

One of the most conspicuous and influential features of Hollywood's commercial center was its movie theaters, the aggregate of which posed a challenge to Broadway as the metropolitan region's focus of popular entertainment. That challenge stemmed not so much from size or elaborateness of the facilities as it did from their function as settings for lavish premieres and first-run pictures. Nationally, first-run movies were shown almost exclusively in downtown theaters throughout the interwar decades, not in neighborhood houses in outlying areas. Having first-run movies, complete with opening spectacles, made Hollywood Boulevard seem unique.<sup>34</sup>

Paralleling what occurred in the financial sphere, efforts to make Hollywood a center for the exhibition of motion pictures began prior to the district's rise as a leading retail area. In 1921, the redoubtable Los Angeles impresario Sid Grauman started construction of the Egyptian Theatre, which, while not large (1,760 seats), was conceived to replace his still new Million Dollar Theatre (1917–1918) on Broadway and be the new scene of his lavish premieres. Five years later, Grauman was at work on a slightly larger (2,200-seat) and much more imposing Chinese Theatre, whose front itself suggested a stage set.<sup>35</sup> More or less concurrently, Warner Brothers erected a 2,700-seat "palace" for the introduction of its films. Complementing this triad was the 1,500-seat El Capitan (1925–1926), probably the largest legitimate theater in the region and developed to attract major performances from New York, and the 2,800-seat Pantages (1928–1930), conceived for extravagant vaudeville shows and adapted for movies by the time it opened.<sup>36</sup> These enterprises, extending the full length of Hollywood's business core, elicited comparisons to Broadway in New York and were as significant as any other development in nurturing the belief that this district would become the new heart of the California metropolis.<sup>37</sup>

## PROMOTION

By 1930, Hollywood functioned much like a metropolitan center in miniature, with an array of mutually reinforcing commercial activities. While it never approached the importance of downtown Los Angeles, it nonetheless was more than the equivalent of small satellite city centers such as in Pasadena or Glendale, for the aggregate encompassed a caliber of retail, financial, and recreational facilities seldom found in those places. Numerous parties shaped the amalgam. Real estate developers such as Toberman and the Tafts played a formative role, but there were many others with lesser resources at their command, including long-time owners of boulevard frontage who constructed single, modest buildings. Initiatives taken by businesses and investors from outside the district were as crucial to Hollywood's advance as were local concerns. Conservative banks no less than the flamboyant Grauman proved essential to transforming the street.

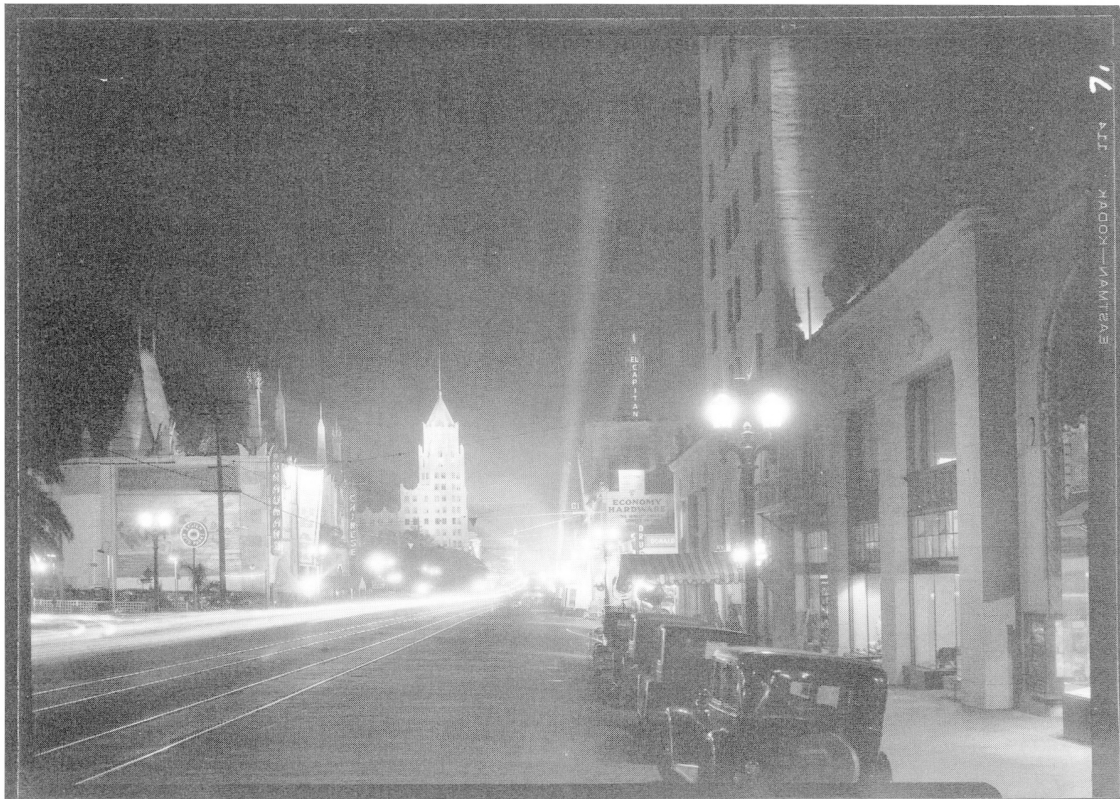
The results would not have been so successful without some cooperative relationship among members of the business community. Hollywood had its own Chamber of Commerce, which worked for physical improvements and generated publicity to enhance patronage. Special shopping days were staged by coalitions of merchants early in the decade, but all such efforts seemed parochial compared to “Hollywood Dresses Up,” a three-day affair organized by the chamber during the 1927 Christmas season. Fusing glamorous aspects of the film industry with those of the retail trades, the event was christened by a battery of klieg lights along Hollywood Boulevard and nearby streets, which, when the master switch was thrown by Mary Pickford, set a forest of illuminating shafts skyward just after sunset (figure 60). The public could “mingle with the stars” while perusing the latest store displays. A chamber spokesman minced no words in explaining the costly program:

