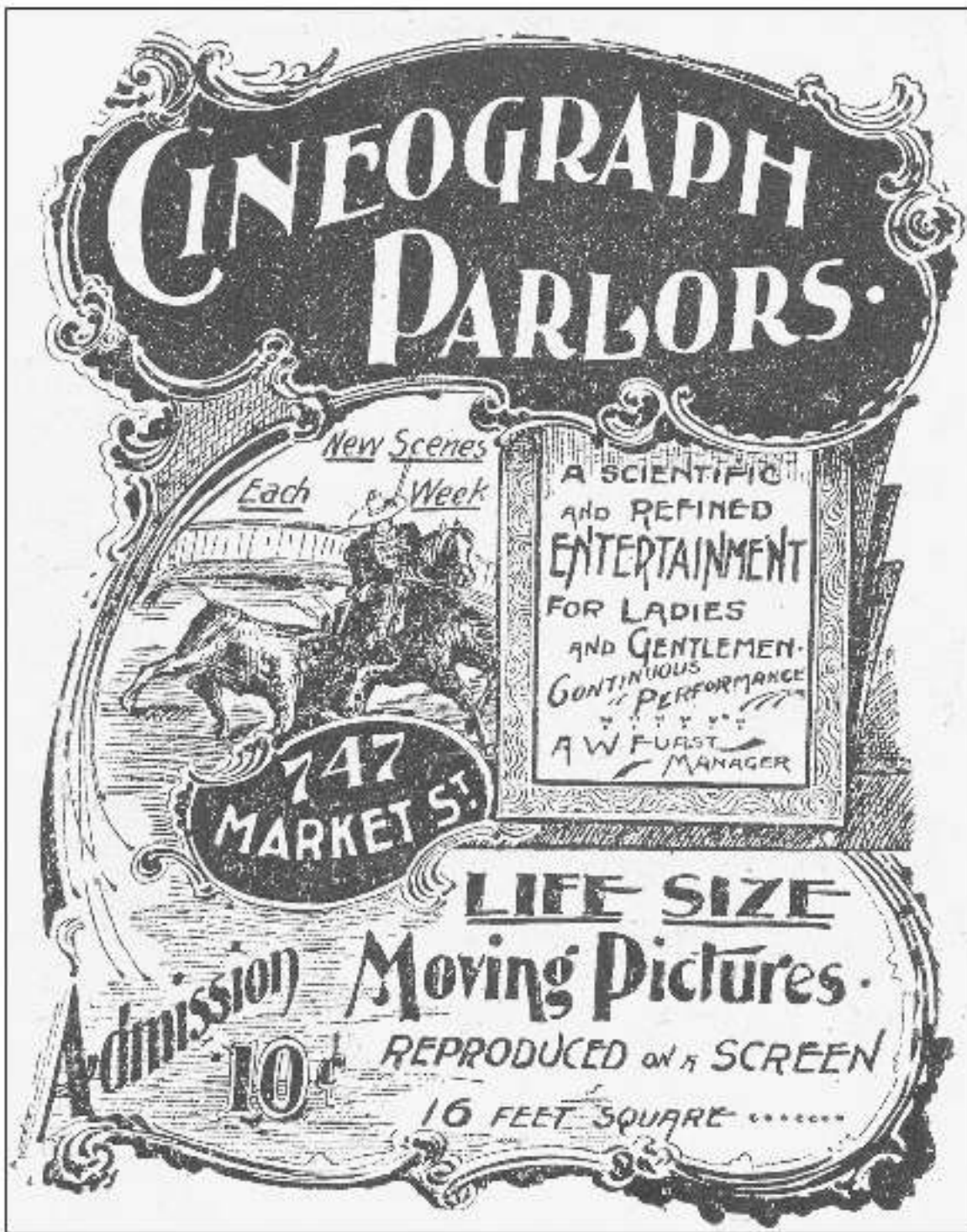


IMAGES
of America

THEATRES OF SAN FRANCISCO

Jack Tillmany



Shortly after the turn of the century, the new marvel of motion pictures, “a scientific and refined ENTERTAINMENT for Ladies and Gentlemen,” began to be exhibited publicly in “Cineograph Parlors” such as this one at 747 Market Street in 1905. The following pages will give you a bird’s-eye view of what happened during the next 100 years.

