

History of Culver City and the MGM Studios

Culver City History - Section 11: 10202 W. Washington (Ince's first)



Culver City With Old Studios Labeled

Thomas Ince was a famous filmmaker when Culver spied him making one of his westerns on Ballona Creek. It was well before "talkies," but the intrigue was there as he watched Ince direct painted Indians in canoes on the waterway. Culver convinced Ince to move his Inceville Studios from the beach (now Sunset and Pacific Coast Highway) to Washington Boulevard, above. The first studio began with the 1915 Colonnade, the ceremonial entrance to **Ince/Triangle Studios** (shown below). The principals were **Thomas Ince, D.W. Griffith** and **Mack Sennett**. By 1918, however, **Samuel Goldwyn** took over the lot and it became **Goldwyn Studios**, where **Howard Dietz** created the **Leo the Lion** logo.



Ince/Triangle Studios

The **Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer** merger took place in 1924, the same year Columbia Pictures was born in Hollywood. MGM rapidly grew to six working studio lots, more than 180 acres by the end of the 1930s, under the management of Russian immigrant Louis B. Mayer. The main lot was like a city within a city, with its own police and fire departments, telegraph and post office, water tower and well, art department, laboratory, and backlot amenities like the mill, electrical, paint and lock shops, as well as the needed wardrobe, make-up, property, lighting and camera departments, etc. By the late 1920s, the glass stages gave way to sound stages (28 during MGM's tenure), with Stage #15 as the largest in the world, another with a tank for underwater scenes and stages with a proscenium arch. Mrs. Mayer, the studio chief's wife taught the commissary chef how to make chicken and matzoh ball soup to her husband's taste. A new commissary was built in the 1930s to keep productivity high on the lot.

Louis B. Mayer was close to his genius head of production, **Irving Thalberg**, who was married to actress **Norma Shearer**. The actress's brother, **Doug Shearer** headed MGM's Sound Department. MGM released 50 films a year and the payroll reached 5,000. MGM was famous for its musicals. Mayer had his child stars (like **Elizabeth Taylor, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland** and **Roddy McDowell**) schooled on the lot. Adoring locals waited for autographs at the East Gate of the studio boasting "more stars than there are in the heavens." The new Administration Building, dedicated in 1938, was named for Irving Thalberg, who died in 1936. The Russian born Mayer grew the studio, but lost power to production chief **Dore Schary** in 1951. MGM added TV, but declined in the 1960s.



The Crawford Building was used as a schoolhouse at MGM

The Culver City Council named two Landmark structures on the studio lot, the Colonnade and the Thalberg buildings. There are also 13 structures which have been given Significant status (including the Crawford Building above, which was first used as Louis B. Mayer's dining room. The Culver City Municipal Code protects the outside of these structures.



MGM Lot #1 in the 1920s

Kirk Kerkorian bought the studio in the 1970s. **James Aubrey**, the new president, stripped the studio, selling off its glorious past in an auction that took place where the yellow brick road had been travelled. The backlots were next. Lot #2, where Mickey Rooney lived on Andy Hardy Street, Gene Kelly danced in *Singin' in the Rain*, and with facades from *National Velvet*, *Mrs. Miniver*, *Gigi* etc. was history. On Jefferson, Lot #3 was sold for housing, while the monkey farm (where the animals were kept), and the plant nursery across the street became commercial property along with the antique car lot, formerly Walter Cameron's Ben Hur Stables, now Raintree Shopping Center.



MGM Lot #2

MGM transitioned into **MGM/UA** in the 1980s, and by 1986, **Turner Broadcasting** bought UA and the film library, and then the remaining, and main lot became **Lorimar Pictures**. MGM moved across the street to the **Filmland** building, where they remained until their 1992 move to Santa Monica.

On January 1, 1990, the studio was purchased by **Sony**, and it became **Columbia Pictures**, making a major commitment to the community and to renovate the Culver City property. The studio went through a three-year approval process for their Comprehensive Plan, while it transitioned into the 45-acre state-of-the-art **Sony Pictures Studios** and the global headquarters of Sony Pictures Entertainment (SPE). SPE entered into a long-term lease for the Filmland Building (now **Sony Pictures Plaza**) when MGM left. Sony Pictures has reproduced the oval office for *An American President*, created *Air Force One*, *Men in Black*,

Stuart Little, and offers Sony Pictures Classics. This historic lot became the home of Jeopardy!, Wheel of Fortune, and continues to produce entertainment with cutting edge technology.



Walter Cameron's Ben Hur Stables, which later became an MGM back lot, and then Raintree Shopping Center

<http://www.culvercity.org/cityinfo/history/10202.html>