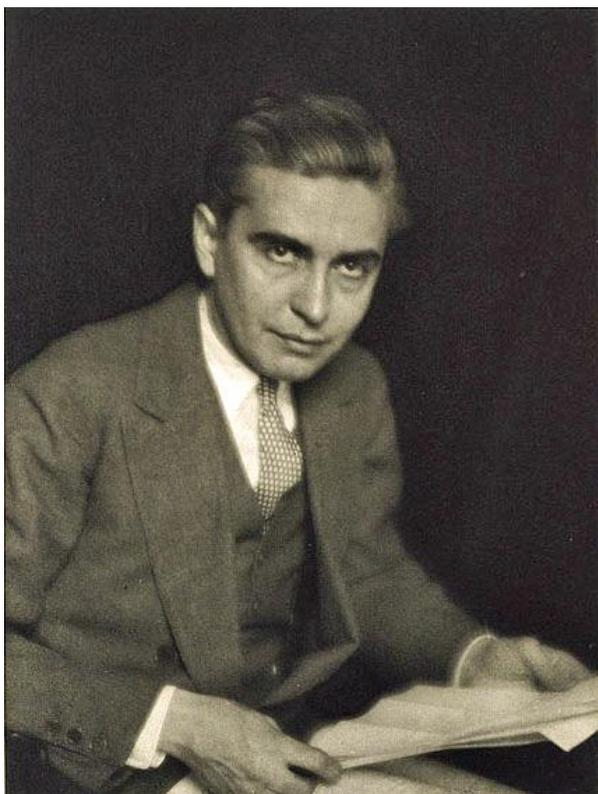


My Association with Henry Blackman Sell **A Personal Reminiscence by Franklin P. Mason (2022)**

Henry Blackman Sell (Mr. Sell) met my aunt, Janet Thompson Leckie (Jennie), in about 1935 in New York City.

Mr. Sell, who was about 46 at that time, was the president of Blaker Advertising Agency and he had been the editor of *Harper's Bazaar* from 1920 to 1926 (and he would be the editor of *Town & Country* magazine from 1949 to 1964). In other words, he was very well established in the world.

Jennie, who was about 27, had graduated from Antioch College in Ohio in 1932 and then moved to New York City. It was the Great Depression, and she was hungry for any kind of work. The work she found was as a dance instructor at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio.¹ From what I understand, that is where Mr. Sell and Jennie met for the first time.² He was a pupil, and she was the instructor.



Henry Blackman Sell in 1925



Janet Thompson Leckie in about 1932

Whatever chemistry there was between Mr. Sell and Jennie, it must have been very strong because shortly thereafter she became his personal assistant and later his business partner, a relationship that would last for almost 40 years, until just before her death in 1971.

There is a third character in this narrative. She is my mother, Agnes Leckie Mason, Jennie's sister.

¹ Arthur Murray opened his first dance studio in 1923 on 43rd street in New York City.

² Refer to the essay: *Henry Blackman Sell and the Leckie Family*

Mr. Sell knew all the Leckie children, the siblings of Jennie and my mother, as early as 1936. (In fact, he employed many of them in various capacities for his company *Vitamins Plus*.³)

During the Depression, my mother worked at Coney Island doing handwriting analysis. (Where and when she acquired this skill, I do not know.) Some years later, Mr. Sell used her skill in this area to help him in hiring new employees for the magazines for which he was editor. In fact, it is said that Mr. Sell would not hire anyone without first having my mother analyze his or her handwriting. Thus, the bond grew between Mr. Sell and my mother.

By 1942, my mother had three children. Because of their association, Mr. Sell became acquainted with the children. Mr. Sell was a great man with a great heart. He was married, but he never had any children. Thus, it was that he “adopted” the Mason children. In 1956, Mr. Sell gave my mother a Bible. In the Bible, on the presentation page, he wrote:

Presented to Agnes Leckie Mason and her wonderful children⁴

Mr. Sell used to give the Mason children various gifts. For example, at Christmas time, he would invariably give each of the children a warm coat and hat to wear in the winter months.



Left: 1944 Christmas: The Mason children wearing their winter coats and hats, presents from Mr. Sell
Right: 1946 Christmas: Franklin Pierce Mason II wearing his winter coat and hat, a present from Mr. Sell

Therefore, it was through Jennie and my mother that it was my very great fortune to become acquainted with Henry Blackman Sell.

