

# THE RECORD

## ‘Best Seat in the House’

by Russ Cohen

ANNUAL  
MEETING and  
PRESENTATION

“Then and Now”

Sun. Feb. 25

pg. 5

One Saturday when I was about 11 years old, I went to the movies and saw a double feature. My friend and I were the only ones in the theater. We watched the two movies on the bill and after a soda, Milk Duds and Good & Plenty at intermission, we decided to watch the two movies all over again. No one kicked us out or made us pay for the third and fourth movie. We were in the single screen movie palace from morning until evening. Like a true palatial estate, the theater was cavernous and ornately decorated—from the plush carpeted floors to the velvet seats to the carved reliefs on the walls to the Italianate ceilings and the seemingly distant and expansive balcony.

While this all-day childhood adventure did not take place in Burlingame, it could have.

Over the last century, Burlingame has had many theaters. From the small Photoplay Theater, to the bigger Garden Theater, to the spectacular Peninsula/Fox Theater, the Theater in the Round Hyatt and the Burlingame Drive-In. Sadly, they are all long gone.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, moving pictures were new and novel. Entertainment was largely a “live” event. Musical acts—comedy, magic maybe even some burlesque for those willing to engage in such frivolity.

The movies that were being shown were silent films. Some maybe even produced locally.

Beginning about 1912, the long gone, Old West style Husing Building on California Drive, now Parking Lot M, occasionally showed moving pictures in its upstairs gathering hall, but it was by no means a theater.

The first “official” movie house in Burlingame was located next door—George Roy’s Photoplay, opening in 1913. It was reportedly one of the first in the country built specifically to show movies rather than solely vaudeville acts of the time. The Photoplay (*shown at left*) was located on Burlingame Square, in a building that is now home to Backhaus Bakery. The theater was also advertised as being fire proof. This was an important distinction at the time. After all, cellulose, the material movie film was made of was highly flammable

and often the heat of the projector’s lamps would cause it to ignite resulting in fire. Theaters needed to reassure the public that going to see a movie would not end up in disaster. George Roy’s Photoplay was a small venue with 460 opera chairs. As movies grew in popularity a larger theater opened around the corner essentially making the Photoplay obsolete.





thought that the noise from nearby Mills Field could not be mitigated.

After Burlingame pioneer George Gates built the Garden Theatre on Burlingame Avenue in 1918, he hired Ellis Arkush and his brother Frank to operate the theatre. They were the heads of aptly named, Arkush Entertainment and owned and operated theaters along the San Francisco Peninsula including leasing the Garden Theater from Gates for 10 years beginning in 1920. After selling 50% of their interest to West Coast Theaters, that company became the largest operator of movie houses in the western United States.

The grandest theatre of all, The Peninsula Theatre, opened on October 12, 1926. It was located at 1415 Burlingame Ave. The Arkush brothers managed the Peninsula Theater and continued to be the sole manager even after a merger with West Coast Theaters. Opening

Opened by George Gates, the former train stationmaster, and designed by Burlingame architect Col. Ernest Norberg, the Garden Theater opened in 1918 on Burlingame Avenue where the Pottery Barn store was located until recently. Soon touted as the “Place Where Everybody Goes,” it featured fountains, miniature lakes and gardens. The lobby contained an inviting fireplace, hand painted murals and cushioned wicker chairs. There was a necktie shop in the lobby but no candy counter. Vincent’s, a candy and soda fountain, was conveniently located next door. Providing the soundtrack to each of the films was an organist known as “Hopsky.” *White Hands* premiered at the Garden Theater to a packed crowd. It ceased operating as a theater in 1925 but housed many other businesses in its place. Like the Photoplay, it boasted of being fireproof. Ironically, the theater building was destroyed by fire on Christmas day in 1990.

