

EL REY

CHICO, CA

History

The El Rey Theater has gone by a few names in its lifetime, The Majestic Theatre, The National, The American and then finally the El Rey. Through it all, it has maintained its long tradition of film screening and presentation.



MAJESTIC THEATRE
Monday, April 23d
ONE NIGHT ONLY.
Whitney's Celebrated Life Motion Pictures
POSITIVELY NO FLICKER OR VIBRATION.
Scenes of the Russian Revolution, Russian and Japanese war, great mine disaster, the fire bug, new Spanish bull fight, train wreckers, etc.
SPECIAL.
See the Chico Fire Department Run in Moving Pictures.
PRICES 25c and 35c
CHILDREN 10c
Seats at Waterland's.

The Majestic Theatre was originally commissioned to be built by the Chico Elks Lodge in May of 1903 on a vacant lot on W. 2nd Street, adjacent to the Chico Public Library. In early 1906 it was opened as the home of the Chico Elks Lodge 423. The lower floor at street level was leased out to the owners of the Majestic Theatre Company, and on April 9th 1906 opened as The Majestic Theater to much Northern California fanfare.



On April 23rd 1906, just 2 weeks after the grand opening, it showed its first set of motion pictures, a series called "Whitney's Celebrated Life Motion Pictures", that consisted of six or more short films of everyday life and included titles such as "Scenes of The Russian Revolution", "Great Mine Disaster", "The Fire Bug" and "Spanish Bullfight". That same evening

it also screened a "life motion picture" of the Chico fire department that would very likely have been produced locally. Since that date it has operated primarily as a film screening and performance venue.

This film screening date makes The El Rey Theater the longest continuously operated movie theater in California and the 3rd in the entire United States, bested only by the Washington Iowa State Theatre (1897) and Plaza Theater in Ottawa Kansas (1905)!



From its opening and through the early part of the 20th century, The Majestic Theatre continued operation and a performance space for vaudeville acts, cinema, music and community conventions. John Phillip Sousa performed twice on its stage, once in 1911 and again in 1921.

On March 8th 1924 the National theater chain of San Francisco acquired The Majestic, as well as several other theaters in Chico, and renamed it The National. It operated as The National for a relatively long period from 1924 until 1939. In 1940 The owners, T & D Jr. Enterprises (which later became United Artists Theatre Circuit), reopened the theater as The American.

The American theater prospered in the early 1940's within the heyday of pre-war and war-time cinema only to have that prosperity cut short in 1946 when an arsonist started a fire that tore through the interior of the theater. When it reopened in 1948, it was renamed the El Rey, because (or at least as the story goes) the owners had a sign that was the only feature to survive a fire at one of their other theaters, The El Rey, in the Bay Area.

From that time until today, The El Rey Theater has not only provided a community performance and cinema space for the city of Chico, it has also served as a historic landmark that binds the entirety of its downtown cityscape.