



The Glendale Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

VOL. 2, NO. 3, 1981

The Living Heritage of the ALEX THEATRE

THE ALEX THEATRE - A GUIDING STAR FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

From its inception as a theatre which was capable of handling any kind of an attraction ranging from such celebrities as Bing Crosby, Ginger Rogers, Stan Laurel and Barbara Stanwyck, the Alex Theatre has traversed the roads of time and man in its fifty-six year history to remain a symbol of excellent Neo-Greek architectural design and solid construction.

Founded upon the concept that Glendale required a good place of entertainment to encourage residents of Los Angeles and Hollywood to come to Glendale, the Alexander (as it was initially known) was formally opened at 216 North Brand Boulevard on September 4, 1925. The theatre was named after Alexander Langley, a son of one of the officials in the West Coast-Langley chain of theatres. Designed by Glendale architects Arthur Lindley and Charles Selkirk, the theatre was initially inspired by the then recently constructed Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood.

Many important motion picture premieres such as Walt Disney's first animated movie "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" were held at the Alex. At one time the theatre housed a large pipe organ which was enlisted on numerous occasions to support charitable and civic events as well as Red Cross campaigns and bond drives during the years of World War II. It is one of the few movie houses existing today that still has an orchestra pit and dressing room facilities. In 1940 architect S. Charles Lee was contracted to remodel the Alex's exterior. In designing a new marquee with illuminated tower he hoped more strongly to focus the public's attention on the theatre.

Possibly one day in the future the Alex Theatre's image as a showcase for motion picture premieres, charitable events, and civic occasions will be restored. If this were achieved, then the "Jewel City of the Verdugos" would shine once again as a guiding star for the performing arts, able to enrich the quality of life of her residents and of the Southern California Community as a whole.

Chris Cox
Director of Public Affairs
Glendale Chamber of Commerce

(Interior wall decoration motif from the Alex Theatre. Joni Atkinson photo)

A BRILLIANT REMINDER OF GLENDALE'S 1920'S ARCHITECTURAL PAST

Behind the columned portico which leads one from present-day Glendale into a world of fantasy lies the Alex Theatre. Designed by two well-known Glendale architects, Arthur G. Lindley and Charles R. Selkirk, the "Alexander" began its long residency on September 4, 1925. A premier theatre in its day, the Alexander attracted the prominent members of Glendale society, as well as those of neighboring cities.

Considered Neo-Greek by some historians, upon closer scrutiny the theatre reveals a combination of architectural features which more accurately place it in the enigmatic realm of "the People's Architecture of the Twenties". Once lit by bright neon lights, the exterior boasts a tall tower capped by a star, a Moderne marquee of wood, and a massive covered walkway. Decorative terrazzo forms a huge sunburst around the ticket booth. All of these elements were added in 1940 by the renowned theatre architect S. Charles Lee.

Hidden behind this mask is the true Alexander Theatre of the silent film era. A tomb-like courtyard of imitation granite block leads to the entry, which is topped by a Mayan stepped pyramid (the wall texture was later coated with stucco). Large Greek urns mark the corners, and a myriad of stencil work, friezes and decorative iron work further confuses the onlooker. Originally, the courtyard included small shops and an arched passage to the adjacent parking lot. The magnificent etched glass doors flanked by massive fluted columns on either side, and fronted by a row of smaller Ionic columns, prepare the visitor for the interior opulence. Although a modern snackbar is now the centerpiece of the lobby, two large murals grace the walls: a bright battle scene complete with chariot on the east wall, and a more serene garden scene on the west wall. An ornate gilt coffered ceiling and a row of Art Deco lamps hanging like pendants from the hall ceiling lead one further into the recesses of the theatre.

One of the largest theatres of its day, the Alexander is complete with balcony, orchestra pit and dressing rooms. The large stage, which forms the central point of this tremendous space, is embellished with fluted columns, murals, a crowning metal sunburst design framed by winged griffins, and a curtain with the city of Athens printed across its center. This curtain has been replaced by a plain curtain.

