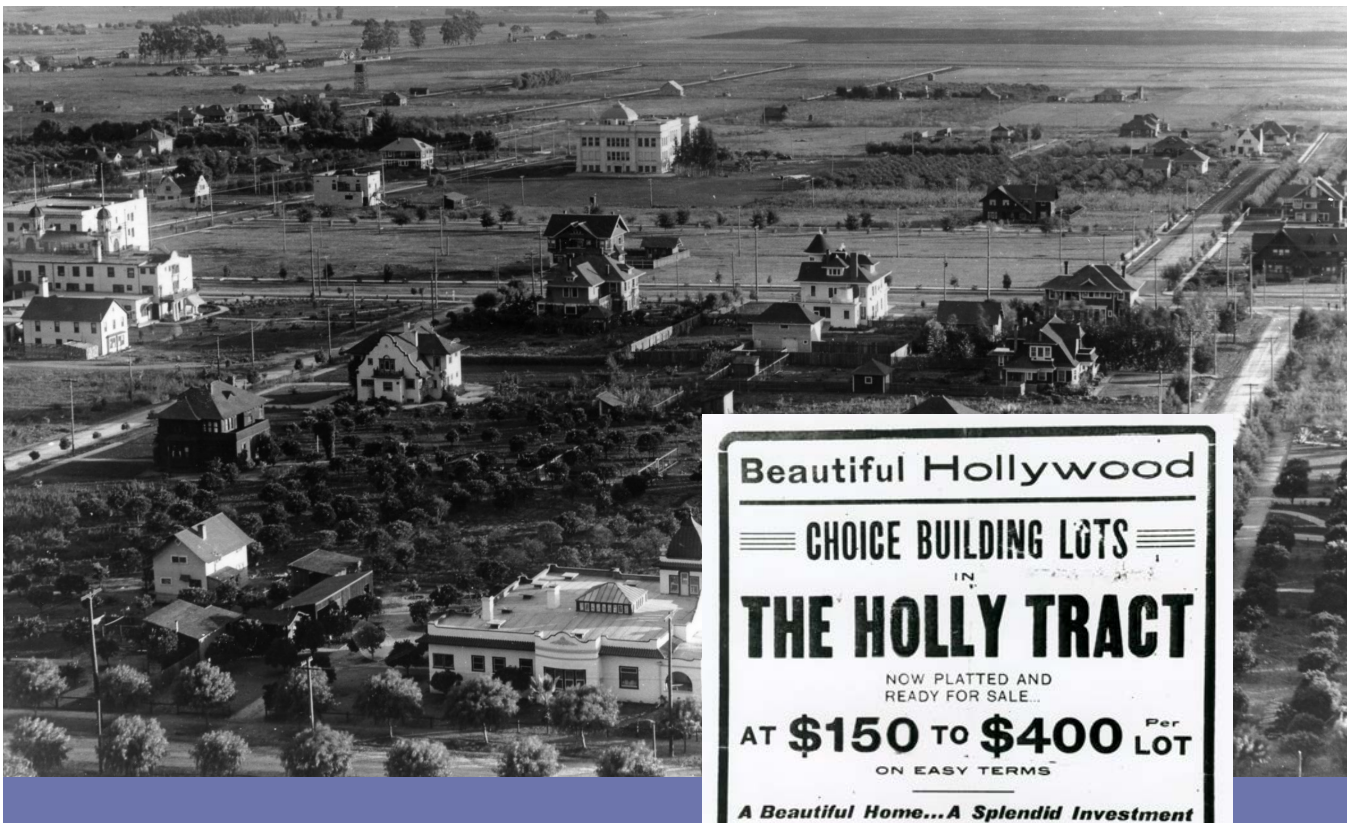


# THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN

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*It started as a billboard for a real estate development called Hollywoodland.*

The Sign was originally cast as a spectacular \$21,000 billboard for “Hollywoodland,” an upscale real estate subdivision located at the end of Beachwood Canyon just below what is now Mount Lee. The development was funded by a syndicate composed of Eli Clark, General Moses Sherman, Tracy Shoults, Sydney Woodruff and *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler. Initially the project was run by Shoults (who oversaw sales) and Woodruff (who spearheaded development and construction), but when Shoults unexpectedly passed away on July 6, 1923, Woodruff was named the lead for all phases of the project.



It's amazing to think that the famously eclectic area began as a planned community with exactly four architectural styles: English Tudor, French Normandy, Mediterranean and Spanish, which were selected to create an "old world" storybook feel. The development was marketed as an escape from the metastasizing urban sprawl below, a lofty oasis of fresh air, spectacular views, and pastoral amenities like swimming pools, tennis courts, tea gardens, a putting green, and a horse stable.

An early ad asked potential homebuyers, *"Where will you live when the second million has come? Will your family enjoy a delightful home in the clean, pure mountain air of Hollywoodland, with its wonderful climate, broad open spaces and plenty of 'elbow' room—or—will you live in a 'dwelling' in the flat, uninteresting houses-in-a-row sections of the City, your family's freedom hampered by this maelstrom of human existence?"*

**Beautiful Hollywood**

CHOICE BUILDING LOTS

IN

**THE HOLLY TRACT**

NOW PLATTED AND  
READY FOR SALE...

AT **\$150 TO \$400** Per LOT  
ON EASY TERMS

*A Beautiful Home... A Splendid Investment*

START THE NEW YEAR OFF RIGHT.  
Buy a Residence Lot in the Right Place.

**R. W. POINDEXTER CO.**

Room 309 Wilcox Block - - - Los Angeles, California  
PHONE BLACK 3626

Or GEO. P. SWAN... South side of Santa Monica Avenue,  
first house West of Church, opposite TRACT

If the ad copy seems a little grandiose, it was nothing compared to the billboard. There are competing claims as to who had the original idea to erect a giant "Hollywoodland" Sign to promote the development. One story has it that real estate developer Hobart Whitley called up Harry Chandler, told him about the electrically lighted sign he had erected for his real estate subdivision, Whitley Heights, and suggested that Chandler do the same for Hollywoodland.

A more recent explanation comes from John Roche, who on his 80th birthday (54 years after the fact) proclaimed that the Sign arose from a misinterpretation of a sketch he made for



an early promotional brochure. The drawing included a street map of the development with the word “Hollywoodland” penciled in the adjacent hills. According to Roche, when he showed it to Harry Chandler, Chandler liked what he saw and wanted to know if Roche could create a giant sign that would be visible from all of Los Angeles.

These accounts give rise to more questions than answers. Setting aside the fact that Whitley Heights never actually had a lighted sign, why would Hobart Whitley offer marketing advice to a rival developer? And why would Harry Chandler, one of the most powerful men in Los Angeles, have to approve preliminary sketches from a 26-year-old brochure designer?

So, if these origin stories seem unreliable, who

did come up with the idea for the Sign? After years of research, it appears that a verifiable answer has been lost to history.

