

## HAROLD LLOYD *Safety Last!* Film Location Tour A SILENT VISIONS Tour of Downtown Los Angeles

Harold Lloyd filmed his first feature-length thrill comedy *Safety Last!* (1923) in the Historic Core of downtown Los Angeles during the summer of 1922. The following tour is provided by author John Bengtson in association with the Los Angeles Conservancy's June 29, 2011 presentation of *Safety Last!* at the Orpheum Theatre, where John will be signing his new Harold Lloyd film location book *Silent Visions: Discovering Early Hollywood and New York through the Films of Harold Lloyd*, from Santa Monica Press. Lloyd staged the famous skyscraper climbing sequence using special sets constructed atop three increasingly taller buildings, and repeated this formula for his final thrill picture *Feet First* in 1930. A photo page following this tour reveals how Lloyd accomplished the effect.

1. The tour begins at the Orpheum Theatre at 842 South Broadway. Walk south from the Orpheum down Broadway, cross 9th Street, continue across W. Olympic, and stop at the small triangular parking lot between Broadway and Broadway Place. It was from atop a now-demolished two-story building at this site that Lloyd built the first of his three climbing sets for both *Safety Last!* and *Feet First*. The Blackstone's Department Store (orange box), appearing prominently in the background during the early scenes, is still standing, although now blocked from view by tall neighbors built after 1923. The extant Southern California Gas Company building (red box) can also be seen.



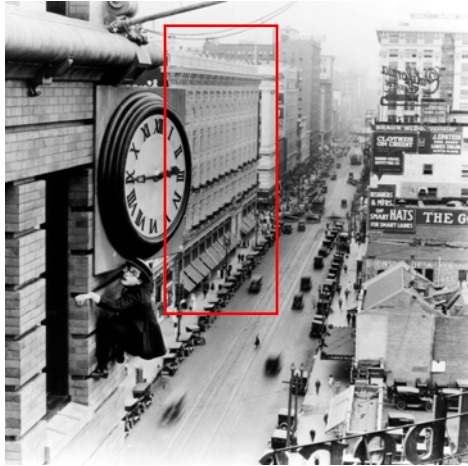
2. From this vantage point, you can also look south towards the dome tower of the Herald Examiner Building, that appears during chase sequences from Lloyd's later feature film *Girl Shy* (1924).



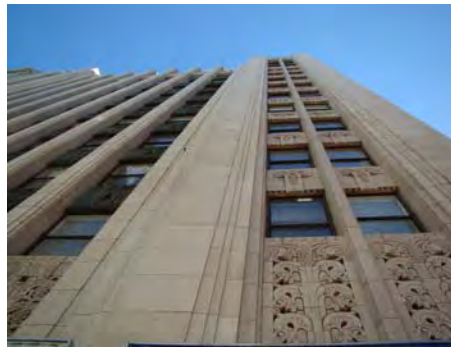
3. Return north up Broadway, crossing Olympic, and pause at 950 S. Broadway. This former Southern California Gas Company building was used for the second stage of Harold's stunt climb in *Feet First*. As revealed on the final page of this tour, Lloyd built a climbing set and camera tower on the roof of this building.



4. Continue further north to 908 S. Broadway, where Lloyd built the famous clock set on the nine-story tall roof. The extant Hamburger's (later May Co.) Building (red box) appears in the background.



