

LOS ANGELES COUNTY POOR FARM, AUDITORIUM
(Rancho Los Amigos, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Building No.
1261)
(Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center)
(Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center)
Intersection of Descanso and Junpier Streets
Downey
Los Angeles County
California

HABS CA-2800-K
HABS CA-2800-K

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LOS ANGELES COUNTY POOR FARM, AUDITORIUM
(Rancho Los Amigos, Los Angeles Building No. 1261)
Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center

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Location: 7601 Imperial Highway. The Auditorium is located slightly southeast of the intersection of Descanso and Juniper Streets, and is sited centrally at the rear of the ornamental courtyard in the center of South Campus directly off Erickson Avenue.

U.S. Geological Survey Los Angeles Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 3754252 N; 392494.4 E

Present Owner / Occupant: County of Los Angeles

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Auditorium is significant under National Register of Historic Places Criterion A for its association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history. The Auditorium is representative of influential Rancho Los Amigos Superintendent William Ruddy Harriman efforts during his early tenure (1915-1931; 1933-1952) to provide patients and staff with daily recreational opportunities and uplifting surroundings as a route for self-improvement and increased vitality. Prior to construction of the Auditorium, entertainment activities were typically held in dining facilities or other areas that could accommodate larger groups. As a building dedicated to solely for entertainment and recreational uses, the Auditorium hosted movies, plays and music programs, a branch of the Los Angeles County Library, and a small smoking room equipped with games and a radio. The Auditorium continued to function as an entertainment venue from the late 1920s until the 1980s. The building's use was changed to storage in the late twentieth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. **Date of erection:** 1928¹
2. **Architect:** Karl W. Muck, County Architect, Department of the County Architect
3. **Original and subsequent owners:** County of Los Angeles (1887/1888–present)
4. **Original and subsequent occupants:** County of Los Angeles (1887/1888–present)

¹ According to historic aerial photographs and Fliedner, Colleen Adair. 1990. Centennial. Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, 1888-1988. Downey, California: Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center.

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5. **Builder, contractor, suppliers:** No known builder, contractor, or supplier could be associated with the Auditorium.
6. **Original plans and construction:** An incomplete set of original architectural drawings for the Auditorium are on file with the County of Los Angeles.
7. **Alterations and additions:** The building was originally constructed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, but was changed to resemble an Art Deco style building in 1974, according to original building plans. Alterations include: painted stucco applied to the building's once exposed brick exterior walls and also over the concrete lintels over first-floor windows and doors; the replacement of the original red-clay tile roof with a flat roof; the removal of original wrought-iron grilles attached to the three windows on the second-story façade; and the replacement of original wood windows and doors with metal windows and doors.

B. Historic Context:

Auditorium

Begun in 1887/1888 as the new County Poor Farm, Rancho Los Amigos upon its inception was a rehabilitation facility that provided work, housing, and medical care to the indigent. The original purchase of 124.4 acres in the vicinity of the town of Downey, founded in 1873, was graded for roads, supplied with water from an artesian well, and improved with a Refectory Building (Dining Hall), the North and South Wards, an aviary, and an Office Building by 1889. During the following decade, barns and ancillary buildings with agricultural functions, a freight and passenger railroad depot, a combined bathhouse and laundry facility, and an additional ward were added.

By the 1890s, the County Poor Farm's livestock and agricultural operations were self-sufficient. The County Poor Farm had a herd of nearly 100 Jersey and Holstein cows, which provided a daily output of 200 gallons of milk. For eggs, the farm relied upon its productive, 800-chicken poultry farm located east of Erickson Avenue and north of Gardendale Street. East of the poultry yard was a hog farm, which supported approximately 150 Berkshire and Poland hogs. Sheep were raised and used for their wool. Percheron draft horses were kept to assist with heavy labor tasks. A wide range of crops were grown at the County Poor Farm, including fruits such as strawberries, peaches, and pears, and vegetables such as cabbage, corn, celery, onions, radishes, sugar beets, peas, cucumbers, and olives. With the assistance of farm supervisors, able-bodied patients helped work the fields and orchards, for which they received compensation of \$1.50 per day. Irrigation was provided primarily by the farm's artesian well. Water from the well was pumped using a 10-horse power engine and stored in a water tower.²

² Fliedner, Colleen Adair. 1990. *Centennial, Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, 1888–1988*. Downey, CA: Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center.

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The County Poor Farm grew into a nationally recognized institution in the fields of cultivation and scientific breeding as a producer of prized crops and livestock. In addition to operating a successful agricultural enterprise, the County Poor Farm gradually expanded its role as a County medical facility. An increasing number of inmates with chronic medical disorders were being admitted to the County Poor Farm during the 1910s, prompting administrators to employ a staff of physicians and nurses to treat them. This surge in patients, and subsequently employees, would create the impetus for expanded development at the County Poor Farm in ensuing decades. The influx of new patients at the County Poor Farm provided the impetus for the expansion of services and facilities needed, resulting in the construction of a number of buildings at the property. The County Poor Farm's expansion reflected an important shift as the focus of the facility transitioned from rehabilitative care for indigents into a hospital to house long-term invalid patients.

