

MOUNT TAMALPAIS STATE PARK, THE MOUNTAIN THEATER
(Sidney B. Cushing Memorial Amphitheatre)
Rock Spring Trail, East Ridgecrest Boulevard, Mount Tamalpais
State Park
Mill Valley
Marin County
California

HALS CA-107
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

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

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HALS NO. CA-107

Location: Rock Spring Trail, East Ridgecrest Boulevard, Mount Tamalpais State Park
The Mountain Theater sits at an elevation of approximately 2,000' on the west flank of Mount Tamalpais.

Mill Valley, Marin County, California

Lat: 37.912633 Long: -122.608628 (Center of stage area, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).

Significance: The Mountain Theater is significant:

- as a work of landscape architecture associated with landscape architect Emerson Knight;
- as a representation of rustic park design from the first half of the twentieth century;
- as an important feature within Mount Tamalpais State Park;
- as the venue of the Mountain Play which began as an annual theater production at this site in 1913;
- and as a representative project of federal "New Deal" programs of the 1930s built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

Description: **General Description**
The Mountain Theater is a massive outdoor amphitheater made of stone terraces. It was built in a natural amphitheater on a southeast-facing slope of Mount Tamalpais at an elevation of 2,000 feet above sea level with spectacular views of the Marin Headlands, San Francisco Bay, and the skyline of San Francisco.

The stone terraces closely follow the natural terrain. There are forty rows of seating terraces with pathway terraces at the top, bottom, and center of the slope. Stone stairs connect the terraces at each end of the amphitheater and two other stairs are located within the amphitheater. Seating capacity is approximately 5,000. The terraces are between 32" and 36" in width, and the risers are between 12" and 16" high. The stones are weathered, providing a very rustic and ancient look to the amphitheater.

Bedrock outcrops and existing trees were preserved and incorporated into the design, giving the amphitheater the look as if it sprung directly from nature. A grassy slope 20' to 30' wide separates the amphitheater seating from the stage area. A director's pit is built into the slope and hidden from spectators' view. The pit is flanked by stone stairs on each side. The stage area is approximately

100' x 40' in size, and three large stone retaining walls support its southern edge, making it flat, and providing a hidden "backstage" area.

Vegetation

The amphitheater was built on a site that was previously open grassy slopes surrounded by forest. The primary trees surrounding the theater include coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) interior live oak (*Quercus wislizenii*), California bay (*Umbellularia californica*), and Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). A significant effort was made to plant native species around the perimeter of the amphitheater including coffee berry, ceanothus, tan oak and azalea.

Circulation

The amphitheater is approximately 230 yards from East Ridgecrest Blvd. where an access road begins at a large pullout. The access road splits and then creates a loop just south of the theater. Several hiking trails pass through the site including the Rock Spring Trail (to the East Peak and towards Mill Valley) and the Bootjack Trail (to Muir Woods). Within the theater, horizontal paths connect one end of the theater to the other at the top, bottom, and mid-level of the theater. The mid-level path separates the bottom twenty rows from the top twenty rows. Stone steps also connect the top and bottom of the theater on both sides and in the center.

Small Scale Features

There are six drinking fountains around the perimeter of the theater. Four of the fountains are of rustic stone construction and are likely part of the CCC construction. A flag staff stands near the upper entry to the theater and it is seen in construction photos of the theater. Split rail/pierced post fencing at the bottom of the theater seating, and several other locations, has been added in recent years. A bronze plaque commemorating the first Mountain Play in 1913 was placed near the entry to the amphitheater in 1983.

Structures

Three structures were built near the amphitheater. They were designed by the National Park Service in cooperation with the California Division of State Parks. These include the men's and women's latrine structures that were built by the CCC in 1937. The latrines are located within the service road loop, south of the amphitheater, and each is approximately 32' x 23' with rustic battered stone walls and flat roofs.

A building with dressing rooms and storage was built south of the stage area. The park rustic style building was built by the CCC in 1939. It is a stone structure with a gabled roof, and built in three sections, each at a different angle, creating a façade that embraces its site, not unlike the way the amphitheater embraces its site.

