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ALBERT RUSSEL ERSKINE, THE HUNTSVILLE  
"BOY WHO MADE GOOD"

by

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and  
Henry S. Marks

For nearly half a century, large illuminated block letters spelling HOTEL RUSSEL ERSKINE have been a focal point on Huntsville's panoramic skyline.

Most of the history of the hotel is fairly well known to Huntsville residents, but the memory of the man whose name is seen atop the building has become somewhat obscured with the passage of time. The large hotel was named for Albert Russel Erskine, a Huntsville native who became president of the giant Studebaker automobile manufacturing company in the 1920s and was recognized as one of the nation's most prominent industrial magnates of that time.

In Huntsville, the late Studebaker president was thought of as the local boy who made good "up North," and that is why letters spelling his name are seen on the city's skyline today. "Up North" for Erskine was principally South Bend, Indiana, the place he lived most of his life and where he would be proclaimed a captain of industry. Yet Huntsville was the town where his meteoric career began.

The Huntsvillian, who would build an industrial empire in the North, was descended from a line of pioneer American Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Three generations of his family had firmly established the Erskine name in this area. His

grandfather was Dr. Alexander Erskine who had served as a physician in the Confederate army during the Civil War. A maternal great-grandfather, Albert Russel, had been a colonel in Washington's army during the Revolutionary War and had come to Huntsville as one of the town's first settlers.

Albert Russel Erskine was born in Huntsville on January 24, 1871, the son of William Michael and Sue (Ragland) Erskine. The future industrial leader attended public and private schools until he was 15 and then dropped out to enter the business world as a \$15-a-month office boy in a Huntsville railroad office. It was not long after that that he rose to the position of chief bookkeeper in that office with a then substantial salary of \$65 a month. Erskine worked in the railroad office until he was 27.

He then left Huntsville to move to St. Louis for a job as chief clerk with the American Cotton Company. A few years later he had become general auditor of the company's operating department with responsibility for 300 cotton gins throughout the South. From 1904 until 1919, Erskine was treasurer and a member of the board of Yale and Towne Manufacturing Company, and the next year became vice president and member of the board of directors of the Underwood Typewriter Company.

Erskine joined the Studebaker Corporation in South Bend in 1911 as treasurer and member of the executive board. Four years later, at the age of 44, he had climbed to the top spot as president of the company. Until that time, the Studebaker firm had been primarily engaged in the manufacture of horsedrawn carriages, and it was Erskine who was credited with making the transition to the production of automobiles.

Early accounts indicate that Studebaker's rise in the automobile field to a place of rank nationally and internationally began with

Erskine's presidency. Following the former Huntsvillian's election to the top job, the company spurred ahead, and in 1921 when the automobile industry over the county suffered a setback, Studebaker leaped ahead by 30 per cent. Eyes of the entire manufacturing world began to turn to Erskine. While forging the Studebaker Corporation into one of the country's leading producers of automobiles, Erskine was also serving as president of the Pierce Arrow Company, president of the S.P.A. Truck Corporation, vice president and director of the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, and director of a large South Bend bank.

Erskine's prominence in South Bend was not confined to his role of Studebaker president. He also played a major part in the city's development by his participation in many community projects and activities. The Studebaker head served on the city planning commission and was instrumental in implementing a city beautification program. In addition, he acted as chairman of campaigns to raise building funds for the city's hospitals, Y.M.C.A., and the University of Notre Dame and served as president of the board of lay trustees of Notre Dame.

One of Russel Erskine's pet projects in South Bend was the development of a residential section called Twyckenham Hills, a 600 acre tract on the western edge of the city. The division had been copied in part from Twyckenham, England. There might, however, been some nostalgic motivation for this endeavor, because Twickenham (although spelled differently) was once the name of Huntsville. Erskine planned the entire Twyckenham project himself, laid it out and specified all improvements as well as paying for the entire development. It was also in the Twyckenham Hills section of South Bend that the Studebaker president built his palatial mansion where he lived with his wife and son, Russel Erskine, Jr.

The Erskine mansion was one of South Bend's most elegant and largest homes. It sat in a secluded wooded area of rollings hills, which also was reminiscent of Erskine's native Huntsville. The mansion was purchased by the Catholic church folowing Erskine's death, and today the large rambling structure is part of the St. Mary's Academy for girls.

Russel Erskine was an ardent sports fan and especially fond of football. He iniated an annual Albert Russel Erskine football award that was presented to teams selected by sports writers all over the country and by a judging committee of 30. The former Huntsvillian had said that he felt there should be recognition of championship football teams since every sport but football produced championship teams at that time. The award was a large gold cup that was given to the coach of the selected team.

