



There was a time, not so long ago, where instead of the brilliantly white, mission revival-style museum at 2002 North Main Street in Santa Ana there was a two-story Victorian home inhabited by a couple named Charles and Ada Bowers. Much has changed since those days. The transformation can be tracked in the different stages of the construction and growth of the museum, but even as the Bowers Museum celebrates its 85th anniversary its mission remains an extension of the dream of that couple who donated their name and property for the creation of Orange County's largest museum.

Charles Wesley Bowers was born in Ohio City, now a neighborhood of Cleveland, on December 26, 1842. His parents were modest farmers who steadily moved in a generally westward direction, picking up and resettling every few years. It was in Missouri that Charles' father caught a debilitating disease. Not long after, the family moved out to California for the warmer, drier climate. Already a grown man by this point but used to managing his sick father's farm, Charles followed his parents to Santa Ana, California and ran their citrus grove. In 1890, the family purchased a large plot of land on 20th and Main for \$6,000 and had a large Victorian home constructed there. Charles' father passed away the same year he purchased the new home and twelve years later Charles inherited the property when his mother passed away. Always too busy taking care of his parents to find time for marriage, Charles was almost 60 when he wedded Eliza Pedelty. The nineteen-aughts were an unforgiving decade for Charles though. Eliza died only three years into their marriage.

Ada Elvira Abbott was born in Perry, Illinois in 1846. Incredibly little is known about her life, but she moved out to Santa Ana at some point, for it was there that she met Charles Bowers. The pair married in 1908 and shared a thrifty life together. They reinvested almost every dollar they made off their citrus. Their one guilty pleasure was travel. In 1910, the couple toured across the United States and Canada collecting postcards and other memorabilia. Seeing America only gave them a better appreciation for the slice of paradise that they had found in Santa Ana though. They developed a shared love of the county's history and made it their mission to see that future generations would have a place where they could learn how Orange County came to be.

They took their first concrete step towards realizing their dream on May 26, 1924 when they created a trust that would see to the creation of a museum. To create more of an incentive for the City of Santa Ana to see the project to completion, they included a stipulation that the city had to move forward with construction shortly after their death or else the property would instead be sold and their assets given to one of the county's rival cities. Charles W. Bowers died November 29, 1929 and Ada E. Bowers on February 28, 1931. The city accepted their bequest almost immediately.

There were several problems that the city had to solve before it had a functional museum.

Photograph of Ada and Charles Bowers with Home, c. 1910 (88a). Gift of Charles and Ada Bowers. Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wesley Bowers, early 20th Century (32154A). Bowers Museum Collection.