Burlingame was not only building theaters, the area also became home to film production. Pacific Studios located on Peninsula Avenue, (near today’s Shell Station) built state of the art studios to produce silent films. Between 1920 and 1927 about a half dozen films began production, but only one full length film was produced — a six-reel melodrama called *White Hands* starring Hobart Bosworth. When “talkies” as they were known, came on the scene it spelled the end of Pacific Studios. The studios simply weren’t equipped to upgrade to handle the new technology and it was



Gates Garden Theatre (lower right)- 1224 Burlingame Ave., 1920s

night premiered the silent movie, *Upstage* with an appearance by comedian, Charley Chase. The cost to build the theater, which was designed not only for movies but for vaudeville shows, was \$500,000—equivalent to approximately \$8 million today. Weeks and Day designed the 2000-seat theater in a Spanish baroque style that featured mosaics of animals and two grand staircases off of the lobby. The first landing featured a large ornamented French mirror and the ushers were attired in uniforms custom made by local clothier Robert W. Gates, the son of George Gates. As testament to the opulence of the theater, its organ alone was valued at \$50,000 and featured one thousand, thirty-three pipes capable of producing orchestral instrument sounds.



One tall tale is that little Ed Arnold went to the Peninsula Theater to see Babe Ruth as he made a promotional stop there. He was lucky enough to get two signed baseballs by the Sultan of Swat himself.

In 1957, Fox West Coast Theatres, spent \$100,000 renovating the theater, reducing the seat number to 1808 seats. It reopened with an extravagant ceremony on the evening of August 16, 1957, and henceforth was named the Fox Burlingame. For many years, the theatre's roof featured a two-sided lightbulb sign, with incandescent fireworks, similar to that which still survives atop the Grand Lake Theatre in Oakland. The theater in the 1970s was underperforming and rather than risk the theater becoming an adult only movie house, as was a popular option for languishing theaters at the time, the city council allowed its demolition. The Fox Burlingame Theater closed on September 14, 1974. The Fox refused to go quietly under the wrecking ball. The Fox Mall opened in 1979.

In 1927, the year after the Peninsula Theater was built, another opulent theater across town opened. The Broadway Theater opened at 1157 California Drive. However, it sat vacant for the first two years, according to the *Burlingame Advance* newspaper, searching for a tenant. Some suggested that if a tenant could not be found then it should become a municipal swimming pool instead of a theater. With a 600-seat auditorium decorated with tapestries, red velvet carpet and drapes as well as three large crystal chandeliers, it had an orchestra pit which often flooded along with flooding the first row of seats as well. Renamed *The Encore* in

1972, it continued to play host to movies and live acts including Janis Joplin's backup band *Big Brother and the*

