

Top Hat Cafe
299 East Main Street
City of Ventura
Ventura County
California

HABS No. CA-2863

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOP HAT CAFE

HABS No. CA-2863

Location: 299 East Main Street, Ventura, California, 93001.

The Top Hat Cafe is in the same block as Mission San Buenaventura in the historic downtown of the City of San Buenaventura (Ventura), at the Northwest corner of North Palm Street and East Main Street, Ventura County, California.

The Top Hat Café sits within the historic/pre-historic sub-surface archeological district listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the San Buenaventura Mission Compound Site (NHRP #75000496)

The coordinates for the Top Hat Cafe are 34°16'51.38"N, 119°17'46.68"W; these were obtained using Google Earth in July 2011. There is no restriction on the release of the locational data to the public.

Description: A classic example of an American road-side, post World War II, steel hot dog stand. The entire one story structure – including walls, roof, and interior walls – is fabricated of interlocking 12 inch wide vertical steel panels. A row of three hand-out windows spans the entire front (south) side, covered by a broad hip roof canopy made of interlocking painted pressed steel sections, this canopy continues around the sides of the building.

The original 8' x 8' stand was built circa 1947, and additions began in 1948 which subsequently enlarged the structure to its current 8 feet wide on Main Street by 20 feet deep along Palm Street. The structure is rectangular in shape with a plywood three-sided signboard rising up from the flat, low sloped roof. A welded steel dining counter, below the handout windows, runs around three sides of the building in the front. The pole from the neon pole sign remains but the sign was removed before 1980. The interior of the stand has some early (possibly original) equipment in the form of a "Reliable" Gas Grill and grill hood.

History: The first known owners of the restaurant were Ed Carr and Harold Serene. Additional work on the building was completed in 1950 and 1951 by S. T. Stewart and Eva Stewart. A neon pole sign was added in 1952, marking the first time the restaurant is definitively known to have been called the Top Hat Café. Other known owners of the restaurant include Doris Chandler (1959), Doris Mashburn (1961), John H. and John W. Durham (1963), and Delbert L. Woods (1964). The restaurant was purchased by Homer and Gretchen McKee in 1966. The last operator was their daughter, Charlotte Bell, who ran the business until its closure in February 2010. (Greenwood, 2005)

The Top Hat is significant as an early example of the American car-oriented road-side development that grew post World War II. It is a little-altered example of an independent American hot dog and hamburger stand that catered to Americans and in turn gave rise to the concept of fast-food before the franchised fast-food restaurants commercialized the idea and multiplied it across the country. Its period of significance is 1947 to 1952 reflective of its initial date of construction and use as a restaurant, through completion of its last major (steel panel) addition (Slawson 2006).

The Top Hat is the oldest remaining road-side hot dog stand in the city of Ventura, and the only one constructed from pre-fabricated steel panels. The structure was built and opened circa 1947 and has been in continuous operation as a restaurant named the TOP HAT until it was closed in February, 2010. As such it was also one of the longest continuously operating businesses in Ventura, and has gained a loyal following. The small building and its food have attained a strong cultural significance to local and out-of-town patrons as evidenced by the May 2004 Petition to "Save the Top Hat" over 4000 signatures were gathered when word of possible closure and demolition of the structure was made public.

A 2007 Historic Resources Survey Update (Historic Resources Group 2007) for the Ventura downtown specific plan area identified the Top Hat building as one of 53 potential contributors to a locally eligible *Main Street Commercial District*, the district period of significance is 1870 to 1962.

- Sources: Phase 2 Historic Resources Report, Top Hat Restaurant, Prepared by San Buenaventura Research Associates. 27 August, 2010.
- Greenwood, Roberta S. and Dana Slawson. Phase I Cultural Resources Investigation. Greenwood and Associates for WestStar Ltd., July 2005.
- Historic Resources Group. Historic Resources Survey Update, City of Ventura, California, Downtown Specific Plan Area. City of Ventura, April 2007.
- Slawson, Dana N. Memorandum to David Armstrong, City of Ventura Redevelopment Agency, Re: Top Hat Burger Palace Relocation. Greenwood and Associates, March 9, 2006.
- Triem, Judy. Ventura County Cultural Heritage Survey: Phase I — San Buenaventura. Final Report and Inventory Data Collection. 1983.
- NPS- DPR 523A/B forms from South Coastal Information Center at California State University, Fullerton.