Although changes have been made to the interior over the years, the Alex as we know it today remains a brilliant reminder of Glendale's 1920's boom period. On our 75th anniversary it behooves us to preserve the best of our city's golden era. Monuments like the Alex Theatre, the Masonic Lodge and the Egyptian Village Cafe not only remain as reminders of our past, but form the building blocks of the future.

Joni L. Atkinson

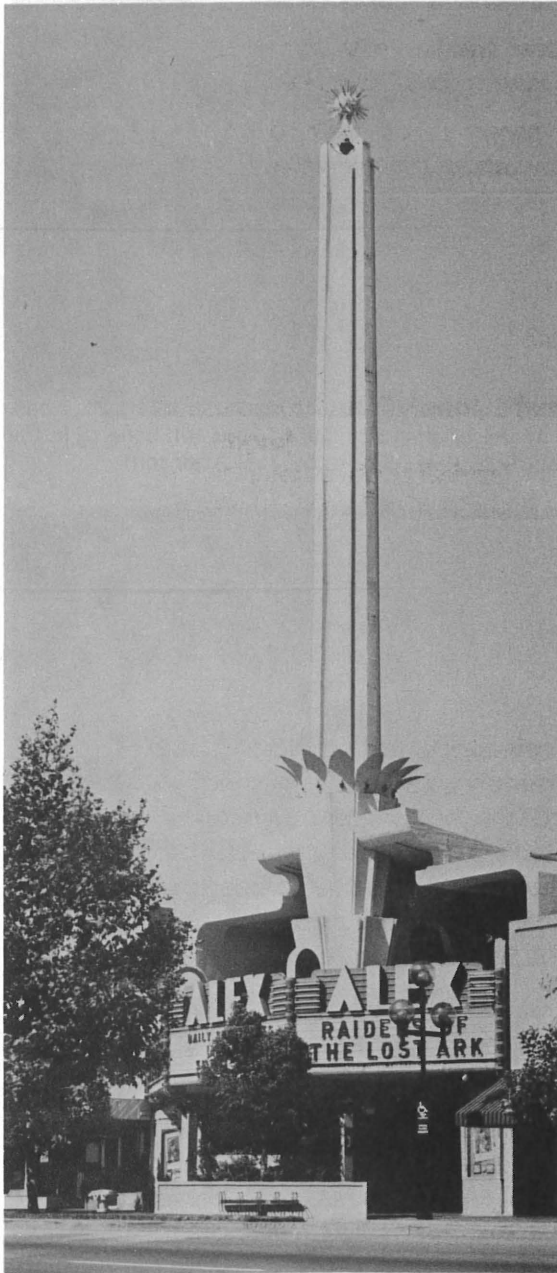
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THE ALEXANDER THEATRE - REMINISCENCES OF CARL MEEKER

Friday, September 4, 1925, was the opening night of the Alexander Theatre in Glendale. This magnificent shrine of amusement drew attention to Glendale as a theatrical city.

The Alexander Theatre, designed by Lindley & Selkirk, Architects, built by Kinne & Westerhouse, Engineers and Contractors, and decorated throughout by the Robert E. Power Studios, reproduced the popular Egyptian motif inspired at that time by the discoveries in the tomb of King Tut.