Changes Over Time

There have been no significant changes to the theater over the years since its construction. The previously mentioned fencing is a recent addition, as are two of the drinking fountains (constructed out of concrete pipe rather than stone) and the bronze commemorative plaque. A wood deck was added (ca. 1988) on the south edge of the seating area to provide accessible space for people in wheelchairs. Other than those changes, the theater remains largely unchanged, a testament to the sturdy construction methods employed by the CCC. It is not known which of the planted native shrubs have survived and naturalized, and which did not survive due to the dry conditions. Trees around the theater have grown considerably over the year and this has impacted some of the vistas.

History:

Introduction

The history of the Mountain Theater on Mount Tamalpais is directly tied to the history of the Mountain Play, an annual theatrical production that began in 1913. The Mountain Theater started as a natural grassy amphitheater, studded with a few oak trees and surrounded by the mountain's forest. The meadow and slope afforded spectacular south facing views of the Marin Headlands, San Francisco Bay, and the skyline of San Francisco. In the early years, theater-goers sat on blankets or newspapers on the grassy slopes. In 1934, the Civilian Conservation Corps began construction on stone seating terraces to formalize the space as an amphitheater and creating the Mountain Theater as we know it today.

Mount Tamalpais and Mill Valley

Mount Tamalpais, or Mount Tam as it is more commonly referred to, is a 2,571 foot-high peak in the Coastal Range on the north side of the Golden Gate, the entrance to San Francisco Bay. At the southeast base of the mountain is the town of Mill Valley. Mill Valley began as a rancho and lumber camp, ideally situated for harvesting the abundant redwood trees in the valleys at the base of the mountain. By the late Nineteenth Century, Mill Valley had become a popular tourist and vacation destination with its cool forests, waterfalls, and abundant hiking opportunities on Mount Tam. Hiking became a very popular activity and there were numerous clubs that promoted and organized hiking. With its scenic environs, Mill Valley also became a destination for artists and art patrons, which led to the founding of the Mountain Play.

The Mountain Play

The Mountain Play began as the idea of two local hikers, John C. Catlin and Richard Festus "Dad" O'Rourke; and Garnet Holme, chair of the drama department at U.C. Berkeley with experience in outdoor productions. As the three men came to the site of what is now the Mountain Theater, they noted what a perfect natural amphitheater it was and came up with the idea of a staging a play. On May 4, 1913, twelve hundred people hiked and rode up the mountain to see "Abraham and Isaac" staged in nature with stunning views. The Mountain Play Association was organized in 1914 and the Mountain Play has been an

annual tradition ever since (with the exception of 1924 when the park was closed due to hoof-and-mouth disease, and the four years during World War II).¹ Audiences of up to 4,000 people were common in the early years.² Play-goers could take a ferry from San Francisco to Sausalito, and then board a train to Mill Valley. From there they could hike the eight miles to the theater, or take the Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway (until its demise in 1929) to within a mile and a half of the theater. Today, park roads can bring you close to the theater, but hiking is still very much a tradition of the Mountain Play, with many audience members hiking back to Mill Valley after the play.

The Mountain Theater

In 1913 the land destined to become the Mountain Theater, along with much of the mountain, was owned by U.S. Congressman William Kent, an ardent conservationist and friend of John Catlin.³ Kent deeded land for the theater to the Mountain Play Association with the proviso that plays continue to be staged at the site. Kent also named the theater the Sidney B. Cushing Memorial Amphitheater after his friend the founding president of the Mill Valley & Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway.⁴ With the prospect of federal funding, the Mountain Play Association deeded the site to the state, and the theater and surrounding lands later became Mount Tamalpais State Park in 1936. California State Parks continues to manage these significant public lands. Adjacent public lands also include those managed by the National Park Service (Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Muir Woods National Monument), and the Marin Municipal Water District.

Emerson Knight

With the Mountain Play in its second decade, the Mountain Play Association desired to improve the facility for the actors and for the audience. Visitors often found themselves sliding down the grassy slopes as the play progressed. In 1925, the Mountain Play Association commissioned landscape architect Emerson Knight (1882-1960) to prepare a concept plan for improvements at the Mountain Theater.⁵

Knight did not hold a formal university degree, but apprenticed with several

¹ Ashley, Beth. *The Mountain Play – The First Seventy Five Years*. Mountain Play Association, 1988.

