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Before Hollywood, the Stars Called Long Beach Home

Before Hollywood became famous as the world's motion picture capital, there was Long Beach. Populated by such famous names as Buster Keaton, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and Jackie Saunders, the streets and boardwalk of Long Beach were once alive with the glitter, fame, and fortune that have surrounded the movie industry since its inception.

Fans could observe silent-era film stars like Keaton and Arbuckle as they worked, shooting comedies along the boardwalk of the famed Pike Amusement Park.

The city's affair with the movie business began in 1910 when J. Searle Dawley came west from New York to shoot films for the Edison Company. Cheap land, a superb climate, and abundant sunlight convinced Dawley to establish his studio in Long Beach. Taking the name of the Spanish explorer Balboa, Dawley built Balboa Studios on the corner of what are now Sixth Street and Alamitos Avenue, in downtown Long Beach.

After three years of producing documentary reels, Dawley decided to move on, selling the studio to H.M. Horkheimer, a fellow New York filmmaker. It was Horkheimer who, along with his brother Edward, turned Balboa Amusements Producing Company into the largest motion picture studio in the world, worth an estimated \$400,000 in 1916.

The studio was believed to have possessed more than 100,000 props—some of which are still in use by studios today. For more than 10 years, movie making was Long Beach's single largest industry.

By 1917, the original studio was expanded to cover the entire Sixth and Alamitos area and included 20 buildings. The facility housed the largest glassed-in outdoor stage of the silent film era. Although the company was largely known for producing roaring comedies, Balboa also owned land in nearby Signal Hill on which western and adventure reels were shot.

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Many local residents were hired as extras for as much as \$5 a day. Later, they were able to watch themselves on any one of the half-dozen hometown movie screens. But the studio's real stars like Arbuckle, Buster Keaton, Hazel Tranchell, Pearl White, Mabel Normand, Jackie Saunders and Slim (Pickens) Pickett, were what attracted and dazzled moviegoers of the day.

Most of the contract players lived near or next to the studio, except for Arbuckle and a few others who drove to work each morning from their mansions along Ocean Boulevard and First Street. A few of the grand homes are still owned by the stars' heirs.

Things appeared to be going well for Balboa Studios. In a 1917 interview, Horkheimer was quoted as saying, "While I do not pose as a prophet, I have every reason for believing that the biggest improvements in pictures are still ahead.... The films are here to stay and so are the Balboa Studios and Horkheimer brothers as producers thereof." As it turned out, Horkheimer was only half right. After World War I, Hollywood came into its own as a movie town. The Horkheimer brothers gradually slowed production at Balboa Studios and allowed the facility to fall into neglect. Finally, in 1924, the structures, along with their contents were auctioned off and the property was cleared for subdivision.

Although Long Beach is no longer home to a major studio, the city has remained a popular location for filmmakers and television and video producers. During World War II, because of the close proximity of the Long Beach Naval Station and Douglas Aircraft Company, Long Beach was used as a backdrop for numerous training and propaganda films, including those starring such legends as Clark Gable, Gary Cooper and a yet-to-be-discovered Norma Jean (Marilyn Monroe). A few "Hollywood" classics shot on location in Long Beach including *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Operation Petticoat* and *Forty Pounds of Trouble*.

The Long Beach-Hollywood connection was sustained by movie idols such as Clark Gable and Carol Lombard who frequently summered in Long Beach. Elizabeth Taylor spent her very first honeymoon night in Long Beach at the West Coast's first Hilton—now the Breakers Building—following her marriage to Nicky Hilton, son of hotel magnate Conrad Hilton.

Perhaps the most well-known Hollywood production—and one that continues to live on today thanks to syndication—were filmed at Alamitos Bay. The three-hour tour that turned into a 31-year run of *Gilligan's Island* sailed from Long Beach on a crisp autumn day in 1964.

Still recognized as a location of choice by many filmmakers because of its modern skyline, historic districts, and excellent climate, Long Beach continues its long-standing relationship with the movie industry.

Such memorable scenes as the opening sequence of *Lethal Weapon*, starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover, the final dramatic scene of *An Innocent Man*, featuring Tom Selleck, were shot on location in downtown Long Beach and *Anchorman* when Will Ferrell drives over the Queensway Bridge.

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Over the years, the Queen Mary has served as the backdrop for a large number of movies including *The Poseidon Adventure* and the *Elizabeth Taylor Story*. The stately luxury liner was also the site selected by Elizabeth Taylor for the shooting of her White Diamonds perfume ads. The Queen Mary Seaport Dome (formerly the Spruce Goose Dome) is frequently used as a sound stage. Such box-office hits as *Batman Forever*, *Pirates of the Carribean*, and *Stargate* were shot inside the huge geodesic dome.

Other movies shot in and around Long Beach include: *Casablanca*, *Speed*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Transformers 2&3* and *Star Trek*.

About Long Beach, Calif.

Long Beach is a refreshing mix of urban sophistication with the atmosphere of a beach resort. Offering affordable, big city amenities alongside the visitor friendly charm of a small town, visitors will find first-class accommodations, shopping, dining, notable attractions: The Queen Mary, Aquarium of the Pacific, seaside sightseeing along picturesque bays and 5 ½ miles of sandy beachfront. Day or night, convention or vacation, it's the best of all worlds—right in the center of everything Southern California has to offer. To plan your visit to Long Beach, log onto www.visitlongbeach.com or call (800) 452-7829.

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