



WHY I LIVE IN



LOS ANGELES

there's no place like
Los Angeles, because
there's no such place

BY FRED BECK

■ I LIVE IN LOS ANGELES because this is where the spirit of the individual soars magnificently above the spirit of the city.

I can do what I want to do, restricted only by reasonable laws and by the practical bounds of reason, never hampered by the dried-up fetishes of fellow citizens who live in a Boston-type rut. I can wear what I want without provoking the shocked or smirky stares of sophisticated, urbane New York-type slaves to custom and "rules."

If I want to express the opinion that the Los Angeles Angels are low-grade muscled mutts playing a boys' game for money, the man I tell this to might yawn, because maybe he doesn't even know Los Angeles has a ball club. If a Detroitter spoke that way of the Tigers, he would be stoned to death, because for 80 years the Detroitter has embraced a standardized, unchanging regard for the Tigers. *My* man is absorbed with his own prowess as a back yard badminton player.

The point is that in Los Angeles the individual leads his own life and plays his own games rather than lose himself vicariously in the capers of professionals.

A neighbor of ours gives her white Spitz a weekly henna rinse. The dog thus matches the decor of her house, and the color henna just happens to do something for the lady's spirit that the color white won't do. In any other city this would be regarded as eccentric behavior. The true Angeleno who has learned to think objectively sees nothing unusual in the circumstance that the color henna, on a dog, is pleasing to the dog's owner. It is as reasonable, from the true Los Angeles viewpoint, as would be the dyeing of panties in Cleveland. And for this reasonable attitude we get ourselves a national reputation as "California nuts."



I live in Los Angeles because the town doesn't have an adequate public transit system. The reason we don't is that the city has grown faster than draftsmen can get out blueprints, so the natural expansion is always way out in front of planned expansion—and so, fortunately, we do not have a rapid transit system.

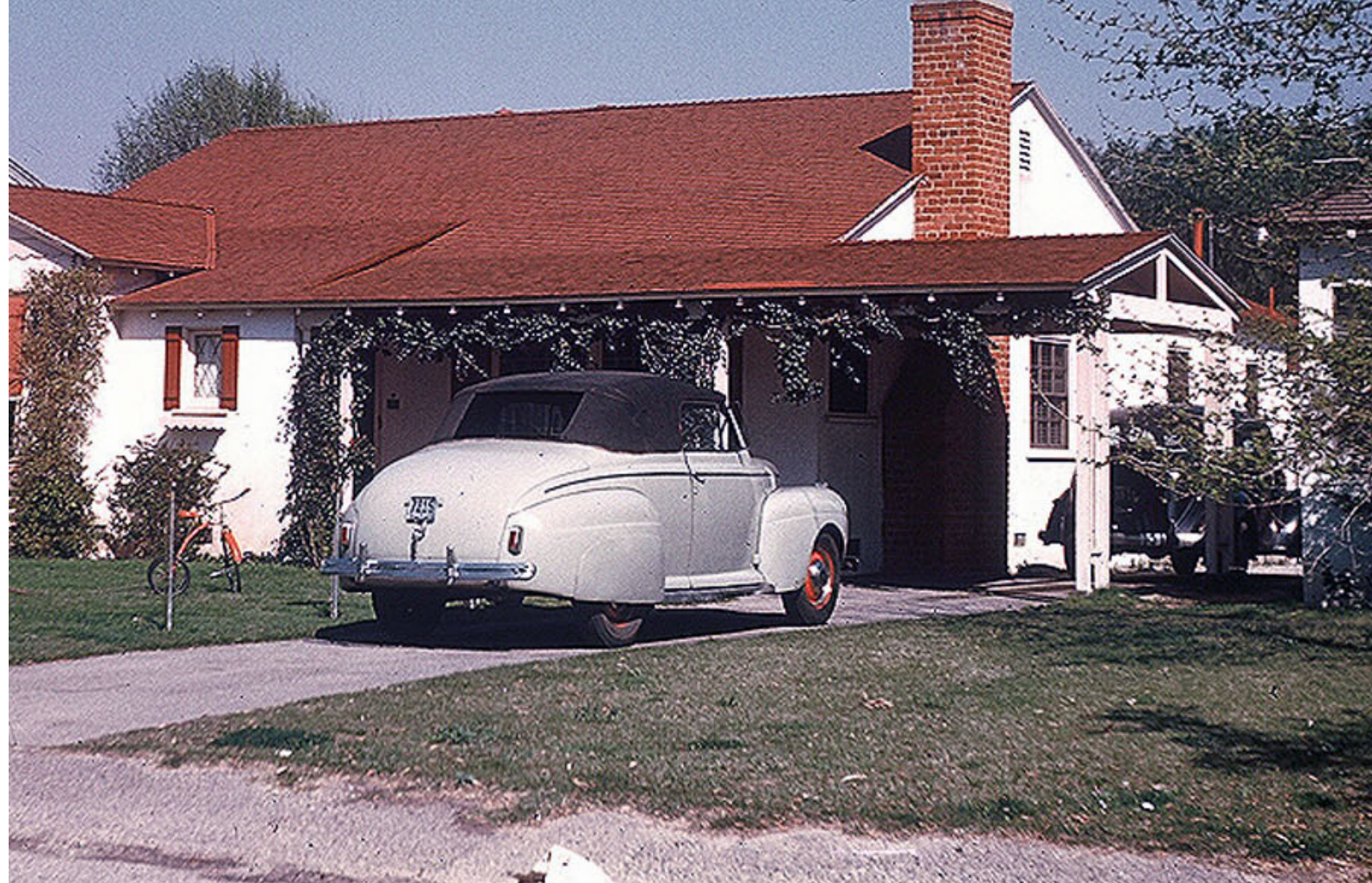
If we did have a subway I would have to get on it and go downtown to work every day. As things are I get in my car and drive for 20 minutes through pleasant surroundings to CBS headquarters in Hollywood, where I do a brief early a.m. daily stint, and then in 20 minutes more I'm back home—home being a three-acre avocado grove. It's a great life.