## A STEEP CHALLENGE

Fortunately, the “how” is better documented than the “who.” Despite the scope and visibility of the project, there were no contemporary news accounts of the Sign’s creation; however, photographs of the construction tell the story of an intrepid venture. A crude road was established by scraping away the brush on the hillside, enabling a tractor to haul most of the materials, including the 60-foot telephone-type poles that would serve as the Sign’s support posts, to within about 75 yards of the site. The last leg of the journey was too steep to drive, so mules were

*The famously eclectic area began as a planned community with just four architectural styles and spectacular views.*



## KEEP THE WHITE SPOT WHITE

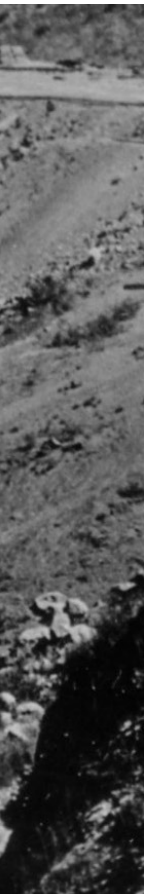
In late 1924, the Sign was underscored with a 35-foot-diameter white dot—or more precisely, a spot. It was more than just an eye-catching decoration; it was a political statement.

In the early 1920s the Chamber of Commerce produced a map illustrating “business conditions” in different areas of the country: black indicated “poor conditions,” gray indicated “fair conditions,” and white indicated “good conditions.” In a sea of gray and black, Los Angeles shone through as a large white spot on the map. This inspired the vehemently anti-union Harry Chandler to refer to the city as a “White Spot of America,” free from communism, crime and corruption.

In early 1924 a group of prominent businessmen, including fellow Hollywoodland syndicate investors Eli Clark and Sydney Woodruff, formed the Greater Los Angeles Association (later incorporated as the Greater Los Angeles Corporation), whose mission was to “Keep the White Spot White” by promoting investment in manufacturing and industrial businesses. To support the cause, 3,000 Boy Scouts set out to place “Keep the White Spot White” stickers on every motor vehicle in the city. The publicity push was punctuated with the addition of the massive white spot under the Hollywoodland Sign. The tagline and symbol were also included in Hollywoodland sales brochures at the time.



*A crude road was created in order to get the materials to the construction site of the Hollywoodland Sign.*





enlisted to drag the poles and other long pieces to the final destination.

Workmen had to hand-carry the smaller pieces, and that was just the beginning of their labors. In the ensuing days they dug 18 eight-foot holes, lowered the roughly 1,440-pound poles into those holes, girded the poles with 104 horizontal support pipes, then anchored and installed 96 vertical supports to the pipes. With the frame in place, they set about connecting all of the bracing and guide wiring for the lights.

The next task was to nail the more than 1,320 pieces of sheet metal (each perforated with one-inch holes to reduce wind resistance) to the Sign's frame in order to form the letters. Ladders and scaffolds were used to install some of the lower pieces, but the majority were nailed to the frame by workmen sitting in bosun's chairs, which were lowered and raised from the top of each letter.

Once all the sheet metal was attached, the Sign's 540 light boxes were installed around the inside and outside perimeter of every letter. Next, the electrical wiring had to be installed and connected to the power source. The Sign's 3,700 light bulbs were installed by workmen using ladders, bosun's chairs, which were lowered and raised by ropes, and horizontal supports—all of which had to be hauled up the steep final slope to the construction site.

### **THE SIGN FIRST LIGHTS UP IN DECEMBER 1923**

The start date of the project can't be verified, but it was definitely completed prior to December 8th, 1923. A *Los Angeles Evening Express* newspaper article published on that date stated, "... immense Hollywoodland Sign, believed to be the largest in the world, will be illuminated tonight."





# TV LAND

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*One of the most important historical sites in television history.*

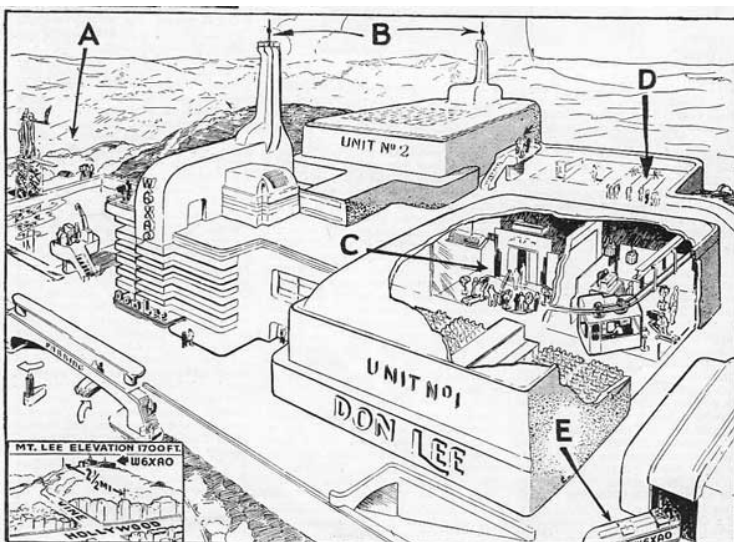
Mount Lee, the home of the Sign, bears the name of a famous entrepreneur who made this ridge in Griffith Park into one of the most important historical sites in television history.

Don Lee was a classic California bootstrapping entrepreneur who, among other claims to fame, owned the exclusive rights to sell Cadillac cars in California in the 1920s. He extended his business into radio in 1926 with the purchase of station KHJ and other stations on the West Coast.

In 1930 Lee saw an opportunity to take the lead in the development of broadcast television, then just a promising but unproven technology. Using a portion of his substantial radio profits, he hired a team to incubate the television filming, transmission and receiving technologies that were just emerging.



*Plans for the Don Lee television station to be built atop Mount Lee. When completed, it boasted the highest elevation television transmission tower in the world.*



Broadcasting under the call letters W6XAO, Lee's first programming went live in December 1931 from a location near Gardena, launching more than eight years before NBC began its broadcasts in New York. By 1932, he had moved the TV studio to downtown Los Angeles at 7th and Bixel, atop his Cadillac dealership. W6XAO aired the first documented television news coverage, of the Long Beach, California earthquake of 1933, as well as the very first soap opera, Vine Street.

However, since television signal transmissions were limited to line-of-sight, large population areas such as the San Fernando Valley were unable to receive his broadcasts. In 1938 the Don Lee Network (then run by Don's son Thomas) purchased a 20-acre site just behind the Hollywood Sign, an area that was co-owned by Mack Sennett, the silent film director and father of "slapstick" comedy. Plans included a state-of-the-art broadcast studio and transmission tower, indoor and outdoor filming facilities, a suspended control room that would move on a track, and, just for the sheer glamor of it all, a full-size swimming pool.

