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BACK IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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The Cinema Heritage Project is presenting a free screening of "The Children's Hour" at 7 p.m. today at Shadow Ranch Park, 22633 Vanowen St., West Hills.



Tina Burch/Staff Photographer
Cinema Heritage Project volunteers Ron Sobel, left, and Dan Brin take pride in the role this house in Shadow Ranch Park in West Hills played in the filming of "The Children's Hour."

Valley ready for its close-up as site of early film classics

BY ANGIE VALENCIA-MARTINEZ
Staff Writer

WEST HILLS

In the early 1960s, Shadow Ranch was a hotbed of scandal, salacious lies and rumors of lesbianism. On the big screen, that is.

The San Fernando Valley site emerged as one of the stars at the heart of "The Children's Hour," the adult-theme movie featuring Audrey Hepburn and Shirley MacLaine in which a troublemaking student at a girls' school accuses two teachers of being lesbians.

And it is just one of dozens of Valley locations that have become famous — or infamous — in hundreds of films over the years.

Now, a group of volunteers has formed the Cinema Heritage Project, hoping to highlight and preserve the Valley's film legacy.

"Our purpose is to reconnect the residents of the area with our rich heritage as a backdrop for America's great movies," said Dan Brin, the group's chairman. "This is our history. We want to help others connect with history."

In the early days of filming, studios bought large tracts of undeveloped land in the region for shoot locations — much of it in the Valley.

"They built ranches, extra lots in wide-open spaces so they can do more outdoor type of shooting where they can have a railroad, horses and cattle, lakes and forests," said Jonathan Kuntz, a Porter Ranch resident who teaches Hollywood history at UCLA.

"Since the birth of Hollywood, particularly as we moved into the sound era, you see pieces of the Valley in 99 percent of classic Hollywood movies. Almost all of the Westerns were shot here."

Kuntz said the Valley was popular with location scouts because of its proximity to Hollywood, good weather and vast open space.

The grass-roots Cinema Heritage Project — with volunteers from West Hills and Canoga Park — is hoping to highlight that history with on-location screenings of some of the films shot in the Valley.

"We're showing films on location and contacting casts and crews and other key people to come and talk about the making of the film," said Barry Seybert, a West Hills resident who works in the film industry and is a group volunteer.

The group's first showing is today, but it hopes to hold future events at Ahmanson Ranch in the Simi Hills in Ventura County and Iverson Ranch nestled among the rocky cliffs and hills of Chatsworth.

Scenes in "Gone with the Wind" were filmed at Ahmanson, which was then known as Lasky Mesa. Movie producer Jesse Lasky first bought the 4,000-acre ranch, noted for being the film location for "The Thundering Herd" and "They Died with Their Boots On."

Iverson Ranch is among one of the most prominent film locations, featured in Roy Rogers and John Wayne movies. Brin said the group hopes to hold an Iverson Ranch event early next year that could include a barbecue and country-western dancing.

Steve MacDonald, president of FilmL.A. Inc., a private, non-profit agency that oversees on-location productions, said the Valley drew film producers because its open space could be transformed to look like just about anywhere.

"Legend has it that more than 2,000 films and countless early TV episodes were shot at the Iverson Ranch near the Santa Susana Pass," MacDonald said. "The Valley has been used for countless Westerns."

The Cinema Heritage Project also hopes to screen a selection of films by European silent-film star Francis Lederer during a two-day event at Hidden Chateau and Gardens in West Hills — now used for garden parties and weddings.

Lederer and his wife, Marion, built the mission-style structure in 1934 as a stable for their horses. The building was designated a

historic monument by the Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission in 1974.

Cinema Heritage Project organizers said they hope the classic screenings will highlight another side of Hollywood.

"It's nice to know about the stars from the past instead of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton," said Ron Sobel of West Hills, a project member. "We want to introduce people to movie stars from 25 to 30 years ago who are not at the forefront today."

"A lot of young people don't know who Audrey Hepburn was."



Shirley MacLaine, James Garner and Audrey Hepburn in the 1961 MGM film "The Children's Hour"

Valley shoots

Some notable movies filmed in the San Fernando Valley:

- "Wee Willie Winkie," 1937, Iverson Ranch in Chatsworth.
- "Stagecoach," 1939, Iverson Ranch in Chatsworth.
- "Gone with the Wind," 1939, Ahmanson Ranch (then known as Lasky Mesa).
- "The Birth of a Nation," 1915, near Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale.
- "It's a Wonderful Life," 1946, at the RKO Encino Ranch, near what is now Balboa Park.
- "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," 1939, at RKO Ranch in Encino.

SOURCES: Cinema Heritage Project and FilmL.A. Inc.

Gregg Miller/Staff Artist