

CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL LANDMARKS SERIES

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MERCED THEATER

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by

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MERCED THEATER

The Merced Theater, which derives its historical interest as the first theater building in Los Angeles, is located on North Main Street next to the famous old hotel, the Pico House. Both of those early landmarks were erected in 1869. By that time Los Angeles was losing the appearance of its Spanish days as the old tumble-down adobes made way for large blocks of new wooden, brick or stone buildings with handsome fronts. The Merced Theater was housed in one of the finest of these. As the only theater there in the early seventies, it was proudly pointed out by the people of Los Angeles as one of the new improvements significant of the development and growth of the city. There the theater-going people of the town found diversion in the burlesques of traveling troupes and the dramatic and musical efforts of local talent; often celebrated actors arrived by steamer from San Francisco to produce the current successes of the legitimate stage.

Prior to 1869 there had been no regular theater in Los Angeles. Now and then plays were given by visiting troupers, but these were infrequent, and amusement of a theatrical nature consisted only of occasional performances varied by traveling minstrel shows, circuses or en-

tertainments supported by local talent. As Los Angeles emerged from a small town into a thriving city, greater cultural and social interests developed as a natural accompaniment of the town's increased wealth and population. An established theater was eagerly welcomed to fulfill the city's social needs.

An item in the Los Angeles Weekly News of April 6, 1869, remarking on building activities and improvements in the city, mentions the clearing of a site for a first class hotel to be known as the Pico House, and adds that "parties well able to build and furnish one are contemplating the building of a theater."¹ The News probably referred to William Abbott, who built the Merced Theater building in 1869 next to the Pico House.

Mr. Abbott, a native of St. Albany, Indiana, came to California in 1849 and settled in Los Angeles. He was a cabinet maker by trade and established a thriving furniture business. He became one of the town's prosperous and influential citizens. Since 1853, he had been located in a small wood and adobe building. In 1869, desiring more commodious quarters, he erected the Merced

1. Los Angeles Weekly News, April 6, 1869.

Theater building. The site of the new building, even at that time, was historically interesting, for in 1851 the first wooden building ever erected in Los Angeles was built on that location. The material for that earlier structure was framed in Boston, all ready to be put together, and shipped around the Horn to San Pedro. Old Mexican ox carts hauled the wood from the harbor to Los Angeles.²

The first floor of the theater building was used by Mr. Abbott as a furniture store and the third by his family as living quarters. The theater occupied the second floor. The Merced was named by Mr. Abbott in honor of his wife, the former Mercedes Garcia, a young Spanish señorita whom he married in 1856. Señorita Garcia was born at San Juan Capistrano and grew up in Los Angeles. She was a talented musician, harpist and vocalist. For some time she taught music, embroidery, drawn work and fine sewing at the sisters' school in Los Angeles.

Well designed and attractively arranged, the theater derived much of its charm from the artistic ideas of Mrs. Abbott. In size it was thirty-five by one hundred feet, with a stage thirty-five by twenty-five feet. Four

2. J. M. Guinn, "Los Angeles in the adobe age," in the Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, V, 49.

boxes against either wall were ornate with red plush curtains edged with gold fringe. Other seats offered ample accommodations for a good sized house. Doors connected directly with the Pico House for the use of hotel guests. A porch extended the full length of the theater's front entrance. Preceding the evening performance, when there was a show, a band played on the veranda and created a festive atmosphere for the occasion.³

Entertainments at the theater were not a daily occurrence and several weeks often passed with no engagements being filled. Theater nights were greatly anticipated gala events. From its premier performance, the Merced was well attended. Much of the theater fare, especially in the earliest days of the playhouse, was of an indifferent quality and consisted of minstrel shows, plays and musicals put on by traveling companies or local talent. Soon theatrical producers from San Francisco began to take their companies to the southern city to produce plays of the legitimate stage. The performances of those actors were so well received that such companies frequently opened for a season at the Merced. The professional troupes brought additional stage properties with them to

3. H. R. P. Forbes, Merced Theater, 1.

add to the limited equipment of the local theater. The actors usually arrived by steamer. Their advent was always well advertised in the local papers with an account of the forthcoming production. The people of the town were urged to support the play well so that Los Angeles might enjoy more frequent performances of the better type of drama.⁴

As the town was of pueblo origin, and Spanish people made a considerable portion of the city's population, plays were advertised in Spanish as well as English. One of those advertisements, preserved by a citizen of Los Angeles, announced the attraction for January 30th, 1871:⁵

Teatro Merced
Los Angeles
Lunes, Enero 30, de 1871
Primero Funcion de la Gran Compania
Dramatica, De Don Tomas Maguire, El
Empressario Veterano de San Fran-
cisco, Veinte y Cuatro Artistas de
ambos sexos, todos conocidos como
Estrellas de primera clase.