When the facility was completed in 1939, it boasted the highest elevation television transmission tower in the world, broadcasting from over 2,000 feet above sea level or (in terms that would have impressed any American at the time) one and a half times the height of New York's Empire State Building.

From this lofty perch, the network broadcast a wide range of programming, including both in-studio and remotely filmed shows. In 1940, it became the first station on the West Coast to transmit a live remote telecast, using an elaborate radio relay system to send a live signal of Pasadena's famous Tournament of Roses Parade to Mount Lee and then out over the tower. By 1941, it was operating about two hours per day.

After the war ended, Mt. Wilson was identified as a better location for broadcast towers, and all three then-existing television broadcasters moved their transmission towers to that peak. The last television transmission from Mt. Lee took place in October 1951.





*The site atop Mount Lee and the skyscraping radio tower still seen there today eventually came to be operated and owned by the City of Los Angeles. Hollywood still pays tribute to this fascinating period in TV history by referring to the ridge behind the Sign as “Mount Lee.”*





# LEGENDS & MYTHS

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*The true stories behind the Sign's tallest tales.*

Like any proper Hollywood legend, the Sign has sparked its share of rumors and urban myths. But if you dig a little deeper, you'll find a remarkable reality behind the larger-than-life characters and unbelievable events. Read on for the true stories behind the Sign's tallest tales.



*With high hopes to make it big in Hollywood, mounting setbacks crushed Peg's spirit. She found herself blacklisted at only 24 years old.*

## THE HOLLYWOOD SIGN GIRL

On September 18, 1932, a hiker discovered a woman's shoe, jacket and a purse in the canyon below the Sign. The purse contained a single item: a handwritten note that read, "I am afraid I'm a coward. I am sorry for everything. If I had done this a long time ago it would have saved a lot of pain. P.E."

The police made a sweep of the area and soon found what they were looking for. There, at the bottom of the Sign's letter "H," lay the crumpled body of "P.E." – Millicent "Peg" Entwistle.

James Zeruk Jr.'s excellent book *Peg Entwistle And The Hollywood Sign Suicide* chronicles the events (summarized below) that led to this dark chapter in the Sign's history.

Following the untimely deaths of her father and stepmother, young Peg moved from Wales to Hollywood with her aunt and uncle, Charles

and Jane Entwistle, both of whom were in the theater business. As a teenager, Peg began reading and interpreting script scenes with her aunt, and she soon enrolled in the Hollywood Theater Community School. In 1925, she was so smitten with the acting bug that she took the train to New York City with Charles, enrolled in the prestigious Guild School, and began performing in plays in Manhattan.

On April 19, 1927, after a whirlwind romance, Peg married fellow actor Robert Keith. Robert testified on the marriage certificate that it was his first marriage, but Peg soon discovered that he had a previous wife—and a son. (That son, also named Robert, later changed his name to Brian Keith and became a successful actor,

perhaps best known as “Uncle Bill” on the hit TV series *Family Affair*.) After months of suffering in an abusive marriage, Peg was granted a divorce on May 6, 1930. Robert Keith married actress, Dorothy Tierney, and Peg resumed her theatrical career.

The missteps that led to Peg’s suicide began in the early summer of 1932. First, she committed to join the Lakewood Players in Maine for their summer season. Then she jumped ship for a better offer: a role in Bela Blau’s production of a play called “The Mad Hopes” starring Billie Burke and Humphrey Bogart. Things became even more complicated on June 13 when she signed a one-picture contract to appear in RKO’s film *Thirteen Women*. In the span of a few weeks, she had reneged on two job commitments—a cardinal sin in the theatrical world.

She was hoping the risk would pay off in film stardom. In *Thirteen Women*, Peg plays Hazel Cousins, a character who in the original script gets caught up in a romantic relationship with a woman named Martha. That was before the script was reviewed by the Studio Relations Committee, which was responsible for enforcing the Motion Picture Production Code. After their review, the head of the committee sent the following statement directly to RKO producer David O. Selznick: “The lesbian relation between Hazel and Martha, or even the hint of this sort of thing is impossible under the Code. No one now could fail to catch the hint of lesbianism in the various scenes between the two women, and my advice is to kick it right out of the picture.”

When all was said and done, Peg’s role was reduced to no more than a cameo appearance. In part because of the severe script butchery, the film was poorly received, and in August 1932 Peg was released from her contract—her film career derailed as quickly as it began.

Up to that point, Peg had maintained an apartment in New York City with a roommate named Mari. Mari had previously lost her job, and Peg had been covering her portion of the rent and other expenses, but those funds dried up when Peg was let go by RKO. They lost the apartment, and because of the delinquent rent owed, Peg also lost most of her personal property. Meanwhile, she was forced to give up her own Hollywood apartment and move back into her aunt and uncle’s home on Beachwood Drive. Looming above it all was the mocking spectacle of her former husband, Robert Keith, and his new wife, Dorothy Tierney, who were both enjoying successful careers and, by all appearances, a happy marriage.

The mounting setbacks crushed Peg’s spirit. The crowning blow was that she had been ostracized from the theatrical community because of her broken commitments to the Lakewood Players and Bela Blau. She still dreamed of theatrical success, but that would no longer be possible—still only 24 years old, she had been blacklisted.

On Friday, September 16, 1932, Peg told her aunt and uncle she was going to get a book at the drugstore in the Hollywoodland village, but it was a sad alibi. Instead, she made the arduous trek up the canyon hill to the Hollywood Sign, climbed up the ladder at the back of the letter “H,” and plunged to her death.

Peg Entwistle, a young woman of talent and intelligence, was reduced to a tabloid caricature: “The Hollywood Sign Girl.”





*Dick Van Dyke starred in a short film depicting the legendary caretaker who changed the 3,700 light bulbs that surrounded the Sign's letters. View the short at [HollywoodSign.org](http://HollywoodSign.org).*

## HOW MANY PEOPLE DOES IT TAKE TO CHANGE 3,700 LIGHT BULBS?

In the case of the Hollywoodland Sign, the answer is one: a German immigrant named Albert Kothe. Originally hired as a handyman/caretaker by the Hollywoodland real estate development company, he was charged with minor sign repairs, including changing the light bulbs when they burned out, no small task given that the letters were outlined with 3,700 incandescent bulbs.

The urban legend is that he lived in the tiny wooden shack that once stood at the summit behind the Sign. Given the number of light bulbs, it's easy to imagine poor Albert scurrying back and forth between the shack and the Sign in a Sisyphean struggle to keep the lights burning. The less colorful truth is that he resided on nearby North Beachwood Drive, not in the shack, which had no plumbing and was barely large enough to store lights and small equipment. According to another oft-repeated bit of folklore,

one night while Kothe was driving drunk on the road above the Sign, he lost control of his car, careened down the hill, and knocked over the "H." Here again the (well-documented) truth is much less dramatic: the "H" was felled in 1944 by a hard-driving wind, not a drunk-driving caretaker.

