

San Diego's Bygone Burlesque: The Famous Hollywood Theatre¹

Winner of the Joseph L. Howard Memorial Award

by Jaye Furlonger

Burlesque, one of America's most significant contributions to popular entertainment in the pre-radio and television era, played an important role in San Diego's social and cultural history. The legendary Hollywood Theatre put the city on the map as one of the best places in the entire country to find "big time" burlesque, often referred to as the "poor man's musical comedy."² During the 1940s and 1950s, it became a major stopping point on the West Coast circuit for such big-name striptease artists as Tempest Storm, Betty Rowland, and Lili St. Cyr.³ The 1960s, however, brought an end to its "golden era," and by 1970 the Hollywood was the last great burlesque palace to close on the West Coast. The construction of Horton Plaza in the 1980s eliminated any visible trace of the colorful, bygone world that existed at 314-316 F Street. People now park their cars where the Hollywood once stood and look to shopping and movies for entertainment, not musical comedy. The glamorous headlining striptease artists seductively advertised on the marquee and the droves of young sailors who crowded the sidewalk lining up to see pretty girls and comics have faded into the past.

Early burlesque takes root in San Diego: 1880s – 1920s

The first American burlesque shows developed in eastern metropolitan centers during the late nineteenth century. The shows played on people's desires to laugh and lust, the key factors that helped spread its popularity to the far reaches of the country, despite its perceived threat to the social and moral order. Beginning around the 1860s, burlesque developed a predictable format based around a full-company of dancers, singers, actors, and comedians. Notorious for suggestive humor and scantily-clad showgirls, it was targeted foremost at working class men. In notably smaller numbers, people from all walks of life (including some women) also enjoyed the titillation of witnessing something then widely considered to be socially taboo.

San Diego, while remote, was a primary port of entry on the Pacific Coast for a large number of single men seeking to improve their prospects in the West. A place exclusively dedicated to presenting stock burlesque, however, did not emerge to capitalize on this sizeable male market until the early 1920s. Until then, performers with burlesque influences arrived in town solo or with road shows for short

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engagements at various vaudeville and variety halls on the touring circuit. Many performed near to or within the bounds of the notorious vice district below Market Street known as "The Stingaree."⁴

In the late nineteenth century, San Diego had at least two major social gathering halls: Horton Hall (1869), located not far north of the Stingaree on the south-east corner of 6th and F Streets, and Leach's Opera House (1884) on D Street, now Broadway, between First and Second Avenues. Both were used for civic events but also hosted traveling road shows and other theatrical fare. In addition, there were about a dozen smaller establishments, including saloons, hotels, and other meeting halls, where live entertainment could regularly be found. In 1887, Horton and Leach's were joined by a third major venue, Louis' Opera House.⁵ Early risqué female entertainers – variety performers, bold comediennes, dance hall girls, and the like – had gained a presence alongside the gambling, drinking, and prostitution that characterized downtown. However, an authentic burlesque road show with a full company of bawdy theatrical women, Lydia Thompson's Grand English Burlesque Company,⁶ did not arrive until 1889 when, for a two night engagement at the popular Louis,' the world-renowned troupe presented satirical versions of two different plays, *Penelope* and *Columbus*.⁷

The worlds of theatre and prostitution shared deep historical ties; this association continued to taint the reputations of female actors during Thompson's era. In the minds of some early local residents, the close geographic proximity of the city's first theatres to the rowdy Stingaree may have reinforced this type of commonly held negative stereotype about show people. Suspicion directed towards entertainers – especially women who did not conform to the day's standards of behavior and dress – and at the leisure activities of the lower classes in general were basic sentiments held by those who considered themselves to be morally upright citizens at that time. Such a perspective is alluded to in the local news section of the *San Diego Union*, October 27, 1886, where it briefly notes: "A variety show came to the city yesterday. It also left yesterday. These shows should find out before they come here that we have an ordinance prohibiting dance halls and the like."⁸

Journalists continued to keep public attention focused on performers who crossed the line of decency. Worthy of such a distinction in 1897 was a mysterious "oriental danseuse" identified as Omene who shocked audiences with a "muscle dance" during a vaudeville show at the "Fifth-Street Theater," probably another name for Louis' Opera House. The act provoked an outraged commentary in the next day's *San Diego Union*, where it was unfavorably compared to a toned-down version of the "cootch" dance, or hootchy-kootchy – a scandalous attraction found primarily on the carnival midway. In a follow up news item the next day, the same writer, apparently still flustered, claimed that the majority of Omene's audience had been made up of men and boys, and that a good portion of those in attendance were horrified by her suggestive body movements. He also predicted that the theatre would soon go out of business with more programming of that nature.⁹ However, and surely to the dismay of many like-minded individuals, the popularity of the cootch was actually on the rise. Taken-up by a virtual army of brazen turn-of-the-century women like Omene, the first commercial exotic dance was becoming a staple in road shows, dime museums, "small time" vaudeville, and early burlesque houses across the country.¹⁰

San Diego's fourth theater, the Fisher Opera House, opened in 1892 on Fourth between B and C. The Fisher was built by the producers Fisher, Dunne, and Ryley, and funded with profits from *Floradora*, the most successful musical comedy of its day. It was the first theatre on the West Coast to be equipped with electric lights. For a short time, it was considered to be the West's finest and most beautiful opera house, but its initial prestige was destined to fade in the wake of newer competition.¹¹ In 1902, the Fisher was acquired by Katherine Tingley, founder of the Theosophical Society, who changed its name to the Isis. The Isis was only used by the Theosophists for meetings on weekends, so for most of the week it hosted traveling road shows. In the 1920s, it became the Colonial Theatre and was turned into a "tab show" house.¹²

A boom in theatre construction took place in San Diego from the 1890s to the 1920s. Everything from musical concerts to serious theater, road shows, films, family-friendly vaudeville, and occasionally burlesque, could be found within the bustling core. The Lyceum, a medium-sized theatre for this period, was built in 1913 at 314-316 F Street by the Fontinelle family, who intended to produce serious dramas. During the next several years, however, musical comedies dominated the program. The name and management of the theatre rotated frequently until becoming the Liberty Theatre.¹³ After World War I, the Liberty featured "musicale" (or "Mexican vaudeville") and random events such as boxing. Shortly after, ca. 1921-1924, it became the first and only theatre in San Diego to present an all-burlesque format with its own stock company.¹⁴ Historical photographs depict small but typical theatrical burlesque troupes. Easy to identify are comics



Showgirls at the Creole Palace, ca. 1930. During segregation, the cabaret performers in the Creole Cuties Chorus were the dark-skinned counterparts of the chorus girls at the Liberty. ©SDHS Sensor 7:143, Guy Sensor Collection.

in ill-fitting suits and putty noses, and chorus girls posed in skimpy, matching costumes. The women display a generous amount of flesh in sheer quantity of naked legs, arms, shoulders, and backs; indeed, more skin than would have been typically revealed by the day's swimming attire.

