

[Mr. Thomas J. Henry]

Thomas J. Henry, Jr.

250 Auburn Ave., N. E.

Lawyer.

By

Geneva Tonsill,

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The interview took place in Mr. H's law office which consists of two rooms, simply furnished but attractive.

"I am a child of the late Flora (Thompson) and Thomas J. Henry, Sr. My mother moved to Georgia from South Carolina a few years after the War Between the States. She was a very ambitious women and took advantage of the meager opportunities offered for study and improvement. She was among the first students to attend Spelman College, when it was located in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church. Her family was very poor. She was unable to pursue her studies very long at Spelman. After a short attendance in Spelman she then secured work for the then President of Atlanta University, Edmond Asa Ware. While working for his family she did part-time study in Atlanta University. This gave her a good background, and she was able to write letters to her friends and relatives, a thing she liked to do, and also to do some literary work in connection with her church and clubs. An ardent Christian woman, she was a member of Big Bethel African Methodist Church for more than sixty years and took a leading part in the church work.

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“My father came to Atlanta from Morgan County, Georgia, a few years after the war. His father's name was Cudger, but after the war my father and two of his brothers went to the courthouse in Mor an County and had their names changed to Henry, as they didn't like the named Cudger. His 2 grandfather was one of the late slaves brought over from Africa and was a man who never was conquered by slavery. It seems that father inherited some of the courage of his ancestors because he was a man that always stood for what he thought was right. He too took advantage of what schooling he could obtain and attended night school under Mrs. Norris, the same woman who gave Atlanta University the clock which is now in the tower of Stone Hall. With this night school training and with the work which he did himself at home, he was able to read well, a thing he liked to do, and out loud. I can picture him now sitting there at night by the lamp light with his newspaper, reading aloud, unmindful of his disturbance to the other members of the family, no matter what they were trying to concentrate on. The joy, however, he got from his reading compensated us in pleasure, for we knew how proud he was of his ability to read, so we didn't complain. He was also able to learn enough mathematics, from his untiring efforts to get an education, to take care of his business affairs.

“Very soon after coming to Atlanta my father obtained a job with a firm known as the Franklin Plumbing and Tinning Company, for whom he worked more than twenty years. During these years he was able to learn both the plumbing and tinning trades well, as the Franklin Company did much work along both lines. However, as he was colored he was very poorly paid for the work he was doing and finally decided to go out and start business for himself. After two or three years in business for himself and after having built up a fairly good trade, a law was passed requiring all plumbers to get licenses. He was ordered to report for an examination on several occasions, but for one reason or another the examiners always found that he almost passed but never quite passed. Having a growing family at that time it was necessary for him to work. He never stopped working although he was violating the law. Finally, one day while working for a white friend of his, Attorney W. A. 3 Fuller, he was arrested and thrown in jail.

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“Attorney Fuller, realizing the injustice of his arrest and being a man of high character, undertook his defense and was so successful that the law was declared unconstitutional, and thus the door was opened not only for my father to work at his trade but for a large number of other colored and poor whites who had been denied the privilege because of an unfair examining board.

“At the time of this incident I was just entering high school, and I was so impressed by what could be done by a lawyer that I decided then and there if I ever had the chance I would study law. I wanted to be a great lawyer like Mr. Fuller.

“My earliest recollections were when I was living in the neighborhood called “South Atlanta.” This neighborhood was located just beyond the city limits in Atlanta and was settled by a mixed population, having both white and colored people living in it. Ninety per cent of the folks were in very ordinary circumstances and the other ten per cent were what we might call poor folks and was about equally divided between white and black.

“The playmates in the neighborhood were both white and colored and, though there were occasional spats, all neighbors lived together fairly well.

“It was necessary for me to attend Clark University because I lived outside the city and from that school I finished the grammar school, or the eight grades. Many of the teachers at the school were white and their children attended the school along with the colored children. When I was in the first grade, my very best friend and chum was Norman Thirkield, son of Bishop Thirkield of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Because of this friendship I was able to go inside of a cultured home and really see what there was to be had in life.

