

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Cohen, Rachel, "Photos preserve daily life of Eden area," *Oakland Tribune*, May 25, 2007



HAYWARD -- A live baby under a Christmas tree. A Hayward High parade with homecoming royalty riding in a convertible down B Street. Tommy's Donuts on Foothill Boulevard.

All are images of everyday modern life.

"I wanted to touch the pulse of the community, which is really the pulse of America," said photographer Bill Owens. "Hayward is fortunate it still has its character. It has not been completely stripped and modernized."

It has been 35 years since Owens published "Suburbia," a photographic study of suburban California life and its rituals. The critically acclaimed collection launched him into the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and international collections.

"He's known all over the world, and he's here in Hayward," said Jim DeMersman, director of the Hayward Area Historical Society, which commissioned Owens to shoot the Hayward Documentary Project.

Owens submitted some 250 photos in 2006 that he had taken since 2002 to capture life in Hayward, San Lorenzo, Castro Valley and the rest of the Eden Area, all of which now has more than

250,000 residents.

"He has a flair for picking interesting subjects," DeMersman said. "It's a fine job of life at the moment."

The moment includes a woman on a cell phone walking across a parking lot to a 99-Cent Store, and another photo of a couple sitting on a park bench, with the caption "They are no longer dating."

"His sense of humor comes through," DeMersman added.

The photos record iconic images such as the 12-foot roller skater at the Valle Vista Skating Center, which is slated to come down this year, as well as more enduring symbols such as the giant praying hands carved from a tree trunk at Lone Tree Cemetery.

There are also images of cars on Interstate 880 from the West Winton Avenue overpass, as well as a muddle of street and restaurant signs at the downtown Foothill and Mission boulevards intersection that echo Hayward's "Heart of the Bay" slogan.

The Historical Society, 22701 Main St., has its own photo collection, mostly of images from 1860 to 1980, though it is "almost nonexistent" after that, DeMersman said. Its greatest strength is the World War II era, he added.

The Hayward Documentary Project aimed to look not just at buildings, but culture and how life has changed. Owens' photos for the Hayward Documentary Project likely will not be on public display for another year because the museum is working on arranging them into a paperback book for sale along with the exhibit.

Owens received a \$10,000 grant to complete the project, and the Historical Society was supplied with color prints and electronic rights. HAHS won a \$2,500 grant for the project from the Alameda County Arts Fund, which it matched and then paid for the rest from the museum's exhibits budget.

Owens also photographed a similar collection for the city of Brisbane, first as a student from San Francisco State University in 1968 and then returning in 2001 with some of his photos from the old shoot.

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"I was thrilled to meet the guy, so he and I went around town and we tried to find the same locations," Brisbane Assistant City Manager Fred Smith said.

Now these photos hang on walls all over Brisbane City Hall.

"He has a great ability to just walk up to people and they'll let him take their picture and not be self-conscious," Smith added.

DeMersman said HAHS hopes Owens will be able to document Hayward again in another five to 10 years. Owens said that if he does the project again, he would like to capture a toast inside Neumanali restaurant, people gardening because he is "interested in the greening of things," and also go inside a convalescent home.

"We are totally franchised as a nation. I'm for small businesses," added Owens, who started the popular Buffalo Bill's Brewery on B Street in 1972.

He said all this over the phone while sipping rum in Tennessee, where he's working on an upcoming photography book about craft distilleries.

"My favorite place to hang out is The Bistro," Owens said. "I'd like to get the grouchy old guys."

But he added that he is just one person, not a team, and that timing is everything.

HAHS now is hosting the "Lewis and Clark Revisited: A Trail in Modern Day" exhibit. Admission is free. For more information, visit <http://www.haywardareahistory.org> or call (510) 581-0223.

Rachel Cohen can be reached at (510) 293-2463 or rcohen@dailyreviewonline.com.

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