

PREVIEW CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

By FRED HOLLADAY



Frankenstein (1931)

BACK in the late 1920's up to the beginning of WW II, San Bernardino was the motion picture preview capital of the world. Every major film studio, at one time or another, gave unannounced showings of their new productions at one of our city's three major movie palaces, the Fox Theatre, Ritz Theatre or California Theatre.

Most of these "first showings" were in rough form. That is the film was shown before final cuts were made and sometimes even two endings were provided, so that studio heads could see which one the preview audience preferred and use that version in the final, edited film.

Along with the previews came all the famed stars of Hollywood; on hand to view their latest effort. Clark Gable, Robert Taylor, Fredric March, Spencer Tracy, Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, etc., name any other great stars of that era and they attended their own picture's preview in San Bernardino.

I saw many of these great personalities at one or more of the above listed theatres. One incident remembered, as though it happened yesterday, was the night Wallace Beery, standing in the lobby of the Fox Theatre after his 1931 film "Hell Divers" had ended, replied to an elderly lady who was crying because he had been killed in the movie, "Aw, it was just a pitcher!"

It was strange to see Laurel & Hardy dressed in tuxedos; something entirely unappropriate for these comedians. Boris Karloff was present at the first "uncut" showing of "Frankenstein" where he had thrown a little child into a lake after she -- not realising, in all childhood innocence, that the monster was no different than any other person -- had tossed a flower on its surface to watch it float away. Needless to say, this scene was eliminated from the final print.

When Hollywood's producers, writers, directors, cameramen and stars came to San Bernardino for previews, they arrived in privately-chartered, big red Pacific Electric street-cars; switched off the main line near the theatres. Many tales have been spun about the big parties tossed aboard the cars, both before and after the preview. For some reason, they all liked to come to San Bernardino. A few previews were shown in Glendale, but most were held here.

The Fox Theatre, on the corner of Court and "D" Streets, resembled a lavish palace in those days. Its two huge lounges and foyer were covered with rugs so thick one almost sank ankle deep walking across them. Its rest rooms were as large as small houses and everywhere was the appearance of great wealth. What a pity so many of these great movie palaces have fallen into disrepair or demolished to make way for some crass commercial venture. Today the once mighty Fox Theatre serves as a storage hall.

What a thrill it would be to attend those previews once again; to turn around and see Joe E. Brown sitting behind you -- opening his cavernous mouth in a huge grin. Or to watch Leslie Howard escort Norma Shearer across the Fox Theatre foyer. To see Clark Gable hugging his great love, Carole Lombard, as they sat close together, watching the flickering scenes on the screen, or Robert Taylor waving at teenagers, or