Note: At this time, I would like to mention that I am also related to Henry Blackman Sell *by blood* in addition to a personal relationship! It is strange to tell, but my blood relationship comes through my father (Willard Franklin Mason), not through my mother.⁵ (My father and Mr. Sell hardly knew each other, and they had very little interaction, whereas my mother had a close personal relationship with him.) What strange coincidence should put my father and mother together such that I would have both a blood relationship *and* a personal relationship with this wonderful person: Henry Blackman Sell!

³ Refer to the essay: *The Story of Vitamins Plus*

⁴ Refer to the essay: *Henry Blackman Sell and the Leckie Family*

⁵ Refer to the essay: *The Blood Relationship between Henry Blackman Sell and Franklin Pierce Mason II*

The best way I can think of to describe my relationship with Mr. Sell is to narrate some of the interactions that I had with him.

Upon, perhaps, two occasions, Mr. Sell was the host to the Mason family for *Tea at the Plaza*. In the 1950s, Tea at the Plaza was a very sumptuous affair with everyone dressed to the nines and with a chamber orchestra playing. The hall in which Tea was served was surrounded by marble columns, and the decor was perfect in every way.



1950s Tea at the Plaza

Can you imagine Mr. Sell, a 65-year-old, high-powered business executive, arriving at the Plaza Hotel for Tea with a mother and five small children in tow? Well, that is what happened, and not just once but several times!

Mr. Sell was a frequent patron of the Plaza. Thus, everyone knew him. When we went to Tea, the *maitre d'* would greet Mr. Sell personally and would put us at a prime table.

At that time, Mr. Sell was the editor of *Town & Country Magazine*, *thee* fashion magazine of the day. Thus, he was a very powerful man. One positive mention by him and your fortune was made. A negative comment might mean ruin. Therefore, Mr. Sell never paid for anything. Tea at the Plaza was complimentary for him. The hotel would not take his money. (However, he tipped everyone lavishly, from the *maitre d'* to the waiter to the busboy.)

For me, Tea at the Plaza with Mr. Sell was like being in a dream, like being in a perfect world. To this day, whenever I am in New York, I make it a point to go to Tea at the Plaza. And whenever possible, I go to Tea at the best restaurant available wherever I am (for example, Tea at the Fairmont in San Francisco).

Mr. Sell loved the circus, and he would go whenever he had the time when the circus was in town.

He had the Number 1 Pass to the circus, which was given to him by John Ringling North, who was the president and producer of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus: “The Greatest Show on Earth”! (Mr. Sell never did things in a small way.)

In New York City, the circus was put on in Madison Square Garden. Mr. Sell’s pass allowed him to enter Madison Square Garden by a special entrance, for pass holders only. And with the #1 Pass, he was allowed to sit in John Ringling North’s personal box, which was, naturally, the best seat in the house.

Mr. Sell’s favorite part of the circus was the dog act. He would pop in as often as possible just to see the dogs.

Most years in the 1950s, Mr. Sell would take one or more of the Mason children with him to the circus. I remember that he took my sister, Vivi, and me there in 1958. I still have the program from that show. What a privilege it was to sit with Mr. Sell in John Ringling North’s box to enjoy the circus!



1950s Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Circus in Madison Square Garden



1958 Program from Ringling Bros. & Barnum and Bailey Circus, showing the cover and a brief essay by John Ringling North, President and Producer of *The Greatest Show on Earth*

During that visit to New York City to be with Mr. Sell and to go to the circus, Mr. Sell also took Vivi and me for dinner after the show to Trader Vic's Tiki Room. [This location of Trader Vic's Tiki Room had just recently opened. It was in the Savoy-Plaza, a luxury hotel on Fifth Avenue and 58th Street.]

Like all the other branches around the globe, the New York location of Trader Vic's had clam shell lights, war clubs, carved masks, and Japanese fishing floats hanging from the ceilings, which were covered with wooden palm leaves. The food menu was a mix of inauthentic Chinese and Indonesian fare, plus a few American and European dishes, and the beverage list was full of potent rum-based concoctions.⁶

Of course, Mr. Sell knew Trader Vic (Victor Bergeron). Thus, during our meal, Trader Vic, himself, came over to the table to say hello. Being with Mr. Sell was always an adventure!