Besides the evening performance, there was usual-

4. Los Angeles Weekly News, July 15, 1871.

5. H. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 422.
Translated, this means:

Merced Theater
Los Angeles
Monday, January 30, 1871
First performance of the great dra-
matic company, of Don Thomas Ma-
guire, the veteran impresario of San
Francisco, twenty-four artists of
both sexes all known as first class
stars.

ly a matinee at half price. The customary admission price for ordinary seats was about fifty cents. Reserved seats and private boxes at various prices could be had by those who desired them. The box office often opened in the morning, and, on occasions when especially good plays were advertised, tickets were obtained before-hand by those who wished to be sure of good seats. A visitor in Los Angeles wrote to the Alta California on September 31, 1873:⁶

The Merced Theater, a handsome place of amusement, is well attended and supported. I went there one evening on the occasion of a complimentary benefit to some old friends of ours, Professor and Madame Van Gulpen. These artists are too well and too favorably known in San Francisco to need praise, while they defy criticism from my feeble pen. Among the performers was Master Alphonse Sutter, a grandson of General Sutter, a boy of ten years whose performance was something marvellous, (sic) his execution of the most difficult concerted pieces having the precision and finish of some of our oldest and most accomplished musicians. Mademoiselle Blanche Crowley, a young lady of the same age, a grand daughter of Baron Marenhout, the French consul, is also a musical prodigy. The grace and artistic expression with which she rendered Nors' composition of the 'Long, Long Weary Day' being received with rapturous applause that demanded an encore. This is the same young lady who, about a year ago, at one of Mr. Badger's

6. The Alta California, September 31, 1873.

matinee in San Francisco, created a sensation in San Francisco by her performance of one of Grisar's beautiful fantasies. A Mons. Ploennies, a fine baritone, sang and acted exceedingly well with Madame van Gulpen, a scene from the opera of 'L'Elisie d'Amore.' In fact I confess to having been as well entertained as by any operatic concert of much greater pretensions in San Francisco.

Local events and prominent individuals of the town were subjects for frequent burlesque and satirical comment by the featured entertainers. The common council and the City Fathers were subjected to many barbed jests which highly amused the audiences. Probably one of the best remembered burlesques of a well known character was put on at the Merced in May, 1874, at the expense of the bandit Tiburcio Vasquez. Vasquez was a well known outlaw. He had been identified as the chief bandido of a gang which had perpetrated several robberies and killed three or four men in the process during the early seventies. Afterward, he was linked with many other crimes. A mysterious, romantic, much feared character, he frequented Southern California and eluded the police for several years. In the spring of 1874, he was captured about ten miles from Los Angeles, at the home of Greek George, a Syrian who had been imported as a driver for the camel freight line in California. After his capture, Vasquez was taken to Los Angeles and kept in irons

at the city jail. The capture, and the presence of the outlaw in Los Angeles, created a great furore of excitement. Until his execution, Vasquez was the chief subject of conversation and many local jokes, including the burlesque at the Merced Theater in May.⁷

The Merced always had an established reputation as the oldest theater in Los Angeles. Even after new theaters were built it remained as "the" place to go for theatrical diversion. However, the height of its popularity was during the early seventies. New and more elaborate theaters, such as the Novelty and the Municipal, offered competition. In the latter part of the decade the Merced was definitely on the wane as the theater of the day.

The present owner of the Merced is Miss Carmen Abbott, a daughter of the builder, William Abbott. It still stands next to the Pico House on North Main Street. Not many people who pass this old-fashioned, three-story building would guess that it was once one of the finest and most commanding structures of the city and the popular playhouse of Los Angeles. If the theater itself could

7. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 453-459.

speaking it might tell many tales of famous old troupers. It might also tell of first nights and enthusiastic audiences of well known Californians of the past, who strolled or drove up in their carriages to the Merced as the band on the porch played gay and welcoming melodies.

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