“My boyhood days were quite happy due to the fact I was not living in a 4 crowded city area but was surrounded by woods, fields, branches, and streams. There were berries to be picked in the spring, nuts in the fall, and trips to be made to the woods for violets and

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other wild flowers. There was an old wash hole in the branch where the boys would go and swim in their birthday suits. There was the Junior League at Clark University, which at that time was banded by a Miss Marie Hardwick, a teacher there. This league had very interesting meetings on Sunday afternoons and always had various social functions, which were a source of delight to all of the children.

“Among my playmates at the time were Dr. Louis G. Wright, now head of the Harlem Hospital; Mr. J. T. Arnold, on the staff of the Y. M. C. A. in Harlem; and Mr. W. T. Cunningham, a prominent business man and realtor of Atlanta, Georgia.

“My mother had lived for a number of years on the west side of Atlanta prior to her marriage and during the first years of her marriage and never reconciled herself to living any other place, so in 1905 my father began purchasing a two-room house on Mitchell Street in the southwest section of Atlanta. In the year of 1906, when the famous riot occurred, the family added three rooms to the two-room house on Mitchell Street and moved from South Atlanta.

“I then entered Atlanta University in the year of 1906 and seven years later was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

“The teacher who impressed me most while in school was George Howe, who had charge of the manual training department of the school. So well did Mr. Howe impress me with his ability that I undertook his course after completing the high school department. I took the course of English and a professional teacher's course and became so proficient that during my last two years in college I was made instructor of the first year high school department.

“During the year of 1913, when I graduated, there was a depression in the country which made jobs not only scarce but unprofitable. I first taught manual training in Fessenden Academy in Florida and was paid \$30.00 per month. Out of this salary I had to pay laundry fee and contribute to the Sunday School at least \$1 per week. Board was supposed to be free but was of such caliber that it was necessary to supplement heavily the meals served

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in the dining room. It was here that I learned about 'boarding school gravy' which could be made without any sign or semblance of meat or grease. I also found how one small hen could make chicken stew for sixty people and one pound of cheese was sufficient to make macaroni for the same number. After one year at this school I decided that teaching would not do, so for the next two years I followed, intermittently, plumbing work which I had learned from my father as a boy. I also secured a job writing insurance with the Standard Life Insurance Company, which had just been started by the late Heman Perry, one of the greatest financial geniuses that the colored race has produced. During the second year with this company I travelled a great deal in the interest of the company in Georgia and Mississippi.

"Old line insurance was now among colored people at that time, and selling this class of insurance to colored people was really pioneering work. Although the work was quite hard, there were certain compensations that made the work worth while. One could learn such from travelling from county to county and seeing the conditions under which colored people lived. Many fine contacts were made during this period with people in various towns and cities in Georgia which have yielded pleasant and lasting friendships until today.

"Like the average boy, the question of the relation of the opposite sex started quite early in life. Sweethearts began with Daisy, a brown-skinned girl, who came over the fence to play quite often, and ended with Eunice. I first met Eunice in my junior year in college and, after a very regular courtship of four yours, we were married in 1917. Just an I was about to leave for 6 the World War.

"At the age of twenty I joined the church, Friendship Baptist, and I have always found something to do in connection with church work. For several years prior to the war I was a Sunday School teacher and active in the Young People's Union. I an reporter, at present, for the church and make all of the general announcements at the regular church service on Sunday.

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“In the spring of 1917, while I was selling life insurance in Elbert County, Georgia, my mother called me over long distance telephone to tell me that she had heard of a plan for an officer's training school and she thought it was good for me to come home at once to see what it was all about. I had been registered under the draft law and, being adventurous, I decided to take advantage of this training school. I felt if I had to serve in the army of my country, it would be better to get commissioned if possible. I was accepted by the recruiting officer and allowed to take an examination, physical and mental, which one had to pass in order to gain admission to the training school. Neither of these examinations was very difficult, so I had very little trouble in being accented for training.

