

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

DRAFT

## 1. Name of Property

Historic name: Top Hat Hot Dog Stand  
 Other names/site number: Top Hat Burger Palace; Top Hat Café  
 Name of related multiple property listing:  
N/A  
 (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

## 2. Location

Street & number: 297-299 East Main Street  
 City or town: Ventura State: California County: Ventura  
 Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

## 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this \_\_\_ nomination \_\_\_ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property \_\_\_ meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

\_\_\_ national      \_\_\_ statewide      \_\_\_ local  
 Applicable National Register Criteria:  
 \_\_\_ A      \_\_\_ B      \_\_\_ C      \_\_\_ D

_____ <b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b>	_____ <b>Date</b>
_____ <b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b>	

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.	
_____ <b>Signature of commenting official:</b>	_____ <b>Date</b>
_____ <b>Title :</b>	
<b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b>	

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#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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#### 5. Classification

##### Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

##### Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object



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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER: Roadside Commercial

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**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: METAL/Steel

### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

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### Summary Paragraph

The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand is located in the city of Ventura, California at 297-299 East Main Street. It sits on a half-acre site bounded by an alley to the north, East Main Street to the south, North Palm Street to the east and a one-story commercial building to the west. On the parcel, there is the steel hot dog stand building and two wooden storage sheds abutting the hot dog stand to the west. The parcel was listed in 1975 within the boundary of the Mission San Buenaventura and Mission Compound Site (NRIS# 75000496). The building stands on a busy corner lot in the center of downtown Ventura, constructed in the Roadside Commercial style of architecture without attribution to any known architect. The 8-foot by 22-foot building, in the traditional Classic Chicago Box style,<sup>1</sup> is constructed of prefabricated, interlocking steel panels and features a row of three steel-framed pass-through windows spanning the entire front/south façade and a single-pane windows on the east and west façades. The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand has sustained few significant alterations since its construction—most of which have been removed, returning the building to its original form. The building retains all aspects of historic integrity.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Kraig and Patty Carroll, *Man Bites Dog: Hot Dog Culture in America*, (Lanham, MD, Alta Mira Press), 91.

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## Narrative Description

The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand (Top Hat) is located at 299 East Main Street in the city of Ventura, California. The parcel, spanning addresses 297-299 East Main Street, is bounded by an alley to the north, East Main Street to the south, North Palm Street to the east, and a one-story commercial building to the west.

Top Hat is a classic example of an American roadside, post-World War II commercial, steel, walk-up hot dog stand. Due to the inability to obtain full access to the resource and reduced visibility due to the presence of construction fencing, the following description is based on an October 2, 2017 site visit and a July 2005 Greenwood and Associates report, *Phase I Cultural Resource Investigation: Proposed Development at the Northwest Corner of Main and Palm Streets, Ventura*.

The one-story rectangular building measures roughly 8 feet by 22 feet. The entire building—including walls, interior walls, and roof—is fabricated of painted, vertically seamed, interlocking steel panels with a steel-faced concrete slab foundation. Both 12-inch wide steel panels and 16-inch wide steel panels are featured on the exterior of the building. The 16-inch panels are part of a distinctive Unistrut framing system. The flat roof is composed of “C-section steel panels covered with built-up roofing material and the panels overhang the walls slightly, forming narrow eaves.”<sup>2</sup>

Fenestration consists of a row of three steel-framed pass-through windows which span the entire front/south façade and a single-pane aluminum window on the east and west facade. The front pass-through aluminum windows are shielded by hinged, wooden doors. On the west façade, the single-pane pass-through window has been in-filled with a plywood panel with three small-screened openings.<sup>3</sup> Below the pass-through windows is a steel counter formed of the same steel panels that comprise the walls and the roof. The counter wraps around three sides of the building. At the roofline above the wraparound counter are the rollers for the original canvas awnings. Wrought-iron security bars have been added to the windows and door on the west façade. Along the east façade of the building is a long wooden counter and bench with exposed pipe supports.

Non-original plywood signage stands at the roofline of the southeast corner of the building attached to an added sign brace and obscure the visibility of a large added ventilation unit. Directly to the southwest of the southwest corner of the building stands the steel pole from a no longer extant neon pole sign. Abutting the west façade are two non-original, noncontributing vertically seamed plywood sheds with shed roofs.

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<sup>2</sup> Greenwood and Associates, *Phase I Cultural Resources Investigation: Proposed Development at the Northwest Corner of Main and Palm Streets, Ventura*, July 2005, 16.

<sup>3</sup> The Greenwood and Associates report indicates that the plywood infill panel that “appeared quite old” as of 2005.

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Character defining features include:

- Single-story height
- Small, box-like shape
- Simple, unadorned minimal metal design without ornamentation
- Detached, rectangular 8' x 22' plan
- Slightly sloping pitched (almost flat) roof
- Rectangular, hand-out/pass-through window opening on south (Main Street) elevation
- Window openings above counter on southernmost portions of east and west elevations
- Shallow, wrap-around counter
- Vertically seamed interlocking steel panels
- Unistrut construction at the rear addition to the building
- Handpainted art signage at rooftop
- Free-standing metal sign pole at southwestern portion of property
- Location at the corner of Palm and Main Streets with open-air areas to the south and east, and west historically used for congregating, service and seating

#### Alterations/Integrity

The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand has sustained few significant alterations since its construction. Some alterations, such as the addition of a metal shade canopy and freestanding menu board, have been removed, visually returning the main façade to its original design and massing. Original building permit documentation is unclear.<sup>4</sup> Historic photographs and aerials indicate the building was not there as of August-September 1947.<sup>5</sup> Official permit history begins in February 1948.

Historic building permits, photographs, and visual inspection of the property indicate the presence of two additions. Based on the permit, the earliest portion of the building is the 8' x 8' southernmost section. This was borne out by Greenwood and Associates' inspection of the building in 2005 that observed distinct differences in wall construction—suggesting two extensions to the original 8' x 8' square box plan.<sup>6</sup> The first addition, only three to four feet in length, includes the building's only exterior door, a modern glazed and paneled door on the west side, incorporating horizontal steel panels at the top of the walls. This addition may have been associated with a plumbing permit for the addition of a sink and toilet just one month after the original stand was to be available for inspection. Both the square front section and this section are constructed of 12-inch wide vertical steel panels. The earliest permit lists the completion date for the project as April 25, 1948.

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<sup>4</sup> Permit #11911 dated March 5, 1948 can be read alternately as construction of the original building or an addition to the original.

<sup>5</sup> USGS Aerial Survey (8/15/1947-9/12/1947) from Historic Aerials.com (accessed October 1, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Greenwood and Associates, *Phase I Cultural Resources Investigation*, July 2005, 16.

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Greenwood and Associates also observed that the panels forming the 10.5-foot wide rear portion of the building are 16 inches in width, suggesting subsequent construction of a second addition.<sup>7</sup> No building permit documentation was found for the second addition, approximated between 1950 and 1952. This is supported by building permit documentation showing the dimensions of the stand to be roughly 9 feet by 12 feet in February of 1950, and County Commercial Building Records indicating the building reached its length of 22 feet by 1952.<sup>8</sup>

In 1951, to create more visibility to passing motorists, a post with a neon sign was erected. The sign was removed in later years at the request of the City of Ventura fearing it might fall on someone.<sup>9</sup> The steel sign pole remains at the edge of the sidewalk.

A historic photo from 1952 indicates the original awning was canvas. The canvas awning was replaced some time before 1966 with a broad hip-roof canopy made of interlocking painted pressed-steel sections dissimilar to the walls of the building.<sup>10</sup> This metal canopy has since been removed.