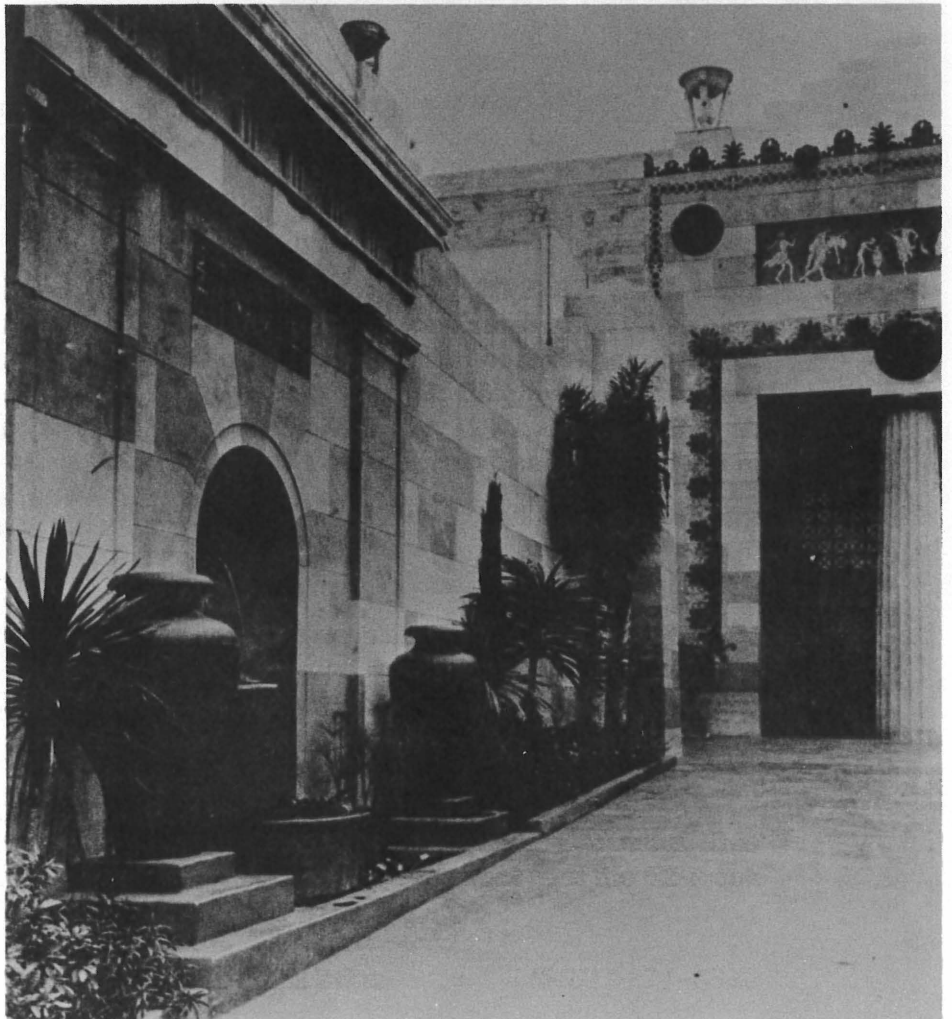
Images of the Alex Theatre



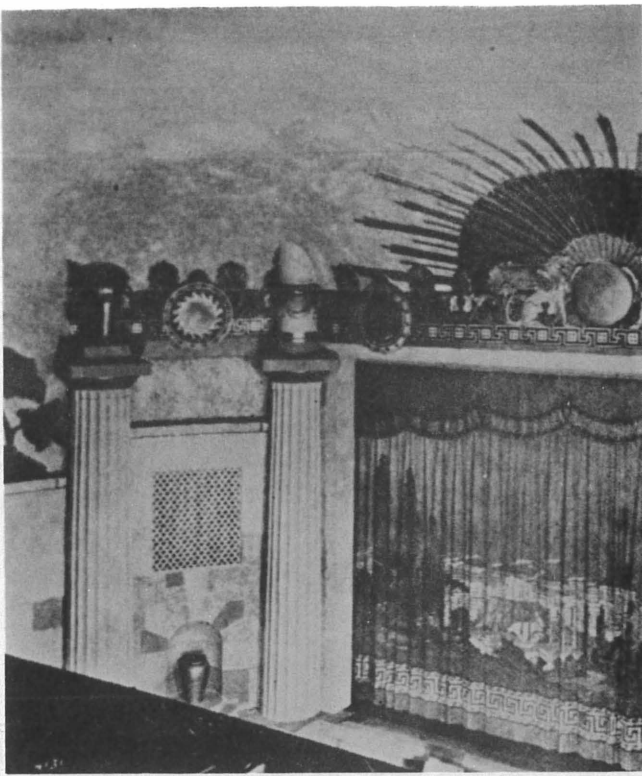
The Alex as it looks today from Brand Boulevard.
(Photo by R.M. Newcomb)