A mere minority of the populace goes downtown to work in Los Angeles, and the reason for that is that, confidentially, there is no such city as Los Angeles, in the sense that there is a city of Pittsburgh.

There are city limits, and within them there are 470 square miles mapped out as Los Angeles. Within the 470 miles there are Boyle Heights, Hollywood, Westchester, Brentwood and an estimated 200 other "neighborhoods." New "neighborhoods" sprout with an amazing suddenness. The bean field of today is the hot spot of tomorrow.

Because Los Angeles revolves eccentrically on no given center, it produces a very special kind of dizziness. The visitor is confused by it, and of course does not understand the city. Its personality is evasive. New York and New Orleans and San Fran-what's-its-name have crystallized personalities that the visitor "feels" immediately.

The reason you don't get "the feel" of Los Angeles is that there



is no such place. It's 200-plus other places.

This explains why Los Angeles is the most maligned and most misunderstood of all cities. Eastern writers come upon this amazing scene, are confused by what they see and feel, and, at a loss to understand, they nervously titter at Los Angeles in print. Los Angeles is something new, and like the new boy who comes to school in mid-term, it's given a bad time. Failing to see what Los Angeles really is, the writers see the obvious—the cults, the henna Spitz, the neon on the cemetery sign—and thus a sort of literary tradition was born, and it became fashionable to write disparagingly of Los Angeles.

The first impression is never a satisfying one, and that has produced a phenomenon. Nearly everybody who comes to Los Angeles to live comes here to live two times.

I (Beck) am no exception. The first time I came here to live, my child bride and I moved into a luxurious two-room furnished English manse—one of several of the same arranged in what you call “a court.” Outside our door was a plaster brownie squatted on a plaster toadstool. The brownie held a fish pole and fished in a goldfish pond, in the shade of a palm tree.

That damned brownie bothered us. So did a lot of things about Los Angeles, so we went away. Then a strange thing happened. Los Angeles began to pull us back. The pull was irresistible, so we arrived back here about the same time as The Crash, and proceeded to enjoy The Depression and to get to be Angelenos.

I mention this matter of “the second take” because it explains how the first revulsion to Los Angeles is gradually replaced by a deep regard not for the city and its history, but for life as it is lived

