Henry Blackman Sell and the Leckie Family

Franklin P. Mason II

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by Franklin P. Mason II, Winter 2020

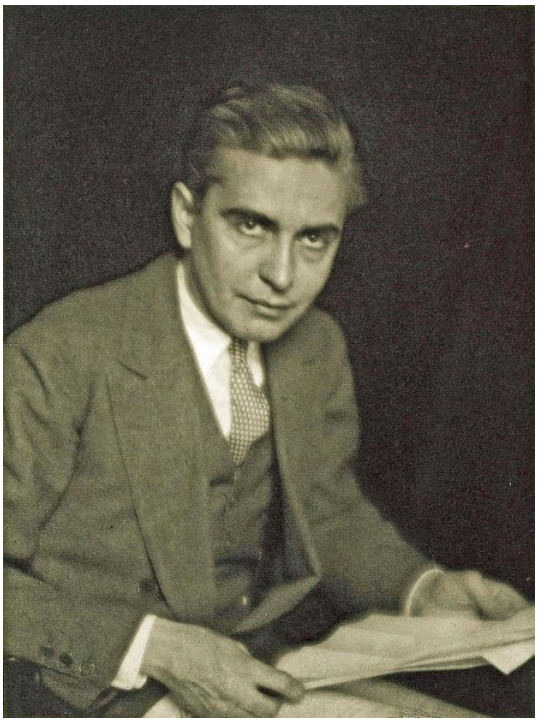
Henry Blackman Sell was a great man, and he had a great heart. In one way or another, he touched the lives of every member of the Leckie family: Sophia Leckie and her six children—Bessie, Jennie, Bill, Johnny, Agnes, and Jimmy.[1] [2]

Henry Sell was born in Wisconsin, but he was descended from some of the first English and Dutch families to settle in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey. [3]

Henry Sell was born in 1889. Therefore, he was well established by the mid 1930's, when he became associated with the Leckies. In fact, he was *very* well established: He had been a newspaper editor and a magazine editor, and he had his own, successful advertising agency.

So how did Henry Sell meet the Leckies?

The first Leckie who Henry Sell met was Janet (Jennie) Leckie. Jennie moved to New York City in early 1935, in the depths of the Great Depression. Jennie was intensely intelligent, and she had a bachelor's degree. In addition, she was young (27) and attractive. But in 1935 times were tough, so she took the best job she could find. And that job would transform her life, as well as the lives of her entire family! The job she found was as a dance teacher at an Arthur Murray dance studio.[4]



[1] Every member except for John Taylor Leckie, Sr.

[2] For a history of the Leckie family, refer to the essay "Our Leckie / Irvine Grandparents", Franklin P. Mason II, 2020".

[3] It is strange to tell, but Henry Blackman Sell is a cousin (several times over) of Willard F. Mason, husband of Agnes A. Leckie Mason. No one knew of this relationship until 2020 when it was discovered by the author of this essay, who is thus also a cousin of Mr. Sell. What a happy circumstance! Refer to the essay "The History behind the Blood Relationship between Henry Blackman Sell and Franklin Pierce Mason II".

[4] Arthur Murray had opened his first dance studio in NYC in 1923 on 43rd Street.

Henry Blackman Sell in 1925 Janet Thompson Leckie in about 1940

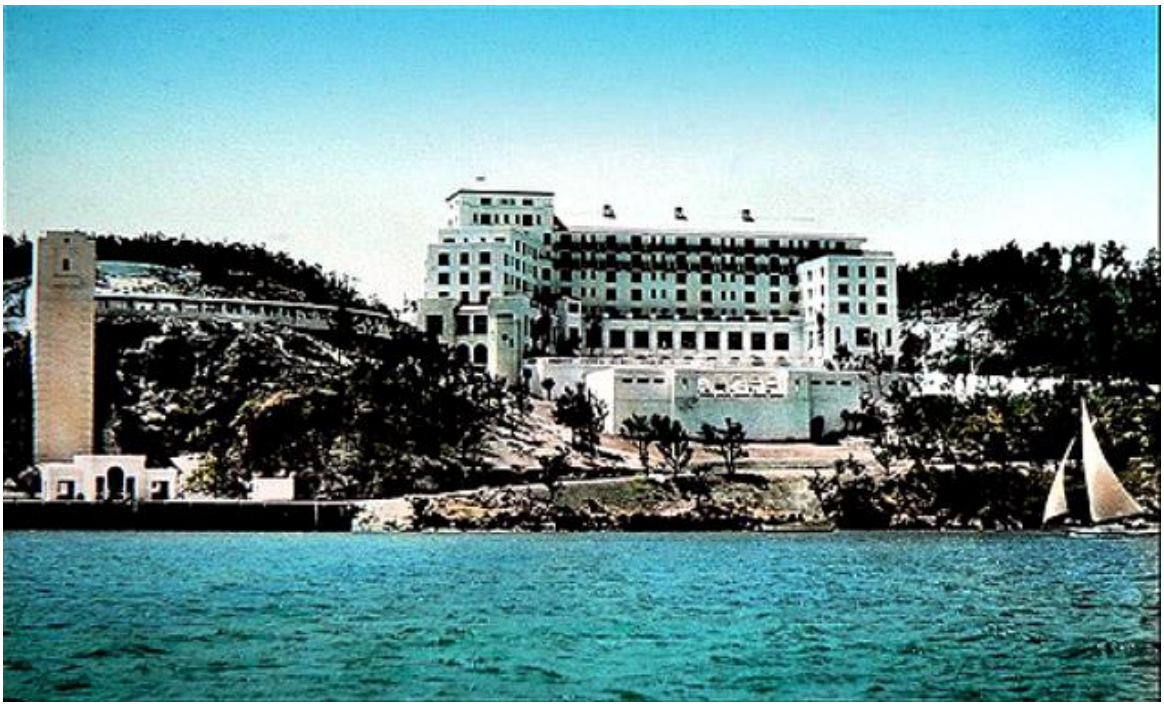
Henry Sell, editor of "top flight social and fashion magazines", advertising executive, and bon vivant (in the best sense of the phrase), knew everyone, including Arthur Murray. Henry Sell had been associated with Arthur Murray since, at least, 1932. Mr. Sell and his wife, Ann, had even taken dance lessons at Arthur Murray's dance studio in 1932, and Ann Sell had become quite an accomplished Tango dancer.