A large, three-sided plywood sign featuring a painted top hat and cane and the text “Hamburgers” and “Hot Dogs” replaced a smaller earlier version atop the roof of the building, sometime prior to 1980. That sign was later re-painted with various signs featuring a new top hat, gloves, and cane prior to 1990. All of these signs have been removed. The most recent sign may be in the possession of the Bell family along with the original grilling unit.<sup>11</sup>

The long wooden counter/bench unit with exposed pipe supports was added circa 1980 in an area previously occupied by picnic benches.<sup>12</sup> A low concrete wall with a menu board along the west edge of the site was added prior to 2005, and has since been removed. Two wooden storage sheds were added abutting the west façade of the building in the early 2000s.<sup>13</sup>

Although the property has been the target of graffiti since it ceased to function as a working hot dog and hamburger stand in 2010, it retains all seven aspects of historic integrity:

*Location:* The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand remains in its original location and therefore retains integrity of location.

*Design:* As a postwar commercial building, the Classic Chicago Box style design for a hot dog stand retains its classical elements of simplicity, functionality, and economy. Earlier additions, such as the roof canopy and menu board have since been removed. The removal of original and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Greenwood and Associates, March 2006, Memo from Dana Slawson, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Bell, interview with Stephen Schafer and Sian Winship, December 18, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Greenwood and Associates, *Phase I Cultural Resources Investigation*, July 2005, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Bell, interview with Stephen Schafer and Sian Winship, December 18, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Greenwood and Associates, *Phase I Cultural Resources Investigation*, July 2005, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 16.

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later roof signage and the addition of wooden storage sheds are reversible. Therefore, the Top Hat Hot Dog Stand retains integrity of design.

*Setting:* Since its inception, Top Hat has stood alone on the parcel located at one of Ventura's most visible intersections on busy Main Street. The physical environment of the surrounding area appears largely as it did through the period of operations. Open on three sides to foot traffic and passing automobiles on East Main Street and North Palm Street, it retains integrity of setting.

*Materials and Workmanship:* Due in large part to its steel construction, the property retains its most significant original materials and workmanship. Although the steel has been repainted several times, all panels and all but one of the original windows remain intact. The early 1950 rearward expansion of the stand retains its early Unistrut construction. Although the building's original/early art signage and its neon pole sign have been removed, its steel componentry is original, intact, and visible. The property, therefore, retains integrity of materials and workmanship.

*Feeling and Association:* The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, and workmanship. These aspects combine to convey the property's aesthetic, historic sense, and association as a post-World War II, walk-up hot dog stand. The property retains integrity of feeling and association.



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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

COMMERCE  
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION  
ARCHITECTURE

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

1948-1952

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Dates**

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

Unknown

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the areas of Commerce and Entertainment/Recreation as a rare and intact example of a postwar roadside commercial walk-up hot dog stand, specifically reflecting California roadside architecture. It represents the very beginning of postwar American fast food culture, by reflecting the independently owned, entrepreneurial stands that have been eliminated by the national and regional fast food chains. Top Hat is also eligible at the local level of significance under Criterion C in the area of Architecture as a rare and intact example of early postwar, prefabricated steel construction and one associated with the pioneering Unistrut building system. It is one of the few remaining unaltered steel hot dog stands in Southern California. The period of significance is 1948 to 1952, reflecting completion of original construction through the last major steel panel addition.

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand is eligible at the local level under Criterion A as a rare and intact example of a classic American steel walk-up hot-dog stand from the postwar period. Its creation reflects the significant postwar population growth of the city of Ventura and the increasing importance of automobile culture. It is emblematic of the independently owned roadside eateries that pre-date the development of chain fast food restaurants/culture in America. Locally, the Top Hat is the oldest remaining roadside hot dog stand in the city of Ventura—and the only one constructed from prefabricated steel panels. The property is also eligible for listing under Criterion C as embodying the distinctive characteristics of prefabricated steel construction in the postwar period. The building is not only a rare and early example of interlocking prefabricated steel panel construction after the lifting of wartime restrictions banning the use of steel, it is a rare and early example of Unistrut construction—a significant advance in construction methodology leading to space-frame technology. The 1948 to 1952 period of significance reflects the date of its original construction through the last major steel panel addition.

Top Hat is associated with the following contexts: post-World War II development in Ventura, the hot dog stand and California roadside commercial architecture, the beginning of American fast food culture, and postwar prefabricated steel construction. A discussion of each of these themes follows.

*Post-World War II Development in Ventura, 1947-1962<sup>14</sup>*

Ventura city and county experienced enormous growth during World War II. With the establishment of the military base at Port Hueneme in 1942 and later at Point Mugu, 21,000 military personnel and 10,000 civilian workers came to the region.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The dates of this period have been defined by the period of significance for the Main Street Commercial District identified in the 2007 survey, for which Top Hat has been identified as a district contributor.

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Postwar prosperity and optimism fueled the eastward development of the city of Ventura, and also impacted the downtown area with infill development and the upgrading and expansion of existing buildings. The vast majority of these commercial properties were either late Moderne or Mid-Century Modern in design.

In 1945, the first proposal was made for a statewide freeway network that included a north-south thoroughfare along the coast, closely paralleling the existing State Highway 101 that ran along Thompson Boulevard through Ventura.<sup>16</sup> As Californians took to the roads in record numbers, dozens of roadside motels and drive-in dining establishments were built in eastern Ventura. Downtown, however, retained its profile as the walkable heart of the city.

In 2007, the Top Hat was identified as a contributor to the Potential (Downtown) Main Street Commercial Historic District recommended in the Historic Resources Update.

#### *The Hot Dog Stand and California Roadside Commercial Architecture*

The hot dog stand is the stationary version of the traditional hot dog pushcart. The location of a hot dog stand often took its cue from where cart vendors had been successful. In cities, that meant public gatherings in a park or crossroads meeting place. Where there was vacant space, where business might be done, there was a place that an entrepreneur could set up a stand.<sup>17</sup>

Typically, roadside stands were one-story, wood-frame sheds. At least one wall of the building contained a service window or opening, or a horizontal band of open space above a ledge or counter secured by a pull down shutter after business hours.<sup>18</sup> These simple buildings were often composed of locally available building materials and sported handmade art in their signs.

At first, roadside stands tended to be placed flush with sidewalks. Over time, they were set back from roadways and serviced by parking lots and driveways.

Based on its climate, California was one of the few places where roadside stands were not seasonal in nature. In less favorable climates, eat-in highway cafes and highway destination restaurants proliferated.<sup>19</sup>

A new category of restaurant, the outdoor walk-up, emerged after World War II. Served from windows, customers ate in their automobiles, sat at picnic tables, or took their food to eat elsewhere. The buildings were often constructed from inexpensive, locally sourced materials

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<sup>15</sup> Historic Resources Group, Historic Resources Survey Update, City of Ventura: Downtown Specific Plan Area, April 2007, 51.

<sup>16</sup> The freeway officially opened in Ventura in September of 1962.

<sup>17</sup> Kraig and Carroll, *Man Bites Dog*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> John A. Jakle and Keith Sculle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 42.

<sup>19</sup> With California's focus in the automobile, however, drive-ins also began to take hold in Los Angeles in the 1930s. Mimetic (a.k.a., programmatic) forms also lured hungry drivers from behind the wheels of their cars with giant donuts, oversize puppy dogs, and the occasional tamale.

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such as wood-frame, stucco, and concrete block. Some outdoor walk-ups were made from prefabricated steel frames covered with glass and porcelain enamel. Regardless of their materials, these establishments reflected postwar, self-made-on-a-dime entrepreneurship.