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Jack Tillmany

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The Star Nickelodeon at 1939 Post Street opened in 1907 and was typical of the dozens of similar venues that sprung up throughout the city after the devastating earthquake and fire of April 1906. Most of them only lasted a year or two, but a handful had amazing survival skills and a few can still be found today.

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On Wednesday, December 21, 1910, a capacity crowd greeted the new Castro Street Theatre, built and operated by the three Nasser Brothers, Abraham, Albert, and Sam. It was their third venture into film exhibition, and its success prompted their building of today's Castro Theatre in 1922. Today it's Cliff's Variety Store (see also page 108).

INTRODUCTION

Irving Berlin was right: There's no business like show business. A theatre is an inanimate object, a pile of brick and mortar that takes on a personality all its own as a result of what's being presented inside. Its success or failure, life or death, depends on the public's acceptance of what's being offered and their willingness to pay money to see it. Theatres close for one reason only: the public fails to show up. (Oh yes, there are earthquakes too, and, occasionally, as we shall see, the structure simply starts crumbling apart of its own accord.) But when the people stop coming, the doors close and the lights go out. Why once-filled seats suddenly become empty ones would fill a book twice this size, and that's not our purpose here. However, some of the more obvious reasons will inevitably pop up.

San Francisco has always been considered a "good theatre town." The nature of its inhabitants has always been to seek entertainment outside the home, particularly in the evening hours. Theatres have always been there to provide just that and will continue to do so despite what technological marvels may arrive to provide homebound diversions. Which theatres thrive or fail, and what films are shown reflect the fickle tastes of the ticket buyers. It's really as simple as that. Times change, tastes change, people change, and theatre operators face a constant challenge to keep up. Having been there and done that, let me tell you, it's a tough call. Fifty years ago, virtually every man, woman, and child went to the movies regularly, meaning at least once a week. Today, that number has dwindled to somewhere around 15 percent of the total adult population who attend with any regularity at all, meaning maybe once a month or less. Like them or not, multiplexes are here to stay, and are the only feasible economic solution to providing today's moviegoers with the widest possible selection of films in a state-of-the-art technological environment.

But you want to know about the way it was, not the way it is, so let's get on with the show. The earthquake that struck San Francisco on the morning of April 18, 1906, and the devastating fire that followed was the end of one era and the beginning of another in many ways. By coincidence, it also divided two centuries, two cultures, and two technologies. For the purposes of this book, we are dealing here with theatres of the post-1906 era, although there is still one pre-quake survivor still standing, and duly noted. The 20th century is history now, so let's take a look back and see just where and how San Franciscans chose to find their sources of entertainment during those 10 most remarkable decades.

Within the limitations of the book, I have tried to be as inclusive as possible. A few sites that I would have liked to include seem to have eluded photographers completely, though there is always hope. Somewhere in someone's attic or basement or bottom dresser drawer is that one terrific shot of the Round-Up on Market Street or the Liberty on Broadway or the Rita on Church Street or the Cameo on Sixteenth Street or the Lincoln on Sixth Avenue or the Point in Hunters Point or the Terrace Drive-In on Alemany Boulevard that has escaped me up until now. Early exterior views, before remodeling as well as interior shots, seem to be missing in all too many cases. Such finds will be appropriately welcomed and rewarded!



Market Street during the World War II years was alive with masses of people, night and day, most of them going to and from the movies, as seen in this 1944 shot in front of the Paramount Theatre. War workers, who worked around the clock in shipyards and in other wartime-related activities, were hungry for fun and entertainment to take their minds off the grim struggle for survival that engulfed the world for the better part of the decade. Movies had always provided a very welcome and necessary escape from reality and, at this particular time, were needed and embraced more than ever.