Only two blocks south of the Liberty, on the north side of Market between Second and Third Streets, the Hotel Douglas opened in 1924 with its Creole Palace nightclub, a racy, high-energy African American cabaret.¹⁵ Known as the "Cotton Club of the West," the Creole brought in big name stars like Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Count Basie, and boasted a variety show with an all dark-skinned company of singers, dancers, musicians, comedians and, quite possibly, striptease artists. In addition to burlesque's requisite slapstick buffoons and provocative female house singer-comediennes, photographs from the 1930s depict showgirls at the Creole dressed in the same style of exotic costumes worn in virtually all burlesque theatres at the time. However, despite the Creole troupe's similarity in terms of attire and composition to the companies shown at the Liberty and the Colonial, their brand of musical-comedy could not be officially considered burlesque. This distinction was due both to the physical, non-theatre, cabaret nightclub setting of the Creole, and to the strict racial segregation of the national burlesque industry. Nonetheless, burlesque's comic and other aesthetic influences could be witnessed plainly in these productions.

The Liberty's most prominent competitor during its early years as a burlesque house, the Colonial, was demolished in 1928. The Creole Palace, on the other hand, was able to tap into a broad non-segregated audience, which helped it to survive the economic downturn of the 1930s and beyond into the post-World War II era. Distinctly different, the Creole managed to peacefully co-exist with the Liberty (and then later as it was known as the Hollywood) from the 1920s into the 1950s. In fact, it was even a popular spot for performers from the Hollywood to unwind after finishing their last show of the night.¹⁶ Like the famous burlesque theatre, the "Old Creole" served up some of the best live entertainment in Southern California. Its prosperity came to an end, however, as the civil rights movement opened up previously whites-only establishments across the country and lured African American entertainers and audiences away from their beloved, but restrictive, old haunts. Still, the Hollywood lived on.

Bob Johnston & The Hollywood Burlesque Theatre

The history of the Hollywood Theatre is tied to the remarkable man who ran the landmark theatre for almost fifty years. Robert "Bob" Johnston, a local legend, was born in Belfast, Ireland in 1897. His family moved to England two years after his birth but did not escape poverty. George, the family's patriarch, soon left to explore the family's prospects in Canada while Johnston, still a young child, went to work as a brushboy at a barber shop to help support his mother and four siblings. When it came time to finally follow George, who had at last settled in Calgary, Robert went separately from the rest and worked his way over on a ship transporting livestock. He was fourteen years old when the family reunited in 1911.¹⁷

In England, the Johnston children had formed a singing group and entered amateur vaudeville competitions as "The Johnston Kids." After arriving in

Calgary, Robert worked as a newspaper boy selling papers on the street. He soon turned his job into a solo vaudeville act, winning weekly talent contests as "Scottie Johnston, The Newsboy Tenor."¹⁸ A violin virtuoso visiting Calgary's Pantages Theatre with a road show, Madame Musette, hired him to sing a popular song of the day from the balcony while she played on the stage below. He accepted her offer to join the tour, traveling from Spokane to San Francisco before heading back again to Calgary.

Johnston joined the Canadian Army in 1918 as the First World War was drawing to a close. Both before and after his service, he worked for the Canadian Pacific Railroad as a machinist apprentice, long enough to earn a travel pass. In 1920, on a whim, he took his free pass to California. He intended to stay only a few months but found a job at a "nickel bar" in Los Angeles.¹⁹ The direction of his life began taking shape. The Follies Theatre, across the street from the bar, hosted a regular variety show with an amateur contest. Johnston quickly made a name for himself in the competition and was hired by the Follies to sing with a quartet and to work as a "candy butcher" on the side, selling candy, peanuts, and chances to win prizes from the aisles between acts. The theatre's management, impressed by his aptitude as a salesman, sent him to San Diego to manage the company's concession businesses at a small handful of theatres there, including the Colonial and the Liberty.

Making about thirty or forty dollars per week at his newfound profession, Johnston, who was still in his early twenties, was finally living well. In addition to holding down his concessions job, he resumed his singing career at the Colonial. At the time, around 1921, the Liberty Theatre was presenting Mexican musicale under the proprietorship of Alex McPherson. He and McPherson became friends, bonding over their mutual enthusiasm for horse-racing and show business. McPherson brought Johnston into the Liberty as his partner for only a couple hundred dollars.²⁰

In the early 1920s, the McPherson-Johnston partnership oversaw a busy house catering to American soldiers returning from service overseas. Seeing a ripe opportunity, Johnston replaced the Spanish-language musicale with a vaudeville-influenced burlesque show. The burlesque format, which included comics, "blue" humor, and attractive dancing girls, was particularly suited to an audience composed primarily of young, unmarried men.²¹ In the beginning, the Liberty's chorus line was small, with fewer than ten dancers making about ten dollars per week each. Admission for the five-hundred seat theatre was affordable, assuring a steady stream of customers coming in on shore leave. Later in his life, Johnston recalled his exciting and prosperous start as a young burlesque entrepreneur:

When we took it over, the Scotchman (McPherson) and I, he was just running a stage show only and we were running so many shows a day because of the fleet coming in we were packing them in. And I couldn't have the girls working steady all day, so I had to give them a rest, so I put in movies. One show would go on at 2:00 and get over at 3:00 or 3:20 and the next one would go on at 4:00, you see. On the days when we had a forty-five minute intermission, you couldn't keep them waiting for forty-five minutes, so I put in movies...²²

Johnston assumed full control of the Liberty after the death of McPherson in 1925. By this time, theatres across the country were guaranteeing profits by cutting back on live performances and shifting entirely over to motion pictures. In less than a decade, the Great Depression would kill many theatres still trying to support actors' salaries.²³ Johnston, who had been accustomed to poverty most of his life, managed to keep the Liberty (and himself) alive throughout most of the Depression on a "shoe-string" budget. He later described what this period was like:

I struggled with the theatre. I didn't make no money. Whatever I could make, if I could make myself five or ten dollars a week you were satisfied. You were living in a hotel and you were only paying two dollars a week room rent, so you didn't have too much to worry about. Rent was cheap, food was cheap, clothing was cheap, and then about 1939 things picked up here...²⁴

In 1929, just prior to the onset of the Depression, Johnston married Frances "Fanny" Myers, a lively chorus girl and musician from San Francisco who had stopped at the Liberty for a limited two-week engagement en route to perform in Panama. After a brief courtship with the man she initially claimed to dislike, Frances cancelled her trip and became the choreographer of the Liberty's chorus line.²⁵ Together, Bob and Frances reigned over San Diego's small but important burlesque scene.

Bob Johnston stayed dedicated to preserving the live format at the Liberty despite financial worries and occasional trouble with the City over



The Johnston Family, 1940s. Author's collection.

claims of indecency, a common inconvenience of the burlesque industry. He was a businessman with a warm personal side who was always willing to help anybody who was down on their luck. Johnston's generosity was his legendary weakness.²⁶ It was not uncommon for him to put his friends, unemployed celebrities and sports figures, into the show so they could make a little cash. A fervent fan of boxing, he gave former heavyweight champion of the world Jack Johnson one hundred and fifty dollars to appear for two weeks in 1929. The once famous pugilist earned his keep by sparring with a clown and taking questions about his career from the house. Leta Gray and Mildred Harris, two ex-wives of Charlie Chaplin, and the Hilton Sisters, conjoined twins who sang and played the violin, also did short stints at the theatre when in need of the work. As vaudeville neared its demise, the Liberty became a sometimes refuge for displaced variety acts such as hypnotists, jugglers, contortionists, and a range of others. In the spirit of the "big time,"

audiences received a program packed with plenty of action.