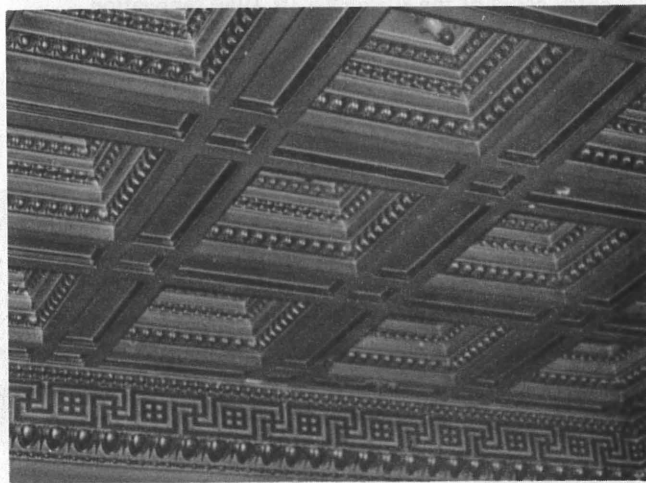
The present day entry court of the Alex after its 1940 renovation.
(Photo courtesy Planning Division, City of Glendale)



The original entry court of the Alex as it looked after its construction in 1925.
(Photo courtesy of Tom Owens, History Librarian, City of Los Angeles Central Library)



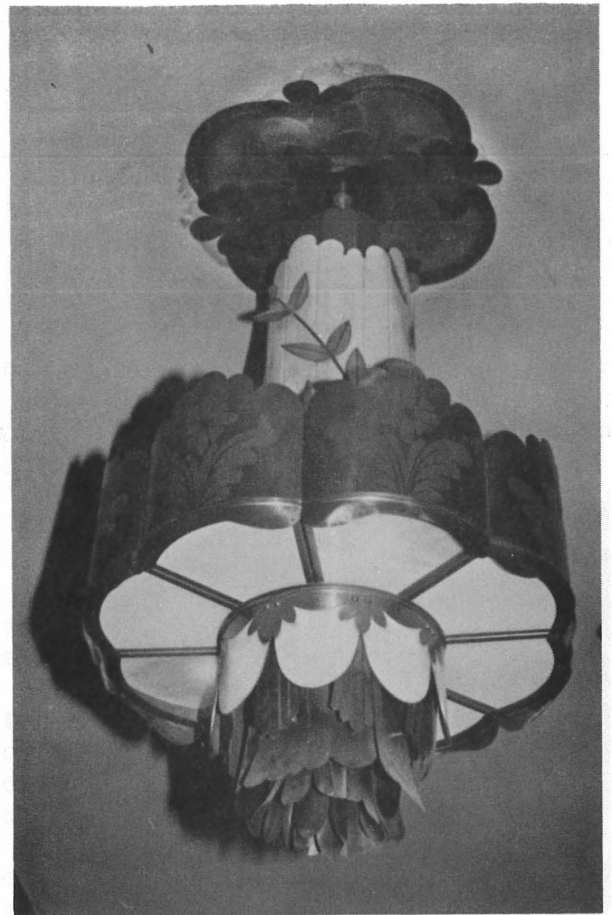
The original stage of the Alex with its sunburst framed by winged griffins and a scene of the City of Athens upon the curtain. (Photo courtesy of Tom Owens, History Librarian, City of Los Angeles Central Library)