"Mr. Sell had something of flair for attracting what nowadays are called 'the beautiful people', and he was retained in the Depression to fill the large public rooms of the then new Waldorf-Astoria and other hotels with attractive persons."[5]

Because of these proven abilities, Mr. Sell was chosen to do the advertising and promotion for a new, luxurious hotel in Bermuda called the Castle Harbor Hotel. The hotel opened on 01 November 1932. However, Mr. Sell was in Bermuda as early as December of 1931, while the hotel was still under construction, laying the groundwork for the grand opening to be held almost a year later.

Map showing the location of Bermuda, about 775 miles from New York City (and about 3500 miles from London or from Paris)

[5] New York Times obituary, October 25, 1974, p. 42



Castle Harbor Hotel about 1932

To be successful as a new, destination hotel, the hotel needed to be popular with people who could afford to go there. Therefore, the hotel needed to *seem* to be popular from the very beginning. That is, the rooms needed to be full, and the evening's entertainment needed to be well attended and to be enjoyably, even exciting. Mr. Sell had various ways of achieving those goals, one of which was to *hire* people to be in attendance and to enjoy themselves.[6]

Some of the people Mr. Sell hired were teachers from Arthur Murray's dance studio in New York City. "A feature of these [hotel] galas was the dancing of the cream of Arthur Murray teachers—young, and as gracious as they were graceful."[7,8]

Jennie was, almost certainly, one of those gracious and graceful people, because she was a frequent visitor to Bermuda. Jennie traveled there as early as August of 1935, shortly after being hired as a dance teacher.

Mr. Sell began to visit Bermuda in 1931, and he continued to do so until, perhaps, 1936. When he went to Bermuda, Mr. Sell usually took the ship *Monarch of Bermuda*. Jennie's first trip to Bermuda was in 1935.[9] When Jennie went to Bermuda, she also took passage on that ship, but she also traveled on the *Monarch*'s sister ship, the *Queen of Bermuda*. Both ships were both built in 1931, and in their heyday, they were both true luxury liners.[10]

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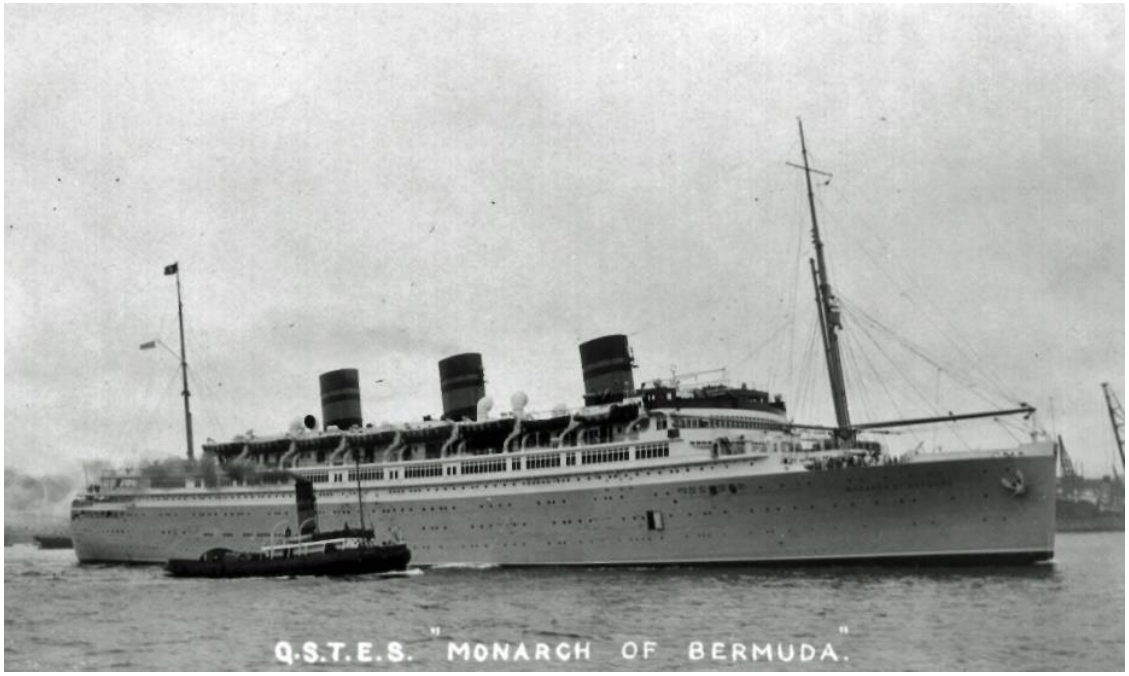
[6] By using this ploy, Mr. Sell turned a potential disaster into a smashing success. The Castle Harbor Hotel, which was in the middle of nowhere, opened at the height of the Great Depression, and it succeeded well beyond anyone's expectation!

[7] *A Talent for Living, The Story of Henry Sell, An American Original*, Janet Leckie, 1970, Hawthorne Books, Inc., p. 141.