As described by Tom Marble, who served on the Board of the Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design from 2002 to 2007:

The fast food stand is a species of structure native to Southern California. What often begins as something mobile—a push cart, an abandoned caboose, a roach coach—becomes fixed in a specific location to serve a particular clientele. Sometimes it evolves into a chain, but more often it remains solitary, the realm of the lone vendor. When that vendor retires, dies or his/her clientele evaporates, the structure either disappears or is taken over...<sup>20</sup>

Authors Bruce Kraig and Patty Carroll, who have traversed the country documenting hot dog stands, identified the Classic Chicago Box as a prototypical postwar form. Square in plan, the painted wooden building features open windows on three sides, with hinged flap window closures that double as shade structures when opened and secured by chains.<sup>21</sup>

While these simple buildings were largely ignored by the architectural press of the time, America's foremost architectural historian, Henry Russell Hitchcock, noted that, "The combination of strict functionalism and bold symbolism in the best roadside stands provides, perhaps, the most encouraging sign for the architecture of the mid-twentieth century."<sup>22</sup>

Locally, Top Hat is the oldest remaining roadside hot dog stand in the city of Ventura, and the only one constructed from pre-fabricated steel panels.

### *The Beginning of American Fast Food Culture*

Before the American landscape was dominated by chain fast-food restaurants, independent hot dog and hamburger stands were the options of choice for roadside dining. As a scholar of roadside eateries described:

Hamburger and hot dog joints...were more than places to eat. They were places of deep psychological satisfaction; focal points of social interaction with others, blended aromas and special sounds, and signals of parental approbation—no small thing for a child. Food was eaten at these stool-and-counter stands or beside hot-dog carts after some equally pleasant recreation...a streetcar ride or a movie.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Tom Marble, "A City is Not A Forest," Los Angeles Forum for Urban Architecture and Design, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Kraig and Carroll, *Man Bites Dog*, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Russell Hitchcock, *The Architecture of H.H. Richardson and His Times* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 302-303.

<sup>23</sup> Jakle and Sculle, 6.

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The hot dog is widely known as “the first fast food.” It was one of the first mass-produced, “portion-controlled” foods in the United States. Hot dogs were “created to be served at public functions, whether at festivals, boardwalks, or simply walking in city streets.”<sup>24</sup>

As automobile ownership was embraced by middle-class Americans, the market for “road food” grew.<sup>25</sup> These quick service, unpretentious establishments took the form of roadside stands.

Roadside stands were ideal for entrepreneurs with limited capital. Whereas carts had been a sign of pre-World War I entrepreneurship; stands became a sign of post-World War II entrepreneurship. Most stands were built by their owners—often with a considerable amount of sweat equity. The roadside stand, like the tourist cabin court, was “hailed as one of America’s last frontiers for independent businessmen.”<sup>26</sup>

As an indication of the hot dog’s popularity, by the late 1920s, there were 83,000,000 hot dogs sold at roadside stands; more than all other kinds of sandwiches combined.<sup>27</sup> During the 1920s, roadside stands were also the subject of derision. The derisive descriptor “hot dog kennel” was widely applied before World War II. In response, the National Standowners Association was formed in the late 1920s to serve the “roadside refreshment industry” and to “combat blight.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the differentiators between the old-fashioned stands and the new outdoor walk-up buildings was the increased mechanization of food preparation. The assembly line processes that had turned out bomber after bomber were now turning out hot dogs, hamburgers, and drinks. McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc is perhaps the best-known pioneer of the fast food industry. In 1941, Karl Karcher (1917-2008) started his fast-food business with a hot dog cart in Los Angeles and opened his first Carl’s Jr. restaurants in Anaheim and Brea in 1956. Later, in 1961, Wienerschnitzel founder John Galardi did the same for hot dogs, from a single initial stand in Wilmington, California.

Eventually, the clean, convenient, and reliably consistent fast food chains would push all but the most formidable independent owners out of business. Subsequent generations of owners, often recent immigrants to the U.S., added items reflecting their heritage to the menu, including tacos, Japanese food, and Korean specialties

### The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand

The northwest corner of East Main Street and North Palm Street has been a central Ventura location dating back to the Mission period. The parcel is located on the site of the former San Buena Ventura Mission Compound. The mission and compound were listed on the National

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<sup>24</sup> Bruce Kraig, “The American Hot Dog Stand,” *Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium*, “Public Eating,” (Oxford, 1992), 177.

<sup>25</sup> Jakle and Sculle, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Hot Dog Not So Hot,” *Freeport Journal Standard*, December 14, 1929, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Weldon Fawcett, “Roadside Merchants Organize to Study Mutual Problems,” *Sales Management and Advertising Weekly*, September 1, 1928, 193.

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Register as a Historic District in 1975 (bounded by Poli Street, Ventura Avenue, Santa Clara Street and Palm Street). Top Hat is located on the eastern edge of this district.

The Mission was composed of the church with additional buildings to the east and a courtyard surrounded by single-story wings forming a square. This first quadrangle included the priest's quarters, a single-woman's barracks, and kitchen. As the mission grew, a second quadrangle was erected to the east of the first for storing food and trade products (primarily tallow). Top Hat is located in the area of the second quadrangle.<sup>29</sup>

After the Mission was secularized, the mission complex declined and the Mexican government sold off land to private speculators. During the 1880s, a saloon with bowling alley, a blacksmith shop, and a hose house of the hook and ladder company occupied the corner of the lot where Top Hat stands.<sup>30</sup> Beginning in 1888, the site was occupied by the Anacapa Hotel, built to accommodate the rising number of visitors to Ventura arriving by passenger train. The hotel was demolished in 1928 and the parcel was used as a car sales lot.<sup>31</sup>

During World War II, the site became an important place for congregating. On September 9, 1943, the parcel was the focal point of the Third War Loan Drive and parade down Main Street featuring the Seabees of Camp Rousseau. The same day, the Victory House (1943, Harold Burket), where war bonds could be purchased, was dedicated. Here also, a bandstand/platform was erected featuring a large federal eagle backdrop facing the intersection. The 150-piece Seabee band, drum, and bugle corps and a host of performers appeared to entertain war bond buyers. The entire effort was sponsored by the Ventura Junior Chamber of Commerce and on that day alone, the 10,000 attendees raised \$58,000.<sup>32</sup> The war finance committee of Southern California routed some of its major bond selling attractions through Ventura to appear at Victory House.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the northwest corner of East Main Street and North Palm Street became a central gathering place in downtown Ventura.

After the war, the Victory House was razed and the high visibility location made it the perfect parcel for the new postwar entrepreneurial venture of Edward J. Carr and Harold G. Serene: a hot dog stand. Edward J. Carr (1917-1984), a Ventura resident married to Mary K. Carr, operated the Ed Carr Richfield Service station at 415 E. Meta Street (later East Thompson Boulevard) in the early 1940s.<sup>34</sup> In April of 1945, the 28-year old Carr enlisted in the army at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro.<sup>35</sup> After World War II, Carr returned to Ventura. By 1949, he was a Ventura realtor at Perry & Carr. Carr stayed in the real estate business, eventually moving to Ojai and selling real estate there.

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<sup>29</sup> Greenwood and Associates, *Archeological Assessment and Recovery E. Main Street and N. Palm Street City of Ventura*, n.d., 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3; also Greenwood and Associates, *Phase I Cultural Resources Investigation*, July 2005, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Greenwood and Associates, *Archeological Assessment and Recovery*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> "Parade Spurs Bond Drive," *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 1943, I3.

<sup>33</sup> "Fund Raising Drive for Victory House Ready Here," *Ventura County Star-Free Press*, August 3, 1943.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1940 U.S. Census.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) (accessed October 1, 2017).