² Today, by agreement to protect the park's resources, Mountain Play audiences are limited to 3,750 people and the six performances are often sold out.

³ In 1908 William Kent donated 295 acres of the last old-growth redwoods on Mount Tam to the U.S. government for the creation of Muir Woods National Monument.

⁴ Ptak, Elisabeth. *Marin's Mountain Play – 100 Years of Theatre on Mount Tamalpais*. Mountain Play Association, 2013. The name of the railroad was changed to the Mt. Tamalpais & Muir Woods Railway in 1913, and it continued in operation until 1929.

⁵ Ptak, P.49.

practitioners and had a keen interest in nature and art. He began working on gardens in the Santa Barbara area and then in San Francisco. Knight's work included several small estate outdoor theaters and in 1924 he designed the Mount Helix Theater, a hilltop outdoor theater near San Diego, in collaboration with architects Richard Requa and Herbert L. Jackson. Also in 1924, Knight authored an article on outdoor theaters in *The Architect and Engineer* magazine (August 1924 entitled "Outdoor Theaters and Stadiums in the West."⁶ These works and writings led to his commission with the Mountain Play Association.

In his writings, Knight recognized that the Pacific states had a perfect climate for enjoying outdoor performances and he drew direct connections to the outdoor theaters of ancient Greece, Rome, Pompeii, and Southern France.⁷ He also recognized the value of outdoor theaters in natural settings. For his concept plan of the Mountain Theater, Knight combined the idea of the ancient Greek theaters' stone seating terraces with the natural contours and features of the Mountain Theater site. Rather than the formal geometry (generally circular) of the Greek theaters, Knight's stone terraces followed the natural undulating contours of the site. He left in place large rock outcrops and trees to become features of the theater.

Civilian Conservation Corps

During his campaign for president in 1932, Franklin Roosevelt promised "a new deal for the American people" in response to the Great Depression. Within a month of taking office he signed into law an act "for the relief of unemployment through the performance of useful public work." The Emergency Conservation Work Act⁸ provided for the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a program to put young men around the country to work on a variety of projects. The work included improvements to parks and forests, flood control, irrigation, wildlife enhancements and other types of outdoor projects.

Over the nine years that the CCC program was in operation, from 1933 to 1942, more than three million men were enrolled, working from 2,650 camps in all forty-eight states and the territories of Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The program had a profound effect on both the lives of the enrollees and the landscape of the United States. For the young enrollees, the program was a respite from the despair of the Great Depression. It gave them a sense of purpose, camaraderie, and a modest paycheck, the majority of which they were required to send home to their families.

⁶ This article entitled "Outdoor Theatres and Stadiums in the West" appeared in the August 1924 issue of *The Architect and Engineer*.

⁷ Knight, Emerson. "Outdoor Theatres and Stadiums in the West". *The Architect and Engineer magazine*, August 1924.

⁸ The Emergency Conservation Work Act was just one of a number of a number of "New Deal" programs established by Roosevelt in the first hundred days of his administration.

The CCC projects have left a lasting and positive impact on the nation's landscape.⁹ National and state parks particularly benefitted from the work of the CCC and other federal programs. The Mountain Theater was one of several projects on Mount Tamalpais that received funding. Other projects on Mount Tamalpais constructed by the CCC include the Fire Lookout Tower, foot bridges and other trail improvements, campsites, and day use sites.¹⁰

Park Rustic Style

The National Park Service (and the Forest Service in other locations) provided designers and supervisory personnel to oversee the CCC's work. In the 1920s NPS designers developed a park rustic style for structures and landscape features in park settings. Most of the CCC projects, including the Mountain Theater, were built in this style.

