

Modesto History Center Newsletter

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The monster shark on display probably in San Francisco in 1887. (1)

The Monster Man-Eating Shark of Modesto



By Bob Barzan

The giant rotting fish stunk. It had been caught the week before and had been on display in a San Francisco park for several days. Its 10,000 pounds of rotting flesh filled the neighborhood with a stench (2). People complained but still they came by the thousands and paid fifteen cents to see the great man-eating shark. Twenty years later, a group of businessmen used the same dead shark as bait to successfully lure new residents to Modesto. How did they do it?

The Shark

In late April 1887, a 35-foot basking shark was caught in fishing nets near Monterey Bay. By the end of the month, the mostly harmless shark was being falsely billed as a monster man-eater to promote its exhibition in San Francisco. In just two days, more than 4,000 people came to see the dead and smelly creature. Eventually, the shark was stuffed and exhibited again in San Francisco for 25 cents a look

“together with his backbone, heart, eyes, organs of pregnation and a portion of the stomach containing locks of human hair.” (3) Then the preserved shark began a national tour that lasted for more than 28 years.

Beginning in 1897, the shark, sometimes billed as a whale, was part of a touring exhibition in two specially equipped railroad cars owned and operated by Mondula Leak an experienced advertising man from San Francisco. Leak had hired the Southern Pacific Railroad Shops in Sacramento to build his patented main exhibition car which had display cases around the outside (4) and was lit inside and out with electric lights powered by a generator. (5) Beginning in 1891, Leak contracted the two railroad cars out for traveling promotional exhibitions particularly of California counties including Placer, Santa Clara, Napa, Marin, Mendocino, Lake, and Sonoma.
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Modesto History Center News

Modesto History Project

You probably know that Modesto was the first city in the country to provide for an airstrip in its 1910 city charter, but were you aware that in 1925, a new office building in downtown Modesto was the first in California to be heated by electricity, or that another downtown office building from 1913 had solar water heaters on its roof?

Now you can learn about these and other unusual events and sites in Modesto through the Modesto History Project, a series of posters designed by graphic artist William Coons. Each poster will be displayed at relevant sites in downtown Modesto for at least six weeks beginning Friday, 18 February 2022. You can see all ten posters together at an opening event at the Chartreuse Muse Gallery at 918 10th Street, 5 to 9 pm., Thursday, 17 February 2022, during the monthly art walk.

The Modesto History Project is part of Building a Better Modesto, the Modesto Art Museum's award-winning place-making program. The goal of the project is to raise consciousness about Modesto's amusing history and influential architecture. Modesto has a rich and fun heritage some of which is well known but much has largely gone uncovered or forgotten for the last 151 years.

You can find more information about the Modesto History Project, at <https://modestoartmuseum.org/>.



The Princess Theater, later the Covell Theater, in the Hotel Covell in 1935. The building was designed by architect Albert W. Cornelius. Hotel Covell and its theater are featured in the Modesto History Project and in the theater article beginning on page 3.

Modesto Goes to The Movies: A Brief History of Modesto's Earliest Movie Theaters

By Randy Siefkin

It was not until the early 20th Century that movies found a permanent home in Modesto. Motion pictures were likely available in storefront Nickelodeons on the free-standing kinoscope or mutoscope, designed to permit a single person to view short films through a peephole located at the top of an enclosed cabinet.

Thomas Edison and his competitors introduced more powerful projector systems that allowed for a group theatrical experience. In smaller communities like Modesto, motion pictures were screened in tents, storefronts, or existing entertainment venues, often as an added attraction to vaudeville shows. A review in a December 1896 issue of *The Stanislaus County News* headlined "A Wonderful Invention" described an exhibition of the Edison "improved kinoscope" at Modesto's opera house, featuring "rivers, steamboats, street scenes, waterfalls, dances, bucking horses, bathing sequences...that could not have been more natural if actually presented before the audience." The review added that between "improved and distinct Photographs" were recordings of "vocal and instrumental selections that were very pleasing."

