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When Hollywood Boulevard Became Santa Claus Lane

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History & Society

History



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Today, shopping malls hang garland, pipe in holiday tunes, and build showy reproductions of St. Nicholas' polar hideout, attracting customers to their privately owned concourses and encouraging the buying spirit. But before malls, holiday shoppers flocked to Los Angeles' downtown and suburban retail districts where shops and department stores lined publicly owned streets. To attract business, retailers in these

districts banded together to transform these public spaces into flashy winter wonderlands.

Hollywood boasted one of the most elaborate Yuletide displays. Each November beginning in 1928, extravagant holiday decorations transformed a one-mile stretch of Hollywood Blvd. between Vine and La Brea into Santa Claus Lane.

The brainchild of businessman Harry Blaine and the Hollywood Boulevard Association, which promoted the thoroughfare as the "world's largest department store," Santa Claus Lane lured shoppers away from downtown's dominant Broadway retail district with winking lights, daily processions featuring a reindeer-drawn sleigh, and plentiful, brightly decorated Christmas trees.

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Hollywood Blvd. transformed into Santa Claus Lane, circa 1950. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

More Christmas History

Christmas Tree Lane: The Origins of a Southern California Tradition

Orange County's Fossil-Fueled Christmas

The first year, 100 living firs were dug up from the forest near Big Bear and placed along Hollywood Blvd. in wooden planters. Once fully dressed in nearly 10,000 incandescent light bulbs, the trees lit the path for a nightly parade. Joined on his sleigh by a silver screen star, Santa Claus greeted passersby as a team of six live reindeer pulled him down the boulevard. After New Year's Day, the trees were replanted on the grounds of the Hollywood Bowl.

In later years, metallic decorations replaced the living trees. Drawings of film stars' faces smiled at shoppers from the center of tin wreaths hung from lampposts. Whimsical, shiny toy Christmas trees blinked with colorful lights. At the annual promotion's peak, organizers boasted that Hollywood Blvd. was the most brightly lit street in the nation.

To complete the wintertime transformation, Hollywood Blvd. took on a new name. For one month, signs at intersections read "Santa Claus Lane," and merchants updated their street addresses to reflect the temporary name change.

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In 1928, the first year Hollywood merchants organized Santa Claus Lane, live fir trees were transplanted from Big Bear. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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Daytime view of the fir trees along Santa Claus Lane in 1928. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

Another view of Hollywood Boulevard as Santa Claus Lane in 1928. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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After moving away from live trees, Santa Claus Lane's organizers experimented with metallic wreaths that featured film stars' faces in the center. Here, Claudette Colbert poses with a wreath bearing her likeness. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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Birdseye view of Santa Claus Lane and Vine Street in 1932. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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Conical, metallic toy trees followed the wreaths on Hollywood's Santa Claus Lane.
Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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Actress Mary Pickford switches on Hollywood Boulevard's holiday lights in 1935. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA. Used under a Creative Commons license.

Circa 1935 view of a wet Hollywood Boulevard decorated for the holidays. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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Postcard of Santa Claus Lane in 1936. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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Light standards became Christmas trees on Santa Claus Lane, as show in this circa 1938 photo. Courtesy of the Dick Whittington Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

Circa 1948 view of Hollywood Boulevard decorated as Santa Claus Lane. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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Hollywood film stars accompanied St. Nicholas in the annual Santa Claus Lane Parade. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

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Santa Claus Lane Parade in 1945. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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Hollywood Boulevard decorated for the holidays, circa 1950. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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Hollywood Boulevard decorated for the holidays, circa 1950. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Hollywood Boulevard decorated for the holidays, circa 1950. Courtesy of the Photo Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

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Hollywood Boulevard as Santa Claus Lane. Courtesy of the James H. Osborne Photograph Collection, CSUDH Archives.

1957 postcard of Santa Claus Lane. Courtesy of the California State Library.

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Highlights at the Archives Bazaar: 10 Fascinating Southern California Collections and Historical Organizations

Every year, Southern California museums, libraries and archives come together at the annual Archives Bazaar to exhibit historic items and artifacts. Here are 8 collections and historical organizations whose archives tell a fascinating story of L.A.

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History of Avocados in California

The history of commercial avocados in California comes from a collection of chance discoveries, Indigenous heritages exploited and improbable survivals that were ultimately hitched to the power of California's industrialized agriculture.

Lost Cemeteries of Early L.A.: The Forgotten Burial Sites of the City's Earliest Settlers

The deaths of early Angelenos didn't always lead to eternal rest. When the first Catholic, Jewish and Protestant cemeteries in Los Angeles were abandoned by 1910, the displaced dead were scattered to other cemeteries — but not all were found and reburied.

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