

# Local moviehouses flickered to life early, found a home in history

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The Nickelodeon is celebrating 30 years in business a \$5 movie marathon today, marking a longevity that's a major accomplishment for an independent cinema. Looking back over the century, we find local movie houses have gone from small unadorned nickelodeons, to giant "movie palaces," back to small cineplexes.

In 1876, Edward Muybridge invented sequence photography at Leland Stanford's ranch on the east slope of the Santa Cruz Mountains. He created the illusion of motion by flipping a stack of his photos. Flip-picture machines were first seen in Santa Cruz in 1892 in the penny arcade of Fred Swanton's West Cliff Casino at Woodrow and Pelton.

In 1896, Santa Cruz had its own special showing of Thomas Edison's and George Eastman's new filmstrip process, which at first was used only in arcade machines.

A capacity crowd was undeterred by the rainy December night at the large Palm Theater at Pacific and Laurel (now the new Saturn Cafe site). In quiet amazement, patrons watched New York street scenes, a Staten Island ferry ride, a bullfight in Spain and President McKinley on parade.

Early cinemas were called "electric theaters", and usually were shown in midway tents in traveling exhibits. Where the clock tower now stands, a permanent "electric theater" occupied Anthony Hall for a dozen years.

But no turn-of-the-century cinema showed only movies. Seven-to-15 minute films were interspersed with



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simple cabaret acts, always including someone leading public singing to slides of words and images. Called "nickelodeons" after the admission price, they offered an hour's entertainment. Better houses had organists or bands, plus sound effects. Lesser ones used player pianos, or coin-operated "orchestrans." Most were intentionally small, due to primitive projection equipment, housed in converted storefronts, with kitchen chairs and no atmosphere. The Gem and Lyric were in the St. George block of Pacific Avenue.

Thirty to 60-minute feature films became a new draw when the novelty wore off, which, coupled with live variety acts, made a good 90-minute show. With this bill, Walnut Street's Dime Theater was proud it couldn't be called a nickelodeon.

Then in 1904, the town's first great cinema opened, just north of today's Del Mar Theater site. It was remodeled from a hay and feed store into the first class Unique Theater, designed in the Parisian art nouveau style, including a horse-shoe balcony. Its grandeur, and 10- to 20-cent programs of live acts and films, set the standard for other theaters and established a Pacific Avenue theater district between Wal-

nut and Cathcart streets.

