

# San Jose Light Tower documentary sheds light on landmark's history

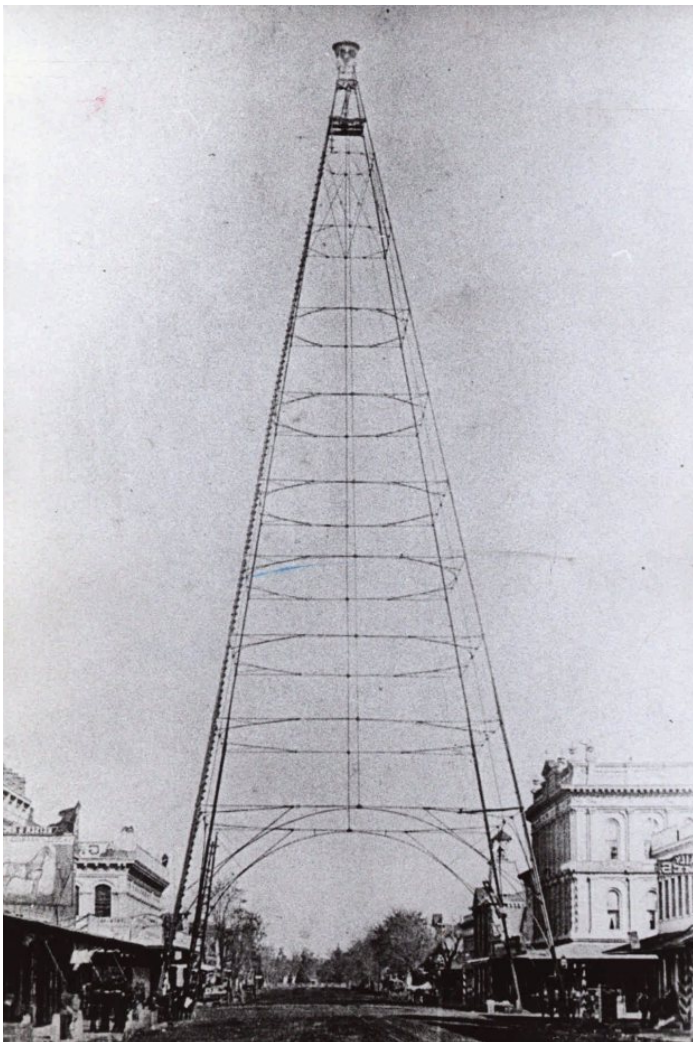
## New film explores San Jose icon's connection to the Eiffel Tower

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Almost a decade ago, filmmaker **Thomas Wohlmüt** was intrigued by a rumor he heard that Gustave Eiffel paid a visit to San Jose in the 1880s and was inspired by the city's downtown light tower to create the famous structure in Paris that bears his name.

"As in all good rumors, there are sometimes an element of truth," Wohlmüt said. "I started to dig into what if there was some connection and I could find it."



A landmark electric light tower arched over Market and Santa Clara streets in San Jose until a series of 1915 storms toppled it. Credit: Mercury News File Photo.

Wohlmüt spent nights researching on the Internet, eventually taking trips to Zurich and France and unearthing rarely seen personal letters, scientific journals and newspaper clippings. The result of all that work is "[The Light Between Two Towers](#)," a documentary that had its premiere Wednesday night at San Jose's 3Below Theaters.

The audience was made up mostly of donors to the project, including lead sponsor **Linda Lester**, along with San Jose Mayor **Sam Liccardo**, downtown Councilman **Raul Peralez** and **Sophie Lafitte**, the deputy consul general for France in San Francisco. Also there were **Jon Ball** and **Steve Borkenhagen**, who were inspired by

Wohlmut's work to form the nonprofit [San Jose Light Tower Corp.](#), with the goal of creating a new landmark for the city.