One

MARKET STREET

It was called the Great White Way because of the non-stop stream of lights that flooded the street from dusk to midnight, many of them provided by the array of movie theatres that held court for six incredible blocks. For over 50 years, from the mighty 4,650-seat Fox at 1350 Market Street to the humble 300-seat Silver Palace at 727 Market Street, a dozen and a half venues of every size and demeanor beckoned patrons to a grand total of over 25,000 seats, approximately one-quarter of the San Francisco theatre total. Every first-run American-made film opened on Market Street and nowhere else in the city; the neighborhood theatres got them later. But starting in the mid-1950s with *Oklahoma!* at the Coronet, distribution policies started to change, and big new films started bypassing Market Street and premiering more and more in the outlying areas. Hence, the lights started going out in the 1960s, and for the next 40 years, Market Street got dimmer and dimmer.

Today there are a few survivors. The lights are on again at the Orpheum, Golden Gate, and Warfield, all now upgraded and offering live entertainment, with the benefit of office buildings upstairs to help defray the ever escalating costs of operation. The former United Artists, renamed the Market Street Cinema 30 years ago, offers more exotic forms of live diversion, as do the little Regal (now L.A. Gals), and Biograph, now Crazy Horse Gentlemen's Club. Market Street goes on, greeting the new century even as historic streetcars from the previous one still rumble by.

