



## Notes from the Archive

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

Welcome to Notes from the Archive, a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department.  
If you are informed by what you read here, please share it with a friend or colleague.

Featured this month is the museum fossil hunter who has been chipping away to unbury L.A.'s Mortuary Row.

### THE EPHEMERA COLLECTION

The term "ephemera" can be defined as printed material that carries a verbal or visual message, sometimes on flimsy paper, often produced for a specific not intended to be kept permanently. The Ephemera Collection contains business brochures including manufacturer product catalogs; leaflets meant for tourist such as those once issued by real estate promoters or theme parks; invitations such as the 1913 opening of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, to name a few date back to the 19th century, and today they are useful to learn about businesses, events and places. The collection may be the sole source for hard-to-find something ever existed. It is from this collection as well as other archival resources that aided researcher Doug Goodreau, who is also a Senior Paleontology Preparator at the Natural History Museum's Dinosaur Institute.

### THE RESEARCHER

Doug Goodreau explains his research journey:

I never intended to become a mortician. I moved to Los Angeles in 1988 to attend a makeup effects school and work in the film industry. Monster movies passion, or so I thought. In between films I was always interested in seeking out references for the next horror film I was going to work on. I approached a mortuary listed in the yellow pages (remember, there was no internet), but I instead discovered none of them would hire just any makeup artist, only embalming college. Hmmm, interesting - "Sign me up," I said to myself.

After receiving my embalmer's license in 1991, I worked from small, family owned mortuaries up to large corporations, enjoying the stability of a regular pay schedule. Coincidentally, it was around this same time I began volunteering in our Museum's Vertebrate Paleontology Department preparing fossils and applying molding, casting and painting skills that I learned in the film industry. Still wanting to learn more and challenge myself, I heard by word of mouth, "trade show" was the thing to do; this was only for the most seasoned experts and restorative artists (folks like me that specialize in facial reconstruction on severely traumatized human remains) who subcontract to all funeral homes throughout the Greater Los Angeles Area and get paid well for doing so. Naturally, for me, I seized the opportunity, but had no idea of the kind of experiences I'd have, nor the eclectic group of living people I would work with and the stories they told me.



Doug Goodreau excavating an ichthyosaur skull in Nevada, September, 2019

(Image provided by D. Goodreau)

Being the youngest trade embalmer for Schenk Professional Services (with which I still work today) I was hazed as well as coached by hard working men from all walks of life. Everyone brought their own life experience to the funeral industry and always had a side hustle: some staff were World War II, Korean war veterans; one owned a hair salon during normal business hours; another supported a professional car racing hobby; one needed to moonlight temporarily full-time mortuary gig to supplement putting their kids through college; or frankly they just needed the cash.

One recurring theme that I kept hearing from the old-timers was about a legendary time and place in Los Angeles funeral history, a "good ol' days for emb" some embalmers refer to it with a smile as they reflect back to what was once nicknamed Mortuary Row. This was an area uniquely zoned for mortuaries: early 1920's to the mid-50's, between what is now the Staples Center and our very own Natural History Museum, which was home to over 40 funeral parlors and funeral industry businesses. More specifically, the main streets were West Washington and Venice Boulevards (going east to west) and loosely bordered by running streets, Toberman Street to the west, and Flower Street to the east.

Within a 16-block rectangular portion of the historic West Adams district, a grieving family would commonly conduct business among a diversity of mortuaries to meet their particular needs, and the casket could be loaded onto a trolley car that had direct routes out to Rosedale or Evergreen cemeteries for interment. At a time when most funeral homes lacked large refrigeration units because these buildings were usually just homes converted into businesses, everyone in our ever expanding population of Los Angeles was embalmed, that is, intravenously injected with formaldehyde and other preservatives to disinfect, preserve and restore humankind along with dressing, cosmetics, hair styling, and casketing, as opposed to the approximately 50 percent of cremation that people opt for today. This kept everyone busy! "How busy?" - you may ask. It was so busy a coworker told me he would have a falling out with one funeral director in the morning and get fired, on lunch, and get a job a couple doors down just by asking for work, no resume required. It was a 24-hours, 7 days-a-week operation.



