

BEYOND BULLET POINTS: CONTEXT AND CONNECTIVITY IN AN ONLINE HISTORICAL EXHIBIT

INTRODUCTION

As part of a recent processing project at the Occidental College Special Collections, I created an online exhibit about American writer and reporter, William Mellors Henry (1890-1970), entitled “Bill Henry and the News: the rise of Los Angeles and American News Media.” Bill Henry’s life is often discussed, both in print and in the collective memory of his alma mater, as a series of professional roles: a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, news broadcaster for CBS and NBC, historian of the Olympic Games, and aviation enthusiast. I think archivists tend to understand individuals and families in this compartmentalized fashion because we arrange and describe records in the context of the activities in which they were produced. However, Henry was more than a newsman working in 20th century Los Angeles. He was part of a larger social framework that experienced massive political, cultural, and economic change.

Rather than presenting the life of this man in isolated segments, which suggest that his professional identities are not connected, I wanted to discuss Henry in the contexts of the rapid urban and sub-urban development of Los Angeles, and the expansion of American news media during the 20th century from print to radio to television. Rather than exhibiting his accomplishments and speculating on how he impacted his era, I wanted to explore how the social context of his time and place could be understood through specific items in his collection.

SCOPE

The schedule of the processing project limited the amount of research I could perform for the exhibit. I also I needed to process and describe a 50 linear foot collection, appraise a 100-volume library, and digitize and publish selected items from the collection: in four months. The exhibit therefore needed to be minimal and concise, but I did not want its small scope to encourage a hollow interpretation of this figure.

RESEARCH

I conducted a broad literature review of resources that discussed 20th century Los Angeles history, as well as the development of contemporary American journalism (see bibliography). These sources helped me to summarize the rapid population growth and explosion of suburban development in 20th century Los Angeles, the journalistic evolution from civic boosterism to balanced critique, and the effect of radio and television on American national consciousness.

CURATION & DESIGN

Selected items from the collection exemplify the larger historical frameworks of 20th century Los Angeles. For instance, for the section, “A suburbanized city,” I provide the following introductory remarks:

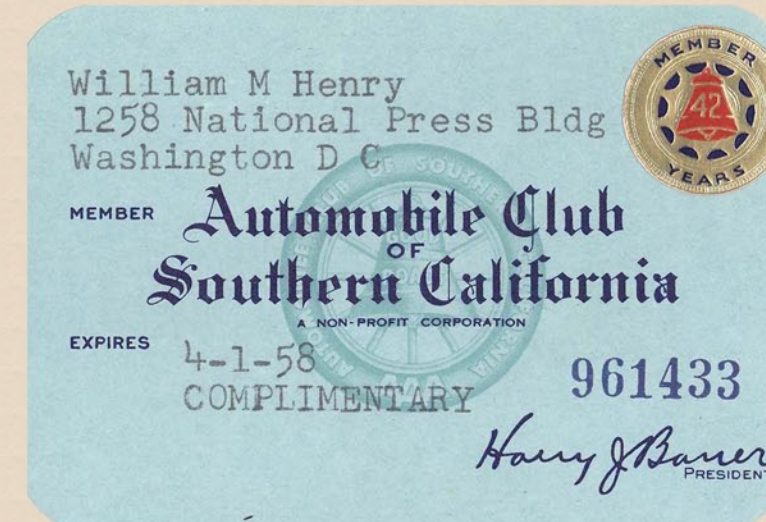
The 1950s-1970s witnessed a widespread suburbanization of Los Angeles, fueled in part by the popularization of automobiles and the construction of several major highways leading out of the city. Historian Eric Avila describes the freeways of the 1950s as a symbol of a “new Los Angeles,” emerging from the Second World War as a place in which residents were free to move away from urban areas that were perceived as overcrowded and dangerous to new developments in surrounding suburbs (Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight, 217). Growing faster than the city, LA County population rose from about 2.8 million in 1940 to 7 million in 1970 (Popular, 29).



Henry at CBS Studios, circa 1940

This summary is illustrated with several images, including an image of Bill Henry’s Automobile Club of Southern California membership card, with the accompanying text:

The Automobile Club of Southern California encouraged the development of new freeways by conducting traffic surveys and producing publications centered on automobile travel and tourism. Henry served as editor of the club’s membership magazine, Touring Topics (renamed Westways) from 1920-1926.



Henry’s Automobile Club of Southern California membership card, 1945

Along with a photograph of Bill Henry posing in front of his car, and an article about his suburban home, these images evoke a moment of collective excitement about lifestyle and transportation that was particular to Los Angeles in the 1940s.

EXHIBIT OUTLINE

(Omeka’s Exhibit Builder plugin uses “pages” within “sections” to create exhibits.)

Section 1: Introduction

Page 1: About Bill Henry

Section 2: Los Angeles Rises

Page 1: Los Angeles as boom town

Page 2: The Los Angeles Times: from civic boosterism to a new journalistic era

Page 3: A suburbanized city

Section 3: Broadcast Journalism and the New National Consciousness

Page 1: Radio

Page 2: Television

Section 4: About the Bill Henry Collection

CONCLUSIONS

Practical solutions often require compromises.