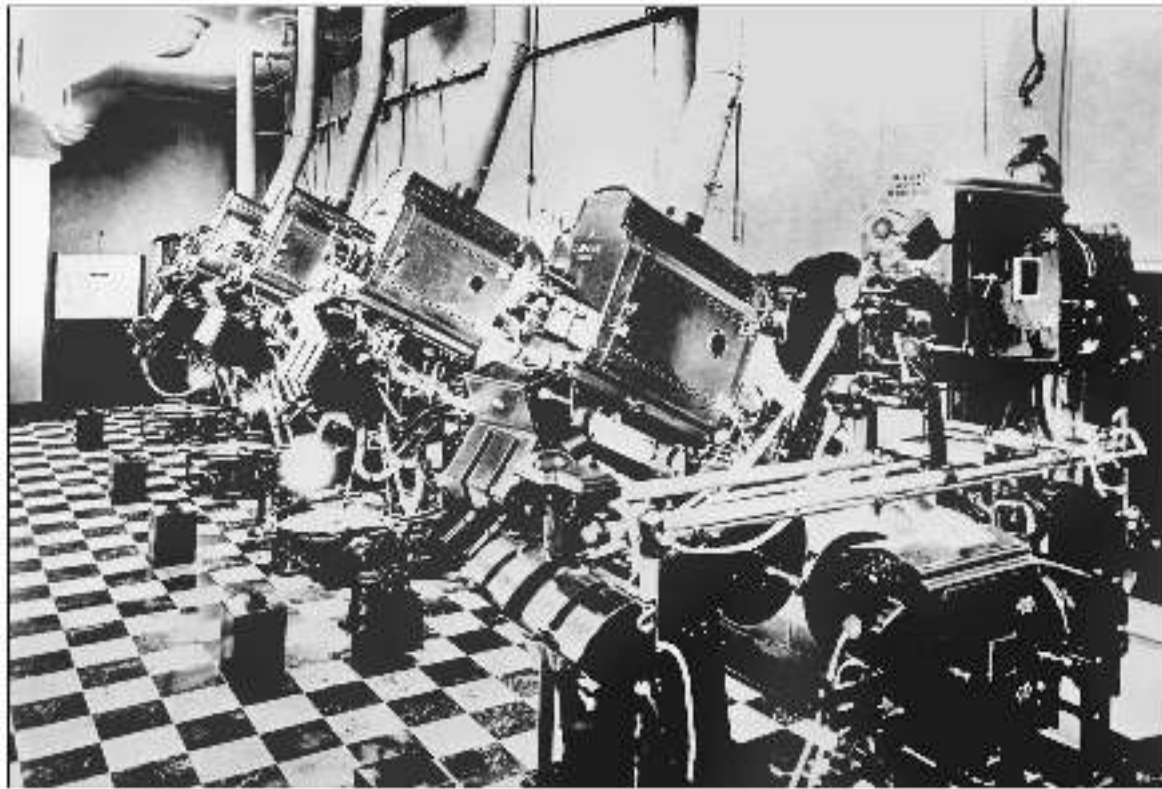


This c. 1966 photograph shows Market Street, looking east from Seventh. The Sound of Music is

already in its second year at the United Artists. Department stores like Weinstein, Kress, and Penney still welcome nighttime shoppers, and a crowded N Judah heads westward, taking people home.



The Fox Theatre opened on June 28, 1929, a \$5-million, 4,650-seat movie palace in every sense of the word. Designed by Thomas W. Lamb, it was to be San Francisco's largest, finest, and ultimately, saddest memento of 1920s extravagance. Its untimely end still brings tears to the eyes not only to those old enough to remember it in its heyday, but also to those who know it only by reputation. The Fox's architectural grandeur, thankfully, is preserved in countless photographs. The cover image shows the Fox at the peak of its popularity as it celebrated its first anniversary in the summer of 1930.



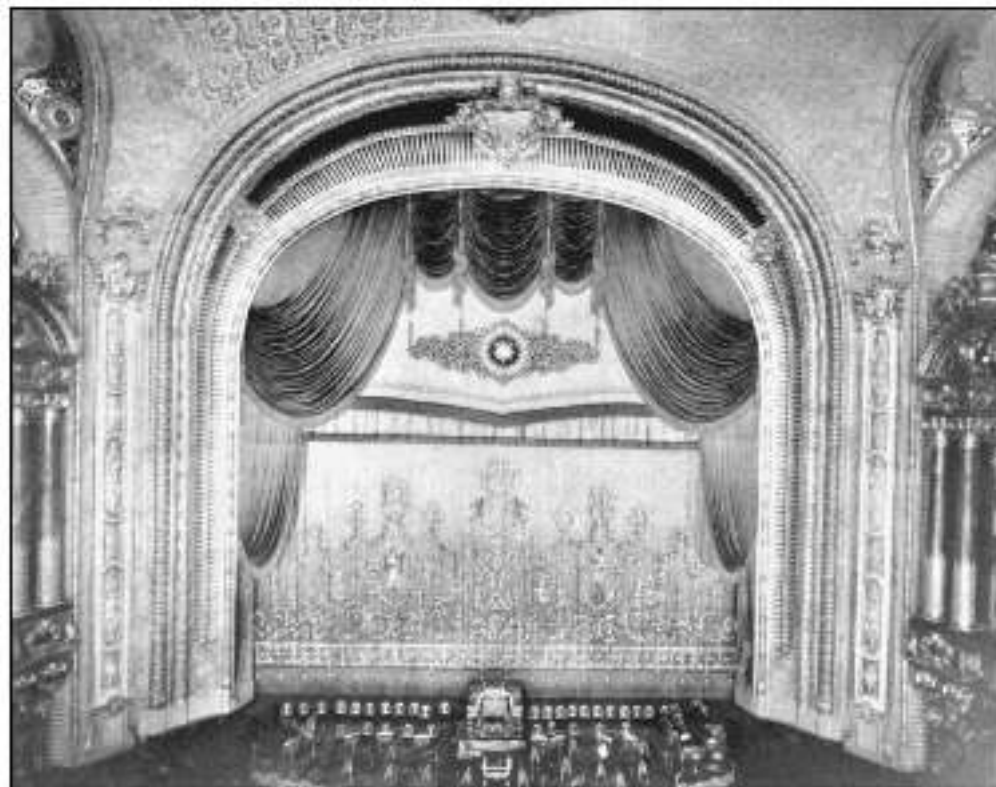
Above the top balcony, over 200 feet from the original 29-by-22-foot screen (believed to be the longest projector-to-screen distance in the United States), four projectors and a brenograph (a lighting effect machine) are aimed at a 27-degree angle towards the screen below. Note the Vitaphone turntable attachments, used to accommodate films with sound tracks still being recorded on disk.