[8] The order of events is not clear. That is, it is unclear whether Mr. Sell employed Arthur Murray's dance teachers first at the Waldorf-Astoria or first at the Castle Harbor Hotel. None-the-less, this ploy was used in both places, and it worked very well in both places.

[9] For more information on all of the travels of the Leckie family to Bermuda, refer to the essay "Our Leckie / Irvine Grandparents", Franklin P. Mason II 2020.

[10] Totally coincidentally, the Queen of Bermuda was sold to the Greek Line in 1958, and she was renamed the *Q.S.S. Arkadia*. In 1963, the *Q.S.S. Arkadia* was engaged in the Bremerhaven-Quebec-Montreal service (however, at that time,



The ship *Monarch of Bermuda* about 1931

So, Mr. Sell and Jennie met, either in NYC (at the dance studio) or in Bermuda (at one of the galas). They met because she was who she was and because she was employed as a teacher by Arthur Murray's dance studio. The rest, as they say, is history.

Shortly after they met, Jennie went to work full time for Mr. Sell. This was the beginning of a collaboration that would last for the rest of their lives.

Jennie's first major project with Mr. Sell was Vitamins *Plus*.[11]

In 1936, Henry Sell was asked to look into promoting "something that had been named 'vitamines'. Knowing little about them, Sell had told the client some research would be necessary before giving an answer and proceeded to hire a small group of college graduates to visit universities where work on vitamines was going on."[12]

Heading up the research team were Jennie and a second Leckie, William (Bill) Leckie. By the time the beginning research was complete, Mr. Sell, Jennie, and Bill were so enthusiastic about the potential of vitamins in human health, and as a business opportunity, that they decided to start a vitamin company of their own. After a year of intensive work, they had created a company, produced a product, and named it Vitamins *Plus*. It was the first vitamin-mineral product to be sold directly to the public.

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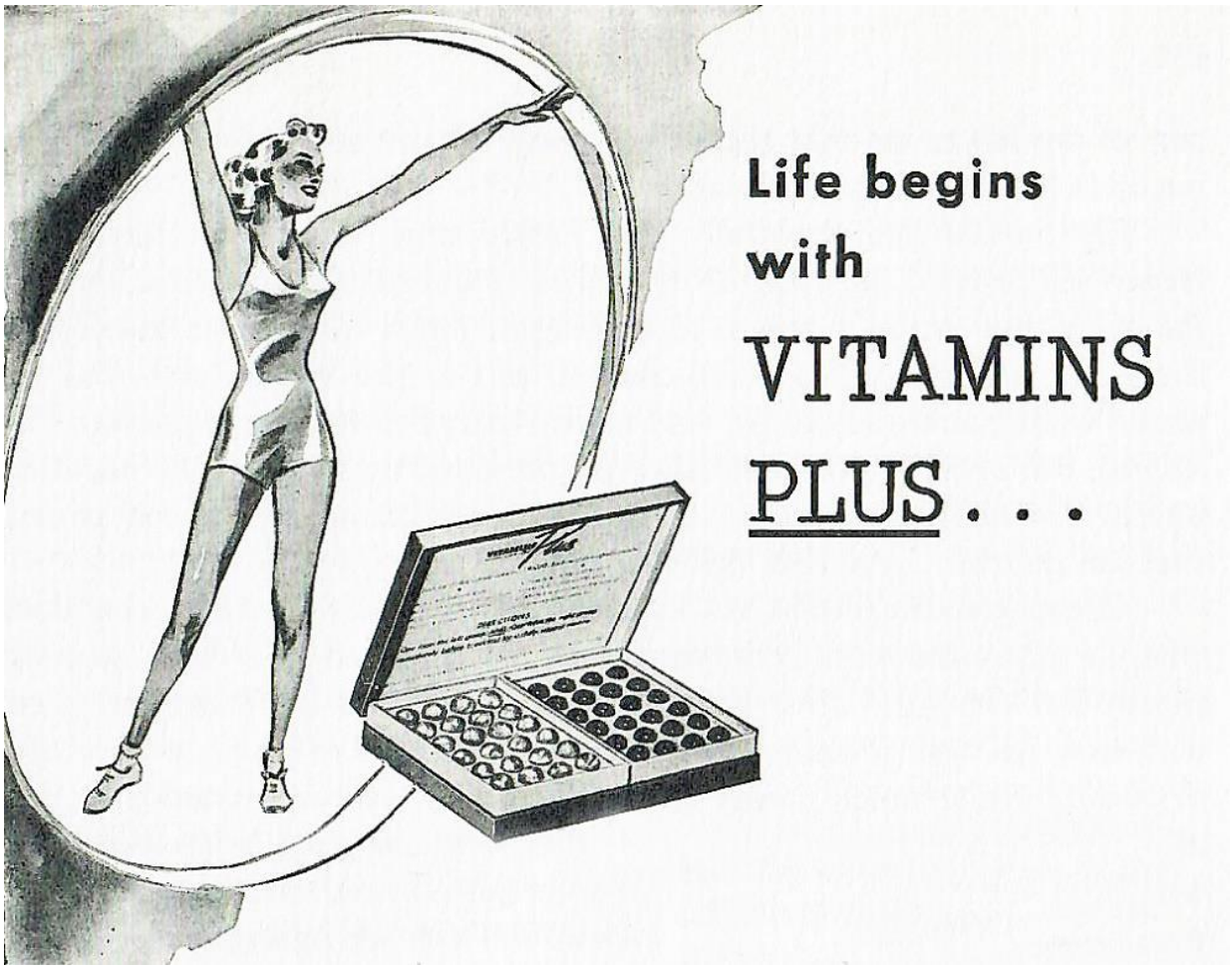
she was not quite the luxury ship she had been in the 1930s). And in 1963, *I*, the author, traveled on the *Q.S.S. Arkadia* from Montreal to Bremerhaven on my way to Münster, Germany for my Kalamazoo College study abroad experience!!!

