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: 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 newspaperman 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 suburban 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 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:

“Increasingly, Los Angeles was not just the Garden of the Gods, but also the Garden of the Film. The city, which was once known as the ‘City of Angels,’ has now become the ‘City of Stars.’”

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 highways 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 Weekends) from 1920-1930.

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 “sections” within “pages” to create exhibits.)

Section 1: Introduction
Page 1: About Bill Henry
Page 2: Los Angeles

Section 2: Los Angeles Rising
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
Page 3: 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, it 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 achievements and achievements.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