The 1935-1936 California Pacific Exposition in Balboa Park nearly put an end to the Liberty. The Exposition offered a formidable assortment of exhibits meant to excite, fascinate, and sometimes shock visitors. Sexuality and the female form were flaunted at Zoro Gardens (a semi-nude, nudist colony), as well as along the ballyhoo (where performers were placed on small stages in front of tent shows to advertise the acts that could be found within), at the Moulin Rouge cabaret, and in other girl shows and spectacles. One such grand spectacle, *Sensations*, employed opulent lighting and stage mechanics to create a Ziegfeld-inspired tableau of beautiful women appearing to ascend and descend on jets of water with others swimming around them. During the first season of the Expo, there was also *Midget City*, a scale village of 100 "little people," and the Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not pavilion, with its display of freaks and oddities.²⁷

The engagement of Sally Rand, America's famous nude fan dancer, was one of the most celebrated events of the 1936 season. Rand was a darling of the Great Depression whose graceful fan and bubble dances, according to biographer Holly Knox, "gave a whole generation something to think about other than unemployment and breadlines."²⁸ She was alleged to have saved the 1933 Chicago World's Fair from financial ruin by causing a flurry of publicity by showing up uninvited to one of its opening banquets on the back of a white horse, "dressed" as Lady Godiva in a long, flowing wig.²⁹ In San Diego, the dancer was booked for a



The Liberty Theatre Company, ca. 1930. ©SDHS Sensor 7:151, Guy Sensor Collection.



The Hollywood Theatre, April 10, 1943. Sailors and servicemen went to the Hollywood to see “big girl revues” and professional comics like “Say No More Joe” during WWII. ©SDHS #84:14825, Barbara Jean Burlesque Theatre Collection.

week of multiple daily performances. Her act, for which a glass stage was erected over the south reflecting pool in the Plaza del Pacifico, was entitled “Leda and the Swan.”³⁰

After a continuous run of over a decade, the Liberty was forced to shut down for a year and a half. Its musical-comedy revues seem dated and modest in comparison to the bounty of excitement and titillation available in Balboa Park. Johnston and Frances returned to their roles as performers, traveling to Los Angeles and San Francisco for singing and dancing engagements. For a time, they both ended up working at the Expo’s Gold Gulch, Frances as a dancing girl and Bob as a barker. They also used some of their down time to redecorate the theatre. When the Exposition ended, the Liberty reopened as the Hollywood Theatre. In order to save money, Johnston acted as the house singer while Frances choreographed and danced in the chorus line.

The Hollywood Theatre flourished as a result of the influx of servicemen into San Diego just prior to and during World War II. In the early 1940s, the U.S. Navy mustered soldiers at the El Teatro Balboa building, today’s Balboa Theatre, at Fourth and E Streets.³¹ The Balboa was only a short block away from the Hollywood on F between Fourth and Fifth. Suddenly, there were thousands of young men virtually camped out on the Hollywood’s doorstep. Downtown became packed with men in uniform, and the Hollywood was their place to relax and enjoy the seductive peelers and spicy comedy of a real live burlesque show. In 1952, in an article on the Hollywood in *San Diego Magazine*, its author Joe Kneffler speculated that roughly 80 per cent of all servicemen who had passed through the area had visited the Hollywood at least once.³²

Johnston, who was at the center of the action, recalled the 1940s and '50s with enthusiasm: "the theatre was nothing but packed all the time. It was always packed. In fact, we did six shows on a Saturday and five shows on a Sunday. It was packed with sailors. That was all there was – sailors."³³ It was his good fortune to run the only "Big Girl Revue"³⁴ in town. The number of company members soared. The show featured a chorus line of thirty women plus a whole cast of singers, male dancers, striptease artists, comedians, and musicians. The entire musical revue changed every two weeks, and generally so did the big-name, visiting striptease headliner. There were multiple, daily hour to an hour-and-a-half long performances. For the day to day operations, there was additional support staff: ticket sellers, costume mistresses, stage hands, and bouncers. The Hollywood was a world, and a busy industry, unto itself.

Sold-out houses during war-time and the immediate post-war years afforded Johnston luxury items like a stable of thoroughbred racing horses (The Hollywood Theatre Stables), a box at Del Mar Racetrack, a Cadillac Fleetwood, and a house on Fort Stockton Drive in the prestigious uptown neighborhood of Mission Hills. Money from the theatre also allowed him to acquire the Palace Buffet, a bar in the ground floor of the Horton Hotel at 328 F Street, next door to the Hollywood. Under his proprietorship, the Sports Palace became one of San Diego's unique watering holes, notable for photographs of famous athletes, celebrities, and high-class strippers covering almost every inch of wall space. It was also known for its colorful regulars. Johnston had friends from all walks of life, including politicians, ex-boxers, and movie actors, not to mention, downtown's resident characters.

The Hollywood had just reached its commercial peak in 1945 when Bob and Frances' only child, Dee Ann, was born. They were not young parents. Johnston



The Hollywood Theatre Company in the 1940s. Stars of the "golden years" included: Jane Greg (seated, centre), Bozo Lord (reclining at right), Zena Ray (aka Katherine Flores, seated directly above Lord's head), and Charlotte Henry (former child film star, standing above Lord's feet). Courtesy of the Johnston Family.

was forty-eight and Frances thirty-six but, for the first time in their lives, they could consider themselves wealthy. Having survived the long, hard struggle of the Depression, and with the peak of the frenzied war years behind them, the new family enjoyed the recent material wealth and social status brought to them by the theatre. Bob and Frances bestowed Dee Ann with an upper-middle class lifestyle and treated her like a young protégé. Her early training for a career in show business began with a regimen of acting and dancing lessons. She dressed like a young starlet and had professional portraits taken regularly. Every day, Bob and Frances helped stretch her limbs to achieve and maintain the flexibility that she would need later to do high kicks and the splits.³⁵

Growing up at the Hollywood during the latter part of its golden years, Dee Ann was primed to go into the family business. By the time she was a teenager in high school at Point Loma, she was helping her mother choreograph the chorus line. She began dancing with the company in the early 1960s, in the line and in specialty numbers, while pursuing other outlets for her talent.³⁶ Until the Hollywood reached its inevitable demise, the theatre derived much of its unique personality from the close-knit and talented Johnston family.

The Show & the Performers

The theatre fostered a long list of regular cast members and employees during its run of nearly fifty years.

Lili St. Cyr, the striptease superstar of the 1950s, started her career at the Hollywood, where she was mentored by veterans such as Janne “Irish” Cafara (aka Janne Kane). Many cast members worked at the theatre for more than a decade, including Zena Ray (aka Katherine Flores), Barbara Jean Dishong, and Big Bobbi “Texas” Roberts. In an era when most variety entertainers moved from short-term engagement to short-term engagement, members of Hollywood’s company were able to settle in San Diego, raise families, and enjoy some of the material comforts of the middle class.

