



History and construction of the Lompoc Theatre

The Lompoc Theatre is legendary for its place in stage, music and movie history. From vaudeville to ballet, symphonies to rock concerts, from Hollywood classics to independent film, the Lompoc Theater has hosted it all.

As California's movie industry grew, it needed new theaters to showcase productions. In 1926, the West Coast Theatre Company of Santa Barbara made an offer to lease a theater building on a site on H Street at the alley, if one were to be built.

Enter the Knights of Pythias, a worldwide organization that had a policy of building their temples along with schools or theaters.

The Knights of Pythias had purchased the lots about five years earlier from Lydia Latton of Glendale with the intent to build a lodge. Construction of such a hall still seemed quite remote when in 1926 the West Coast Theatre company of Santa Barbara made an offer to lease a theater building on the site.

A financial plan for such a structure seemed feasible. The local theater men, Calvert and his partner and brother-in-law, William Baker, made a similar offer and terms of the lease were drawn.

A building association was formed with Judge L. Huseman as chairman. A financial offer by Dr. L. E. Heiges enabled the committee to work out plans to proceed.

The initial costs to construct the theater building comprised \$100,000: Approximately \$59,000 in the bare building alone, \$22,000 for the new organ, \$6,000 for seats and \$3,000 for part of the curtain.

Among the local contractors were C.D. Reiner and Son of Santa Maria, general contractors, as well Valley Electric Company, for the wiring and lighting. W.E. Rohrer supervised the construction of the control system,

considered one of the best on the coast. G. F. Learned did all the painting, except for the decorating done by Verne Laney of Hollywood. Learned did the woodwork in the theater, offices and stores in the building. William J. Fisk, hired by the K of P association, was the building inspector.

The theater's scenic equipment —drapes, scene curtains and a "beautiful" cyclorama — were built to the specification of the Los Angeles Scenic Studios.

The Historical Lompoc Land Office and its role in construction

The "Lompoc Land Office" building was the first built in the valley, in 1875. It was retained by the Knights as an operations office and moved to the back of the lot from H Street, where it remains today.

The Land Office is vital to Lompoc history as a very rare example of the typical wood-framed commercial storefronts constructed during the Colony Period (1894-1902) of the the town's growth.

Also of historical significance is the way the Land Office was adapted at a later period to be used as dressing rooms for the Lompoc Theater when it was relocated from the frontage of H Street, making it an early example of adaptive reuse within the city.

On the west side of the building are ghosts of signage that convey two past uses in the words "Harness Shop" and "Shoe Shop." On the north side is signage that indicates the age of the building in the painted advertisement: "MJB Coffee WHY?"

In May 1906, the MJB Coffee Company of Morris J. Brandstein launched a nationwide advertising campaign or "teaser" to increase brand awareness of its product. This was one month after the Great Earthquake in April 1906, when the company's San Francisco headquarters had burned to the ground.

The Lompoc Theatre opens

From opening night in May 1927 well into the 1970s, the theater was Lompoc's primary venue for entertainment, culture and civic events. During opening week, proprietor Walter Calvert sent an open letter to the local newspapers:

"To the fathers, mothers, and children of this prosperous and enterprising community... to the masses and the classes, the new Lompoc theatre is respectfully dedicated. As an integral part of this community, the new Lompoc Theatre is hereby pledged as a public institution, where daily worries, work, and cares may be obliterated through the medium of the universal language — motion pictures. People of the Lompoc valley, this theatre is YOURS."

And so it became, providing a venue for local civic theatre and orchestra groups as well as world-class acts ranging from jazzman Sonny Clay to cowboy crooners Sons of the Pioneers, from classical pianist Van Cliburn to Tex-Mex superstar Freddy Fender and R&B legends the Coasters. Even Liberace played the Lompoc Theatre!

The theater was the heart of Lompoc culture and entertainment for many years. It offered much more than films. Concerts, plays, lectures, Mickey Mouse Club sessions, even dog "contests," all took place on its wood stage.

The popular "dog contest," held as part of the Mickey Mouse Club session, offered prizes to the best-trained, best-groomed and smallest and largest dogs, and the theatre was widely viewed as the heart of downtown Lompoc.

During opening night in 1927, Howard McBride, publicity director for the Universal Film Corporation, presided as master of ceremonies. McBride was always in demand on premier nights at new theaters.

Walter Calvert arranged a premier showing of a new comedy, "Lost at the Front," and the world premier of an Andy Gump comedy, "Circus Daze." Also included were a Newsreel and other short subjects, as well as an organ solo by a renowned organist, orchestral members, singing, dancing, and the introduction of stage and screen celebrities available for the occasion.

