



Notes from the Archive

Seaver Center for Western History Research
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
March 2020

Welcome to Notes from the Archive, a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department.
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In the Beginning: the Early Days of the Seaver Center and Remembering Its First Curator, Dr. Errol Wayne Stevens

Errol Stevens worked at the museum from 1985 to 1994. Since that time he remained a friend and advocate of the History Department. His sad passing on January 17, 2020 prompts us to take a look back.

The Seaver Center for Western History Research opened its doors for the first time on Tuesday, April 29, 1986. Ironically, on this same day, an historic fire struck the Central Library downtown destroying numerous records on local history. For the staff of the History Department it must have been a momentous occasion culminating from years of planning that stemmed back to the late 1970s.

The Natural History Museum's holdings of research materials documenting the history of the American West, and particularly southern California, had grown substantially since the earliest days when one of the museum's founding organizations, the Historical Society of Southern California, had donated books, manuscripts, pamphlets, and photographs in 1913.

These materials belonged to the people of Los Angeles County and have always been open to the public. However, the museum's main purpose in collecting them was for exhibition and curatorial research. The collections grew in a random fashion, reflecting the collecting interests of individual curators and the resources of different sections of the museum.

While the museum's Research Library maintained the book collection, the History Department had collected and maintained other historical material, such as photographs, manuscripts, maps, posters and ephemera. By the late 1970s serious thought was given to the idea of pulling these various collections together, placing them under one administrative umbrella and making them available to a wide audience. The renovation of the California History Hall in 1980 provided the intellectual catalyst for this consolidation.

Beginning September, 1982, the Western History Library operated on the Ground Floor of the museum. That same year the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a challenge grant to the Western History Library. In June of 1983, the Seaver Institute, a southern California philanthropic foundation, announced a gift of \$300,000 to establish the Seaver Center for Western History Research. Richard C. Seaver, the head of the Institute, was a member of the museum's Board of Governors - elected in 1967 and remained on the board for nearly 40 years.

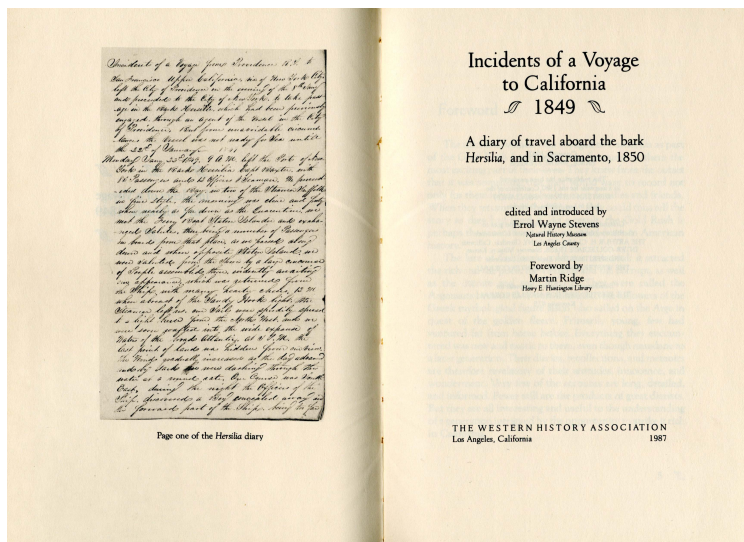
Dr. Stevens was hired as Associate Curator of History to lead the Seaver Center, and he hit the ground running at the start of 1985 to set up the new Center by ordering compact shelving. Working closely with the head of the Research Library, Katharine E. S. Donahue, he oversaw the Seaver Center's physical design and layout and developed the necessary infrastructure and policies.



Pictured are John Cahoon, Errol Stevens and Kathy Donahue in the Western History Library, 1985, preparing for the move (GPF.7805)

The new Seaver Center reading room, along with an adjacent office, was established in former exhibit spaces. Nearby collection storage arranged onto compact shelves took over another former exhibit gallery.

Soon Errol's work included historical edits to a 40-page Gold Rush voyage diary, which he published in 1987 as *Incidents of a Voyage to California 1849: a Diary of Travel Aboard the Bark Hersilia, and in Sacramento, 1850*. This diary is a part of the founding collection by the Historical Society and is housed in the Seaver Center.

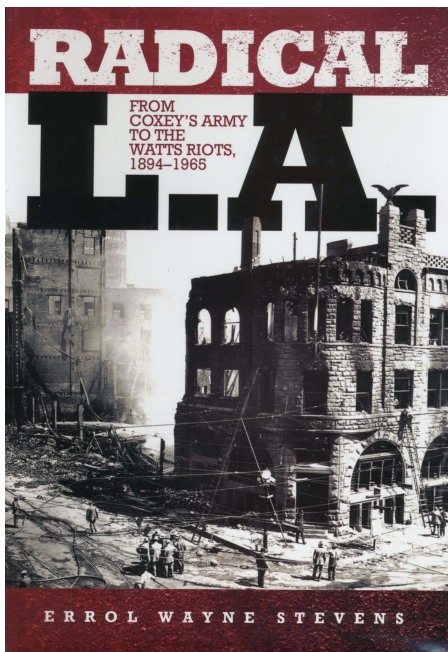


Errol organized several exhibits, and he acquired new collections, including the Jean Stinchfield Ambassador Hotel Publicity collection that documents the former 1921 mid-Wilshire hotel famous for its Cocoanut Grove night club as well as being the site of the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy.