The early National Park Service leadership decided that a new design ethic was needed for park improvements. NPS architects, landscape architects and engineers developed a park rustic style to have park facilities harmonize with natural environments through the simple and unrefined use of indigenous materials such as wood and stone. This style was greatly influenced by precedents such as the Adirondack camps and their rustic vernacular lodges, and the shingle style with its use of massive timbers and stone. Landscape architectural influences include the picturesque landscape style promoted by Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted.

Emerson Knight was likely influenced by the park rustic style when he created his concept plan for the theater in 1925. He adapted the vision of theaters from ancient Greece and Rome with the ethic of harmonizing with the natural setting of Mount Tamalpais. For the Mountain Theater construction, Knight insisted that the stones used in creation of the terraces have weathered surfaces to provide the look that the stones had weathered in place naturally. The Mountain Theater remains one of the best examples of a landscape feature built in the park rustic style.

Construction: "*a massive work of utmost simplicity*"

Construction at the Mountain Theater started modestly in 1929 when the Mountain Play Association began implementation of Emerson Knight's 1925 plan with the building of the first row of terraced stone seating. Two ravines that cut across the stage area were filled, leveled, and underground drainage installed. This first phase of work was done under Knight's supervision. Lack of funding

⁹ The website *The Living New Deal* (<http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/map/>) includes an interactive map showing the distribution of CCC projects (as well as other New Deal programs).

¹⁰ Fairly, Lincoln. "The Civilian Conservation Corps on Mt. Tamalpais 1933-1940". *The Californians*. July/August 1983: 21-27.

stalled further construction until 1934 when federal funding for the CCC provided a workforce for the Mountain Theater and other projects on Mount Tamalpais. At the same time, Emerson Knight was employed by the National Park Service as a project inspector and likely played a role in making the Mountain Theater a CCC project. Knight visited the work several times a month and assisted landscape foremen Paul Holloway and Howard Cox in the completion of the work.

The entire construction was done without detailed construction plans. Work was based on the 1925 concept plan prepared by Knight and by decisions made in the field.¹¹ Knight did have strong design ideas that were carried throughout the construction. One was to minimize grading of the seating area. Seating terraces would follow the natural contours. Another was to preserve existing rock outcrops and existing trees and shrubs. To these Knight supplemented construction with indigenous stone and native plant materials. He was very particular in how the stone was selected and placed and wrote the following about the specifications for stone:

*"In order to conform to the spirit of the plan for the theatre it is requisite to select massive, weatherstones of hard texture and variation in color, especially with two excellent flat surfaces at right angles to each other or as nearly so as possible, the one face to become the riser and the other the seat terrace tread. In order to preserve the effect of big scale simplicity attained to date, each stone unit should vary in length from about 2 1/2 to 4 feet, or more and will probably weigh from 1500 to 2500 pounds, approximately. It should be kept in mind that for firm security and long endurance, each great stone will have its bulk below the visible surface when set. No seat stone should ever be split as natural forms and weathering are essential. The final effect must be informal and non symmetrical in order to become one with the mood of the mountain."*¹²

Knight later wrote about the design of the theater:

*"Due to this manner of development, the completed theater tended soon to take on a character of age-old ruggedness, thus preserving the spirit of the mountain. From the inception of the work on both map and plans, the designer was intrigued and thrilled by the possibility of here creating a massive work of utmost simplicity."*¹³

¹¹ Jewell, Linda and Cancian, Steve Rasmussen. *Keeping the Boys Busy: The Revival of Incremental, On-Site Design by the National Park Service Designers During the Great Depression*. National Center for Preservation Technology and Training. 2004.

¹² Knight, Emerson. Unpublished and undated notes. This may have been prepared by Knight to be given to the CCC crews to ensure his vision for the theater was followed. Environmental Design Archive, University of California, Berkeley.

¹³ Knight, Emerson. "Mountain Theater on Mt. Tamalpais." *Landscape Architecture Quarterly*. October 1949.

The lower twenty rows of seating were constructed between 1934 and 1938.¹⁴ The work was done without heavy machinery. Large stones were quarried from a nearby site and brought to the theater. Each stone was maneuvered within the site using several large masts and booms with rigging, and set in place using pole tripods with block and tackle. When in place, the majority of each stone was buried below grade “for enduring stability – for centuries” as noted by Knight.¹⁵ The rows of stone seats were placed following the existing terrain, with a minimum of change to the natural slopes.

