



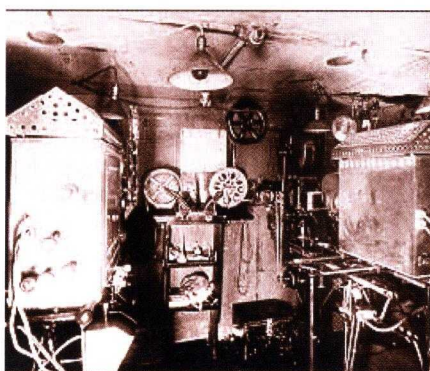
A Century of Santa Cruz Cinemas

From silence to sound – local movie palaces live on

By Terri Morgan

Santa Cruz and the silver screen have had a long relationship. Residents and visitors embraced the cinema during its early days, and the city boasted a special connection with one of Hollywood's earliest stars. Actress ZaSu Pitts honed her acting skills on the stage at Santa Cruz High in the early days of the 20th century. She moved to Los Angeles in 1916, and landed her first role a year later when she was featured in "The Little Princess" with Mary Pickford. Pitts was one of only a few actresses who successfully made the transition from silent films to talkies and enjoyed a career that spanned nearly five decades. Her last role was in the comedy "It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World," which was released in 1963, three years after her star was installed on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

While not born in Santa Cruz, Eliza Susan Pitts, who was better known as ZaSu, moved to town with her family from Kansas when



(Above) One of industry's early film projectors at Santa Cruz's Grand Theatre.

she was just 9 years old. It's unlikely she had any aspirations to become a movie star when she arrived in Santa Cruz in 1903, two years before the first movie theater in America opened its doors. While moving

pictures had been produced since the 1890s, the early years of the industry featured brief snippets, usually under a minute long. By 1905 the technology had improved enough to produce longer films, and an entrepreneur in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, began charging patrons 5 cents to come into his new theater and be entertained. He called his new venue the Nickelodeon. So it's only fitting that the movie house that opened next door to the Pitts family home on Lincoln Street in downtown Santa Cruz decades later is named the Nickelodeon.

"I decided to call it the Nickelodeon because Nickelodeons date back to the founding of motion picture technology when the word meant music hall," said Bill Raney, who launched the theater in 1968. The Nick, as it's

(Above) The original New Santa Cruz Theatre on Pacific Avenue provides a colorful backdrop for a busy 1930s afternoon.

often called, quickly became a Santa Cruz institution where patrons could view a wide variety of independent and foreign films, while other theaters in town focused on big budget Hollywood films. The Nick had a only a single screen when it opened, but Raney and his wife JoAnne realized that twin theaters were the up-and-coming thing, and they expanded the theater.

"We bought the lot next door so the Nick could have two screens," Raney said. "Later, after the two screens had been successful, I figured out how to get four screens on that same piece of property."

The Nick still has four screens, although the theater has changed hands several times over the past 25 years. Raney sold the theater to Jim Schwenterly, one of his employees in the early 1990s. The Nick has been operated by Landmark Theaters since December 2015.

Landmark Theaters also own the Del Mar Theatre on Pacific Avenue. One of Santa Cruz's best known movie houses, the art deco cinema was built during the depression. Craftsmen were hired to build the mural ceiling, install architectural detailing, put in the gold plated ceiling in the foyer, and create the elaborate facade. With admission prices a quarter or less, the theater gave people an inexpensive way to escape from daily life when it opened in 1936.

"The Del Mar was the palace of the people when the people didn't have much," said historian Ross Gibson.

Time took a toll on the movie palace, and it was closed in 1999 after years of neglect. Historians, civic leaders, builders, and city officials successfully fought to save the Del Mar after plans were made to gut the theater and remodel the interior into shops and offices. A public-private partnership was cre-



Photo: Special Collections, University Library,
University of California Santa Cruz

(Above) The New Santa Cruz Theatre after its 1940 remodel with its Streamline Moderne tower illuminating the corner of Pacific and Walnut Avenues. The theater was closed after the historic flood in 1955.



(Above) The newly constructed Del Mar Theatre overlooks Pacific Avenue in 1936.

Image: Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History

ated, and the beautiful theater was renovated. The restoration work was designed to retain as many historic details as possible. Crews restored the marquee, repainted the front facade and the decorative relief, cleaned and touched up as much of the original interior possible. The ceiling mural was restored to its former glory, and a new box office was built in the style of the original one. One new feature was the elevator, built to make the theater accessible for the entire community. The restored Del Mar reopened in 2002 as a three-screen theater.

"They did a great job restoring it to its grand and glorious beauty and character," Gibson said.