Endlessly changing thousands of light bulbs might seem like the definition of monotony, but each replacement was a mini adventure. Ladders were installed behind the letters so that Kothe could, perilously, change the bulbs. After climbing a ladder, he would stand on the horizontal pipe closest to the burned-out bulb, then side-step across the pipe to make the swap. He performed this feat, again and again, for nearly ten years.

There were no news articles reporting when the Sign ceased being lighted, but documents suggest that it was no later than 1933. This was



the year that the Hollywoodland syndicate was dissolved and the unsold land, including the Sign, became property of the M.H. Sherman Company. According to documents at the Sherman Library, the Sign quickly became a financial burden for the company, costing more to maintain than it generated in terms of revenue. In short order the decision was made to discontinue maintenance.

As for Kothe, the records indicate that he went on to work as a chauffeur and caretaker at the Hollywoodland residence known as "Wolf's Lair." He continued to live in the area bosun's chairs, which were lowered and raised by ropes, and died in 1974, a year after the Sign had been designated an official historic monument.

## PRANKSTERS AND THE SIGN

On the night of August 31, 1973, during the restoration, someone altered the Sign by draping a large canvas over the entire letter "D." On the canvas was a color image of singer

Leon Russell underscored with words "Save The Sign." This was the first known vandalized alteration of the Sign. Pranksters have since manipulated the letters with fabric and other materials to create various messages. On two occasions (January 1, 1976 and January 1, 2017) Angelenos awoke to the image of "HOLLYWEED" blazing in the skyline (both times marking the enactment of looser state marijuana laws). Another repeated alteration was "HOLLYWOOD," which shone down from the heavens on April 18, 1976, a nod to the Easter Sunrise Service held that day at the Hollywood Bowl, and again in September 1987, during Pope John Paul II's visit to Los Angeles. Two months prior to the 1987 alteration, the "H" was obscured to spell out "OLLYWOOD," a reference to the all-consuming news of the day: Oliver North's testimony during the Iran-Contra trials. Other notable alterations included "GO NAVY" (1983), "CALTECH" (1987), "PEROTWOOD" (1992), and "GO UCLA" (1993).



# NEGLECT, DECAY & REPAIR

*The Sign's tattered history from 1930 to 1973.*

After years of neglect, the Hollywood Sign was repaired in 1939. In 1944, it was donated to the City of Los Angeles. Unfortunately, its decline continued, and in 1947 it was repaired again—and the word “LAND” removed. This saga of neglect and repair continued until 1973, when the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce gave the aging star another facelift.





## DECLINE & REPAIR: 1930-1949

As mentioned above, the decision was made to discontinue regular maintenance of the Sign circa 1933, but the bigger question was what to do with such a massive and highly visible landmark, one that was quickly becoming an eyesore.

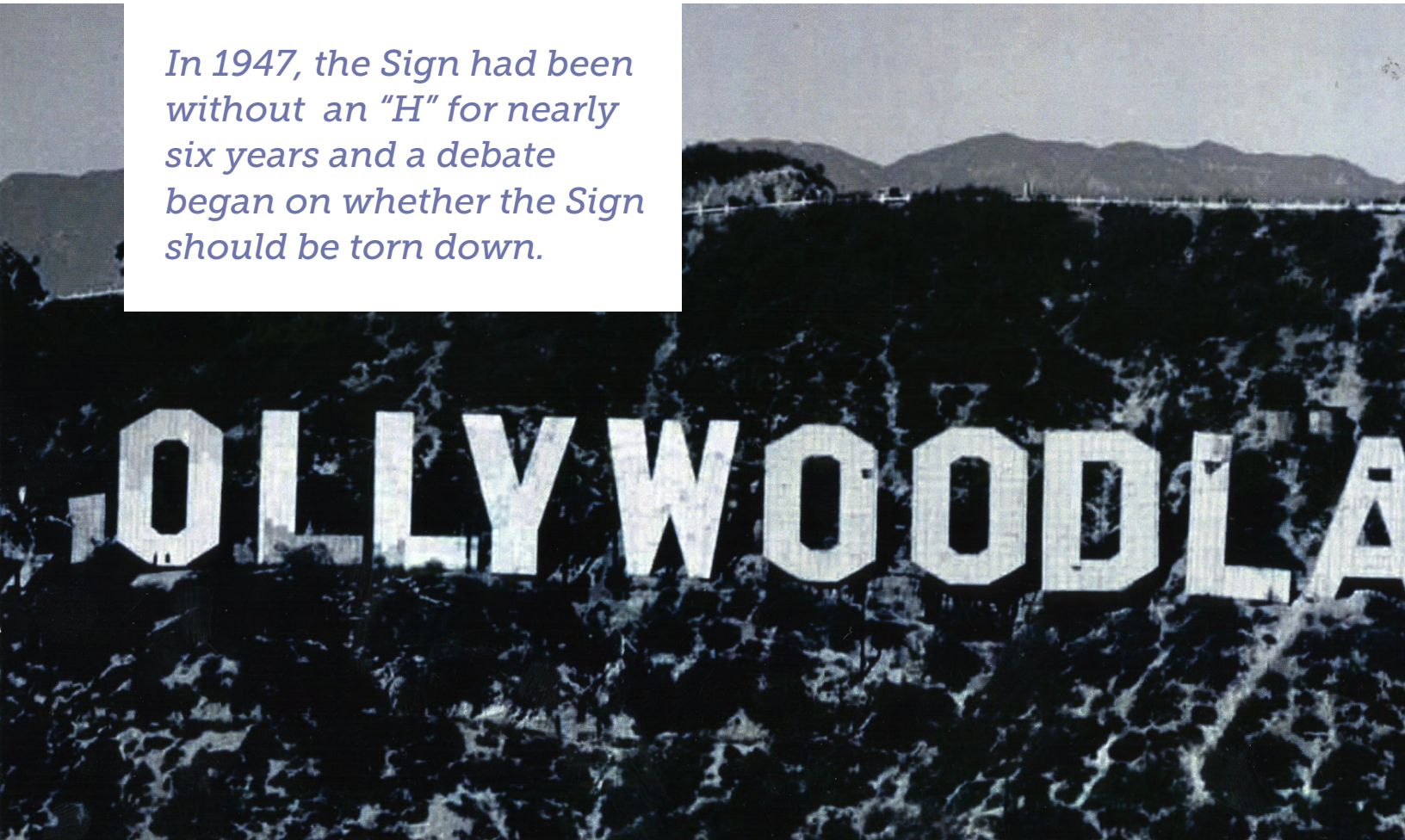
On September 19, 1936, the second “O” collapsed in a windstorm. Following an inspection of the Sign’s frame, Hollywoodland manager Gilbert Miller penned a letter stating that the wood frame “was too badly dried, split and warped” and recommending that they spend no money “fiddling around with the Sign.” During the next two-and-a-half years, two other Sign letters were blown down.