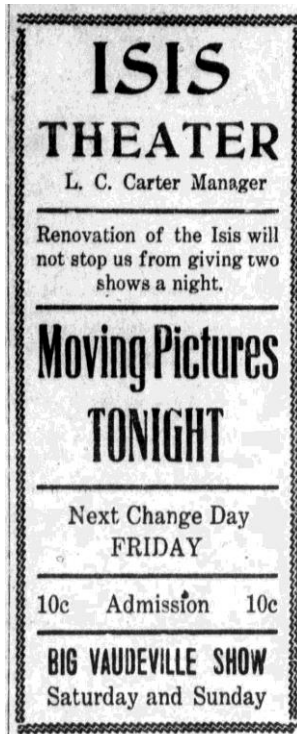


The Strand, "The Handsomest Theatre in the Valley" according to the December 11, 1920, edition of *The Modesto Evening News*. Constructed at a cost of \$300,000, the theatre could seat 1800 patrons who were invited to gaze in wonder at the mighty Wurlitzer pipe organ, crystal chandeliers, maroon velour drapes, elaborate wall murals and art nouveau curtain. An estimated 3,500 took part in the opening ceremonies featuring a "massive" vaudeville show, an organ recital and the showing of the swashbuckling Douglas Fairbank's action classic *The Mark of Zorro*. **The Strand** continued to operate until the early 1970s, later gutted by fire, then demolished to make way for the Brendan multiplex.

Projection systems were soon to be linked to phonographs, presenting a challenge for theatres to synchronize ten-minute reels of film on hand-cranked projectors with recordings of 3-4 minutes in length, and providing adequate sound in exhibition spaces.

A review titled "A Fine Entertainment," in the *Stanislaus County Weekly News* for December 8, 1899, noted a double bill at **Plato's Opera House**, an 800 seat venue located just above Plato's menswear store, featuring Professor Topping's "splendid tests of the mind reading" paired with "an excellent Edison concert phonograph and moving pictures by the Kinetoscope and Phonograph Company" with "war scenes in a life-like manner," a reference to the recently-concluded Spanish American War of 1898.

A 1907 issue of *The Stanislaus County News* contains a display ad for **The Electric Theatre** on 10th Street offering "Illustrated Songs/Good Music" and "Flickerless Bioscope" productions (flickering images were an issue for early projection systems) for a ten-cent admission. To coincide with the 1908 Modesto Fiesta Celebration, a temporary **Electric Theatre** was constructed on the event's site, offering a documentary about The Great White Fleet which President Teddy Roosevelt had dispatched on a world tour. A brief news item noted that the managers of another local theatre (**The Dream**) had gone to "much trouble and expense" to bring the film and the latest "motion picture machine" to the event.



The Airdome Amusement Company, “devoted to moving pictures exclusively,” appeared in 1910, offering “High Class Motion Pictures” in their 9th and J Street location. (*The Modesto Daily Evening News*, July 30, 1910). Admission was ten cents and pictures changed four days a week, an indication that the featured films were not lengthy productions. That same year a reference appeared to an early **Modesto Theatre**, announcing a vaudeville act (“The Royal Hawaiian Sextette”) and a “photo play,” starring western matinee idol Tom Mix.

The second decade of the 20th century saw the acceleration of local movie theatre options. Early in 1911 **The Star**, with 372 seats (“twenty-nine inches apart for complete comfort”), opened on the west side of 10th Street (later moving across the street), offering “up to date photo plays” vaudeville acts and a curtain featuring a mural of the Bay of Naples with Mt. Vesuvius looming in the background, all in “cool and perfectly ventilated atmosphere.” *The Modesto Herald* described the theatre as “the cleanest, neatest, safest playhouse” in town. Also appearing that year was **The Auditorium** at 6th and I streets. Initially built as a meeting and live performance hall, the 1800 seat structure was converted to a film house in the early 1920s, later ending life as a roller rink.

