



Episode 3, 2012: Hollywood Sign

Chuck Anhein: I'm Chuck Anhein. I live in Glendale, California. Back in 1978, my three sons and I hiked our way up to the Hollywood sign. I was an engineer. I was always fascinated by the fact that they could build something like that. I walked down the hill a little bit, there was some trash or debris in the ravine there. I saw this metal piece about two feet long laying there in the dirt. I grabbed it and pulled it up, and it came up quite easily, but it was six feet tall, not two feet. And that's when it all hit me. I realized this could be one of a kind. I'm wondering: do I really have a piece of the original Hollywood sign here?

Eduardo: I'm Eduardo Pagan and I've long been fascinated with Los Angeles and spent quite a bit of time researching and writing about the city's social history. There's probably nothing more distinctive than that Hollywood sign. Overlooking the American film industry, this L.A. fixture has long symbolized the glamour and fame that entices millions to Hollywood. Having an original piece would be very cool indeed. Chuck tells me that when he first hiked up there, the sign was not in the pristine condition that it's in today.

Chuck: Back in 1978, it was in terrible disarray. It was falling apart.

Eduardo: You're absolutely right. That is an eyesore.

Chuck: The second letter, the "O", the top had blown off, and then it looked like a "U". Surprisingly there was very little debris on the ground.

Eduardo: But he did find something, more than 100 feet beyond the letter "D".

Chuck: And laying in the dirt there was this piece of metal.

Eduardo: This is a significant distance away from the sign itself.

Chuck: Yes. I was looking for a smaller piece, quite honestly. It's the only piece I could find up there.

Eduardo: Ok.

Chuck: About two months after we were up there, the sign was demolished and the new sign was built, which means that all those letters in the original sign, now the whole thing is gone.

Eduardo: So this may be a one of a kind piece then.

Chuck: That's what I'm thinking.

Eduardo: Let me play devil's advocate for just a moment. How do you know this isn't just some random piece of junk that was just dumped up there?

Chuck: The short answer is I don't.

Eduardo: Ok.

Chuck: Well, I've thought about that for 34 years and if that's the case, I'll probably let go of it.

Eduardo: Okay. If this were a piece from the face of one of the letters, I would expect it to be flat and thin. I suppose this could be part of the sign's scaffolding.

But there are these obvious sockets. There's threading in there. There certainly look like there could've been light bulbs that were screwed in here at one time.

But I really don't see any kind of serial number or any other kind of machining marks that I might be able to look up to help me figure out who made this thing and for what. The Hollywood sign behind me originally read "Hollywood Land". That sign first went up in 1923. Los Angeles was a boomtown, and real estate was at a premium.

Hollywood is synonymous with the movie industry, but it hadn't always been that way. It was founded in 1887 as a refuge from the sin and vice of Los Angeles.

City ordinances outlawed saloons and gambling houses, pool halls, camping, and even movie theaters. But by the early 1920s real estate developers saw mountains of money to be made in Hollywood's open hills. Harry Chandler, the publisher of the Los Angeles Times, backed one of these developments, turning a virgin subsection into an exclusive community called "Hollywoodland".

Now the whole idea for the sign came from one of his marketing people, John Roche. As he drew a sketch of the Hollywoodland development, almost absentmindedly he simply wrote the words "Hollywoodland" on the hills. Now when Chandler saw this, he loved the idea, wanted to see if in fact it was possible to put the big letters of "Hollywoodland" up on the hills. It was possible, but cost \$21,000, more than a quarter of a million today, to raise thirteen 50-foot-tall letters above the hillside. And, this is interesting, to ensure it's visible at all hours, Chandler orders the 13 letters be illuminated every night by 4,000 twenty watt light bulbs. Is Chuck's piece a section of this lighting?

So, let's see what we've got here. This is an image from 1923 when the "D" just went up. The face of each letter is assembled from flat sheets of roofing tin, three feet long and nine feet tall. I see holes that were punched in the tin to allow wind to pass through, but I don't see any sections that look like regularly spaced light sockets.

I'm going to check the back of the sign as well, but these pipes are much smaller than this very unique piece of metal, and there's certainly nothing that looks like they've got light sockets that are planted into them. I was feeling pretty confident that I had a piece of the sign's lighting rig.

I'm on my way to the actual Hollywood sign. I've been told to come prepared for an arduous 30-minute hike up a steep incline. Almost since its creation, the public's fascination with the sign has made it a magnet for sightseers, vandals, and for occasional tragedy. In 1932, a young actress, Peg Entwistle, reportedly leapt to her death from the sign. Today, the sign is protected by a multi-camera CCTV surveillance system, microwave triggered motion detectors and a bilingual audio warning system. This is a high security area, and it's restricted access. So I'm going to meet Chris Baumgart. Chris is the Chairman of the sign's Board of Trustees. I want to run Chuck's story by him.

