

The La Paloma

This landmark theatre stands today as the most striking reminder of the period in the 1920s when movie stars discovered Encinitas as a kind of seaside oasis. Some built homes here, others seeking an escape from prohibition merely stopped over on their way to the “watering-holes” of Mexico. One silent film star who chose to make Encinitas her home for a number of years was Bessie Love. Miss Love built a two-story house and adjacent cottages during 1926 to 1928 at 541 Fourth Street, and these structures stand today. Charlie Chaplin purchased a home for his mother around 1925 at 1448 Neptune. But it was Aubrey Austin, president of the Santa Monica Savings Bank, who financed the construction of the most notable building of that decade, the La Paloma Theatre, which opened its doors on February 11, 1928.

The theatre’s Spanish Mission and art deco design was conceived by Edward J. Baum of Santa Monica and Carroll N. Cook of Hollywood. The fifty thousand dollar structure drew praise from critics upon completion. The house with its high vaulted ceilings was filled with ornate fixtures and lighting. Walls were decorated with old-world prints. But the showcase piece of the theatre was a Kilgen Wonder Organ from which the La Paloma “overture” was played.

It is boasted that the La Paloma was the first “talking” theatre in the rural United States. Indeed, in 1928 Encinitas was a small farming town and could justifiably be termed “rural.” “Talkies” were the sensation then, having been introduced in 1927, and the La Paloma presented the earliest ones. Acoustics for the theatre were perfected by a New York specialist, so no sound was lost.

Although there does not seem to be documented proof, it has been said that Mary Pickford bicycled down for the gala opening of the theatre from the ranch home she shared with her husband Douglas Fairbanks in Rancho Santa Fe. Other stars reportedly came south from Hollywood for the affair which included vaudeville acts and the movie, “The Cohens and Kelleys in Paris.”

Throughout the thirties and forties, during Hollywood’s most successful years, the La Paloma was a favorite entertainment center for Encinitas and the surrounding communities. Then in 1963, following a period of decline, the theatre was closed. Today it is making a gradual comeback as a community gathering place, hosting some of the annual civic events as well as plays, concerts, and, of course, movies. The La Paloma Theatre itself, however is “part of the show.”

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