Dancer and choreographer Lee Torry made a significant creative contribution to the Hollywood’s renowned productions during a career that spanned three decades.³⁷ He began dancing as a chorus boy at the Hollywood around 1940 and graduated to choreographer of its full-company, “picture” numbers.³⁸ He also designed and built stage sets in the 1950s. Other multi-talented stalwarts in the



Zena Ray and Ginger Kay, 1940s. Zena Ray (aka Katherine Flores) was professionally trained in ballet but made her living as a chorus girl. Her friend Ginger Kay was one of four sisters who worked together in the Hollywood’s chorus line. Author’s collection

show included Torry's partner Don Saylor, a chorus boy who also made gowns and jewelry for the feature strip artists, and Bob Ross, who doubled as a house singer and a comic.

It was not uncommon for people to claim they went to the Hollywood not for the strippers but for classic burlesque sketches and hilarious comics such as "Say No More Joe."³⁹ As one fan recalled, "...the blackout skits were so funny, so risqué, so loaded with double meanings that the comics needed only look at the audience and get a big, big laugh."⁴⁰ Unlike today's stand-up comedians who perform solo, burlesque funny men used interchanges between actors to tell jokes, and lines were delivered with the rapid fire of a machine gun's pace. Comedians relied on a canon of recycled and reworked material, skits easily recognizable in their day, such as "In Court," "Slowly I Turned," and "Susquehanna Hat Company."⁴¹ The Hollywood's stage was of an adequate size and many of these scenes were acted out in front of sets while shorter, less elaborate "bits" were done in front of the closed curtain to buy time until the company was ready for the next big production number.

Typical comic bits had at least three parts: an opening line, a response, and a punch line. The jokes and sketches captured in the film *The Famous Hollywood Burlesque* (1948) range from one-liners to more complex, mad-cap scenarios involving up to six men and women on stage at one time. References to local events and places such as La Jolla Beach added interest to the repertoire. Ken Cilch, a regular patron of the theatre in the 1960s, reported that if he had friends visiting from out of town, he'd warn Johnston in advance so that they'd be treated with a big surprise, an on-stage mention by one of the comics.⁴² Although burlesque was bound by tradition in many respects, spontaneity remained part of the overall experience, especially when it came to the comedy.

While the Hollywood had an impressive stable of professional male jokesters, women were inarguably the main commercial draw. With more roles available to them, they passed through the Hollywood's company in far greater numbers than the men.⁴³ Sadly, since employee records were thrown away long ago, it is impossible to know how many women in total worked there over the years in the chorus line, as specialty dancers, striptease features, singers, and secondary comedians (referred to in the industry as "talking," "straight," or "extra" women). If a young woman had the basic ability to walk in time to music, she could almost always find work at the Hollywood.

Janne Cafara, or "Irish" as most people called her, was a veteran burlesque performer and "strip woman." Her striking good looks and emerging talent earned her a coveted role as the young starlet "ingénue." Cafara was working a stint at the Burbank Theatre in Los Angeles when her son was killed by a drunk driver. Distraught, she accepted an invitation to perform at the Hollywood from Frances Johnston, who promised her that a small "no-hassle" part in the show (strictly as a feature) and some quiet time in sleepy San Diego would help her get over the tragedy. The Hollywood proved to be an effective remedy for near-paralyzing grief. Slowly, Cafara returned to her former self, teaming-up for comedy bits with her old friend and Hollywood "top banana" Claude Mathis, and mentoring younger performers like Lili St. Cyr and others.⁴⁴ The theatre had come to her emotional rescue, and she grew a strong attachment to it and to San Diego (which she kept as a permanent base for the rest of her life). In 1952, after being a regular



Hollywood Theatre Stageshow, 1951. From left to right: Bubbles, Margie, Renu, Delia, Larry Kane (house singer), Little Jerry, Kansas City Kitty (front right), Barbara Jean, Ginger Kay. Kansas City Kitty and Barbara Jean were mother-daughter chorus girls. ©SDHS #81:12753-22, Barbara Jean Burlesque Theatre Collection.

in the Hollywood's company for more than a dozen years, Cafara married the handsome and much younger Larry Kane, one of the theatre's house singers and "straight men."⁴⁵ The two continued to perform there on and off for several more years, in between engagements that took them back and forth across the country. Many years later in 1994, the retired classic striptease artist remarked, "I think I played every state in the United States, the big theatres in all the big cities. When I got to San Diego I just don't know, I just never wanted to leave here."⁴⁶

"Zena Ray," known today as Katherine Flores, was another traveled performer who found herself in San Diego just prior to the outbreak of World War II. At twenty-four years old, Flores was not as accomplished a performer as Janne Cafara, but (unlike a lot of the Hollywood's other chorus girls) she had the experience of a professionally trained dancer and a background in show business. During the week, she worked at the Convair aircraft plant as a time-keeper; in the evenings and on the weekends, she sang and danced for servicemen at the theatre and at U.S.O. events. The sailors were generally appreciative and respectful. The Hollywood performers had a great fondness for them. In fact, a number of the women in the chorus were actually married to military men.⁴⁷ Others, like June La Rue (who became June Brown), would go on to marry them soon. Flores remembers a "very dramatic" moment in the theatre when one of the women's husbands, just returned from overseas, surprised her in the middle of a production number. It was a moving moment as she broke out of the line to lean over the stage

for a big “welcome home” embrace in front of the entire company and audience.⁴⁸

Flores performed at the Hollywood for fifteen years during its most successful era. Some of her contemporaries included Mary King (the Hollywood’s principal specialty or “character” dancer), Ginger Kay, Kay’s sister June (“La Rue”), Lila and Lola Baker (Mormon twins), Charlotte Henry (a former child actress who played Alice in the first motion picture version of “Alice in Wonderland”), and Claudette Mathis (the daughter of “Say No More Joe”).

Big Bobbi “Texas” Roberts was the Hollywood’s favorite in-house strip feature for twenty-four years. Her striking good looks and ability to walk like a born showgirl earned her a spot in the back row in 1946. She eventually moved up to line captain and then co-feature. She also sang and played extra women in comic sketches. When out-of-town headliners were unavailable, Roberts would receive top billing in print advertisements and on the marquee. Once asked about how she felt to be a stripper, she remarked, “we had to wear large pasties and G-strings; I wound up with more clothes on at the end of a strip than I did in the chorus line!”⁴⁹

Thanks to Johnston, who invented stage names and catch-phrases for many strip-teasers, Roberts never lost the association with her distant birth state, Texas, a place known for all things big. She was five feet eleven inches tall, but well over six feet in heels and a headpiece. In burlesque jargon, women of Roberts’ stature were referred to as “tree-toppers.” Billed as “6 Feet 1 of Texas Fun,” “Big Texas Bobbi,” and “The Tall Texan,” she literally stood out from the rest. “There would be thirty-three girls on stage, but the only girl the men would look at was Bobbi,” Johnston recalled after her death in 1981.⁵⁰ In a letter to the *San Diego Reader*, an old fan could recall the sense of awe Roberts inspired in youthful admirers:

