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For El Defensor Chieftain

BRIEF HISTORY OF CINEMA

American inventor Thomas Edison is often credited with constructing the first motion picture camera. While Edison did finance the project, credit must be given to one of his employees, William Dickson, for the invention of the "kinetograph" in 1891. This was a crude, motor-driven camera system for photographing and projecting the first motion pictures. Carrying the Edison name, the first produced movie was entitled the "Blacksmith Scene" featuring three blacksmiths at work. The film was an astounding 34-seconds in length.

These early Edison Kinetographs were coin-operated machines placed in train stations and stores. The short motion pictures were viewed one person at a time by looking into an eyepiece contraption. These "full length movies," lasted about a minute and usually cost 5 cents to view.

The first projectors able to display the moving images on a screen came about in 1900. This quickly led to the first motion pictures made for viewing by small audiences. These were short productions shown in local clubs or vaudeville theaters with limited audiences. Still, they were seen as real novelties for their time. These were not movies with a plot, as we know them today, but motion pictures showing moving trains, running horses, people boarding ships — basically anything that moved.

It was not until around 1909 that short motion pictures with a plot, usually a comedic theme, were produced and shown across the country. Of course, these were silent movies with no sound track. The words were displayed on the screen for the audience to read, usually accompanied by live piano or organ music.



Photo by Paul Harden

For more than 30 years, these are some of the faces that have greeted moviegoers at the Loma Theater. Managers Sheila Armijo (left), Bessie Moya, and Johnny Armijo.

Movies with sound tracks, first called "talkies," began to appear in 1929. Their popularity was so overwhelming that only a few silent movies were made in the 1930s. These early talkies were plagued with poor sound quality and the constant problem of the spoken word never quite synchronizing with the film's jerky movements. New technologies were quickly developed to improve both the film and sound techniques. By 1932, motion pictures that ran smoothly with good, synchronized sound began to appear.

During this era, the "big five" motion picture studios were formed: Warner Brothers, Paramount Pictures, RKO, MGM and 20th Century Fox. Although deep in the Great Depression, motion pictures became a major American industry, which created enormous amounts of wealth for the companies and their on-screen stars.

NEW MEXICO'S FIRST MOVIE THEATERS

New Mexico's early theaters were used for vaudeville performances and traveling theatrical groups — the dominant form of entertainment of the time. By the late

1800s, the larger towns in New Mexico had a theater. This included the Garcia Opera House in Socorro, built in 1881, and it is still in use.

In the late 1890s, short motion pictures were often shown in conjunction with the evening's theatrical performances. By the early 1900s, these theaters were adapted to show the first "silent movies."

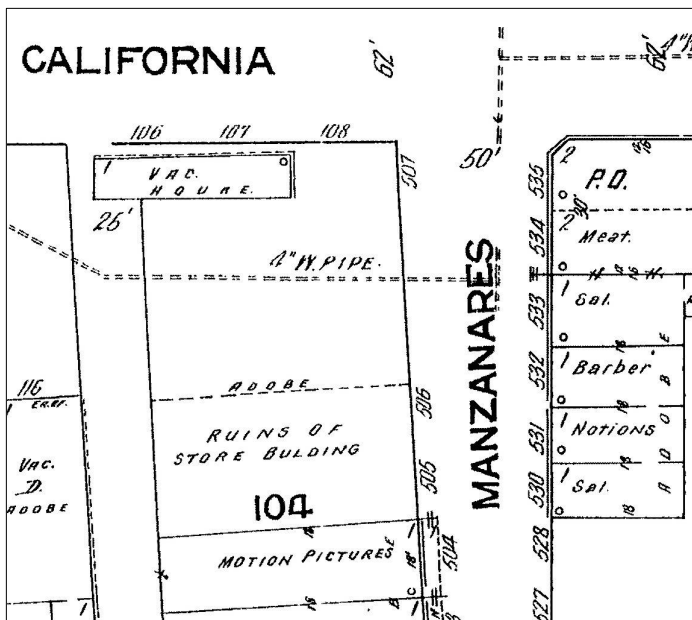
One early theater is the Fountain Theatre in Mesilla, built in 1907 as a vaudeville stage. Motion picture projection was added to it in 1913. It is believed to be the oldest motion picture theater in New Mexico that is still standing and still in use.