The ornate grandeur of the Fox Lobby shows well in this view looking outwards towards Market



The Fox lobby is pictured here from the same point, looking into the theatre and towards the grand staircase. Note the Fox emblem in the carpet.



The Fox proscenium, 64 by 40 feet high, utilized three of the largest and heaviest curtains ever hung

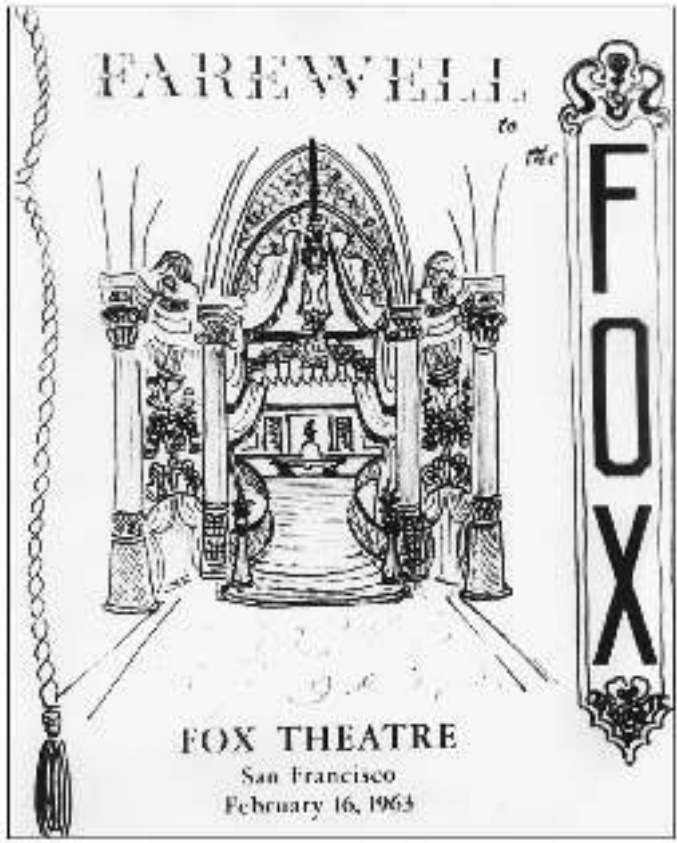
a theatre. The orchestra pit accommodated not only a full orchestra but a Wurlitzer pipe organ as well.



There were 4,650 seats available for Fox patrons. The theatre advertised it was the largest west of the Mississippi, and indeed it was.



In February 1952, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis appeared in person for a single week at the Fox Theatre. There were five shows a day—six on Saturday and Sunday—and the crowds kept coming. An estimated 90,000 tickets were sold, for an all-time San Francisco attendance record yielding a box office gross of \$123,000. That might not sound like much, but this was an era when adult tickets were only a little more than a dollar apiece, and children about half that.



After 10 years of continually declining patronage (due in no small part to the incredibly poor quality of the films being presented), the Fox hosted a combination wake and farewell party that drew a capacity crowd—the first in a long, long time. After an evening of cheers and tears, the Fox was laid to rest at the age of 33 years, 7 months.



Proposition I, listed on the ballot of November 7, 1961 as the “Fox Theatre Acquisition” for the sum of \$1,100,000 by the City of San Francisco for future use as a convention center and/or performing arts center, was rejected by the voters by a two-thirds majority. The rest, as they say, is history. For the complete Fox Theatre story, the author heartily recommends Preston Kaufmann’s magnificent “Fox: The Last Word . . . story of the world’s finest theatre.”



