Celebrating Owney

As you know Owney, the mascot of the Railway Mail Service, received his own U.S. postage stamp this summer. In conjunction with the stamp issue, the museum held a four-day Owney celebration for our visitors. After the stamp issue ceremony, the museum offered visitors an array of activities celebrating Owney. Mona Kirby and Dirk Wales read from their Owney books, kids and their families created dog puppets and learned about topical stamp collecting as well as the variety of animals involved in moving America’s mail.

To help the museum celebrate Owney and his stamp, first day cover cachet artists from around the country have sent in covers featuring their Owney artwork. These covers will become part of the museum’s permanent collection and some will be selected for exhibition in the William H. Gross Stamp Gallery. The New Initiatives Committee of the Council of Philatelists and the NPM Philately Department coordinated the initiative with the American First Day Cover Society.

Owney may have been a nineteenth-century canine, but this year’s celebration has been a very twenty-first-century one. In conjunction with the stamp issue the museum has released the Smithsonian Institution’s first augmented reality application. Once this application has been downloaded on your iPhone or computer, you can use your phone or webcam to make the stamp come to life. Simply place the stamp (or an image of the stamp) in front of the camera and Owney will come to life, barking and trotting in full 3D. The iPhone application can be found at the iTunes Store (key word: Owney) and is a free download. The online version is available at www.postalmuseum.si.edu/owneyapp.

The museum also has brought Owney “to life” through an online “look alike” contest organized through Owney’s Facebook website. More than seventy dogs were entered into the contest. Some eager owners used images from Owney’s life to pose their pets; others dressed their dogs in postal uniforms. Participants came from all across the United States and the competition has been fierce! You can view the winner on a link from this page: www.postalmuseum.si.edu/owney.

Although the contest winner won’t be announced until after this issue goes to press, we can tell you that the winner will receive an uncut press sheet of Owney stamps and an iPad2. He or she can use that to access another new Owney application, and so can you! Owney’s first e-Book is available now. This interactive
and moving story combines the nostalgic feelings about Owney with up-to-date scholarship and today's advanced technology. This exciting new story is based on recent curatorial research and will be used in classrooms across the United States. The e-Book offers readers an interactive experience, and features the voice of country singer Trace Atkins. It is available as a free iPad application through the iTunes Store (key word: Owney) or on the museum's website. The e-Book was created by media company Amüsme and funded by the Smithsonian's Office of Education and Outreach.

Our curatorial and collections staff have cleaned up and researched all of Owney's tags. You can view them and learn more about Owney's life and travels through the museum's online collections website, www.arago.si.edu. We also invite you to look through the museum's new Owney page (www.postalmuseum.si.edu/owney), which links to all of the information available on Owney from the museum.

Teachers can download a curriculum guide titled "Owney the dog!" that has been designed for the second grade. The guide offers background information on Owney as well as the e-Book storyline to give teachers a solid foundation for using Owney's story in their classrooms. The curriculum includes a pull-out section for students with special needs in reading, writing, and math. Teachers using this guide can encourage students in math with exercises in counting and measuring Owney's tags, or in geography by looking at the regions the dog visited, to mention just two of the many lesson plans offered through Owney's curriculum guide. Available at: www.npm.si.edu/owneycurriculum.

We have enjoyed celebrating Owney this year, and sharing his story with the public in so many different ways. If you love stamps, dogs, or just a good story, take some time to play with Owney today.

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