[11] Refer to the essay *The Story of Vitamins* Plus, *1936 to 1940*, Franklin P. Mason II, 2020.

[12] *A Talent for Living, The Story of Henry Sell, An American Original*, p. 183.



Vitamins *Plus* advertisement (detail) from 1937

Thus, the principal players in the development and sales of Vitamins *Plus* were Mr. Sell, Jennie, and Bill. For four years—from 1936 to 1940—those three lived, breathed and dreamed Vitamins *Plus*.

However, additional Leckies also got into the act. For example, Elizabeth (Bessie or Betty) Leckie Peck became a principal in-store sales associate. Mr. Sell had arranged with Bernard Gimble (the owner of Gimbles Department Store in Midtown Manhattan and an old friend of Mr. Sell's) to set up a free-standing booth at the intersection of two busy aisles in the cosmetics department. Bessie manned the booth. But, perhaps, more importantly, she trained the Gimbles salesgirls on how to promote and sell the product with confidence. Bessie, because of her direct dealing with customers, was also able to develop sales materials that were used in other stores across the country.

Two additional Leckies—John (Johnny) Leckie and James (Jimmy) Leckie—also joined the Vitamins *Plus* company as salesmen. The 1940 U.S. Census shows the following: Jennie was listed as "Executive, Vitamins", Bill was "Manager, Vitamins", Johnny was "Sales Manager, Vitamins", and Jimmy was "Salesman, Vitamins".

So, by 1940 all the Leckie siblings (except for Agnes, on whom, more later) were in Henry Sell's immediate circle.

Henry Sell and Vitamins *Plus* transformed the lives of the Leckie family. Before that association, Sophia and three of her children—Jennie, Bill, and Johnny—were living together at 62-30 Saunders

Street in Rego Park (Queens).[13] As was mentioned, times were tough. Thus, they were having a hard time making it financially.

Vitamins *Plus* was a very successful company. Therefore, due to their association with Mr. Sell and the company, the Leckies were also very successful. For example, by 1940, the family had moved to 14 Sutton Place South, which was (and is) quite a fashionable address in mid-town Manhattan, close to the East River.

From that time on, Jennie was Mr. Sell's right-hand man and close business associate. Therefore, she had a well-paid, stable job until she retired in 1970.[14]

By 1942, the Leckie children had gone their own ways from Sophia's home. As has been mentioned, Bessie and Agnes were already married and living with their own families. Bill and Johnny and Jimmy had joined the U.S. Armed Services to fight in World War II, Bill in the Navy, Johnny in the Army, and Jimmy in the Marines.

However, Jennie remained living with Sophia (or rather now, Sophia continued living with Jennie) until Sophia's death in 1958.

[13] Bessie was married and living with her husband, Kenneth Peck, on Long Island. Agnes was also married and was living with her husband, Willard Mason, in Ossining, New York. Jimmy was away at college (Duke University) from 1935 to 1939.

[14] The next major undertaking of Mr. Sell and Jennie was Sell's Specialties, with the first of many products being Sell's Liver *Pâté*. Refer to the essay "The Saga of Sell's Liver *Pâté"*, Franklin P. Mason II, 2020. And for the entire story of their association, refer to *A Talent for Living, The Story of Henry Sell, An American Original*.

Thus far, this essay has discussed the importance of Henry Sell in the lives of Sophia Leckie and in the lives of five of the six Leckie children. However, Mr. Sell had a deep and affectionate relationship with the sixth Leckie child—Agnes Leckie Mason—as well.

The relationship between Agnes and Mr. Sell must have begun at a similar time as the Vitamins *Plus* project, in the late 1930s. It seems it was firmly established by 1942 because, beginning about then, at Christmas time, Mr. Sell gave each of Agnes' children a winter coat and hat as a present.

Children of Agnes Leckie Mason wearing the coats and hats given to them at Christmas by Henry Sell.
Left: 1942, Willard L. Mason; Right: 1944, Janet T. Mason, Franklin P. Mason, and Willard L. Mason