*Peninsula Theatre (later Fox Theatre) on Burlingame Avenue, 1950s*



*Encore Theatre (originally the Broadway Theatre) being demolished, 1993*

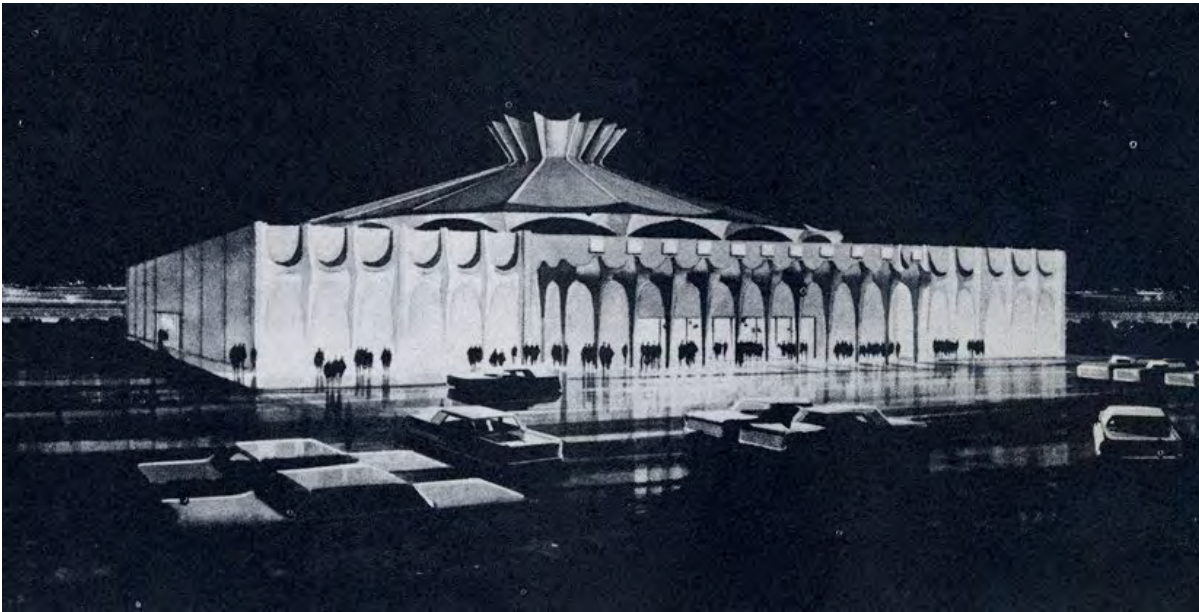


*Holding Company.* The building was demolished in 1998, replaced by a strip mall with an unknown man on a horse sculpture that has no association with Burlingame history whatsoever.

The Hyatt Corporation thought the Bayfront at 1307 Bayshore Blvd. seemed the perfect place for "live" theater to re-

emerge. The Burlingame Hyatt theater, a mid-century modern structure, some might say "Googie" style architecture, was built in 1964 as a Theater-in-the-Round. While big stars including Mary Martin and Dorothy Dandridge appeared in some plays, the critics were not kind. One criticized the venue as a dangle of microphones hanging above the stage, and wine and beer were served in plastic cups. The complaints also included lack of a coat checkroom, insufficient





*Hyatt Music Theatre designed by Burlingame architect Robert M. Blunk advertised seating for 2,500 in its circular auditorium*

drinking fountains and inadequate air conditioning. It was short-lived as a theater for live performances and was, for a short time, a children's theater and an acting school. In 1966 it was then transformed into a cinema, (just two years after it opened.) Later it became a two-screen theater and then a triplex. Some say the theater spaces were awkwardly pie shaped due to its original round orientation and as a result, sound from one adjoining movie migrated into the other neighboring theater spaces. The Hyatt Theater closed permanently in 2008. The property is currently under city review for redevelopment with office buildings.

Also, along the Bayfront at 350 Beach Rd. was the Burlingame Drive-in. It had two screens. Technically, one side was called The Burlingame Drive-in and the other The Peninsula Drive-in. It opened in 1965 on 16 acres of bay-fill. One side could accommodate 900 cars and the other side 1000 cars. In 1973 it was converted to a four-screen drive-in and named The Burlingame Drive-in. Its distinctive architecture was reminiscent of the space age era in which it was built. The snack bar was a domed, circular pink and white flying saucer-like building. The grounds included fountains lit with orange, yellow, blue and green

spotlights and the ticket booths had geometric spike shaped roofs. The drive-in closed in 1998.

Today there is a large engraved stone monument at 350 Beach Road, the former entrance to the drive-in, placed by the Burlingame Historical Society with



*Burlingame Drive-In - 1993*



*Norton Pearl's aerial photograph of the Burlingame - and Peninsula Drive-In Theatres - 1960s*

donations from our membership, and a Community Grant from the City of Burlingame, with cooperation from Meta and generous assistance from the Burlingame Public Works Department.