THE BOWERS

BUILDING ON A DREAM

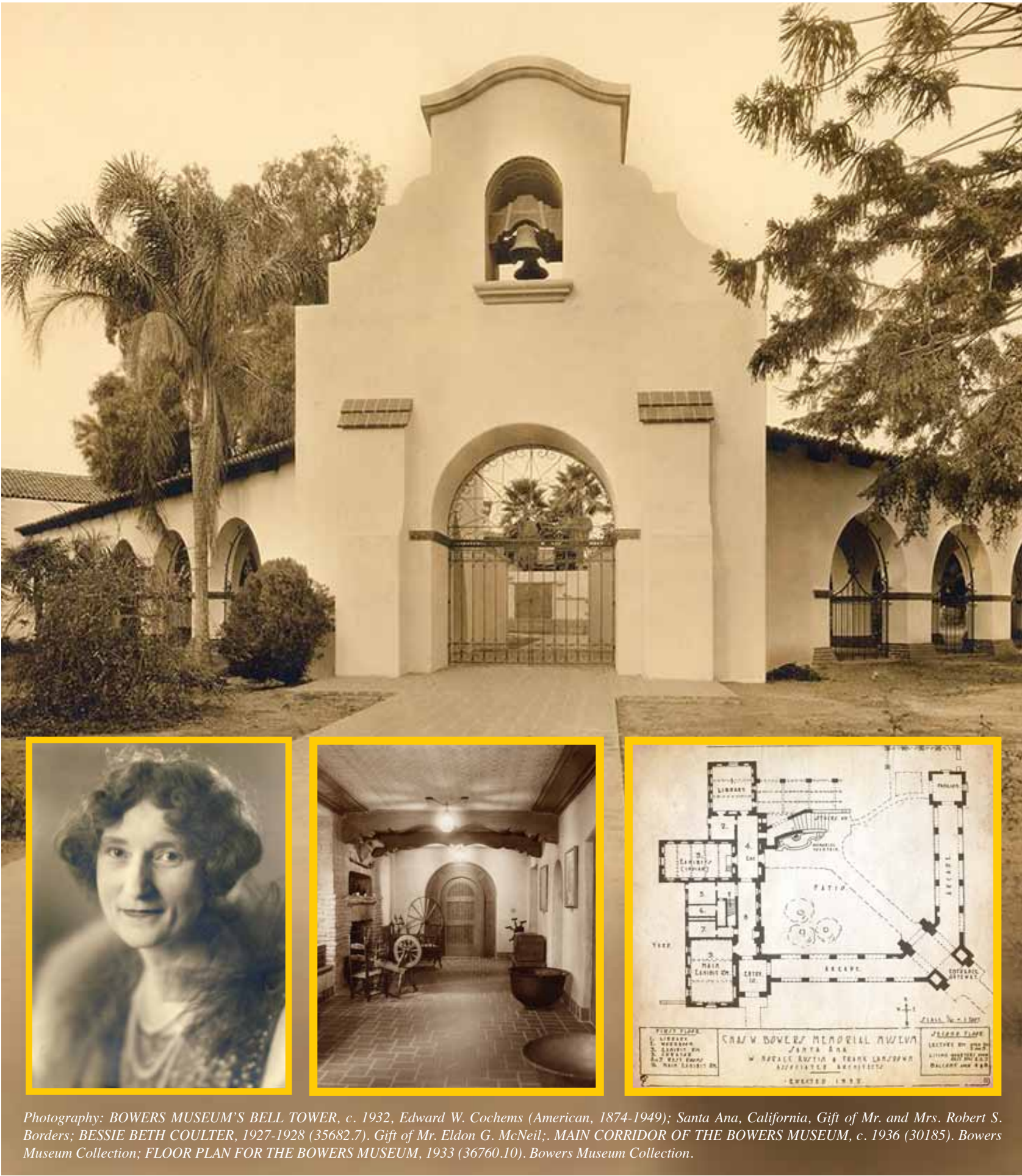
by Mark Bustamante

The first was the most obvious: the lack of a building. Fearing that some other city would snatch up the great opportunity if they delayed, the City of Santa Ana hired Frank Lansdown and W. Horace Austin as architects. They quickly got to work on a design, focusing on a plan which would preserve as many of the original property's trees as possible. To be in keeping with the state's Spanish roots, the early building was designed to look like an old rancho home, complete with a fireplace for a display on cooking. It was approved in December of 1931. With the city already in the grips of the Great Depression, a contractor who employed mostly Santa Ana residents was hired and on February 15, 1932, they began construction by demolishing the Bowers' original Victorian home. Remarkably, construction on the building was completed by September of that year. Only a few items remained to be completed, such as Marten Syversten's interior ceiling murals of California history, and Ada May Sharpless' memorial fountain with a sculpture of Juan Cabrillo.

However, the other two barriers to opening the museum remained: the new Charles W. Bowers Memorial Museum needed a permanent staff and there was nothing to exhibit. Back in 1932, another client at the bank that was managing the Bowers' trust had mentioned she had an interest in being the Bowers' curator. Her name was Bessie Beth Coulter and she was involved in no less than four local organizations at the time. Her name was passed up the chain to the first museum board and, impressed by her drive, she was hired. In 1934, she walked into the empty Bowers Museum for the first time. But instead of seeing the cobwebs which had largely claimed the museum, she had a vision of a place where people could learn and dream—a place teeming with children and adults who could find direction in a shared heritage.