The hourlong film is a fascinating look into the history of the San Jose icon, which San Jose Mercury Publisher J.J. Owen willed into being in 1881 as a new way of illuminating downtown with electricity. It's a testament to the notion that the innovative drive that created Silicon Valley was here when this was the Valley of Heart's Delight, too. Even for local history buffs, the film contained fascinating new gems: downtown department store owner Alex Hart — whose own tragic family history has a significant spot in San Jose lore — was leading a campaign to restore the dilapidated 237-foot-high tower and plans were already under way when it collapsed in a 1915 storm.

But what of the connection with the Eiffel Tower? Wohlmut debunked the rumor of Gustave Eiffel's visit, but the film makes a convincing case that the French engineers who designed the Paris landmark would have been very aware of the San Jose Light Tower. At the time, the tower was celebrated as an engineering and electrical achievement in *Scientific American*, as well as newspapers around the country and the world. And the documentary has Pedro de Saisset, a prominent French-born San Jose resident, as a prime connection who personally sent word of San Jose's tower to prominent friends and family members in France who had influence over the Eiffel Tower's design.

Wohlmut concedes all the evidence is circumstantial, but he's not disappointed by not uncovering a direct connection. "From the engineers that I spoke with in Europe they clearly say that engineers start with something someone else has made and try to make it better," he said. "So it's entirely logical that they would start with our tower — not use it, not copy it — but begin the design process with something that works and was world famous."

Wohlmut says he would like to get "The Light Between Two Towers" on PBS at some point. And 3Below co-founder **Shannon Guggenheim** says the theater will have future public screenings of the documentary, but none have yet been scheduled. You can get more information on the film — and stream it for a rental fee — at [www.the2towers.com](http://www.the2towers.com).



San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo, French Deputy Consul General Sophie Lafitte, filmmaker Thomas Wohlmutter and sponsor Linda Lester at the premiere of “The Light Between Two Towers” at 3Below Theaters in downtown San Jose on Feb. 20, 2019. (Sal Pizarro/Bay Area News Group)

**OFF TO A RUNNING START:** The [San Jose/Dublin Sister City Program](#) is launching a new tradition next month with its inaugural San Jose Shamrock 5K & 10K run/walk. The race is set for 8 a.m. March 17 — St. Patrick’s Day — and will benefit the program’s Pat McMahon Masters Level Exchange Scholarships.

The races — there’s also a Leprechaun kids run for the wee ones — will start and finish at San Pedro Square, where there will be a post-race party with live entertainment and a beer garden. While the San Jose/Dublin program has traditionally hosted a ticketed dinner or lunch as its fundraiser, chairman **Sean O’Kane** said a run was seen as a way to introduce the program and its scholarships to a larger segment of the community.

To register or get more details, go to [www.sanjoseshamrockrun.com](http://www.sanjoseshamrockrun.com).

**CAMPBELL SCRAMBLE:** For a relative small city, Campbell's full of surprises. Nobody could have been shocked about the [negative feedback over the bikini-clad baristas](#) at the new Pink Pantherz Espresso. But then again, the Orchard City was also home to the South Bay's only Hooters restaurant until that location closed recently.

The next thing likely to cause a stir among the citizenry? The [environmental impact report](#) has been released for the In-N-Out Burger proposed for the site of the old Elephant Bar on Hamilton Avenue. Campbell's planning commission will have a public hearing for comments on Feb. 26 at 7:30 p.m. at City Hall. [People are worried about the additional traffic](#) the popular burger joint will create on an already crowded street near Highway 17 — and they're not wrong.

**STORIES ON THE MOVE:** [Play On Words](#), the literary arts series, brings its creative cabal of writers and performers to the San Jose Museum of Art at 2 p.m. Feb. 24 for "New Terrains," a collaborative performance that features the work of 15 writers. A group of professional actors will perform a collection of stories — fiction, nonfiction, poetry and theater — from Iran, India, Ireland, Mexico, South Korea, Serbia, China and the United States.

The piece is part of the San Jose Museum of Art's "New Terrains: Mobility and Migration" exhibition, a series of cross-disciplinary programs that explores how bodies move through social and political spaces in Silicon Valley. Admission is free by registering at [sjmusart.org/event/play-words-new-terrains](http://sjmusart.org/event/play-words-new-terrains).