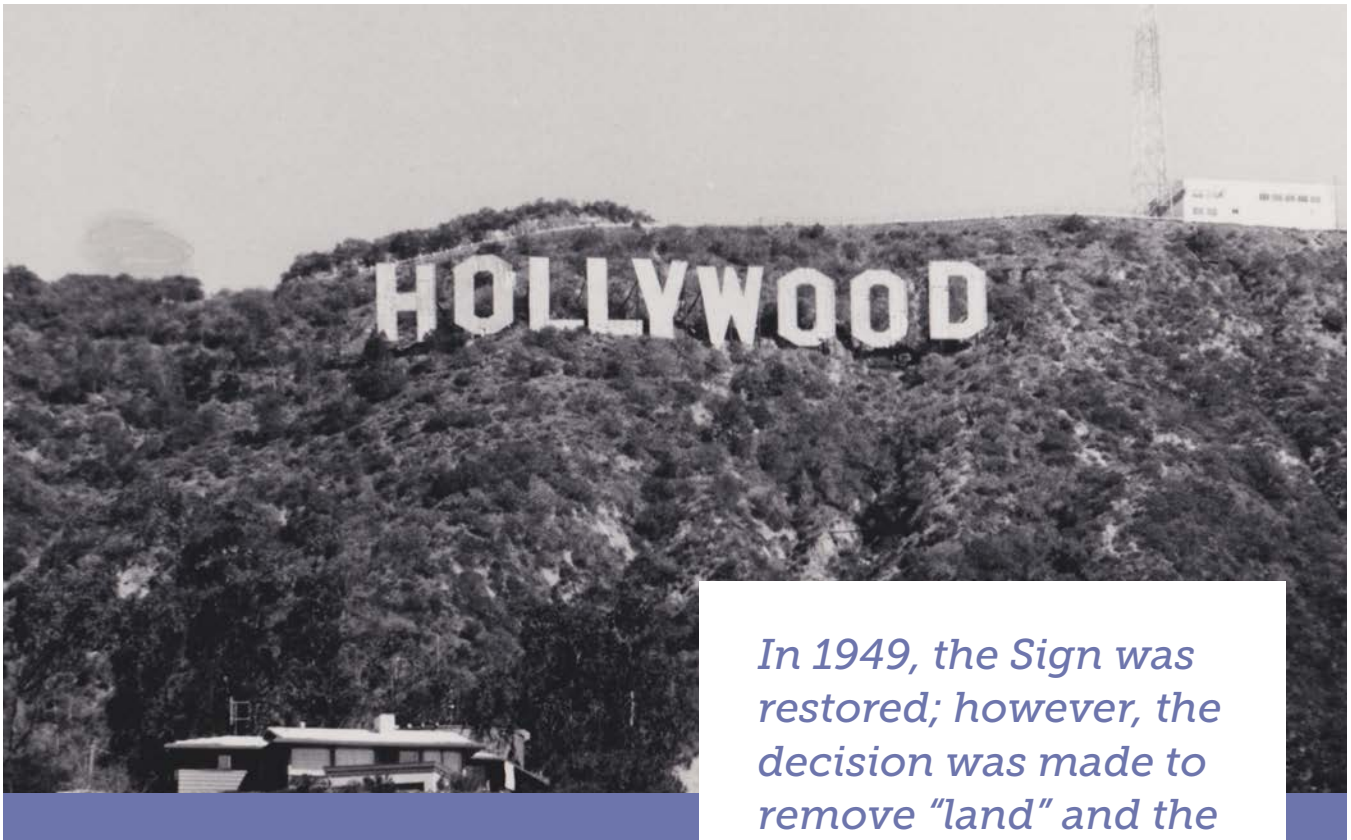
Finally, in early 1939, the company bowed to public pressure and entered into a contract with Harman & Company to repair the Sign at a cost of \$2,177.43.

## THE SIGN IS DONATED TO THE CITY OF LOS ANGELES: 1944

On December 18, 1944, the Hollywoodland tract developers, then known as the M. H. Sherman Company (led by original syndicate investor General Moses Sherman), decided to donate the remaining undeveloped land, consisting of 425 acres, to the City of Los Angeles for a token price of \$1. On January 30, 1945, the City of Los Angeles formally accepted the offer and added it to the Griffith Park acreage under control of the Park Commission.

*In 1947, the Sign had been without an “H” for nearly six years and a debate began on whether the Sign should be torn down.*





*In 1949, the Sign was restored; however, the decision was made to remove “land” and the Sign became what we know today.*

Unfortunately, the Sign’s decline continued under the ownership of the city. In a *Los Angeles Times* article dated March 27, 1944, the actor Pat O’Brien stated that “...a recent windstorm made a cockney out of Hollywoodland. The big Sign now reads OLLYWOODLAND.” For nearly six years, the letter “H” lay on the ground, and the weather continued to deteriorate the rest of the Sign.

## **HOLLYWOODLAND BECOMES HOLLYWOOD: 1949**

In 1947 the city’s Recreation and Parks Commission advocated tearing the whole Sign down, but residents in the Hollywoodland tract protested. Hollywood Chamber of Commerce president John Kingsley entered the argument by offering, on behalf of the Chamber, to finance the re-erection of the “H,” provided the last four letters (“LAND”) were removed. For nearly two years, the battle continued,

with Hollywood residents and the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce on one side and the Recreation and Park Commission on the other. Finally, in April 1949, the Commission granted permission to the Chamber of Commerce to rebuild the “H,” remove the “LAND,” and refurbish the rest of the Sign.

On September 26, 1949, Mayor Fletcher Bowman and John Kingsley puffed their way up the mountain trail and had wind enough to swing a pick-ax for the groundbreaking ceremony. Kingsley predicted the rebuilding of the letter “H” would be completed within three weeks—and it was. With that, the Sign took on a new role: an emblem of the city, the entertainment industry, and the whorl of dazzling associations sparked by the word “HOLLYWOOD.”



## **THE SIGN—AND THE TOWN— NEGLECTED: 1960s**

During the 1960s Hollywood suffered 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 major studio left in town.

In the void left by this civic and business flight (and against a backdrop of looser obscenity laws), Hollywood became overrun with adult theaters and the “adult” culture they ushered in: massage parlors, porn shows, adult bookstores, and other seedy venues. Crime soared and the town’s once-glamorous boulevards fell into disrepair and neglect.

By the end of the turbulent ‘60s, it didn’t take a Weatherman to know what the elements had done to the Sign following its 1949 restoration.