**2024 Annual Election and Program - Sun., February 25th**

Mark your calendars for Sunday, Feb. 25,  
2024 for our 2024 Executive Board  
Election at 1:45,

*followed immediately by our*

**Annual Presentation at 2pm,  
Burlingame Public Library, Lane  
Room**

*Then and Now...*

*Come join us to view our latest pairings of  
vintage Burlingame scenes (including some  
newly acquired photos) and their current  
counterparts.*



*Greyhound Depot with 40-line - 1940s and Depot with SamTrans bus - 2023*

**ANNUAL ELECTIONS:** Sunday, Feb. 25th at 1:45pm-Lane Room, Burlingame Public Library, 480 Primrose Rd.  
**Proposed Executive Board Slate: 2024-25**

The following slate of **Executive Officers** was approved at the November 2023 Board meeting: President - **Jen Pfaff**; VP Museum - **Russ Cohen**; VP Technology and Educational Tours - **Diane Condon-Wirgler**; Treasurer - **Mary Griffith**; Secretary - **Leslie McQuaide**.

**Elections open to all current members.** *Nominations for all positions will also be taken from the floor at our Annual Meeting on Feb. 25th at 1:45.*

**Membership renewals for 2024 are due.** Please use the enclosed envelope:

**Senior/Student \$30, Individual \$50, History Buff \$100, Charles Seabiscuit Howard \$500, Anson Burlingame \$1000. Life memberships are no longer offered, but existing Life Memberships will be honored. Life Members are always welcome to donate.**

**WELCOME NEW MEMBERS:** David Thacker, Shauna Rose, and Francesca Aweeka

**-TO ALL OF OUR 2023 Yearend DONORS-  
Thank You! Our work would not be possible without you.**

Anonymous-  
-in Memory of Nick Baylock  
Linda Easton  
Pfaff Family  
Bobbi Benson  
Jill Wakeman-Goodman  
Marion Hoekenga  
Pam Merchant  
Gary Hernandez  
John Parkin  
Lorraine A. Smith  
Donna Lema-Cerna  
Arlene and Art Citron  
Thomas Blake  
Farris Horak  
Marcia Parish  
Fred and JoAnn Hawley  
Julianne W. Mooney  
Diane E. Elcan  
Ann Malouf

Mary Lou Wald  
Tom Carey  
JoAnn Lyons Quadt  
Erik Winkler  
Christopher Voon  
Jack and Lynn  
Van Etten  
Linda Milliken  
Mary and Richard Griffith  
Jeannie Howard Siegman  
Thomas Friebe  
Dennis Moskovitz  
Leslie and John  
McQuaide  
Jim Nantell  
Rocky and Julie Allen  
Lee Ebbert  
Michael Gaul

Katherine L. Colman  
Serena Conti, Realtor, Inc.  
Don Donoughe  
Beth Concoby  
Leslie Inokuchi  
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Peter and Joanne Garrison  
Beverly B. Conrad  
Michael Wiebracht  
Norton Pearl

Clare E. Cavanaugh  
Russ Cohen  
Nick and Stephanie Delis  
Don and Debbie Doyle  
John Catania  
Chris Chan  
The Dunn Family  
Wayne and Pamela  
Gehrke  
Jill and Kent Lauder  
James Brogan  
Rebecca Haseleu  
Emily Beach  
Karen Crandall  
Jean Lombardi  
Victoria Jacobs  
-in Memory of Ruth  
and Bob Jacobs  
David W. Kell  
Anonymous (5x)



**Acquisitions:** Many thanks to **Gary Vielbaum** for an original *Burlingame Transit* shuttle sign for the short-lived transit system comprised of 4 propane-fueled shuttle-buses that transported people throughout the city commencing in May 1974, a vintage Spreckel's/ Russell Milk bottle, and multiple early business receipts and digital photos (including a circa 1940s image at right) depicting Pacific Auto Repair and the 124 Highland Avenue and California Drive area from the 1940s- 1980s. (The Vielbaum family business—Pacific Auto Repair at 124 Highland Avenue—is the oldest continuously run Burlingame business under the same family ownership since 1923); **Russ Cohen** for several digital images of the BHS Centennial



