



And he had fun

By NORTON MOCKRIDGE

Henry Blackman Sell died the other day at the age of 84 and the obits dutifully listed many of his achievements, editor of Harper's Bazaar, head of an advertising agency, editor of Town & Country, developer of Vitamin Plus, and the originator of Sell's Liver Pate, and so on.

But nowhere in the staid accounts of his life did I see any mention of the FUN he had throughout his long and extremely diversified career. And that's a shame because, after all, that's what Henry lived for! He was a champagne cocktail and lobster man, and he quit every project when it became successful so he could go on to something more exciting and challenging.

Had you known Henry as a boy, you'd have given up on him. Everybody else did. He never passed a school examination, for instance, and even though he went to high school for five years, he never graduated.

This distressed his family—his father was the Rev. Dr. Henry Thorne Sell, the highly respected author of "Sell's Bible Study Text Books"—but it didn't bother li'l ole Henry. He went out and got jobs as a newspaper reporter and rapidly advanced to the position of gypsy editor of the Indianapolis Star. It was while writing about gypsies that he met a dark-eyed sorceress named Zenora. She looked in her crystal ball and told Henry he was "failure proof." He believed her, and he went out and showed it.

He bought and operated a couple of movie houses. Then he became a glove salesman, free-lance writer, advertising salesman, theatrical press agent, Chicago opera super, interior decorator, book writer, furniture salesman, newspaper book critic, public relations man, advertising copywriter,

wine salesman, magazine editor, vitamins manufacturer, and meat, poultry, and pate packager.

He blithely danced his way through this odd assortment of jobs as easily as Fred Astaire tapping through an MGM movie, and he had fun every minute. When he was doing advertising for the Church toilet seat, for instance, he created the slogan, "The Best Seat in the House." It sold more seats in one year than in the preceding 10.

When he accepted the job as editor of Harper's, he said he'd done it because it was the job for which he had the fewest qualifications. In fact, he'd never even read a single copy of the magazine.

A physical culture nut, he daily gulped an assortment of vitamin pills, yeast cakes, and wheat-germ oil. Every day he upended himself for 15 minutes on an inclining board, every week he walked 20 miles (measured by a pedometer lashed to his ankle), and once a week he went to the gym and let Philadelphia Jack O'Brien teach him boxing and deep breathing. Then, when he had nothing to do, he worked out on trapezes and flying rings that he had installed in his huge apartment.

A descendant of Buffalo Bill, Henry loved to give parties. At them, he always had gypsies, singing and dancing, and he always paid the gypsies in gold coins—from a bag he carried. Once, when he was giving a huge party on the Ile-de-France, he didn't want his guests to have to walk the length of the pier, so he phoned Atlantic City and had 20 of the boardwalk wheel chairs—and their pushers—sent to the pier. "It was a great idea," he said, "because everybody was fresh and lots of fun when they got to the ship. They weren't all tuckered out from the walk."