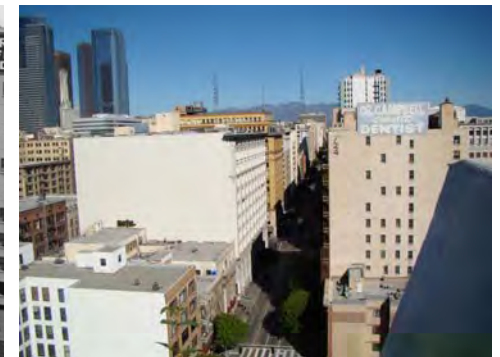
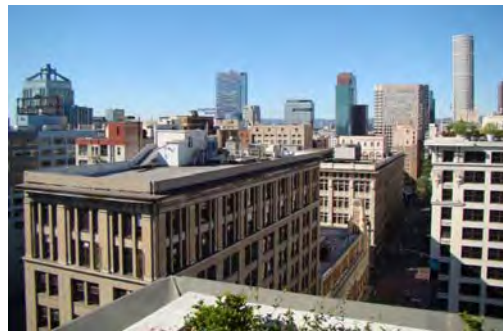
5. Continue north and cross 9th Street. The corner Ninth and Broadway Building portrayed the real life building that torments Harold during *Feet First*.



6. Continue north past the Orpheum, and study the painted wall signs on the side of 820 S. Broadway. You can still make out “HIGH GRADE LADIES TAILOR SIXTH FLOOR” as it appeared during the movie.



7. Continue north up Broadway and turn right (east) at 8th Street, and continue to the NE corner of Spring Street. The Great Republic Life Insurance Building (1923) at 756 Spring, now residential lofts, is where Lloyd filmed the final stage of his climb during *Feet First*, filming looking both west down 8th Street (*below left*) and north up Spring (*below right*).



8. Continue north up Spring Street to the NE corner of 6th Street. The Merchants National Bank building at 548 S. Spring Street, now residential lofts, is where Lloyd filmed the final stages of his climb during *Safety Last!*, looking north along Spring towards the Alexandria Hotel (*below left*) and south (*below right*) along Spring towards the extant Stock Exchange, Union Oil, and Van Nuys Buildings.



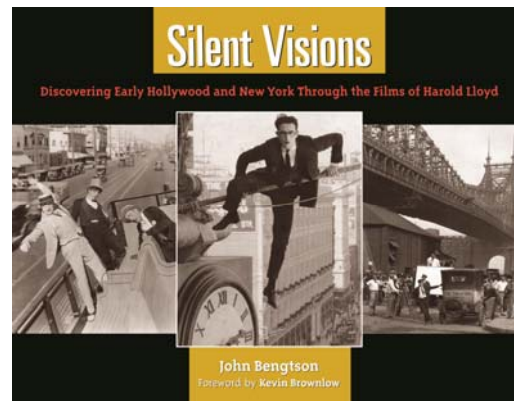
9. Turn around, and return back down Spring Street, and turn right (west) at 7th Street, and continue to Broadway. The NE corner of 7th and Broadway appears in *Safety Last!* as Harold rides an ambulance to work.



10. For a detour, continue west along 7th Street two blocks until Olive Street. Lloyd filmed his short thrill picture *Never Weaken* (1921) atop the red and white Ville de Paris Department Store (LA Jewelry Mart Building) on the SE corner, with views of the former Pantages Theatre (Diamond Center Building) (*lower left*) and the Los Angeles Athletic Club (*lower right*) across the street in the background. The Ville de Paris appears during a scene from Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), and its interior was used for the department store scenes in *Safety Last!*



