

AUSTIN HISTORY CENTER
OUR COMMUNITY'S COLLECTIVE MEMORY

[AHC HOME](#) | [ABOUT US](#) | [COLLECTIONS](#) | [EXHIBITS](#) | [REFERENCE](#) | [PHOTOS](#)

Answer 3

What's the origin of the term "City of the Violet Crown" referring to Austin? Did it really originate with O. Henry?

Yes, the first published use of the phrase is found in O. Henry's short story "Tictocq" in the Rolling Stones collection of O. Henry short stories. It was originally published in his locally published newspaper *The Rolling Stone* on October 27, 1894.

The phrase is used in Chapter Two: "The drawing-rooms of one of the most magnificent private residences in Austin are a blaze of lights. Carriages line the streets in front, and from gate to doorway is spread a velvet carpet, on which the delicate feet of the guests may tread. The occasion is the entrée into society of one of the fairest buds in the City of the Violet Crown."

(from the Violet Crown Soap Company <http://violetcrownsoap.com/vcrownnm.html>) Somewhere along the way, Austin became known as "The City of the Violet Crown". "Why is Austin called that?" I've heard several explanations.

The story I'm most familiar with also happens to be my personal favorite: With near-by hills that keep air-born things from drifting on to other places, Austin has a fair amount of haze. Before the current problem of auto exhaust, it was attributable to smoke, dust and such. At sunset, and into dusk, the haze takes on a purple cast, covering all with a violet crown. I've experienced this evening corona, and it is truly lovely.

Another popular explanation likewise involves the setting sun. Looking west from town, the Balcones Escarpment marks the beginning of the Hill Country. When they turn purple at sunset, the hills form a violet crown around the city.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that Violet Crown is also considered a reference to the purple-ish glow from the Moon Towers.

"What are the moonlight towers?

They are the 165-foot-tall towers that support outdoor lighting for parts of Austin. Thirty-one of these metal giants were erected in 1895 using electricity from Austin's first power plant on the Colorado River. The towers first used carbon arc lamps that were lit nightly by a worker who got to the top in an elevator that runs up the center of the framework. These were replaced in the 1920s by incandescent lamps and then by mercury vapor lamps in 1936. There are 17 towers in use today. A replica of a moonlight tower serves as the center post for the Zilker Park "Christmas Tree" of lights each year. " (Austin History Center)

We also liked the fact that the nickname has a literary connection. The first published use of the phrase was in O. Henry's short story *Titocq: The Great French Detective, in Austin*. The story was originally published in his locally published newspaper *The Rolling Stone* on October 27, 1894.

The phrase is used in Chapter Two: "The drawing-rooms of one of the most magnificent private residences in Austin are a blaze of lights. Carriages line the streets in front, and from gate to doorway is spread a velvet carpet, on which the delicate feet of the guests may tread. The occasion is the entrée into society of one of the fairest buds in the City of the Violet Crown."

Austin isn't the first City of the Violet Crown. That distinction goes to Athens (Greece, not Texas) . During the 19th century, in a time when Athens was considered the cradle of western civilization, Austin called itself the "Athens of the South". If you consider that *Titocq* was a political humor story, as well as a spoof of a popular literary figure, French detective Leroq, you might come to the conclusion that O'Henry was poking a little fun at Austin's high-faluting cultural claim.

(from the Violet Crown Soap Company <http://violetcrownsoap.com/vcrownnm.html>)

Courtesy of JB Goodwin