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HENRY B. CHASE: A MAN FOR ALL AGES

By FRANCES ROBERTS

As I sat in my bedroom this morning overlooking the beautiful glittering, orange maple trees, I remembered what Mr. Henry had said one time - "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." It had been my intention to construct this paper and give it to Dr. McKissack who insisted that in two weeks we could put it in the "Review" and hand it to you today. But, mixed and mingled with other things that have to be done I constantly thought about Mr. Henry Chase. I collected my notes and yesterday on the way back from an Executive Board meeting in Birmingham of the Alabama Academy of Science I wrote this paper. This is not a historical document. As such I will convert it to the life of Mr. Henry Chase and give it to Mr. Watson in due time. But, as I looked through and saw the blue sky this morning and the beautiful maple leaves, my mind went back to many interesting associations with Mr. Henry Chase.

Henry B. Chase, 1870-1961, was a man for all ages. The life of Mr. Henry B. Chase exemplifies the best traits to be found in universal man. He was a man for all ages in all seasons of his life. Had he lived in ancient times, he would have appreciated the ethical ideas of Socrates, the empirical approach to learning of Aristotle, the stoicism of Cicero, and the human and divine love of Jesus Christ. If he had lived in the Middle Ages, he would have understood the blending of faith and reason in the writings of

Thomas Aquinas, the selfless service of Saint Francis of Assisi, the scientific views of Roger Baker, and the just price theory of the Roman Catholic Church as a guide to all economic endeavors.

Had he lived at the dawn of the modern world, he might have been at home on one of the ships which brought his ancestors to the rocky shores of Maine in 1639. Had he lived during the years when the Colonies won their independence from the mother country, he might well have knelt in prayer with Washington at Valley Forge, or conversed with Thomas Jefferson on the meaning of the Declaration of Independence, as well as pursuing the latest scientific knowledge in the field of horticulture. Or, he might have been on an expedition with the early botanists to identify the native plant life of the western frontier. Had he lived in the early part of the nineteenth century, he might have followed Parkman on the Oregon Trail to the beautiful Wyoming Valley. Or, he might have passed the south pass and gone into the great Sacramento Valley of California.

Since Henry Chase was born in the last half of the nineteenth century, he chose to bring his pioneering spirit to the New South in 1889. After spending two years in the grocery business with his brothers in Hickory, North Carolina, he came to Huntsville at the age of nineteen. Even at this early age he was mature in his judgement, sound in his business practices, far sighted in his view of the future development of the nursery business in the Tennessee Valley.

At the beginning of his career as a nurseryman, Henry Chase was a member of a four man team of brothers, Herbert and Charles, and his younger

brother Robert. From 1889 to 1906 these young men developed a flourishing nursery under the tutelage of their cousins Louis and Ethan Allen Chase of Rochester, New York, who had operated the nationally known firm the New England Nurseries since 1869. Initially these two men provided the necessary capital investment to establish the Alabama Nursery Company, which was located just north of Gladstone near the site of the first Madison County nursery company. The title of that company was the Huntsville Nurseries.

After a period of years this company was reorganized in 1906 as Chase Nursery, and moved to its original location because of its accessibility to railroad lines and the beautiful, rich loam soil.¹ The brothers purchased in the neighborhood of 1,000 acres in this vicinity. Old records show that part of this property is the sixteenth section of land in that particular township and was originally designated for public schools. In a study of the initial request for land purchased in this area made by the pioneers who were here in 1808, more than ten petitions went forward to secure that particular piece of land. This indicates, I think, how very much the early pioneers appreciated the worth of the land on which Chase Nursery is located.

At this time - that is in 1906 - the business was incorporated and Henry Chase was made president of the company. All his brothers were still involved but he took the most active part in it along with his younger brother Robert. He held the position of president for almost fifty years until he retired. I remember the year he retired. He told me he bought a new car. This was age eighty-five, I think, or there about, and he said he was going to Maine to visit his relatives and friends, and then he was go-

ng to Washington and visit his kinfolks and then to California. He loved to travel and he felt that now that he was going to retire he could really become active in some of those aspects of life that he enjoyed. He had been pinned down to a desk a bit long and now he was on the road to travel again.

