

Williams Writes Definitive Hollywood History

I was surrounded by puppets. Really nice ones, sure—there was Cher, and the governor, and Michael Jackson—but they were *puppets*. And I was here to interview the author of what will probably go down in history as the definitive book on Hollywood. I was greeted by publicist Georja Skinner, who knew my name and ushered me into the private office of Gregory Paul Williams. I *was* in the right place. Williams entered with gale-force energy. Sitting at his desk, his conversation was highly animated with an infectious enthusiasm. It was evident that 14 years of hard work to produce *The Story of Hollywood: An Illustrated History* has not dimmed his love for the project or the subject. And as we talked I was to discover we shared two passions—historic preservation and Hollywood history.

“First the puppets,” I said, “What’s the connection between writer and puppeteer?”

“I’ve been a writer since I was a kid,” Williams

answered, “I thought I was going to be a writer for a living. But I had puppets as a kid. One day I took them to grammar school as an exhibit of my hobby. Later when I went to high school, one of my grammar school classmates’ grandmother—an investor with the Bob Baker marionettes—remembered me from my exhibit. She asked me if I wanted a job with Baker and I thought, ‘I don’t know, maybe.’ But then I went to one of Baker’s shows and my whole life was transformed.”

Gregory’s career as a puppeteer and puppet designer is extensive, from his stage work with Bob Baker to film and TV work on such projects as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the *Men in Black* movies, *Child’s Play 3*, *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*... trust me, it’s a long list. So when did he find time to write?

“My first book, *Hollywoodland*, started when my uncle George found Gilbert Miller’s collection of photos of Hollywoodland. Gilbert Miller was one of the original Hollywood real estate agents and now his son, Alan, had the photo collection. So when my uncle found out about it he suggested, ‘Let’s do a book on Hollywoodland.’ I thought it would be fun. So my Dad (Dino), my uncle, me and my little sister Alexa worked together. We put *The Story of Hollywoodland* out in 1991 and it was so much fun we thought ‘How about another one?’ My puppet studio was in the Taft building in Hollywood and it was my partner, Steve Sherman, who said ‘Why not do a book on Hollywood?’

“My uncle found this collection of photos by Clifford Wesselmann who was a photographer in the twenties, thirties and forties. When Wesselmann died in 1961 he left a very valuable collection of first edition books. The books were removed but they left his entire personal photo collection of thousands of negatives. His house was going to be demolished *with the negatives in it!* The family let us have the collection for a nominal fee. I’m so glad we saved it. Some of these photos have never been seen before. Wesselmann loved Hollywood—he’d go out in the middle of Vine Street and shoot at five in the

morning. It’s really a treasure trove, filled with movie and radio celebrities. He used to hang out with John Barrymore, W.C. Fields, and a bunch of those guys—in fact there is a book about Barrymore and his friends and they talk about Wessleman as part of the gang. Finding

was a really poetic story about them losing their infant son. To console themselves they would take the carriage, led by a striking pair of white stallions, and just drive around the Los Angeles basin looking for someplace to get away from the grime and bustle of Los Angeles. They found

a little fig orchard at what would become Ivar and Hollywood Boulevard. Harvey thought it would be a good investment for him to develop the land. Daedra decided to dry figs as another way to generate income. The Wilcox’s would sit next to the fig barn during breaks and work on his map of Hollywood, amusing themselves by making up street names. The two Weid children [the Weid family owned Holly Canyon near the fig ranch] came down from the canyon every day, crossing the Wilcox’s property on their way to the Cahuenga Pass school, so Wilcox just named their paths to school after them, Ivar and Selma.”

But I wanted to know how this book was going to be different from all the other Hollywood books.

“One thing that compelled me to finish the book was that as I did all the research I realized there was no book like it,” Williams said, “When people write about Hollywood, they go up to a certain point—they talk about the founding of Hollywood, Sid Graumann, that sort of thing—then they follow the movie

business out of town and leave Hollywood. The last parts of these books don’t really deal with Hollywood as a town, but rather as an idea. What happened to poor old Hollywood? I wanted to stay in Hollywood and just let it morph around me and see what happened—like a time machine.

“It got kind of ‘dark’ toward the end because as I researched, I was falling in love with all these little two story buildings around Hollywood and Vine and they were all getting burned and trashed. If you find something in Hollywood that’s over 50 years old it’s remarkable. We almost lost the Egyptian Theatre. I was involved with Hollywood Heritage after the earthquake and we had to make a stink because they were just going to leave the theater open to the elements where the walls had collapsed. This important historic theater almost became a flea market.