Event on October 14, 2023 (incl. image above); **Terry Nagel** for a collection of handwritten notes and printed material from her former neighbor, author and longtime local historian Don Ringler; **Joan Murray** for a vintage photo of 2021 Hillside Drive, former home of Grace and Fred Schwartz (deceased); **Jim Shypertt** for misc. digital memorabilia including a digital collage of photos related to the May 18, 2019 Burlingame Neighborhood Network (BNN)/ CERT/ HAM Appreciation Event in recognition of Central County Fire Training and various neighborhood training events; **Graeme Whifler** for digital imagery related to the Whifler family presence in Burlingame and Hillsborough, including a circa 1936 image of future architect William Whifler and relatives walking at the dead-end of Drake, beyond which undeveloped, forested lands of the Mills Estate can be seen. **Harwood White** for digital materials related to his uncle, author Stewart E. White of Hillsborough, including an image of the author in his "Ark" of animals at 355 Hillsborough Blvd., (above); **Mark Lucchesi and Ray Tyler** for multiple podcast interviews and DVDs of local



business owners and personalities and **Leslie McQuaide** for transcriptions thereof; **Mollie Ricker of Dostart (developers of Town Square- 220 Park Road)** for images of the new mosaic artwork depicting local Burlingame landmarks that is being fabricated in sections in Montreal, Canada to be installed on the new building adjacent to the former Burlingame Post Office and for an Oct. 22, 1953 *Advance Star* newspaper promotional insert entitled LIFE COMES TO BURLINGAME advertising Burlingame businesses and business people when *Life Magazine* highlighted life in the Bay Area; **John Poimirro, and Lee Livingston** for updated information on BHS students drafted during the Vietnam War (Frank M. Zustiak, Chet Beers, Wayne R. Funai) who have finally been memorialized in various ways after succumbing to injuries and trauma suffered years before during combat; **Linda Field** for a poster

advertising Burlingame's first ever Holiday Market that took place in the Community Center on Dec. 2-3, 2023; **David Weinstein** for a 1996 memoir by former Burlingame resident Dorothy Brown of 746 Laurel Avenue (1950s) that describes her childhood and family business "Bay Area Ambulance Co." one of only two local ambulance services for several decades. Ambulances were stored on the long duplex property; and the City of Burlingame, kindness of

City Manager **Lisa Goldman** for many clippings and slides and photographs of events, official openings public works activities, etc. circa 1980s – early 2000s.



-2023-

**OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS BY THE NUMBERS:****FIVE Special Projects:**

We are working hard behind-the-scenes to mitigate damage to our historic El Camino Real Tree Rows; in addition we are working with CalTrans Cultural Resources Dept. to create a **History Walk on El Camino Real** made up of embedded sidewalk plaques. We have also been working with the Burlingame Public Works Department on a **Historic Sites Story Map** project highlighting the location and history of a number of sites in our city. We produced a video and contributed materials for the **Burlingame High School Centennial**. If you live in town, you undoubtedly have noticed the construction at 220 Park Road, the old Post Office site. Two exciting additions are planned there: a beautiful **outdoor mosaic mural** will feature Burlingame scenes (it is modeled after the “*Living in Burlingame is a Special Privilege*” mural featured in our book and displayed in the main library. Lastly, we are assisting the city with photos and information for a didactic panel display related to **Burlingame Creek** that will be part of the beautiful new public plaza next to the development.

**Hundreds of Hours:**

O u r dedicated archive volunteers meet weekly—sorting, filing and recording each of our

donations. They are the backbone of our organization and we can't thank them enough!

**FIFTEEN New Museum Exhibits:**

Closed due to the pandemic, we took the opportunity to redo our museum. Several new exhibits are being prepared and await you in 2024 when we plan to re-open. More in coming newsletters!

