## Born in a New Orleans Saloon

New Orleans has always provided the greatest source material for tall tales and short stories. It was here O. Henry found his name.

Ernst Hoepner was a talented artist for the *Picayune* over a century ago, a remarkable draughtsman and graduate from the University of Heidelberg in Germany. According to fellow newspaperman William P. "Billy" Ball, Hoepner was "the cartoonist on the old Times-Democrat" and "a genius if ever there was one." "That," he explained, "was long before the Times-Democrat and the Picayune merged as the Times-Picayune of today." The artist possessed "a fund of accurate information on any topic that came up for discussion than any man I ever met," said Ball. But there was another skill this illustrious illustrator picked up in Heidelberg: he simply loved his beer!
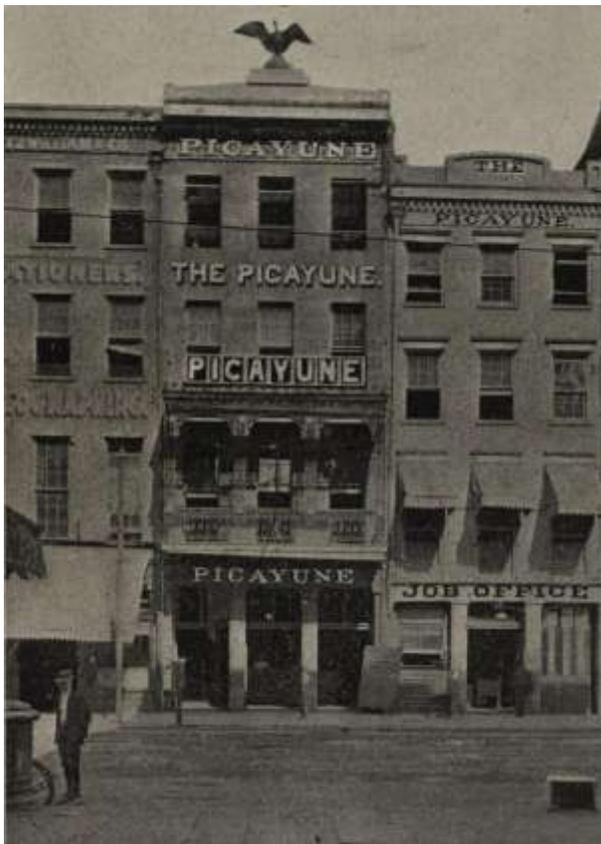

The Picayune Building, 1903

Ernst's alcoholic proclivities caused him to lose his job on more than one occasion, even though his artistic aptitude rendered him almost indispensible to the paper. Stories in the 1890s and early 1900s almost always required a sketch, and Ernst was excellent at his craft.

He once stumbled into a church while on assignment and caused a terrible commotion. He was sent there to sketch the funeral of a beloved priest for the newspaper's next day's edition but, full of grief and an abundance of alcohol, Ernst leaned so heavily against the bier that he totally disturbed the corpse and coffin, not to mention the horrified mourners. He was fired from his job one more time, but it wasn't long before they hired him back again.

When he sobered up, Mr. Hoepner was described as "gentle, even timid, a devotee of the arts and music," so stated an article by Marjorie Roehl in the *Times-Picayune* dated January 25, 1987. "But," as Billy Ball put it, "how he loved his beer!"

Yet there is one thing that Ernst Hoepner did that would forever change history. Thanks to a suggestion by Hoepner, great American short story writer William Sydney Porter (1862 – 1910), while working as a newspaperman in New Orleans, adopted the pen name O. Henry.
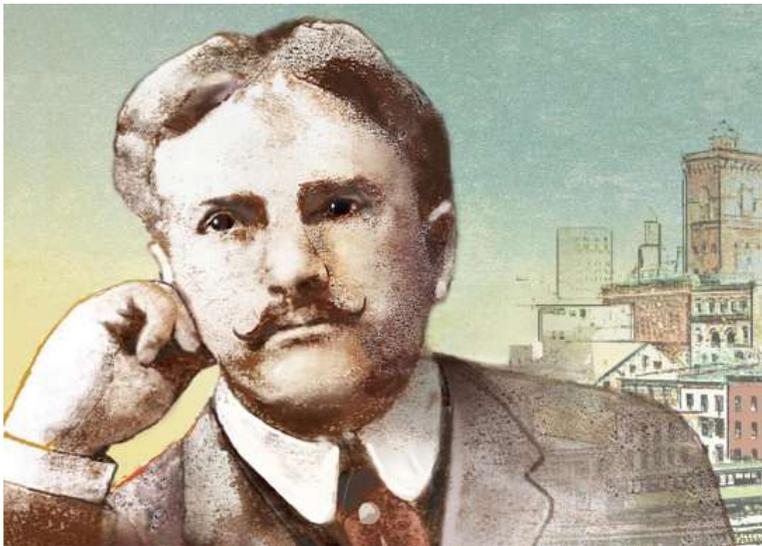
Postage stamp art honoring literary giant O. Henry