She was something else. Very tall, red hair as I recall, and so far out of our league she might have well been from Mars. She was dating some big land developer, and he would pick her up after the show in a Cadillac roughly the size of an aircraft carrier. We would stand around like goofs and then wander off.⁵¹

Barbara Jean, another member of the company, also flourished at the Hollywood. She danced side-by-side with her mother, “Kansas City Kitty,” a well-known, platinum blond bombshell and recording artist of the 1920s and ‘30s who had sung with the Count Basie Orchestra and other bands.⁵² Mother and daughter started out as “brooms,” the term given to newcomers who strutted in the big production numbers before they were actually allowed to lift their feet off the floor and dance.⁵³ They had to borrow money to buy their dance shoes, platforms with ankle straps, but chorus girl costumes were reused over and over again for different productions and almost every size was already available in stock backstage. There was also a wardrobe mistress to sew new costumes and make repairs and alterations.⁵⁴

Barbara Jean described herself as a “pet” of the Johnstons. Her energy and talent helped foster her thirteen-year-long career at the Hollywood. Within two weeks of joining, she advanced to the front line and became a partner in a mixed-couples dance “team.” Lee Torry, Don Saylor, and Jimmy Merrill were the show’s three main male dancers at the time. Barbara Jean would partner with them countless times over the years. Her advanced education in the chorus

line came from a woman named "Bubbles," a vivacious dancer "from the old school" who had been there since the 1930s, and from Mary King, a sophisticated, professionally trained dancer there since the early 1940s. With King on one side and Bubbles on the other, Barbara Jean claimed that she had to "dance (her) can off" to keep up with them and avoid looking ridiculous.⁵⁵

Barbara Jean's initial salary as a chorus girl in 1950 was twenty-six dollars per week. By the time she left more than a decade later, she was clearing one hundred dollars. By her accounts, it was a pretty decent living. She quit for two main reasons: her age, and the realization that the burlesque world and the Hollywood had changed significantly since she had begun dancing there in 1950. She described her sudden moment of clarity:

There were girls there I don't know why anyone would turn around and watch. They couldn't dance, they were full of dope, stringy hair, no shoes, a brown bathing suit. I came on very glamorous; I wore a fur thing; I was the headliner. And there, there was nothing. You see, I was older. I looked in the mirror then because I was a grandmother then, and I always said that the day I felt like I was too old to be in it I was getting out. I looked in the mirror and thought, "What am I doing here?!" When I got off that stage I went right in and told the boss I quit. He couldn't believe this. I said, "It's time." And I never went back again.⁵⁶

By the 1960s, only a few of the Hollywood's "old timers" remained, including Eddie Ware, Lee Torry, and "Texas" Bobbi. Many dedicated, long-term performers had begun to notice a diminishing in both the quality of the show and in attendance numbers by the early 1950s. Sensing change, entertainers gradually left to pursue a range of other opportunities. Some, like Katherine Flores and Mary King, went on to teach private dance lessons, while other chorus girls like June La Rue became wives and mothers. Some of the company's more seasoned professionals, like Janne Cafara and Claude Mathis, spent large portions of the year on the road, performing in nightclubs and burlesque theatres as far away as the eastern U.S., Hawaii, Mexico, and Canada.

The Hollywood's sold-out "golden years" were marked by big song and dance productions, a large company, and elaborate stage sets, costumes, and choreography. At one time, the high-class productions of the Hollywood rivaled those at any of the well-known burlesque palace on the West Coast, including The Follies and Burbank theatres in Los Angeles and the El Rey in Oakland. The Hollywood's performers, particularly those who dedicated a large part of their lives to the theatre, deserve due credit for their role in its commercial successes and fame. In fact, some of its most celebrated, long-standing and tenacious members may have been responsible in part for the theatre's trend-defying longevity. Helping Johnston to keep classic American striptease and baggy pants humor alive in San Diego well into the national twilight of burlesque, faithful employees such as Bobbi Roberts and Eddie Ware stuck by the Hollywood into its final dying years.

The End of an Era: Decline in the 1960s & the Post-Hollywood Years

By the mid-1950s, what was left of the once great national burlesque industry was crumbling. The top entertainers, when given the chance, took their well-honed craft and retreated from dark, old theatres into dazzling, new nightclubs. The lucky ones were able to branch out into radio, film, and television.

The Hollywood Theatre survived longer than most due to the fact that San Diego housed one of the largest concentrations of sailors in the country. When downtown's exuberant period of military-based prosperity finally ended in the 1960s, so did the Hollywood's. In order to save money on salaries, the band, which had always been made-up of union musicians, was replaced by recorded music. The impressive stage scenery, which used to rotate several times over the course of a single show, was no longer changed. As ticket sales plummeted, less and less money went back into producing the Hollywood's shows or maintaining the building.⁵⁷

In the 1960s, the Hollywood faced another new threat: a cultural shift in attitudes about women and sex. The increasing explicitness of violence, language, sexuality and nudity in films had an allure for young people that could not be matched by the Hollywood's "cheeky" and outmoded stage show. Movie houses like the nearby Savoy had been competing for its predominantly male audience since the early 1950s with screenings of low-budget, "cheesecake" films starring strippers and pin-up models.⁵⁸ Signaling the looming end days for classic, live burlesque striptease, these relatively innocent clips spawned the first generation of XXX-rated movie houses in the 1960s. Many of history's once-treasured, old burlesque and motion picture palaces, the ones that weren't fated to be bulldozed into parking lots, were converted into porno theatres.



The Hollywood Theatre Company, early 1960s. Dee Ann Johnston, who began singing and dancing in the show in the early 1960s, curtsies on the catwalk while her father acts as Master of Ceremonies. Courtesy of the Johnston Family.

The appetites of the 1960s, informed by women's liberation, war, hippies, drugs, pornography and more, rendered classic burlesque obsolete. Depending on one's perspective, stripping was either oppressive of women, or just too tame.⁵⁹ Traditional burlesque strove to be naughty but its use of sexual innuendo could not compare with the real thing. Unlike those who produced films, Johnston was forced to abide by comparatively more rigid and antiquated local decency laws that only applied to live theatre. Among other things, the theatre was bound to its own strict policy of no "four-letter" words and to the City's obscenity laws against full nudity. A brief attempt to spice up the show with topless go-go dancing was quickly cut short by vice enforcers. Regardless of the obstacles, Johnston's stubborn business sense kept burlesque chugging along locally well beyond its years as a popular and financially viable form of mass entertainment.