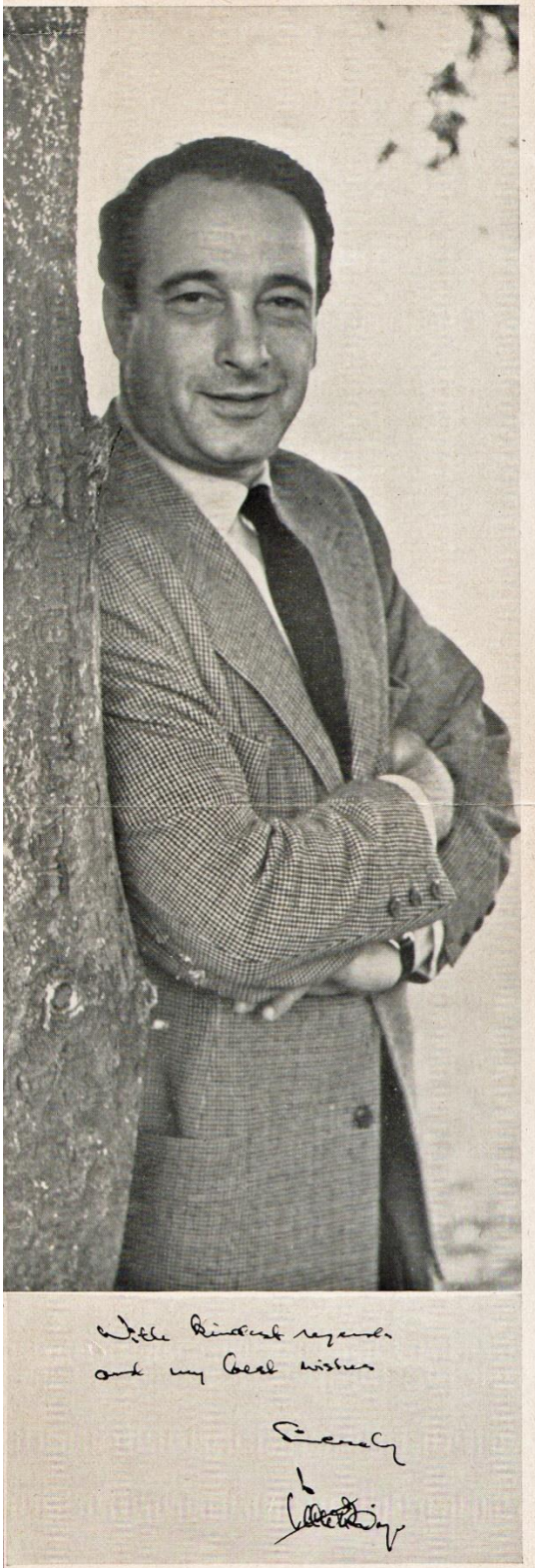
As with all the Leckie children, Agnes was born, and graduated from high school, in Cleveland. Then, from 1932 to 1935, she attended Barnard College in New York City on a full scholarship. Thus, she was the first of the Leckies to move to NYC.

After attending Barnard, Agnes continued[15] to live in the City, and one of her jobs there was at the Coney Island Amusement Park. Somewhere along the way, she had learned the skill and art of handwriting analysis. And that is what she did as a job at Coney Island.

That talent was to prove to be very valuable. Mr. Sell became Editor of *Town & Country* magazine in 1949. And he would not hire anyone at the magazine without having his/her character analyzed by Agnes by using handwriting analysis! (A little know trick of the trade by Mr. Sell.)

Mr. Sell believed in handwriting analysis so strongly he had Agnes do analyses of famous people for publication in Town & Country. One such analysis, that for Victor Borge, is shown below.

[15] After a year of teaching in the South of the USA.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR VICTOR !

There are unique personalities, much in the public eye, about whom there is a wide difference of opinion. You, Victor Borge—musician, comedian, wit, and friend—are such a one. So, as a Happy Birthday gift we have asked AGNES MASON *to prepare for you this brief character sketch, based on the projective technique of handwriting analysis.*

VICTOR BORGE, you are a sensitive, versatile man with a warm heart and a keen mind. The almost limitless variation in the size and shape of the letters shows that you have a complex and involved personality. It also reveals that you are full of contrasts and contradictions; that it is difficult to understand the intricacies of your character.

In contrast with the small height of the letters, the words are extended along the lines, and the connecting strokes are large and curved. By these and other signs we know that you are sociable, responsive, adaptable, and that approval of others is important to you.

Your signature, which is completely illegible, shows that you would like to wrap yourself in a cloak of mystery; to be aloof, formal, restrained. This concern for appearances seldom lasts long, however, for there are no indications in your writing of snobbery or social conceit. Instead, you think of yourself as a plain, ordinary fellow, and when you relax completely this is the way you act—no airs, no furbelows, no flourishes.

But you really are not a plain, ordinary fellow. In spite of your adaptable, easygoing nature, you are blessed with an imagination that will not be bound. Things pop into your head, apparently from nowhere. As a result, you have spurts of impulsive activity, quite out of character with your usual quiet, poised self.

The words and the lines in your handwriting are well separated, a sign that you have the ability for clear, straight thinking. This characteristic, combined with creative imagination, is a clue to your unique personality. It is unusual to find combined in one handwriting both brilliance of mind and friendliness and interest in others.

The many fluctuations in height, width, and slant in your writing, show that you have exceptional sensibilities. In combination with the firm, heavy pressure which reveals energy and vitality, these indicate that you are open to experience and are very responsive to emotional stimuli. As a consequence, although usually outgoing and accessible, you are at times removed and unapproachable.

It is interesting to note that in spite of the ambition and possessiveness revealed in some details of your writing, the sign for materialism—large lower loops—is completely missing. The exceptionally abbreviated lower zone shows that while you like to live graciously, physical comforts and the satisfaction of appetites are not especially important to you. All the rhythmic and artistic forms concentrated in the upper third of the writing space indicate the intellectual and aesthetic interests which accompany your active and fertile imagination. The soft, round loops on the small letters show that your imagination is playful and fanciful, but the impulsive thrusts in the writing warn us that it is also quixotic.

Your theatrical success, including the hilarious effect your performance has on audiences, is probably a source of amazement to you. But you will undoubtedly be able to go on endlessly producing new material because, in a sense, you aren't acting at all. You are just being yourself, or more accurately, your two selves: the quiet, poised one and the imaginative, impulsive one. The circle "i" dots are an example of the attempt to bridge the gap between these divergent sides of your personality by adopting mannerisms and artifices which, though they have no deep relationship to your real nature, are useful in your performances. If one who knew you only as a neighbor got together with someone who knew you only in your professional capacity, the two might have difficulty in coming to an agreement as to what your personality and character *really* were. They could end up wondering if they were talking about the same person.