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Harold Guy Serene (1904-1991) was a Colorado-born insurance salesman in Ventura. His residency in Ventura can be traced to the late teens. He married his wife Martha and in the mid-1940s he appears to have given up insurance sales in favor of liquor sales—operating Pan’s Wins Liquor Fancy Foods.<sup>36</sup> He too, retired to Ojai, where he operated Oilfield Liquor and Sporting Goods into the 1980s.<sup>37</sup>

For their postwar entrepreneurial joint venture, Carr and Serene hired local concrete contractors, Hall Bros. to pour the slab for their hot dog stand.<sup>38</sup> It is unclear if Hall Bros. was also responsible for the building of the building. Hall Bros. was composed of two English-born brothers James Harry Hall (1878-1958) and Matthew A. Hall (1878-1957). It is unknown if the procurement of the original prefabricated steel panels was related to building materials or surplus used by the nearby Seabees.

By 1950, Carr and Serene had sold the hot dog stand to Texas-born Seth T. Stewart (1894-1980) and his wife Eva Stewart (1902-1996). They came to Southern California via Flagstaff, Arizona. Stewart, a former baker and bakery operator in Santa Monica, oversaw the 1951-52 extension of the building and the addition of the neon pole sign to attract motorists along Main Street. By 1956, Stewart was a firefighter at Port Hueneme.<sup>39</sup> It was under the Stewarts’ ownership that the first-known reference to the stand as “Top Hat Hot Dog” appeared on an October 1951 electrical permit.<sup>40</sup>

Top Hat ownership continued to pass through a series of small entrepreneurs including Doris Chandler (1959), Doris Mashburn (1961), John H. and John W. Durham (1963) and Delbert L. Woods (1964). In 1966, the restaurant was purchased by Homer and Gretchen McKee. Homer Mc Kee (1900-1984) had resided in Ventura County since the mid-1930s. They relocated there during the Great Depression. In the 1940 Census, they were enumerated in Hueneme township; Homer listed as a rancher/laborer and Gretchen as a sorter in a citrus packing house.<sup>41</sup> The couple later opened McKee’s Café at 101A Highway and Hueneme Road in Oxnard.<sup>42</sup> Homer’s purchase of the Top Hat Hot Dog Stand at the age of 66 was the couple’s retirement job. Their daughter, Charlotte Bell (b. 1930), took over the business in 1970 when her father suffered a heart attack.<sup>43</sup> Bell’s son and grandson ran the business until it closed in February 2010.<sup>44</sup>

Top Hat’s clientele represented a cross-section of the Ventura community. From working class patrons from the adjacent commercial blocks to the lawyers and other professionals working at

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<sup>36</sup> Ventura City Directory, 1948-49.

<sup>37</sup> Ojai City Directory, 1981.

<sup>38</sup> City of Ventura, Building Permit #11911, March 5, 1948.

<sup>39</sup> Ventura City Directory, 1956.

<sup>40</sup> City of Ventura Electrical Permit #23511, November 1951.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1940 U.S. Census.

<sup>42</sup> “Directory,” *Oxnard Press Courier*, May 28, 1957, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Charlotte Bell, interview by Stephen Schafer and Sian Winship, December 19, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Top Hat Flips Its Last Burger,” *Ventura County Star*, February 3, 2010, C1.



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the nearby Ventura County Courthouse, to regular patronage by families on Saturdays, Top Hat remained a reliable presence during the economic cycles of downtown Ventura.<sup>45</sup>

The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand gained a strong cultural significance to the Ventura community as evidenced by the extensive media coverage and May 2004 petition to “Save the Top Hat,” which garnered over 2,000 signatures when word of pending demolition was made public.<sup>46</sup>

### *Postwar Prefabricated Steel Construction*

While the use of prefabricated steel components existed in prewar construction, it was after World War II that the use of prefabricated steel components in commercial buildings became more commonplace. As early as the 1920s, European architects such as Walter Gropius and Charles-Edouard Le Corbusier were using prefabricated materials.<sup>47</sup>

Prefabricated steel buildings were popularized in Southern California by the Pacific Steel Building Co. Established in 1922 by Richard C. Barrie (1885-1954), the Los Angeles-based firm offered a variety of prefabricated steel building designs in the company’s mail order catalogue. Designs for garages, rest rooms, market buildings, restaurants, and lunchrooms were available for sale by 1928.<sup>48</sup> The company was best known for its gas stations and provided a variety of station designs for Atlantic Richfield Corporation. Given that one of the Top Hat owners, Ed Carr, was also a prefabricated-steel Richfield station owner, he would have been familiar with the benefits of prefabricated steel construction: economy, portability, and fire resistance.<sup>49</sup> No definitive link has been made at this time between Top Hat and the Pacific Steel Building Co.

Although the wartime use of steel was restricted, these restrictions were lifted after WWII. The utility of prefabricated metal buildings had been proven during the war with the erection of Quonset Huts—a staple of construction by the Seabees Naval Construction Battalion stationed at nearby Camp Rousseau. After the war, surplus Quonset huts were sold to civilians for commercial and residential uses.<sup>50</sup> Many of them dotted the postwar landscape of Ventura County.

At the same time, many steel and aluminum products manufacturers turned their wartime production machines toward construction on the home front. Such companies included the Nigg Engineering Co., Butler Manufacturing Company, aircraft manufacturers such as Vultee, and the radar-housing manufacturer Lincoln Industries.

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<sup>45</sup> Charlotte Bell, interview by Stephen Schafer and Sian Winship, December 19, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> The business was ultimately sold to new owners who opened a new Top Hat at another location in Ventura. It lasted only a few years before it was closed.

<sup>47</sup> One of these Quonset huts exists at 43 S. Olive Street, Ventura (c. 1945).

<sup>48</sup> “Display Ad 70,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 30, 1928, F5.

<sup>49</sup> The location of Ed Carr’s Richfield Station, 415 E. Meta Street (later Thompson Boulevard) in Ventura, remains the site of a prefabricated steel gas station building, strengthening the potential for Carr to have been influential in Top Hat’s construction method.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Reynolds, “American Quonset,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1991.

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Although the source of the steel materials used to erect Top Hat and its first addition are unknown, the final circa 1952 addition extending its length to 22 feet utilizes the Unistrut Metal Framing System. Unistrut's distinctive open-faced "U" or "C" channel construction frames are visible at the roofline of the north façade. Invented by Charles W. Atwood around 1920 as a means of efficiently mounting electrical components in large cabinets, the steel structural support system could be applied to a variety of applications including framing and as a precursor to space-frame construction. Originally known as Deceleco, Inc. (the company later became Unistrut Corporation), Atwood began national marketing of the product and flourished in the late 1940s and early 1950s when demand for standardized building systems was at its peak.<sup>51</sup> The company's success was enhanced by the creation of the animated character "Mr. Unistrut" by none other than Walt Disney himself, in the 1950s.<sup>52</sup>

Key components of the Unistrut system included the "C" or "U" channel, and the spring-loaded toothed nut, channel flange, and nut fittings that simplified assembly, adjustability, and reuse. Only a hacksaw and a wrench were required for installation. The channel was typically made of cold rolled steel, and was also available in aluminum, magnesium, brass, and stainless steel and was available in a variety of dimensions.