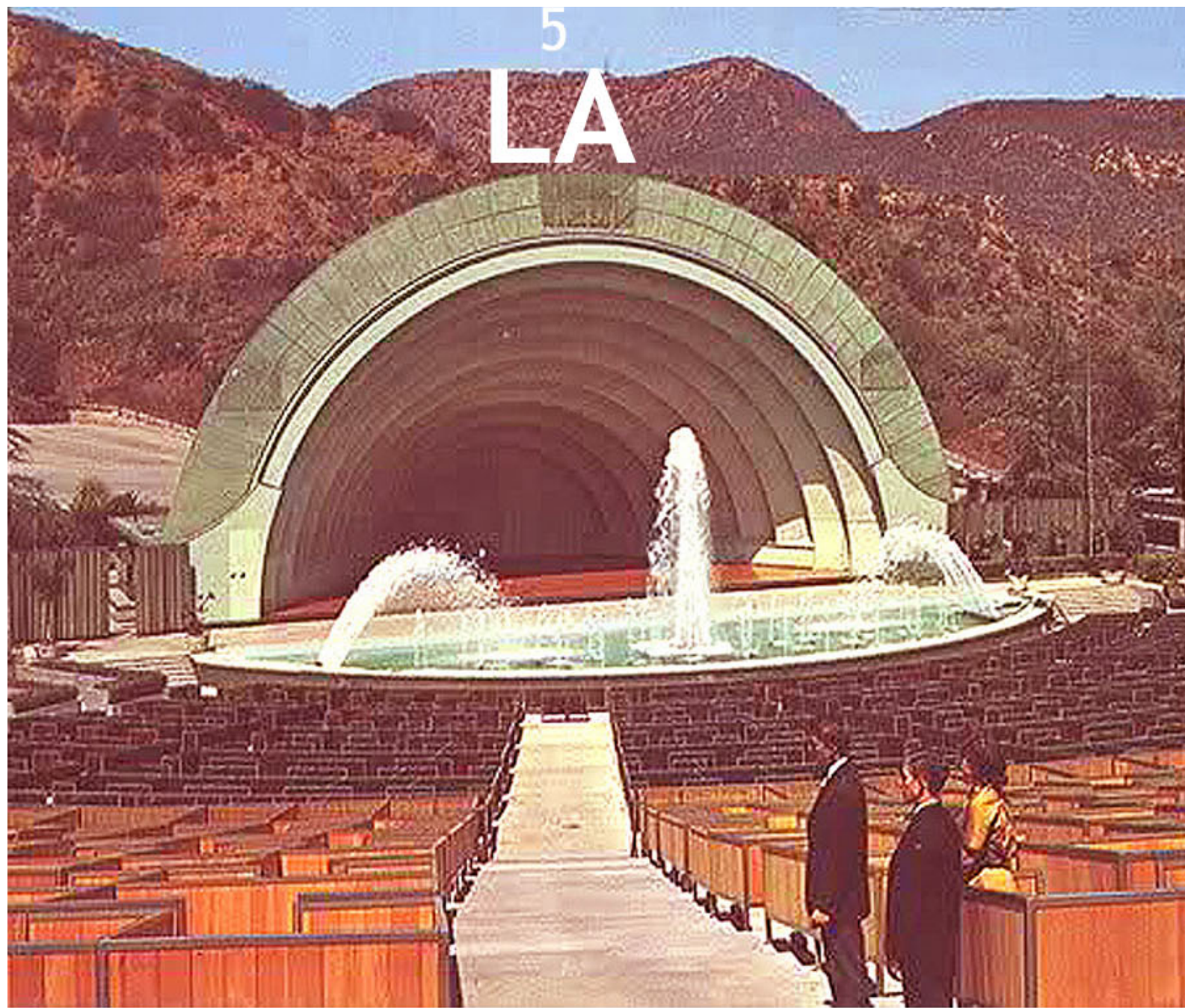


in Los Angeles. A majority of the people who live here actually tried to escape, and then were drawn back a second time, and resisted no longer as they sank languorously into "California Living."

The present population of California is 10 million going on 20 million, with most of the increase taking place in and around Los Angeles. The war workers are back (the phenomenon of the "second take") and they love California Living. Good wages, store cookies, a salubrious climate, no coal bills and a free look at Rhonda Fleming from behind the ropes on World Pr'meer nights.

They, too, know Why They Live in Los Angeles, although of course it's not Los Angeles. They live in Wilmington and San Pedro and Watts and North Hollywood. There's not been integration at the Los Angeles center since that brief span of time when a few Spaniards clustered around The Plaza in 17-what's it. The Plaza is still there, but it's strictly from pigeons, and the city has no center. Los Angeles, as a city with a history and with heroes and with pride in a ball club, doesn't exist. Thousands gather in the Hollywood Bowl for Symphonies Under the Stars, but this does not do for Los Angeles what the Saturday Night band concerts in the park do for Mason City, Iowa. Los Angeles' newspapers are home-town papers to no one. The city has no heart, no soul, no center, and it turns out now that the lack of integration at the center is fortunate—for here, suddenly, is the first modern decentralized industrial city in the world. Los Angeles has found by accident a solution to a problem with which other cities struggle, and struggle in vain.

Even though there's really no such place, the city can boast of the things that most cities point to with pride: universities, parks, fine hotels, famous restaurants and so on. There's apartment house life if you want it, but few do. We have



something better.

All the good shows play L. A. "with the original N. Y. cast," but nobody goes because everybody's home broiling steaks in the backyard. You can swim and ski the same day in Los Angeles. We not only have year-round golf—but 24-hour golf. They're beginning to floodlight the courses. We even have culture and you can have that nearly all to yourself because few people realize that we have an art gallery. (I presume we have one. Oh, we must have.) Anyway, we buy more books per capita than Boston—but then, that's not saying what kind of books.

I live in Los Angeles because people stay home and barbecue lamb shanks and serve pretty fair bourbon to drop-in guests.