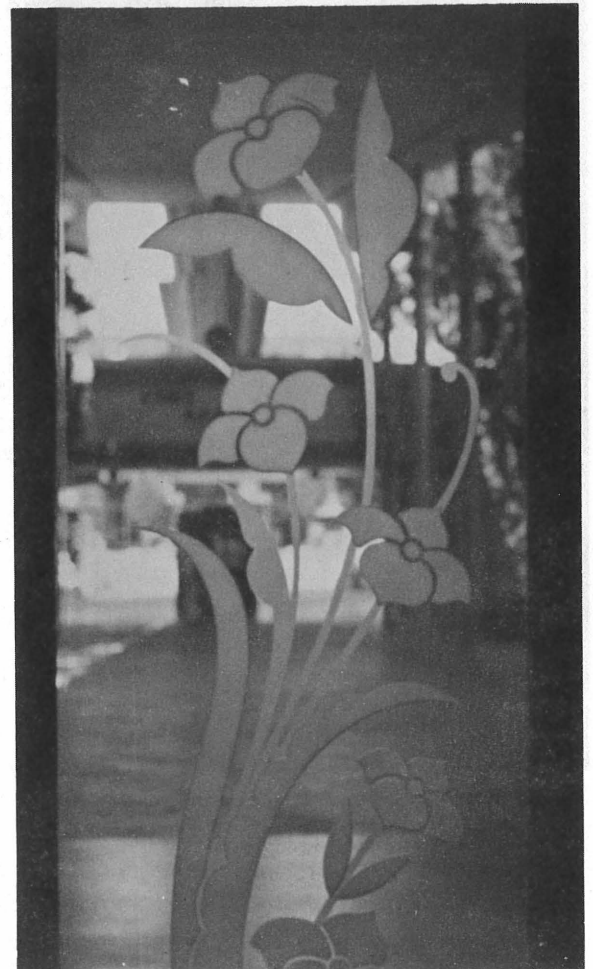
The ornate gilt coffered ceiling of the lobby of the Alex as it remains today. (Photo by Joni Atkinson)



Ornate Art Deco wall fixture still serves to guide customers to the rest-rooms in the Alex. (Photo by Joni Atkinson)



One of the original Art Deco lamps still hanging in the lobby of the Alex. (Photo by Joni Atkinson)



Motif from one of the etched glass doors leading into the lobby of the Alex. (Photo by Joni Atkinson)

THE GLENDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Calendar of Events for Fall and Winter, 1981

- SEPTEMBER 2
Wednesday
General meeting when Brand Associate Kathy HULL will present a slide show on L.C. Brand and his mansion. Nominating Committee report will follow the slide presentation. We meet in the Carillon Room at 7:30 pm, Glendale Federal Savings, 401 North Brand Blvd.
- SEPTEMBER 12
and 13
Saturday and
Sunday
Garage Sale benefiting the Doctors' House to be held 9 am to 4 pm at 418 Spencer Street, Glendale. This is off North Pacific and just below Kenneth Road.
Send donations to Audrey HALES, 418 Spencer Street, Glendale, CA 91202. For pickup, call 243-6320.
- SEPTEMBER 19
and 20
Saturday and
Sunday
Second Annual House Tour sponsored by the North University Park Community Association and the Los Angeles Conservancy, 10 am to 4 pm, starting point at the Salisbury House located at 2703 South Hoover. Tickets are \$6 for the public and will be on sale at the Tour. For more information call 747-2798.
- OCTOBER 7
Wednesday
Annual Meeting of TGHS which includes the Annual Report, Election of Board Members, and Awards. To be followed by a Social Time, 7:30 pm, Carillon Room, Glendale Federal Savings, 401 North Brand Blvd.
- OCTOBER 17
Saturday
Days of the Verdugos Parade, 10:00 am, Brand Boulevard.
TGHS Day at Webb's Department Store, 12:00 pm to 4:00 pm. Ten percent of the dollar amount of your purchases made on this day during these hours at Webb's will be donated by Webb's to TGHS if our society's name is mentioned. Last year Webb's donated over \$500 to TGHS. So, after the Days of the Verdugos Parade, come do your Christmas shopping and encourage your friends to do likewise. Have a cup of tea and a cookie and help us to raise funds for the Doctors' House.
- OCTOBER 18
Sunday
Second Annual Historic Structures Tour in Glendale featuring this year eight structures. From 9:30 am to 5:30 pm, tickets \$5.00 for members. Send your check to P.O. Box 4173, Glendale 91202 to receive a map and parking sticker for the tour, and be sure to enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. See flyers for more details. To help, call Bill Troiano, 241-5777.
- NOVEMBER 4
Wednesday
General meeting of TGHS, 7:30 pm, Carillon Room, Glendale Federal Savings, 401 North Brand Blvd. Program to be announced.
- DECEMBER
Membership Drive with a no host champagne reception at a private home. Members and prospective members only. Details will be announced.
- JANUARY 6
1982
Wednesday
General meeting of TGHS, 7:30 pm, Carillon Room, Glendale Federal Savings, 401 North Brand Blvd. Member Virginia RUZICKA will give a presentation on restoration of venerable oil paintings that are discolored and damaged.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

