

## Henry B. Sell and the French Legion of Honor

The Legion of Honor was created by Bonaparte Napoleon in 1802. It is awarded to those who have made an outstanding contribution to France. The Legion of Honor (French: *Légion d'honneur*) is the highest decoration in France and is divided into five degrees in ascending order: *Chevalier* (Knight), *Officier* (Officer), *Commandeur* (Commander), *Grand Officier* (Grand Officer) and *Grand Croix* (Grand Cross).

Henry Blackman Sell received this prestigious award twice, once in 1926 at the *Chevalier* level and again in 1957 at the *Officier* level.

Henry B. Sell was editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar* magazine from 1920 to 1927. And he was the editor of *Town & Country* magazine from 1949 to 1964. In both of those positions, he traveled to France often. He loved France, and he wrote often in each of these magazines about the French countryside, about French fashion, and about many other things French. Because of that, and because Henry was Henry, the French loved him in return.

The awarding of the *Officier* Legion of Honor award is described in the book *A Talent for Living*, as follows.<sup>1</sup>

One day France said "Thank you" for his efforts. In a letter from Herve Alphand, French Ambassador to the United States, Henry Sell learned that by decree of the President of the French Republic, dated May 18, 1957, he had been made an *Officier* in the National Order of the Legion of Honor. Alphand wrote: "I take great pleasure in conveying to you my hearty congratulations for the granting of this distinction, which is a token of the great appreciation of the French Government for the sentiments you have shown my country in so many instances."

Maurice Schumann, of the National Assembly, had been one of the sponsors of the honor. Wrote Henry to Schumann: "With your gracious assistance I have been made an *Officier* of the Legion of Honor of France, thus upgrading my position after thirty-one years [in 1926] as *Chevalier*." In the twenties the investiture for *Chevalier* had taken place at a small luncheon at the home of Pierre Cartier in New York, but the one for *Officier* was to be a different matter. Georges Marin and Henry decided that since Jean Medecin, mayor of Nice, had also been a sponsor, his city could properly be the place for the ceremony. Furthermore, Henry felt the occasion might lead to publicity for the area, helping to suggest Nice as a place from which to approach Paris: "The Garden Gate to France," Henry called the area.

Just the previous month *Town & Country* had carried a story, written and photographed by Jerome Zerbe, who had recently driven between Paris and Nice in the lively company of Louella Parsons. Knowing Henry wished it, the mayor of Nice accepted with alacrity to be host for the investiture, suggesting that a fine ceremony could be staged at the historic Villa Massena. Wrote Medecin to his friend Georges Marin: "I intend to arrange a ceremony that will be as magnificent as possible." And magnificent it was, with the investiture attended by all the notables of the region. The cover of the ceremonial menu read: *Dejeuner-offert par la Ville de Nice à Henry B. Sell, Officier de la Legion d'Honneur*. After the party Henry Sell and Georges Marin drove blissfully northward along the route described in the magazine, making overnight stops at fabulous Les Baux

---

<sup>1</sup> Leckie, Janet T. (1970). *A Talent for Living: The Story of Henry Sell, An American Original*, Hawthorn Books, Inc. Publishers, New York, pp. 225-226.

and bustling Lyons. The day after they arrived in Paris, Henry's old friend Christian Dior gave a small luncheon at the Plaza Athénée. On the cover of the menu was engraved, in color, a picture of the medal that had recently been conferred. After returning to New York, Henry wrote to Georges Marin: "All that has led up to this event, and its consummation, has given me a strong lift. To feel that one is wanted by those one loves is so important to the good life."

The French Legion of Honor award is also mentioned in a newspaper article (included below) by syndicated columnist Earl Wilson on August 06, 1957. (Note, however, that the article cites the *Chevalier* award (see arrow) and not the more recently awarded *Officier* honor.)

In the 150 years between 1802 and 1950, thousands of Americans received the Legion of Honor award. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive list of recipients in existence. Thus, the records in *A Talent for Living* and in the newspaper article are the only indication that Henry B. Sell received these awards.



French Legion of Honor:  
*Chevalier*



French Legion of Honor:  
*Officier*

# *It Happened Last Night*

By EARL WILSON  
N.Y.'s CHAMPION WALKER  
HIKES 10 MILES FOR FUN

## I LEARN TO WALK . . .

NEW YORK — I invited myself walking the other night with New York's No. 1 Pedestrian, Henry Blackman Sell, 67, who hoofs our pavements and parks 5 to 10 miles a day.

It was a mistake . . . because now he's got me doing it.

"How much have you walked today?" I had just asked the distinguished editor, food-packager and gourmet, a Whitewater, Wis., boy.

"Five miles," he announced. We were at the Colony, 61st and Madison.

"Well, I think I'll walk with you—to the corner," I said.

Making it those 60 paces left me worn out.

"Where are you going now?" he inquired.

"To '21,'" I lied. I mentioned the famous restaurant on 52d off 5th Av.—nine blocks distant, thinking that would be too far for him.

"I'll walk with you!" he sang out.

Huffing and puffing while trotting beside my young chum with the Chevalier Legion of Honor ribbon and the bow tie, I found that he prefers Central Park. <=

"Don't your friends stop you and slow you up?" I asked . . . hopefully, after about five blocks.

"I don't meet many of my friends in the park except the squirrels. They're good friends of mine," he said.

"Squirrels are great comedians," he assured me. "I found out something about them—they don't hide nuts for the winter. They bury them in the ground to soften them so they can eat them. I'm nuts about squirrels."

He talked so excitedly of the other pedestrians — Phil Silvers, Jack Pearl, Bernard Baruch, and Bugs Baer, that I determined to become a walker myself.

Si Seadler, the MGM ad genius, another hiker, once went to El Morocco with a pedometer in his pocket — and danced three miles.

So I walked all over town hunting pedometers.

One clerk said rather sheepishly to me, "Not many people care to know how much they walk — they'd rather not know."

I walked more miles to find out how many miles I walked than anybody. And after buying one, I discovered my son Slugger already had one. So if you see somebody walking along very briskly, with a 10-mile look in his eye, that won't be me . . . that'll be Henry Sell.

Me, I'll settle for two miles a day.