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Warner Bros.—First National Studios, Burbank

In 1929, two years after making *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Warner Bros. purchased First National Pictures and moved into the First National Studios in Burbank. The 1930s was the studio's most successful decade, producing musicals (with Broadway choreographer Busby Berkeley), gangster flicks, dramas, action films, and soap operas on the elaborate soundstages and back lot featured on this card.

WARNER BROS.

1903-1950s

PART ONE HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS

**Eur Ing BRIAN ROBERTS CEng Hon.FCIBSE
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CIBSE HERITAGE GROUP

WARNER BROS.

HOLLYWOOD

PART ONE

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Photographs and text extracts are from the book "Early Warner Bros. Studios,"
E. J. Stephens and Marc Wanamaker, Images of America, Arcadia Press, unless otherwise noted,
and except for that added in the "Revisited Section."

INTRODUCTION

The meteoric rise of the Warner brothers is a tale so unlikely that had it been submitted as a screenplay at their own studio, it may well have been rejected as unbelievable. The story begins in 1903, at roughly the same time another set of siblings from the Midwest named Orville and Wilbur Wright were busy birthing the airplane. Nineteen-year-old Albert, the second-oldest Warner brother, was in Pittsburgh selling soap when he chanced upon a nickelodeon. He was so smitten by the hand-cranked silent films projected onto a stretched bed sheet that he returned to the Warner home in Youngstown, Ohio, with only one desire in mind: to get into the motion picture business. He was shocked to learn that his brothers Harry, 23, and Sam, 17, had come to the very same idea independently.

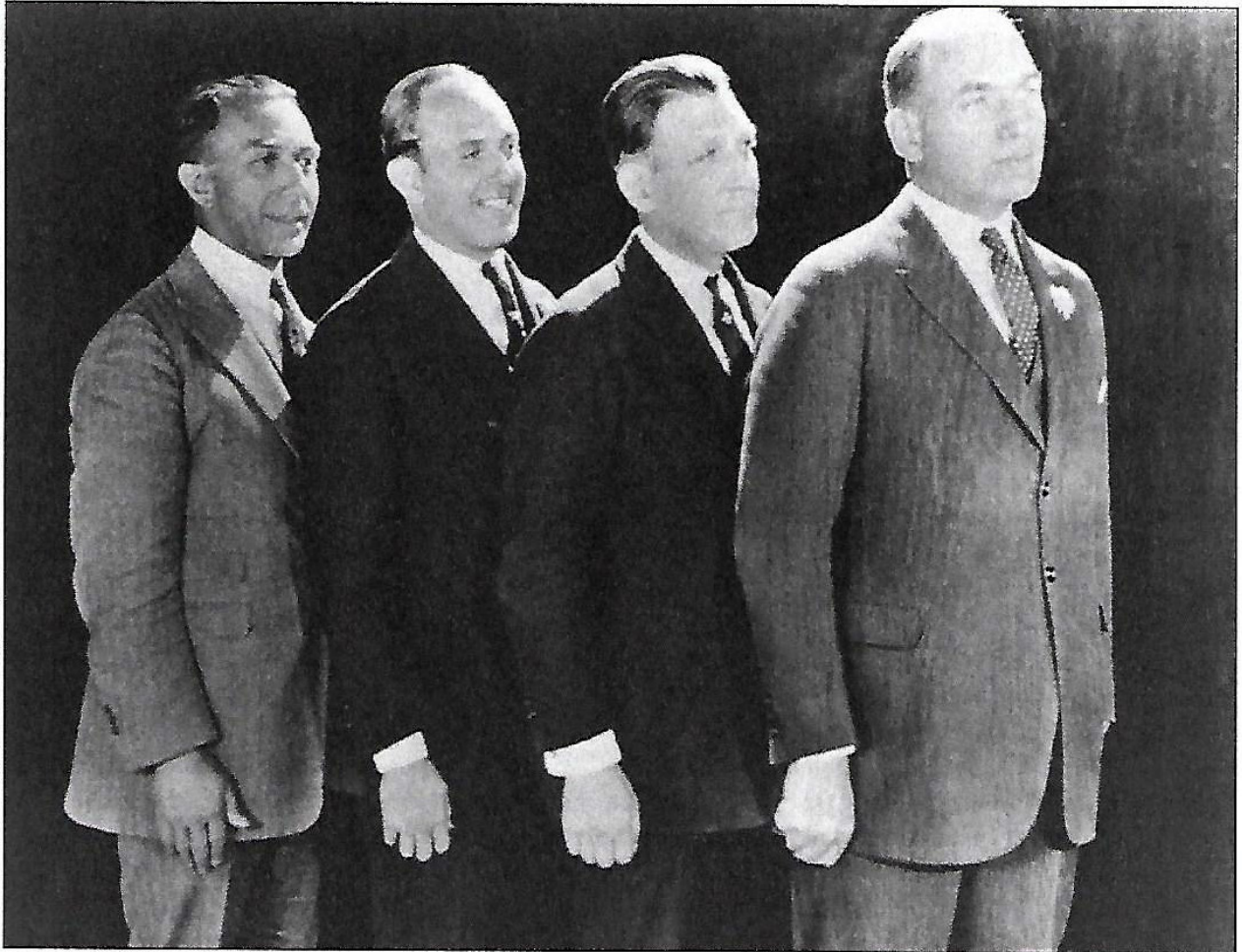
The brothers settled into roles at the Cascade that they would continue to play in one fashion or another for the rest of their careers. Harry, the oldest and most sober, handled the money; affable Sam, a technically minded dreamer, cranked the projector; salesman Albert hawked the tickets; and showman Jack “entertained” the crowds as the “chaser”—the less-than-gifted singer whose performances helped clear the theater between shows.

It did not take long for the brothers to see that the “reel money” to be made in motion pictures was to be found in distribution. This led them to create the Duquesne Amusement Supply Company. This film exchange, as distributors were known at the time, was a successful concern for several years until crushed in 1910 by Thomas Edison’s monopolistic film trust.

The Warners, who always believed in expansion, took the biggest gamble of their careers in 1925 by purchasing Vitagraph Studios, one of filmdom’s founding enterprises. This acquisition gave them two new studios, access to Vitagraph’s vast film library, plus 50 new exchanges in North America and Europe.