The potential for Unistrut as a building system was first realized in the late 1940s when Atwood, who was educated as an architect, used the system to construct two buildings at its Wayne, Michigan plant. Atwood also promoted the system to architecture schools, including the University of Michigan's College of Architecture, as a low-cost method of constructing schools—in significant demand during the postwar baby-boom period.<sup>53</sup> Growth in Unistrut applications and usage necessitated the production of new fittings and by 1979, the company annually produced more than 12,000 unique frame fittings to be sold worldwide.<sup>54</sup> In 1957, Unistrut exhibited a building constructed entirely of the metal framing system at international expos and won the silver cup award at the Barcelona trade fair.<sup>55</sup> During the 1960s, the company developed the Telespar and Space Frame product lines.<sup>56</sup>

#### Comparison With Other Mid-Century Hot Dog Stands In Southern California

While a formal, comprehensive list of independently owned walk-up hot dog and other food stands in California from the postwar period is nonexistent, the number of such establishments is easily estimated to have been in the thousands at the peak of their popularity.

According to Tom Marble, of the Los Angeles Forum for Urban Architecture and Design:

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<sup>51</sup> "From the Unistrut Archives," *Uniwold*, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 1979, 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Norman Light Productions, "The Sky's The Limit," <https://unistrut.biz/about-us/> (accessed October 4, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Amy Arnold and Brian Conway, Michigan Modern, <http://www.michiganmodern.org/buildings/walter-sanders-house> (accessed October 4, 2017).

<sup>54</sup> "From the Unistrut Archives," *Uniwold*, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 1979, 5.

<sup>55</sup> "From the Unistrut Archives," *Uniwold*, Volume 1, Number 3, Summer 1979, 5.

<sup>56</sup> "From the Unistrut Archives," *Uniwold*, Volume 1, Number 4, Fall 1979, 5.

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As a building type, the solitary fast food stand is endangered. Because they are the simplest of structures, often just a metal box plopped next to a sidewalk, they cannot easily grow. Building codes limit expansion as well, requiring things like parking lots and accessible bathrooms for even the most modest change. Finally, health department standards that favor the larger, more modern kitchen result in ratings rarely above a ‘B,’ discouraging all but the more adventurous diner.<sup>57</sup>

In 2008, photographer Gerald M. Painter photo-documented 53 independent walk-up roadside stands around Los Angeles in his book, *Eating on the Run*. Only 19 of those buildings remain, and the majority of those extant having been significantly altered.

Drawing from existing documentation of these buildings from books and internet sites, it can be concluded that steel hot dog/hamburger stands are relatively rare among this building type. The vast majority of them were constructed of wood frame, stucco, glass, and concrete block. Of the 53 walk-up roadside stands documented by Painter, only two appear to have been of steel (stainless steel) construction and those have been razed.

Research credits one individual, Richard J. Morey (1910-1995), with having a construction firm that built “numerous metal food stands around Los Angeles after World War II.”<sup>58</sup> It is unknown how many projects Morey, a steel worker living in South Gate in 1940 who went on to work for Bethlehem Steel during the 1950s, may have completed. His sole known project at 4321 Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles has been significantly altered.

To put the scarcity of the roadside hot dog stand into perspective, authors Kraig and Carroll indicate that in Chicago, where a regional version of the delicacy is part of the dining culture, “barely a handful of hot dog stands that predate the 1950s” remain today.<sup>59</sup>

The majority of stands that survive lack historic integrity. They have often been altered to comply with local health regulations, provide additional storage space, or seating. The Top Hat Hot Dog Stand, in contrast, experienced few alterations and those have been reversed over time. Among Southern California’s walk-up roadside hot dog stands, Top Hat is one of the few that continues to convey its historic significance.

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<sup>57</sup> Tom Marble, “A City is Not A Forest,” Los Angeles Forum for Urban Architecture and Design, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Bob Pool, “Beef Closes Old Burger Joint,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 5, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Kraig and Carroll, *Man Bites Dog*, 69.

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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # HABS.CA.2863
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Stephen Schafer, Box 24218, Ventura, CA 93002

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** \_\_\_\_\_

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreege of Property** less than one acre

### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: \_\_\_\_\_

(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 34.280967 Longitude: -119.296337

### Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

APN: 071-0-194-070 consisting of the following:

Parcel 4A: (APN: 071-0-194-070 – portion)

Lots 6 and 7 and the East 15 feet of Lot B, Block 58, according to the map entitled “Partial Map of Catholic Church (Mission) Grounds, being part of Block 58 of the Town of San Buenaventura, Ventura County, State of California,” recorded in book 2, page 129 of Miscellaneous Records (Maps), in the office of the County Recorder of said county.

Parcel 4B: (APN: 071-0-194-070 – portion)

Portion of Lot 4, Block 58, Town of San Buenaventura, in the City of Ventura, County of Ventura, State of California, according to the map recorded in Book A, Page 327 of Miscellaneous Records (Maps) transcribed records from Santa Barbara County, in the office of the County Recorder of said County, being also shown as the F. Hartman property and an 8-foot strip on the West of said Hartman property on the map of “Catholic Church (Mission) Grounds” and recorded in Book 2, Page 129 of Miscellaneous Records (Maps), described as follows:

Beginning at the Southeast corner of said Block 58, at the intersection of the North line of East Main Street and the West line of Palm Street; thence from said point of beginning, 1<sup>st</sup>: North 170 feet along the West line of Palm Street; thence at right angles; 2<sup>nd</sup>: West 66.50 feet to the Northeast corner of Lot 6 of said Catholic Church (Mission) Grounds; thence along the Easterly line thereof, 3<sup>rd</sup>: South 170 feet to the North line of East Main Street; thence at right angles, 4<sup>th</sup>: East 66.50 feet to the point of beginning.

### Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

As boundaries appear in legal description on Grant Deed.

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### 11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Stephen Schafer and Sian Winship  
organization: \_\_\_\_\_  
street & number: P.O. Box 24218  
city or town: Ventura state: CA zip code: 93002  
e-mail: [schaf@west.net](mailto:schaf@west.net)  
telephone: (805) 652-1000  
date: January 2018

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### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

### Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

### Photo Log

Name of Property:	Top Hat Hot Dog Stand
City or Vicinity:	Ventura
County:	Ventura
State:	California
Photographer:	Stephen Schafer
Date Photographed:	October 11, 2017



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Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 9 Exterior, oblique view of southwest corner showing two noncontributing sheds at rear, October 2017. Camera facing NE.
- 2 of 9 Exterior, view of front (south) façade with welded steel wrap-around counter and pass-through window behind folding wood doors, October 2017. Camera facing N.
- 3 of 9 Exterior, southwest corner of building with steel wrap-around counter and wood and steel pipe bench, October 2017. Camera facing NW.
- 4 of 9 Exterior, detail view of east façade showing transition between 12" steel panels to 16" steel panels, October 2017. Camera facing SW.
- 5 of 9 Exterior, general view of west façade of building showing parcel fronting on East Main Street, October 2017. Camera facing E.
- 6 of 9 Exterior, vertical view of original steel post for neon sign at sidewalk on East Main Street with building behind construction fencing, October 2017. Camera facing NE.
- 7 of 9 Exterior, view of building behind construction fencing from corner of North Palm Street and East Main street. October 2017. Camera facing NW.
- 8 of 9 Context, view across East Main Street toward south façade of building behind construction fencing, October 2017. Camera facing N.
- 9 of 9 Context, view of entire parcel and building behind construction fencing, October 2017. Camera facing NW.