Arthur H. and Margo ATKINS, Loree FLETCHER, Mary HASKELL, Stan and Molly HYMAN, June M. JOHNSON, Mr. and Mrs. L. D. JOHNSON, Lois OLIVER, Jo Franklin SNOW, and Dorothy TUCKER.

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THE ALEX THEATRE ON TELEVISION:

On Thursday, 2 July "Two on the Town" from Channel 2 spotlighted "Visits to Old Movie Theatres in Los Angeles". Included in the footage shown was Glendale's Alex Theatre.

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NOMINATIONS FOR THREE POSITIONS ON THE BOARD OF TGHS:

At the September meeting of our Society the Nominating Committee will place before the membership the following six names for three positions falling vacant on our Board of Directors:

Claude BROWN, Ed DELANEY, Bill HEYLER, Marie LUFT,
Dick MONTGOMERY, and Mike SHARP

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HELP WANTED DEPARTMENT

The following three positions need to be filled from the ranks of our Society; any volunteers?

Membership Chairman who will be responsible for sending renewal notices, keeping a list of current members, mailing meeting notices, and compiling a list of new and renewing members quarterly for publication in our Newsletter.

If you are interested in this position, please call Acting Chairman Audrey HALES, 243-6320.

Program Chairman who will schedule speakers for eight of our Society's evening meetings, introduce the speakers, and prepare a news release for our Press Chairman to use.

If you are interested in this position, please call Carole DOUGHERTY, 246-0508.

Historical Cook Book Promotion Chairman. This is a position for a creative person who would help make the Cook Book widely known and more readily available to the community. If you're interested, call 234-6320, 246-0508, or 242-7447.

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A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

A number of TGHS members have suggested a change of name for our organization. It seems that we are often confused with Glendale High School in our press releases! How do you feel about a new name? Glendale Heritage has been suggested. Please call either 242-7447 or 246-0508 or write P.O. Box 4173 and let us know your wishes.

New Image will donate the artistic work for a minor logo change. Our goals, incorporation papers and bylaws will remain the same.

Owned by the West Coast-Langley Theatre Circuit, the largest theatre chain in the world, the Alexander Theatre was dedicated to the following principles of entertainment:

- . "To show nothing upon our screen that we would not want shown in our own home.
- . To lend the power of our screen to the upbuilding of every city in which our theatres are situated and all the worthy institutions therein.
- . To fearlessly and vigorously eliminate from our programs all that does not conform to the highest standard of morality.
- . To acknowledge and perform our duty as citizens and to zealously guard the position we have attained in our communities.
- . To keep our theatres clean, cozy and comfortable and to serve our patrons above ourselves.
- . To deliver, at all times, the finest entertainment attainable at the lowest prices commensurate with a just profit."