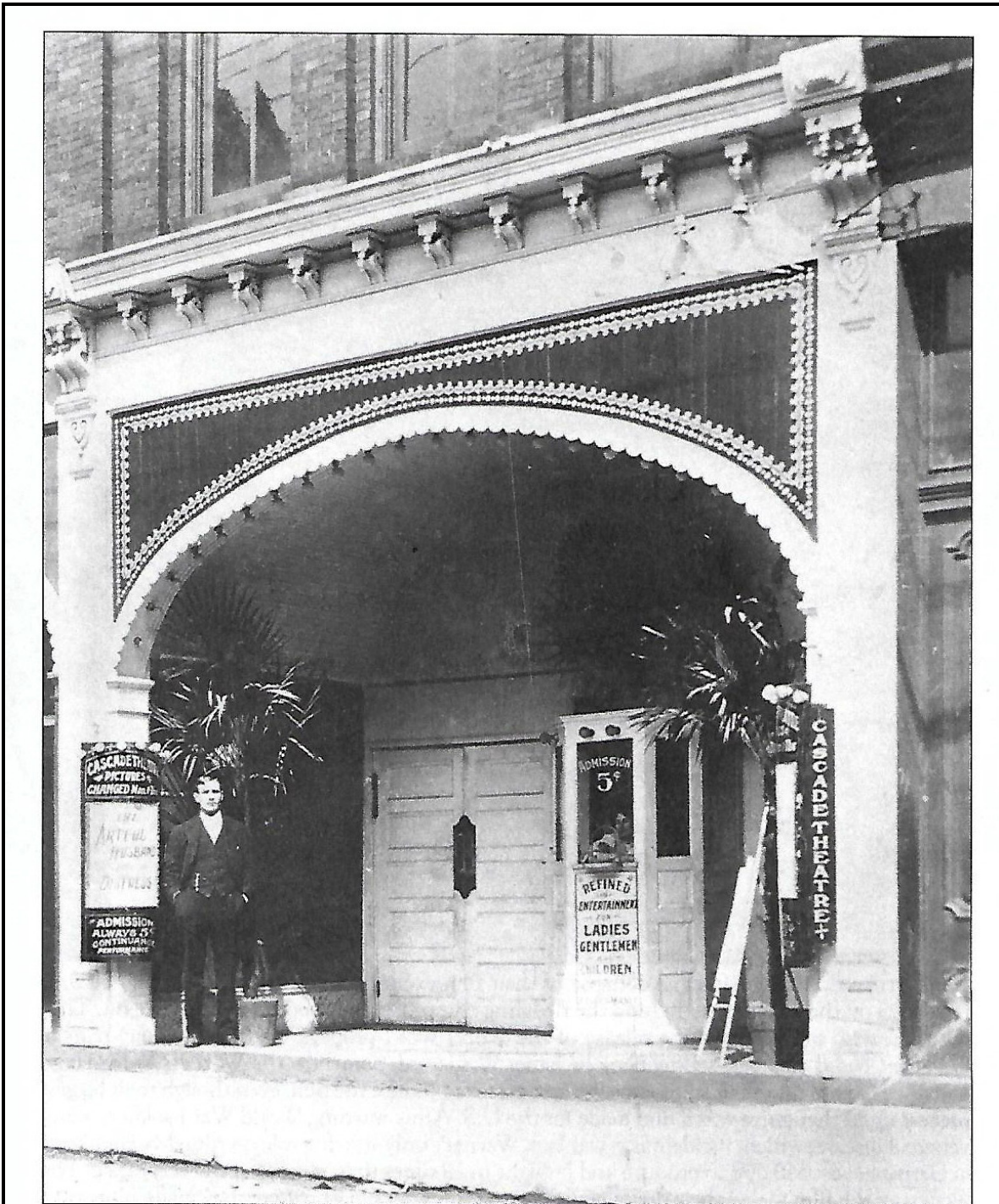
On March 3, 1925, Warner Bros. launched KFWB, their first radio station in Los Angeles. Three of the four Warner brothers felt it should primarily function as a vehicle to promote Warner Bros. films. Sam Warner, however, saw the radio station as the first step in ushering in a new era of motion pictures where the audiences not only saw their heroes on the screen, but *heard* them as well. Sam had a lifelong fascination with machines and technology and worked closely with an engineer setting up KFWB’s studios. That same engineer later showed him a process he was working on to synchronize sound to moving pictures. Further demonstrations convinced the other three brothers of the merits of the new system, which they purchased and renamed “Vitaphone” to capitalize on their recent acquisition of Vitagraph.

THE FOUNDERS



THE BROTHERS WARNER, 1926. The four Warner brothers are, from left to right, Harry, Jack, Sam, and Albert. By 1926, they ranged in age from 33 (Jack) to 45 (Harry) and had been in the motion picture business together for over 20 years. They had recently purchased Vitagraph Studios and were busy making *Don Juan* (1926), their first film using the Vitaphone sound process.

THE FOUNDERS



CASCADE THEATRE, NEW CASTLE, PENNSYLVANIA, 1907. Harry Warner stands in front of the Cascade Theatre in 1907. The Warners opened their first permanent theater in this city because New Castle had no other theaters and was only a short ride from their home in Youngstown, Ohio. Figuring they could make more money renting films to other theaters than by showing them, they soon bought three trunks of films for \$500 and opened a film distribution exchange in Pittsburgh. The Cascade was so successful that the Warners were able to sell their interest in 1909 for \$40,000. They used the profits to expand their film distribution business by opening a second film exchange office in Norfolk, Virginia. Today a group of dedicated volunteers is working to restore the site to the way it looked during the Warners' time at the Cascade.

THE FOUNDERS



THE WARNER BROTHERS, 1921. The Warner brothers, from left to right, are Sam, Harry, Jack, and Albert. The story of the Warner brothers is a tale of four impoverished immigrant boys who used their “advantages of disadvantage” to overcome the odds. By being Jewish, they faced prejudice, but countered it by succeeding in so-called “Jewish trades” that prepared them for the rough-and-tumble world of Hollywood. Being poor, they entered the workforce at young ages, keeping their formal educations to a minimum. This apparent drawback kept them unencumbered by set careers—any trade was as good as the next, as long as it paid the rent. This gave them the ability to act quickly on hunches and to swiftly embrace new ideas. But most importantly, their willingness to work together as a family combined with their good fortune to come of age alongside the motion picture industry quickly transformed the Warner brothers into Warner Bros.

THE STUDIOS



ROMAYNE SUPERFILM COMPANY STUDIOS, 1919. The Romaine Superfilm Company Studios in Culver City was another early rental studio used by the Warners. The aerial photograph above shows the small lot with its partially covered studio stage, and the front entrance is featured in the image below. Romaine Studios was owned by producer Henry Y. Romaine. The lot was not ideal; Jack Warner called it "a dump." Warner Bros. produced a two-reel comedy at this studio starring Monty Banks. Romaine was not the first motion picture studio in Culver City; Thomas Ince built one there as early as 1915. MGM (today's Sony Pictures Studios), Selznick International Studios (where 1939's *Gone With the Wind* was made), and Hal Roach Studios soon became Culver City tenants. Romaine Studios was located on the northeast corner of Ince and Washington Boulevards.



THE STUDIOS



WARNER BROS. SUNSET STUDIOS, 1927. The look of the lot changed a great deal during the 1920s (aerial view above and main building below). What was once vacant land grew into a complete film factory. These photographs were taken the year *The Jazz Singer* was released. The film proved so successful that the Warners found themselves rich for the first time in their careers. Always looking to expand, they saw low-hanging fruit waiting to be plucked in the form of financially troubled First National Pictures. They moved most operations to First National's new studio in Burbank after the purchase and sold the Hollywood property in 1937. For years it was a bowling alley, but eventually reopened as a studio, passing through several owners, including Gene Autry and Paramount Pictures. Today it is known as Sunset Bronson Studios.

