

Harvey Wilcox

Born: Harvey Henderson Wilcox

He envisioned a model city; not a city of models.

1832 (Monroe County NY) – Mar 19, 1891 (Los Angeles CA)

IN 1883, IN CALIFORNIA'S Cahuenga Valley, former Kansas real-estate developer Harvey Wilcox purchased 160 acres of land for \$24,000.

The cost was considered high for undeveloped property. But Wilcox was well-heeled and besides, his wife Ida, thirty years his junior, had fallen in love with the beautiful rolling hills, especially the free-growing stands of bright English holly that everywhere graced the landscape.

It was Harvey's intention to produce apricots and figs on the land, so he subdivided the land into orchards, figuring the fruit trees would thrive in the 300-plus days of yearly California sunshine.

The sun did shine for the requisite number of days each year, maybe even more, but the topsoil was so thin and nutrient poor that coaxing fruit from the trees in his orchards was, well, pardon the pun, fruitless.

After four years of doing his best to raise fruit and finding the venture a bust, he decided to do what he had done in Topeka, establish a real-estate company and turn the orchards into a town, complete with businesses and beautiful residential areas.

It was now 1887 and Harvey knew that the property, dotted by young, albeit poorly producing fruit trees and the previously mentioned stands of English holly that Ida loved, would be the perfect place to create a new kind of community.

He wasn't interested in the typical speculator's approach, that of throwing together a mindless cluster of cookie-cutter homes that could quickly be turned for a profit.

As an outspoken member of a no-nonsense temperance society, he imagined an exemplar community. A beautiful town that would serve as a wholesome model for Christian living.

It would be, as Harvey envisioned, a town whose name might one day be known around the world. A town without saloons, dance halls, casinos or brothels; a town devoid of loud music, exotic dancing, slick-talking men, and ladies of the night.

Yes sir! It would be a community based on heavenly ideals and sober religious principles.

Building lots were sold to teetotalers only, a non-negotiable rule, for \$1,000 per lot.

The lots sold, homes were built, and the city turned out just as Harvey and Ida had imagined. Ida laid out the landscaping for much of the town and created most of the street names.¹ It was a truly tranquil setting, a place of peace and sobriety and so free of crime the town never even bothered to build a jail.

Then, on March 19, 1891, Harvey Wilcox, age 59, died, leaving Ida a 29-year-old widow.

Four years later, Ida met and married Philo J. Beveridge, a businessman, and the son of former Illinois governor John L. Beveridge.

They continued to develop the town, perhaps not with Harvey's outgoing religious zeal, but with great civic pride. Ida and Philo donated land for churches and public parks and paid for the town's first sidewalks.

And life was good in California.

But before continuing with Ida and Philo, we now shift our attention to something taking place three-thousand miles to the east, in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

In Menlo Park, Thomas Edison² had just invented the first practical motion picture camera. He called it a *kinetoscope*, and in 1889 it became one of 1,093 patents that Edison would hold at the time of his death in 1931.

Edison claimed that the *kinetoscope* would "do for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear." But before the world could fully appreciate the magic of his marvelous invention, someone had to invent a flexible alternative to the heavy glass photographic plates that were being used in photography.

George Eastman of Rochester, New York solved the problem in 1893 by inventing "roll film," coating one side of a strip of clear celluloid with a fine layer of silver nitrate.

Still, it would be another 17 years (1910) before the first motion-picture would play before an audience.

That first-ever motion-picture was a 17-minute offering that we would call a short subject today. It was titled *In Old California*, a silent-movie melodrama depicting life in a small

Mexican village, produced and directed by D. W. Griffith³ who would become legendary for his silent era epics.

The location selected by Griffith for shooting that very first motion-picture was on the outskirts of a town known for its friendly people, beautiful scenery, and the bright green plant that dotted the rolling hills, the plant that Ida liked so well, English holly.

In fact, one legend claims it was that very plant that inspired Ida Wilcox to suggest to her husband that they name their small emerging town, *Hollywood*.⁴

Over the long haul, Hollywood may not have ended up as the idyllic Christian community that Harvey and Ida Wilcox had once envisioned, but Harvey was certainly right about one thing.

The town that he and Ida founded, is today, certainly known around the world.

¹ Perhaps the most famous street named by Ida Wilcox is the one known as *Sunset Boulevard*.

Stories from History's Dust Bin (additional reading):

² Vol 2, Jul 10: Thomas Edison with Nikola Tesla

³ Vol 3, Oct 14: D.W. Griffith with Lillian Gish

⁴ The naming of *Hollywood* is the subject of multiple legends. One legend tells of Ida meeting a woman on a train whose estate in Ohio was named *Hollywood*, and Ida liked the name. Another suggests that Ida first heard the word *Hollywood* when used by a neighbor who lived in nearby Holly Canyon. And of course, there's the version used in the above story. Regardless, when Harvey Wilcox submitted a grid map of his proposed town-site development to the Los Angeles County Recorder's Office on February 1, 1887, the document listed the name of the new town's first residential subdivision as *Hollywood*.

*Strip away the phony tinsel of Hollywood and
you'll find the real tinsel underneath.*

Oscar Levant (1906-1972) Composer