The success of the Chase Nursery, reflects the philosophy of Henry Chase, his brothers, and the key men such as Charles O. Roth, whom he chose to work with him in developing a nursery to serve world wide customers as well as his own employees. The fact that Henry Chase specialized in ornamental shrubs and was particularly partial to dogwood was not a happenstance. Henry Chase loved the beauty of God's world and he wanted mankind not only to be aware of it but to love and appreciate it as he did. To him the nursery business was an institution - an institution that helped to deepen man's sense of the divine spirit that was all around him. And yet, Henry Chase was a practical man. Let his words speak for a moment. For instance on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the founding of Chase Nursery, he wrote, and I quote from his president's message to his faithful customers and employees. I think from his own words we can see Henry Chase in a way that we would like to remember him, as a successful business man in this community:

"We just didn't realize fifty years had passed since we the Chases, four brothers of us, came to Alabama to enter the nursery business. Half a century! They have not all been rosy and easy years but on a whole they have been progressive and happy years. We can't forget hard years, though viewed from this distance they do not seem so hard as they did at the time. We remember for instance the year when we lost, by fire in the night, our barn and all

the mules, wagons, feed and so forth. A mighty jolt to our lean bank account and that year when the late spring frost in one night caused a loss far in excess of our invested capital. There were of course, dry years, wet years and years of depression but all have been more than offset by the good years. And though we have been often down and with the count perhaps of six to eight, it never reached ten and for this we are very grateful.

"Through the good and bad years the loyalty of our employees will ever be remembered. There was just one pay day in the entire time when we could not get cash enough for the payroll and that was August 11, 1893, at the start of that financial panic. That lapsed payroll was met two weeks later and the only question raised by any of the force when the lack of cash was announced was 'boss can we eat out of commissary?' Luckily there was ample stock on hand and none went hungry.

"Looking back over fifty years we note so many changes in methods and equipment. During our first five or six years we thought a telephone an excessive luxury at the plant and would not consider it. Didn't need it because we had a yellow mustang to ride down to town and to do the errands. It was long after that we finally decided that a telephone might help and took one on a month's trial. Then the automobile, trucks and tractors came along.

"In those old days we used a shingle which had been planned for the purpose on which to write up digging orders for the field foreman and regarded the shingle system as the last word in nursery practice. What a revolution when the multi-order-system, digging list, seller list, packing order list, acknowledgement and office record all typewritten at one time came into use with us. And when the



HENRY B. CHASE (1870-1961)

First president of the Huntsville Historical Society.

improved implements that we had seen came on such as the openers, the planters, the diggers, the deep tillers, the culti-packers, the tractor cultivators and so forth. It was within the past fifty years that those astounding discoveries have been perfected and adapted to man's use. The automobile, the wireless, the radio and the airplane, television just around the corner, and what an age in which to live and now the word of appreciation for those brothers who did so much to lay the right foundation for this business.

"First to Herbert the oldest who pioneered in selling the nursery stock by sample. For a sample case he used a whip case. Black, pointed top, heavy leather case, used as a whip drummer in those horse and buggy days packed with samples of Chase, Alabama, grown fruit trees, none better. He made the rounds of the nursery trade of the United States. Particularly around the middle west by train, of course checking the whip case from town to town and to this day he is referred to by many of the old customers as 'Herbert the man with the whip case.' Herbert always insisted the sample had to be a little above the average. That a doubtful tree was decor and told gardeners 'when in doubt, put it in the lower grades.' He designed the round tree gauge now used by so many growers of fruit trees and seedlings.

"And then came Charles, five years younger than Herbert; by instinct a merchant rather than a nurseryman. After a year at Chase brothers office in Rochester he opened our first office in Huntsville in December of 1889 and started to build up a force of house to house canvasses. He worked day and night organizing a force numbered at times of 150 men. Sold a big retail delivery for the fall of 1890.

Struck a low price cotton year with poor collections and just about went broke. It was a discouraging start. He hung on, continued to master the agency and dealers department until such a time as we began producing nursery stock at a wholesale market.

"And then, five years younger than I came Rob our beloved secretary and treasurer. He passed away just a few weeks ago. June, the 8th, in fact, 1939, age 63. It is difficult to write of him - he was so recently one of us, aiding, directing, counciling, maybe cussing on occasion, but always helping. He was so keenly alive to the activities throughout the nursery business, his vision was broad and his judgement was sound. As a boy counting trees on the nursery row by the five tally plan, one grade at a time, he always attached some bicycle speedometers to his handlebar and evolved the tree counter, recording accurately all grades in one trip down the row, around the bend, a system which is now in general use. He used his own thinking, stood on his own two feet, was a man of strong conviction. He extracted a lot of fun from life as he went along, giving liberally of himself and of his means. Truly we shall forever miss him.