THE STUDIOS

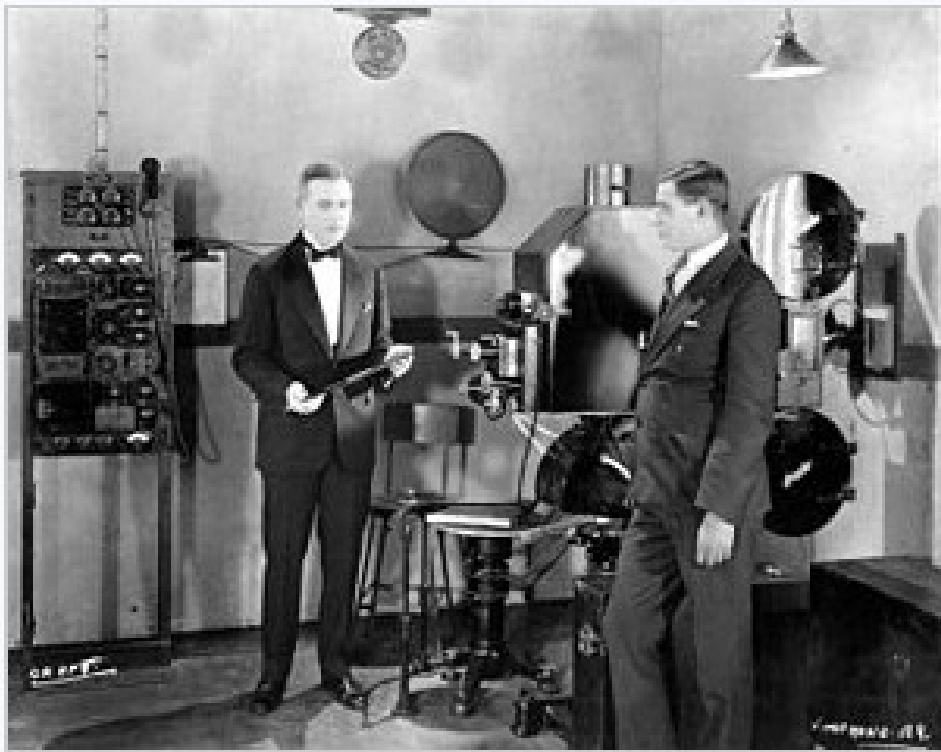


WARNER FIRST NATIONAL STUDIOS (AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH), 1932. After scraping by for nearly two decades as a second-tier producer, distributor, and exhibitor, Warner Bros. had finally made the big time with their purchase of First National. But Warner Bros.'s arrival on the Hollywood scene nearly proved to be short-lived as the Great Depression, which began soon after, almost forced the new enterprise out of business.



WARNER FIRST NATIONAL STUDIOS (AERIAL CLOSE-UP PHOTOGRAPH), 1932. Mines Field opened in 1928. Its name was changed to Los Angeles Airport in 1941, and later to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in 1949. The arrow with the words "L.A. MINES 14M" atop the soundstage aided pilots in navigating to the new field, 14 miles to the southwest.

THE TALKIES



A Vitaphone projection setup at a 1926 demonstration. Engineer E. B. Craft is holding a soundtrack disc. The turntable, on a massive tripod base, is at lower center.

(Wikipedia)

Vitaphone was a [sound film](#) system used for [feature films](#) and nearly 1,000 [short subjects](#) made by [Warner Bros.](#) and its sister studio [First National](#) from 1926 to 1931. Vitaphone was the last major analog [sound-on-disc](#) system and the only one which was widely used and commercially successful. The soundtrack was not printed on the film itself, but issued separately on [phonograph records](#). The discs, recorded at $33\frac{1}{3}$ rpm (a speed first used for this system) and typically 16 inches (41 cm) in diameter, would be played on a turntable physically coupled to the projector motor while the film was being projected. It had a [frequency response](#) of 4300 Hz.^[1] Many early [talkies](#), such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927), used the Vitaphone system. The name "Vitaphone" derived from the Latin and Greek words, respectively, for "living" and "sound".

(Wikipedia)

THE TALKIES



THE JAZZ SINGER, 1927. October 6, 1927, marked a tectonic shift in the history of the world's filmed entertainment. Before that day, silent films were king. After the world premiere of *The Jazz Singer* that evening at the Warner's Theatre in Manhattan, talkies would ascend to the Hollywood throne. While the idea of talking pictures was not a new one (some of the earliest films had soundtracks), silent films held many advantages over talkies. A silent film could be shot anywhere without the risk of a passing ambulance ruining a take, and a quick translation of dialogue cards could make it available to a foreign audience. Silents were also inexpensive to exhibit—an organist-for-hire was usually the only soundtrack that was ever needed. For these reasons, most believed silents would continue to rule Hollywood. That all changed on the night of the premiere. Sadly, none of the Warner brothers were on-hand to share the moment, because three of the brothers were rushing back to California to be with their dying brother Sam.

Warner's Theatre in New York's Manhattan was air conditioned. See PART TWO

The stars learn to talk

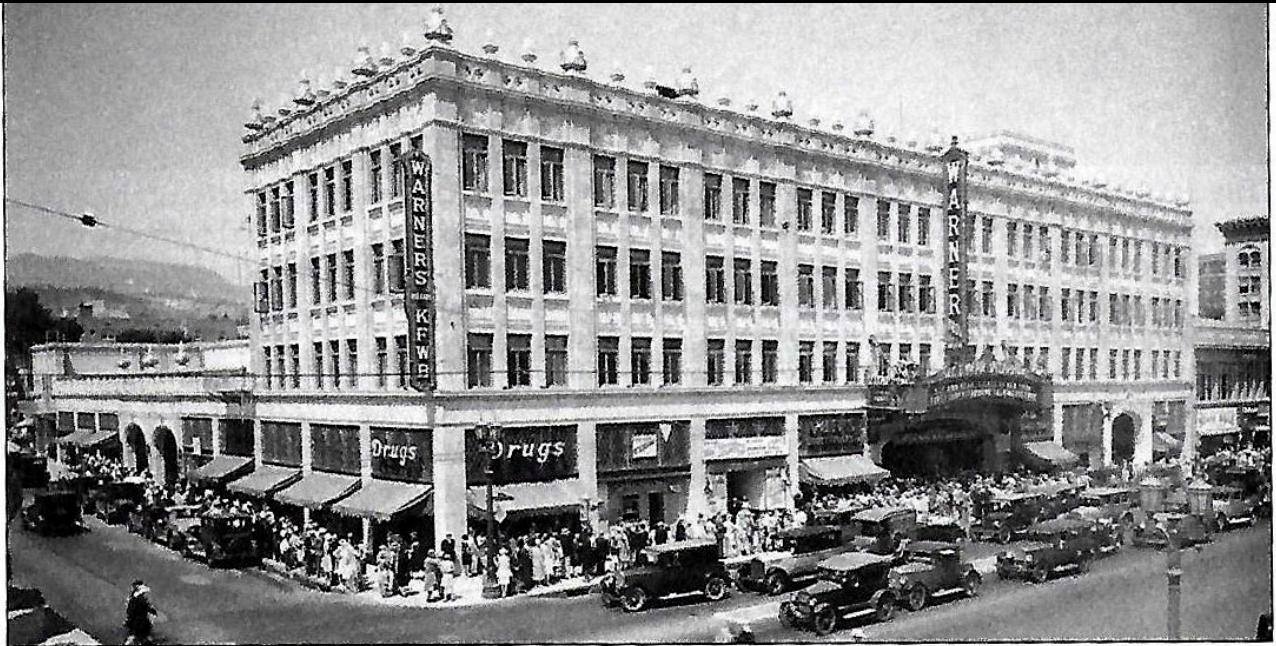
The rumour reached Hollywood that Warners' East Coast studio was producing talking pictures! Back in Beverly Hills the stars waited uneasily to see what would happen next . . .

DECEMBER
25 CENTS



(The Movie magazine, Issue 1, Orbis Publishing London, 1979)

THE TALKIES



WARNER HOLLYWOOD THEATRE, 1928. This theater, located at 6433 Hollywood Boulevard, was intended to host the West Coast premiere of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), but trouble with the new sound system postponed its opening. The film being shown on the day this photograph was taken was *Lights of New York* (1928), the first true "talkie." One of Hollywood's biggest blockbusters to date, it cost only \$23,000 to produce, but sold over \$1 million in tickets.