I live in Los Angeles not because I'm impressed with our industrial output (1,400 ventriloquists' dummies produced in the first half of 1949 alone)—but because of the life we lead.

It's gay, and silly, and easy on the disposition—and if you want to live the urbane life it's here to be lived by those who make a pretense at it. The most urbane man I ever knew is Charlie. Charlie got rich in the music publishing business, and used to dress for dinner every night, in New York. When he settled in Los Angeles (the second time) he bought a house with a garden, and then he went to Desmond's Westwood and bought a blue shirt with hibiscus flowers printed on it, and he wears it outside his trousers just like Bing Crosby and the rest of us.

Charlie also planted a ponderosa, but he'll get over that because a ponderosa is nothing but a melon-sized lemon that has no merit other than immensity. Charlie also set up a woodworking shop in his garage, and he's been planing a board. He doesn't know what he's making, but he has a damn smooth board



there. The point is that Charlie's urbanity is completely shot, and he feels better. His ulcers stayed east when he came west.

I live in Los Angeles because it's nice to be able to borrow a chisel from Charlie any old time.

THE DRIFT TO L. A. has been going on a long time. The influx at one time was mainly made up of old folk who chose to spend the remaining time in the sunshine. The sunshine was good for them, they lived longer than they'd planned, and that presented problems and produced such spectres as the Townsend Plan.

The current influx is made up of young families—and they're settling in new "neighborhoods." Henry Kaiser and Fritz Burns throw up houses 5,000 at a whomp. Then the A. & P. and Karl's Shoes and Thrifty Drug rush to provide a shopping center for the new "neighborhood." A man gets a franchise for a Ford agency to serve the new community and to eke him some ekes. A young doctor finds a ready-made practice. The Big Chain provides a movie house, and the L. A. School Board does its best to provide the new "neighborhood" with a school. Note that the new "neighborhood" does not really affect Los Angeles. It's another development on the ever-expanding peripheral edge, and the intact self-contained "neighborhood" is there because new industry is there too, and the workers needed the new "neighborhood." Some of them may never even see downtown Los Angeles, and why should they?

Los Angeles has more automobiles per capita than any other city. The critic says "Yeah? More cars than bathtubs!" And to that I say—"Did you count the swimming pools?"



I LIVE IN LOS ANGELES because I like the climate. This is a matter we had to come to sooner or later—the climate. In its natural form it is benign. Industrial growth brought the smog—a mixture of soot and orange juice in suspension. It's no good. But a city that can grow where no city was meant to be, a city that piped its water from the distant Colorado, can do something about smog—and will probably do it when the smog reaches out to those 200-plus “neighborhoods.”

Aside from the smog, the well-nigh perfect climate, like everything else Los Angelesque, has been splattered by the aspersions flung by our city's critics. They charge that the Los Angeles climate is “monotonous.” By monotonous they mean it's so good most of the time, they can't stand it. I live in Los Angeles because I love that kind of monotony. But it's not really monotonous at all. I've seen that climate burst suddenly loose from lead-gray skies and come tearing down the canyons sweeping houses and real estate agents with it.

That stuff isn't orange juice. It's climate.

I live in Los Angeles because it's fun and because every night is Halloween and because if I lived any place else I couldn't watch what's going on here.

And in case you missed the point there, what's going on is the BIGGEST show on earth, and the main performance hasn't even begun. They're still putting up the tent poles. The canvas crew is spreading out the big top. The animals are still being unloaded and the clowns are making up. Millions of people are on their way to the biggest show on earth, and in case YOU are wondering how YOU would make out in Los Angeles, well, an awful lot of pink lemonade is going to be changing hands.

LA

Of all cities, Los Angeles provides the world's biggest **WHY** *anybody* would live here.

About the Author:

BECK: LOS ANGLOPHILE

FRED BECK is the pixie who made Hollywood's now-famed Farmer's Market a success by writing about it every day in the *Los Angeles Times*—in paid advertising space. Maybe because he wrote such unhucksterlike copy as “our tomatoes are pretty punk, today,” or maybe because the guy's just terrific, his column became a popular feature of the paper and Beck became something of a local hero.

Last year this began to seem like work: he was writing a column for the *Mirror*, doing regular radio and television shows and wearing himself out running to the bank with royalty checks from his two books, *Second Carrot from the End* and *73 Years in a Sand Trap*. So he put a workshop, complete with power tools, in his home. He still fizzes for Alka Seltzer five mornings a week, on the Columbia Pacific Network, but his heart belongs to furniture making. PAGEANT coaxed him away from his table saws, his jointers and his sanders long enough to tell why a Detroit-born, Montreal-reared wanderer lives in Los Angeles.



PAGEANT

February, 1950: p. 70

OldMagazineArticles.com