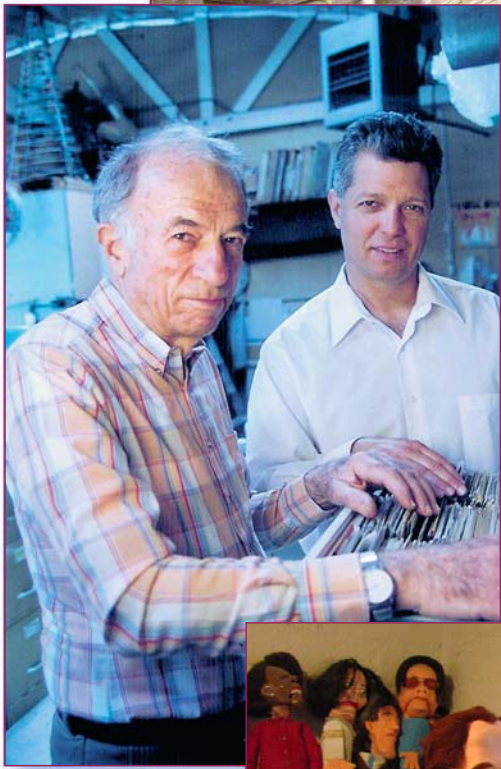
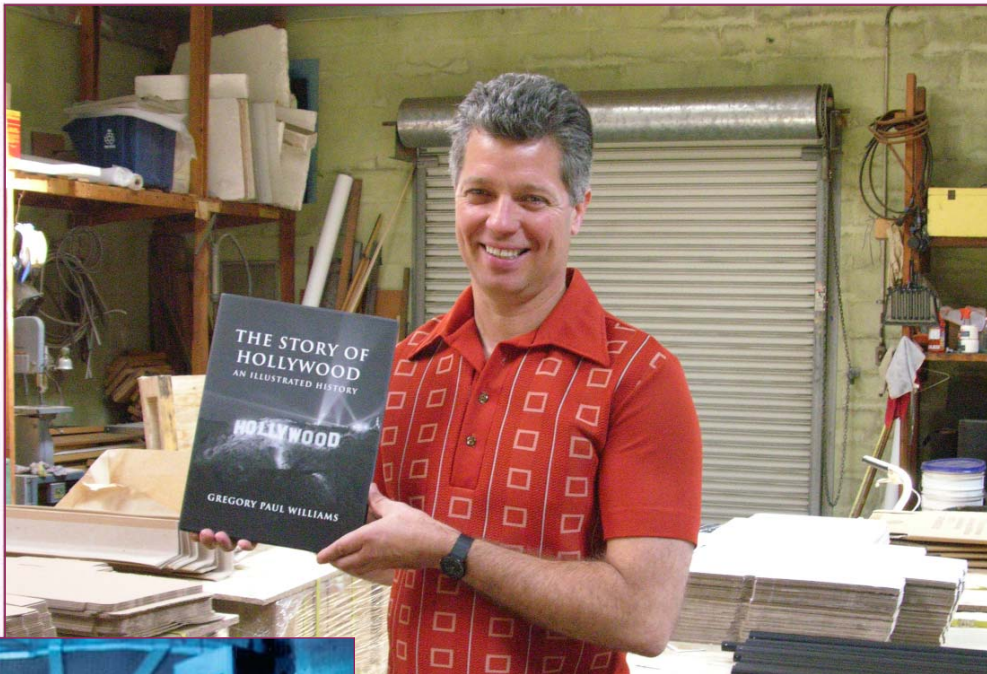
“All these new developers are taking whole blocks and turning them into ‘Times Square’ with the big screens. Everything is looking ‘Bladerunner’ now, with the animated billboards. When the CRA came here they said the billboards were a blight, but now they’ve turned the buildings into a festoon of billboards. They’ve brought in *more* blight.”

What’s next for Williams and his publishing aspirations?

“Maybe an addendum with just pictures, no text,” he muses, “There are so many photos we didn’t have room for. And I’d like to do a documentary using moving images, both rare archival footage of old Hollywood and the city as seen in major film productions.”

Now *that’s* a film I’d stand in line for.

—Kurt Reichenbach



Top: Gregory Williams stands amidst skids of his book, *The Story of Hollywood: An Illustrated History*. Middle left: Dino and Greg Williams look through thousand of rare negatives. Middle right: Greg makes last minute adjustments to a huge man-eating puppet. Bottom: Greg and the governor discuss important California legislation.

his photographs was providential—we knew we had to finish the book. And it was hard to finish because the story just keeps going.

“We wanted to make it a storybook,” Williams continued, “with a picture on every page that corresponds with the story, keep a narrative flow but still be valuable as a reference tool. My uncle originally wanted to do it really quickly—get it out within a year of starting it—but as the research progressed it started growing on its own. I was stunned by how much material there was. It ultimately took about 14 years of research, writing, editing, and designing to produce the book.

“This would have made a great epic historical novel,” he adds, “because there are so many stories and characters throughout this whole time. Daedra and Harvey Wilcox turned out to be some of my favorites. We all know that they founded and named Hollywood, but there

Photo Courtesy Gregory Williams

Photos by Kurt Reichenbach except as noted.