In June 1915, William Ruddy Harriman was appointed the new superintendent at the County Poor Farm in order to reestablish the facility after devastating floods and a hog cholera epidemic in 1914 damaged the property's agricultural enterprises. Harriman promptly moved his family into the new Craftsman residence that had been constructed by the prior County Poor Farm superintendent, Charles C. Manning, at the center of the property. When Harriman took over management responsibilities at the County Poor Farm, the institution was providing care to 500 indigent men and women with a staff of 45. Under Harriman's leadership (1915-1931; 1933-1952), the County Poor Farm's agricultural fields and livestock rebounded and an ambitious plan of improvements, including new and expanded wards, was immediately begun to address the rapidly expanding need for patient accommodations and services. Harriman dramatically improved the property, installing an irrigation system, upgrading the utilities, constructing new buildings, organizing administration duties and developing the property's park-like landscape. These improvements were largely accomplished in the wake of the financial surge following World War I.³

The range of improvements Harriman initiated at the County Poor Farm reflects the rapid growth of the facility during the 1920s. New and expanded services included the construction of new on-site housing that was provided for the employees responsible for around-the-clock patient care and attention, patient wards, additions to men and women's psychopathic buildings, dining room extensions, nurses' dormitories, employee bungalows, a new power plant, and street improvements.

³ Fliedner, Colleen Adair. 1990. *Centennial, Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, 1888-1988*. Downey, CA: Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center.

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In addition to the physical changes that were implemented under Harriman's leadership, there were also philosophical changes at the County Poor Farm. Harriman subscribed to the idea that the physical condition of an individual could be improved through occupational therapy activities and uplifting surroundings. Harriman's philosophy for self-improvement soon encompassed every activity at the County Poor Farm. He insisted that the patient's needs and comfort be addressed through the development of amenities at the County Poor Farm. Patients were assigned to work on the farm or in the greenhouse, based on their physical capabilities and individual talents. These occupational therapy activities were also intended as physical therapy, by providing the patients with fresh air, sunshine and independence.⁴

Throughout the 1920s, as residency continued to increase, Harriman expanded and improved the County Poor Farm's facilities, including a number of large building projects. Understanding the need to house additional patients, Harriman began the construction of four patient wards in 1922 followed by an additional four wards soon after. This project signaled the full-fledged transition of the farm from a rehabilitative care facility for indigents into a hospital to house long-term invalid patients. By 1922, the institution had a staff of approximately 175 employees to care for the needs of the 1,500 ambulatory patients living at the South Campus.⁵ By late 1925, an additional five infirmary wards had been constructed. Several substantial buildings continued to be erected through the 1920s. In 1928, the old brick refectory building was razed and replaced with an 850-seat Spanish Colonial Revival Auditorium which provided much needed diversions to the ailing patients and staff. Movies were screened weekly in the Auditorium and other musical types of entertainment were offered as well.

Prior to the construction of the Auditorium in 1928, entertainment functions at the Poor Farm were located in the areas of the facility that could accommodate large groups, such as the chapel and dining areas. As the patient population grew, the facility's existing spaces were not sufficient to accommodate leisure functions without limiting the number of or excluding patients from events. The Auditorium provided the necessary space for large community and leisure events at the Poor Farm. Within the new Auditorium building, a room was used to house a local branch of the Los Angeles County Library during the day. Another room was dedicated as a smoking room, providing spaces for games and a radio. In the evening, the Auditorium's theater provided weekly motion picture screenings and served as a live entertainment venue. The Auditorium represents the expansion and development of the Poor Farm during the 1920s.

⁴ Fliedner, Colleen Adair. 1990. *Centennial, Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, 1888–1988*. Downey, CA: Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center.

⁵ Foster, Henry. 5 October 1959. "History of the Rancho." Los Angeles: University of Southern California Archives. Box 25, Folder 57.

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By the end of the 1920s, the County Poor Farm comprised an impressive 540 acres of farmland and buildings, with a property value of \$2 million dollars. Real estate improvements included 3 annual crop yields, one mile of paved roads, an additional one and one-fourth miles of decomposing granite roads, miles of sewer mains connected to the County sanitation system, hundreds of acres of new lawns, gardens, trees, and numerous buildings serving a variety of purposes.^{6,7}

PART II. ARCHITECTURE INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. **Architectural character:** The two-story Auditorium is rectangular in plan, symmetrical in appearance, and largely unbroken by openings. The elevation is organized into three equally sized bays. The center bay is lightly projecting and contains the main entrance on the ground floor. The character-defining features reflect the building's original Spanish Colonial Revival Style: symmetrical, three-bay façade composition whose slightly projecting central bay has a battered profile; pinched arch over the entry, side doors, and some windows; pyramid-topped piers flanking the entry; and voussoirs that define the entry arch.
2. **Condition of fabric:** The current condition of the Auditorium is deteriorated. The property's windows and doors have been covered with boards.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. **Overall dimensions:** The Auditorium's net interior condition space, interior dimensions exclusive of covered or enclosed exterior spaces, calculates to 8,153 square feet. The building has a gross area of exterior square footage of 8,700 square feet and a footprint of 6,695 square feet.⁸
2. **Foundations:** The building sits on a concrete foundation.
3. **Walls:** The exterior walls are painted stucco over unreinforced masonry.