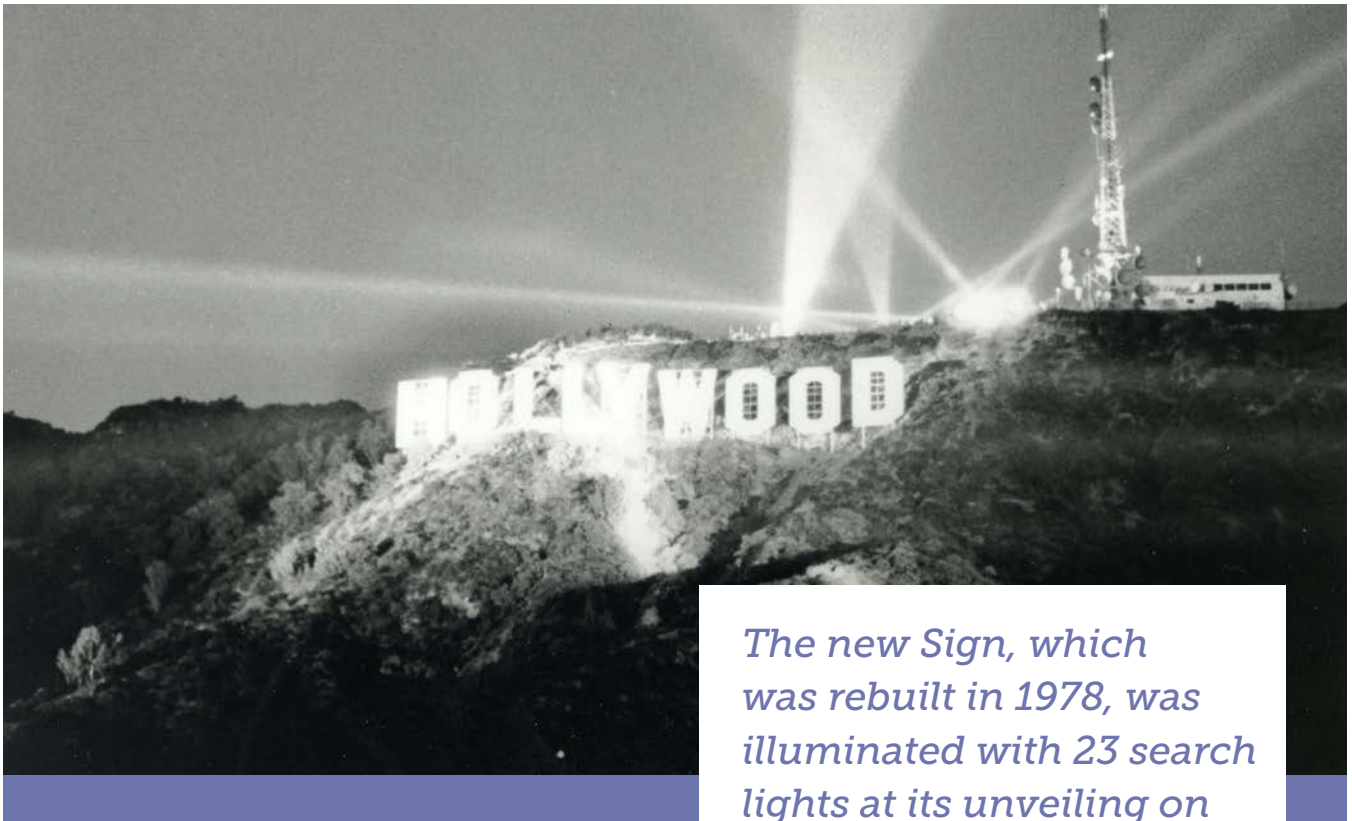
Wind, rain and the sun warped and rusted the sheet metal face, while wood-rot and termites eroded the frame. Hollywood’s once-proud emblem now served as a glaring badge of dishonor for a city in decline—rusted, dilapidated, ready to crumble under its own weight.

## **THE SIGN BECOMES A HISTORIC LANDMARK: 1973**

Time had taken its toll on the Sign, but it was also beginning to lend it historical significance. In 1973 the Sign was designated as Historic-Cultural Monument #111 by the Cultural Heritage Board of the City of Los Angeles. Once again, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce came to the Sign’s aid. Two committees were formed to help the Chamber raise awareness and funds for the Sign’s restoration: the Save the Sign Committee and the Friends of the Hollywood Sign Committee.







*The new Sign, which was rebuilt in 1978, was illuminated with 23 search lights at its unveiling on November 11. In 1973, the Sign had a facelift that did not include structural repairs.*

Concerts and other events were held to raise the estimated \$15,000 needed to restore the Sign. The Association of Motion Picture and Telephone Producers donated \$1,500, which was followed by a \$10,000 donation from Les Kelley, automobile dealer and founder/publisher of the Kelley Blue Book. (Kelley pledged an additional \$1,000 for the Save the Sign Committee to establish a perpetual maintenance fund.) Contributions were also solicited from the general public, and by mid-April 1973 the committees had received contributions from more than 4,000 individuals and companies.

In September 1973 the Chamber of Commerce announced that the contract for the Sign's facelift had been awarded to the Neon Products Signs. (Note the careful use of the word "facelift"; few, if any, structural repairs were included in the scope of work.) For the next several weeks, workmen braved the wind and

the sharp edges of the Sign to replace missing or damaged pieces of sheet metal. For a few days in August, the Sign seemed to disappear as a green rust resistant primer, which blended into the hills, was applied by the painters. Three coats of bright white paint later, the Sign re-emerged, by all appearances as good as new.

On Friday, September 14, 1973, a gala event was held to celebrate the restored Sign's unveiling. Silent film star Gloria Swanson was called upon to flip the switch on the floodlights that had been temporarily installed to illuminate the Sign for the event. Unfortunately, a thick fog had blanketed the hills, obscuring the Sign's comeback performance. In hindsight, it may have been an omen of dark days to come.

# THE SIGN IS REBORN

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*The Sign needs more than a cosmetic fix.*

As mentioned above, the 1973 repair was simply a facelift. The structural integrity seemed to be fairly intact, so the job focused on replacing, repairing and painting the sheet metal face. That notion was stripped away on February 10, 1978 when a powerful windstorm battered Los Angeles, causing damage, of varying degrees, to every letter of the Sign. The third “O” sustained the greatest damage—broken beams, twisted metal, snapped telephone poles, ripped guide wires, and missing sheet metal. The “Y” partially collapsed after one of the compression braces snapped. And all the other letters had missing pieces of sheet metal.







*In 1978, Hugh Hefner hosted a party at the Playboy Mansion West to raise funds to rebuild the Hollywood Sign. Hefner continued to support the Sign until his death in 2017.*

On February 27, 1978, the structural engineer company Edmond Babayan & Associates was asked to perform a field inspection of the damaged Sign. Among its many findings was the following statement: "Main Support Poles: These poles being of unpreserved wood, have rotted over the years and since they were embedded directly in the ground, they are heavily infested with termites." It was this report that convinced everyone, particularly the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, that the Sign was un-repairable and needed to be completely replaced.