Warner's Hollywood Theatre in Los Angeles was air conditioned. See PART TWO

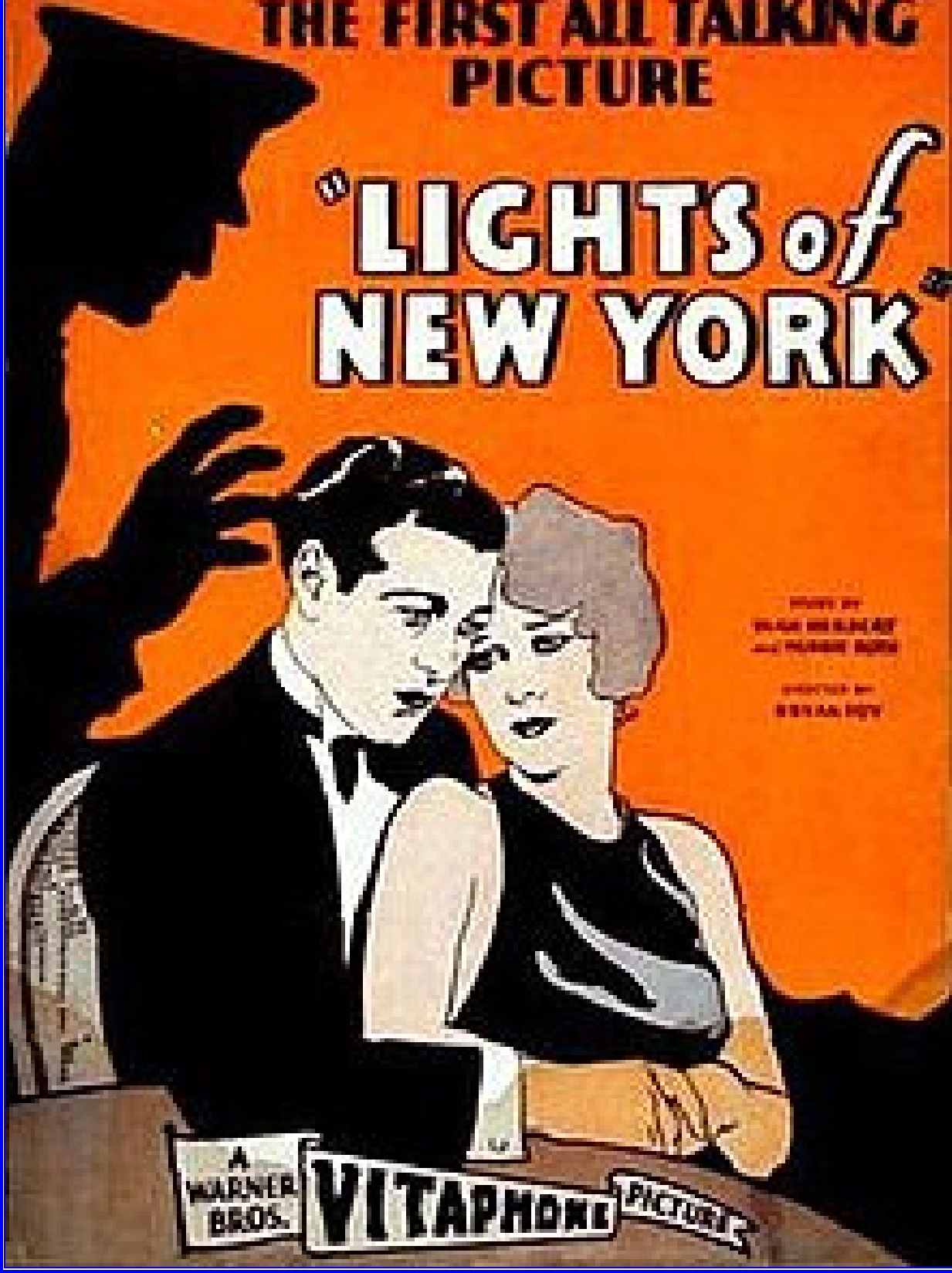
WARNER BROS. present

THE FIRST 'ALL TALKING'
PICTURE

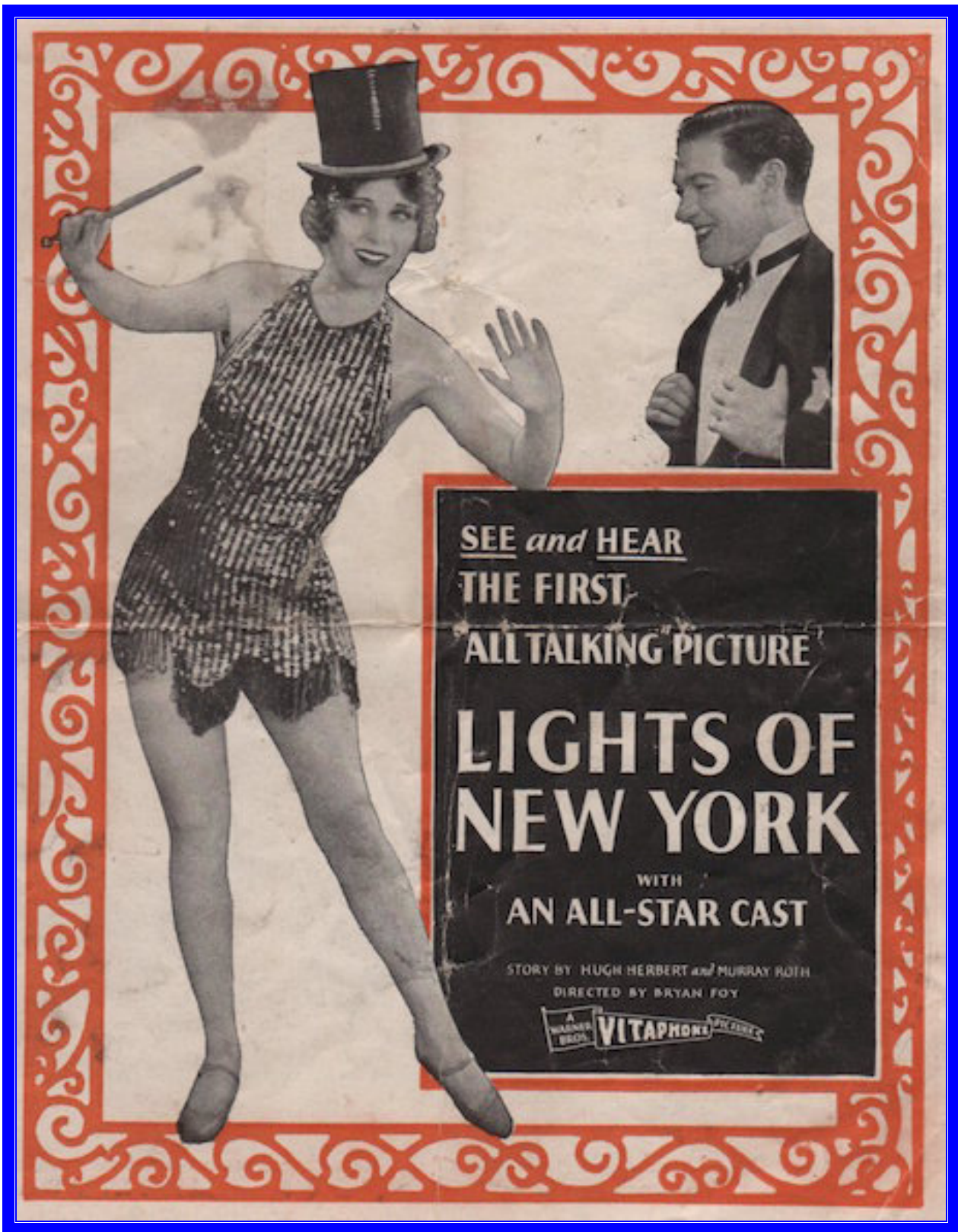
'LIGHTS of'
NEW YORK'