“Although I was eager to experience the life of a soldier, having read quite a lot of the happenings of the World War, I must admit I was loathe to leave Eunice behind, so after several conversations with her and a little persuasion we decided to get married before I went away to war, and this we did on May 27, 1917.

“About the 12th of June, or maybe two weeks after our marriage, a crowd of recruits from Atlanta and the surrounding territory left on a special train for Des Moines, Iowa, where the task of being a soldier for two years began.

“I wasn't very much impressed with the work to begin with, due to the fact that many of our instructors were non-commissioned officers from the 7 regular army who had very little literary training. I found out later, however, that the specialised training which they had in the matter of army regulations, tactics, discipline, and so forth, was of the highest quality and, although they could not speak English so well or spell correctly, they really knew what it took to make a soldier. After the training period was about over I took a real interest in the training, worked hard, and was given a commission at the end of the training period as first lieutenant.

“From time to time during our training period quite a deal of confusion and uncertainty arose among the cadets, due to various rumors as to what was being done with the

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officers after they completed their training. The school in the first instance was to run three months, but just a week before the school was supposed to close a riot occurred in Brownsville, Texas, in which colored troops from the 24th Infantry participated. These troops had been abused by prejudiced white citizens of Brownsville and were so aroused by the unfair treatment accorded them that they went to their barracks and got service rifles and shot up the town. This incident caused the War Department to defer commissioning of colored officers at that time and so we were kept in training for another month.

“Among those who investigated the riot was Sergeant Holland who had been non-commissioned officer in charge of Company 7 to which I was attached. Sergeant Holland was one of the brightest non-commissioned officers at that time in the army. He had been quarter-master sergeant for a long time and knew the supply business exceedingly well. At no time during the 18 months that I served with Sergeant Holland was his company without adequate food and clothes even when in the front lines. Sergeant Holland is now at the Veterans Facility at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, where he still has charge of quarter-master supplies.

“Finally, at the end of our training we were given two weeks' absence and then ordered to report to one of the cantonments for duty. The various 8 captains selected their officers at the camp and I was quite surprised when I was selected by Captain Holland. I hadn't thought that I had made the kind of impression that would make him want me as an officer in his company.

“The regiment to which I was attached was ordered to train at Camp Dodge, which was located just a few miles from Des Moines, Iowa. This camp was the home of the 38th Division.

“The winter of 1917-18 was spent in training raw recruits for combat service and for special training in the use of certain arms, and the officers took turns in attending the school for

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machine gunners, while highly technical problems were worked out in connection with theory of fire arms. This winter was a very severe one, and in the course of the winter I contracted tonsillitis which caused an impairment of my hearing which has persisted ever since.”

It is very difficult to talk with Mr. Henry, for one ordinarily feels he has to shout to make himself heard, but it is not true in his case, for he watches the lips very closely and thus readily understands, and so I found myself trying one minute to tone down my voice and the next minute shouting.

It was late in the evening, about 9:30 o'clock, and it seemed that Mr. Howe had planned previously to end his talk with me by asking me to do some work for his benefit. He looked at his watch and said, “Well, its 8:30 and I have some documents I have to get out for court in the morning. Will you type them for me, please?” As tired as I was, I could not very well refuse his request, for I had taken quite a deal of his time and, too, he had it all figured out by saying, “This is my bread and meat and your getting my story is yours, so you help me and I'll help you.” I put aside my pad and told him I'd do the document. He explained that he didn't have a regular secretary but he hoped to in the near future. I was very tired, as I had carried my work over into the night, hoping to get the entire interview. I consoled myself, however, by saying, “This is my good deed for the day.”