### **SAVE THE SIGN CAMPAIGN: 1978**

Once again, the community sprang into action. On May 25, 1978, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce launched a "Save the Sign" campaign, with a goal of raising \$250,000 to build a new, more permanent Hollywood Sign of the same design and size as the original. Meanwhile, Hugh Hefner announced that Playboy Enterprises would host a fund-raising party for the Hollywood Sign on June 29, 1978, at the Playboy Mansion West.

On June 14, rock star Alice Cooper pledged \$27,700 to rebuild the third "O" in honor of Groucho Marx. Following Cooper's announcement, Warner Bros. Records announced they would also contribute \$27,700, for the replacement of the second "O."

On June 29, Hugh Hefner hosted a \$150-per-person, star-studded party at the Playboy mansion. The highlight of the event was Andy Williams' announcement that he would pitch in \$27,700 to replace the "W." As a token of appreciation, Chamber of Commerce President Jack Foreman announced that \$27,700 of the \$45,000 raised at the party would be used to replace the "Y" and the new letter would be dedicated to Hefner.





DONATED BY  
GIOVANNI MAZZA

DONATED BY  
GENE AUTRY  
& KTLA

DONATED BY  
ANDY WILLIAMS

DONATED BY  
ALICE COOPER  
IN HONOR OF  
GROUCHO MARX

DONATED BY  
TERRANCE DONNELLY

DONATED BY  
LES KELLEY

DONATED BY  
HOLLYWOOD CHAMBER  
OF COMMERCE  
IN HONOR OF  
HUGH HEFNER

DONATED BY  
WARNER BROS.  
RECORDS

DONATED BY  
DENNIS LIDTKE

*Nine generous donations (pledges of \$27,700 for each letter) made the 1978 rebuild of the Sign possible.*

The week following the Playboy party saw a flurry of participation in the "Save The Sign" campaign. Gene Autry and KTLA announced their contribution of \$27,700 for the second "L." Terrance Donnelly, publisher of the *Hollywood Independent* newspaper, announced a donation of \$27,700 for the "H," and Dennis Lidtke, of Gribbitt Graphics, donated \$27,000 for the "D." By mid-July only two letters remained to be sponsored. Italian movie producer Giovanni Mazza, who was moving his production company to the United States, took care of the first "O" with his \$27,700 donation. And Les Kelley, founder of the Kelley Blue Book, once again came to the Sign's rescue by donating \$27,700 for the first "L."

## THE MAKEOVER BEGINS

Thanks to these contributions, the Sign was ready for its makeover. The contract to build the new Sign was awarded to the Pacific Outdoor Advertising Company, assisted by Hughes Helicopter and Heath Company. The day before the old Sign was to be demolished, on August 8, 1978, a "bon voyage" gathering was held on a dirt lot across from the Sign. In attendance were several of the donors, Chamber officers, Councilwoman Peggy Stevenson, and the four Playboy Bunnies who accompanied Hugh Hefner to the event.



*Pacific Outdoor Advertising knocked down the old sign and within two days all the letters were lying flat against the hillside.*

That same day, the crew from Pacific Outdoor Advertising arrived to knock down the old Sign, and by nightfall two days later all the letters were lying flat against the hillside. For the first time in 55 years, Hollywood had no sign.

Once the old Sign was removed from the site, the real work began. First, the workers dug holes for 20 large vertical support beams. Steel girder beams were skillfully lowered into the holes by a Hughes 500D helicopter, then the holes were filled with 194 tons of concrete. Next, the helicopter lowered the first "row" of 15-foot-long steel beams, which were bolted to the tops of the foundation beams. Each beam was then fitted with two additional 15-foot beams. The result was a lineup of 45-foot-high steel beams ready to serve as the Sign's structural core.





Once all the vertical beams were in place, the crew got to work attaching the horizontal supports and, later, the corrugated baked enamel sheet metal panels that form the Sign's letters. When finished, the Hollywood Sign stood as the largest sign in the world, a claim supported by the following numbers:

- Height of letters: 45 feet
- Length of Sign: 450 feet
- Square footage of the Sign: 11,850 square feet
- Girders and steel columns: 66,683 pounds
- 194 tons of cement
- Corrugated baked metal sheet metal: 20,000 pounds
- Sign's total weight: 240 tons, or 480,000 pounds

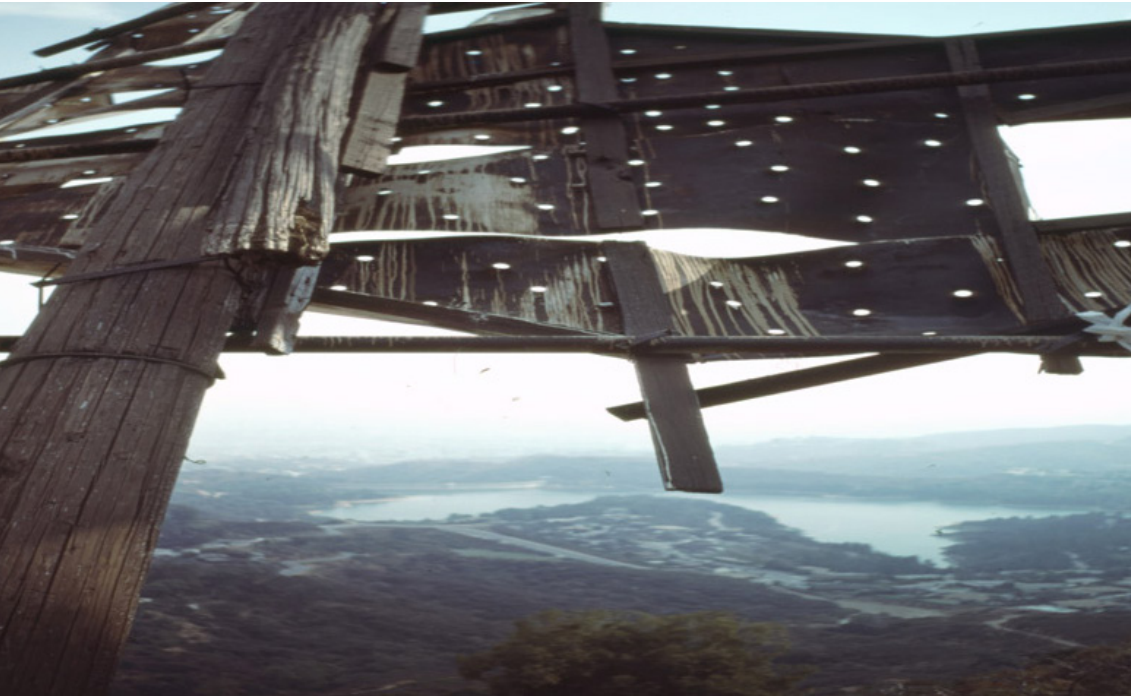
To celebrate the new Sign's debut, CBS televised Pierre Cossette's "Hollywood Diamond Jubilee" on November 11, 1978. The Hollywood Chamber of Commerce hosted a party at the Griffith Observatory, affording guests a prime view of the unveiling. At about 8:00 p.m. the Sign was illuminated with two argon laser beams and 23 searchlights, casting 2.3 million foot-candles of light on Hollywood's biggest star. After decades of neglect and half-measures, the Sign shone brighter than ever.





