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The Fascinating Tale of Hollywood Bread Founder Eleanor Hansberry

Hollywood's Own Mid-Century Glamour Queen

By Clive Taylor, President, HOLLYWOOD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, edited by Robin Drulard, Director

In October, with four giant blasts and several days of traffic disruptions, the Hollywood Bread building was imploded and came crashing down, ending an era when drivers arriving on Federal Highway from the South knew without a doubt they were indeed entering downtown Hollywood Florida, Joseph Young's Dream City by the Sea. Thankfully, the iconic sign was removed prior to the demolition, although I don't know if and when it will resurface.

I must have reached the point of historical amnesia when a friend recently asked me why that building was called the *Hollywood Bread Building*

anyway.

I guess I should have seen it coming. Hollywood Bread has been out of business for many years. That's right folks, there was a real bread called *Hollywood Diet Bread*. With development coming to this site, I thought it was time



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in her quest. But he knew an investor who would. Hope Hipwell gave Eleanor \$1000 in cash in return for 49 percent of the company. Hansberry hit the pavement and headed to Hollywood, California, to enlist some movie stars to sell her bread. That Hollywood, not Hollywood, Florida, is where the name originated. **Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Crawford, Grace Kelly, Joan Fontaine, and Judy Garland** had their pictures in the stars that adorned the bread wrapper.

Eleanor Hansberry was a woman show on a mission. Her bread company never



The iconic Hollywood Bread Building has been demolished to make way for residential development

had its own bakery while she was alive. Instead, she sold franchises of her bread recipe to bakeries across the country and would ship the mix to different bakeries, who would bake and distribute it to local grocers while Hansberry ran a huge marketing campaign. What a time she had as a woman in the '40s, walking into bakeries and convincing them to bake her bread when they had their own brands.

Around the late '50s or early '60s, Mrs. Hansberry decided to relocate herself and her company to one of her favorite vacation spots: Hollywood, Florida. After relocating, the company stopped using the movie stars but kept the stars on the wrappers.

She built what we now know as the **Hollywood Bread Building** built in 1969, about the same time the neighboring **Home Tower** was being constructed. The building was a classic mid-century modern structure with a huge cantilevered roof and a well-designed parking garage underneath. The sign used to be illuminated and could be seen for miles, as there were no other high rises around at that time.

Strangely, the new developers have chosen not to incorporate the Hollywood Bread name nor the landmark sign into their new residential design that will be built on the bread building property.

But back to Eleanor Hansberry. She made her home at 900 South Northlake Drive. This prime piece of real estate is one of the best in the Lakes, with spectacular views of Northlake and the barrier island, water on two sides. The home, as well as her many community activities were featured in society pages around the region.

Many fancy parties were held there, including one for her Northlake neighbor **Mr. Bert Parks** of Miss America fame. "*There she is, Miss America,*" It was said that Parks had to sing for his dinner that night.

.But it wasn't all fun and games on South Northlake Drive. One night in 1963, four masked men broke through Mrs. Hansberry's bedroom door and stole ten fur pieces and a \$12,000 diamond ring. Wow, that's a big rock!

They tied her up with her designer drapery cords and her scarves, cut the phone lines and left her. The story is that even in tragedy, the glamorous Hansberry maintained her flair. After managing to free herself, she fled to the home of her neighbor Thomas Wohl, the president of Home Federal Savings, who called

to learn the story of the building, before the landmark "Hollywood Bread Building" sign came down.

This article was supposed to be about the building. But the more I investigated I became aware the real story was not the building but the company's glamorous founder and president, Mrs. Eleanor Hansberry. She presided over the bread empire (and in a way over Hollywood Lakes!) until her death in 1978.

Mrs. Hansberry was a woman who was, as they say, way ahead of her time. Her success in business was unmatched. She once boasted that she'd had hundreds of men working for her. Asked how she handled telling men what to do, she replied: "I have one head man, and he tells the other men what to do but they all know where the orders come from!"

Way ahead of her time.

Born Eleanor Roth in Canton Ohio sometime in the 1920s, she never divulged her true age. She was quoted as saying that any woman who tells you her age would tell you anything. Hansberry married at 15, had a baby, and was divorced at 18. She married again that same year, divorced again at 20, and then remarried again that same year. Huh???? Busy lady! Again, way ahead of her time!

In her early 20s, struggling to lose weight but unwilling to give up her breakfast toast, she came up with the idea for a bread low in calories with healthy ingredients.

After divorcing her third husband, she came up with a special formula for this new kind of healthy, tasty, diet bread. She approached Elam Health Foods in Chicago. Her formula contained eight vegetables: parsley, carrots, cabbage, cauliflower, artichoke, lettuce and pumpkin and — get this, a smidge of seaweed. I have to say it again, this woman was way ahead of her time. The final product had flavor and fewer calories than a traditional loaf and the slices were thinner to shave more calories.

Around this time she met, let me see, I guess it would be her fourth husband, who laughed at her idea and wouldn't put in a dime to help



Eleanor Hansberry promoted her bread along with movie stars of the era.

the police.

She also owned a luxury yacht named "*The Miss Hollywood*," followed by "*The Miss Hollywood II*" and "*Mis Hollywood III*." Like her bread company, I guess they just kept getting bigger.

She opened *The Hollywood House of Beauty* on Galt Ocean Mile. It was an exclusive salon offering facials and hair styling, and she imported the best stylists and facial specialists in the country. In addition to her salon, she also owned a Hollywood diet cola company, the Elam Health Food company, where she had tested her original bread recipe, and the Hopkins-Patwell advertising agency.

She held extravagant parties in her home and on her yachts, and appeared in magazines and television shows — she was a contestant on "*What's My Line*" with panelists Arlene Francis, Dorothy Kilgallen, Bennett Cerf, Buddy Hackett, surprise guest Joey Bishop and mystery guests Lucille Ball and Bob Hope. By any measure, she was a huge success.

Eleanor Hansberry passed away in 1978 and her funeral was held at the Little Flower Catholic Church in the city she loved. A few years later, Hollywood Bread and her other businesses went out of business.. Her home was demolished many years ago. A large mansion built in 2000 stands there today.

The Hollywood Bread Building was the last remainder we have of this incredibly strong, independent and smart businesswoman. In an era of a male-dominated society, Eleanor Hansberry was a woman who was definitely "way ahead of her time".

If you've enjoyed reading this article, we invite you to hear more great stories of South Florida's past by joining THE HOLLYWOOD HISTORICAL SOCIETY, a nonprofit 501(c)(3)* cultural organization founded and operated by volunteers. Individual memberships start at just \$25.

THE HOLLYWOOD HISTORICAL SOCIETY has over 20,000 items in its collection, housed at its headquarters and research center at the Historic Hammerstein House at 1520 Polk Street in the Hollywood Lakes section. We offer unique items for sale, including books, historic postcards, photographs, maps, and posters.

In addition, we sponsor historic walking and bike tours, home tours, an informative and entertaining lecture series, a recognition plaque program for historic homes, and many other exciting and fun events that help ensure the rich and varied history of Hollywood and its surroundings is not lost.

To learn more, please contact us At



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