Another historic movie house that is still standing is the Rio Theatre on Soquel Avenue, although it no longer shows movies. Construction on the Rio began in 1946 by the state-wide chain Golden State and TBD theaters, which operated 110 film houses at the time. Barney Gurnette, a Rio Del Mar resident who managed the Del Mar and the New Santa Cruz Theaters on Pacific Avenue, wanted to open a movie house where he could install a curved screen to give films an early 3-D effect. Television sales were beginning to impact theater ticket sales and he was looking for a way to attract viewers. An innovative businessman, Gurnette also was a proponent of Think Local First long before the movement became popular. The theater, which opened in 1949, was built using cement



Photo: Mickey Carroll

(Above) Originally constructed in 1949 in Santa Cruz's East Side District, the Rio Theatre, with state-of-the-art Cyclo-ramic screen, quickly became a local favorite.

from Davenport and wood from the local Hebbbron-Nigh Lumber Company.

The 938-seat Rio Theatre opened to great fanfare. A 15-minute dedication ceremony was broadcast live by KSCQ Radio. The ceremony was followed by a double feature: "Song of India" and "Law of the Barbary Coast."

Another uniquely Santa Cruz movie theater was the Sash Mill Cinema on Potrero Street. The 200-seat theater opened in 1975, and closed its doors for good in the mid-1990s. The theater was built in a former window sash mill structure constructed from steel and corrugated metal. The builders were early proponents of the reduce, reuse, and recycle philosophy. The repurposed building included 40- and 50-year-old seats salvaged from old theaters. The Sash Mill found its niche airing foreign films and independent, experimental films.

"They were importing European films that you couldn't see anywhere else," Gibson said.

The Sash Mill is not the only film house in Santa Cruz that has disappeared from the cityscape. The Unique Theater, which was located on Pacific Avenue, originally was known as "Swain's Theater." It opened in the 1880s and hosted vaudeville and other live performances. It was renamed the Unique Theater in the 1920s when it began showing films. The theater closed in 1936 when the Del Mar Theatre opened up next door.

The New Santa Cruz Theatre, which opened in 1920, doubled as a civic and convention center. The theater building on Pacific Avenue was gutted in 1975 and remodeled into a retail and office building.

Pacific Avenue was also home to several other movie

houses that have long since disappeared, including the Jewel, Grand, and Cameo theaters, while new cinemas have opened in the modern era. Pacific Avenue is home to the former Cinema Nine, which opened in 1995. The nine-screen movie house has been owned by the Regal since 2004, and is now called the Regal Santa Cruz Nine. Regal also owns the former Riverfront Twin on River Street, which was built in 1970, and is now called the Regal Riverfront Stadium 2.

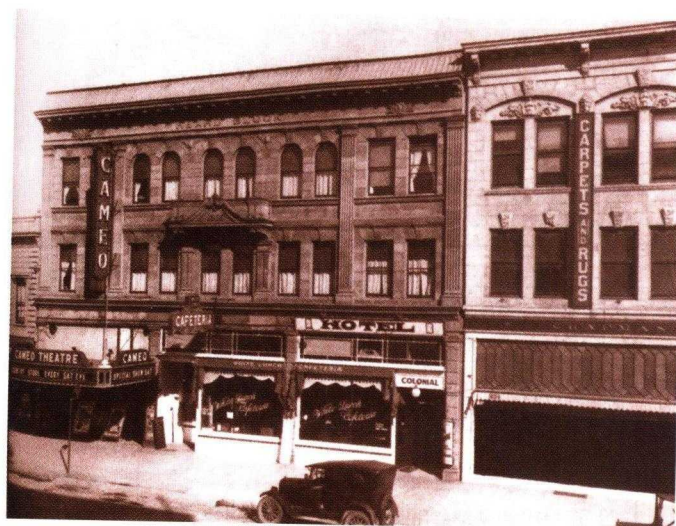


Photo: Special Collections, University Library, University of California Santa Cruz

(Above) The Cameo Theatre (left), located on Pacific Avenue was one of the city's earliest movies theaters and enjoyed a brief run during the 1920s

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Photo: Mickey Carroll

(Above) The Nickelodeon, named after America's first theater, opened in 1968. The Nick was the first local venue to consistently offer foreign and independent films in Santa Cruz.

(Left) The Grand Theatre located on Pacific Avenue was screening silent films as early as 1915.



Photo: Courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History



Photo: Special Collections, University Library, University of California Santa Cruz

(Above) Originally known as Swain's Theatre, which opened in the 1880s and hosted vaudeville and other live performances; it was renamed the Unique Theater in the 1920s when it began showing films.