

SOBS, SNIFFLES AND SMILES

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By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

“Life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles,” said author and poet William Sidney Porter. “With sniffles predominating.”

Not many would know that better than the man we know better as his pen name, O. Henry. He lost his wife and the mother of their daughter, Margaret, to tuberculosis. And then he spent three years in prison ... for a crime that he most likely didn’t commit.

Only after all those sniffles would Porter become known as a prolific author of short stories — especially the snuffle-inducing “The Gift of the Magi.”

O. Henry was released from prison on July 24, 1901 — 125 years ago.

FROM PRISON TO STARDOM AS A BELOVED AUTHOR

William Sidney Porter was born in 1862 in Greensboro, North Carolina. After finishing school at age 15, he became a licensed pharmacist and began working in his uncle’s drugstore in Greensboro.

In 1882, Porter moved to Texas, worked for a while as a ranch hand and began writing in his spare time. He married in 1887, worked for a while as a draftsman for the Texas General Land Office and, in 1891, started work for his wife’s father at the First National Bank of Austin.

In 1894, Porter founded a periodical he called “The Rolling Stone,” which he filled with amusing short stories and sketches. When that failed, he moved to Houston and went to work for the Houston Post.

In 1895, Porter was charged with embezzling from the bank where he had worked. He set out to return to Austin, where he said he would plead not guilty. But en route, he had second thoughts and headed instead for New Orleans. He worked there as a writer and began using the pen name O. Henry.

When people asked him what the O stood for, he’d tell them “O stands for Olivier, the French for Oliver.” Another theory is that he used that name because the family cat his family owned when he was young was named Henry. The cat would come when

O. HENRY THE BANK TELLER

In 1891, Porter went to work as a teller and bookkeeper at the First National Bank of Austin, which was owned by his father-in-law. That’s Porter in the center, here, with the large mustache. Porter left the job and moved to Houston in December 1894.



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After his departure, federal officials audited the bank and brought up Porter on charges of embezzlement.

But, in fact, the bank was loosely managed. Patrons could walk up and pull money out of the till, unsupervised. They were supposed to leave a note, but sometimes, they forgot.

Working under conditions like this were stressful. The teller who had Porter’s job before him retired. The teller who took his place attempted suicide.

When Porter was charged, he proclaimed his innocence and fled to New Orleans and then Honduras. His wife had planned to join him but fell ill.

When he finally went to trial, Porter said little in his own defense.

Porter was convicted for three particular occasions when money went missing ...

Oct. 10, 1894
\$354.48

Nov. 12, 1894
\$209.60

Nov. 12, 1895
\$299.60

... but the third theft took place 11 months after Porter left his job at the bank. The foreman of the Grand Jury later expressed regret about indicting Porter.

Porter yelled, “Henry! Oh Henry!”

Porter later moved to Honduras — a country that did not have an extradition treaty with the U.S. — and began writing in earnest. He planned to have his wife and daughter join him there but his wife fell ill from tuberculosis. When he was told her case was terminal, he traveled back to Austin and surrendered to authorities.

