

A look back/ El Cajon could have been a 'Hollywood'

Back in the 1910s and 1920s, when silent movies were being filmed in the El Cajon Valley, two attempts were made to establish movie studios in the area of today's Grossmont High School. Plans were made to make Grossmont the headquarters of the film industry. But, for various reasons, that never happened. The studios settled, instead, in a small town called Hollywood.



Film star Lila Lee and Dorothy Hill of El Cajon in a photo taken in 1929. Dorothy, now Doroth Horde of El Cajon, vividly remembers the filming of "Flight" by Columbia Pictures. Lil was one of the stars and the movie, which was filmed in El Cajon and directed by noted Hollywood director Frank Capra, include three companies of Marines and many local residents as "extras."

Ever wonder what El Cajon was like in its infancy? How streets or areas came to be named? What kinds of people were important to the early growth of the community?

Anyone who has lived in the area for even a short time has probably been curious about these subjects.

This column aims to help answer those questions and instruct us a little bit about our history. It is being presented by the El Cajon Historical Society and The Californian. The photos and artwork shown with each column are from the society's collection on display at the Knox Hotel on Magnolia and Park avenues in El Cajon.

The feature will appear monthly.

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EL CAJON GETS LOTS OF COVERAGE, sometimes delayed, in both newspaper and television at the time of the Mother Goose Parade each November. Local residents recognize quickly the businesses along Main and Magnolia streets that provide a background for the floats, bands and mounted units that travel the parade route yearly.

There was a time, in years past, when movies were made in El Cajon, with well-known stars of the time, even though the setting wasn't always credited as happening in El Cajon. In fact, there was one movie made here that was supposed to be a locale in Nicaragua and was directed by the well-known Frank Capra. That was in 1929.

But back to earlier days. A recent story in The Daily Californian told of Allen Dwan who, in 1911, shot westerns both in Lakeside and in La Mesa as part of the Flying A film company. Nearly 100 films were made before the company moved on to other locations.

In El Cajon, the Corona Hotel which was on the northwest corner of Main and Magnolia from 1886 to 1920, was the setting for some early films.

The 40-room hotel resembled, in a minor way, the larger Hotel del Coronado and played an important part in El Cajon history. Not only did it cater to visitors but it was where civic organizations met, the board of trustees (city council) met after El

This same film company, which was supposed to have headquarters in Balboa Park, opened an office in El Cajon at the Corona. Called El Cajon Valley Film Co., with John Filson as director and general manager, this was the suburban headquarters of the film company.

The Dec. 27, 1919, news item said, the "Director will devote two days of each week to giving instruction at the branch headquarters to young people who are desirous of getting into the moving picture business and making that their life work. As soon as the people show talent they will be added to the payroll of the company."

It would be interesting to know what the cost was for such instruction and how many really got paying roles after being instructed.

Two attempts were made to establish motion picture studios in the area of today's Grossmont High School.

The first was in 1916 when James A. Murray closed a deal to sell 40 acres of his Murray Hill to the Empire Feature Film trust which was to "expend at least \$20,000 within the next six months," according to the Dec. 2 issue of the El Cajon Valley News. The main building was to be 360 feet long with a stage 200 feet long and 80 feet wide, with various types of architecture. There were to be other buildings, a clubhouse with permanent quarters for the actors, a dining room and a swimming pool, planned to be built below the lake.

Wouldn't this have been a boost to the local economy?

It was the second studio S and L (for Arthur Sawyer president and general manager and Bert Lubin) that had an impressive start but never got to its full development.



Silent film actor George "Pete" Morrison and his wife, the former Lillian Knapp of La Mesa, in a photo from the 1920s. Morrison played in many of the movies made by the Flying A Studio, a company that made many westerns in Lakeside and La Mesa.

the visit at the El Cajon home of the Charles de la Cours of Bert Lubin and of Miss Aileen Ray, who was enroute to Hollywood on location with the Metro people. Miss Ray was twice winner of \$10,000 given to the star voted most beautiful woman in filmdom. Mr. and Mrs. de la Cour had started the Garrick theater in San Diego 14 years previously and the entire family all played stock. The son, better known as Lew Fields, was with the Laskey company in Hollywood.

However, it was Columbia Pictures' filming of "Flight," in 1929 in El Cajon that recalls memories for several local residents.

The stars of this film included Jack Holt, Ralph Graves and Lila Lee, with Capra directing. Three companies of Marines from San Diego, plus 10 planes from North Island were part of the cast, including some extras hired locally.

Some of the extras, hired for a fight scene filmed at El Monte Park, took their job too seriously. They peppered the Marines, supposed to be protecting a stockade in Nicaragua, with blanks from their rifles. The Marines retaliated and a real war almost ensued.

The action that took part in El Cajon was centered on Chase Avenue west of Magnolia. One section was a landing field where the planes were to set down, another part was given over to about 50 Army tents and to a 60-foot-long, 25-foot-high false-front headquarters building. A freak end-of-May whirlwind delayed the filming in this location, backing down the

At the time of the filming, Mr. and Mrs. Hill had gone on a trip to Maine leaving their children in a housekeeper's care. Dorothy (taking her brother Melvin's bike) and friend, Edith Ellis, would go down to Chase Avenue where the action was. It was a business proposition for Dorothy, for she carried along with her jugs of ice water for which she charged the actors 50 cents.

One day, however, she had to confess to her father what she had done. The two of them were standing on the corner of Main Street and Magnolia Avenue, in front of Hill's drug store, when Jack Holt and a car full of actors drove by and stopped.

"Why, Dorothy, how are you? We've missed seeing you," said Holt.

"Wasn't that Jack Holt?" her father asked.

And Dorothy had to confess how she happened to know him.

She had fond memories of Lila Lee, from watching the filming and meeting the cast. It was Miss Lee who warned Dorothy not to accept a ride from one of the actors who had a flashy car and quite a reputation. It was Miss Lee and Dorothy, hand-in-hand, who dashed over to see what had happened to the pilot after one of the North Island planes took a nose dive during the filming.

Dorothy had more than a casual interest in that Flying A film company that shot westerns in Lakeside