11. Return to Broadway and continue south back to the Orpheum, which concludes the tour.



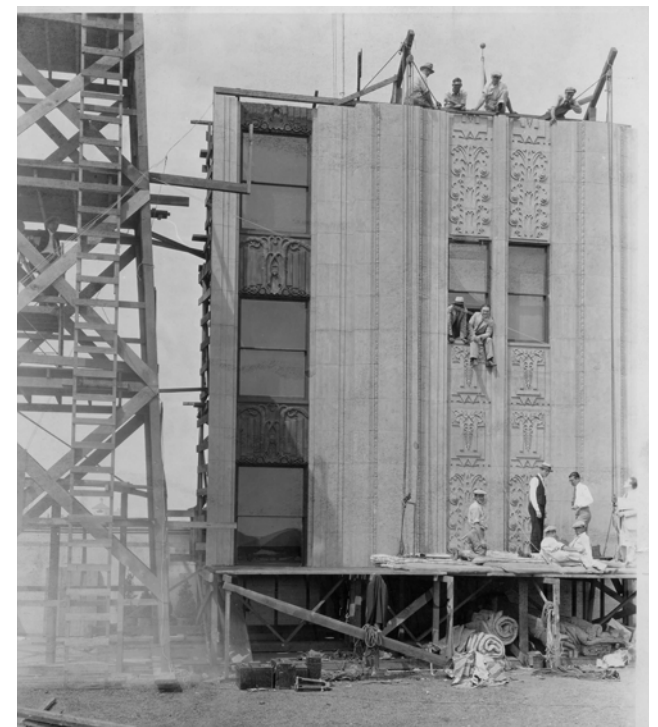
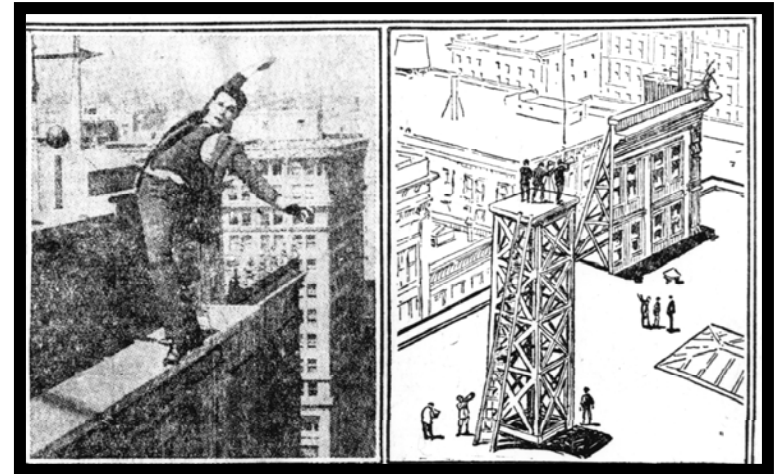
*Harold Lloyd*  
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Visit the author's blog at  
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## How Harold filmed *Safety Last!*

Although the danger was minimized, Harold Lloyd was just as high in the air as he appeared to be during his climbing stunts. Wishing secrecy, Lloyd did not photograph the stunt climbing sets built for *Safety Last!*, and in later years was coy about how it was filmed. One newspaper revealed the secret in 1923, although the graphic to the right depicts Harold on a set nearly four stories tall! As shown, Lloyd built a façade set on the roof of a tall building, and placed a camera tower nearby. The camera looked down on the set from the tower, while excluding the real building's rooftop from the bottom of the movie frame. The tower allowed the cameraman to create different illusions of height by changing the vantage point. Because the camera recorded exactly what was there to be seen, these scenes crackle with authenticity that computer generated effects fail to replicate.



These production images from Lloyd's final thrill picture *Feet First* (1930) reveal how Lloyd constructed a rooftop climbing set and camera tower to create the illusion of great height.



The Western Costume Company Building at 908 S. Broadway (*above, left*). In the photo above, center (from left to right) is sound-man Eric Brazier, cameraman Frank Haysom, and award-winning directors and film historians Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, visiting the rooftop site to film part of their 1989 Emmy-nominated documentary *Harold Lloyd: The Third Genius*. The box above David's head marks the original Hamburger's Building that appears prominently in the background of the scenes filmed from this setting. The full extent of the clock set built here is visible in this composite image (*above, right*) created from a vertical panning shot from the movie.

Although news of Lloyd's devastating hand injury in 1919 was publicized at the time, audiences most likely failed to appreciate that Lloyd performed all of his subsequent stunt work missing the thumb and index finger of his right

hand. This was how Lloyd wanted it. We can see in this shot (*left*) that Lloyd's prosthetic right thumb is not grasping hold of the rope. Lloyd was always a fine athlete. He needed to be in order to endure numerous takes and retakes while hanging in mid-air.