Show times and ticket costs set by proprietors Baker and Calvert and were as follows: "One performance week nights beginning at 7:45 p.m. Matinee every Saturday at 2:15. Two performances every Saturday and Sunday night beginning at 7 and 9 p.m. Admission prices: 10 cents for kiddies and 25 cents for adults at Saturday matinees, and for the evening performances, 15 cents for kiddies and 35 cents for adults."

Local actors under the auspices of the Alpha Club performed the first play in the new theater, a three-act comedy-drama called "The Dream Wife," June 6, 1927.

The theater's blind organist, Charles Poulson, was born in the family home in Miguelito Canyon and during his lifetime, according to historical accounts, worked as a "composer, philosopher, counselor, pianist, organist, accordionist, jurist, legal advisor, broker, salesman, lecturer and humorist. He graduated from the State School for the Blind in Berkeley in 1911, and later attended the University of Redlands and studied law at LaSalle University and George Nix Law School in Los Angeles."

With the help of a sighted assistant, Poulson for years played piano and organ accompaniment for silent films at the new Lompoc Theatre and the Opera House.

By 1929, "talkies" had replaced the old silent films, and Poulson was no longer a vital part of the theatre.

A second generation steps up to manage the theater

Earl Calvert, son of Walter Calvert and nephew of Baker, was attending the University of California in Berkeley during the time of the construction and opening of the Lompoc Theatre. In the summer of 1929 he returned to Lompoc to assist his father in the management of the theater.

Born in San Jose on Sept. 25, 1905, Earl Calvert was six months when his family moved back to Lompoc. He graduated from Lompoc High in June 1925, and went away to college. While there, he kept in touch with Anne Scolari, and the two married in June 1929 in San Jose.

The couple married about the time “talkies” began to replace silent films, and the Great Depression was about to start.

However, the theater’s popularity endured throughout the Depression, and it remained the entertainment focal point for families in the Lompoc Valley, and then for thousands of Army troops at Camp Cooke during World War II.

Earl Calvert eventually took over the management of the theater as the health of his father, Walter, began to fail. It was he who instituted the popular “Mickey Mouse Club” that kept Lompoc’s children entertained on Saturday afternoons throughout the 1930s. The theater also sponsored a Youth Band under Calvert’s guidance; the band became the nucleus of Lompoc High School’s Blue Ribbon Band.

In the late 1930s, Technicolor movies were introduced into the theater systems, and classic movies such as “Gone With the Wind” became a vital part of Lompoc’s entertainment fare.

In 1939, Walter Calvert died. Baker, then 80, remained a partner in the business, but had lived in San Jose for many years because Earl Calvert managed the theater. Baker retired in 1948, and Earl Calvert purchased the Lompoc Theatre building from the Knights of Pythias and bought out Baker’s share of the business.

Lompoc’s theater venues doubled in 1944 when Earl Calvert opened the La Mesa Theater on Ocean between I and J streets, where the farmer’s market is held today, making Lompoc a two-theater town for more than 10 years. Regular films were shown on all nights, and Hispanic films were shown one night a week. In June 1956, however, the La Mesa theater burned to the ground.

The Lompoc Theatre was completely redesigned, modernized and refurbished within 12 days in late 1954. Installed were an enlarged Cinemascope screen, a new sound system, new seats, carpeting, a new box office, and a new, larger lobby. The theater reopened in a gala event on Christmas Day, 1954.

Hard times

The Lompoc Theatre survived both the Depression and the 1960s, but midway through the 1970s, attendance fell to a level too low to be economically sound. The kinds of movies gaining popularity during those years were deemed not suitable for the family-style fare always favored by Calvert and Baker and later, Earl Calvert.

In addition, competition from multi-screen suburban cinemas and the rise of cable television, as well as regional and national economic woes, diminished the viability of the Lompoc Theatre, and the Calvert family closed the theatre in 1975.

The once-elegant 450-seat theater has been largely unused since the mid-1970s. The last year a film was projected onto its Cinemascope screen was 1985.

In the mid-2000s, the Calvert family, descendants of Walter and Earl Calvert, declined multiple offers that would have demolished the theater building. In 2006, the Calverts sold the property to a local nonprofit, the Lompoc Housing and Community Development Corporation (LHCDC).

LHCDC's plans to rehabilitate the theater as the Calvert Center for the Performing Arts stalled and were eventually abandoned, leaving the Calvert's greatest wish — a restored community theater located in the heart of downtown — unfulfilled.

LHCDC still owns the title to the Lompoc Theatre. Ongoing efforts to remove LHCDC's unpaid liens and transfer ownership to the Lompoc Theatre Project are nearing completion.

[Sources: The above account includes information from the Lompoc Valley Historical Society's "*Lompoc Legacy*," published in Summer 1985, from the 2007 application for Historic Preservation Certification and from other published reports].