It is important to maintain perspective of the larger goal when encountering disadvantages to a particular choice. At the time of this project, Occidental College was undergoing a university-wide website migration to the Drupal platform, and any deviation from this platform would require departmental purchase of separate server space. Occidental’s Drupal instance does include a gallery template, but it does not allow for enough customization to create an immersive-feeling exhibit. Furthermore, the Special Collections Department is not currently prepared to support and administer their own server space. Hence, Omeka’s hosted service, omeka.net, was selected as a platform for the exhibit. While easy to use, and even easier to set-up, omeka.net does not allow for full customization of themes and layout.

Design can convey complex information, if used effectively.

I found that the hierarchy instituted by archivists when describing collections does not always translate well in graphic design. The average user of an exhibit probably doesn’t care that a particular item resides in a series or sub-series, and trying to represent this structure can be distracting.

Creating a narrative about someone’s cultural context takes time.

It requires critical engagement with a range of social and political issues that are a whole lot more complex than a timeline of activities and achievements.



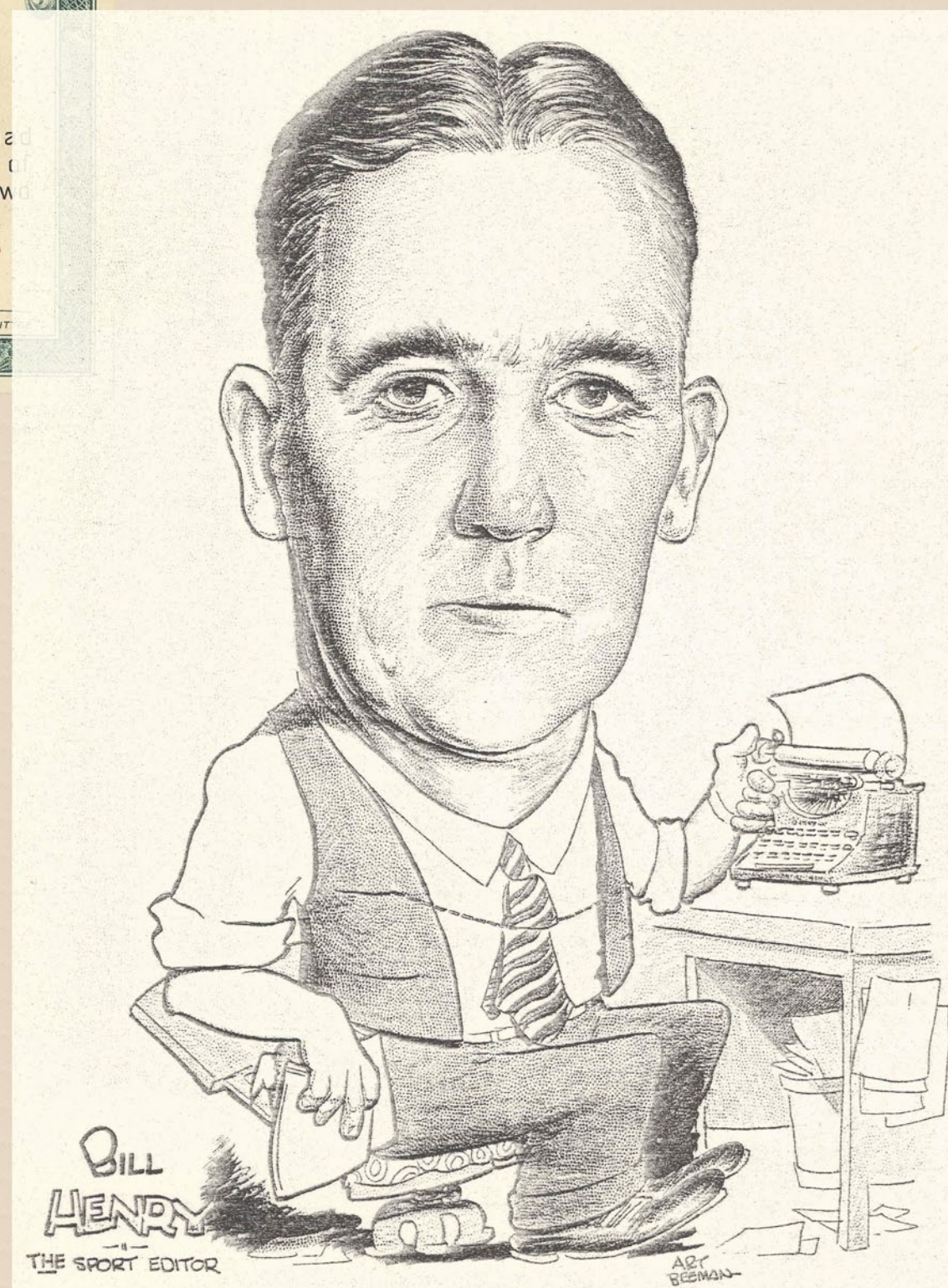
Promotional brochure for NBC’s “Window on Washington,” 1953



Henry at Mutual Broadcasting System, 1951



Stadium pass, Games of the Xth Olympiad, 1932



A caricature of Henry as Sports Editor of the *LA Times* by Art Beeman, circa 1920s



Los Angeles Olympic Village, 1932

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