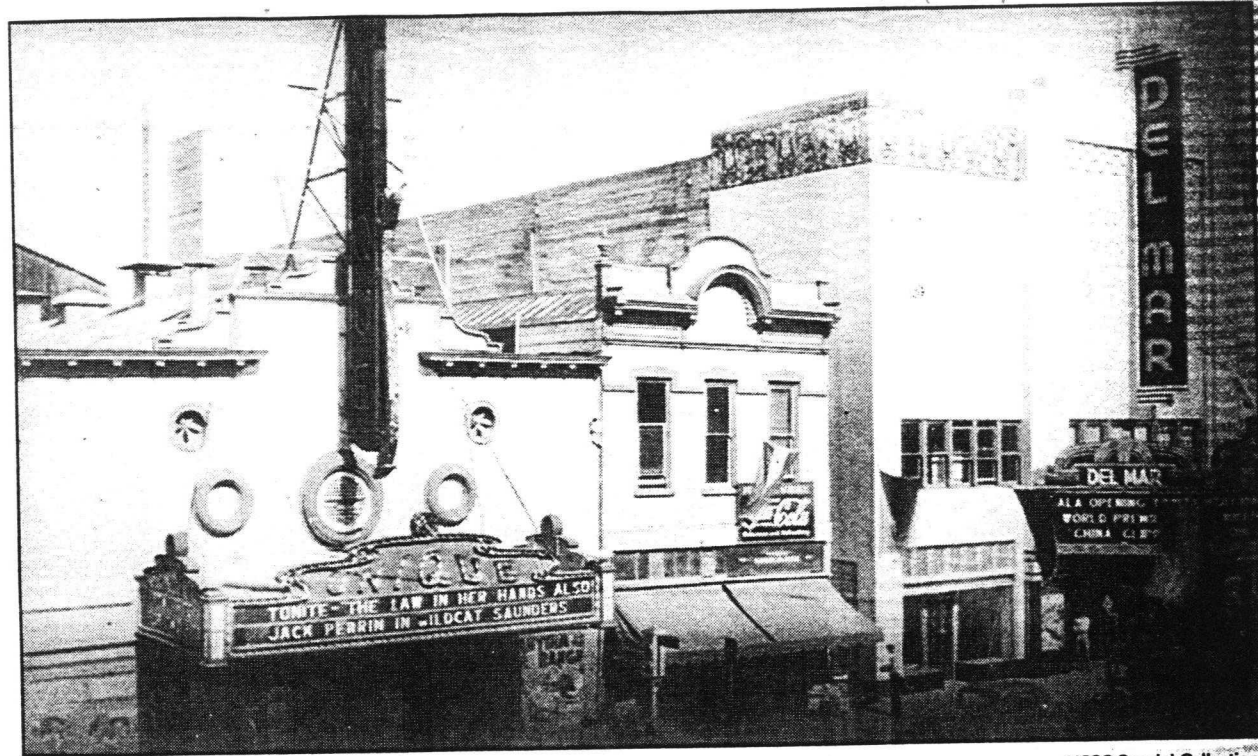
Towns our size seldom had more than one cinema, but tourism demanded entertainment options. Along Pacific Avenue was the Star Theater at the northwest corner of Cathcart, and in a row below Cathcart was the castle-like Empire, the San Joaquin later the Novelty, and the Grand. Two elegant mid-size theaters were Andy Balich's Princess at today's Palace Stationery site, and the 1908 Jewel south of it.

The Jewel showed the first local talking pictures, a dozen years before the 1927 "Jazz Singer" introduced the film sound track. The 1913 showing was Edison's Kinetophone synchronized to a record, and sometimes was jarred out of sync by a passing truck.

In 1907, the Unique dropped its Vaudeville format to be a legitimate playhouse as "Mac Swain Theater." Tall and hefty Swain had a magnetic personality, and the theater became the Unique again in 1913, when Swain went to Hollywood to co-star in Charlie Chaplin comedies.

Fred Swanton's 1903 "New Santa Cruz Plan" improved the waterfront with a boardwalk, auditorium, hotel, and Casino Theater cinema west of the merry-go-round. To compete, downtown hotels were enlarged and upgraded, and a 1,200-seat auditorium was built in 1920, called the New Santa Cruz Theater (now The Old Theatre Building).

Billed "the Temple of motion pictures," this dramatically lit art deco fantasy was by the designer of San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel. It be-



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The Del Mar art deco movie palace prepares for its 1936 grand opening, overshadowing the Parisian art nouveau splendor of 1904's Unique Theatre.

came the town's civic auditorium, and the Star, Grand, and Opera House closed when it opened. Events like the Miss California Pageant were held here.

The 1936 1,500-seat Del Mar Theater was the ultimate art deco movie palace. Gilded nudes graced the facade, lobby and auditorium, amidst colorful murals and bas relief. Special touches included uni-

formed ushers, a house orchestra, and the county's finest moviehouse stage. The original mezzanine snack bar looked down on Pacific Avenue; the Delmarette lunch counter now houses the Downtown Host program.

The day after the Del Mar opened, the Unique closed, and the New Santa Cruz dropped the "New" from its sign. In a 1939 remodeling, the Santa Cruz Theater moved its en-

trance to Walnut Street, with a new entrance tower based on examples at San Francisco's 1939 World's Fair.

■ Ross Eric Gibson is an author/historian, historic architectural consultant, and chairman of the Santa Cruz Historic Preservation Commission.