Before I reveal the circumstances by which the pseudonym O. Henry was created, it must be noted that there have been numerous accounts through the years of how this famous *nom de plume* came about.

Before coming to the Crescent City in the summer of 1896, Porter worked as a teller and bookkeeper at a bank in Austin, Texas, where he was charged with embezzlement. He eventually served time in the

Ohio Penitentiary in Columbus, Ohio, but not before fleeing to New Orleans and Honduras, attempting to avoid incarceration. Some have suggested that O. Henry was perhaps the name of a guard or pharmacist at the prison, or the name in a druggist's book. Porter was a licensed pharmacist and worked in the prison hospital as a druggist.

Another account said Red Henerey, the port superintendent at Puerto Castillo, Honduras, was the source of Porter's pen name. Other stories suggest it came from one of the verses of an old song, "Root, Hog or Die," based on an old expression signifying self-reliance.

Porter himself offered various stories for the origin of O. Henry. In 1909, he gave the *New York Times* this explanation:

"It was during these New Orleans days that I adopted my pen name of O. Henry. I said to a friend: 'I'm going to send out some stuff. I don't know if it amounts to much, so I want to get a literary alias. Help me pick out a good one.' He suggested that we get a newspaper and pick a name from the first list of notables that we found in it. In the society columns we found the account of a fashionable ball. 'Here we have our notables,' said he. We looked down the list and my eye lighted on the name Henry, 'That'll do for a last name,' said I. 'Now for a first name. I want something short. None of your three-syllable names for me.' 'Why don't you use a plain initial letter, then?' asked my friend. 'Good,' said I, 'O is about the easiest letter written, and O it is.'"

As for what the O. stood for, Porter once stated, "O stands for Olivier, the French for Oliver." Well, that does have a New Orleans slant to it.

But in 1924, colorful author and reporter Meigs O. Frost, who came to New Orleans in 1915 after working such newspapers as the *New York Times* and *Dallas News*, uncovered the true eyewitness story of how O. Henry was born.

Writing for the *New Orleans States* on July 13, 1924, Frost's Page One headline was "IMMORTAL 'O. HENRY' WAS BORN IN A NEW ORLEANS SALOON." The immortal name's birthplace, he discovered, was the Tobacco Plant Saloon, located at the corner of Bank Place and Gravier Street.

Bank Place, which now bears the name Picayune Place, was originally called Banks Alley for Thomas Banks. But after Mr. Banks went broke

