

NYC 400: 1909-2009

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Nineteen-o'-nine was the last full year in the life of one of the greatest chroniclers of New York who ever lived. William S. Porter, known to the world as O. Henry, was the master of the short story with the surprise ending.

When I was a child, I would sometimes play a game in which I imagined that a historical figure had come back to life, and I'd take him 'round the modern world, amazing him with its wonders.

Sitting in the center section of a jumbo jet the other day coming in to JFK airport, I glanced at the empty seat beside me and began to play the game again. What, I wondered, if O. Henry were here, would he think of New York today?

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The jumbo jet, surprisingly enough, might not astonish him. In 1903, America had seen the first Orville and Wilbur Wright flight. More significant, in 1909 Louis Bleriot had just flown across the Channel from France to England in 37 minutes, and within months of that flight, the world had also seen the first female airplane passenger. I'm not sure even the size of the jumbo would have shocked O. Henry. The great lighter-than-air dirigibles of his day were even bigger. But as we landed, it would surely be the scale of John F. Kennedy Airport, and the fact that the entire population was now accustomed to flying, that would amaze my imaginary companion.

I was still imagining him at my side as we came through the concourse. He'd certainly be expressing surprise at seeing so many women in men's pants. And would a twinkle appear in his ghostly eye at the sight of their shorts and tights? The "Gibson girl" look of blouse, belt and skirt was familiar to him, but except on the beach, it would still be decades before most women showed leg above the knee.

Taking a cab into the city, I wondered, what did he think of all the cars around us? In 1909, there were about 75 US makers of motor "buggies." But cars were still for the few. For the truly rich there was the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost. Rolls-Royces would be so beloved in America that by the 1920s, there was a factory in Massachusetts and a body shop on Long Island. The Ford six-cylinder Model K, the "silent cyclone" cost \$2,800 — well into the Mercedes price range in today's money.

Even the Ford Model T that had just come out that year, at \$850, wasn't yet so cheap. It was only a few years later that Henry Ford started his assembly line production of the Model T that allowed the price by the 1920s to drop to \$300.

It was this mass production of cars for all Americans that necessitated the mighty highways into the city on which we'd be traveling, and in my mind I was busily explaining to him the god-like career of Robert Moses, who gave us the FDR drive, the Henry Hudson Parkway, and the Cross Bronx Expressway — not to mention the Triborough and other bridges that make it possible for today's stupendous numbers of motor vehicles to circulate 'round the five boroughs.

Yet in those ghostly, sardonic eyes, I seemed to detect a hint of boredom. In vain, I explained the romance of the '30s, the '40s and the chromium and great-finned '50s. As the ghostly figure gazed out of the window, he looked unimpressed.

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I noticed then that, in my imagination, I had given considerable figure and form to my companion. For some reason, he wore the drooping moustaches of his younger years, though his face bore unmistakable signs of the heavy drinking that marked the last period of his life. Still eager to impress him, as we got our first glimpse of Manhattan's great skyline, I began to wax eloquent.

Until a century ago, the skyline of New York was long and low. For generations, only the spire of Trinity Wall Street, at 284 feet, had soared over the rooftops. The only "skyscrapers" — as they were then called — were the masts of the great sailing ships which, by the end of the nineteenth century, might reach as high as 200 feet.

It has always amused me to recall that long before steel frame construction was dreamed of, tall buildings were hardly new in Europe. In medieval England, the 404-foot spire of Sarum cathedral, in the city of my birth, topped any New York skyscraper for 600 years until in 1908, the 391-foot Park Row skyscraper was surpassed.

By 1909, the Singer Building — the Singer Factory was on the Lower East Side — and then the Metropolitan Life Tower, inspired by the campanile in Venice, broke through the 600 and then the 700 feet barrier. That year, I should say, marked the true start of the vertical, vertiginous city we know today.

What a story of daring and drama it has been, I told him eagerly. For drama, it's hard to beat Walter Chrysler's surprise move, when the Chrysler Building's huge, crowning spike was suddenly added in a single day — amazingly, in the very week of the great crash of 1929. But for daring optimism, how about the fact that the Depression was already beginning when the Empire State Building started construction? It remained only partly tenanted for a couple of decades, during

which time it was known as the “Empty State Building.” Even more magnificent, to me, is the story of Rockefeller Center. With the country slipping into Depression, and with investors gone, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. decided to finance the entire development himself, and gave us the elegant and glorious landmark we have today. In an age of titans — of Morgan, the Astors, Carnegie, the Vanderbilts — Rockefeller’s indomitable New York spirit was never surpassed.

But the ghostly figure at my side emitted only a faint chill. Raising a pale and bony hand, he pointed toward one of the uglier glass boxes in Midtown and sadly shook his head.

What could I say? For a man who has seen the elegant 1902 Flatiron Building, what excuse could be made for some of the huge stumps that have appeared since the “setback” regulations — meant to permit sunlight to reach the streets below — were abandoned?

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As we progressed into the city, I was coming to realize that, by some process I did not understand, the figment of my imagination had started to assume a life of its own. Could it be O. Henry’s very ghost that was now occupying the space beside me? Despite the chill, we were quite companionable. We entered the canyons of New York’s streets. The taxi stopped. We stepped out.

And then O. Henry raised his hand to his head, and, making a low moan, he spoke.

“My God,” his voice was like a hoarse whisper, “I cannot smell a thing.” I had not known that ghosts could smell at all, but suddenly understood. Of course. No smells. Well, hardly any.

