## WRITERS AND ARTISTS BUILDING

Hideaway of the Beverly Hills Literati

by Edward Iginio Placidi

The names on the doors of the two long dark halls of the building read like a Who's Who of movie and television writing. It's the hideaway of the Beverly Hills literati, and it sits at the hub of the Golden Triangle, the juncture of Cañon Drive and Santa Monica and Wilshire Boulevards.

Ray Bradbury, Rowland Barber, Will Rogers, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, artist Arnold Mesches, Eddie Cantor and even Al Jolson once had offices in the building. Michael Blankfort, Chuck Barris, Manny Ruben, Billy Wilder and artists Art Secunda and Archie Hurwitz still do maintain offices

Owner Henry Fenenboch will only permit genuine artists and writers to rent space in the Writers and Artists Building. There is rarely a vacancy and always a long waiting list. The small offices, averaging twelve feet by fourteen feet, are only seventy-five dollars while the large suites averaging fourteen feet by twenty-four feet, are only \$175. But there's no heat, no running water in the rooms and only one lavatory on each floor.

It's one of the most unusual buildings in Beverly Hills.

A.C. Heegaard, a former Beverly Hills Chamber of Commerce president, was the original builder and owner of what was not only the first office building in Beverly Hills, but the tallest building, and it remained so for twenty years. Will Rogers, the first citizen of Beverly Hills, was also the first writer to move into the building. Many writers have followed Rogers, but before Fenenboch bought it in 1960 anyone (not just writers and artists) could have rented an office.

For twenty-eight years and ten months, barber Julian Metika kept a shop on the street level of the building. He cut the hair of politicians, actors, directors and businessmen. His shop became the neighborhood gossip center.

Wallace Berry was sitting in Metika's chair getting a shave and a haircut one day when he saw a policeman ticketing his car out front. "I'll pay that ticket over my dead body," was Berry's comment. The next day Wallace Berry died of a heart attack.

When Nick Bodogolu assumed ownership, times changed for the building. He was known locally as Nick the Greek - not the real one, but both loved to gamble and they were friends. Bodogolu ran the notorious Beverly Hills Clover Club, a gambling den that died out in the 1940s, but prospered under the protection of the Beverly Hills police. The first Beverly Hills office building was not without its own resident bookie and some wild poker



games in those years.

In 1958, in a memorable poker game, Bodogolu was pitted against Lou Costello. In the final hand of the game, Bodogolu put the building up against Costello's house. Costello lost, but when he tried to write it off his taxes the IRS ran an audit on Bodogolu. He hadn't declared the winnings, ended up in jail on a tax-evasion conviction and lost the building. At this time Henry Fenenboch appeared

In 1920, when the first office building in Beverly Hills was being completed on the northwest corner of Rodeo Drive and Little Santa Monica Boulevard, Fenenboch worked for the New York street hustlers who set up folding stands on the sidewalks and hawked everything from fountain pens to corn remedies. Fenenboch's confederate role was to approach the table and buy in front of a crowd listening to the hustler's sales pitch. He would then circle the block, put on a hat, and buy again. The ruse usually bolstered the confidence and courage of the listeners enough to get them to buy. Meanwhile, Fenenboch and the hustler always had an eye out for the police, and they spent most of their time on the run.

Street-savvy Fenenboch started selling his own pens and soon had a pen company of his own. In 1933, at the age of twenty-two, he set up twenty-nine souvenir stands and demonstrated his fountain pens at the Chicago World's Fair. Twenty years later, when Disneyland opened, he opened concessions on Main Street and in Adventureland.

After an enormously successful five years, his lease ended and Disney bought him out. He was looking for an investment when he discovered an old building for sale on Little Santa Monica Boulevard in Beverly Hills. He

"If you knew my wife and me, you'd know that we fall in love with everything that has sentiment and history. This building has a lot of history. We checked into it. We went down to the library and secured some books on Beverly Hills," Harry explains. Wherever you looked there was Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Fred Niblo, Will Rogers, Harold Lloyd. All the activity in Beverly Hills was highlighted and the building was a half block away. Now who wouldn't buy a half block of anything in Beverly Hills, even though it was empty, if you had any imagination?"

