

Historic Hemet Theatre

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HEMET'S HISTORIC THEATRE GETS NEW LIFE AS A FOUNDATION

Built in 1921 by William Martin, the movie house in the center of Hemet's downtown district is one of the oldest in the nation. For five decades, the venue was a cultural center of the community, bringing sights and sounds from around the world to this small town. Long before television and the internet exploded our world view, movie houses were a very popular source of entertainment and education.

The Hemet Theatre was operated by William Martin and then by his son, Harold. The Martin Theatre was well known and hosted a number of prestigious events, including a pre-release screening of "Gone With the Wind," attended by several members of the cast. Back in the 1920's and 30's, this valley was a Hollywood resort destination featuring the glamorous Gilman Hot Springs. But times changed and the Martin Family closed the theatre in the 1980's. In 2004, a couple of film buffs, David Bernal and Emerson Bixby purchased the theatre, but struggled to revive the business. Then in 2010, the storefronts next door burned to the ground and although there was no structural damage to the building, the partners were never able to reopen the theatre.

These days old movie houses are closing up and falling down all across the country, their downtown districts struggling for relevance in today's fast-paced society. Is it possible that an old vintage movie house can thrive in today's world? Here in Hemet, there is a dedicated group of volunteers convinced that Martin's old theatre can once again become a vibrant center of Hemet's Downtown District. And this month the Historic Hemet Theatre Foundation has taken a giant step forward in that effort with the purchase of the 97-year-old venue.

Since 2013, the Foundation has leased the venue, hosting concerts, movies and community events. Steadily, the crowds have grown until the point where now the concerts are full and the impact on the community is clear -- this old vintage movie house has something very powerful to offer this valley.

The cultural impact includes a growing range of performances and dozens of fundraisers and educational programs hosted by local nonprofit organizations. The growing number of out-of-town patrons dramatizes the impact the theatre has had on the economic revitalization of Hemet's Downtown District. All this while preserving a charming slice of valley history, soon to include a Museum of Early Film, featuring an assortment of vintage memorabilia and equipment in the upper level of the facility.

To-date, the Foundation has hosted over 500 events with over 35,000 patrons. After some repair and remodel work, the impact will be even greater. Renovation plans include a "face-lift" for the charming Art Deco interior. The lobby will be enhanced with a larger concession area and handicap accessible bathrooms. The stage area will be enlarged, allowing for a wider range of performances. And the facade will be renovated to include a pointed marquee similar to the one that the theatre had in the 1950's.

A fundraising campaign has begun to cover the repairs and renovations scheduled for the next four years, leading up to the 100th birthday of the building. "Century Club" donors will have their names engraved on a plaque that will forever celebrate the community's support for this treasured landmark. Information on the "Century Club" and all theatre events is available at www.HistoricHemetTheatre.com or by calling the ticket office, (951) 658-5950.