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Los Angeles' hillside star is shining again

Griffith Observatory, reopening this week after renovations, is not just an eye on the sky -- it's a beloved link to the city's past.

By Jim Newton
Times Staff Writer
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There is something about the Griffith Observatory, which reopens this week after a four-year renovation, that makes it more than mere landmark, something akin to an exemplar of Los Angeles itself.

The observatory was the indirect outgrowth of a scandal, kissed by criminality. It was willed into existence by grand ambition, delayed by politics, hashed out in the courts and then, at last, it came of age in gilded splendor: a fan favorite that drew millions in its first years. And as the observatory grew to maturity, it found its way to film and there sealed its place as an iconic emblem of the city it perches above.

"It's a powerful memory site," said D.J. Waldie, an author and observer of Los Angeles and Southern California culture. Grand and optimistic, solid in construction and radiating confidence in science, the observatory is the rare institution that binds Los Angeles to its past, he said — "a durable site for memories" in a city that "has a tendency to scrub its past clean."

The observatory got its start through the generosity of Griffith J. Griffith, an early Los Angeles silver mining magnate with plenty of need for redemption. In 1903, Griffith forced his wife to kneel and pray and then shot her in the head. She lived. He went to prison and then, after nearly two years behind bars, returned home to Los Angeles and resumed his life.

A free man again, Griffith in his later years devoted much time and attention to leaving a better Los Angeles. He donated the vast and hilly land that was to become Griffith Park — more than 4,000 acres — and he offered to give the city $100,000 to build an observatory on the property.

Describing the project, Griffith captured early Los Angeles' sense of boundlessness and reach. "Ambition," he told the city's mayor, "must have broad spaces and mighty distances."

Proving that not all of Los Angeles' troubles are new ones, however, Griffith's attempt to donate the money for the building became bogged down in a contentious discussion with the City Council, which could not decide how to accept and allocate the gift. The park itself was also underappreciated: In its early years, California historian Kevin Starr notes, the trees of Griffith Park were logged for firewood.

Stymied by the stubborn council, Griffith died without handing over the money for the observatory, but he bequeathed it to the city anyway. The project's troubles did not end there, though, as planners then turned to dickering over where precisely to put the building. Some believed that Griffith imagined it on top of Mt. Hollywood, while others suggested that a more appropriate location would be just below the mountain's peak, where it would be more accessible to the public.

Foreshadowing the politics of the future, the two sides took their debate to court. Superior Court Judge Albert Lee Stephens walked the competing sites and consulted at length with architects and trustees of the estate. In 1931, 12 years after Griffith left the money to the city, Stephens picked the site below the peak. "The question of the populace enjoying this munificent gift is an important one," he concluded.

By then, Griffith's bequest had grown to $750,000, and architect John C. Austin, who had lobbied for the lower-elevation site, completed his plans for the building within six weeks.

Workers leveled a section of hill 1,134 feet above sea level and constructed the observatory's signature features — its theater for the planetarium, its stately dome and its telescope, through which millions would eventually peer into space.

Even as it took shape, the building was visible across Los Angeles, from the far reaches of the Westside, around the swath of South and East L.A. Although concealed from the San Fernando Valley, a glimpse of it could even be had from Eagle Rock, where the dome is visible through a nook in the Hollywood Hills.

At 8 p.m. on May 14, 1935, the observatory and its planetarium projector, which was built in Germany and shipped to Los Angeles, opened to the public.

In the days leading up to it, the site was so enticing that special fences had to be erected to keep the curious at bay so construction crews could finish the job. One small party was allowed in early, and the Los Angeles Times' report only heightened the city's anticipation.

"Would you like to see how the stars looked to the shepherds of Judea on the night Jesus of Nazareth was born?" The Times asked. "Or gaze upon the night sky which watched the death struggles of long-since extinct animals as they floundered in the La Brea pits thousands of years ago? Or see how the heavens will look to California in 2034?