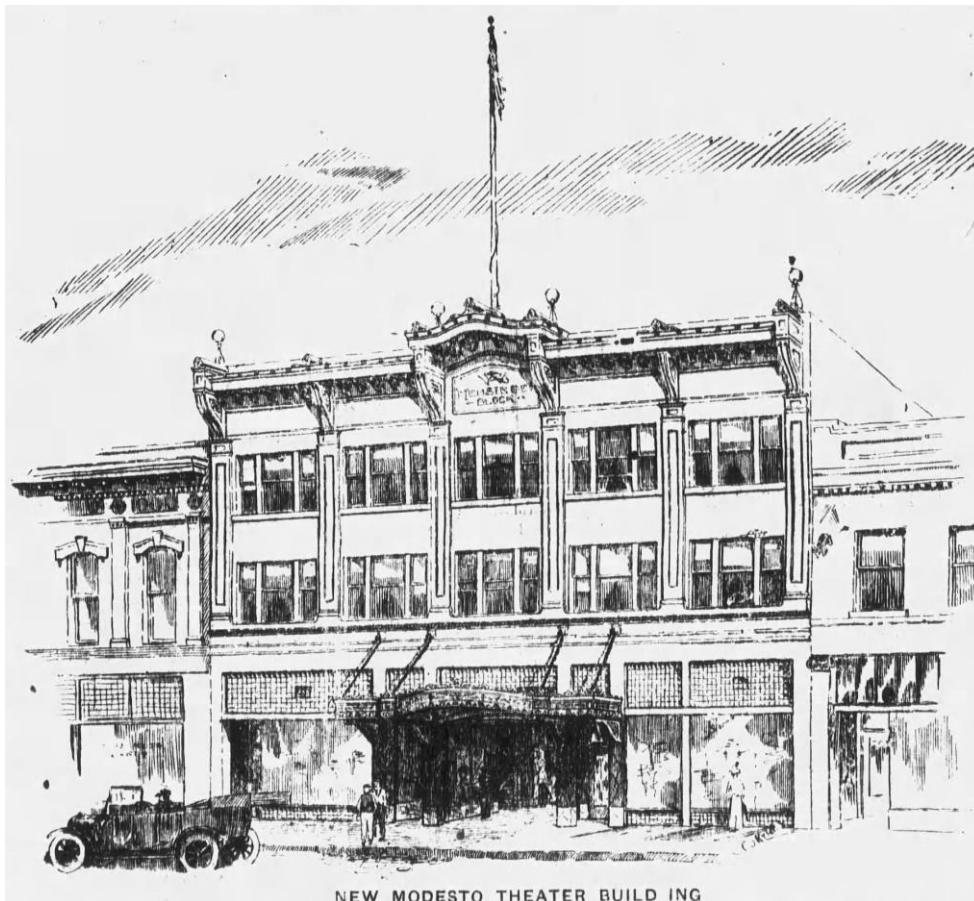
The Liberty (1912) advertised three reels of “the latest” photo plays and three vaudeville acts, all for just a quarter.

The Isis, which appears to have undergone several name changes during the decade, was a competitor for local audiences. Located at 916 10th Street and seating six hundred, it offered vaudeville acts and current photo plays, along with the claim it was the only theatre in town with ventilation. Later in the decade it promised “the good kind of films,” “polite vaudeville,” and “proper music,” to local audiences for those movie goers who may have been shocked at the fare offered by other houses. Not far from **The Isis** was the five hundred seat **Dreamland**, advertising its “exits, ventilation and high-class pictures.” An added attraction was a locally shot film that would allow patrons “an opportunity to recognize themselves, as well as scores of familiar scenes.”



Lyric Theatre next to the fire station on 10th Street between G and H.

