

The American Image

Frank L. Dennis, '29ba, has long been one of O.U. Journalism's most illustrious graduates. Now special assistant for Washington affairs to the president of the American Petroleum Institute, Dennis' career can be traced through the newsrooms of the *Kansas City Star*, *Boston Herald*, assistant managing editorships of the *Oklahoma City Times* and *Washington Post*, and director of press and publications for the United States Information Agency.

One of Dennis' most significant achievements, however, is not in the news field, but in history—the preservation of American milestones in a fascinating new wax museum which is fast becoming a Washington tourist “must.”

An abiding interest in American history fostered by the late University of Oklahoma professor, Dr. M. L. Wardell, '19ba, was a factor in the creation of Washington, D. C.'s newest major tourist attraction, the National Historical Wax Museum.

Originator of the idea for the museum is Frank L. Dennis, '29ba, formerly of Sand Springs, who studied American history at O.U. under Dr. Wardell. Dennis' enthusiastic chief aide is Mrs. Dennis, who is director of research and a member of the board of directors of the museum. She is the former Katherine Wright, '28bfa, of Miami.

The museum, which opened its doors March 17, 1958, has attracted more than 425,000 paying customers in the less than two years since then. Educators have lauded it as a way for students to get authentic glimpses of American history in the making and of the personalities who have helped create the American story.

President Eisenhower and Chief Justice Earl Warren have co-operated in the preparation of their likenesses.

How and when was the idea for the museum conceived?

“I can pinpoint the time and place,” Dennis says. “I was in Paris in 1952 as director of information in Europe for the Marshall Plan. Mrs. Dennis and I were liv-

ing at the Hotel Magellan on Avenue Marceau, near the Arc de Triomphe. One Sunday our next-door neighbors from Washington, the Richard Riddells, came to visit us on a motor tour of France, with their four children. They wondered what to see that Sunday afternoon, and I suggested the Musée Grevin, Paris' counterpart of London's Madame Tussaud's.

“When they returned later in the day, they said the children had been entertained and had learned a lot about the French Revolution, and that the grownups had, also. I suggested then and there that the same medium might be effective in Washington, a mecca for history-minded tourists. Mr. Riddell agreed. He is now the vice president and treasurer of the company.”

It was not until the Dennises returned to Washington in 1954, after a year in Rome, that work was begun in earnest toward establishing the museum. At first, it was planned to use the traditional material, beeswax, for the likenesses, and a tentative arrangement was made with the leading French creator of such effigies, a noted sculptor. However, it was evident that the work would be doubly complicated by having figures representing well-known Americans made abroad, by a French sculptor. Anything short of startling likenesses would be unsatisfactory, hence close super-

vision by an American during the sculpturing process was necessary.

To the rescue in this impasse came Earl Dorfman, a Baltimore scenic designer who had been engaged by Dennis to make the settings for the museum's tableaux.

“Let me try to do the job by assembling some of my own technicians and artists,” Dorfman said. “We ought to be able to do the job with modern techniques and materials.”

After considerable trial and error, Dorfman and his associates produced a remarkable likeness of Abraham Lincoln, created not in beeswax but in a vinyl plastic, of a special formula, that even after being baked in a kiln has a skin-like softness.

In due time the completed figure of President Lincoln was placed in the Dennis library for safekeeping. A few minutes after it had been placed, seated in an easy chair, and while the Dennises were downstairs, the household's two dogs discovered the seated figure and began barking. When Dennis rushed upstairs in alarm he found one dog in “Lincoln's” lap, the other licking the hands.

