

Basic Detail Report



Bessie Beth Coulter

Date

c. 1927

Medium

Photographic print

Description

Construction of the Bowers Museum began soon after the passing of Ada Bowers in 1929. By 1932, the museum had been built but could not yet open due to the financial constraints of the Great Depression. The museum was at a standstill; there was a general lack of interest from the city, there were no qualified staff to run the museum, and there was essentially nothing to exhibit. Charles and Ada Bowers' trust had been managed by First National Bank since 1924 and, despite having already processed the gift of the museum to Santa Ana, it was still in part responsible for realizing the grantors' dream. During a routine 1932 meeting with Bessie Beth Coulter, who was

at the time serving as executor for her late husband's estate, she mentioned that the position of Curator at the museum sounded like an interesting job. Despite having almost no background in arts and culture, she piqued the interest of bank staff for having held leadership positions in no less than four local organizations and committees. Two years passed between this conversation and her first entering the museum, but she was eventually selected for the position of the Bowers Museum's first Curator. In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established, and a portion of the government funding that was distributed to the City of Santa Ana was earmarked for the museum. Through the WPA Bessie Beth was given funding for two secretaries, an archaeologist, and a clerk. With staff and financial problems solved, her next challenge was finding objects to exhibit. To secure loans and donations to the museum she made house calls across the county, reaching out to descendants of Orange's earliest families. She started with practically nothing and built collections of significant artifacts from California's Indigenous peoples, the Mission Period, and the Rancho families who played a pivotal role in the establishment of Orange County. Within just two years Bessie Beth had accomplished the enormous task of getting the Bowers Museum ready for the public. After the museum opened, she remained a tireless force in the advancement of the Bowers' permanent collection and reputation for 26 years until her retirement in 1960.

Dimensions

6 7/8 × 5 in. (17.5 × 12.7 cm)