Shortly thereafter, other theaters were built around the state. Silver City's Airdome was built in 1909; the Shuler Theatre in Raton in 1915; the Apollo Theatre in Artesia in 1918; and the Lyceum vaudeville theater was built in Clayton in 1919 and converted to a silent-movie house in 1923.

Albuquerque's first theater was the Mutual Theater, built downtown in 1912. The oldest theater still standing in Albuquerque is the famous Kimo Theatre, which was built in 1927.

SOCORRO'S FIRST MOTION PICTURES

It is not known when the first motion picture was shown in Socorro. The first mention found in the Socorro Chieftain is 1898. In that year, several motion pictures of the Spanish-American War were shown in



1913 Sanborn Insurance Map, Socorro Historical Society
Socorro's first "motion picture" hall is shown on the 1913 Sanborn Insurance maps (bottom center). It was called the Guild Theater. Today, this block is the Gambles Hardware store.

conjunction with theatrical performances at the Garcia Opera House. These short, one-minute long films gave Socorroans their first look at war — moving images of the sinking of the battleship "Maine" and Col. Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt and his Rough Riders.

These early movies were on a single cylinder or disk of film, which limited their playing time to about one-minute in duration. Around 1909 the continuous strip "reel film" was developed by the Kodak Company and allowed longer motion pictures to be produced. The first silent movies were produced on reel-film with 20-30 minute playing times as the norm.

As previously mentioned, the very first motion picture theaters in New Mexico were built from 1909 into the 1920s, coinciding with the explosive growth of the silent-movie industry. It might be surprising to learn that Socorro had one of the first motion picture theaters in New Mexico.

GUILD THEATER, 1912-1918

The first motion picture theater in Socorro was called the Guild Theatre and appears to have opened in 1912. It is clearly shown on the 1913 Sanborn Insurance maps on Manzanares Street.

It was a long, narrow building consisting of dark hardwood floors, an embossed tin ceiling and a decorative brick facade. The floor was level — slanted floors to aid viewing came about in later years. Socorro's first movie theater still stands — it is part of today's Gambles-True Value Hardware Store.

Who built or operated the Guild Theatre is not known, only that the 1917-1918 manager was M.E. Pickens.



Photo by Paul Harden
The 1912-1918 Guild Theater is now part of Gambles True-Value Hardware Store. The theater is the lefthand portion of the photo.



Photo by Paul Harden

The old dark, hardwood floor of the Guild Theatre is still visible inside today's Gambles Hardware Store. After nearly a century of use, the old floor still shines.

The Guild Theatre is scarcely mentioned in the Socorro Chieftains of the time, nor did they advertise their movies as they do today. Instead, Socorro photos of this era show movie posters hung on a wall, where Gene's Flowers & Gifts is located today, to advertise current and future movies.

The next time your "honey-do" project sends you to Gambles, visit the historical first motion picture theater in Socorro. The fancy interior is still plainly visible. It is unknown whether or not owners Dave and Paul Torres will have popcorn available.

GEM THEATRE, 1918-1937

In 1918, George Keith built the famous "Keith's Ocean-to-Ocean Garage" on the west side of the Plaza where the U. S. Post Office now sits. Along with the garage, Keith also built a movie theater for the Guild Theater. Manager M.E. Pickens renamed it to the Gem Theater. At this time, Socorro was known as the "Gem City."

Construction of the new theater is described in the Socorro Chieftain with an interesting sidebar of history. The Gem Theatre was completed and ready for use by the end of October 1918. However, it was quarantined by the State of New Mexico before it was opened. This was a period of time,

toward the end of World War I, when the Spanish influenza was ravaging New Mexico – in fact, it had spread throughout much of the world.