From Le Guide Francais de Los Angeles, 1932, p. 127

(Courtesy of the Seaver Center)

[Editor's note: Godeau & Martinoni, pictured above, was one example along the Row. Doug learned from co-workers that Martinoni was known to change "Martinian" in order to market himself to the increasing Armenian population at the time. Today the building is the headquarters for Giroux Glass, located Washington Boulevard.]



From a Google Maps screenshot

After many years of working with all of these characters, listening to countless details of this rich local history, and hearing their repeated stories until they dying off, I realized I really needed to document this. It wasn't until I was a little older that I truly began to value their collective past, an era that will neve

have so many friends and family that simply wouldn't believe that this was how we did funerals per folks that are still serving the public today. A few years sitting with individuals to digitally record their oral histories, along with copious note taking, fact checking their accounts, and asking a lot more questions: this "trade embalming" business model, and why was it so successful? How many other morticians have done this and for how long? Were their stories similar to mine, or entirely different? What unexpectedly bizarre events took place that were most memorable? Why did Mortuary Row come to an end?

A prime example from my project was a good friend, an embalmer's embalmer, the late Louie Brousseau. He began his career as a trade embalmer in 1942 on his tour of duty in WWII. Louie lived above the Willen Glasband mortuary for a time. Armed only with his instrument kit and the strongest work ethic I've encountered, he started his own business. He soon met his wife at a dance hall across the street, and raised three daughters in the apartment behind the building. This building happens to be located on the corner of Oak Street and West Washington Boulevard, known as "the heart of Mortuary Row" by industry people of that era. This building still exists as an evangelical church and there are a few remaining buildings on the row that can be easily identified based on the architecture (you know what to look for). Groman and Armstrong Family mortuaries are the only remaining two businesses that still function as funeral homes, I still do work at the latter.

I was fortunate enough to do a walking tour with Louie when he was an energetic 94, video recorded with the assistance of Chris Weisbart (former museum staff), as he pointed out every mortuary that existed during the heyday of the neighborhood, in addition to many other unrelated fun facts. For instance, down the south side of the street, used to stand a miniature golf course, next door to Rodger Young Auditorium (a former German beer hall that was revamped for concern of Nazi sympathizers meeting there, but the building is now demolished) where such big names as Jimmy Durante and Judy Garland once performed, just west of that was Bresee Brothers Mortuary (currently a charter school). Bresee Brothers played a significant role in establishing the zoning for the funeral industry in this vicinity. All the elderly embalmers I know spoke highly of their facilities.

My research has included going through thousands of photos in several collections, studying city maps and records, leading me to our very own Seaver Center. Betty, Brent, and John have all been a great help! I even took a trip out to the Orange Empire Railway Museum in Perris, where they fully restored the "D" cars, a handful of specially designed trolley cars for the funeral industry. It's been really effective contacting descendants of all the mortuary owners previous to Mortuary Row area for interviews because there is little to no physical evidence that many of these businesses existed other than old phone book advertisements and/or obituaries in old newspapers. Of course, I keep my eyes peeled for any footage in old films and classic T.V. series that may include filming in and around buildings that no longer exist. The ultimate goal here is to publish a book on the subject.



Orr & Hines predates the zoning along Mortuary Row according to Doug  
From Los Angeles To-Day, ca. 1900  
(Courtesy of the Seaver Center, GC-1299.1-2)



I always appreciate any suggestions that folks have to improve and add to my search in an effort to paint a more complete picture of this particular morbid interesting part of our collective past. If anyone reading this newsletter happens to already be aware of Mortuary Row, have related stories they're comfortable sharing, or have any funerary ephemera (i.e. photos of the businesses & funerals in this area, fans, postcards, matchbook covers, etc.) please don't hesitate to reach out at [dgoodrea@nhm.org](mailto:dgoodrea@nhm.org).

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Pictured above trekking through a Utah sandstorm in 2009 and below at the "Gnatale" quarry in Utah to dig up sauropod material, 2013  
(Images provided by D. Goodreau)



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#### UPCOMING EVENT

**15<sup>TH</sup>-ANNUAL LOS ANGELES ARCHIVES BAZAAR**

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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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