

FOREST THEATER  
Santa Rita Street and Mountain View Avenue  
Carmel-by-the-Sea  
Monterey County  
California

HALS CA-55  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
PACIFIC WEST REGIONAL OFFICE  
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## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### FOREST THEATER

HALS NO. CA-55

**Location:** Santa Rita Street and Mountain View Avenue, Carmel, Monterey County, CA  
Lat: 36.55355 Long: -121.91679 (Center of Stage, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).

**Significance:** This is the oldest outdoor theater west of the Rockies. It was built in 1910 and deeded to the City of Carmel in 1939. For 100 years, the community has kept this cultural resource viable.

**Description:** The site of the 60-seat theater is a naturally occurring bowl-shaped area in an oak woodland, in a residential neighborhood of Carmel. Oaks were removed to construct the bleacher seating but the grove remains at the back and sides. Most of the understory has been cleared. The view back of stage is through Monterey pines and beyond to the Monterey Bay. The character of the site and planting is left a bit wild and natural.

The perimeter of the theater is defined by a four-five foot high grape-stake fence. There are two gates into the theater; one wide enough for vehicles and one pedestrian gateway that has a beam overhead with "Forest Theater" carved into it. There is an asphalt and stone lined path to the ticket booth and restroom buildings.

Materials are limited to wood and rough stone plus very simple, ornamental iron handrails at stone steps. The wood is either painted "state parks brown" or left unpainted. The bleacher seating is divided into two sections with concrete paths at either side and in the middle. There are 11 rows of seating, then a stone retaining wall about 30 inches high, and 6 additional rows of seating. Seats have backs and the space between rows is compacted earth.

Near the stage there are semi-circular stone fireplaces built at either side of the bleachers that provide warmth to those sitting near enough and ambiance for the rest of the audience.

The stage is wood and there are storage areas for props at either side. Additional storage, dressing rooms, and an indoor theater are below the main stage. There is also a wood deck (about 40 feet x 80 feet) with a built in bench on the downhill side of the theater.

The form and layout of the theater all appear to be original as does the stone work and arrangement of the seating. In 1939 Works Progress Administration (WPA) crews undertook a major reconstruction. They built new benches, laid a

concrete foundation for the stage, and replaced a barbed-wire fence with the grape-stake fence. Some lattice on the sides of the stage appears to be a relatively recent addition and does not fit the character of the rest of the theater. The wood stage and bleacher seating was again replaced in the 1960s and in 1980s and 1990s the city did a major renovation that replaced the stage, seating and added safety features.

To stage left there is a square of stones and an upright carved boulder: "Here lies Pal the friend of all who knew and loved him. Carmel's dog. Born Aug 1929, died Dec. 1943."

History: The theater was built in 1910 led by actor/director Herbert Heron with poet Mary Austin. The land for the theater was given rent free by Carmel's founder Frank Devendorf. The Forest Theater Society also started in 1910 and the Western Drama Society in 1911. Plays, pageants, musicals and Shakespeare have been performed at the theater plus outdoor films and there is a children's theater that began in 1968. The theater has a long-standing tradition of featuring original works of California authors including the work of Robinson Jeffers (Tor House), Mary Austin, and Barbara Newberry who wrote *The Toad* and *Junipero Serra*, a historical pageant focusing on the life of Father Junipero Serra.

The privately owned theater was deeded to the city of Carmel in 1939 so it would be eligible for federal support when it became a WPA project. The theater closed during World War II in response to mandatory blackouts, but reopened after the war.

In 1949 Herbert Heron founded the Forest Theater Guild. Cole Weston and Philip Oberg produced plays by local authors, Shakespeare and classic drama. During this era the dressing rooms and theater under the main stage were constructed.

Interest declined and the theater was unused through much of the 1960s but was revived in 1968 by Marcia Hovick who leased the indoor theater for the Children's Experimental Theater. The children's theater continues to be active currently. According to Wikipedia, "in 2005, Pacific Repertory Theater presented the theater's highest attended production, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, to a combined audience of over 10,000 ticket holders."

Interest in the theater waxed and waned in the 1960s, 70s and 80s and the city considered closing it at least once, but community members came forward each time to mount campaigns to renew the theater. Various individuals and groups continue to revive interest and the theater continues to be viable after 100 years.

Sources: Site visit, July 12, 2010.

Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest\\_Theater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_Theater), Accessed July 2, 2010.

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July 2, 2010



Wood bleacher seating, compacted earth aisles, grape-stake fence in oak woodland setting (Chris Pattillo, June 12, 2010).



Wood stage set for a performance of *Treasure Island*, bleacher seating with center aisle, and Monterey pine backdrop with a views of Monterey Bay in the background (Chris Pattillo, June 12, 2010). Author's mother, Lottie Pattillo on stage.