

During the 1920s, Angelenos saw Hollywood as a model for decentralization and credited the automobile with spurring the district's meteoric rise. When Hollywood was incorporated as a third-class city in 1903, approximately 700 people resided within its limits; when annexed to Los Angeles seven years later, the population was at 10,000. The increase was more than sevenfold over the next decade and thereafter climbed at an average of 10,000 people a year, the total exceeding 153,000 in 1930.⁴ The rise of the motion picture industry to a position of national leadership during the same twenty-year period helped transform Hollywood into one of the fastest-growing parts of the region. The large amounts of capital generated by that industry also fostered the rise of a major new business district in its midst. But Hollywood's economic strength was beholden to no one source. Many residents worked in downtown Los Angeles. The most frequently cited reason for Hollywood's success was its appeal as a place to live, using the automobile as a routine mode of conveyance. The most prestigious residential areas of previous decades, lying on more or less level terrain west and southwest of the city center, began to lose ground. Further removed from downtown, more varied topographically, and tinged with the glamour of the movies, tracts in and around Hollywood were now the places of choice for many prosperous commuters. A large affluent populace and an even larger middle class made the average income in Hollywood considerably higher than that citywide, an extremely appealing market for many businesses.

STORIES

At the end of World War I, Hollywood's commercial landscape combined features typical of new outlying districts and of large town centers found in many parts of the United States. Small clusters of modest one- and two-story buildings were scattered along Hollywood Boulevard, the main east-west artery and streetcar route from downtown Los Angeles. Toward the western end of the car line, extending for eight blocks between Cahuenga Boulevard and Highland Avenue, lay the largest of the city's first-generation outlying centers, with more than 200 stores by 1920 (figure 51). These outlets purveyed routine goods and services used by middle-income households. Almost all the businesses were locally based. Selection was limited; a trip downtown was necessary for specialized needs and for comparison shopping.

By the mid-1920s, conspicuous changes began to affect the size, composition, and character of Hollywood's business core. New commercial buildings were rising at a rapid rate on lots previously vacant or occupied by houses and smaller store blocks. Many new retail outlets opened, joined by others that were expanding. The range of available goods increased, particularly in clothing and accessories. Spurred by the film industry, Hollywood was emerging as a center of fashion, with shops that sought to rival ones in New York and Chicago as purveyors of stylish



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Hollywood commercial center, Hollywood Boulevard at Wilcox Avenue, looking west. Photo E. T. Estabrook, ca. 1922. (Security Pacific Historical Photograph Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.)

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Mullen & Bluett store, 6316 Hollywood Boulevard, 1921–1922; W. P. Fuller & Company store, 6318–6322 Hollywood Boulevard, 1922; and Witzel Studio 6324 Hollywood Boulevard, ca. early 1920s; all buildings demolished or altered. Photo before 1928. (Security Pacific Historical Photograph Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.)

women's wear.⁵ The most decisive factor in Hollywood's rise as a magnet of trade was the first wave of branch store development among prominent local and national downtown-based retailers. Specialty stores in apparel and accessories led the way, among them Schwab's (1921) and Mullen & Bluett (1922) in men's clothes, Myer Siegel (1925) in women's clothes, Innes (1923), Young's (1923), Wetherby-Kayser (1923), and C. H. Baker (1925) in shoes, and the New York Hat Store (1924).⁶ Hollywood boasted the first branch of the distinguished San Francisco emporium I. Magnin, which opened in 1923. A second Bay Area clothier, Roos Brothers, followed six years later.⁷

Numerous other well-known businesses built Hollywood outlets as well. The paint manufacturer W. P. Fuller erected a large store in 1921. Barker Brothers opened a multistory, 50,000-square-foot facility in 1927, for a brief period southern California's largest branch outlet. Showrooms were built for Maytag (ca. 1925), Frigidaire (1927), and General Electric (1928) at a time when major household appliances were still regarded as new emblems of attainment.⁸ Yet other branches such as the Platt Music Company (ca. 1922) catered to the recreational pursuits of the well-to-do. Fancy restaurants of the sort then primarily identified with downtown also appeared: Paulais (1924), the Elite Catering Company (ca. 1926), and Pig N' Whistle (1927). Chain drug and food stores could be found in considerable number by 1926; variety stores (F. W. Grand, J. J. Newberry) somewhat later (1928–1930).⁹

By 1930 Hollywood had some 300 stores along the heart of "The Boulevard" and probably 100 more along nearby side streets. Promotional efforts emphasized the small-scale ambience of the district's stores, where one could purchase goods in an intimate, convivial atmosphere.