# FROM DESTRUCTION TO REBIRTH

Noted photographer Darius Aidala captured these photos of the Hollywood Sign rebuild.



After years of neglect, the Hollywood Sign kept a lonely vigil over Los Angeles. By 1978, the famous Sign was in total disrepair.

The historic letters were a target for graffiti. On August 8, 1978, the day before the old Sign was to be demolished, a “bon voyage” gathering was held on a dirt lot across from the Sign, attended by donors, Chamber officers, Hugh Hefner and four Playboy Bunnies.





Pacific Outdoor Advertising Company, assisted by Hughes Helicopter and Heath Company, was awarded the contract to tear down and rebuild the Sign.

Raiden Peterson was project manager of the 1978 reconstruction, and helicopter pilot Greg Ashe flew 20 steel beams to the construction site. The beams were secured in deep holes filled with 194 tons of concrete.



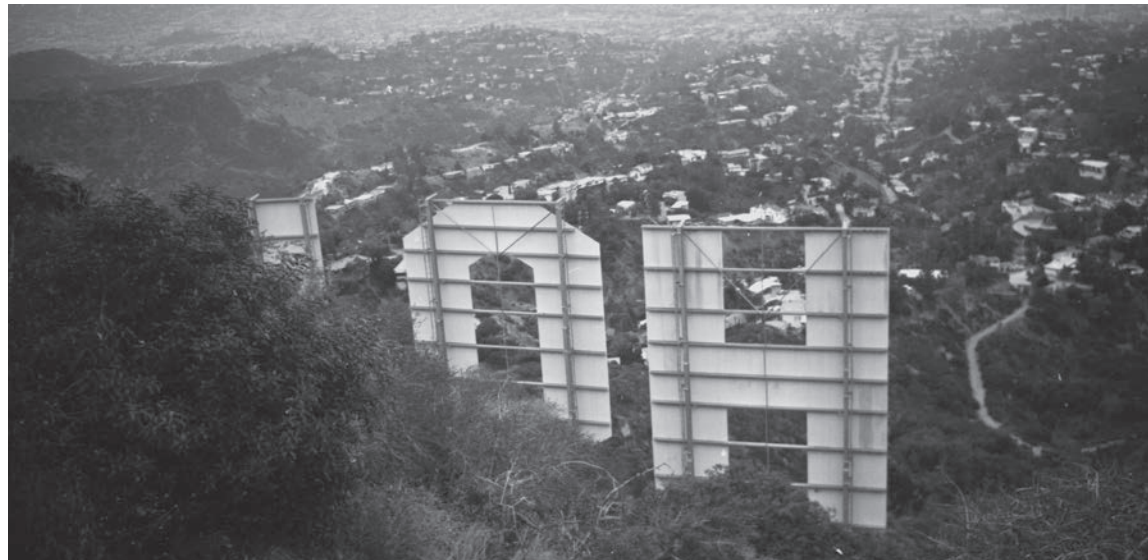
After horizontal supports were installed, the crew attached corrugated baked enamel sheet metal panels that form the Sign's letters.





The letters H and O are nearly complete.

The Sign takes shape.



The Hollywood Sign is restored and stands as the largest sign in the world. After decades of neglect and temporary repairs, today the Sign shines brighter than ever.





# HOLLYWOOD REBUILDS

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*Hollywood blossoms and the Hollywood Sign Trust is born.*

The Hollywood 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 a larger mission of helping to preserve Hollywood's standing as the worldwide center of motion pictures and cinema arts).

During the past 40 years, the nine men and women appointed to the non-profit Sign Trust have spearheaded numerous campaigns, from physical maintenance, to security systems, to public awareness campaigns for the Sign. The Trust also supports Hollywood cultural and community events. To accomplish its central mission, protecting this landmark and educating the world about Hollywood and its most-famous symbol, the Trust relies on the volunteer efforts of its board and on contributions from generous donors who recognize the importance of Hollywood's monuments and history.

Despite its sturdy construction, the new Sign is still subject to the ravages of nature and mankind. To protect against the former, the Sign received a new paint job courtesy of Dutch

Boy Paints in 1993. (Fittingly, the unveiling was hosted by the self-proclaimed "queen of facelifts," Phyllis Diller.) To prevent the latter, the area was equipped with a sprawling state-of-the-art surveillance and security system, courtesy of Panasonic, in the year 2000, putting an end to what had been a sordid tradition of people climbing up to the Sign and defacing it with graffiti.

In 2003 the Sign received another new paint job, this time courtesy of Bay Cal Painting and Construction. And 10 years later, in preparation for the original Hollywoodland Sign's 90th anniversary, Sherman Williams donated special eco-friendly latex paint along with the labor for a 10-week makeover of the Sign.







## THE SIGN TODAY

When the original Sign was built in 1923, no one could have imagined that what was conceived as a temporary billboard would endure to become one of the world's most recognizable landmarks.

During that improbable journey, the Sign fell into irrelevance and severe disrepair, before finally being recognized as a civic treasure to be restored, protected and promoted.

Today, as it approaches 100 years of stardom, the Sign is poised to play its signature roles for generations to come: a celestial fixture above a city of constant change, a dazzling marquee for an industry perpetually announcing its own gala premiere, and a beacon for aspiring stars from all walks of life, conjuring a parade of dreams and desires with nine simple white letters:

**H-O-L-L-Y-W-O-O-D.**

## THANK YOU TO...

- Members of The Hollywood Sign Trust for donating their time and talent to protect and preserve this global treasure;
- Bruce Torrence, HollywoodPhotos.com, for his exhaustive research that made this updated history possible—and for sharing his historic photos of Hollywood and the Sign;
- The talented photographers who allowed us to use their photos;
- Raiden Peterson and Greg Ashe for sharing their memories of the Sign's 1978 rebuild;
- The Hollywood Chamber of Commerce for leading campaigns to restore the Sign in 1949 and 1973 and to rebuild it in 1978;
- Council District 4, the Department of Recreation and Parks, LAPD and the City of Los Angeles for working to preserve this cultural treasure;
- Millions of fans around the globe for keeping the dream alive.



## SUPPORT THE SIGN

The Hollywood Sign Trust, a 501c3 non-profit organization, maintains the Hollywood Sign. To support this iconic landmark, visit [HollywoodSign.org](http://HollywoodSign.org) and click on the "Donate" button.

For more information, email [info@hollywoodsign.org](mailto:info@hollywoodsign.org) or visit [www.HollywoodSign.org](http://www.HollywoodSign.org).

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