Chris: Welcome to the security cage for the Hollywood sign. There you go: Hollywood.

Eduardo: This is an amazing view.

Chris: Basically, if you look where I'm pointing, that was Hollywoodland, those were the lots they were trying to sell.

Eduardo: That is awfully steep land over there. I just can't imagine...

Chris: How they got up here?

Eduardo: Yeah, how they got that up, how they built it in...

Chris: There was no road up here, so what they had to do was come up this razorback, the hard way, with laborers and carry everything up.

Eduardo: For sixty days, mule teams lug telephone poles up the hillside, and mostly Mexican workers labored on the steep terrain.

Eduardo: Can we actually get down by the sign?

Chris: Let me take you down to the "H".

Eduardo: How likely is it that old pieces would have been lying about?

Chris: Oh, absolutely possible.

Eduardo: Chris explains that the sign was only built to last about a year, and twenty three years later, it was little more than an eyesore.

Chris: 1949 was a critical moment in the sign's life. The residents were screaming "Hey city, it's just trash, it's a real estate billboard, it's all done and over with long ago. Get it off the hill."

Eduardo: But Chris says that, like the sign itself, by the late 1940s the film industry was also in decline. Movies were facing stiff competition from the upstart TV business. With film jobs disappearing; the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce saw a way for the sign to help reassure the local film industry.

Chris: The sign served its job selling real estate; now let's have it being a beacon of the entertainment industry. They dropped off the last four letters, L-A-N-D. So now it says Hollywood, and the message was, "Hey film industry, your jobs are safe, we love you. Please don't leave."

Eduardo: If the sign was fixed in 1949, could Chuck really have found a piece of the original almost 30 years later? Chris says it's possible, because the '49 work was just a repair, not a reconstruction, and old and new debris littered the site.

Chris: The sign continued to suffer from weather, earthquake, whatever, and so you get into 1960, it's falling apart. It wasn't until 1978 when they said, "Look, just tear it down, start over again, do it right, and you won't have to be back here every year trying to fix it."

Well, if we're going to replace it, that's going to be a lot of money, how are we going to do that? So, Hugh Heffner stepped in and said, "Party, at the Playboy mansion!"

Eduardo: Heff threw a fundraising party, auctioning off each letter for nearly \$28,000.

Chris: So you had a group of celebrities who went in there and said, "I'll buy," in essence, "a letter."

Eduardo: Gene Autry sponsored the second "L", Andy Williams took the "W", rocker Alice Cooper dedicated the first "O" in "WOOD" to Groucho Marx, and Heff reserved the "Y" for himself. In August 1978, the sign was torn down and rebuilt from scratch. Chris suggests that the reason I couldn't see any lighting rig in construction photos of the first sign, might be because lights were among the last pieces added.

Chris: They'd gotten to the point where the "L" and the "A" in "Hollywoodland" was just getting completed, and the workers started carrying up pieces to go along the outside perimeter of each letter. These would later flash Holly-Wood-Land.

Eduardo: If I show this to you, do you think you'd be able to take a look at it, and tell me one way or the other whether it's legitimate or not?

Chris: Oh, absolutely. And certain pieces of the sign, it's real clear whether it was from the 1923 construction or not.

Eduardo: Chris, this was the piece of artifact that I was telling you about.

Chris: This is very intriguing. I think I have something that'll help complete the circle for you.

Eduardo: Okay, great.

Chris: Hang on one minute.

Eduardo: Okay.

Well, Chuck, I gotta tell you, it has been one fascinating journey.

I tell him how I struggled to find photos showing anything like his piece of metal.

There is just really nothing that matches up with this particular artifact no matter where you looked on it.

Chuck: I see. I appreciate the try.

Eduardo: But, I found something else that I think you will find interesting.

Eduardo: That looks very familiar.

Chris: Well, Eduardo, these are not quite as pretty as yours, but these are authenticated pieces of the front of the original 1923 Hollywood sign. What do you think? These light sockets were eight inches apart. Guess how long these are? Eight inches.

Eduardo: Eight inches, right. You know what, I think we've got a match.

Chris: I think you do. So, I would say what you have here is a piece of the truly original 1923 Hollywood sign.

Chuck: All these years and my suspicions confirmed.

Eduardo: So, are you glad you carried it down the hill?

Chuck: Oh, absolutely. This is a very personal thing to me, and, and this is great, this is great.