WRITTEN BY
FRANK CRICHTON
AND HENRY SHERB

PRODUCED BY
WALTER WHITE



A WARNER BROS. VITAPHONE PICTURES



SEE and HEAR
THE FIRST
ALL TALKING PICTURE

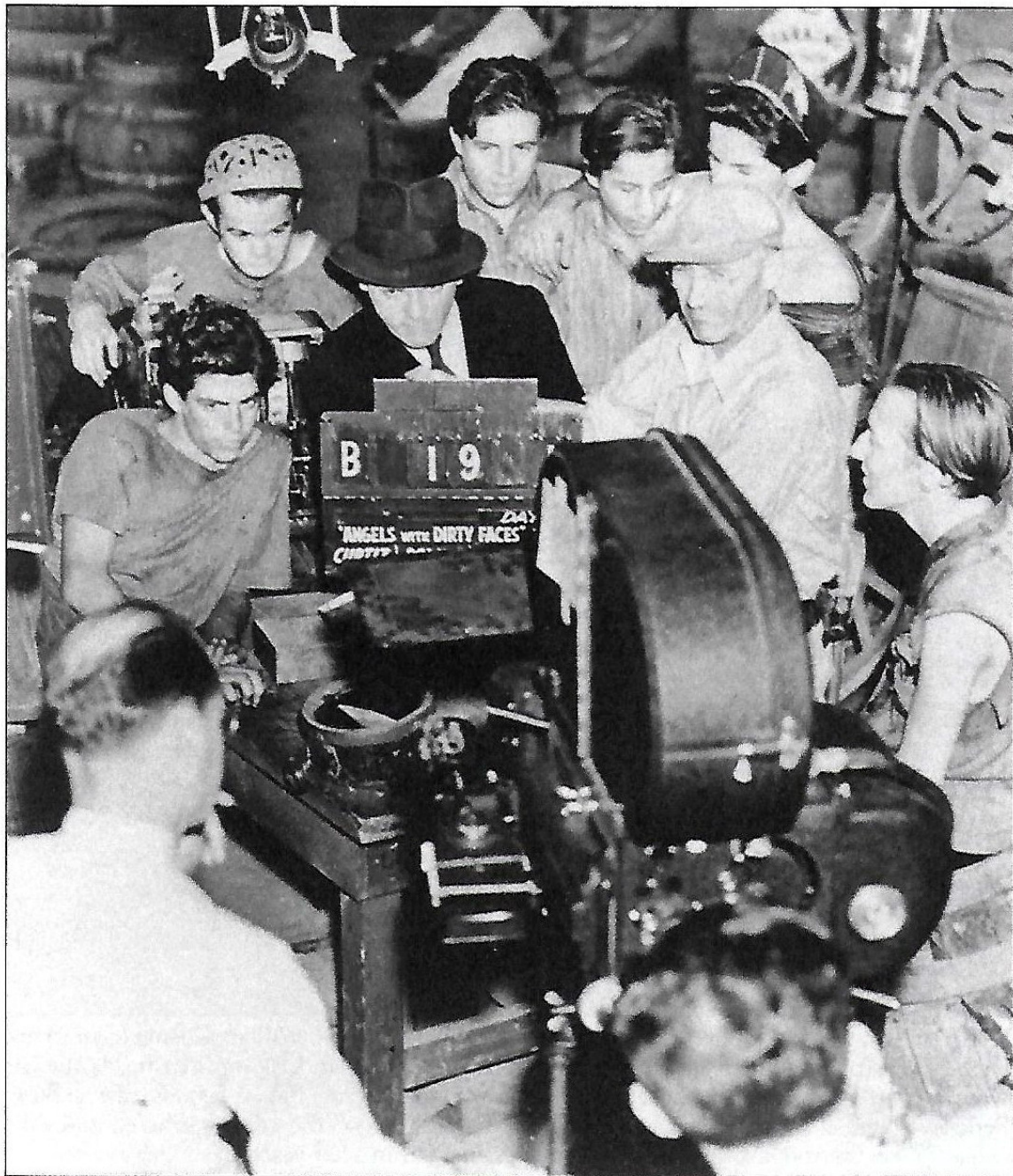
LIGHTS OF NEW YORK

WITH
AN ALL-STAR CAST

STORY BY HUGH HERBERT and MURRAY ROTH
DIRECTED BY BRYAN FOY

A WARNER BROS. **VITAPHONE** PRESENTS

THE NINETEEN-THIRTIES



ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES, 1938. James Cagney and the "Dead End Kids" pose for a close-up during the making of *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938). The Dead End Kids got their name on Broadway in the play *Dead End*. They were brought to Hollywood to revive their roles in a film version for United Artists and bounced around Hollywood at several studios, performing at various times as the "East Side Kids," "Little Tough Guys," and "Bowery Boys." As possible reflections of their on-screen personas they earned the reputation of troublemakers on the lot as well. From left to right facing the camera are Billy Halop, Leo Gorcey, James Cagney, Bernard Punsley, Gabriell Dell, Bobby Jordan, an unidentified man, and Huntz Hall.