In an attempt to stop the spread of the lethal disease, New Mexico enacted an emergency health law to "maintain and enforce quarantine; to close theatres, schools and other public places and to forbid gatherings when necessary for the protection of the public health." As a result, the new Gem Theatre sat empty for months.

When the Gem Theatre was allowed to open is not known. Unfortunately, there are few copies of the Socorro Chieftain known to exist for the years 1919-1920 – not even in the official microfilm records. In March 1919, the quarantine was lifted, suggesting a time frame of when the Gem Theatre was finally allowed to open.

Throughout the 1920s, the Gem Theatre entertained Socorro with the constant flood of silent movies coming out of Hollywood and Burbank, Calif. The movie industry's first stars, such as Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields and Greta Garbo amused Socorroans on the silent screen.

Other popular silent films shown at the Gem Theater were "Ben Hur," "Hunchback of Notre Dame," and "The Ten Commandments" – movies that have been remade numerous times over the years since their silent-movie versions in the early 1900s.

In January 1932, new projection and sound equipment were added in response to the arrival of the industry's first movies with sound, or "talkies." A Gem Theatre ad read, "Enjoy the Talk of the Talkies with our new Western Electric Sound. All shows start promptly at 7:30 p.m. Jan. 24-25, Buster Keaton and Anita Page in 'Sidewalks of New York.' On Wed.-Thurs., Spanish movie will be 'Sombras de Gloria,' another all-Spanish



Socorro County Historical Society

Photo by Paul Harden

A westward view down Manzanares Street. Many of the old 1880s buildings, from the Price-Lowenstein Store (Loma Theater) to the old Hilton Drugs (today's Chamber of Commerce) are still in use.



First State Bank collection
The Gem Theatre and Keith's Ocean-to-Ocean garage shortly after they were built in 1918. Today, the U.S. Post Office occupies the site.

talking picture for Socorro to enjoy. Admission 10 cents children, 25 cents adults."

Some of the popular talkies to follow were "Anna Christine," where the world first heard Greta Garbo's voice; James Cagney starring in "The Public Enemy"; and, in 1934 the first talking Tarzan movie featuring Johnny Weismuller and his famous Tarzan yell.

The Gem Theatre prospered in Socorro during the 1930s in spite of the Great Depression. Gone were the days of vaudeville or the traveling theater groups. Motion pictures had become America's preferred entertainment.

In May 1937, the Gem Theater was bought by Gibraltar Entertainment. They immediately closed the theater for two months for extensive renovations. The front of the theater building was completely removed. In its place, a modern foyer and lobby were built, along with a large "V" shaped marquee. New projectors were installed to accommodate the new wide screen and color movies that were starting to be released.

Socorroans must have really missed the movies, because ads began to appear in the Chieftain, such as "While the Gem Theater is closed — come to the Casino Theater in Magdalena and see Clark Gable in 'San Francisco.'" It was a long two months without the Gem.

LOMA THEATER, 1937-2008

The grand opening of the new theater occurred on Friday, July 2, 1932. The first big change noticed by Socorroans was the brightly lit marquee with the new



First State Bank collection
It's Roy Rogers Day at the Loma Theatre in 1955. This is the Loma Theater (formerly the Gem Theatre) that was destroyed by a fire in December 1956.

name — the Loma Theater. The first movie shown in the Loma was "Captains Courageous" starring Spencer Tracy. Admission was 35 cents.

The editor of the Chieftain must have been impressed, for he wrote: "The latest type lighting system will present on the new screen, a beautifully clear and sharp image with no eye strain whatsoever, and with the new sound system even whispers can be heard with ease." Also mentioned is that the new Loma Theater now contains restrooms for both men and women

Just in case you are wondering, "Sergeant Murphy," starring Ronald Reagan, was shown Aug. 18-20, 1938.

"GONE WITH THE WIND"

The most anticipated movie ever released was "Gone With the Wind." Paramount Pictures spared nothing in the production of this movie, which turned out to be the first true mega-hit. Filmed during 1938-1939 for a cost of more than \$4 million dollars, an absolutely unheard of budget in the 1930s, it was the first major movie to be released in color.

