

It all began in 1924 ...

Tracing the link between the Lobero Theatre's reopening and Old Spanish Days Fiesta

The grand opening of Santa Barbara's rebuilt Lobero Theatre took place on August 4, 1924, with the play *Beggar on Horseback*. Nine days later, on August 13, 1924 another horse-related event took place just around the corner on State Street, soon to be known as the first official Fiesta parade. Given that these two celebrations occurred so close together, was there a connection? And which one came first, thereby inspiring the other? Lobero Theatre Boardmember George Burtness worked with prominent local historians including Erin Graffy, Neal Graffy, and Michael Redmon at the Santa Barbara Historical Museum to find the answers.

Two months prior to both the parade and the Lobero Theatre's grand reopening the managers of the new theatre, Hamilton McFadden and William McLennen of the Community Arts Association, met with the city's leaders including Charles Pressley (unofficial first president of Old Spanish Days Fiesta) and Herbert Nunn (City Manager), to decide what sort of celebration would be appropriate. The business community had long been considering ways to enhance the visitor appeal of the city during the summer off-season, and a festival to celebrate the local history of the "Rancho period" or, Old Spanish Days, was envisioned. Paul G. Sweetser reports in *History of Fiesta*, "The group began to formulate plans for the celebration, to be comprised of a number of activities to include a parade, aquatic and sports events and, of course, a gala celebration at the theatre on its opening night."

"Fiesta is a holiday that began as a small-town family party to mark the resurrection of a cherished institution—a theatre."

- Otis Wickenhauser, *Captured Dream, A History of the Lobero Theatre*



Beggar on Horseback ran at the Lobero Theatre from August 4-16, 1924, with August 13, billed as the "Fiesta Performance," and the closing show on August 16, coinciding with the last day of Fiesta and the equestrian parade. The cover of the program read as follows:

"Old Spanish Days Fiesta, organized this year, is an attempt to establish as an annual event a few days of festivities in Santa Barbara in which all the people can participate. We hope everyone will enter into the spirit of the occasion and have an enjoyable four days."

It seems that neither celebration was planned to coincide with the other; they were planned in parallel. Their individual beginnings happened to take place during Santa Barbara's formative years leading up to August of 1924 when both began their now 88-year history, creating a lasting impact on one of America's most beautiful and celebrated cities. In the words of historian Erin Graffy, "The Lobero opening in the year 1924 was the kindling, and when [the city leaders] lit the flame, it found a life of its own. Though [Old Spanish Days Fiesta] had nothing to do with the play or the Lobero, the theatre was the contemporary impetus that kicked it all off!"

(Special thanks to Santa Barbara Historical Museum for research done on this piece. Historical images used with permission.)