Much of the outside world is more prone to order things from Hollywood than the average resident of the town. We have . . . the means of setting fashions throughout the world. Many of the best people here realize this. . . . But there are enough Hollywood people going down town for all their needs to have inspired us to inaugurate this campaign.<sup>38</sup>

The spectacle gave the public something downtown did not offer, underscoring the idea of Hollywood as a unique destination point.<sup>39</sup> Property owners continued the initiative the following April when they established the Hollywood Boulevard Association, which was patterned after

60

Hollywood Boulevard, looking east from Sycamore Avenue; night view probably taken at movie premiere. Photo “Dick” Whittington, 1928. (Whittington Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California.)



organizations promoting Broadway in New York and Michigan Avenue in Chicago.<sup>40</sup> Among the most ambitious of the group's early projects was held in the spring of 1929 and entailed coordination of merchandise and pricing throughout the commercial center so that it would function as the "World's Largest Department Store."<sup>41</sup> By this point, the objective was not so much to stimulate awareness of what retailers had to offer as to demonstrate that prices were competitive with those downtown. Such programs were, of course, partly built on illusion. Hollywood never actually operated as a single store. Even for the association's event, only about a third of the merchants in the business center participated. Yet the stream of publicity emanating both from the chamber and from the association enhanced trade. These activities also helped prepare business leaders for devising strategies in response to the subsequent economic downturn, when aspirations to become another Fifth Avenue soon faded and "dressing up" for boulevard spectacles no longer had such widespread public appeal.

## STRUGGLE

Hopes continued to run high for Hollywood's future during the early stages of the depression, but increasingly were directed toward recapturing what was now portrayed as a past era of elegance. In 1932, Roos Brothers placed a conspicuous advertisement in the *Hollywood Citizen News*, declaring, with some unease, "Hollywood is still Hollywood!" Appearances still counted, even if the emphasis of promotional campaigns was shifting to more basic objectives. By 1934 the *News* itself ran a full-page call for a "modern crusade," urging that "just as the Crusaders of old went in search of the Holy Grail—so we seek the modern "Holly-Goal"—a bright, gleaming, spotless town—comparable to the Hollywood of pre-depression days! Spring is here. . . . Let Hollywood be Hollywood again!"<sup>42</sup>

The situation was not quite as gloomy as such accounts might suggest. 1931 saw the completion of the so-called "Five Fingers Plan," a six-million-dollar public works project. The result of intensive lobbying by the Chamber of Commerce and other local groups, the improvements included widening, straightening, and repaving six miles of arteries in the business district to make it more accessible to motorists.<sup>43</sup> The number of national chain store branches increased, and a more or less steady influx of new independent outlets opened along Hollywood Boulevard throughout the 1930s.<sup>44</sup> Some merchants expanded their quarters. Campaigns for building modernization were launched as early as 1930; by the eve of Pearl Harbor, many Hollywood Boulevard storefronts were updated or completely remade.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, two major companies, I. Magnin and Mullen & Bluett, closed their branches. Robertson's went out of business. Even more ominously, Hollywood failed to attract any new stores of comparable stature.<sup>46</sup> Much of the mercantile growth that did occur was oriented more toward a broad, middle-income market than to-