1958 Trader Vic's Tiki Room at the Savoy Plaza in NYC

⁶ <https://ny.eater.com/2013/10/30/6345505/remembering-trader-vics-new-yorks-favorite-tiki-bar>

In 1963, I spent three months in Germany as part of a study abroad program with Kalamazoo College. During that time, I hitchhiked around Germany with a friend. When Mr. Sell learned of my adventure, he arranged for me to stay at the Grand Hotel Nürnberg.⁷ We arrived on the appointed day and went into the lobby. After hitching around Germany for a week or two, we were two unbathed, unshaved guys with backpacks, who more resembled bums than college students. None-the-less, we were greeted by the manager of the hotel and put up in one of the finest rooms the hotel had to offer. And after a shower and a shave, we were wined and dined in the hotel restaurant. All this for free, of course. Mr. Sell had a wide reach!



Seal from the Grand Hotel
Nürnberg

The Mason family was always well stocked with products from Sell's Specialties, Mr. Sell's food company. Of course, the famous Sell's Liver *Pâté*⁸ was always there in abundance. But in addition, the entire array of products—Deviled Ham Spread, Corned Beef Loaf, Braised Beef in Gravy, and so on—were also available. Also, we had the more unusual products like a whole canned turkey in a huge can. I even seem to recall Sell's canned *Pâté de Foie Gras* with Truffles. And later *Panforte Di Siena* and bread sticks imported from Italy.

Mr. Sell was pivotal in the publication of my mother's book, *God's Wonderful World* (Random House, 1954).^{9,10} A very special (to me) aspect of Mr. Sell's involvement with my mother's book is that during the publication process, Mr. Sell had a great deal of interaction with Victor Weybright. Victor Weybright was the editor-in-chief of New American Library, the publishing house that produced *God's Wonderful World* in paperback. Mr. Sell had known Victor Weybright for many years, but it was only during their interaction over Mom's book that they discovered their mutual interest in Buffalo Bill Cody. They subsequently co-authored the book *Buffalo Bill and the Wild West* (Oxford University Press, 1955). Thus, it was the Mason family, to whom Mr. Sell had given so much, that catalyzed the publication of Mr. Sell's book!

Some anecdotes that I remember about Sell are as follows:

Someone noticed that Mr. Sell hardly got wet when he was out in the rain, and they asked him how that was possible. He answered, "I walk in between the rain drops." To me, that statement characterized Mr. Sell's life. No matter what was happening, he was always positive and upbeat. He always walked between the raindrops of life.

⁷ Grand Hotel Nürnberg was a very well-known and popular hotel. Not only businessmen and politicians stayed there but also international entertainers such as Bob Dylan, Harry Belafonte, The Beatles, Herbert von Karajan, Joe Cocker, Robbie Williams and many more came to stay at the Grand Hotel.

⁸ Sell's Liver *Pâté* was still available in stores until 2020 (for a total of 80 years) under that brand name.

⁹ Refer to the essay: *Henry Blackman Sell and the Leckie Family*

¹⁰ Refer to *A Talent for Living*, Janet Leckie, pp. 235-236

Mr. Sell's remedy for curing the common cold was to go to bed and put your hat on one of the bed posts at the foot of the bed. Then, begin to sip Scotch whisky. Continue to drink Scotch until you see two hats, then go to sleep. In the morning, the cold will be gone!

Many years after Mr. Sell died (in 1974), I learned that Mr. Sell is more to me than one who I admired and loved so much. He is also my cousin. In fact, he is my cousin three times over!¹¹

In 1639, Mr. Sell's ancestor, Reverend Adam Blackman (Blakeman)¹² led a group of people to form a new religious community, which would become Stratford, Connecticut. In that company was my ancestor, Elizabeth Hutchins Curtis. Well, it turns out that Adam Blackman's grandson, Ebenezer Blackman (1656-1715) married Elizabeth Curtis' great granddaughter, Abigail Curtiss (1671-1734). Through that union, Mr. Sell and I are ninth cousins twice removed.

The Blackman / Curtis(s) relationship is the most meaningful of the relationships between Mr. Sell and me, but there are two others, as well.

Mr. Sell and I are both descended from William Edwards (1612-1685) and Ann Cole (1611-1700) of East Hampton, Suffolk, Long Island, New York. Through this union we are seventh cousins, three times removed.

Mr. Sell and I are also both descended from George Squire (1618 - 1691) and Ann Wheeler. George Squire was born in England, and he was one of the first settlers of Fairfield, Connecticut, which was founded in 1639. Through this union we are also seventh cousins, three times removed.

¹¹ Refer to the essay: *Blood Relationship between Henry Blackman Sell and Franklin Pierce Mason II*

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Blakeman