The decision to close the Hollywood in 1970 was difficult but inevitable. In a 1969 *San Diego Union* newspaper article entitled, "Burlesque House Stripped of its Glory," Johnston claimed never to think about retiring from the theatre, but he openly lamented burlesque as a slowly dying art. Business was terrible, Frances was at home most of the time suffering from the arthritis she'd developed as a dancer, and Johnston was now in his seventies (though he still also ran the Palace Bar next door). Sadly, but not surprisingly, the Hollywood folded in less than three months, after its 11:00 p.m. show on February 9, 1970. The official word was that Johnston wanted to devote as much time as possible to his first and only grandchild, Robert Johnston, Jr. Other reasons surely included his advancing age, the death of burlesque, and pressure from the City of San Diego and developers who aimed to turn San Diego's "tenderloin district" into valuable commercial real estate.⁶⁰

Johnston did not slow down after the Hollywood closed. He kept the Palace Bar and continued holding court there with his cronies. When the City finally forced him out, he bid goodbye to his much-loved bar on F Street and took over a widely-reputed "dive," the Four Aces, at 1111 Broadway (now also gone). He renamed it the Palace Bar and ran it until the mid-1980s. The Horton Hotel (1888), which had housed the original Palace Buffet at ground level, was torn down in 1981.⁶¹

Johnston passed away at age ninety-three in 1991. He and Frances had been married for over sixty years and still lived in the house on Fort Stockton Drive which they had purchased during the highpoint of the Hollywood's success. During his lifetime, he had risen from the ranks of a poor, small-time showman to a wealthy and celebrated member of the local community. The charismatic young man who had come to California in 1921 on vacation from Canada became one of the best known and most celebrated burlesque theatre operators on the West Coast.

The Hollywood had allowed the Johnstons to live as upper-middle class San Diegans, to treat themselves to previously unaffordable luxuries, and to lead an active social life. In addition to running his businesses, owning racehorses, and promoting boxing matches, Johnston was a Mason, an Al Bahr Shriner, a member of the San Diego Rowing Club, and a generous contributor to many charitable causes, including his favorite, the Salvation Army. In his eighties, he continued to stay active and sang for "old timers" at convalescent homes. He always remained loyal to his birth roots and was honored by the Irish Congress of Southern California's "Irishman of the Year" title in 1989. At the age of ninety-one, he proudly rode in the San Diego St. Patrick's Day Parade.⁶²

A truly great man, Johnston mixed company with people from all walks of life, from California Governor Goodwin Knight, to comedy great Lou Costello, famous actors, sports celebrities, and San Diego's most downtrodden residents below Broadway. For a large part of the twentieth century, Johnston was the unofficial "mayor" of F Street and "king" of downtown. Photographs of him can still be found hanging at the Horton Grand Hotel, in the Blarney Stone Pub on Fifth Avenue (his main haunt later in life), and alongside other notables from San Diego's history at the Gaslamp Bookstore & Museum.

The Hollywood Theatre was at the center of downtown San Diego. It played a notable role in the city's social and cultural life from the early 1920s until it closed in 1970.

Johnston was the theatre's dearly loved and long-reigning patriarch. While a few other local entertainment establishments featured burlesque-influenced variety acts and productions on occasion, the Hollywood was recognized for decades as the city's only place exclusively dedicated to presenting classic American burlesque.



Hollywood Theater. Courtesy of the Johnston Family.

NOTES

1. Special thanks to Dee Ann Johnston and Robert Johnston Jr. for sharing their family story and photos. Thanks also to Robert Wright, volunteer at the San Diego Historical Society, who conducted the oral history interviews with Bob Johnston and others so many years ago.
2. *The Famous Hollywood Burlesque*, VHS, directed by Duke Goldstone (Continental Pictures, Inc., 1948; Something Weird Video, 1996). Alternately titled *Hollywood Burlesque*, the film showcases an entire Hollywood Theatre production with an introductory dedication that reads: "This picture is dedicated to the thousands of people all over the world, who have not had the opportunity of seeing big time burlesque as it is presented on the stage of the famous Hollywood Theatre."
3. The most famous of all strippers in the 1950s, Lili St. Cyr, actually learned her trade at the Hollywood in the late 1940s under the tutelage of Frances Johnston and Janne Cafarra. For a small number of photographs from her early years performing at the Hollywood, ca. 1947, and early 8 x 10 inch photographs autographed to her "strip teacher," Cafarra, see: San Diego Historical Society (SDHS), Booth Historical Photograph Archives, The Barbara Jean Burlesque Theatre Collection, C021.
4. Ken Cilch, Sr., interviewed by author, May 20, 2005. Long after its official dissolution, memories of the Stingaree continued to mark downtown as an area not to be visited by decent people. For decades to come, mothers would continue to warn their sons to stay away from the area below Broadway and its "dirty burlesque theatre."
5. "Theatre History in the Nineteenth Century," SDHS, <http://sandiegohistory.org/collections/theaters/theaters.htm> (accessed January 14, 2006). Louis' Opera House was located on the east side of Fifth between B and C Streets and was later renamed the Grand.
6. Bernard Sobel, *Burleycue* (New York: Farrar and Rhinehart, 1931), 8. Thompson and her company (also known as the English Blondes, the British Blondes, and by similar variations in title over the years) are frequently credited by historians for inspiring the emergence of the classic American burlesque show. These women cross-dressed, exposed their shapely legs with tights, and did bawdy

impersonations of the upper-classes and ethnic stereotypes. Thompson's irreverent treatment of *Ixion, or Man at the Wheel* by F. C. Burnand was described by Sobel as "a framework for elaborate costumes, song, dances, local allusions, sarcastic comment, imitations of swell dandies and German benders."

7. *San Diego Union*, January 15, 1889, 3. Unfortunately, the world-famous Lydia Thompson, who was actually known throughout Europe for her serious acting abilities, remained in Los Angeles and did not appear with the company at Louis' the first night due to a "severe attack of nervous prostration, brought on by overwork." No follow up was given as to whether the great burlesque "legend" was able to rejoin the show the next night.

8. *San Diego Union*, October 27, 1886, 3:1.

9. *San Diego Union*, June 29, June 30, 1897, 5.

10. The cootch was a prototype of today's Middle Eastern belly dance. A dancer named Little Egypt premiered the "muscle dance" on the midway at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. As the first "exotic dance," it was eventually succeeded by the even more suggestively sexual shimmy, and then the striptease. See Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) for an in-depth history of the rise of the girl show attraction.

11. Jim McVicar, "Palaces of the Past: What Ghosts Lurk Backstage?" *San Diego Union*, November 9, 1969, G-2. A bulletin for a show at the Fisher Opera House starring the "charming, little comedienne, singer, and dancer" Katie Putnam appeared in the *San Diego Union* on June 29, 1897 (the same issue that contained the initial report on Omene and a posting for her performance at Louis'). During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Putnam was a well-traveled "soubrette" who led her famed troupe to rural opera houses, honkytonks, vaudeville and other variety theatres across the United States and Canada. She mixed company with and exhibited the same spirit as famed burlesque pioneer Pauline Markham, who left the British Blondes to travel with her own company.

12. Ralph W. Hastings, "The Play Was The Thing In Old San Diego Theaters," *San Diego Union*, June 25, 1967, G-1. The tab show shares a close relationship with burlesque, and both were largely the domain of the working class. Derived from the word "tabloid," tab shows were parodies of popular musical comedies, cut down to a length of about an hour. In early burlesque shows as well, the middle act always featured a parody (or "travesty") of a well-known story. By the twenties, the term "tab show" was sometimes used as a euphemism for burlesque in order to avoid the word's negative, low-brow connotations.