David Gill recreates a famous Lloyd pose (*middle right*). Brownlow, Gill, and Haysom (*near right*).







Million Dollar Theater  
307 S. Broadway (1917)

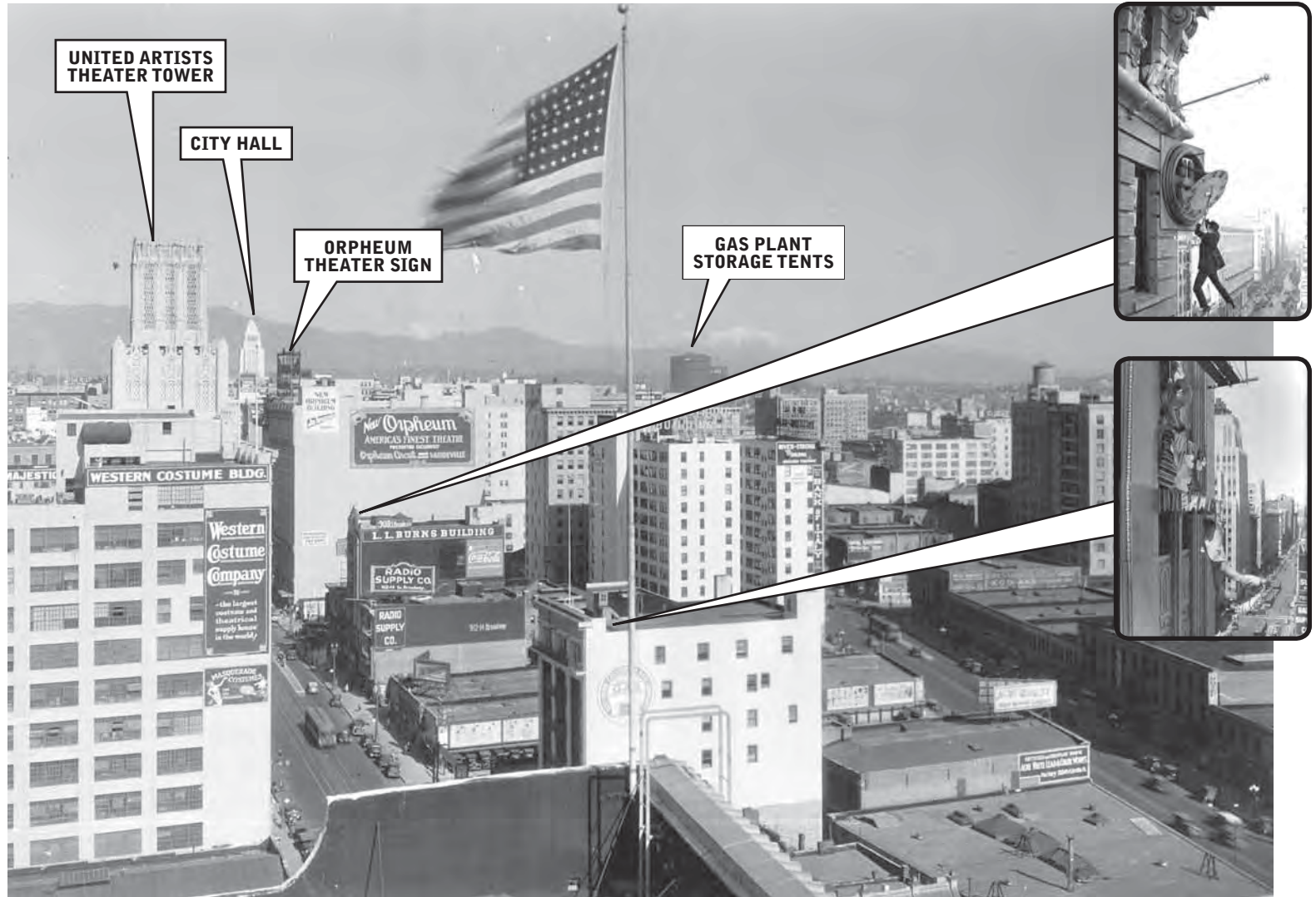


Second City Hall  
226-240 S. Broadway (1888-1928)