The years 1938 to 1940 saw construction and completion of the upper twenty rows of seating. These rows varied somewhat from the lower twenty in that there was more variation in the width of the terraces and there was some undulation with the terrain.¹⁶ Existing rock outcrops and existing trees were saved and worked into the design. Production of the annual Mountain Play continued without interruption during construction.

Upon completion, it was clear that the Mountain Theater was a masterpiece that evoked theaters of the ancient world, but with a natural design ethic that reflected and complemented the beauty of the natural setting. Today the Mountain Theater remains the home of the annual Mountain Play.

¹⁴ There were ultimately 40 rows constructed, each approximately 300 feet long, with a seating capacity between 4,000 and 6,000 people.

¹⁵ From inscription on back of March 1936 photograph taken by Emerson Knight. Environmental Design Archive, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁶ Jewell and Cancian.

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http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC_Brief_History.html

Google Earth for aerial photography images.

Inventory of the Emerson Knight Collection, 1898-1965. Annotated. U.C. Berkeley Design Environmental Design Archives.
<http://pdf.oac.cdlib.org/pdf/berkeley/ceda/knight.pdf>

The Living New Deal. U.C. Berkeley. <http://livingnewdeal.berkeley.edu/>

Mount Tamalpais State Park CCC Features. California Department of Parks and Recreation. http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=24889

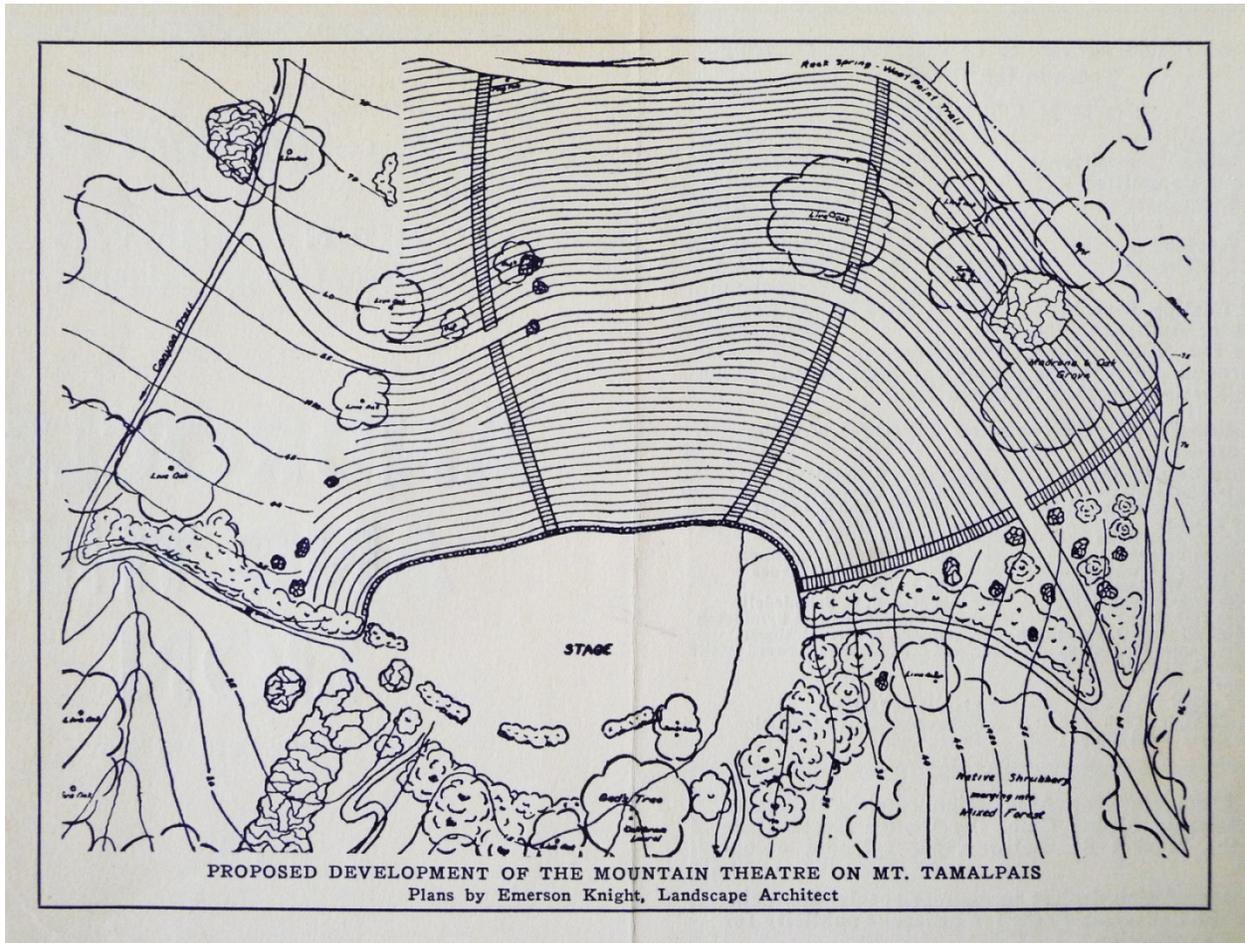
Calisphere, University of California:
<http://www.calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu>
Search Mountain Theater and Mountain Play for historic photographs and documents.