There were three tenants in the building when Fenenboch bought it, and all three were members of the Writer's Guild. He asked the Guild to put up a sign that rooms were available for thirty-five dollars a month. His response was overwhelming.

"Before I knew it, I had writers coming in by the bushelfull." says Fenenboch. "It was only a matter of six months before the building was filled with writers, prominent writers, working away."

From that time on, only well-known writers or artists have been allowed into the building, the Writers and Artists Building, a Beverly Hills landmark.

Fenenboch has developed something of a penchant for sheltering writers, claiming he likes to rent to them because they don't complain. They don't need luxuries like heating or air-conditioning, the privacy of a room is enough. He often talks about his dream to build a high-rise Writers and Artists Building, providing offices for hundreds and hundreds of them. This year alone, he has turned down a dozen offers, each in excess of one million dollars, to buy the building.

And the building residents hope Fenenboch doesn't change his mind. The tenants all seem quite content with their cozy little offices. Besides, where else could they rent and participate in the life of the Golden Triangle for such rental fees?

Manny Ruben, writer for "Mannix," "Barnaby Jones," and recipient of an Edgar Mystery Writers Award for "See the Man Run," is one of few tenants who uses his office every day. "It's an escape hatch. I can't work around my family. And once into it, I don't hear the traffic below. I become oblivious to the traffic."

Artist Archie Hurwitz has been in the building for five years creating Interfaces. He claims that "Everybody's face is a mask and I try to get underneath. It's my feeling, my emotional response." For Hurwitz, the whole Beverly Hills, Holiday Issue, 1977/1978

feeling of the building is desirable. When



offered the opportunity to rent, he grabbed it. He says, "I was working on a painting until late and returned the next morning to look at it. I walked down the stairs again and bumped into a writer. I told him that I was sorry, that I must have been dreaming. He looked at me and said, 'Aren't you lucky!'"

Michael Blankfort, a renowned writer on Jewish subjects, is one of the building's longest residing tenants. He's been writing books there in his little room since 1961. Sitting at his desk, surrounded by piles of papers and magazines, with racks of pipes and an ancient Royal typewriter in front of him, he enthuses "It's convenient and I love the building. My windows haven't been cleaned in three or four years. That lamp went out in 1965. But they come to vacuum the carpet and take out the trash. It's a great neighborhood and I love to walk at lunchtime."

Art Secunda, noted for his graphics work, has been in and out of the building for twenty-five years. His son was born the first day he moved into his studio. "I work until late in the morning, blast my music and it's great here," he laughs.

Harvey Lembech, who played Eric Von Zipper in the Beach Party pictures with Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello, has an office in the building. He runs the only professional comedy workshop in the world not, incidentally, located in the Writers and Artists Building. "I do with comedy what Strasbourg does with drama," he claims. Why does he keep an office there? "It's convenient, inexpensive and safe. We can work late, the building is always open. We have the best landlord in California, and it's a very prestigious building. Many of us here are honored by being in Who's Who in America."

Screenwriter/director Billy Wilder, Fenenboch's newest tenant, is more enthusiastic about the building than anyone else. In one breath he blurts, "It's a place for contemplation. I love old buildings. It's a few minutes from where I live; it's near The Bistro and a good cigar store. I feel like I'm in the middle of Rome, Berlin or Paris. If I'm lonely I walk the streets. And by God, people are walking, strolling along. It's in the immediate reach of three great book stores. It's small, comfortable. I'm sure glad I got it, and I love it!"

Fenenboch grimaces as his taxes continue to jump, \$9,600 last year to \$27,300 this year. "This is the Golden Triangle. It's not just me, everybody is affected." he says. But he plans to raise each tenant's rent in the near future by only five or ten dollars. He wants them to stay where they are, and he knows they are happy there.