Advertising for "Gone With the Wind" began appearing in the Socorro Chieftain in April 1940 for the May 24-25 showing. Tickets were \$1.12, reserved seating only, compared to the normal 36-cent ticket price. The 10-cent



Socorro Chieftain archives
A strange ad in the April 1940 Socorro Chieftain.



Socorro Chieftain archives

Images such as this were printed in the Socorro Chieftain weeks before the showing of "Gone With the Wind" to hype the movie. It worked!

matinee tickets were 75 cents on a first-come, first-served basis. The famous Clark Gable movie was shown in Socorro several times over the next two years, along with a notice that tickets would remain at the "advanced price until at least 1941."

Apparently, Socorro just couldn't get enough of Rhett Butler, Scarlett O'Hara and the burning of Atlanta.

"Gone with the Wind" and "The Wizard of Oz" are the two most watched movies in cinema history. Not only were they among the first mega-hit movies, they clearly established Technicolor as the standard for which all future movies were produced. Certainly you've seen at least of these classics?

“WIZARD OF OZ”

The second hopeful MGM big-hit movie was the "Wizard of Oz," being filmed in standard black-and-white. Fearing the Technicolor "Gone With the Wind" would destroy the success of the "Wizard of Oz," the decision was made to go color with this movie as well.

Even though the first portions of the "Wizard of Oz" had already been filmed, the decision was made to finish the movie in color. This is why this now classic movie begins in Kansas in black-and-white. When the tornado-tossed house crashes, the movie turns to color when Dorothy opens the door into Munchkin Land.



Socorro Chieftain archives

"Gone With the Wind" was the most anticipated movie of its time – first shown in Socorro at the Loma Theater May 24-25, 1940.

THE LOMA AND WORLD WAR II

The United States was fully engaged in World War II during the first half of the 1940s. The war changed the face of Socorro with so many of the men gone to war, and the hardships of shortages and rationing.

Nothing was more important than getting news of the war in Europe and the Pacific. There was no television in those days; it was at the local movie house where Americans got news of the war.

War update movie clips, produced by Fox Movietone (a division of 20th Century Fox), were shown before each movie and were updated at least weekly. These brought to Socorro images of the war, the campaigns that were taking place, updates of major battles and often included short speeches to Americans by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and later by President Harry S. Truman. For the first time in history, Americans could "watch" the war as it unfolded.

In July 1945, many Socorroans were awakened with a blinding flash of light from the east. For more than two weeks, there was no explanation until President Truman, on a Movietone war update, explained to the world how the first atomic bomb was detonated near Socorro, New Mexico. Even though this occurred in our back yard, most Socorroans learned about the Trinity test at the Loma Theater.



Socorro Chieftain archives

"The Wizard of Oz" was first shown at the Loma Theater on Jan. 7 and 8, 1940.

The weekly showings of the Movietone war news were a vital role in which the Loma Theater served the community of Socorro in wartime.



Socorro Chieftain archives
In 1939, Joe Wills became the manager of the newly renamed Loma Theater.

Following the war and throughout the 1950s, the movie industry exploded with constant new releases; by now most of them were in color and presented Americans with new movie stars like John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe. The Loma Theater remained the center of all town activity

throughout the 1940s and 1950s.

LOMADISASTER, 1956

On the cold winter day of Dec. 17, 1956, Socorroans went to see the highly anticipated horror film, "The Day the World Ended." The matinee showing was packed. The evening showing was another full house when the movie began at 7 p.m. Then, the world really did end as fire engulfed the Loma Theater.

The next issue of the Socorro Chieftain told the story:

200 Escape Theater Fire At Socorro

Fire broke up a showing of 'The Day the World Ended' and 200 theater patrons escaped safely as the flames destroyed three businesses here last night. The blaze



Author's collection/Albuquerque Journal
A photo in the December 18, 1956 Albuquerque Journal shows the entire block west of the Plaza, including the Gem Theater, fully engulfed in flames.

raged for three hours before being brought under control about 10 p.m. Firemen from Magdalena and the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology joined the Socorro volunteer department in fighting the fire that may have caused loss as high as \$200,000.