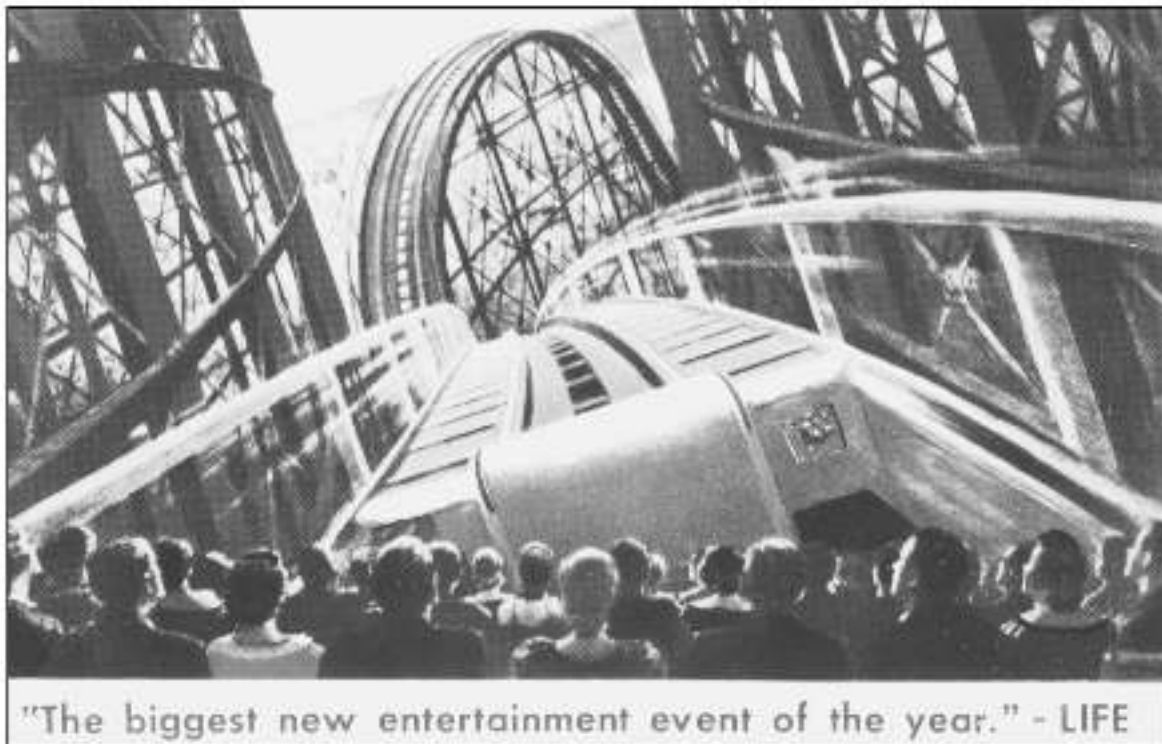
The Orpheum at 1182 Market Street is a Gothic-Moorish design by B. Marcus Pritica for Alexander Pantages. It opened as the Pantages on February 20, 1926, offering vaudeville and motion pictures, and was described as “a copy in part of the Cantabrian Cathedral of Leon.” It was renamed Orpheum in 1929 and survives today as a beautifully restored live venue, operated by the Shorenstein Hays Nederlander Organization.



The ornate but tasteful mezzanine of the Pantages/Orpheum was a splendid sight. Here it is as it originally looked in 1926.



*It's Christmastime in 1929, and female hearts skip a beat as crooner Rudy Vallee ("America's Idol") appears in his first talkie feature, *The Vagabond Lover*, on the RKO Orpheum screen.*



Twenty-four years later, on Christmas Day 1953, This is Cinerama opens in San Francisco at the Orpheum. Cinerama was a technique wherein features were photographed on three separate strips of film, and shown via three separate projectors running simultaneously. It began an 83-week, reserved seat engagement, to be followed during the next 10 years by six more big-screen Cinerama extravaganzas, finishing up with How the West Was Won, which closed in December 1963.