Hollywood not only lacked the traffic of downtown Los Angeles, boosters claimed; it also lacked the pressing crowds, particularly those segments of the population that a well-heeled clientele found undesirable.¹⁰ Most stores were of modest dimensions and many were boutiques. Hollywood Boulevard was cast as a great collection of specialty shops unsurpassed anywhere in the region. Some leading branch and chain stores looked the part, with buildings that were considerably more elaborate—inside and out—than facilities in other outlying centers prior to the late 1920s (figure 52). Yet the majority of buildings were of a conventional cut.¹¹ Hollywood's distinction lay with the scope of its businesses, not with their physical attributes. At the end of the boom, the commercial center no longer resembled that of a midwestern town, but rather that of a moderate-sized midwestern city (figure 53).

Just as with a city, the specialty store was only one part of the equation. While promoters stressed exclusiveness, they also cultivated the mass-market appeal of a metropolitan center. Soon after the first world war, business leaders began to pursue the development of a large department store as a catalyst for retail growth. By October 1921, Charles E. Toberman, a major landholder along Hollywood Boulevard and a key figure in advancing its business development, announced plans for a large emporium. When the building opened ten months later, Toberman noted that he had tried to interest prominent Los Angeles businesses in Hollywood but was always rebuffed due to a lack of distinction in local outlets. Thus, "I determined to build a department store, . . . not only [because] . . . it would be good business . . . but because . . . it would do more to hold business in Hollywood than any other one thing."¹²

Initially called the C. R. S. Company and soon renamed Robertson's, the department store did in fact stimulate retail growth. The building rose four stories and contained some 46,000 square feet, making it by far the largest store in Hollywood and among the largest outside downtown Los Angeles when it opened. Yet the business was a new one, with-



out reputation, and while Toberman claimed that it equaled the finest emporia on Broadway, the store never approached that stature. Downtown merchants might be receptive to opening branches in Hollywood, but not to creating equivalents to their parent stores.¹³ An establishment befitting the core of a great city still eluded The Boulevard.

The chance to bestow metropolitan stature on Hollywood's shopping district came five years later, in July 1927, with plans for an enormous second B. H. Dyas store at Hollywood and Vine. The program stipulated a nine-story edifice containing over 130,000 square feet, making it larger than the downtown Dyas emporium (figure 54). A syndicate of local businessmen had aggressively pursued the project, persuading Bernal Dyas to break ranks with his competitors. Los Angeles department store executives had informally agreed to resist branch development in an effort to maintain the volume of their downtown trade.¹⁴ Dyas was a newcomer to the field, having expanded his business from sporting goods a decade previous, and may well have believed that creating a large Hollywood store was the best means of capturing a larger share of the market. The new building was not only bigger than his existing one, it was run independently, with a separate staff of buyers who targeted the affluent residents of Hollywood. Here, Dyas believed, his company could move to the forefront. When announcing the plan, he proclaimed that Hollywood and Vine would rival Forty-second Street and Broadway in New York.¹⁵

Dyas's move had little precedent anywhere in the United States. When the Hollywood emporium opened in March 1928, the trend toward branch development among downtown department stores was barely under way. Just as in Los Angeles, parent companies had invested millions of dollars in their physical facilities, and conventional wisdom held that a big branch would erode downtown patronage. The few branches then operating were mostly small and specialized in nature. Among the first was erected in 1925 by William Filene's Sons Company of Boston and targeted to students at Wellesley College. Over the next three years, Filene's opened two additional stores in other college towns, three in resort communities of Massachusetts and Maine, and three in small cities—Portland, Providence, and Worcester—of which the Worcester outlet was by far the largest at 28,000 square feet. Branches of New York stores were limited to tiny outlets of departmentalized stores specializing in apparel and accessories: Best & Company (1924) and Saks Fifth Avenue (1925) at Palm Beach.¹⁶ All these units were conceived as extensions of the parent store, engaging the patronage of customers while they were at school or on vacation or enlisting a new clientele beyond the company's trading radius. An important exception to this tendency was the first known branch of a major downtown store: B. Nugent & Brother's outlet in the Midtown district of St. Louis, which opened at the remarkably early date of 1913. Adapting space in an existing facility, the store contained nearly 40,000 square feet, some 15,000 of which was at first used for selling space.¹⁷ The only other comparable outlet constructed before Dyas Hollywood was the 50,000-square-foot branch of a small but long-established Philadelphia department



store, George Allen, completed several months earlier. Situated in German-town, it was likewise designed to attract residents of affluent enclaves nearby as a substitute for shopping downtown.¹⁸ Dyas's store was thus far the most ambitious of its kind and stood at the leading edge of a phenomenon that would transform urban retailing in later years.