13. "Theatre History in the Nineteenth Century," SDHS, <http://sandiegohistory.org/collections/theaters/theaters.htm> (accessed January 14, 2006). In various years up to 1924, the theater was known as the Lyceum (1913 & 1919), the Gaeity (1914 & 1915), Little (1914), and Ballein's (1915). The name "Liberty" was meant to evoke the patriotism of World War I-era musicals. See also the many articles by Welton Jones on the history of theatre in San Diego in the *San Diego Union Tribune*. He wrote several on the Hollywood and his friend Bob Johnston including "Stripping Away the Veil of History," *San Diego Union Tribune*, October 16, 1994, E-2.

14. Jim McVicar, "Burlesque House Stripped Of Its Glory," *San Diego Union*, November 9, 1969, G-2. There are many discrepancies between various sources over the precise year, between 1921 and 1924, that the Liberty officially became a burlesque house. This situation also pertains to when its name was changed to The Hollywood, whether it was before or after it closed temporarily in 1935-36. Since City Directory listings, printed advertisements, newspaper and oral accounts contradict one another over these non-crucial dates, only approximate ranges will be provided in the text in these instances.

15. Micheal Austin, "Harlem of the West: The Douglas Hotel and Creole Palace Nite Club," (master's thesis, University of San Diego, 1994).

16. Katherine Flores (aka "Zena Ray"), interviewed by author, July-August 2005.

17. Joan M. Vale, "The Johnston Follies: A biographical sketch of Robert Johnston," SDHS Manuscript Collection, 3-5. This very helpful article provides many more details on the lives of Robert and Frances Johnston based on numerous personal interviews as well as historical research.

18. Vale, "The Johnston Follies: A biographical sketch of Robert Johnston," 5, 20. As a teen in Calgary, because Johnston's accent was not British, people mistook him for Scottish. The nickname stuck, even though he was actually Irish.

19. A "nickel bar" was a place that sold near-beer and sandwiches for 5 cents during Prohibition.

20. Vale, "The Johnston Follies: A biographical sketch of Robert Johnston," 8.
21. There are two main distinctions between vaudeville and burlesque: 1) vaudeville was meant to be "clean" so that women and children could enjoy attending the theatre, whereas burlesque was rather coarse and targeted primarily at adult males; 2) vaudeville featured individual, consecutively running variety acts, while burlesque had a unified company that carried the show throughout most of the program. Johnston, who was a vaudeville performer since childhood, inflected a tinge of vaudeville into the Hollywood's "big time" burlesque stage shows with the semi-regular inclusion of variety acts.
22. Bob Johnston, interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, May 17, 1980, transcript, 8. Orchestra seats cost twenty-five cents while the balcony went for 10 cents each. Johnston also exported floorshows to Tijuana, Mexico during his early years at the Liberty. The critical flaw in his operation was that his girls had to be back in the country by six o'clock in the evening or risk getting in trouble at the border. Not surprisingly, the enterprise did not last very long.
23. Jim McVicar, "Palaces of the Past: What Ghosts Lurk Backstage?" *San Diego Union*, November 9, 1969, G-2. McVicar stated that when the Depression came, vaudeville practically disappeared in San Diego.
24. Johnston, interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, May 17, 1980, transcript, 6.
25. Dee Ann Johnston and Robert Johnston, Jr., interviewed by author, March 21 and April 4, 2005. Frances Johnston was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1905 to a Russian immigrant family of former circus performers. They moved to Los Angeles when she was a young child. She began her show business career at age 14, touring in a hundred-piece saxophone orchestra with famous female impersonator, vaudevillian, and silent film star, Julian Eltinge.
26. Cilch, Sr., interviewed by author, May 20, 2005; Johnston and Johnston, Jr., interviewed by author, March 21 and April 4, 2005; Flores, interviewed by the author, January 15, 2006. Occasionally, Johnston's goodwill paid him back, as it did in the 1940s when he took in "Shanty," a mysterious man in his fifties or sixties with a cowboy hat and dusty overalls. Shanty proved to be an excellent set designer and builder. He stayed gainfully employed at the theatre for "years and years," creating some of its most artistic stage scenery during the 1940s "golden years." Unfortunately, not much is known about him, including his real name, although he is remembered by Katherine Flores as "the love of (her) life," for the innocent and unrequited crush that she and the other young women in the chorus all shared.
27. Richard W. Amero, "San Diego Invites the World to Balboa Park a Second Time," *The Journal of San Diego History* 31, no. 4 (1985): 261-280.
28. Holly Knox, *Sally Rand: From Films to Fans* (Bend, OR: Maverick Publications, 1988), 24.
29. Dixie Evans, The Exotic World Burlesque Museum, Helendale, CA (closed). This story is a regular part of the guided tour of the Exotic World Museum given by Dixie Evans (the "Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque"), the museum's curator and founder.
30. "Sally Rand Due by Plane at 10 A.M.," *San Diego Union*, April 9, 1936, 1-2. Rand's appearance at the Exposition endeared her to the hearts of local San Diegans. She was enthusiastically welcomed back to the city on at least two other occasions, performing at the Orpheum Theatre (located at Fifth and B) both in 1942 and 1945. In a later article ("Sally Rand Packs Orpheum," *San Diego Union*, August 5, 1942, 2), the *Union* referred to Rand's traveling show as "a vaudeville program of real merit" with soft-toe dancers, acrobats, singers, ten different scenes, and a line of thirty girls. The vaudeville tag meant that the show was considered appropriate for women and children even though Rand, probably wearing a body stocking, had the appearance of being completely naked behind her ostrich fans and bubble.
31. Derek Danziger, "The Balboa Theatre – Downtown's Hidden Treasure," *Gaslamp Quarter Connection* (February-March 2005), 5.
32. Joe Kneffler, "San Diego Burlesque," *San Diego Magazine* (June-July 1952).
33. Johnston, interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, May 17, 1980, transcript, 6.
34. SDHS, Booth Historical Photograph Archives, Barbara Jean Theatre Collection, #84:14825. In 1943, a crowd of officers and sailors gather beneath the Hollywood's marquee, which reads "BIG GIRL REVUE" at the top.
35. Johnston and Johnston, Jr., interviewed by author, March 21 and April 4, 2005.