GPF.8036 Maria Maximoff and donor Jean Stinchfield with Errol, 1987

In 1994 Errol left the museum to become head of Special Collections at Loyola Marymount University's Charles Von der Ahe Library where he stayed until retiring in January, 2006. At LMU he developed the research collections, but his appreciation for the paper and photo collections at the Seaver Center remained with him. As a result, he published journal articles on Helen Hunt Jackson's impact on southern California tourism through her novel *Ramona*, and he explored the Western photography of Frederic Hamer Maude. In both articles he richly cited Seaver Center materials.



His interest in social reform and American radicalism led him to produce the 2009 book, *Radical L.A.: From Coxey's Army to the Watts Riots, 1894-1965*. And just before his passing he completed the manuscript on Los Angeles in the 1930s. One of the main perks of being an archivist is to find one's affirmation in the pages of the author acknowledgements. Errol wrote of us: "My old and new friends John Cahoon, Betty Uyeda, Brent Riggs, and Beth Werling at the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Natural History Museum, made me feel at home whenever I walked through their door."

Betty Uyeda, Collections Manager

Remembrances from the History Staff

I met Errol in my office not long after his publication of *Radical L.A.*, in 2009. It was a chance encounter, as our professional paths had not crossed until then. We had a lengthy talk, comparing notes on the time period and people covered in his book.

Dr. William D. Estrada, Curator, History

In the early years Errol was at the museum I was the head of a different section in History and spent a lot of my time at one of our warehouses or

at the Huntington Library or UCLA doing research. At the same time he was overseeing the plans and completion of infrastructure and policy for Seaver. So I had limited contact with Errol, although I was on the search committee that recommended him for the job. We did rap about history, exhibits, and other stuff when we had the time. In addition, he and [his wife] Ellen showed up at one of my band's gigs in Arcadia where he gave me a pair of shades so I would look like one of the Blues Brothers, his favorite rock band, I believe. (I still have the shades.)

He was particularly interested in U.S. Western history, American radicalism, and cartography, although his publications show he had other interests at different times. He also had an interesting spin on some of his subjects based on his hilariously dry humor.

Dr. Tom Sitton, Curator Emeritus, History

Errol was a serious scholar but he didn't mind rolling up his sleeves to work side by side with the Seaver Center staff every week on our special projects that took us from ground zero to become one of the most recognized research facilities in Southern California. Errol also had a wonderfully dry sense of humor about our world and those trying to make sense of it which I've come to appreciate even more now with the passage of time. It has been a genuine pleasure to have him as a friend for the past 35 years.

John Cahoon, Collections Manager

I did not know the Seaver Center existed when I first encountered Errol. It was my first quarter in library school in 1994, and on campus a man wearing a flamboyant hat caught my eye as he crossed a parking lot at Cal State University Fullerton. It turned out the man with the hat was also enrolled in a class I was taking. We teamed up on several assignments. I found out later that Errol had a doctorate and was already experienced working in an archive, yet he was pursuing a library science degree. After knowing him from the single university course, I lost touch with him. I became a volunteer at the Seaver Center in 1999, and his name came up. We re-connected by email; we shared our mutual experiences working with TV journalist Huell Howser; he attended a public history program I presented at a public library on the centennial of the Simons Brick Company.

Betty Uyeda, Collections Manager

My time with Errol was at the Braun Research Library, Southwest Museum in the mid-to late 1990s, when he researched the photo collections at the Braun and gave several talks for the Braun Research Library Friends group. We talked about local turn-of-the Twentieth Century photographers such as C.B. Waite, Frederic Hamer Maude and George Wharton James. The Seaver Center and Braun held collections by these local people. Errol had a wonderful perspective on how the local photographers and their studio share photographs and put their names on the images, thus leading contemporary researchers confused as to attributions. Errol was a great researcher and wonderful colleague.

Kim Walters, Collections Manager

News of Note

The History Department and the Seaver Center are happy to announce the award of a \$35,000 archival grant from the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation. The funds will be used to process a recent, large acquisition of materials from the Historical Society of Southern California.

On February 18th, the new Consul General of Mexico in Los Angeles, Marcela Celorio Mancera, visited the Seaver Center as part of her tour of the Becoming Los Angeles exhibition with William Estrada and Kim Walters. During her visit the Consul General was shown rare 19th century Mexican government-issued documents, including an 1835 decree elevating the *pueblo*, or town, of Los Angeles to a *ciudad*, or city.



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The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.
The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.



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