Upon its completion, the Dyas store was heralded as a benchmark in Hollywood's commercial ascendancy. Seeing the benefits the new emporium would bring to his own business, Robertson's manager asserted that "Hollywood Boulevard can now in every sense of the word be the 'Mecca' for the great shopping public," adding that only "a few years ago people could with some justification say, 'I can't find what I want in Hollywood and have to go downtown anyway.' That can hardly be true now for Hollywood has not only ample stock to choose from but a great variety of stocks at prices to fit any purse."¹⁹ Within a short period, however, this purported capstone to the shopping district was experiencing financial problems. Dyas had overextended his resources. At an early stage of the depression he retrenched, consolidating assets in the downtown facility and concentrating on a more limited range of goods. Though Dyas's bid for leadership failed, it inaugurated the idea of large-scale

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Hollywood Boulevard, looking east from
McCadden Street. Photo ca. late 1920s/
early 1930s. (Courtesy Christy McAvoy.)

branch development. Even with the economic downturn, several competitors bid to take over the enterprise and, on the third anniversary of its initial opening, purchase was announced by the president of the Broadway department store.²⁰ What seemed like a disastrous turn of events for Hollywood was averted, the retail base strengthened in the process.



The Broadway's reputation and very name, synonymous with the retail corridor downtown, gave recognition to Hollywood in a way that Dyas could not. At the same time, the Broadway's executives followed their predecessor's strategy in using the outlet to upgrade their clientele. The Broadway had built its business upon a middle-income market. Now the company could court a more elite audience as well, featuring fashionable wares and other costly items. The attributes of store and community thus were mutually reinforcing. The Broadway Hollywood prospered, expanding to occupy three previously unused floors and, in 1938, to include a six-story addition of over 52,000 square feet.²¹ For several decades, the facility fulfilled its promise as an anchor for trade in the community.

An important factor in the Broadway's decision to establish a large store outside downtown was that its competitors were contemplating, and in one case had already made, similar moves. Bullock's confirmed long-standing rumors when its president announced plans to build an elegant emporium on Wilshire Boulevard in April 1928, seven months after the company had achieved complete financial separation from the Broadway.²² Far more ominous from the latter's perspective were indications that the archrival May Company would erect a nine-story branch on Hollywood Boulevard three blocks west of Vine Street.²³ A year earlier, Universal Pictures president Carl Laemmle had nearly succeeded in courting a "large New York department store" to establish an enormous outlet right across the street from the Dyas building. Laemmle had gone so far as to secure a design by an unnamed French architect, which, while somewhat schizophrenic in composition, would have been among the most arresting examples of modernism in the country at that time, making its precursor seem both small and dated by comparison (figure 55).²⁴ Both projects were stillborn, no doubt due to the depression, yet Hollywood's desirability as a center for large-scale retail development was now well established. Dyas's move forever changed the thinking of Los Angeles's major retailers. Not only was further downtown growth hampered by soaring land values, but fear was mounting that with ever more customers living ever further afield, fewer among them would be willing to make frequent downtown shopping journeys. A great emporium could continue to expand primarily by coming to its clientele. The fact that one department store had taken this step no doubt made it seem imperative for the others to follow.

BUSINESS DIVERSITY

Retail trade was by no means the only contributor to Hollywood's commercial boom. The range of enterprises located on or near The Boulevard did indeed resemble that of a typical city center. Together with the Broadway Hollywood store, the most conspicuous components were tall office buildings, seven of which existed by 1930. Over the previous five years Hollywood's "skyscraper" construction had outpaced that in other outlying areas of Los Angeles and elsewhere in the nation as well.²⁵ The impe-

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B. H. Dyas Hollywood (later the Broadway Hollywood) department store, 6300 Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1927-1928, Fred. H. Dorn, architect. Photo "Dick" Whittington, ca. 1953. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)