



**Jacob Albert's "Gift" to San Rafael
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Walking or driving down Fourth St. in San Rafael can still evoke memories of a mid-twentieth century town with tangible touchstones to the city's past such as The Albert Building, Marelli Brothers Shoe Repairing, and of course, the Rafael Theater. However, The Rafael Theater (originally named the Orpheus) was not the only luxurious movie palace in town. Two blocks down Fourth Street, the El Camino Theatre also welcomed moviegoers into its plush interior to 'suspend their disbelief' for a few hours and enjoy the latest Hollywood fare. It was, according to a 1928 Napa Register newspaper article, "Jacob Albert's new half-million-dollar theater... the handsome new show house is in the way of a gift to the people of San Rafael." Jacob Albert came to Marin from Lithuania in the early 1890s, first peddling household goods in West Marin before moving his business to San Rafael. He opened a general store in downtown San Rafael which was relocated several times to larger buildings, built the city's first high-rise, The Albert Building in 1930, donated the land to build Albert Park and built The El Camino Theatre and Albert's Department Store which were eventually sold to Macy's.

The El Camino Theater was designed and built by the architectural firm of Reid & Reid who were also responsible for such California landmarks as The Fairmont Hotel, the Grand Lake Theater in Oakland, and the original Cliff House. It was of Spanish, gothic design with ornate exterior embellishments and a nearly four-story central tower. The interior featured lush velvets of red and gold with a double staircase welcoming patrons to the upper loge seating. Theatergoers could also order delicious, toasted sandwiches from Sausalito café owner, John Carlisle who opened a second sandwich shop in the lobby of the theater. For many years it was part of the large Blumenfeld chain of theaters that included the Orpheus/Rafael, San Anselmo's Tamalpais Theater, The Lark in Larkspur, The Fairfax Theater, and the Gate and Marin theaters in Sausalito. After a 1937 fire and

remodel at the nearby Orpheus it was renamed and the El Camino began to run fewer first-run films and was often the site of local events such as beauty contests, fundraisers, chamber orchestra performances and as advertised in the photograph, "Sunday Night Double Bingo!"

The movies playing at the time of the photograph were both rereleased in 1950 from earlier World War II versions and set a date for the photograph. Robert Mitchum's, "Fighting Command" told the story of Texas A&M military cadets and Japanese spies. Loretta Young's 'Fury in the Sky' recounted the real-life experiences of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS) who flew military fighters and bombers from their factories of origin to military bases throughout the United States.

In 1942, Jacob Albert built his department store next to the theater which remained in business until both buildings were sold to Macy's in 1952. The Macy's chain demolished much of the theater and expanded its store into the space leaving The Rafael Theater as San Rafael's only downtown movie palace.

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