Coulter applying to be curator might just be the best bit of luck the Bowers Museum has ever had. From 1934 on, she spent every spare minute researching the county, reaching out to old landowners and making cold calls, all with the intent of permanently acquiring or borrowing enough of a collection that the Bowers could speak to the history of the indigenous peoples of California, the mission and rancho periods, and early statehood. With Coulter's help, the Bowers Museum opened to the public on February 13, 1936. There was great fanfare that day with Spanish song and dances in the mission revival style courtyard.

Even with the museum's doors open, the work had just begun. Coulter continued to do the work of an entire department to acquire collections from around the county. Feeling that dolls were an ideal medium for teaching the children of Orange County about the nationalities of the world, she personally created an exhibition-worth of dolls and started an annual tradition of "international" doll shows. To their credit, the exhibits rapidly gathered enough of a following



Photography: BOWERS MUSEUM'S BELL TOWER, c. 1932, Edward W. Cochems (American, 1874-1949); Santa Ana, California, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert S. Borders; BESSIE BETH COULTER, 1927-1928 (35682.7). Gift of Mr. Eldon G. McNeil; MAIN CORRIDOR OF THE BOWERS MUSEUM, c. 1936 (30185). Bowers Museum Collection; FLOOR PLAN FOR THE BOWERS MUSEUM, 1933 (36760.10). Bowers Museum Collection.

that Coulter was able to secure loans and donations of dolls that really were from around the world. In 1947, Sherman Stevens offered to donate an incredible collection of early Californian impressionist paintings to the Bowers on the condition that they be transferred directly to the museum. To facilitate the transfer, Coulter saw to the change of the Bowers Museum's status from a municipal corporation to a non-profit and personally interviewed the first seven members of the Bowers Museum's foundation. The Martha C. Stevens Memorial Art Collection, named for Sherman Stevens' late wife, was donated in 1948, becoming the backbone of the Bowers' fine art collections.

Over the years, the museum's collections, staff, and scope of exhibitions continued to grow. Coulter retired in 1960, but by this time she was not alone in running things. There were other staff members and shortly after her departure the museum officially hired on Director Merton E. Hinshaw to fill her shoes. In the middle of the 20th century, the Bowers Museum modernized a lot of its practices around exhibitions. Margaret Key was hired on as registrar in 1962 and was responsible for both updating the museum's system of cataloguing and incorporating standard museum practices like reporting the condition of loans and donations as they arrive at and leave the museum. It seemed like everything at the Bowers was getting bigger and better all the time, the one exception to that being the amount of space for storage and exhibitions.

When the claustrophobia hit a breaking point in 1973, the Bowers Museum closed its doors for its first expansion. Little of this remodel can be seen today, but funding from private sources around the nation allowed for a second building located approximately where the Bowers Museum store is now. All told, the expansion doubled the museum's square footage. The new space gave the museum a venue to look beyond the history of the county to the cultures of the world—the shared heritage of humanity—and many of the new exhibitions featured ethnographic art from Africa, Asia, Oceania, or South America. With its influence growing, it was not long before the Bowers Museum wanted to expand beyond its walls. In 1978 the Bowers converted an older trailer into a Mobile Museum which could travel directly to schools. Its first exhibition was one which would have made Charles and Ada Bowers proud: the history of the citrus industry in the county.

For its golden anniversary in 1986 the Bowers Museum again began to make plans for a museum expansion. Feeling that the last one had been somewhat underwhelming; this update tripled the square footage of the museum. In addition to adding more exhibit space, it solved some logistical issues too: it allowed for the remodel and retrofitting of the museum's old wing and it created a dedicated administrative wing to the building.

With a still-growing permanent collection of ethnographic art and special exhibits space constantly occupied by a slew of impressive, limited exhibitions, the Bowers ran into an issue it was becoming accustomed to—it was once again running out of space. Another national campaign and major funding from Dorothy and Donald Kennedy allowed for the completion of the museum’s most recent expansion, the 2005 to 2007 construction of a North Wing. The new space was to include three exhibition galleries as well as a 300-seat auditorium. Mostly, the new construction afforded the Bowers beautiful indoor and outdoor multipurpose spaces.