Historian: Douglas Nelson, historical landscape architect.

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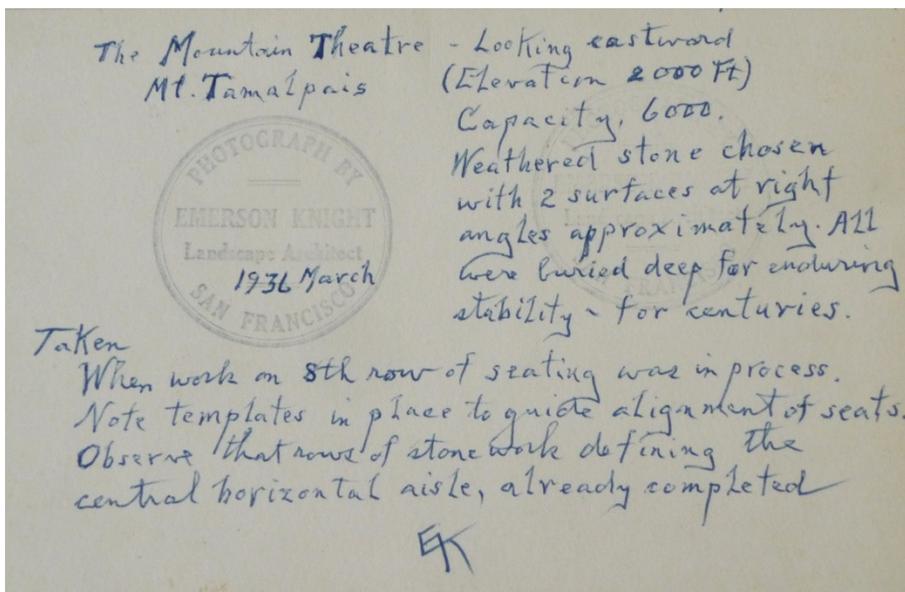
2014 Entry HALS Challenge: Documenting the Landscapes of the New Deal



1925 concept plan that Emerson Knight prepared for the Mountain Play Association. It served as the basis for construction of the theater, but there are several minor differences between the plan and the theater as constructed. (Emerson Knight Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley)



Emerson Knight photograph taken during construction of the Mountain Theater, March 1936. From Knight's notes: "Weathered stone chosen with 2 surfaces at right angles approximately. All were buried deep for enduring stability – for centuries. Taken when work on the 8th row of seating was in process." (Emerson Knight Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley)



Inscription on the back of the above photograph written by Emerson Knight. (Emerson Knight Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley)



Comparable view of the Mountain Theater taken June 2014, looking north from the mid-way path. (Douglas Nelson photograph)



Mountain Theater June 2014, looking south. (Douglas Nelson photograph)