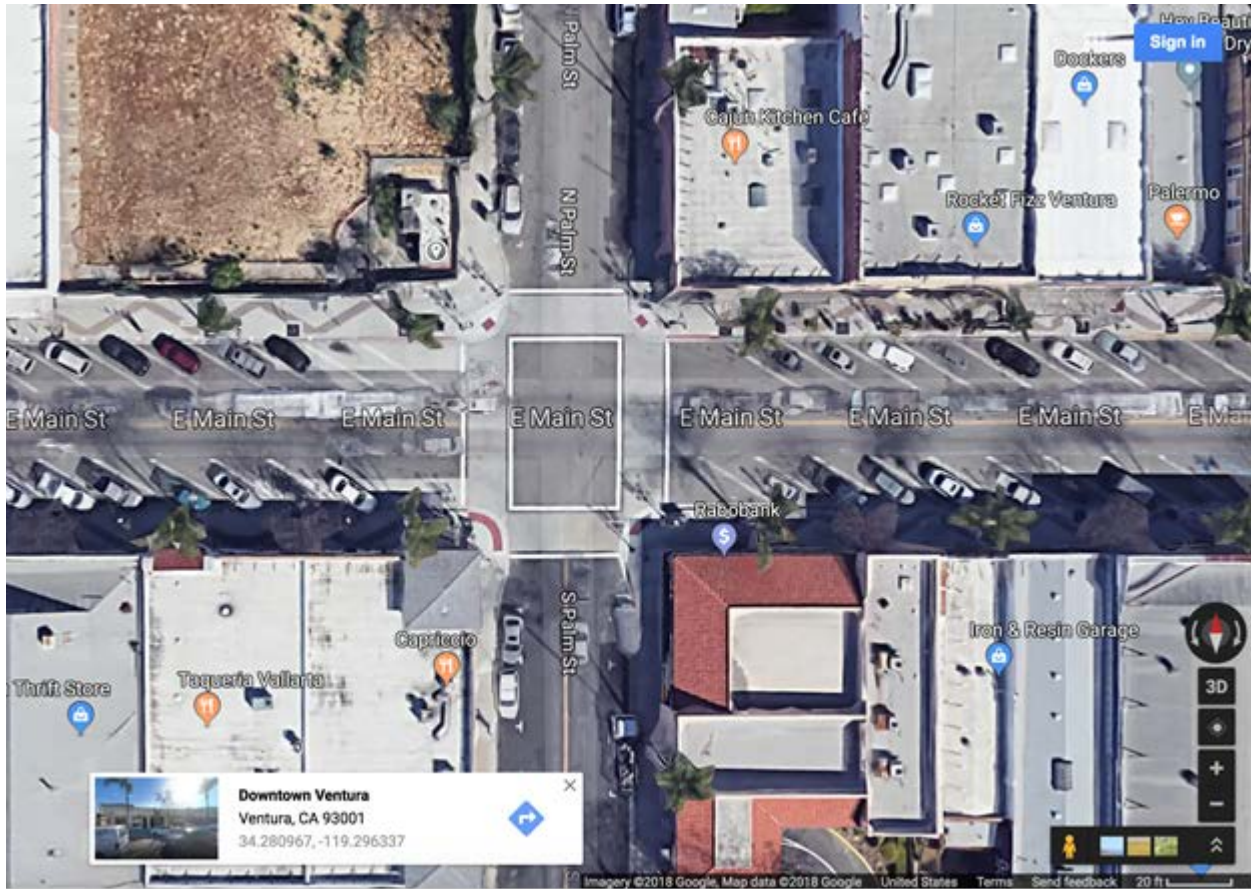
**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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**Figure 1. Location Map**

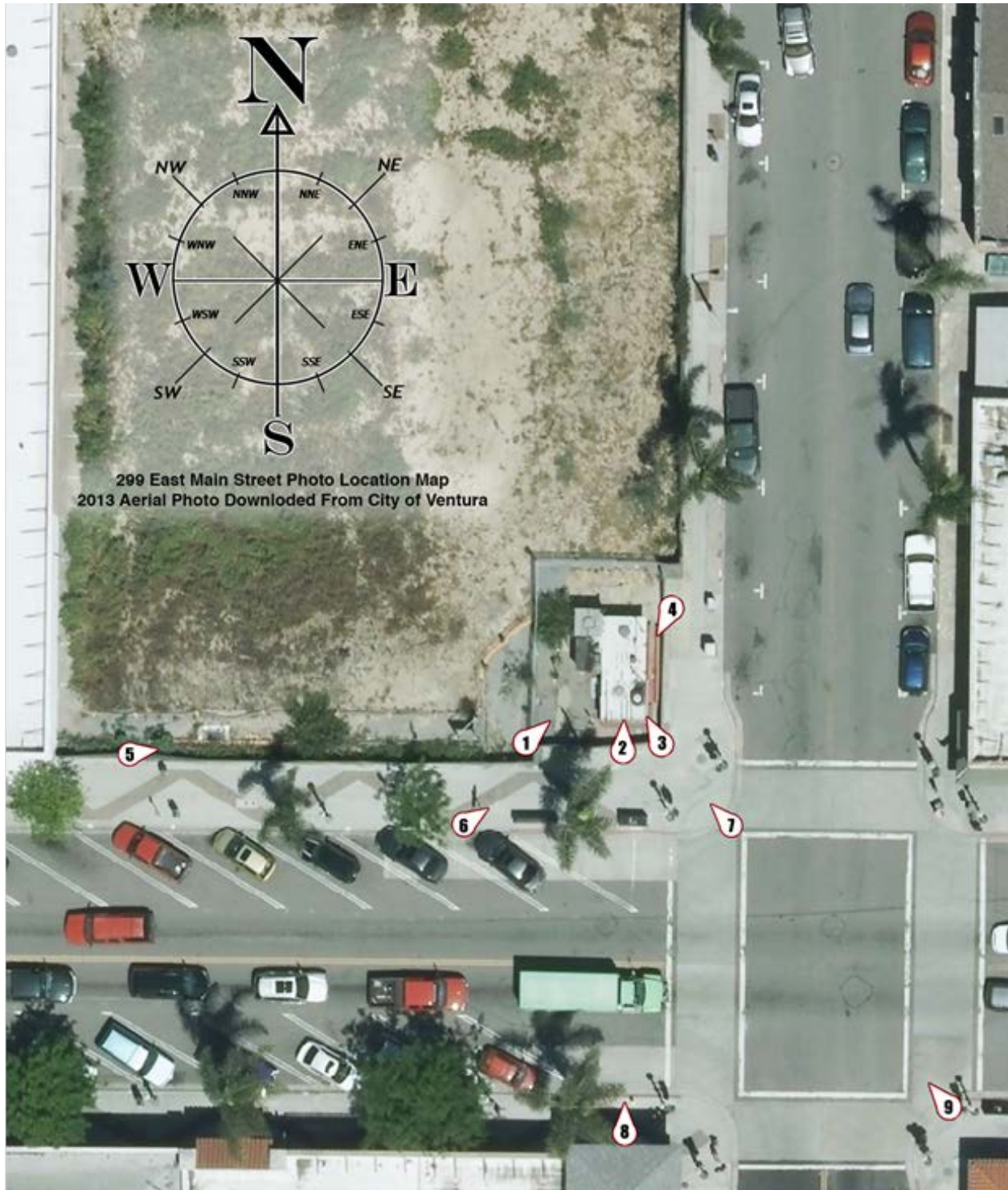


Source: Google Maps (accessed January 31, 2018)

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**Figure 2. Sketch Map/Photo Key**