Local businessman William Mensinger opened the nine hundred seat **Modesto Theatre** in 1913 at 913 10 Street, at an estimated cost of \$85,000. Local historian Coleen Bare noted that Modesto's first movie palace was three stories high, had a 34-foot stage and an Alaskan marble foyer, designed to attract local audiences to live performances and, eventually, major films (a 1914 display ad features Mary Pickford in The Famous Players production of *Cleopatra*). Longtime resident Lloyd Courtney claimed that the theatre was the first to show "talking pictures" that displaced the silent films of earlier decades. Courtney says that the sound stopped halfway through his first "talkie" there because the dialogue and music were on a separate device rather than being synchronized on the film itself, a development that was soon to revolutionize the industry. An embarrassed theatre manager was forced to apologize to patrons for the delay because the soundtrack record had broken. Fire struck the **Modesto Theatre** twice, in 1913, and in 1935, leading to its permanent closure. The dome of the **Modesto Theater** remains visible on the west side of the nine hundred block of 10th Street.



Architect of the first Modesto Theater (above) in 1913, was Ralph Morrell of Stockton. The rebuilt theater was designed by John J. Foley of San Francisco in 1914.

Joining the local theatre scene in subsequent years were the second-run **Lyric/Esquire** at 721 10th Street, an unfortunate location when the alarm went off at the fire station immediately next door, interrupting screenings at critical moments; **The Richards** on J Street (later to become **The National**, **The Princess** and finally, **The Covell**) spending its final years known for X-rated fare and a weekly screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; **The La Loma** (at the corner of La Loma and Yosemite) and, in 1934, **The State**, at 1307 J Street, Modesto's sole surviving historic theatre.

Modesto's early movie houses lacked IMAX screens, vast lobbies stuffed with electronic games and films that relied on special effects at the expense of narrative and dialogue. What they offered local audiences was character and, as Modesto historian Colleen Stanley Bare was fond of pointing out, the promise of seeing a newsreel, short subject, cartoon, chapter of a serial and a double feature, all for a quarter or less.



The State Theater,
designed by S. Charles
Lee, opened in 1934.

Sources: Files of *The Modesto Evening News* and *Stanislaus County Weekly News* and *The Modesto Bee*; Colleen Stanley Bare, *Modesto Then and Now*, McHenry Museum Press, 1999, and frequent columns in *The Modesto Bee*; Lloyd Courtney "From operas to vaudeville to silent movies—Modesto theatres entertained in style" by Lloyd Courtney in *Stanislaus Stepping Stones*, Fall 1991; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures A History of Movie Presentation in The United States*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1992; Scott Eyman, *The Speed of Sound, Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution*, Simon and Shuster, 2015.

Randy is one of the founders of the Modesto Film Society, member of the board of directors of The State Theatre, and historic theatre enthusiast.

Monster Shark

Continued from page 1

The Stanislaus County Exhibition Cars

From 1905 to 1909, businessmen from San Jose and A. B. Shoemaker and Z. E. Drake of Modesto, with encouragement from the Modesto Board of Trade, hired Mondula Leak and his two railroad exhibition cars to travel around the country to promote Modesto and Stanislaus County. The businessmen, who together owned the Sunset Land and Home Company, planned to sell real estate to the families that would come to the area after seeing the traveling exhibits (6).

Besides the monster shark, the Stanislaus Exhibition Cars had other attractions including photographs of Modesto and Stanislaus County, a large exhibit of preserved and fresh fruits and vegetables from the area, and an eclectic collection of natural wonders that had nothing to do with Stanislaus County. They included a stuffed ostrich; Nick, a small live bear; Bob and Josephine, two monkeys; a live alligator; guinea pigs; and a great assortment of fish, seashells, coral, and bones. One newspaper described the exhibits as a miniature World's Fair (7) but the big draw was the monster man-eating shark.

The Stanislaus County Exhibition Cars opened 16 September 1905, in Mankato, Minnesota, where more than 1500 visited on the first day (8). Until late August 1909, the cars visited dozens, maybe hundreds, of towns in Minnesota, Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota, Missouri, Kansas, and Nebraska. Literature about Modesto and the county was distributed in several languages including English, Finnish, Italian, French, and Swedish (9).