Destroyed were the Loma Theater, the B&B Pool Hall and the Midway Garage (the former Keith's Ocean-to-Ocean Garage), where the fire is thought to have originated. Firemen were able to save one of New Mexico's historic buildings, the Park Hotel — which is on the same block with the theater, garage and pool hall.

People in the theater said they had smelled smoke about 20 minutes before they were told to evacuate the building. A sudden puff of smoke filled the theater as patrons were leaving. There was no panic in the crowd and all persons moved out of the building in an orderly manner. Bill Strong, a Loma Theater employee, estimated damage to the theater alone at \$50,000."

For days, the people of Socorro drove around the Plaza to see the smoldering ruins of the Loma Theater in total disbelief.

Sierra Drive-In, 1953-1986

In 1953, the Sierra Drive-In Theater was opened, also owned by Gibraltar Entertainment. It was a big hit. By now, many high school students owned cars and drive-in theaters became a part of the American culture. Socorro was no different.



First State Bank collection
The empty, burned-out hulks of the buildings are all that remained following the fire. The Park Café, far left, was damaged but survived. The others were razed.

Following the 1956 destruction of the Loma, Socorro was left with no theater. As soon as the spring weather warmed up to tolerable levels, the Sierra Drive-In was opened for the season. It wasn't just for the high school kids anymore, now it was for the entire family.

About a year went by and no real effort seemed to be made in rebuilding the Loma. In 1957, Gibraltar Entertainment abandoned plans to rebuild it and sold the Sierra Drive-In to Dollison Theaters. Owner Les Dollison was anxious to rebuild the Loma.

THE NEW LOMA, 1958-2008

At the same time as the fire, the new National Guard Armory was under construction west of Socorro on U.S. 60, which meant the old armory located on East Manzanaras Street would shortly be vacated. Dollison patiently waited until the armory was relocated. Finally, in 1958, Dollison was able to lease the old armory building from the State of New Mexico.

The old armory building was the Price-Lowenstein Store, one of Socorro's major general stores for many years, and a registered historic building.

Built in the 1880s, shortly after the arrival of the railroad, it was called the Price Brothers Store. In the late 1890s, the Lowenstein brothers became partners and changed the name to the Price-Lowenstein Store. The Lowenstein's bought out the Price brothers share in 1904, and operated under the name Lowenstein Brothers until the store closed about 1920. It was converted into the National Guard Armory in 1922. The full-length basement, once used for storage, served as a shooting range for the armory.

Converting the old armory into a movie theater was quite a task. The street level wood floor and joists were completely removed and rebuilt into the slanted floor required for a theater. The lobby, concession area, projection booth and marquee were added. The new



Photo by Paul Harden

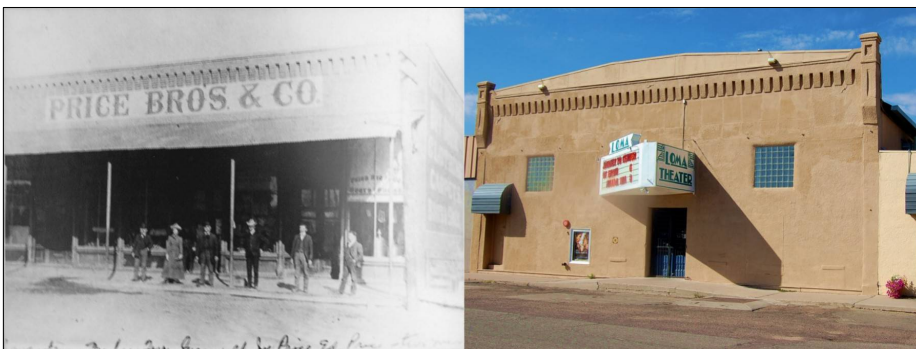
The concession stand in the new Loma. Bessie Moya serves a soft drink and popcorn to Demitra Ulibarri, obviously a happy moviegoer.

Loma Theater contained about 600 seats and a full-sized movie screen. The Loma opened in the autumn of 1958, when the Sierra Drive-In season ended.