and at least two banks subsequently had rear entrances on the narrow street, the name was changed to Bank Place (in the singular). Back before the *Picayune* merged with the *Times Democrat* in 1914, its plant was at 326 Camp (with a busy back door on Bank Place just paces away from the Tobacco Plant Saloon). And in those days, newspapermen frequented watering holes such as this.
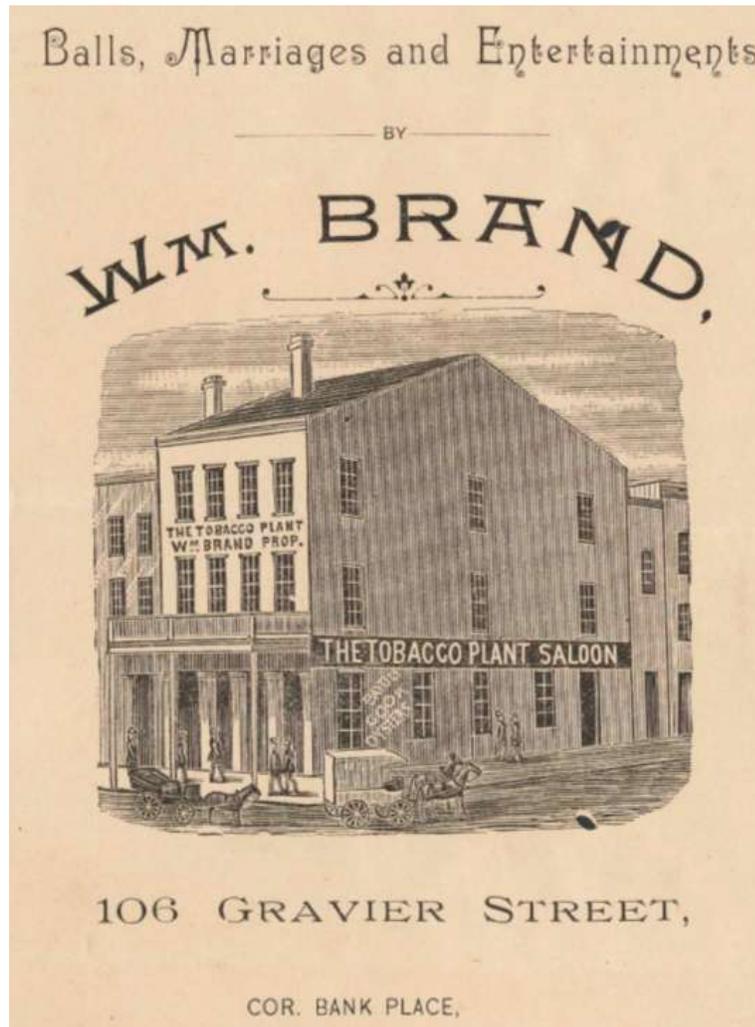
William Brand's Tobacco Plant Saloon, 106 Gravier Street, corner Bank Place, numbered 526 Gravier Street today

The eyewitness source for Frost's article was none other than Billy Ball, mentioned above, back in 1896 a crime reporter. Being interviewed in the editorial rooms of the *New Orleans States*, Ball reminisced about "the wild young bunch of newspaper men in New Orleans" in the 1890s. "Sidney Porter was one of 'em, he said, then a $15-a-week reporter for the *New Orleans Item*, the office of which was then "on

Natchez Alley , facing Bank Place." By that time William Brand's Tobacco Plant Saloon was referred to by Ball as the "Widow Brand's Saloon," which advertised and served "The Biggest Schooner of Beer in the World for a Nickel!"

Where "O. Henry" Was Born

It's a stationery shop now. But this place on the corner of Bank place and Gravier street in the glad old days of the 'nineties, was the Widow Brand's Saloon, where you got the biggest schooner in the world for a nickel. Among the always-broke reporters who slipped in by the side door shown by the white arrow at the right, were SIDNEY PORTER (inset at right), then a $15-a-week reporter on the New Orleans Item, and BILL YBALL (upper left inset), then a police reporter, now city purchasing agent of New Orleans. Billy Ball tells how Sidney Porter, seeking a nom de plume for his first short story, took the name "O. Henry" over a table in the Widow Brand's saloon, at the suggestion of Ernest Hoepner, cartoonist, who had just shouted "Oh, Henry!" to Henry Rosenbaum, the bar-keep.

Site of the Tobacco Plant Saloon, New Orleans States, July 13, 1924

In 1891, Colonel William Brand had won the first capital prize of $300,000 in the September drawing of the Louisiana State Lottery, but later in the decade Mrs. Brand was a widow. And the newspaper gang, which included Ernest Hoepner, Sid Porter, Jimmy Augustin and Billy Little, loved the food and drink she had to offer. "I can see that bunch just as if they were sitting here today," mused Billy Ball, and "those enormous nickel schooners."

Widow Brand's place today: The State St. Coffee Company

"The talk rambled along and we kept the bar busy. There were two bar-keeps at the Widow Brand's place. They were brothers. Rosenbaum their last name was. Henry Rosenbaum was the day bar-keep and the other brother was the night bar-keep. The Widow Brand's place kept open till midnight or one o'clock in the morning or something like that."