**THREE Stellar Quarterlies:** We hope you did not miss any of our quarterly meetings this year that included: 1) Jon Mays, editor-in-chief of the San Mateo Daily Journal; 2) a showing of rare Gabriel Moulin photos of north Burlingame and the George Howard House in Hillsborough; and 3) *Whifler on Whifler*, a visual presentation by Graeme Whifler, son of local mid-century architect William Whifler (who designed Burlingame's current city hall and a historic home on Drake Avenue, among other projects). If you missed our presentations, most are available on our website: [burlingamehistory.org](http://burlingamehistory.org); click on the “Podcasts and Videos” tab.

**ONE Awesome Summer Walking Tour:**

We had a lot of fun learning about Burlingame's unique English village, Willborough, followed by tea-sandwiches at the home of John and May Ward.

**ONE Article for Punch Magazine “Landmark” feature:**

We told the story of the Broadway-Arch and its significance.

**FOUR Educational Newsletters:**

We brought you lead stories on Burlingame's inventor Adelard F. Martel; on Gabriel Moulin's Little Black Book; Overlooked Architecture on El Camino Real; and History of Burlingame High and some of its notable alumni.

**THIRTY Recorded Podcasts:**

We have been busy filming and recording oral histories of local residents past and present that can all be listened to on our *youtube* channel: *Burlingame, it's a Small Town*.

**EIGHT Lively Third Grade Passport Tours:**

As part of the third grade local history curriculum, we offer walking tours to third grade classes. Hundreds of kids get a passport and

a hat, and have their “passport” stamped after visiting tour sites and answering Burlingame History questions correctly. The passport tours are a special memory for many children!

**EIGHTEEN New Members:**

***Please help us spread the word!***



Burlingame Historical Society  
P.O. Box 144  
Burlingame, Ca 94011  
www.burlingamehistory.org  
650-340-9960

**Address Service Requested - Time Dated Material**

Calendar:

**Burlingame Hillsborough  
History Museum 1-4 pm 1st  
Sunday of the month\***

**\*Note: Currently Closed.**

We are reconfiguring our display  
area. Please check our website for  
updates.

**NEXT EVENT**

Sunday, February 25th :

*Annual Election - 1:45*

*Presentation - 2pm*

(see p. 5)

**Burlingame Then and Now**

**Please remember us  
in your trust or will!**

***President's Message:***

As our matriarch Martha May fondly  
used to say: *"Put your feet up and take a*



*break; the work  
will still be here  
when you get  
back". As with  
so many  
things, she  
was right  
about that  
one, too.*

As we launch  
into 2024, I  
want to thank  
all of our  
volunteers including longtime and  
very devoted Board members who  
have worked so hard during 2023 on a  
variety of projects intended to keep  
our local history ever-relevant. Thank  
you for stepping up to the plate and

agreeing to be part of the 2024 slate  
proposed for election this February.

Much appreciation is also due our  
members and others who contact us  
throughout the year to donate  
artifacts, as well as impart information  
and research that makes our collection  
and knowledge-base even more  
robust.

While putting together our upcoming  
"Then and Now" program planned for  
Sunday, February 25th, I noticed that  
the "Now" category from as recently  
as just 5 years ago, is a solid "Then", as  
our surroundings continue to change  
over ever shorter periods of time.

With history, nothing is ever really  
"done"; it's a continuum. We'll  
continue to do our best to keep up  
with most of it.

*- Jennifer Pfaff*

***Current Officers 2023:***

*President - Jennifer Pfaff*  
*VP - Museum - Russ*  
*Cohen*  
*VP Technology and*  
*Education -*  
*Diane Condon-*  
*Wirgler*  
*Treasurer - Mary Griffith*  
*Secretary - Leslie*  
*McQuaide*  
*Corresponding Secretary*  
*-Mary Packard*  
*Newsletter*  
*-Joanne Garrison*  
*Social Media-*  
*-Cathy Baylock*  
*Membership Chair-*  
*Carl Martin*  
*Oral Histories/ Podcasts -*  
*Mark Lucchesi*