"And to you our appreciated customers, many of whom we have served for almost fifty years, we are truly grateful. It is your continued faith and interest that makes possible the Fiftieth Anniversary. It is our sincere desire that the hopes may carry this company forward to serve you for another fifty years. Sincerely yours, Henry B. Chase, President."

As he characterized his younger brother, I caught the feeling of comparison there. "He did his own thinking, he stood on his own two feet, he

was a man of strong conviction. He extracted a lot of fun out of life as he went along, gave liberally of his means and himself" - and so did Henry Chase.

And as we look on we find that Henry Chase was not just a good business man. He was an appreciated member of a family in this home and other homes. In 1900, and you will note as soon as he was financially able to manage it, he returned to Hickory, North Carolina, to marry his first love, Annie Stewart, his life long partner, friend and loving wife. This long and devoted life together has contributed members to the civic life of Huntsville who are well known to most of us here present, today. He was also a devoted father and friend, not to his own children since he had no surviving heirs, but to his nieces and nephews as well as all of the young people here in Huntsville. I remember Mr. Henry telling me one day how pleased he was that he retired. He was glad to know that Robert's son, Henry Homer, and Charlie Roth's son, Charlie Jr. would continue to operate the nursery in the family tradition.

Henry Chase was a Christian gentleman. Throughout his life he extended his love of family and friends to all mankind. Yet he was willing to judge the frailties of men and to take stands within the framework of his own concept of Christian ethical standards. When he felt that he could serve his community in the realm of political affairs he did so with the same zest, enthusiasm, and fortitude that he had exhibited in the conduct of his own business life. When Huntsville went through a rather trying period of changing city governments from the commission plan, which lasted for about six years, back to the Huntsville Town Council plan, Henry Chase ran for and was elected chairman or president of the City Council and served in this capacity

for two years. He translated his leadership among his brothers and his associates to city government and the meticulousness of adequate business operations to the realm of city government. And in 1918 he was elected mayor of Huntsville for two years and he set a remarkable precedent in that he would not receive his pay. And in his own words he said: "I make a living, why should I take the taxes to pay my way in life when it's already provided for? We should give this back to the city to provide services which individual people can not provide for themselves."

In 1920 after his term of office was finished he continued to serve on many appointed boards in the city of Huntsville. For a long period of years he served on the City Board of Education. He served on a number of state commissions including the Board of Agriculture and Industries. He was a professional nurseryman and served from time to time in all the various nursery organizations both state, regional, and national. It was on the occasion of the Southern Nursery Association's meeting here in Huntsville that they prepared the bulletin on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Chase Nursery, which he conveniently gave out to all of his friends and attendants.

In looking over the records of community life, I find his name associated with practically every organization that has as its goal community development, expansion and fulfillment. He was a Rotarian who lived by the Rotarian's honor code. He was one of its charter members and served as an active member most of his life. His attendance record would probably rival any other Rotarian in the history of the organization. You will find the names of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Chase associated with practi-

cally every aspect of community life, particularly in the realm of the library as Mrs. Russell has mentioned. They also appear in the realm of the garden clubs, the beautification of Huntsville.

We are in his home this afternoon, a home which he purchased in 1925 and restored, developed and opened his beautiful gardens to all those who wished to come and share their beauty with him. I remember on a stroll in here one afternoon he paraphrased a little poem familiar to both of us and he said: "A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot, fringed pool, fern grot. A varied school of peace, and yet the fool contends that God is not. Not God in an evening in a garden when the eve is cool? Nay, but I have a sign 'tis very sure God walks in mine." And as I visit that garden from time to time his words always come back to me.

He worked to help beautify the parks of Huntsville that were more or less public and open such as the sidewalks, or the triangles, or the mid section in the four lane highways. He helped work with the garden clubs and the City Council and all the various aspects of the city government to help make Huntsville the dogwood city it has become. And he loved every one of those dogwood trees. Some years ago I was driving down Adams Avenue and I saw this crew propping up a very beautiful dogwood tree. It is now in the Sparkman yard. That was the home of Mrs. Jimmy Lou Cooper as you remember. That was one of Mr. Chase's prize dogwoods and Henry Homer and his crew were busily getting the tree back on its roots properly. It had blown over in a wind storm. It is still there and as you go out this afternoon you might appreciate one of Mr. Henry's lovely dogwood trees.