The horses have all gone. Although the Studebaker brothers were already busy making cars in 1909, they were still producing horse-drawn vehicles 10 years later. Even into the 1920s, great cities like New York and London were full of the smell, often the stench, of horse manure. Today the July streets of New York may be poisonous with ozone, but the organic stench in the old days was often overpowering.

As we walked across the avenues, O. Henry was struck by another astounding absence. “I hear almost nothing,” he cried out loud this time. “What happened to the EI?”

The elevated railway, roaring and clattering up Second, Third, Sixth, and Ninth avenues, a couple of storeys above the street, was the city’s grand and noisy disfigurement, carrying countless millions uptown and downtown, to Queens or The Bronx for a flat fare of a nickel. He had known it all his life, and it would continue until the middle of the twentieth century. It may have depressed property values along its route, but it had become a vital part of the city, and the silence that has followed its passing astounded him.

But it was when we came to the waterfront that the ghost himself could only stare at in horror. And this I easily understood.

The ships have all departed. Ever since its beginning as a trading post, New York has always been a busy port. When we visit the South Street Seaport today, we see a touristic reminder of the waterfront that ran ’round the Lower East Side, the Brooklyn waterfront opposite, and up the Hudson until only a generation or two ago. Merchants kept their counting houses and warehouses there. The wharves were full of ships unloading cargo, and teeming with human activity. “West Side Story” accurately reflects a life on the waterfront that was vigorous and rough. But the advent in the mid-20th century of cargo containers — which were more easily handled by the big new facilities like Newark in New Jersey — transformed the scene with astonishing speed. Within a couple of decades, a whole way of life has disappeared.

Not only the ships have gone. All around the Lower East Side and the Brooklyn waterfront in O. Henry’s day, huge employment was provided by the factories. Big operations like the Singer sewing machine factory, small workshops making everything from pianos to paint, and the innumerable sweatshops of the garment industry may often have obliged poor immigrants to work long hours, but they were the lifeblood of the city. Higher rents, and changing social conditions, have removed them. Something of the old hustle and bustle is still visible in the garment district, but mostly the light industry and the communities that worked in it have disappeared. So has the smoke, pollution and general untidiness the small factories often produced. Working conditions and the environment have improved. But compared to the days when my ghostly friend was a man, the place is strangely bloodless.

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O. Henry was changing from ghost into man. I looked in embarrassment to see if anyone was observing us, but then realized my foolishness. However inexplicable this latest transformation, I could hardly leave him there alone. We went for a drink in a bar.

He had many questions for me. He was surprised to learn that the African-American population had moved north from the West Side into Harlem, where 125th Street had been a Jewish community thoroughfare in his day. The Puerto Ricans in El Barrio were unfamiliar to him. Strange too he found the influx of Asian communities instead of Europeans into the Lower East Side where, thanks to the mid-century changes in the immigration quotas, Little Italy’s Catholic churches, where first Irish, and then Italian congregations worshipped, are now mainly used by Catholic Chinese from next-door Chinatown.

I told him about the last century’s technological triumphs, the advent of mass communication and the internet, and the great tragedies: two World Wars, the Depression, the Holocaust, Vietnam, 9/11. These caused him great grief. But when I told him the sad tale of the dot-com boom and bust, and a credit crisis that has almost provoked another Depression, he hardly batted an eye. “There have been market bubbles bursting for 300 years,” he reminded me. “As for the credit crisis,

don't forget I saw the Panic of 1907. The Wall Street men gambled wildly with other people's money then, and JP Morgan had to save us from financial collapse with government money. People were talking about regulating the banks then, but as I recall, the banks said they'd be better regulating themselves."

And now, at last, I found some subjects that truly impressed him. I took him, first, to the Metropolitan Museum, to the Guggenheim and to MoMA.

He was astounded. "The fact is," he confessed, "in my day, although New York could boast opera, concerts and theater of the high quality, few of us believed that, outside a scattering of great writers, we had much of a culture of our own."

"New York," I promised him, "has become one of the most exciting places to be."

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But it was when we came to politics that I truly flabbergasted him. We were speaking of the old Tammany Hall, of 19th century figures like Fernando Wood, Boss Tweed and Richard Croker, with their vast networks of graft and corruption. "No doubt you have the same boys now," he genially remarked. Yet strangely, I informed him, though no city in history has ever been free of corruption, the record of the last century in New York has been remarkably honest. I told him of La Guardia and Lindsay, of Koch and the present mayor. "Such corruption as we've had in recent generations pales into insignificance compared to that of Tammany Hall in the 19th century or that of most British governors in the two centuries before."

"Well I'll be damned," he said. "Whoever would have thought it possible? I conceive," he added, "that New York has become the finest city that ever was on earth. I think I'll stay."

It was with no small pride that I offered him dinner and a place to stay that night. Over dinner, he asked questions as to how he might earn a living again, and what sort of money he might make. Given his name and reputation, I assured him, he should do very well indeed. His return to life from the ghostly state alone, I reckoned, should earn him a fortune in speaking engagements and appearances.

"Of course," I remarked with a smile, "you'll have to pay a lot of taxes."

"Taxes?" He frowned. "What taxes?"

"Well, income taxes. You know."

"There was a 3 percent tax on income at the end of the Civil War," he said, "but after the war they reckoned it was probably illegal. We paid no income taxes in my day."

"Well," I informed him, "that all changed with a constitutional amendment in 1913. We pay our taxes now. It's somewhat necessary."

There was a long silence.

"Take me back to 1909," he suddenly cried. "I do not belong in this world any more."

Edward Rutherford is the author of six novels, including "London," "Sarum," "The Princes of Ireland," "The Rebels of Ireland," and the upcoming "New York," available in November.