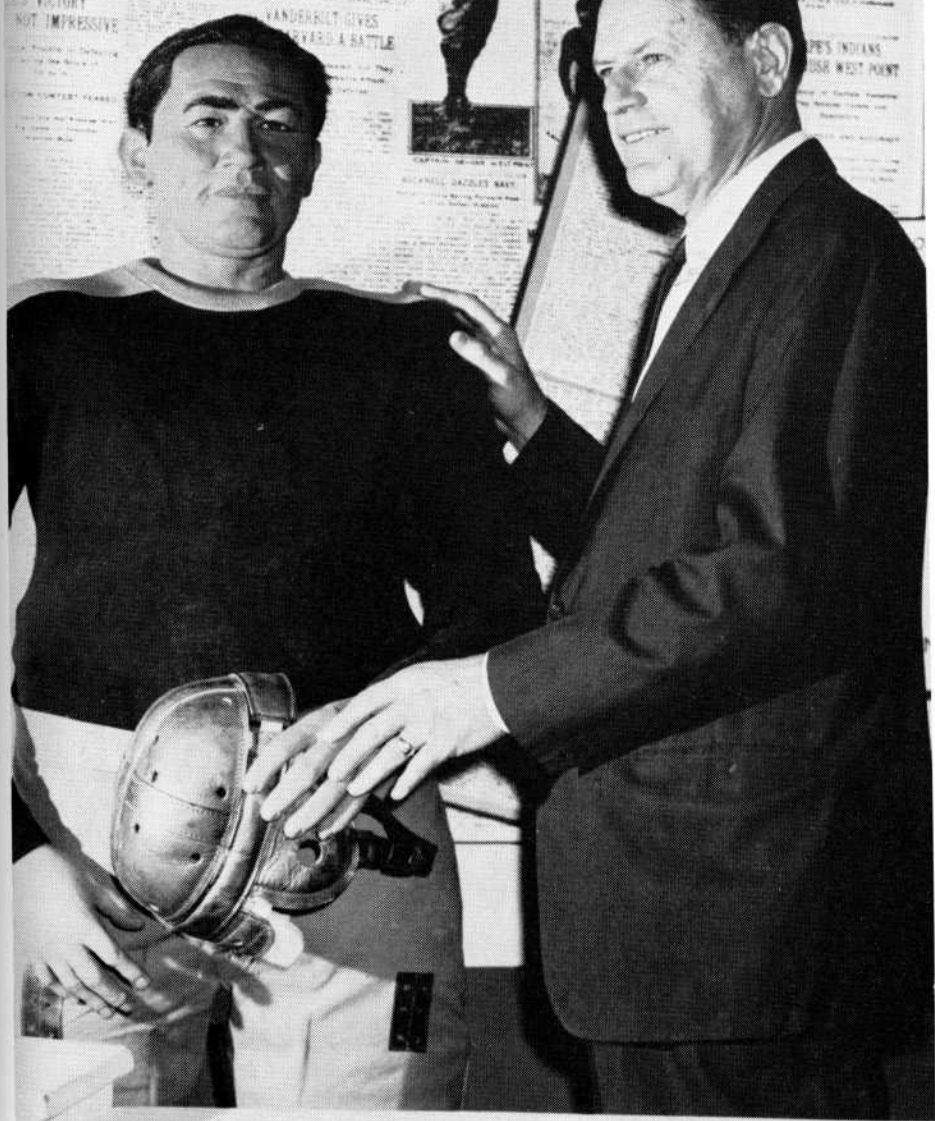
With this as evidence that the figure did, indeed, look human, the contract to create the museum was given Dorfman by the parent company, Historic Figures, Inc., of which Dennis is president. Most of the

JIM THORPE'S INDIANS CRUSH PRES. EISENHOWER'S WEST POINTERS

November 9, 1912

The New York Times

SPORTS SECTION
ALL-DOV'NS BROWN 10 TO 0—INDIANS WIN BATTLE WITH ARMY
PLAYS IN THE GAMES AT WEST POINT AND NEW HAVEN YESTERDAY



Frank L. Dennis, '29ba, originator-president of a unique new wax museum in Washington, D. C., stands beside a figure of Jim Thorpe, one of the greatest Oklahoma athletes. The museum is designed to be a history of America in wax.



Making her way into a high meeting of the Confederacy is Katherine Wright Dennis, museum research director. She stands with Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, plotting Rebel action.



But for mode of dress, Mrs. Dennis might seem a part of the Betsy Ross tableau, so lifelike is the seamstress of the first American flag. Mrs. Dennis designed this exhibit. The furniture is from her home, and she dried and arranged the floral display.