A Success for Modesto

The shark, other unusual specimens, and artifacts successfully attracted thousands of



people to the exhibit cars where they also learned about Modesto and Stanislaus County. Several people then took advantage of railroad excursion fares to visit the county. A group of about 30 people arrived in Modesto in March 1906, after seeing the exhibition in Iowa (19). Another group, from Nebraska, planned to come in April 1906 (11). There are newspaper reports about individual families coming to the area after seeing the exhibits (12). In 1907, the Modesto Board of Trade reviewed the work of Mondula Leak and the exhibition cars and concluded, "That the scheme is a success is evidenced by the number of buyers and investors that have recently made their

Newspaper ad for the Stanislaus County Exhibit Cars, *Albion Argus* (Nebraska), 5 May 1906, p. 5

COMING!



The Monster Shark, on Beach at Monterey, California
 NOW WITH STANISLAUS COUNTY
EXHIBIT CARS
 Undoubtedly The Largest Fish Ever Captured
 36 FEET LONG, WEIGHING 10,383 POUNDS. ONE OF THE WONDERS OF THE OCEAN
REMEMBER **DON'T MISS IT** **FREE to EVERYBODY**
ADMISSION ONLY 15 CTS. Except when special arrangements are made with schools.
SEE SMALL BILLS
A beautiful Sea Shell, Lucky Sea Bean or Coral given to all visitors at the cars.
STEVENS POINT, WIS.
Tues., Wed., Thurs., Fri., Jan. 28, 29, 30, 31
 Open from 8:30 a. m. to 9 p. m.

way into Stanislaus county." (13) In 1908, the Modesto Board of Trade considered purchasing the exhibition cars but decided against it because they had no way of maintaining them (14). Though their number is unknown, the businessmen thought that they had successfully lured new residents to Modesto and the county using a monster man-eating shark as bait.

Notes:

1) Stuffed basking shark caught at Monterey, California, photographer A.H. Rogers, 1887 to 1898, probably 1887 to 1889 in California, Daniel Carter Beard Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/90707756/>

Advertisement for the Stanislaus County Exhibit Cars, *Stevens Point Journal* (Wisconsin), 27 January 1908, page 4. The photograph is of a basking shark captured off southern California in 1906, not the one in the exhibit.

Other sources confirm this as the shark that would eventually be exhibited in the Stanislaus County Exhibition Cars.

2) *Petaluma Courier*, 4 May 1887, page 2

3) *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 August 1887, page 2

4) *Daily Northwestern*, (Oshkosh, Wisconsin), March 4, 1907, page 6

"The Stanislaus County exhibit cars are arranged with show cases attached to the outside of the cars showing specimens of grains, fruits, grasses, etc. raised in Stanislaus County. It also shows a number of large photos showing the system of irrigation."

5) The Electric Plant on Leak's Advertising Car, *Electrical Engineer*, 4 May 1892, page 465

6) "The principal object of the exhibit was to show how luxuriously fruit etc. grow in California, and especially in Stanislaus County, and to induce people to invest in that section. The showing of fruit was splendid. The peaches, oranges, prunes and grapes made one's mouth water to look at them.

We have not had their equal before. The productiveness of the soil could be judged by the great height of the oats, hemp, wheat and corn displayed. One cornstalk measured 19½ feet."

Algona Advance (Iowa), October 12, 1905, page 8

7) *The Fort Wayne Sentinel*, 12 June 1909, page 3

8) *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, 13 October 1905, page 5

"Stanislaus on Wheels Scores a Big Hit East

9) *Stanislaus County Weekly News*, 28 June 1907, page 4

10) Thirty Iowans Are Inspecting Stanislaus, *Stockton Daily Evening Record*, 5 March 1906, p. 5

11) *Banner Press* (David City, Nebraska), 21 March 1906, page 4

12) *Fresno Morning Republican*, 1 November 1907, page 3

13) Exhibit Cars Run for County's Good, *Fresno Morning Republican*, 28 September 1907, p. 12

14) *Modesto News*, 22 December 1908, Page 1