THE NINETEEN-THIRTIES



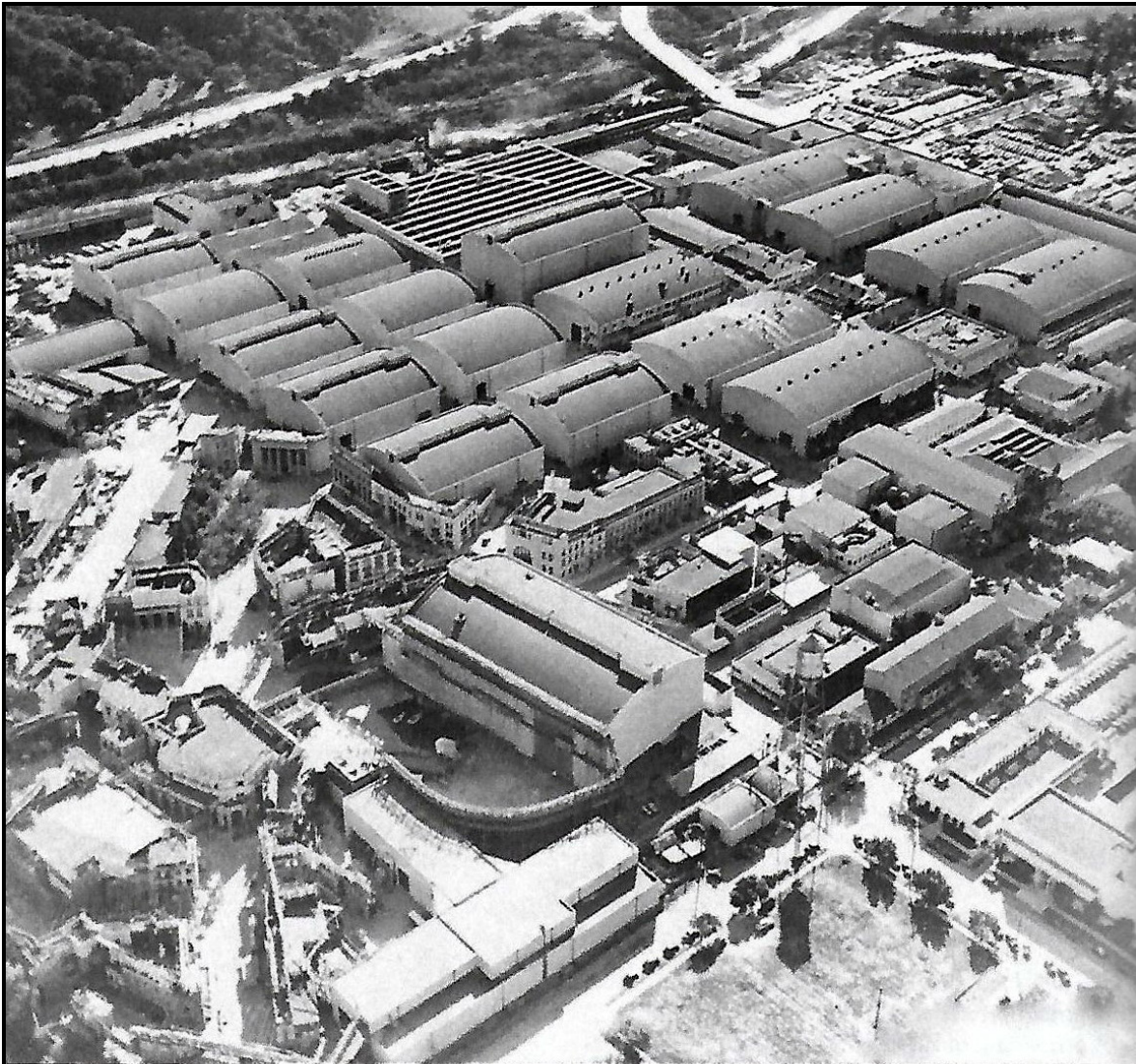
CONFESSIONS OF A NAZI SPY, 1939. After a Warner office in Germany was smashed and an employee killed by a group of anti-Semites, the brothers produced a propaganda spy-thriller called *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) to alert the country to the threat of Hitler and the Nazis. For this controversial decision, the Warners received several death threats and were warned that during the film's premiere, the theater would be bombed. The isolationist U.S. Congress called Harry Warner to Washington to address charges of "creating hysteria." All was forgotten a few months later when Hitler invaded Poland. The studio re-released the film the following year with footage added of the Nazi blitzkrieg across Europe. As with sound, the Warners had once again foreseen the next big thing coming before the rest of Hollywood. But this time, they would gladly have been proven wrong.

THE NINETEEN-FORTIES



CASABLANCA, 1942. Great conflicts can sometime bring out the best in people, and in movies. *Casablanca* (1942) is perhaps the greatest film that Warner Bros. (or the rest of Hollywood, for that matter) ever produced. According to conventional Hollywood wisdom, this film should never have been a success. It was based on a play that was never produced, the writers were literally finishing scenes hours before filming, and at the time, Humphrey Bogart had never played a leading romantic role. But somehow it all came together and is now considered by many to be Hollywood's supreme achievement. This *Casablanca* bazaar scene was filmed on the Warner Bros. backlot, possibly on today's French Street, the same area used for the Paris café exteriors.

THE NINETEEN-FIFTIES



WARNER BROS. STUDIOS, 1951. By the dawn of the 1950s, studio moguls feared that television, the newest kid on the media block, would keep people in their living rooms instead of in the theaters. In 1946, there were only 6,000 television sets in America, but a mere four years later, that number had increased one-thousandfold to six million. Conversely, the big producers sold 100 million movie tickets in 1946 but saw that number cut in half over the next decade. Studio heads hoped they could re-excite moviegoers with grittier films following a Supreme Court decision in 1952 that relaxed the restrictive Motion Picture Production Codes. Most studios, including Warner Bros., resorted to technical gimmickry to lure audiences back, but ticket sales continued to drop. By 1955, the Warners cautiously dipped their toes into the television waters with a program called *Warner Bros. Presents*. Soon, they would produce several Westerns for television, and the medium they had feared so greatly would become a vital part of the studio's strength.

"Welcome Exchange Executives to Warner Bros. Pictures Convention" shouts a banner in front of the Warner Sunset Studio. The bus in the foreground is pulling a portable generator to illuminate the gala affair. 1925.



WARNER BROS.

1903-1950s

HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS REVISITED

Additional information and photographs from the book
"Warner Bros. Hollywood's Ultimate Backlot," Steven Bingham, Globe Pequot, USA
have been added under REVISITED to the original PART ONE.

WARNER BROS. REVISITED



WARNER BROS. REVISITED



An aerial view of the Warner lot and south Burbank from 1939. Note the "30 Acres" backlot property slightly northeast of the studio proper, and, beyond that, the future Walt Disney Studio lot, under construction.

WARNER BROS. REVISITED



The studio power plant, left, and the WB Fire Department, right. Circa 1930s.

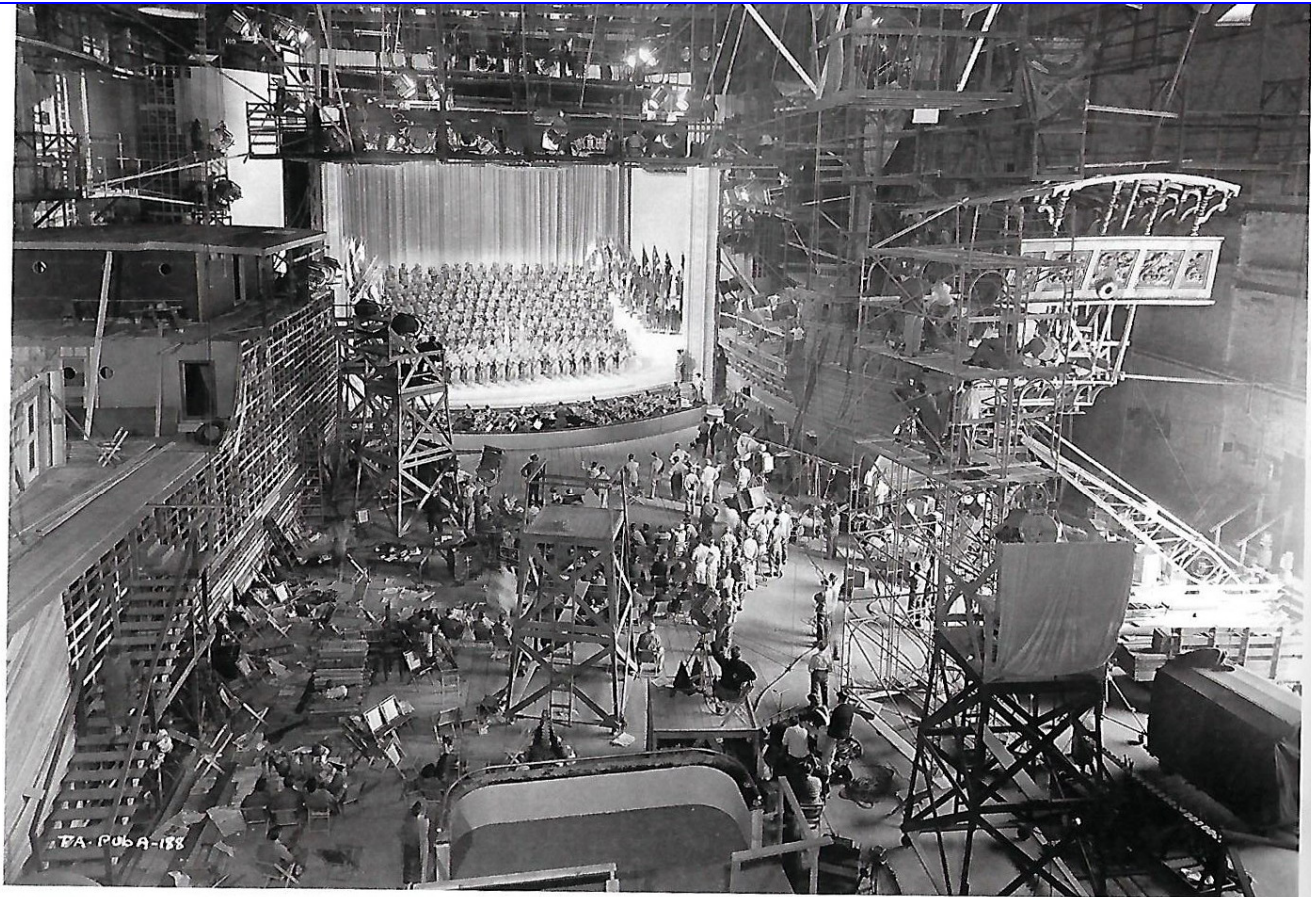
An onsite power plant was part of the original studio construction. Six generators were capable of carrying a load of 35,000 amps at 110 volts, roughly the equivalent of a power station for a city of twenty-five thousand people. One hundred miles of cable were buried to service the entire site. The coming of sound (as in Warner's "The Jazz Singer" and "Lights of New York" of 1927) and the introduction of colour film necessitated the tripling of lights on a set and a steady reliable electricity supply. Portable, diesel-powered generators were brought in to cope with these increased demands. In due course, a second power plant and even more generators were provided.