⁶ Fliedner, Colleen Adair. 1990. *Centennial, Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center, 1888–1988*. Downey, CA: Rancho Los Amigos Medical Center.

⁷ Harriman, William R. "1927–1928 Annual Report for Rancho Los Amigos." Los Angeles: University of Southern California. Box 22, Folder 13.

⁸ Sapphos Environmental, Inc. 15 December 2008. Revised Memorandum for the Record, 1217–056, No. 21, Update to the List of Buildings, Structures, and Features of the Rancho Los Amigos Historic District. Pasadena, CA.

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4. **Structural system, framing:** The structural system for the Auditorium consists primarily of concrete, steel, and wood, but contains some brick and block masonry walls. The available 1972 renovation plan shows an additional 4-inch reinforced shotcrete layer applied to the walls.

5. **Openings:**

a. **Windows:** Openings on the east-facing façade of the Auditorium are arranged in a distinctive, spare, symmetrical pattern. Three equally spaced, identical windows are centered on the second floor above the primary east entry. Each flat-headed, recessed opening contains a six-light, steel-framed, original pivot window. Each side bay features a single window opening with a pair of six-light, steel-framed, pivot sash set below a pinched arch cap. Fenestration on the north and south elevations is functionally and asymmetrically arranged and includes windows and doors. Most of the windows contain original steel-framed sash; some of the openings are also characterized by pinched arches. The west elevation consists of only one opening which has been enclosed.

b. **Doors:** Three pairs of non-original doors are slightly recessed and topped by transoms that are also not original. The door opening is defined by a pinched arch head, essentially a flat-headed opening with rounded brackets at the corners. Pyramid-topped piers flank the opening, which is topped by over-scaled voussoirs. The lintel below the voussoirs contains the word "AUDITORIUM" in metal letters. One door on the north elevation also has a pinched arch cap; another, at the top of the attached staircase, contains a pair of original, wood-paneled doors. An exterior staircase is attached to the north elevation and is supported by concrete brackets and enclosed by a wrought-iron railing.

6. **Roof:**

The building is capped by a flat rectangular-massed roof covered with composition material.

C. **Description of Interior:** The lobby into the Auditorium is located centrally on the first floor with a staircase leading to the balcony area to the south. Past the lobby, men's and women's bathrooms can be found to the north and south as well as the concession stand and a janitor's closet. The seating area takes up about two-thirds of the center of the floor area. The stage is located on the western end of the building with entrances into the stage from the north and south. Three dressing rooms and a men's toilet are located south of the stage; a storage room, dressing room and women's toilet are located north of the stage. Entrances into the building are located along all four elevations. The balcony has a terraced seating area with a projection room centrally located.

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D. Site:

1. **General setting:** Existing landscaping surrounding the Auditorium consists of mature trees, shrubs and grass. There are concrete ramps and sidewalks in the front, on the sides, and at the rear of the building.
2. **Orientation:** The Auditorium is located slightly southeast of the intersection of Descanso and Juniper Streets, and is sited centrally at the rear of the ornamental courtyard in the center of South Campus directly off Erickson Avenue. The building's primary elevation faces east and the majority of architectural detail is concentrated on this facade.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings:

An incomplete set of original architectural drawings prepared by the County of Los Angeles Mechanical Department are located on file with the County of Los Angeles. A set of as-found drawings were prepared for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) documentation in 2007 by Diamond West Engineering Inc. for the County of Los Angeles.

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C. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

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D. Supplemental Material:

Reduced copies of an incomplete set of original architectural drawings
Reduced copies of 2007 as-found drawings

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

HABS documentation for the Auditorium was prepared by Sapphos Environmental, Inc. staff from December 2006 to June 2010 on behalf of the County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office (CEO). The HABS documentation serves as mitigation to comply with the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the proposed Campus Plan project. Measured surveys were carried out in 2007 by Ms. Wanda Ostermann of Diamond West Engineering, Inc., Los Angeles, California. Photographs were taken from January 2010 to June 2010 by Mr. David Lee, production manager, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. Part I of the historical report (historic context) was prepared by Ms. Shannon Carmack, senior cultural resources coordinator; Ms. Rebecca Silva, senior cultural resources coordinator; Ms. Deborah Howell-Ardila, senior cultural resources coordinator; Ms. Marlise Fratinardo, senior cultural

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resources coordinator; and Ms. Laura Carias, cultural resources coordinator, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. Part II of the historical report (architectural information) was prepared by Ms. Rebecca Silva, senior cultural resources coordinator; Ms. Marlise Fratinardo, senior cultural resources coordinator; and Ms. Laura Carias, cultural resources coordinator, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. Ms. Leslie Heumann, Sapphos Environmental, Inc. manager of cultural resources, reviewed the final report and supporting documents and provided research, writing, and project oversight.