Reprinted from the January, 1954, issue of TOWN & COUNTRY

Handwriting analysis for Victor Borge: an article written by Agnes Leckie Mason that was published in *Town & Country* magazine in January 1954

Mr. Sell used to dine frequently at the Plaza Hotel. In the early 1950s, upon occasion (and more than once), Mr. Sell invited Agnes and all her children to join him at the Plaza for afternoon tea. At that time, Agnes lived in Westport, Connecticut, which is just an hour's train ride from the City. In 1953, Agnes had five children ranging in age from 13 years to 1 year of age. So, to join Mr. Sell, she would dress the children in their Sunday best, trundle them down to the train station in Westport, take the train to Grand Central Station, then take a taxi to the Plaza. Mr. Sell would meet the entourage at the door and then usher them into the Palm Court for tea. (Can you imagine a well-established, high-paid executive taking the time to invite a friend and her children to accompany him to tea at the Plaza? Well, Mr. Sell did just that, and he did it with aplomb!)

During one of these excursions to the Plaza, just as a friend, Agnes told Mr. Sell about an idea she was working on and was enthusiastic about. From 1948 into the mid-1950s Agnes was very active in the Nursery and Kindergarten Department at the Saugatuck Congregational Church in Westport. As such, she had developed some songs for the children in her Sunday school classes, and she was thinking about sharing them in some form with a wider audience.

Well, it turned out that Mr. Sell liked the idea. The result of this small conversation was the publication of the songs in a book released by Random House and New American Library (two of the largest publishing houses at that time). The story, as described by Agnes, is as follows:[16]

> For many years I have felt the need for more songs about God and His world which were suitable, and understandable to young children. I eagerly searched through everything that I could find, such as religious magazines and pamphlets, primary hymnals, and songbooks, old and new. Occasionally I would find a gem like "The Wonder Song," which was printed in a pamphlet which I received at a family night supper at the church. Whenever I made such a find I was delighted. Unfortunately, this did not happen very often.
>
> But gradually I was able to collect about fifty songs and hymns which I liked, because I felt that they were understandable to young children. I taught these songs to the children in the Nursery and Kindergarten Department of the Saugatuck Congregational Church, and found they liked them too.
>
> Once a month I sent home the words of the songs so that the mothers could help the children learn them. I hoped, also, that the mothers would sing these songs with their children. I, myself, have always sung a great deal with my own five children, and so I know what a rewarding experience this can be. I put the songs in colored paper folders, decorated them with a sticker, and addressed them to the children themselves. The children were always pleased to receive this piece of mail every month, and the mothers were glad to be kept up to date as to what songs the children were learning. Many of the mothers told me that they wished they had the music, too, because the tunes sung by the little ones when they got home often bore no resemblance to the times they had been taught. Some of the mothers were unable, from their own childhood, to remember even such familiar tunes as the one to "Jesus Loves Me".
>
> When I discussed this situation with ministers and teachers from other Sunday Schools, I found that they, too, were faced with the same problems. One of these ministers said to me, "If you ever put this collection into a book, let me know. I want to buy one for our Sunday School. We need it."
>
> My first thought was to mimeograph these songs for use in our Sunday School and by the mothers at home. While having tea with my friend Henry Sell at the Plaza, I mentioned this

[16] *God's Wonderful World*, Agnes Leckie Mason and Phyllis Brown Ohanian, 1954, Random House, New York, pp. XIII-XIV.

project and in competition with the orchestra, sang him a few of the songs—with motions. He thought it was material for a book and suggested that I put it in publishable form and let him see it.