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36. Johnston and Johnston, Jr., interviewed by author, March 21 and April 4, 2005. Dee Ann appeared in a small handful of movies including "Gypsy," starring Natalie Wood as burlesque legend Gypsy Rose Lee, and went on to be an active leader in professional musical theatre in San Diego.
37. In Duke Goldstone's motion picture, Torry is credited as "Legrand Torry," but he was known by most as "Lee." In various sources, in addition to "Torry," the spelling of his last name is also given as "Torey" and "Torrey." Neil Morgan, *San Diego Evening Tribune Area News*, photocopy, n.d. (ca. 1970). A short news item announcing the Hollywood's plans to close within the week lists Torrey, after thirty years, as one of its remaining employees.
38. Big "picture" extravaganza numbers opened and closed burlesque shows. They incorporated the entire company, standing (and sometimes singing) on risers in a semi-circle configuration, while the house singer sang the theme song and chorus line and various individuals did brief dance solos at the front of the stage. See *The Famous Hollywood Burlesque* (1948) for a typical production that provides excellent examples of the show's various traditional burlesque elements, including picture numbers.
39. Johnston's favorite part of the show was not the dancing or the stripping. He was partial to his beloved slapstick "baggy pants" comedians: Claude "Say No More Joe" Mathis, Slats Taylor, Eddie Ware, Eddie Lyle, and Bozo Lord. Lord worked for Johnston at the Liberty as early as the 1920s. Easily identified in historic photographs by his trademark funny round eye-glasses and short necktie, Lord was an honored senior member of the cast far into the 1950s. Eddie Ware, who was the last of the great comics to depart from the show in the late 1960s, had been there for almost a quarter century. "Say No More Joe," otherwise known as Claude Mathis, was a "top banana" (headlining comedian) at the theatre during its heydays and later years. Mathis had all the characteristics of a classic burlesque comedian: quick jokes, strange whistles, baggy pants, and an upturned hat brim. "Say No More Joe" was apparently even known among local high school boys, according to fan Gus Stevens, who wrote, "In those days, a fellow could get a big laugh at any football game by calling out from the stands, 'Say No More!' All of us girl-less swingers knew what he meant." Stevens was also a classmate of Claudette, Mathis' teenage daughter, who at the time was considered a "celebrity" by her peers because she would occasionally perform bit parts with her father at the Hollywood. Gus Stevens, "New Entertainment Sounds Like the Old," May 16, 1975, SDHS Subject Files, Theatres.
40. *The San Diego Reader*, March 7, 1996, letter by Laurence Gross, 39. In burlesque jargon, a "black-out" is when the lights go out immediately following the comic's punch line. This allows the actors to exit the stage for the next act (usually a strip).
41. In *The Famous Hollywood Burlesque*. Eddie Ware, in his exchanges with straight man Wenn Hitt and clownish Bob Ross, speaks so quickly it is difficult for the modern listener to even keep up, *The San Diego Reader*, March 7, 1996, letter by Laurence Gross, 39.
42. *The Famous Hollywood Burlesque*; Cilch, Sr., interviewed by author, May 20, 2005.
43. Johnston and Johnston, Jr., interviewed by author, March 21 and April 4, 2005. The female portion of the company was frequently referred to in advertising as the "Hollywood Follies" or "Glamourettes," a name concocted by Frances Johnston, who also came up with the handle for the Hollywood's bowling team: "The Bobettes."
44. Janne Kane (aka Jan "Irish" Cafara), interviewed by Robert G. Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, October 31, 1994, transcript, 10-12.
45. "Straight men," sophisticated and dapperly-dressed comedians, were the comic foils to their counterparts, the clownish baggy pants comedians.
46. Kane, interviewed by Robert G. Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, October 31, 1994, transcript, 21.
47. Kneffler, "San Diego Burlesque." Kneffler speculated in 1952 that more than half of the Hollywood chorus line at that time were married to servicemen.
48. Flores, interviewed by author, July-August 2005.
49. Arthur Golden, "Death of Burlesque Queen Rings Curtain Down On An Era," *San Diego Union*, February 3, 1981, B-1, 5.
50. Golden, "Death of Burlesque Queen Rings Curtain Down On An Era," B-1. Johnston further revealed that Roberts was one of his favorite performers at the Hollywood.
51. *The San Diego Reader*, March 7, 1996, letter by Laurence Gross, 39; Golden, "Death of Burlesque Queen Rings Curtain Down On An Era," B-1. After the theatre closed, Roberts continued to entertain

into her late forties. She was still stripping at the Hollywood at its final show in 1970. During the Hollywood's brief resurrection as the Off Broadway, a "legit" professional repertory theatre, she returned there to play a role in the musical *Gypsy*. She also performed for the USO; even though she now kept her clothes on during her act, the audience still loved her demure performance. Roberts passed away relatively young, around fifty, having suffered for several years from a genetically inherited kidney disease. News of her death struck a sad note with many local people; it was a reminder that San Diego's golden era of burlesque was definitely over. See also Beth Mohr, "Recipients Tell Value Of Donor Program," *San Diego Union* (undated photocopy). Over the course of her illness, Roberts received two kidney transplants and was so grateful that she became one of the first volunteers to sign the newly implemented organ donation card on the back of the California driver's license.

52. Kansas City Kitty went by the name "June" offstage. Her legal married name at the time was Vivian Poston.

53. Barbara Jean started at the Hollywood in 1950 when she was nineteen years old, and left about 1963. Barbara Jean Dishong (aka Barbara Jean), interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, October 23, 1981, transcript, 16. Barbara Jean was one of the rare cases in burlesque of a woman using her real name to perform under. Oft married, she is best known simply as "Barbara Jean." See photographs from her personal collection in the Barbara Jean Burlesque Theatre Collection, SDHS, Booth Historical Photograph Archives.

54. Dishong, interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, October 23, 1981, transcript, 29; Flores, interviewed by author, January 15, 2006. A chorus girl in the 1930s and early 1940s, Ruby Miller was the costume mistress at the Hollywood for years after. Even more intriguing, she was a songwriter who composed some of the Hollywood's trademark songs, including one of Johnston's favorites, "You Are Not Free."

55. Dishong, interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, October 23, 1981, transcript, 5-7, 23.

56. Dishong, interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, October 23, 1981, transcript, 12-13, 26.

57. McVicar, "Burlesque House Stripped of Its Glory."

58. *San Diego Union*, February 1, 1958, A-7.

59. The author has found no evidence to suggest that the Hollywood oppressed its female company members. In fact, many performers' recollections seem to suggest that the Hollywood liberated them from financial dependency, conventional roles as wives and mothers, and the ordinariness of everyday life.

60. "The Hollywood Theatre Takes Off Into History," *San Diego Union*, February 9, 1970, 8-6; Welton Jones, "Lyceum Needs A Friend," *San Diego Union*, December 10, 1978, E-1. For years in advance of building Horton Plaza shopping center, city officials were warning property owners that most of the old buildings would be condemned and torn down for future "urban renewal" projects. As a result, many owners stopped caring, ceased making improvements, and watched their property values plummet as the mall failed to materialize and the physical condition of the area, never very respectable, deteriorated rapidly.

61. Architect Wayne Donaldson salvaged parts from both the Horton and the Kahle Saddlery hotels to form the new Horton Grand Hotel, completed in 1986. In honor of Johnston, the Horton Grand Hotel still calls its lounge The Palace Bar and displays several pictures from Johnston's days as a racehorse enthusiast and unofficial mayor of F Street. The new décor, however, is Victorian formal and does not reflect in the least the distinctive, nostalgic dive-bar quality of the former sports bar.

62. Johnston, interviewed by Robert Wright, SDHS Oral History Program, May 17, 1980, transcript, 23. Johnston's mother's side of the family had been devoted members of the Salvation Army back in Ireland, but all perished on the ship *The Empress of Ireland*, which sunk (shortly after the *Titanic*) in 1914 en route to Canada. There were a large number of Salvation Army members on board, on their way to attend an official gathering; Leigh Fenly, "Dim The Lights, The Show is About To Begin," *San Diego Union*, February 19, 1978, B-6; Johnston and Johnston Jr., interviewed by author, July 15, 2005.