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The document he gave me was a petition to a superior court judge by one of his clients who was getting permission to sell some real estate to her husband. He gave me a book and turned to a page where a similar document was printed so I could see just how it was to be formed, as I told him I knew nothing at all about forming law documents. I will write out an example of one of the documents on a separate sheet, for it isn't every day one has an opportunity to get the inside of procedures of law. Well, I did the work in an hour and he was quite pleased over his evening's work. He asked me to return the next day to complete my interview with him.

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“It was thought that if I had remained in the United States and taken regular treatment for the trouble with my hearing that it would have been cured but, due to the scarcity of officers, I was sent along with the others to France, where the rain and cold aggravated the trouble and left me permanently impaired.

“After I got to France and had undergone the general training period, our regiment was sent to a so-called quiet sector in the Vosges Mountains. It was customary to send out patrols into No Man's Land each night, and because of my impaired hearing I was unable to take my turn and for this reason I was relieved from combat duty so that an officer could be put in my place who could take his turn. This move lessened the amount of danger to which I would have been exposed a great deal. I was assigned as company commander of the labor company which furnished work details for a veterinary hospital that furnished first aid to horses. This work was quite life because the hospital was situated some distance behind the front lines and life in the villages went on with ordinary routine, except that no lights were allowed to be shown at night and we were constantly on the alert for air raids.

“The armistice, on November 11, 1919, brought relief to all our minds and it also brought the problem as to just what we would do after we returned to 10 civilian life. After being discharged we all were sent back to the good old U. S. A.

“After being discharged, the Standard Life Insurance Company, for whom I was working at the time I entered the army, through its secretary, Harry H. Pace, offered me a position as attorney in the real estate and mortgage loan department. My service was to begin just as soon as I could qualify for some.

“With this commitment I was able to procure from the Government Rehabilitation Department first a course in lip reading, followed by a course in law. The lip reading was done in the Nitchie Lip Reading School in New York, while the law course was completed at Brooklyn Law School.

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“Immediately after graduation I started my duties with the Standard Life Insurance Company, which was then affiliated with the Service Company and other organizations under an interlocking board of directors. These organizations had grown very rapidly, in fact so rapidly that the personnel of the companies couldn't keep their records space with the growing concern. There was such work to be done in the department that I went in, seeing that all of the proper papers in connection with the purchase and mortgage of estates were in the files. I had to work hard and, by working overtime and on Sundays, in the course of six months I was able to put my department in very good order. However, the fact that the records were not up to date caused a great deal of confusion. Certain financial companies in Atlanta and Nashville, Tennessee, censured this situation, connived with the insurance department of the State, and, through political pressure and otherwise, obtained control of the Standard Life Insurance Company and the other companies associated with it. The insurance company was first taken over by the Southern Insurance Company of Nashville, and then the following year by the Standard Life Insurance of Arkansas. It was finally taken over by the National Benefit Insurance Company.

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The contents of the document follow:

Georgia, Fulton County, Oct. 1939.

To the Judge of Superior Court.

The petitioner, Geraldine Waller, respectfully shows:

1st. That she is a resident of said county.

2nd. That petitioner is the wife of F. M. Waller.

3rd. That the petitioner owns as a part of her separate estate the following described property, to wit,

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(The description was taken from the deeds to property).

4th. That your petitioner desires to sell and her husband, the said F. M. Waller, desires to purchase the said above described property.

5th. That the reasonable value of said property is \$1000.00. which the said F. M. Waller has agreed to pay to your petitioner and which your petitioner has agreed to accept.

Wherefore, the promises considered, an order authorising and allowing her to sell the above described property to her husband, P. M. filler, is prayed.

Petitioner's Attorney.

At Chambers.

Atlanta, Georgia, Oct. 11, 1939.

After reading the above, and foregoing petition having been presented to me and after hearing evidence as to its value, it to considered, ordered and adjudged that the petitioner, Geraldine Waller, be allowed and to hereby authorized to sell the properly hereinafter described to her husband. F. M. Waller. for the sum of \$1000.00.

(Description of property) Judge of Superior Court,

“Now after you have done that document I'd like you do two affidavits for the real estate agents and notary public to sign.