Transported back in time to an uncomfortable era in American history, the Dennises step into the museum's Salem witch trial. Dennis himself posed for the likeness of the stern judge. The furnishings are authentic, including the candlesticks.

\$100,000 in stock was sold to friends who were directed to the library, not knowing the Lincoln figure was there. After recovering from their first startled reaction, most of them subscribed for stock. Another O.U. alumnus stockholder is Warner Lewis, Jr., '50, Tulsa.

It was at this formative stage of the enterprise that the talents and experience of the Dennises blended most effectively. Dennis has had many years of experience as a newspaper reporter and editor, including editorship of the *Oklahoma Daily* in 1926-27 and 1927-28. He is a graduate of Harvard law school; he teaches the law governing libel and the right of privacy at George Washington University; and he has a wide acquaintance with Washington municipal and federal officials, as well as among writers and newsmen. Each of these facets played an important part in launching the enterprise.

On her part, Mrs. Dennis is an expert on early American furniture and decor, and has a collection of representative objects ranging from whale oil lamps of the colonial era to paintings worthy of the White

House. Many of these objects found their way into appropriate museum settings; for example, the candlestick molds in the tableau representing a Salem witch trial.

"This diversity of experience and of interests not only expedited the work of selecting the appropriate scenes and personalities, which of course was essentially an editing job," Dennis explained. "Literally thousands of dollars was saved in legal expense, processing of permits, research, arrangement of exhibits, and organization of the publicity and promotion necessary for such a project.

"Mrs. Dennis even dried the flowers and created their arrangement in the Betsy Ross scene."

Dennis thinks the whole project was blessed with luck from the beginning.

"For instance," he explained, "the local brewery recently had gone out of business, just in time to make available the only suitable building in Washington. This was the brewery's stable, built in 1898, a massive structure with 15,000 square feet of floor space all on the ground level—a consideration important in saving money for settings

and for liability insurance. The owner thought the idea for a wax museum was a good one, and suggested that he was willing to gamble, on a percentage basis, that it would be a success.

"Just about the time the museum was coming into being, the American public was taking a new look at itself. The Russian launching of Sputnik I caused Americans to take a new look at their government, their history, themselves. The museum's theme, a chronological presentation of highlights of American history, was of particular interest then and now."

So the presentation of notable events begins with Columbus landing (his small boat is rocking in real water as the oarsmen beach it on shore). Other tableaux include Pocahontas saving Captain John Smith (who is breathing heavily); the Salem witch scene; the signing of the Declaration of Independence; Betsy Ross making the flag; LaFayette visiting George and Martha Washington at Mount Vernon; the Burr-Hamilton duel; the capture of Davy

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Court in discussing the effect of radio and television in a trial said:

The already great tensions on the witnesses are increased when they know that millions of people watch their every expression, follow each word. The trial is as much of a spectacle as if it were transferred to Yankee Stadium or the Roman Coliseum. When televised, it is held in every home across the land. No civilization ever witnessed such a spectacle. The presence and participation of a vast unseen audience creates a strained and tense atmosphere that will not be conducive to the quiet search for truth.

Some have objected that Canon 35 denies to other media rights presently enjoyed by the working press. The objection is not valid for obvious reasons. The press may abuse its privilege at times and may overdramatize events or testimony and give undue publicity to salacious aspects of the trial. But it does not make live actors out of the participants in the trial. Judge Harold R. Medina has this to say:

. . . the comings and goings of the members of the press are orderly and

easily controlled. They present no such psychological barrier to the ascertainment of truth as do the radio and television.

Many members of the media acknowledge the basic correctness of these views but assert that the responsibility for supervising the production should be added to the other duties of the trial judge. This is completely unrealistic. The judge has enough to do in supervising the jury, holding in check the passions of the parties, ruling on evidence and maintaining general decorum without being made a production manager. These judges are human. They unhappily are not always impervious to the powers of the news media. Understandably some of them will be reluctant to offend the broadcaster or photographer or his bosses. Justice Douglas, commenting on this proposal, said:

Imagine the pressure that judges standing for election would be under in communities where the dominant paper owns the radio and television station.