Tony Jaramillo managed both the Loma and Sierra Drive-In for Dollison Theaters from 1959 to 1974. The big movies of this era were seen by Socorroans at either the Loma or Sierra Drive-In, such as "Goldfinger" in 1965 (admission 65 cents), and "Hang 'em High" in 1968 (admission \$1.50).

In 1972, the State of New Mexico wanted to sell the building. The building was purchased by the First State Bank to ensure the Loma would not be displaced by the new owners. In 1974, Stanley Montoya became manager of the Loma Theater.

By the 1980s, theater attendance across the country began to drop as many people chose to view first-run movies on cable movie channels or by renting a video to watch on their home VCR. In 1982, the old Price-Lowenstein building was extensively remodeled to



First State Bank collection

Photo by Paul Harden

The 1880s built Price Brothers Store (left) later served as the National Guard Armory 1922-1957, before becoming the new home of the Loma Theater in 1958. The building is a registered historic building.



Photo by Paul Harden

The familiar Loma Theater marquee on Manzanaras Street from 1958 until the October 23, 2008 closing.

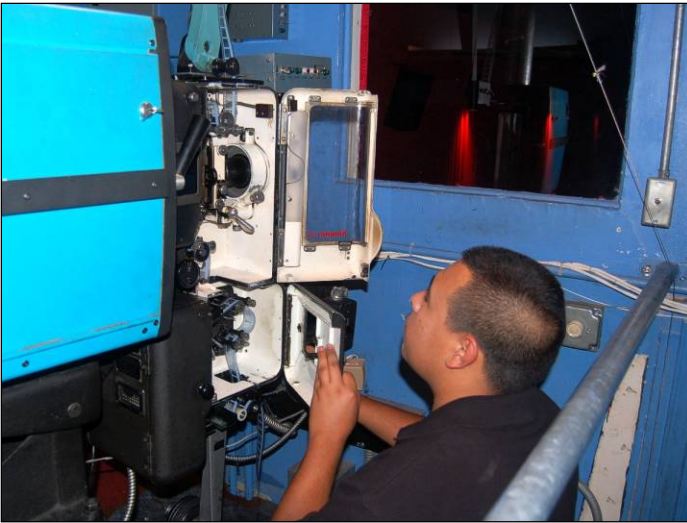


Photo by Paul Harden
Christopher Moya readies the projector for the evening's show. This is the original projector from the old Sierra Drive In, installed in the Loma in 1988.



Photo by Paul Harden
Michael Castillo ensures the feed and takeup reels are working properly during the show. An average movie consists of several thousand feet of film.

reduce the size of the theater for the smaller audiences and for expansion by the First State Bank. The Sierra Drive-In was closed, as were most drive-in theaters across the country. Even in Albuquerque, many of the large multi-screen theaters were closed due to the strong drop in movie theater attendance.

In 1988, upon the death of Les Dollison, the Loma was purchased from Dollison Theaters by the Blue Pearl Company. The theater was temporarily closed in August of that year for some renovations.

Leah and Jonathan Kahn were the new owners. The following year, Stanley Montoya retired as manager after 15 years of service.

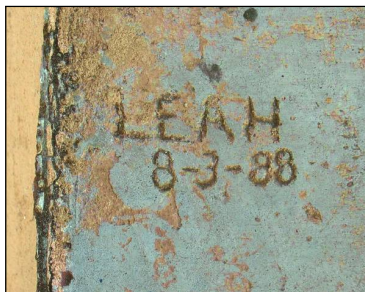


Photo by Paul Harden
New Loma owner, Leah Kahn, left her mark in Socorro, and in the sidewalk near the theater's front entrance.

Sheila Armijo, who had worked at the Loma since the 1970s, served as the manager until her retirement in 2004, having completed more than 30 years of service to Socorro. Sheila's sister, Bessie Moya, is the present manager, and she has also worked at the Loma for more than 30 years.