"Those," The Times intoned, "are just a few of the astronomical treats which are in store."

An 'airliner' view

Like the city over which it presides, the Griffith Observatory exists both in fact and in imagination, as a building and as lore.

Egged on by eager coverage in The Times and elsewhere, residents and tourists flocked to the observatory in its early years, making their way up the hill to gaze through its telescope or take in its planetarium show. Records from the period make clear that many people went just to see the building, as attendance at the observatory far exceeded that at the planetarium or other exhibits.

After Pearl Harbor, California shuddered under the fear of attack, and blackouts were common. That dampened attendance at the observatory, but the war's end and the flood of migration that ushered in modern California also brought the resumption of public enthusiasm for the building overlooking Hollywood. By 1950, California was abuzz with postwar energy and vitality, and 7 million people had made their way to the Griffith Observatory — more than 500,000 a year.

And interest in the observatory never waned: When it closed for renovation in 2002, officials at the building say, it was drawing about 2 million guests annually.

The observatory's exhibits fascinated many of those visitors, but its place above the city gave it an additional niche in Los Angeles' landscape, one particularly well-suited to this city.

"Some cities are imagined as if they were seen from a distance," Waldie reflected in a recent e-mail. "Some, like New York, as if seen from the deck of an arriving ocean liner. Los Angeles is always imagined as if seen from a descending airliner. In movies and novels, that view from above is the first sight of the city. The observatory gives everyone and anyone an 'airliner' view of Los Angeles."

Inevitably, its prominence and its place in the home of the movie industry meant that it would find its way onto film.

For most, the lasting film image of the observatory was forged by its recurring role in "Rebel Without a Cause," the 1955 classic featuring James Dean as a troubled high school student and Natalie Wood as his flirtatious neighbor.

Much of the film was shot at the observatory, and it features prominently in two scenes — bookending the movie in violent confrontations at the building. Near the beginning of the film, James Dean faces off against a group of tough teenagers on the stone parapets of the building and is drawn into a knife fight.

The movie ends in a tragic nighttime sequence that moves in and out of the observatory, its solid stone surfaces and crisp Art Deco angles serving as a counterpoint to Dean's desperate, restless lashing out.

Dean died in a car crash shortly before the film's release. Its other two central figures, Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo, also died prematurely. Wood drowned and Mineo was murdered by a man with a knife. None lived to be 45.

A tale of two boys

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and City Council President Eric Garcetti grew up on opposite sides of the Hollywood Hills, Villaraigosa in East Los Angeles, Garcetti in the San Fernando Valley. Garcetti's family was well-off, and his father eventually became district attorney of Los Angeles County. Villaraigosa's father abandoned his family when Villaraigosa was a boy, and the boy-who-would-be-mayor was raised by his mother.

But both little Tony Villar, his name in those days, and little Eric Garcetti looked upward in fascination at the building on the hill. "It was exhilarating," Villaraigosa said recently.

For each of the now-ranking members of the city's political elite, as for countless other young Angelenos, the first trip to the observatory came at about age 8.

Garcetti went as part of a class field trip. The children visited the planetarium and, nearly 30 years later, Garcetti still grins at the memory of the Tesla coil, which looked like a lightning show. It was part of the standard tour and is featured in "Rebel Without a Cause" as well.

Villaraigosa visited with his family. Seven kids piled into his aunt's car. It broke down on the way, but they eventually made it up the hill. Reaching the top, Villaraigosa looked down on the vastness of his city.

"I felt like I was on top of the world," Villaraigosa recalled.

For Garcetti, the field trip was the first of many visits. And he was among a group of city officials who recently toured the newly refurbished building. That trip, he said, allowed him to see the building with new eyes.

The building seemed so big, so imposing, to a child. But it's typical to return years later to a place of one's youth and find it feeling smaller. In the case of the observatory, Garcetti said with a smile, it's now grown too.

Standing on a street corner in Hollywood, where he governs and above which the observatory still stands, Garcetti noted: "It's like we grew up together."