

The Cross Over Hollywood

If you have ever flown into the International Airport at Los Angeles, you may have seen the large white cross on the hillside near the world-famous “Hollywood” sign. Many thousands of motorists on the Hollywood Freeway see it each day.

At night, this 34-foot-high, steel-framed cross on a concrete base is internally lit, glowing white against the darkened foothills and nightscape. It serves as a silent testimony to Jesus Christ and a spiritual sentry over the City of Angels.

Known by some as simply “The Hollywood Cross,” it is also designated a California Historic-Cultural Monument (No. 617). Additionally, it was depicted for several decades—along with the famed Hollywood Bowl amphitheater—on the official Los Angeles County seal.

The Context for the Cross

In Los Angeles in the early 1900s, there was an interest in developing public buildings and venues for musical and cultural events. Into this civic and cultural interest stepped Christine Wetherill Stevenson, an heiress to the Pittsburgh Paint fortune. As a patron of the arts, she was instrumental in raising civic interest and financial support to build a large outdoor amphitheater in the hillside ravines above the growing and glamorous area of Los Angeles, known by the name of a housing development called “Hollywoodland.”

With civic enthusiasm running high, land was bought in 1919, and a barn was torn down in a spot where a large bandshell would be built. By the summer of 1920, the area began to feature sporadic musical and theatrical events, with guests spreading blankets on the grassy areas of the newly mowed fields or sitting on some temporary benches along the hillside. Under Stevenson’s direction, they even held an

Easter Sunrise service. The first official season of the famed Hollywood Bowl was in July 1922.

Stevenson hoped the Bowl would also be a venue for outdoor plays based on the events of the last week in Jesus Christ's life. She had seen such passion plays in Europe, where large pilgrimages were made to major presentations. But even before the Hollywood Bowl was officially opened, she found opposition to this religious use of public facilities, and she resigned from leadership in its guiding committee.

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Instead, she began to search for an alternate location for this religious, theatrical application. Fortunately, she and some friends found such a location in the canyon and hillside just across the major road (now Cahuenga Blvd and the Hollywood Freeway), to the east of the construction of the new Hollywood Bowl.

Stevenson and her financial backers acquired the 29-acre, acoustically aided canyon. She and her talented thespians began replicating a smaller version of the infrastructure they had developed for the Hollywood Bowl. Sets were built, lighting kits were borrowed from nearby movie studios, and The Hollywood Pilgrimage Play and Theatre was readied for outdoor presentations by June 1920. Stevenson directed the first two seasons of the play but died unexpectedly at the young age of 44 in the fall of 1922.

The Original 'Cross Over Hollywood'

A large, reportedly 40-foot-tall, wooden cross was built on the hilltop above the amphitheater in 1923. The lighted cross was a memorial tribute to the theater's founder, Cristine Wetherill Stevenson. That was over 100 years ago, but what we see today is not that original monument.

In 1941, the Pilgrimage Play Association donated the land, theater and cross to Los Angeles County for its use and maintenance while reserving a lease for annual summertime presentations. The association continued sporadic presentations into the 1960s when a lawsuit was brought against the county for using this facility exclusively for religious performances. This ended regular presentations of the Pilgrimage Play in Los Angeles.

The outdoor theater's 1,200 seats became a music venue for the county. It was renamed the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre after one the county supervisors, who had tried to support the arts and kept the site maintained and meaningful to the constituents. In 1965, the original wooden cross burned down in a brush fire, and the county replaced it with a steel-and-plexiglass structure.

In the 1970s, the Hollywood Cross was again publicly questioned when the county was sued for maintaining a religious symbol on public lands. Eventually, County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn arranged to deed the cross and its limited hilltop area to a nonprofit organization, High Adventure Ministries of Simi Valley, California, to hold and maintain.

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The New 'Old Rugged Cross'

In 1993, High Adventure Ministries, under the leadership of Christian businessman George Otis Sr., removed the previous cross memorial and arranged for a complete rebuild of the monument. The new old rugged cross is a reported 24-foot-tall, steel-framed cross with internal electric lighting behind a sturdy white plexiglass covering. The cross sits atop a 10-foot concrete column.

Understandably, this steel and concrete construction had to be installed on the same hilltop property using a powerful commercial helicopter. It continues to stand there today, strong and sturdy.

‘Let’s Give a Cross to Los Angeles for Easter!’

In 1995, High Adventure Ministries approached Pastor Jack Hayford, founding pastor of The Church on the Way, the Foursquare Church of Van Nuys, California, with a ministry proposal to change the stewardship of the cross over Hollywood. High Adventure explained that doing this would allow the ministry to focus on its core mission of international broadcast ministry.

After extensive review and prayerful consideration by the leadership of the Van Nuys church, Pastor Hayford solicited a consortium of other Los Angeles area pastors to identify with this stewardship and ministry opportunity and together to “give a cross to Los Angeles for Easter!”

Subsequently, the leadership of Angeles Temple in Echo Park, the First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, Faithful Central Bible Church of Inglewood and others joined with the congregation and leaders of The Church on the Way to raise the necessary funds by Easter of 1996.

The Van Nuys congregation agreed to be the primary steward of this ongoing project. Hundreds of individual members from these churches gave substantially to continue this significant testimony to Los Angeles. Their names were included on a dedication scroll and embedded in the concrete base of the cross when it was formally dedicated.

These funds have been faithfully used to acquire and maintain this silent witness of the cross over Hollywood for nearly three decades. Together, these donors have faithfully lifted this symbol of the love of our heavenly Father and the finished work of His Son on the cross of Calvary high over Los

Angeles, “the City of the Angels.”

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