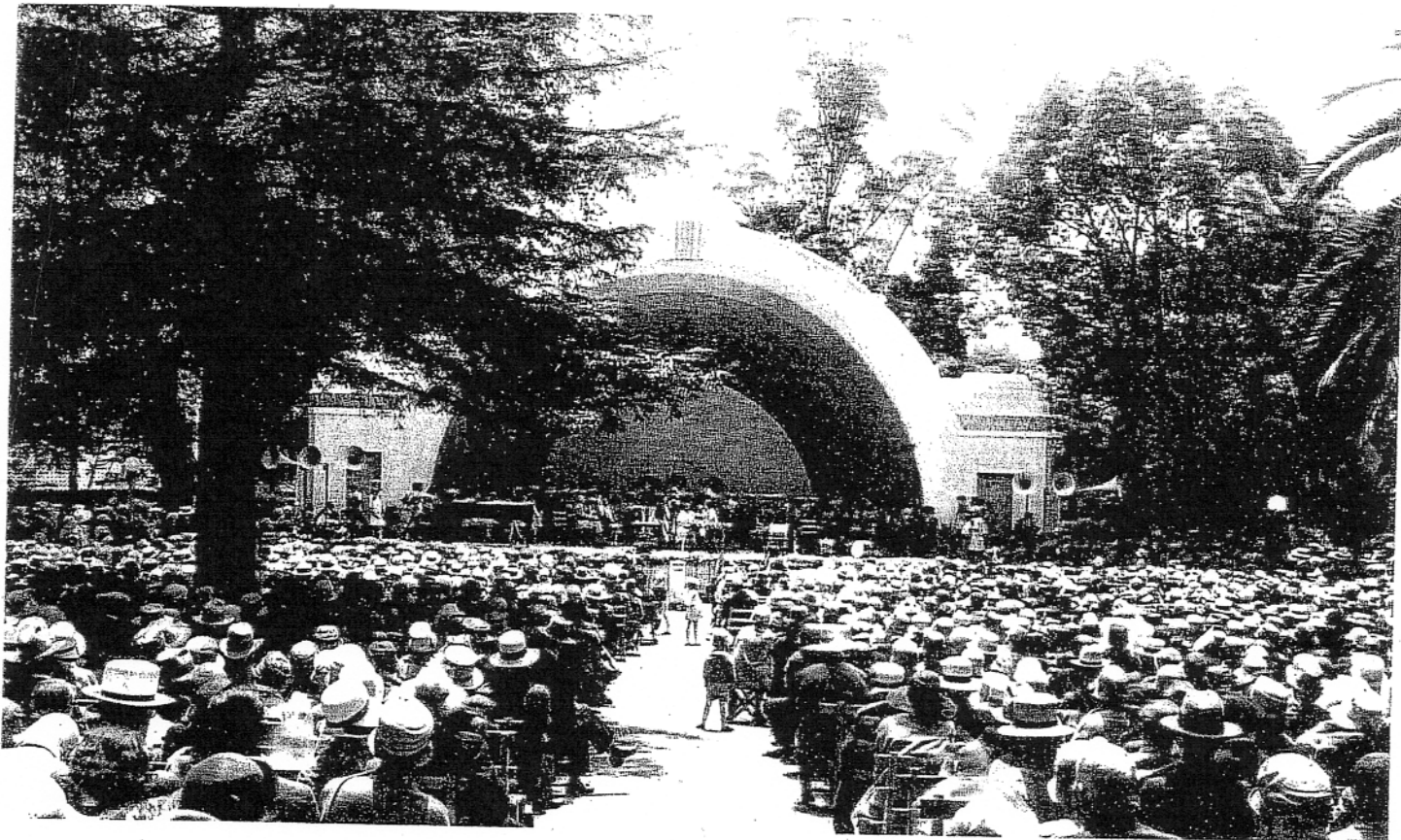


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The Gold Shell the day it was dedicated in 1930.

Pasadena Suite

An Elegant Outdoor Venue Is Tuning Up Again

The Gold Shell, a 1930 band shell in Pasadena's Memorial Park, hasn't seen much action during the past few years, except perhaps from homeless men and women seeking shelter under its gilded arc. But that's about to change. New York businessman-turned-philanthropist Mortimer Levitt (he started a chain of men's stores) is footing the bill to restore the wood-and-stucco looker, one of hundreds of similar structures built in the U.S. between 1920 and 1940.

Back then, it seemed, every community wanted one of the Hollywood Bowl-style venues for gatherings. When the Gold Shell was dedicated on Memorial Day in 1930, Pasadena was abuzz. Thousands turned out to hear a patriotic address from Montville Flowers and to listen to the music, but most of all, to see the shell, which cost \$8,000. The next day, a photo of the scene made the front page of the Pasadena Star-News. The accompanying article called Flowers' address "eloquent" and cheered the acoustics as being "decidedly satisfactory."

Mary Borgerding of Pasadena has fond memories of the shell. She sang there in the early '30s as a member of the Pasadena Junior College glee club and attended regular free concerts by the WPA orchestra during the Depression. "I remember a great deal of laughter from those programs," she recalls. "They were a relief from the things you were worried about."

Retired librarian Anita Gregory, another Pasadena resident, accompanied her grandparents to big-band concerts in the park as a girl in the late '40s and '50s. Among her memories: How the music would simply stop when a train rumbled by on the neighboring Santa Fe railroad and then resume once the engine was out of earshot.

During the '60s, the shell fell into disrepair. Attempts to restore the old luster included a colorful coat of paint in the late '70s by artist Terry Burke. A promoter even booked acts such as Ray Charles and America. But the excitement generated by such events was short-lived.

Levitt, founder of Custom Shop Shirt Makers men's stores, has a soft spot for public open-air pavilions that host free concerts and performances. He wants to build or restore about 25 around the country. Several are in the works. His interest in the Pasadena shell was piqued by a photo sent by his daughter, Elizabeth Hirsch, an L.A. resident and vice president of the Mortimer Levitt Foundation. In short order, Levitt committed \$250,000 to restore and add a state-of-the-art sound-and-light system to the shell, now renamed Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts. He will also contribute \$100,000 a year for five years, which he has asked the community to match, to put on an ambitious slate of 34 free concerts this summer and 50 per summer thereafter. "In a perfect world," says Hirsch, "in a few years there will be so much support from the community, it will run itself. But we'll be there to get them started."

Work began in April. Most of the seating will be on groomed lawn rather than wood benches. The first concert is tentatively scheduled for the end of July, not long after the nearby Gold Line railway is to open. Whether the trains will drown out the music remains to be seen, or heard.—LESLEE KOMAIKO