Source: City of Ventura

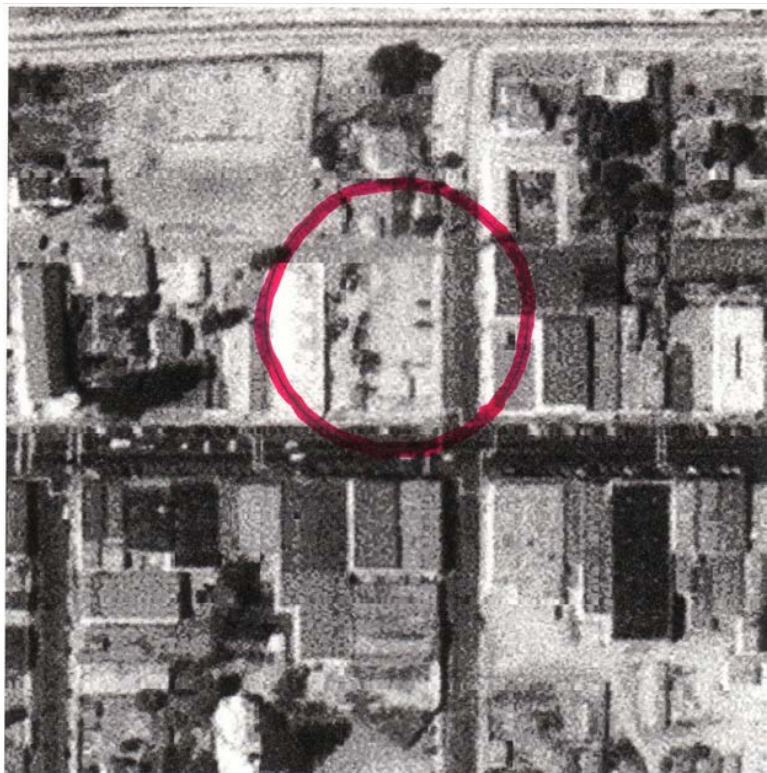
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**Figure 3.** Aerial photograph taken in 1946 shows no hot dog stand on corner parcel. Victory House/bandstand is clearly visible. Source: San Buenaventura Conservancy Archives.



**Figure 4.** Aerial photograph taken August/September 1947 shows no hot dog stand on corner parcel. Victory House/bandstand has been demolished. Source: Historic Aerials.com.



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**Figure 5.** The northwest corner of East Main Street and North Palm Street circa 1875 featuring the second quadrangle of Mission San Buena Ventura. Top Hat's location is that of the building at the far right. Source: Museum of Ventura County.



**Figure 6.** Third War Loan Drive parade on September 9, 1943. Seabees parade westward on East Main Street. Victory House and bandstand are visible on the corner parcel where Top Hat would later be built. Bond rallies made the corner a de facto gathering place for the community during wartime. Source: Museum of Ventura County.



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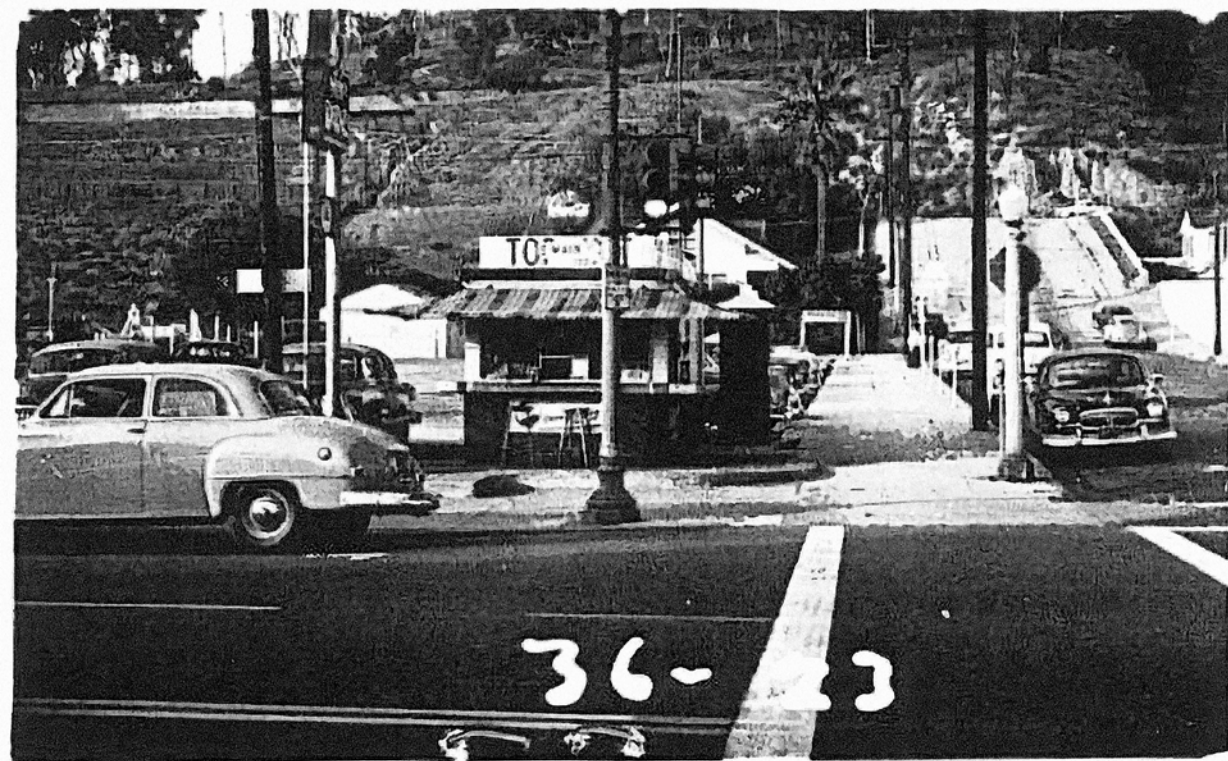
**Figure 7.** Howard and Martha Serene, one of the first owners of the Top Hat Hot Dog Stand, at their wedding in 1938. Source: Public Photos, Ancestry.com



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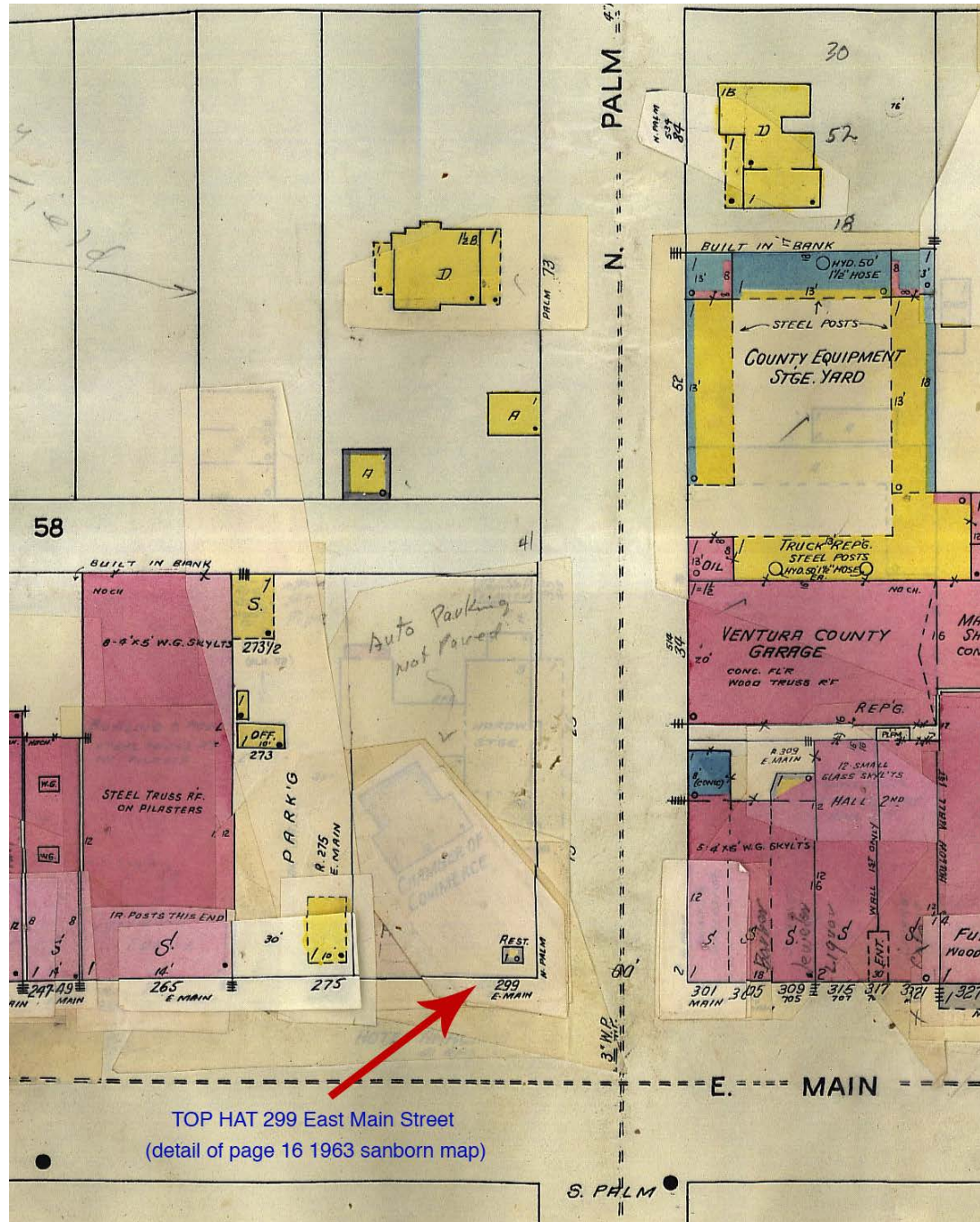
**Figure 8.** Earliest known Top Hat photo, circa 1952. Note original roof signage, neon sign on pole, and canvas awning. Source: 1952 County Assessor Commercial Property Record.