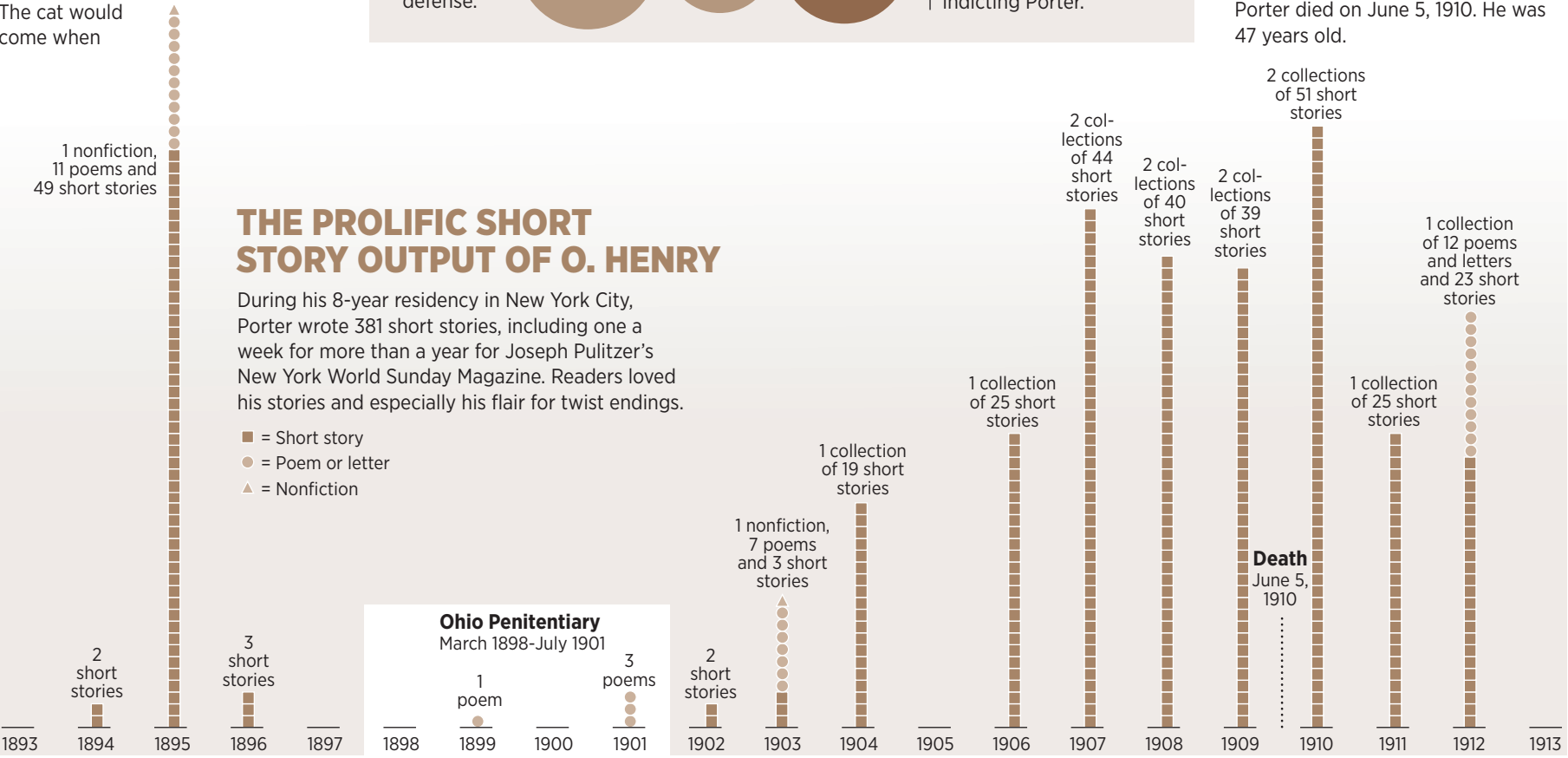
Porter was allowed to remain free until his wife died. Then, he was put on trial, convicted of embezzlement and sent to prison in Ohio.

When officials there found he was a licensed and experienced pharmacist, they put him to work in the prison pharmacy, giving him a room instead of a cell. Porter continued to write his short stories.

He was released in 1901 and moved with his daughter to New York City. He wrote 381 short stories there, including one a week for more than a year for Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World Sunday Magazine. Readers loved his stories and especially his flair for twist endings. His most famous story, “The Gift of the Magi,” was published in 1905.

In 1908, Porter’s health began to fail. His heavy drinking led to cirrhosis of the liver and added complications to his diabetes. He also suffered from an enlarged heart.

Porter died on June 5, 1910. He was 47 years old.



Sources: “Writers Gone Wild” by Bill Peschel, O. Henry Museum of Austin, the New York Times, Texas General Land Office, Library of America, U.S. Postal Service, North Carolina History Project, Riverside Cemetery, ThoughtCo., Goodreads, Biography.com, History.com