WARNER BROS. REVISITED



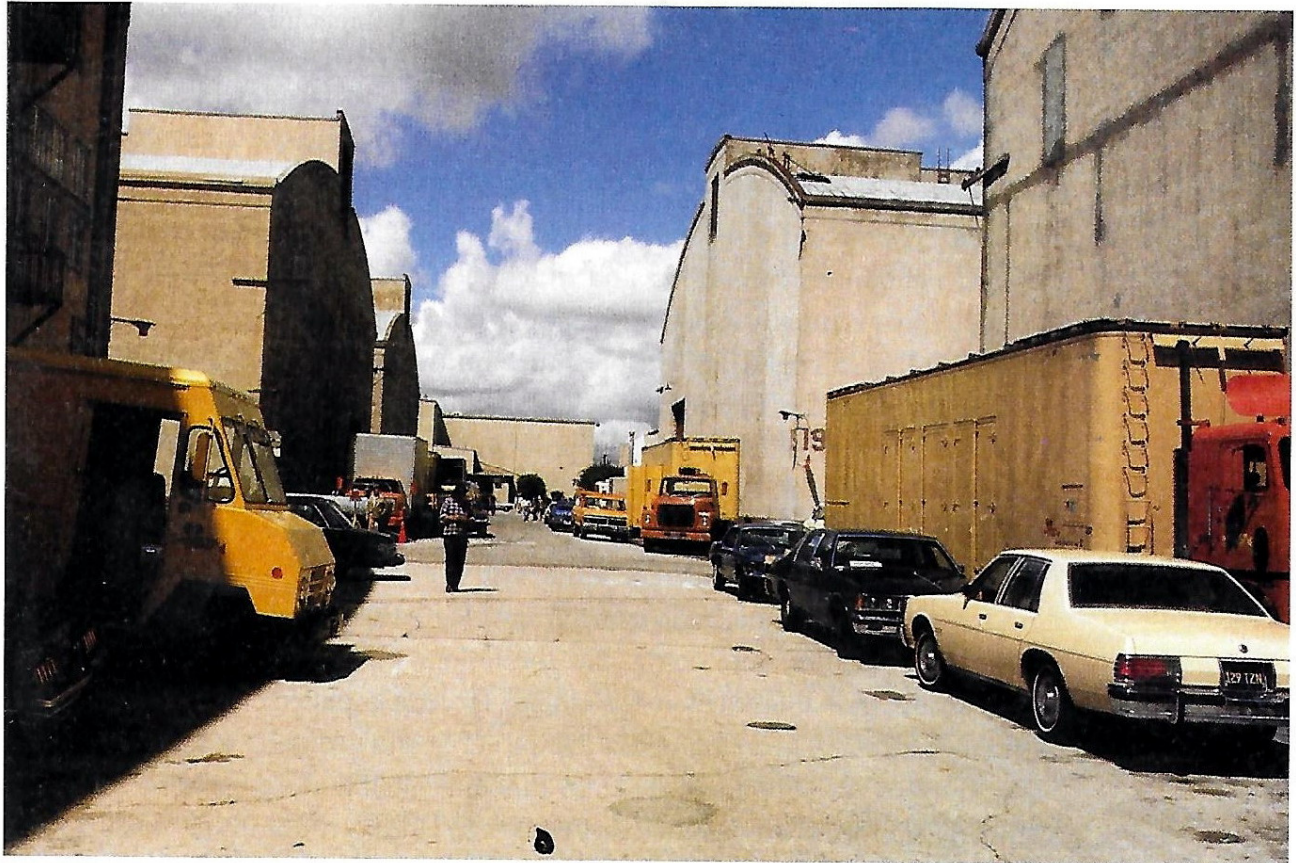
The studio's famous water tower of 1927 was in a different location to where it now stands. The original tower was decorated with the logos of Vitaphone and First National Pictures which changed to the traditional WB logo in 1939. Standing 133 feet high it had a capacity of one hundred thousand US gallons. Intended for fire fighting and factory use it was never used to supply drinking water. It has been said "There is no bigger totem of Hollywood than the Warner Bros. water tower."

WARNER BROS. REVISITED



This Is the Army (1943) shooting the lavish "This Is the Last Time" musical number on Stage 21. The water is gone, but the ship *Falcon* is still there, right.

WARNER BROS. REVISITED



Potholes and peeling paint. The Burbank Studios never had adequate funds to maintain the facility, as this study from 1980 illustrates all too well.

WARNER BROS. REVISITED



The studio in 1994. Note that the Bridge Building (in the location of the Camelot Castle) and a new Costume Department/parking lot are both under construction. The oddly shaped Cartoon Building (chapter 3) can be seen at top left.

GENERAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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Where noted IOA=Images of America, Arcadia Charleston.