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**Figure 9.** 1963 Sanborn Map paste over of earlier map shows Top Hat location relative to the razed bandstand. Source: City of Ventura GIS Department.

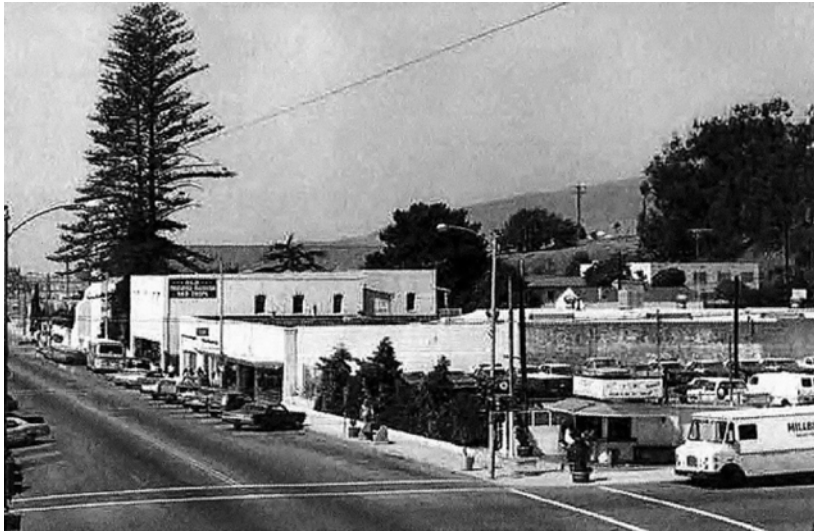




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**Figure 10.** Southeast corner of East Main and Palm Streets from 1972 featuring metal canopy installation and half-height wooden rooftop sign. Neon sign has already been removed. Source: Greenwood & Associates.



**Figure 11.** Top Hat circa 1980 with handmade art signage and hip-roofed metal canopy. Source: San Buenaventura Conservancy Archives.



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**Figure 12.** December 2009. Non-original menu board has since been removed.  
Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



**Figure 13.** Corner context looking northwest February 2010. Source: Stephen Schafer.



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**Figure 14.** Corner context looking north. February 2010. Source: Stephen Schafer.



**Figure 15.** Exterior, oblique view of northeast corner showing steel panels on east façade and Unistrut construction on north façade. Noncontributing shed visible on right. February 2010. Source: Stephen Schafer.



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**Figure 16.** Exterior detail of north façade showing 16” steel panels and C-channel Unistrut construction. February 2010. Source: Stephen Schafer.



**Figure 17.** Looking northwest at the corner of East Main Street and North Palm Street shows the stand's placement flush with the sidewalk, a characteristic of early roadside eateries. February 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-1. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



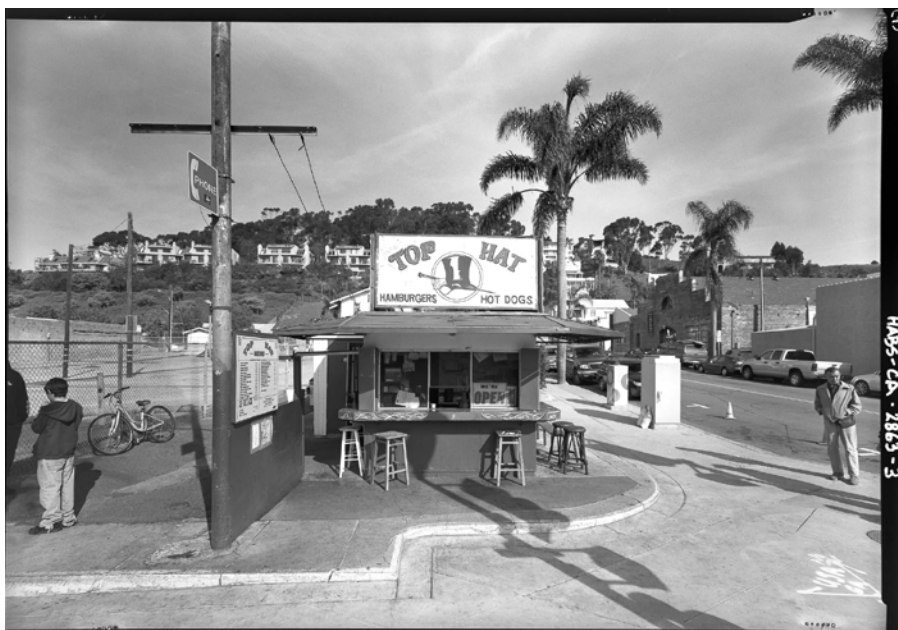
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**Figure 18.** Looking northeast at property's location in a high foot traffic area of downtown Ventura along the city's major thoroughfare, Main Street. February 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-2. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



**Figure 19.** Large glass pass-through window dominates the front (south) façade. The large handmade art rooftop sign shields a rooftop ventilation unit. Non-original wooden menu board sign is visible at left. February, 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-3. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



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**Figure 20.** East façade with pass-through window. The additions to the rear of the building can be clearly read in this image. February 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-4. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



**Figure 21.** North façade shows “C” channel Unistrut construction at roofline. February 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-6. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



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**Figure 22.** West façade shows alteration to pass-through window and two noncontributing wooden storage sheds. February, 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-7. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



**Figure 23.** West elevation detail shows steel panel construction. One noncontributing wood storage shed is visible at left. February 10, 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-9. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.



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**Figure 24.** Detail of welded, steel, wrap-around counter and open wood folding doors for pass-through window. February 2010. Source: HABS.CA.2863-10. Photographer: Stephen Schafer.





Top Hat Hot Dog Stand  
Name of Property

Ventura County, California  
County and State

**Figure 25.** A Classic Chicago Box style hot dog stand featuring large pass-through window and roof signage, circa 2012. Source: *Man Bites Dog*, 91.