Even if an extra judge were assigned to supervise the news media, he could at best hope to reduce the physical distractions but

could not hope to remove the psychological disturbances.

In *Brunfield v. Florida*, 108 SE 2d 33, the Florida Supreme Court said:

There is little justification for a running fight between the courts and the press (and other media) on this question of fair trial and a free press. Both are sacred concepts in our system of government. Both are in one constitution and govern one nation of millions of individuals. All that is required to preserve both is for the press and the courts to place the emphasis on the Constitution instead of themselves.

A vast majority of the bar and bench, not actively engaged in politics, and many members of the press hold the firm conviction that the intrusion of mass media and the stimulation of mass opinion on the technical aspects of a trial are highly inimical to the administration of justice. They believe the courtroom is a cathedral of justice, not to be invaded by foreign influences, silent or noisy, which may interfere with the administration of justice—the only purpose in building courtrooms and holding trials.

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Crockett at the Alamo; the discovery of gold in California; the surrender of Lee to Grant; the assassination of Lincoln.

A progression of scenes culminates in a realistic depiction of the four Army chaplains who gave their life vests to soldiers aboard a torpedoed troop ship in World War II, an action which Dennis says "epitomizes the ideal in personality, patriotism, and religion."

An example of the meticulous effort taken to make the appearance of persons and objects authentic is that a cross-section of the ship in the Four Chaplains scenes is constructed from the original blueprint, obtained from the shipbuilding firm.

In addition to the various tableaux, the museum contains the likenesses of numerous individual Americans who have contributed greatly to American life (as George Washington Carver) or who have been outstanding in a particular activity. Thus Oklahoma is represented by Jim Thorpe, born on a Sac and Fox reservation near Prague, whom many believe was the greatest of all football players. He is in a sports group which includes Bobby Jones, Babe Didrickson, Jack Dempsey, and Babe Ruth. Another Oklahoman is on the list for early presentation, Sequoyah, the Cherokee who created an Indian alphabet.

The museum continues to grow. The first year's response dictated a 50 per cent expansion last winter. Crowds sometimes reach 1,900 a day. In March a trainload of 1,500 to 1,800 Richmond, Virginia, schoolchildren is scheduled to go to the museum in one afternoon.

Right now the artists are creating a tableau showing Helen Keller with Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, who worked with Miss Keller to devise new ways for the deaf and dumb to communicate. The most recent figure added was Colonel Drake, the first man to drill successfully for oil.

Ultimately it is hoped to have all those who have made significant contributions to American life—including the first man to be shot into space, a few days after the event. The artists already have the pictures, physical data, etc., of the seven men in training from whom the first will be selected.

The art of making waxen figures has been an important one for thousands of years, Dennis says. "An enlightened Egyptian Pharaoh began the practice of substituting waxen figures as sacrificial effigies in place of real people. Early anatomists helped teach by use of wax likenesses. We believe our museum is making a contribution by stimulating interest in American history—as well as by preserving the authentic images of the great. Our Henry

Ford, for instance, is modeled on the data he gave on his 1916 driver's license.

"Mrs. Dennis has a fine idea for creating an Indian museum in Oklahoma, a museum of tribesmen, modeled on fullbloods, made before they all disappear.

"As for the museum here in Washington, it is a lot of fun, probably because someone else has to deal with its troubles."

Dennis' full-time occupation is as special assistant for Washington affairs to the president of the American Petroleum Institute, Frank M. Porter of Oklahoma City.

"The museum is an entertaining avocation, because all sorts of odd things keep happening," says Dennis. "For instance, one night the police telephoned about 2 a.m. to say that they had found the front door unlocked. When I went down, the policeman and I decided that we had better search the place to be sure no intruder was hiding there. This involved counting the figures in every tableau. I'm sure that if one of those in the St. Valentine's Day massacre scene had stirred, we both would have run.

"And one day last summer a man fleeing the police actually did take refuge in the museum, and it took the cops an hour to find him, hidden in some attic space we didn't even know was there.

"Of course, that caused a lot of publicity, which didn't do the museum any harm, either."