



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California
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El Piojo Theater in Delano, 1946

by Gilbert P. Gia

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In the mid-Forties when me and my sisters were kids there was ten-cent movie by our house on Fremont street in Delano, California but on the day before Christmas we always crossed the tracks to catch the special matinée at the Sierra.¹ We called that side of the tracks “up town” because that’s where our mother went to do real shopping.

At Christmas time the Panero family put on a free afternoon show for all the kids in town, and everybody who came got an orange or a tangerine and a little bag of popcorn sprinkled on

¹ Author's 2006 interview with Henry Orozco (1940-2009)

top with red and green hard candy. The show started with cartoons like Tom & Jerry, and after that came a fun kids' movie like the Bowery Boys. The Sierra matinées were packed and noisy.

The Paneros owned three theaters, the Sierra, the Delano, and the oldest one, which was the one in our neighborhood. In 1946 that theater was on the wrong side of the tracks, but us kids didn't know it. We were glad we lived around the corner from it, but my sisters' friend Mary Ellen Espinosa was lucky because she lived right next door. Other businesses were there – a small grocery store, and a couple of bars, but if a stranger drove down the street he probably wouldn't even know there was a theater unless he stopped right in front of it and saw the V-shaped entrance. I didn't tell you its name because I don't remember it. We always called it El Piojo, which if you don't know, means louse in Spanish.

El Piojo showed Mexican movies every day, but it didn't have a marquee. You only knew what was playing if the accordion iron

gate was pushed back so you could see the movie posters.

That theater must have been there a long time because it was really small inside, didn't have any stage or curtains, and the seats were just fold-up wooden ones with iron armrests. It didn't have a popcorn counter either, but even if it did have one we never bought anything because we filled our pockets with candy and sunflower seeds before we left home.

I stopped going there before 1950 because the Delano and the Sierra were much nicer, and I was working in the fields by then and making some money. Anyway, I liked the movies across the tracks a lot better.

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