In 1992, ownership of the Loma was acquired by Trans-Lux Corporation, who has owned and operated the theater since. Well, almost. According to their Web site: "In June of 2008 Trans-Lux Corporation sold the assets

of its theatre division to Marwit Capital, one of the oldest and most experienced private investment firms in the United States."

The Last Show, 2008

The new owners have made the decision to close the Loma Theater even though it has served Socorro since the Guild Theater in 1912.

Unfortunately, theaters in small towns across the country are experiencing the same fate. Attendance and profits are dropping as more people prefer to watch movies on cable television or rent DVD movies, or video-on-demand services such as Netflix.

This has been years in the making. Trans-Lux first contemplated closing the Loma about 10 years ago due to rising overhead costs. To keep the Loma open, the First State Bank cut the monthly rent for the building in half. Several years ago, they halved the rent once again.

Upon notification of the Loma closure, the First State Bank offered the building rent-free to the new company to keep Socorro's movie theater open.

The new owners declined the offer. Since then, Holm Bursum III has contacted several companies that manage motion picture theaters. In spite of offering the theater rent-free and other incentives, nobody seems interested in acquiring a new theater in these rocky financial times.

While it seems certain the Loma Theater will very shortly become a part of Socorro's history, it is

important to note the people that worked hard for decades to bring the best first-run films to the people of Socorro.

Tony Jaramillo was manager from 1959 to 1974; Stanley Montoya from 1974-1989; Sheila Armijo 1989-2004; and Bessie Armijo the manager who will have the distinction of making the final curtain call.

When entering the Loma Theater, it wasn't the Trans-Lux Corporation that we saw — it was the many Socorroans who have served as managers, worked the concession stand or as the projectionists. It was their smiling faces we all remember.

Today, the smiles are gone. Thanks to all of those people who have entertained Socorro over the years for almost a century.

Some of the references used in this article: Numerous issues of El Defensor Chieftain; photographs from the Socorro Historical Society; photographs from the First State Bank collections; and interviews with Sheila and Johnny Armijo, Bessie Moya, Holm Bursum III, Tony Jaramillo, and many customers of the Loma Theater over the years. All photos by Paul Harden unless otherwise noted.

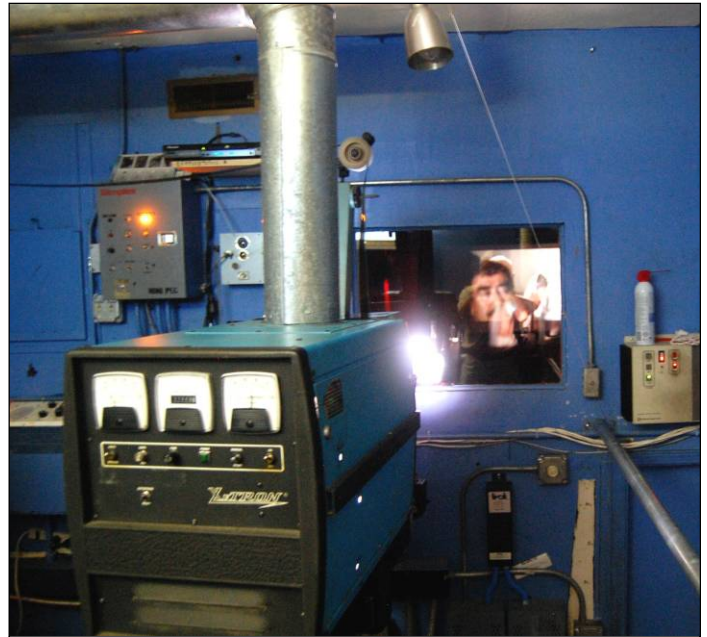


Photo by Paul Harden
The view of the movie from the projector booth.

Some recent Loma Theater managers:



Tony Jaramillo worked at the Loma for years – and as manager from 1959–1974. He also served as Socorro’s mayor from 1978–1986.



Sheila Armijo, manager 1989–2004, and husband Johnny that kept the popcorn machine to the projector working.



Bessie Moya became manager in 2004 when her sister, Sheila Armijo, retired. Bessie has worked at the Loma since the mid-1970s.