How the West Was Won was the last Cinerama feature to be filmed in the three-camera method. Afterwards the name "Cinerama" lived on, but all the films advertised as such were simply some for

of single-strip 70-millimeter film projected onto a giant curved screen.



The Embassy at 1125 Market Street designed by the Reid Brothers, was under construction (as the Bell) at the time of the 1906 earthquake. The facade survived, and it finally opened (as the American) on January 21, 1907. It had multiple personalities, being known during the next few years as the Rialto, the Rivoli Opera House, and in 1927, renamed the Embassy. It fell victim to the October 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake; the building was condemned and subsequently torn down.



Talkies came to San Francisco amid great fanfare. Here, the Embassy hosts Vitaphone, Warner Brothers' revolutionary process that brought sound to the silent screen. Phonograph disks were synchronized with the film as it was being projected, and everything that could go wrong did, as anyone who's seen Singin' in the Rain knows only too well. In the meantime Fox Films introduced Movietone (with a soundtrack embedded on film) and Vitaphone soon bit the dust. Warner Brothers kept the name alive long after they abandoned the actual process itself, however, so it is still well known.



Next door to the Embassy at 1127 Market Street was the Strand, which opened in 1917 as the Jewel

and became the Strand in 1928. During its glory days, it offered “Top Entertainment—Bottom Prices” a daily program change consisting of two worthwhile (although not quite new) feature films, plus bingo for 40¢. Although it ended up running “adult” films via projected video, the Strand survived over the years but had become a haven for druggies, prostitutes, and the lowest of the Market Street low. It was permanently closed after a vice raid in April 2003, more a victim of its own environment than anything else. The Strand was the last film theatre to operate on Market Street.



Neighbors for over 70 years, the Embassy and Strand were friendly competitors for the Market Street movie dollar. Dan McLean took over the Embassy in 1933 and developed the popular Ten-O-Win game (a game of chance where you had to have both the right color and the right number to win). This was a welcome perk to Depression-weary audiences and still a crowd pleaser 30 years later. Often the theatre would be filled to capacity, and the game was piped out onto the street via loudspeakers, so those waiting in line to get in afterwards could still play the game before they entered.



In this photo from November 17, 1921, opening-day crowds greet the Andalusian splendor of the Granada Theatre at 1066 Market Street, designed by Alfred Henry Jacobs. Gino Severi directed the orchestra, Oliver Wallace commanded the Wurlitzer organ, and the operating staff numbered 122 people.

The image shows three program pages from the Granada Theatre. The left page is a 'Program' for May 21, 1929, listing 'A Dangerous Woman' and 'All Talking'. The middle page is a 'Next Week' program for May 28, 1929, listing 'A Dangerous Woman' and 'All Talking'. The right page is a 'Program' for May 21, 1929, listing 'A Dangerous Woman' and 'All Talking'.

A typical Granada program for May 1929 is shown here. As usual, the following week's attraction seems more interesting than the current one, a curious situation that still holds true today. With an "All Talking" lineup that promised among other things, "Tropical nights, love maddened men, and a woman who needed killing," how could one go wrong?



The Granada was renamed the Paramount in 1931 (note the all-neon marquee letters) and pulled out all the stops for the 1932 pre-code bonfire ~~Red Headed Woman~~, starring Jean Harlow. This one delivered all it promised, riled the censors, and made nothing but money in the true Hollywood tradition. Thirty years later, it was deemed “unacceptable” for television showing, but it is still with us today in every pre-code film festival, connoisseur’s videotape library, and on Turner Classic Movies.



*It’s Christmastime in 1939, and kids are lined up in front of the Paramount for Max Fleischer’s animated *Gulliver’s Travels* in three-strip Technicolor. Going downtown to a movie was something “special” in those days, and these kids look like they’re loving it.*

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