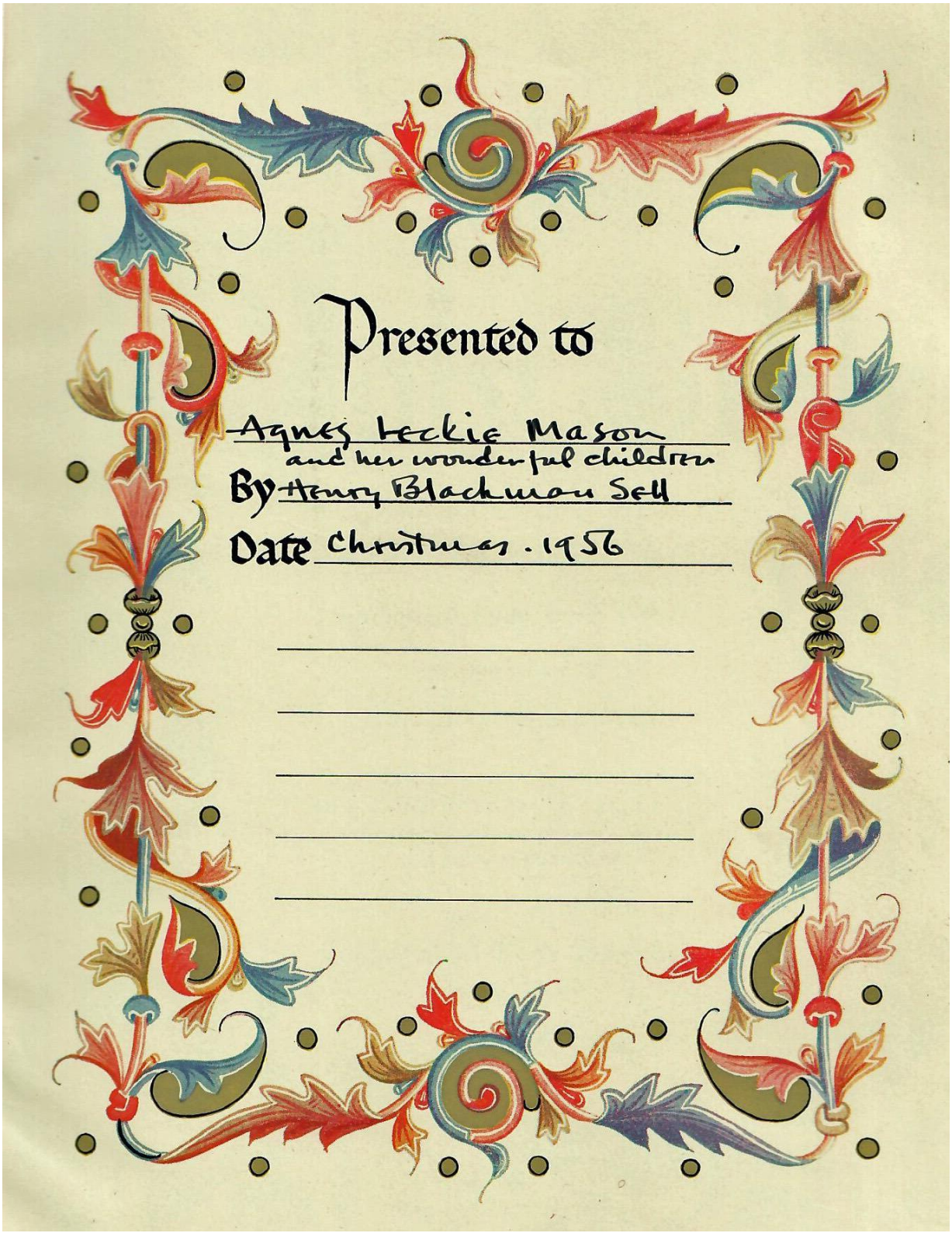
The very next day I called my friend, Phyllis Ohanian, and asked her if she would be interested in writing the piano arrangements for me. She was not only interested, but enthusiastic. I knew she was already acquainted with the problem of the lack of religious songs for younger children, because we had often discussed it when she was church organist, and I was leader of the Nursery and Kindergarten Department. At that time, she suggested some songs which we were able to use and made arrangements for a number of songs which I had composed. When Phyllis Ohanian and I began to analyze the material which I had collected, we found that there were many subjects for which we had no songs. Also, we thought that we could improve on some of those which I had been teaching the children. Even in these, a few of the words were too abstract; they were not related to feelings and events that were familiar to young children.

When about a hundred of the songs were in finished form, I showed the book to Wyatt Jones, our religious adviser. He told me that vacation Bible Schools and weekday religious classes were also in need of new songs. This information greatly expanded my thinking as to subject matter.

Now the collection is almost three times its original size. I believe that mothers and teachers will find in this book at least one song which touches on every religious concept which young children are capable of experiencing and understanding, as well as many songs which will help open their eyes, hearts and minds to the wonders of God's world.

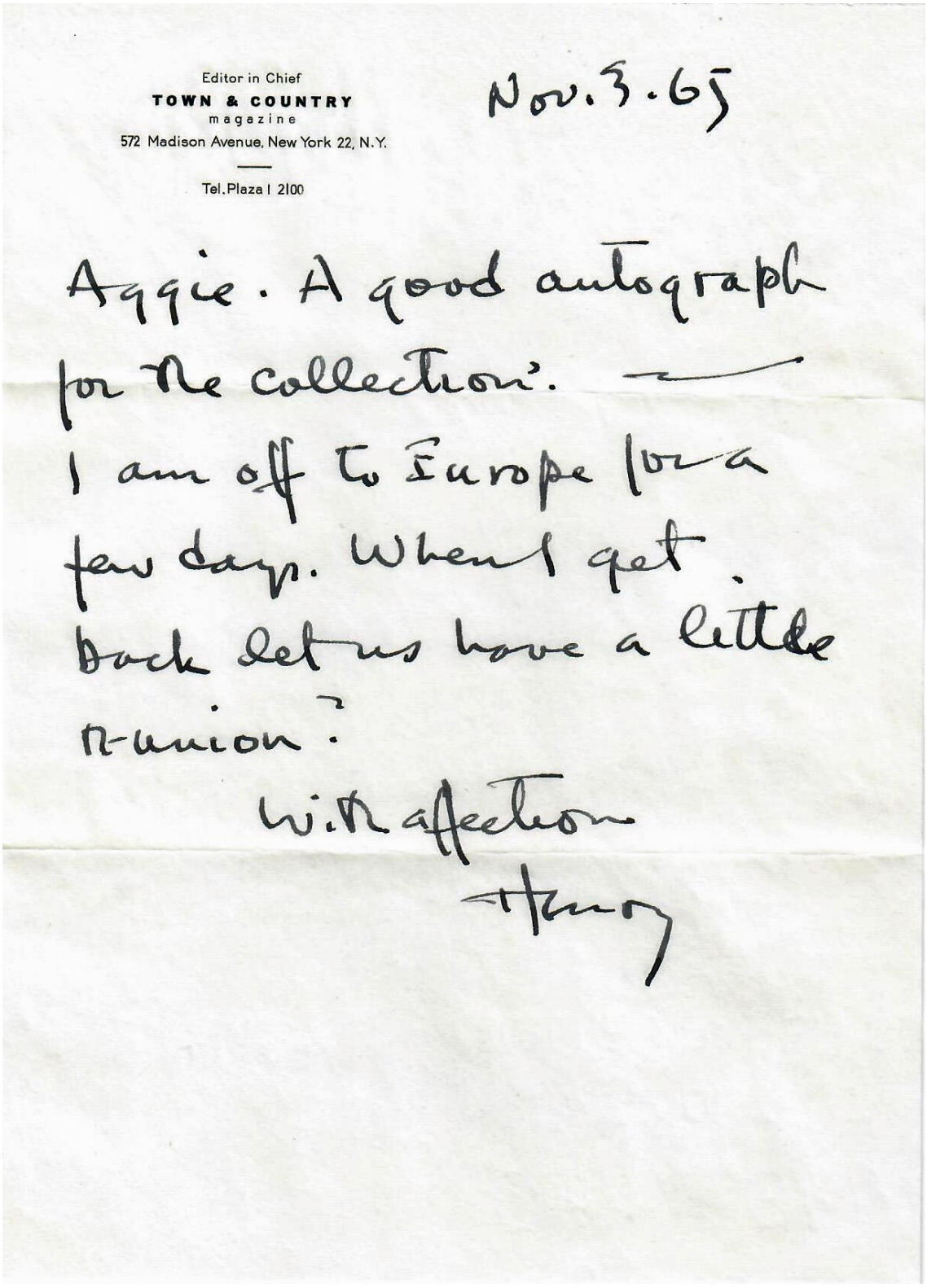
Thus, Mr. Sell was the catalyst for one of the most exciting and fulfilling times in Agnes' life! This is just one example of how he expressed his affection and care for the Leckie family. And with Mr. Sell, it was always so genuine and effortless.

