



ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK
THE BIRCH NORTH PARK THEATRE—A NEW LIFE
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Brothers Emil and George Klicka, who moved to San Diego from Chicago in the early 1920s, were among the early civic leaders of North Park. George Klicka operated the Klicka Lumber Company on 30th Street. Emil Klicka envisioned North Park as "a city of our own," with 30th and University at the commercial core. In 1928, Emil funded and developed, at a cost of \$350,000 a two-story reinforced concrete structure at 29th and University to house a vaudeville performance and motion picture theatre, a bank, a street-level shop, and second-floor medical offices. Emil hired Charles and Edward Quayle to design the building and contracted with B.O. Larsen Construction Company to build the structure.

In January 1929, the movie theatre opened as a Fox West Coast Theatre, part of Edward Fox's movie chain. This was the first Fox movie house built with Vitaphone Sound; the first Fox theatre to be air-conditioned when constructed; and the first mixed use commercial and theatre combination building in the chain. During the 1930s, the North Park Theatre was a leading money maker among the Fox theatres throughout the country.



In the 1960s, the competition from area shopping centers began to erode the North Park Theatre business, and it stopped functioning as a movie house in the 1970s. For a time it was owned and operated by a church, and used for an occasional theatrical or concert performance, until it was purchased by the City of San Diego in the late 1980s, when it sat empty and in disrepair for almost 20 years.

In 2000, developer Bud Fischer was approached by civic leaders Christine Kehoe and Toni Atkins to take on the renovation of the Theatre. He chose Lyric Opera San Diego, led by Leon Natker and J. Sherwood Montgomery, to manage the new Birch North Park Theatre (so named due to a founding gift from the Stephen and Mary Birch Foundation). After five years of work the Theatre was re-dedicated on September 30, 2005.

Our beautifully restored Theatre is garnering notice from newspapers throughout the United States. The Travel section of *The New York Times* recently wrote, “In the last few years, young, independent business owners ... have transformed North Park into one of the [San Diego’s] most vibrant and diverse districts. ... The tipping point was the 2005 restoration [closed in the early 1980s] and reopening of the Birch North Park Theatre.”

It is widely believed that there are ghosts living in the Theatre. We’re not quite certain exactly how many inhabit our stage, but it is thought that Harold Lloyd and his love, Bebe Daniels, are continuing their life-long love affair. Both were famous silent stars who married other people for career reasons, but continued to see one another—often meeting in San Diego where Harold owned a home—until their deaths in 1971. Through the many rejuvenations of this old Theatre, particularly in the ‘70s and early ‘80s when it was Calvary Church, the laughter, whispers and sounds of someone calling for someone else could be heard. Several Lyric Opera San Diego staff members have also seen at least one of the ghosts. For more information please make an appointment with *Ghostly Tours in History, LLC* at www.ghostlytoursinhistory.com.

The Theatre has now been open for nearly five years and hosts more than 170 events each year. In addition to Lyric Opera San Diego’s operatic/musical theater series, San Diegans can also attend jazz concerts, dance, movies, variety shows, and community meetings. New events are posted monthly on our website at www.birchnorthparktheatre.net.

The griffins on the historic façade of the building were the mythic guardians of treasure. Their protective spell saved the Theatre and allowed it to be transformed into the jewel it is today—a Theatre of dreams for all of the citizens of San Diego.



North Park Theatre, circa 1930
Photo courtesy of B'hend & Kaufmann Archives