Mr. Henry was the logical choice of any group

of citizens and may I as a historian qualify the founding of the Society. It was by a group of people as are most organizations that continue. But to Mr. Henry it was a very important group and he willingly consented to serve as its first president and to lend his enthusiasm to its continuance, its growth and development.

He was especially interested in the preservation of the symbols which remind us of who we are and what we represent, of where we are in time and where we are going. Mrs. Russell has informed you of many markers which the Historical Society has placed. I would like to tell you the story of one of them that Mr. Henry Chase encouraged the young men of this community to erect. He went down and spread his enthusiasm among all of the Acme members and he said: "You all have enough money boys, let's buy this marker and on this marker it should record in time that Old Hickory came to protect the city of Huntsville in October of 1813". As you pass by Mims Court today, the triangle is a little smaller but the marker is there. Mr. Henry was a great admirer of tenacity, fortitude and drive as exhibited in Andrew Jackson, so he insisted that we have a marker. Perhaps you are familiar with the story of how during the Creek Wars a rumor came to Huntsville that the Creek Indians were on the war path and that they would be here to eradicate the town of Huntsville within twenty-four hours. At this point Jackson was at Fayetteville, Tennessee, on his march southward to Ten Islands on the Coosa where he was going to front the Creek Indians in the eastern portion of what is now Alabama. General John Coffee had already proceeded him and had recruited forces here in the valley and moved on down to establish Camp Coffee just south of the

Tennessee River near Whitesburg Bridge. Jackson got the message and marched his men without stopping the whole thirty-two miles from Fayetteville down to Huntsville, and camped near Mims Court for the night. It is recorded that all the people from the county and the town came in and lined up their wagons, carriages, and buggies near him so that they could be protected. The next morning they found out that this was just a rumor so Jackson moved on down through northeast Alabama to Ten Islands, and from there to his glory at Horseshoe Bend and later to New Orleans. But he always remembered Huntsville and came back to visit his friends here. Henry Chase thought the symbolism of Old Hickory should be a hickory tree because Jackson is quoted as saying "if I have to eat acorns, I'll stay down here all winter and we'll whip the Creek Indians." So the hickory tree was planted and about a year ago when the triangle was moved, those of us who remembered Mr. Henry kept watching that hickory tree and sure enough one day it was down. The mayor informed us that he got many calls that day because they remembered Mr. Henry Chase's hickory tree that was in memory of Old Hickory. He quickly assured the callers that the tree would be replanted and it is there today. The next time you pass Mims Court read the sign on Andrew Jackson, perhaps you will remember, as I do, Mr. Henry and his multitude of contributions in the field of historic preservation.

As Mrs. Russell mentioned, one of his last projects was the committee on renaming of streets. He, Judge [Thomas W.] Jones, Mrs. [Anna] Rosborough, and I sat for hours, days, and weeks and came up with 287 street names to be supplied to the duplicated names that we found when Huntsville was consol-

idated into a metropolitan area in 1956. He did this with a great deal of enthusiasm and I remember how long he pondered the street from the head of Monte Sano down to where the Space Science Museum today is located because it involved about seven street names. It involved a residential area, a commercial area, an industrial area, and part of the wilderness, since that part of Huntsville had not yet been developed. Finally we came up with the composite title Governors Drive. That would please everybody since it is a plural term named for the nine Alabama governors associated with Madison County history.

Mr. Chase was indeed a man for all ages. He was mature when he was young and he remained young when his body grew old and his spirit was challenged to join that of his wife. I received a very interesting letter from Mr. Chase. In fact, it was written after my last visit to his house when I attended her funeral. It was the most amazing letter I had ever received of its kind and so I cherish it. This was the vein of it: "I do appreciate your coming to rejoice with me on this day when Annie went on. I am looking forward to joining her in the near future." How beautiful a way to look at the ending of life as well as the beginning. May I say his spirit is alive among us today and I am sure he is with us in spirit here as we celebrate the Twentieth Anniversary of the Huntsville Historical Society.