With "those gigantic schooners … sailing across the bar in fleet formation," the talk turned to the subject of literature. "Sid Porter reached into his inside coat-pocket and pulled out a roll of plain copy-paper." He had written "ten or twenty sheets … written on one side, in pencil – that fine copper-plate handwriting of his." Ball continued, "There weren't any typewriters for the staff, then."

Porter informed the group, "I've written a short story and I'm going to send it in to some New York magazine. I'm getting tired trying to live on a reporter's pay. But I wish to God I knew some name to send it in, under. I don't want to send it under my name."

Picayune Building today: Picayune Social House, gastropub

At that time, Porter had not yet turned himself in for the embezzling charge.

That was when Ernst Hoepner "lifted his schooner and grinned," said Ball.

"You've got the best name in the world right here, Sid," said Hoepner as he emptied "the last of that big schooner down his throat" and yelped for the bar-keep, "Oh, Henry!"

"Isn't that good enough name for anybody in this gang?"

Sidney Porter broke out into a great laugh and said, "It's a fine name! I'll take it."

So a call to bar-keep Henry Rosenbaum for another gigantic schooner of beer was the catalyst that brought about one of the world's great literary names.

"That's how it happened," proclaimed Ball. "I'm not talking from hearsay. I sat at that table and drank out of those big schooners that afternoon, and it's as clear and plain in front of me today as it was more than thirty years ago."

On that day in 1924, Ball admitted, "I'm about the only one of that crowd alive now. Sid Porter died and old Ernest Hoepner who christened him 'O. Henry,' he got tuberculosis and went out to Marfa, Texas, and died. Jimmy Augustin and Billy Little are dead. The Widow Brand is alive, I hear, but getting mighty old."

Newspaperman Dies

WILLIAM P. BALL
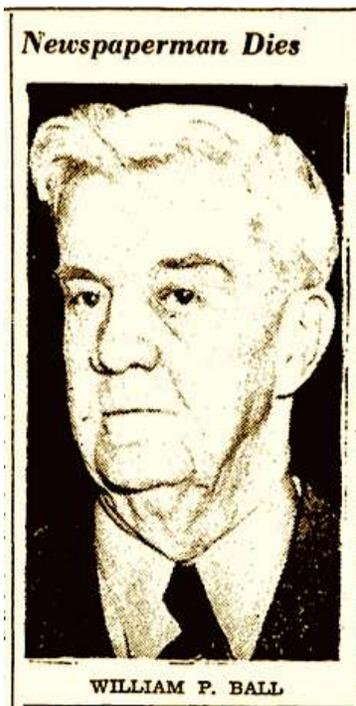
He witnessed the christening of O. Henry.

Billy Ball, "one of New Orleans' last survivors of the era of personal journalism," died July 24, 1939, at age 78, reported the *New Orleans Item*. The veteran reporter and political appointee died of a heart ailment. As for the O. Henry story, it's up to you to believe Billy's eyewitness recollection or William Sydney Porter's varied explanations.

O. Henry's short stories, including such favorites as *The Gift of the Magi*, *The Ransom of Red Chief*, *The Last Leaf* and *The Cop and the*

Anthem frequently have wonderful surprise endings. He also wrote about the city's cocktails, "invented by the Creoles during the period of Louie Cans." And some may have forgotten that *The Caballero's Way* was the O. Henry story in which Porter's famous character, the Cisco Kid, was introduced. O Henry has rightly been called the American Guy de Maupassant.

Porter's own life certainly had its share of plot twists. In retelling the origin of his pen name, William Sydney Porter, who changed the spelling of his middle name to Sydney in 1898, probably wanted to downplay the amount of drinking that took place during his rough-and-tumble newspaper reporter days. Perhaps that was the reason he said he pulled the name at random from a New Orleans society page.

In fact, Porter was a heavy drinker, and it eventually affected his writing. In 1909, his second wife Sarah left him, and he died on June 5, 1910, of cirrhosis of the liver, along with complications from diabetes and an enlarged heart. After funeral services in New York City, he was buried in his home state of North Carolina.

It is sad, yet fitting, that O. Henry was born in a New Orleans Saloon.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Born in a New Orleans Saloon"
Ned Hémard
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