Nothing other than the choicest feature attractions with the most popular stars, the most enjoyable comedy creations from the cleverest comedians, the most interesting scenic offerings, the latest newsreels and the pick of the Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit Acts found their way to the Alexander Theatre. On Mondays and Tuesdays there were five acts of Orpheum Vaudeville in addition to a select feature picture and other film subjects. The price of admission in 1925 was: Dress Circle in balcony 50¢ - 65¢; entire lower floor 40¢ - 50¢; balcony 30¢ - 40¢; and children 15¢ - 25¢. There were three complete changes of program weekly, a decided advantage to the theatregoer.

Music was given careful consideration and the Alexander could boast of one of the largest, finest orchestral unit organs in the United States. The organist at that time was Frank Lanterman, who was better known in later years as State Assemblyman Lanterman from La Canada.

The projectionist in charge was Frank Hibbert, who was still at the Alex 40 years later.

Along with vaudeville and silent films, the West Coast-Langley Theatre's bubble burst in the early '30's Great Depression. In 1930, Fox West Coast Theatres land-leased the Alexander for 99 years under orders from Charles P. Skouras, President. Due to the willingness of the American people to forget their troubles during that depression era, the movie industry flourished throughout the land. To signal this success the physical appearance of the Alexander was modified with the addition of a large marquee, a box office, and a 100-foot tower flashing multicolored vertical running lights. As there wasn't room to spell out "Alexander", the theatre's new name "Alex" appeared in large letters on the new marquee.

I was transferred to Glendale in 1943 as resident manager of the Alex and City Manager for Fox West Coast's Glendale, Capitol, California, Gateway and Glen Theatres. I remained at the Alex until 1962.

Just as the depression influenced theatregoers, people during World War II were able to briefly forget the horrors and grief of that terrible war through entertainment. During my 19 year tenure the Alex came alive with the glitter and magic of Hollywood when it became choice exhibitor for all the major studio previews of unreleased films. These previews, especially with the personal appearances of the greatest stars, producers and directors in the Blue Book of filmdom, once again drew attention to Glendale as a theatrical city.

From that magnificent stage of the Alex, I actively led and participated in various War Bond Drives selling hundreds of thousands of dollars in bonds. I was also chairman of the "Freedom Food Train" for liberated France. I introduced Smokey the Bear to the children of Glendale and promoted wholesome children's entertainment every weekend with the cooperation of the merchants of Glendale. The fashion shows, car giveaways, and amateur nights reflected a tiny glimmer of the old Vaudeville days of the Alexander.

The paramount objective in the erection of the Alexander Theatre was to create a beautiful architectural achievement wherein to present entertainment compatible with the tastes of the people of Glendale and this vicinity. That was 56 years ago.

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THE NAMING OF HISTORIC STRUCTURES

Established practice among preservationists and architectural historians has been to use any one of three possible grounds for structure naming. First of all, a building may be named after an historic person associated with the structure or a famous architect. In Glendale one thinks of the Verdugo Adobe as an illustration. Secondly, naming may be according to the person who commissioned the building or the architect involved, and in the Jewel City the Toll House comes to mind. Lastly, historical custom or convention may be the basis upon which a name is chosen. The Doctors' House of our Society is a prime example of this procedure, for, as we read in the Historic Preservation Element, the home was known from its beginning as being the abode of doctors or physicians. Given the small size of a community such as early Glendale, it is not surprising that familiar and local identifications were attached to particular structures. If these names were both appropriate to the place and easy to remember, they endured and became a part of the landscape of nomenclature which contributes so much to making one place identifiable and different from another. For guidance in these remarks I am indebted to Glendale's Historic Preservation Element, Bruce Medcalf, and the open meetings of TGHS and of the Glendale Redevelopment Agency.

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Thanks go with this NEWSLETTER to Ernie's Camera for excellent photographic help and to the Glendale Printing Center for production. Our typing was handled by Genevieve McKay in a most efficient manner. Your editors also wish to say "Thank You" to our contributors who got their materials in on time and who kindly provided us with text and illustrations.

Suzanne McKay and Robert M. Newcomb

The Glendale Historical Society
P. O. Box 4173
Glendale, California 91202

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