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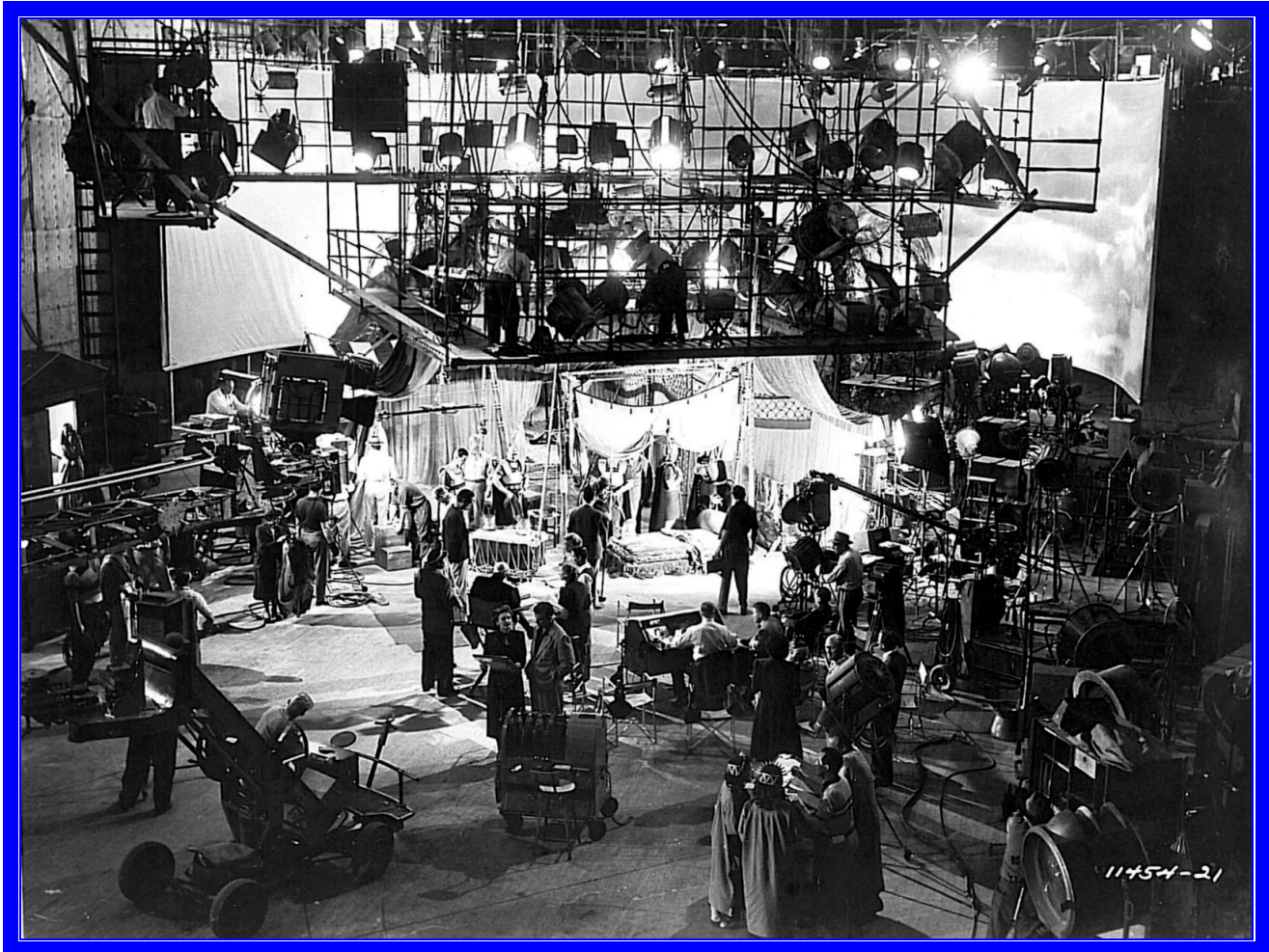
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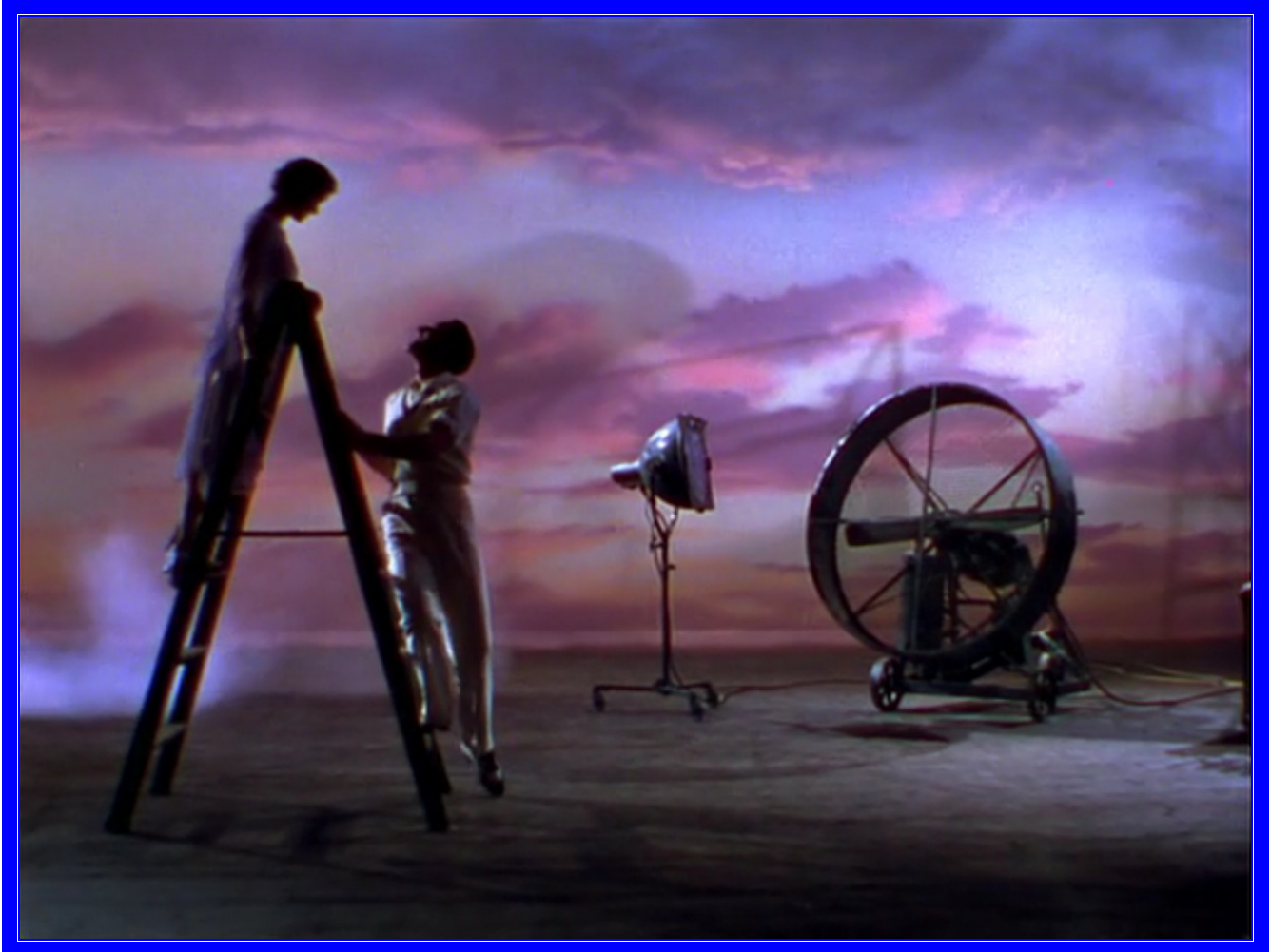
THE COOLING PROBLEM



Typical Hollywood Studio with lights and equipment in the 1950s (actually Paramount's "Sunset Boulevard")

The early movie studios were not air conditioned, but could get very hot due to the southern California climate and the heat added by the batteries of Klieg studio lights. Ventilation and air movement could be maintained by large mobile propeller fans. The fan noise was not a problem in the era of the silent film. This all changed with the introduction of the talkies, because during a "live take" unwanted background noise was not acceptable with the result that actors and crew got very uncomfortable. Both were more fortunate in the early days of TV production as certainly from the 1960s many television studios were air conditioned.

A SOLUTION TO THE COOLING PROBLEM?



There are many photographs of movie studios in use, filled with actors and crew, huge cameras, microphones, sound equipment and complex lighting, but any showing mobile ventilating fans have not been located.

However, the above still from the famous musical "Singin' in the Rain" (an MGM movie) does show in the right background one such fan.