Though the museum reopened for a third time to great ado, it garnered even more attention about a year later when, with the help of the chair of the Bowers Board of Governors, it hosted an exhibition of China’s terracotta warriors. Over 200,000 visitors attended the six-month exhibition, including celebrities like Kobe



Bryant. Since then, the Bowers has hosted almost 70 more exhibitions, with standout greats like *Lucy’s Legacy: The Hidden Treasure of Ethiopia*, *China’s Lost Civilization: The Mystery of Sanxingdui*, and *Guo Pei: Couture Beyond*.

Despite having closed many times for renovations, museum operation in the time of COVID-19 has been a chapter without parallel in the Bowers’ history. All around the country, museums have had to reevaluate what it means to be a museum when our doors cannot open. In this regard it has been fortunate the coronavirus came during the internet age, as being closed has not meant being inaccessible to those wishing to learn

more about the diverse cultures of the world. The Bowers has curated several virtual exhibitions, continued sharing pieces from its permanent collections through the Bowers Blog and social media, created art projects that parents could easily walk through with children, and—in large part with the help of the Bowers Museum Docent Guild—organized a staggering number of tours and other educational programs.

The Bowers Museum reopened to the public on March 17 of this year. Thanks to generous lenders, three exciting special exhibitions have been extended. *Inside the Walt Disney Archives: 50 Years of Preserving the Magic* invites visitors to step into The Walt Disney archives as they walk through a dazzling display of more than 400 objects, including original artwork, costumes, and props that tell the story of the archives, The Walt Disney Company, and Walt Disney himself. *Treasures in Gold & Jade: Masterworks from Taiwan* features

works of incredible beauty and complexity by two of Taiwan’s premier artists. *Test of Medal: Charles J. Shaw and the Montford Point Marines* tells the little-known story of America’s first US Marine Corps base for Black men, and the first Black man to train an integrated platoon of Marines.

The closure also afforded the museum the opportunity to curate *Miao: Masters of Silver*, an exhibition on the silver made by the Miao minority culture of China, and redesign some of our *Spirits and Headhunters: Art of the Pacific Islands* exhibition.

At the Bowers Museum’s inauguration in 1936, Dr. Frederick W. Hodge, then the director of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, gave an address calling museums silent universities, institutions that would fade away if they ever began to think of themselves as finished. As of the Bowers Museum’s 85th anniversary the museum is still growing and changing every day, breathing continued life into the dream of Charles and Ada Bowers.

Photo (left): Illustration of the Bowers Museum as it appeared before the 2007 remodel, c. 2005. All photos courtesy of Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, California