On September 7, 1922, human fly Bill Strother climbed to the top of the International Bank Building, as four movie cameras captured his climb. The resulting footage was used for long shots of “Harold” on the building. This view looks down Main Street, five years before the neighboring City Hall began construction in 1927. Strother began his career in 1914, and climbed buildings across the country, raising funds for the Great War Liberty Loan Drive. He was especially acclaimed for scaling the 57-story Woolworth Building in New York. After witnessing an earlier Strother climb in person, Lloyd had felt so anxious, and yet so irresistibly compelled to watch, that he immediately decided to incorporate Bill into his next production. *Safety Last!* was Bill’s only screen appearance. A minor accident prior to filming had injured Bill’s leg, leading to his character being named “Limpy Bill.” Aside from climbing the International Bank Building, Bill also climbed the Lane Mortgage Company Building and the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles during 1923. Bill got out of the business in the 1930s, and lived until age 61, when he died in a car accident.

This striking photo was taken sometime after City Hall was completed in 1928, but before the two corner Art Deco buildings, prominent in *Feet First*, were built in 1930. The Ninth and Broadway Building now completely obscures the painted Orpheum Theater sign. The clock set from *Safety Last!* and the intermediate climbing set from *Feet First* were built atop the respectively identified buildings. On second glance you might notice something odd about this cityscape. Except for the four items identified above, nothing else extends above the horizon. For more than 50 years, Los Angeles enforced a building height limit of 150 feet (13 stories), resulting in a remarkably flat sky-

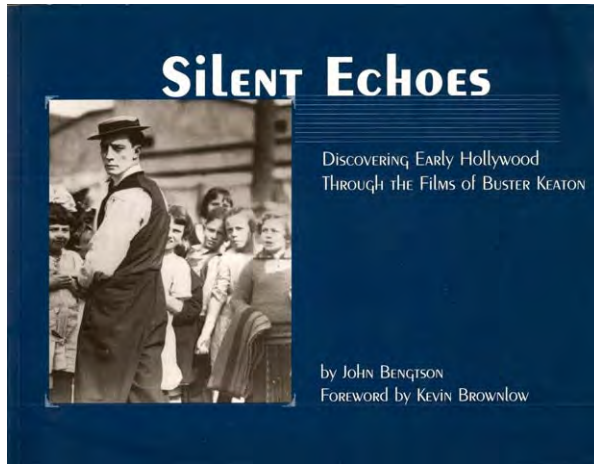


line. Prior to 1957, the lone exception was granted to City Hall (1928), towering at 454 feet (28 stories). The gas processing plants adjacent to Chinatown were not subject to the law, and the tallest of the massive gas storage tanks stood at 378 feet. For decades, then, in most cityscape photos, only City Hall and the gas tanks rise above the crowd. City planners extolled the height limit, noting that lower density construction reduced congestion and transportation demands, while allowing more parcels to share in rising land values. Starting in 1927 or so, a growing trend developed. Under City plans, it was permissible to construct above the height limit so long as the portion exceeding 150 feet was not habitable. Thus, the eye-grabbing tower for the United Artists Theater, pictured here, is a visibly hollow shell. The beautiful Spanish Gothic theater was financed by United Artists, the studio corporation founded by director D.W. Griffith, and stars Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford. The faces of these three stars adorn murals inside the main lobby.

The Los Angeles Conservancy will also be screening Buster Keaton's short film *Cops* (1922). Here are a few locations from author John Bengtson's Keaton book *Silent Echoes*.



Cosmo Street at Selma, east of Cahuenga, in Hollywood.



Cahuenga alley, just south of Hollywood Boulevard.

The former USC Dental College Building, now lost, formerly on Exposition Boulevard near Figueroa.



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