Photographer: Stephen D. Schafer, HABS 5x7 views photographed, Feb 8, 2010.

Figure 1. Front view. (Photograph from City of Ventura archives, circa 1980).

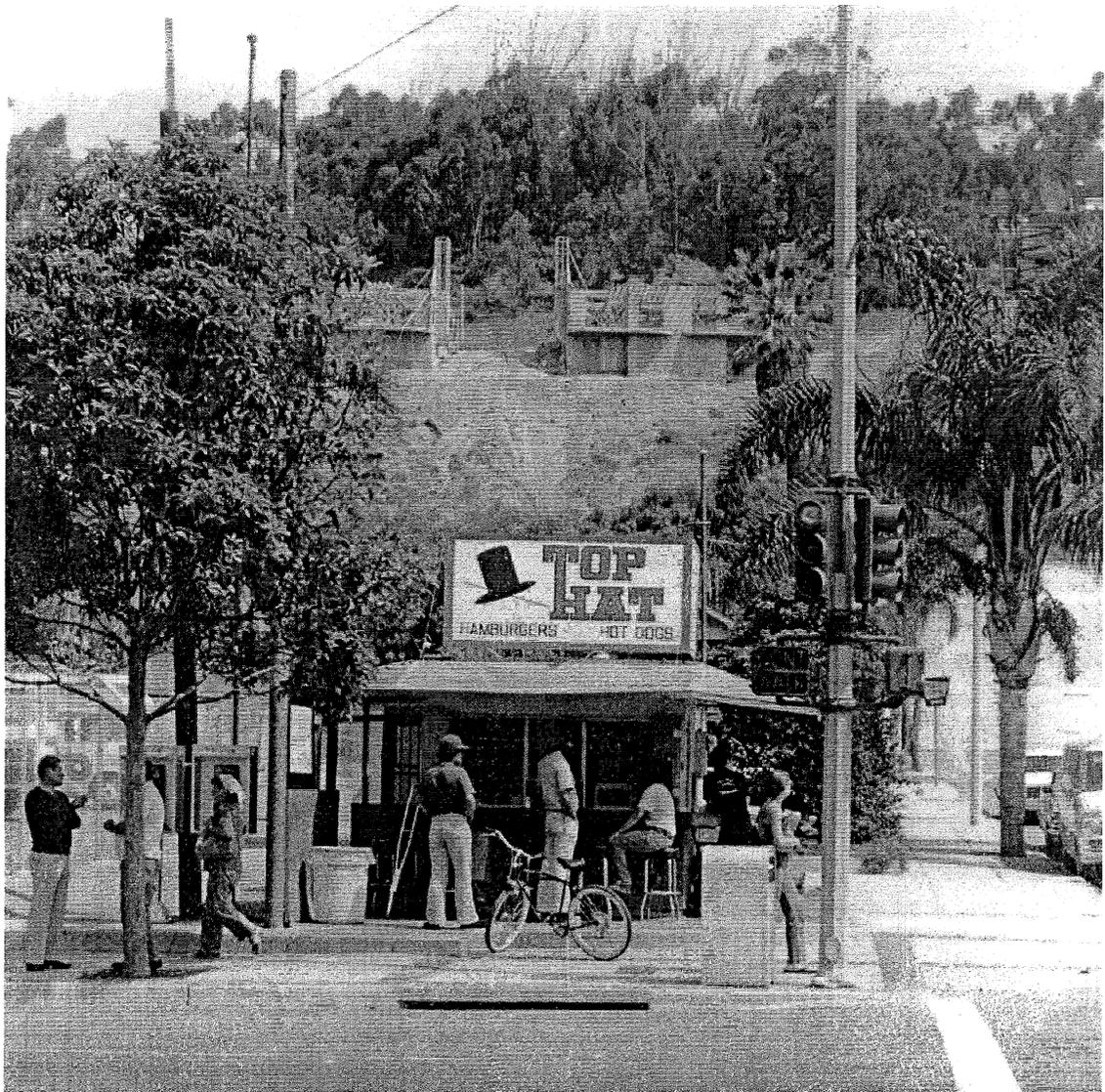


Figure 2. Olique view of front and east side. (Photograph Stephen Schafer, Dec-2009).