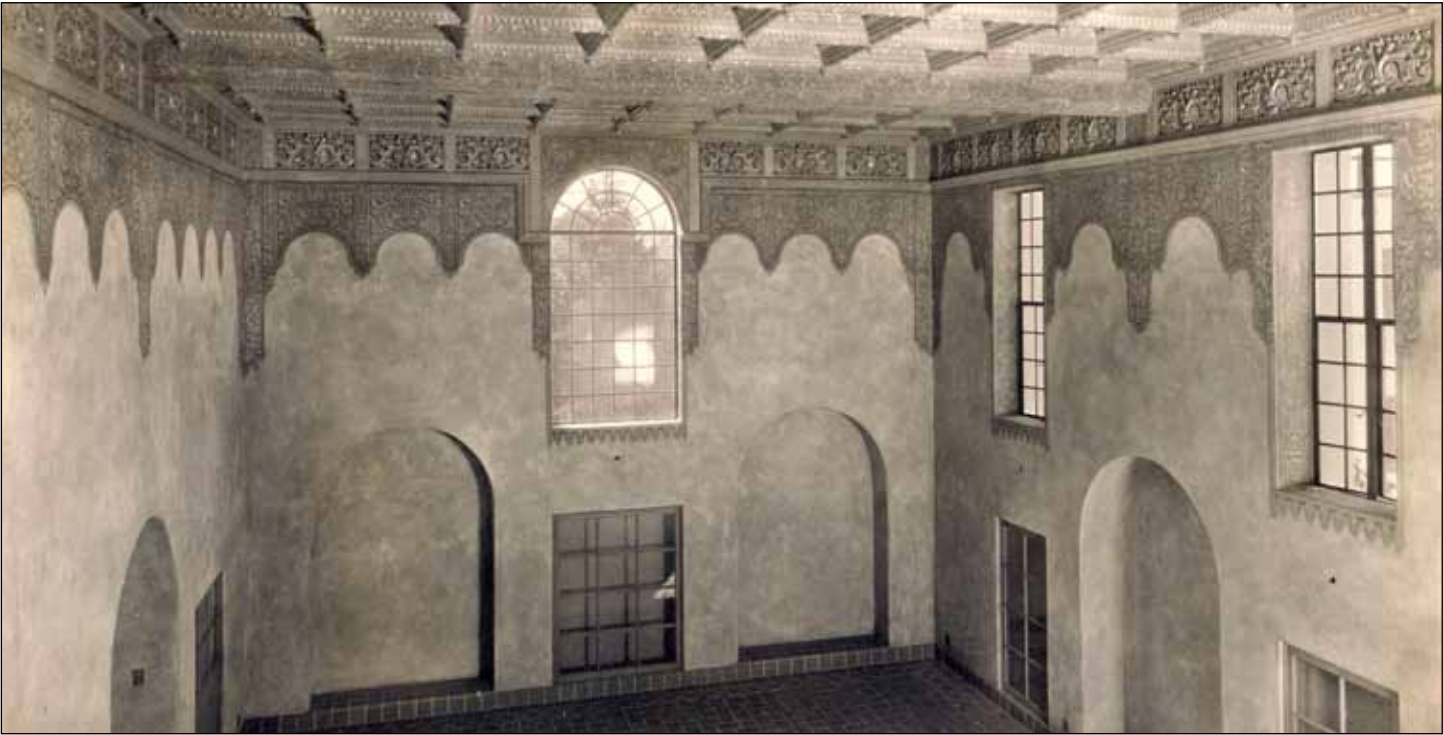


VOLUNTEER IN THE DOCENT GUILD

The Bowers Museum Docent Guild, one of the seven Affiliate Councils of Bowers Museum, has over 100 members. The role of the Bowers Docent is to enhance visitors’ knowledge and engage visitors through conversation and observation. Docents offer public and private tours and host public programs like Sunday Storytelling and a book club for museum members. “Books at Bowers: Touring Through the Pages,” pairs a book with an exhibit and meets every other month for a discussion. Bowers Docents also conduct school tours for children of all ages. During this past year Docents developed virtual tours that featured both collections on display and in storage. Training to become a Bowers Docent is offered annually. Anyone interested in becoming a docent may visit the Docent Guild website at bowersdocentguild.org or contact Rhonda Nalisnik, current chair of the Docent Guild, at 1901 N. Flower St. in Floral Park. Several residents of Floral Park are current or past volunteer docents.

BECOME A MEMBER

Membership to the Bowers goes beyond the range of exciting benefits which are offered year-round. Your investment plays an integral role in bringing life-changing learning opportunities to our visitors and the greater Orange County community. Memberships truly makes a difference in allowing us to continue in our mission to enrich lives through the world’s finest arts and cultures. In celebration of the museum’s reopening, new Bowers Museum members at the Family Level and above will receive a free 50th Anniversary of the Walt Disney Archives tote bag. Sign up to become a member at Bowers.org.



Photos (above) Ada May Sharpless in front of her carving for the Ada E. Bowers Memorial Fountain, c. 1936 (40635). Gift of Mrs. Cecil Marks; Bowers History Room, 1932 (38107.2). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert S. Borders.