The relationship between Mr. Sell and Agnes continued throughout the remainder of Mr. Sell's life. For example, in 1956, at Christmas time, Mr. Sell sent Agnes a present of a Bible, which he inscribed to her.



Presentation page of the Bible given to Agnes by Mr. Sell, Christmas 1956

And in 1965, Mr. Sell dashed off a little note to Agnes, as one friend to another, indicating that he would like to see her again soon.



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TOWN & COUNTRY
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572 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N.Y.

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Nov. 3. 65

Aggie. A good autograph for the collection.

I am off to Europe for a few days. When I get back let us have a little reunion.

With affection

Henry

Note from Mr. Sell to Agnes, November 1965

In 1970, when M. Sell was 80 years of age, Jennie published a book on the life of Henry B. Sell. Mr. Sell again expressed his affection for Agnes by having a little anecdote on *God's Wonderful World*, and a picture of Agnes and her children, included in his biography:[17]

On their Christmas card that year Lila and DeWitt Wallace, of the *Reader's Digest*, wrote a little note to Henry, asking if he had any new careers. Replied he: "If they can be called careers I cannot say, but new projects are plentiful." Among those he reported to the Wallaces was a songbook by my sister, Agnes Mason. Called *God's Wonderful World*, it is made up of enchanting songs Agnes had written for her own children and for her Sunday-school classes. Henry Sell showed it to Victor Weybright, who agreed to publish the paperback edition in the New American Library and to find a publisher for the hard-cover version. At a Christmas Eve party in his home, Victor and his guests began to play the little tunes on the piano; finally everyone was singing along. Someone in the group suggested it would be a perfect Random House book because they would illustrate it so beautifully. Bennett Cerf was in Hollywood that evening, but Victor got on the telephone to him, the whole group sang the songs, and, sight unseen, Bennett agreed to publish the book.

Agnes Mason and her children. Henry sponsored her book of songs for children, *God's Wonderful World*, published by Random House in 1963 (*Photo courtesy of Russell O. Kuhner*).

Text and picture from *A Talent for Living, The Story of Henry Sell, An American Original.* The picture is of Agnes Leckie Mason with her children (Genevieve, James, David, Franklin, and Janet), which was given to Henry Sell upon the publication, in 1954, of Agnes' song book, *God's Wonderful World.*

[17] *A Talent for Living, The Story of Henry Sell, An American Original*, Janet Leckie, 1970, Hawthorne Books, Inc., pp. 235-236.

At one point in the late 1950s, Agnes tried her hand at watercolors. One of the paintings she did was of the Mercier's (back neighbor's) crabapple tree, which had an exceptionally lovely shape. Agnes gave the picture of this tree that she had painted, to Mr. Sell. In his characteristically generous nature, he had the picture framed[18] and he returned it to the artist. Agnes treasured the framed picture for the rest of her days.

Crabapple Tree by Agnes Leckie Mason, *ca.* 1958. Frame provided by Henry Sell and framed by A. I. Freeman of 20 East 49th Street, Manhattan, New York.

18 Mr. Sell had the picture framed by A. I. Friedman, Inc. of 20 East 49th Street in midtown Manhattan. At that time, A. I. Friedman, Inc. was one of the largest independent dealers in art materials, graphic art supply, and office products. A. I. Freidman, Inc. was established in about 1929 at its original location of 20 East 49th Street. In 1991, the store was relocated to 44 West 18th Street, when the rent in midtown skyrocketed. Unfortunately, Friedman closed its Manhattan location in 2017.

In 1941, Mr. Sell, with the help of Jennie, founded Sell's Specialties Company, Inc., a company that produced nutritious canned meat products. The company was sold to William Underwood Company in 1960. However, during the 1940s through 1960, Agnes and her family enjoyed an infinite supply of Sell's Specialties products provided by Mr. Sell and Jennie. Sells Liver *Pâté* was the first product and the star of the line. But there were many more products that the Mason family enjoyed including Corned Beef Loaf, Corned Beef Hash, Braised Beef in Gravy, Beef Stew, Deviled Ham *Pâté*, whole canned turkeys, and the very special and rare Sell's *Pâté de Foie Gras* and the even rarer *Pâté de Foie Gras* with Truffles.

By the way, Sells Liver *Pâté* is still available as of this writing in 2020. And the author, who had his first taste of this wonderful product in about 1945, at age 3 years, still enjoys it frequently to this day.