In sports, Erskine himself was best known for his game of golf. The Studebaker president was a hard man to beat on the golf course. His love for the fame led him to donate 120 acres of his estate to the city of South Bend for construction of a golf course. The course was named Erskine Hills and is still in use today. The Erskine Hills clubhouse still contains several tournament trophies won by Russel Erskine.

By the late 1920s, Erskine had become famous throughout the nation and was recognized as one of the country's leading industrialists. South Bend was now home for the Studebaker president, and it had been many years since he had left Huntsville. But Russel Erskine was still considered a Huntsvillian in his hometown when a group of Huntsville businessmen decided to build a major showplace hotel in the town. They decided the building would be a high-rise structure of 12 stories and would be called the "Joe Wheeler," after the colorful confederate general who had moved to Alabama after the Civil War.

The group of businessmen pooled their funds and resources to begin the mammoth project. Almost immediately a snag developed when it was discovered that not enough money was available to finance construction of the large building. Money was in short supply. The hotel idea seemed to be ill fated. Then the group remembered the former Huntsville boy in South Bend who had become a millionaire. Perhaps he would come to the aid of his old friends. Officers of the original company were T.T. Terry, president; M.M. Hutchens, secretary; L.B. Goldsmith, treasurer; and directors J. Emory Pierce, R.L. Schiffman and Wells Stanley.

So Erskine was contacted, and sure enough, he agreed to provide the needed funds to go ahead with construction. But Erskine had one stipulation: that the hotel be called the Russel Erskine and not the Joe Wheeler. Construction then proceeded on Huntsville's Russel Erskine Hotel.

Work on the building moved smoothly, and in 1930 Huntsville, Alabama, had a 12 story skyscraper in its downtown section with large electric illuminated letters on top spelling "Hotel Russel Erskine." The doors were opened to the public and the facility was incorporated as the Huntsville Hotel Corporation.

The Russel Erskine was the tallest and finest hotel to be found within 100 miles. The structure stood proudly above Huntsville's other downtown buildings and could be seen from the surrounding countryside. The new hotel offered 150 guest rooms, a resplendent ballroom, numerous banquet rooms, and a spacious lobby that was as elegant as could be found in major hotels anywhere.

Huntsville still was a small southern town, and times were hard; but the new hotel became at once a major attraction and entertained guests from throughout the south as well as many from "up North." Early accounts disclose that many

persons from communities around Huntsville came just to look at the new "fancy" hotel. Albert Russel Erskine also came to Huntsville from South Bend to enjoy the facilities of the hotel that he had helped make possible. But ironically, Erskine died tragically at his South Bend estate less than two years after the hotel was opened, and did not see it reach its full renown.

Huntsville, like every other city in the nation was hard hit by the depression years. South Bend, Indiana, where Albert Russel Erskine was now making his home, was also struck by the depression; and the Studebaker Corporation was in financial trouble.

Studebaker had become one of the biggest money-making car manufacturing firms in the country under the leadership of Erskine. The company had even prospered during the early years of the great depression. But in early 1933, the nation's economic situation took its toll, and Studebaker went into receivership. Erskine was now 63 years of age and in failing health. This plus the decline of the company he had headed for so many years proved too much for the man who had known almost constant success.

On July 1, 1933, Albert Russel Erskine was found by his son in the Twyckenham Hills Mansion dead from a self-inflicted bullet wound. The next day, banner headlines appeared in South Bend newspapers quoting a part of Erskine's suicide note "Nervous System Shattered I Cannot Go On."

Notables from throughout the business world attended the funeral of Erskine at the South Bend mansion. The list included such names as Harvey Firestone, the rubber manufacturer; Edward N. Hurley of Chicago; and advertising pioneer Albert D. Lasker. Following the funeral in South Bend, Erskine's body was transported to his native Huntsville where it was entombed in the Erskine mausoleum at Maple Hill Cemetery. The mau-

soleum is located in the Erskine addition at the cemetery, donated by him to the city of Huntsville. He also donated the memorial gateway to the cemetery. Five years before his death Erskine paid his first visit to the city and at that time requested that he be buried in the mausoleum.

Much of Erskine's fortune had been lost when Studebaker went under. His stock in the hotel was sold back to the Huntsville Hotel Corporation. The rest of his estate was sold, and little was left for his family.

The Russel Erskine itself was to enjoy both good and bad days. Today it is closed and final disposition of the hotel has yet to be determined. It no longer "owns" Huntsville's Skyline, for it has newer competitors, the Central Bank Building, the County Courthouse and the City Hall. Yet it remains an impressive sight and a memorial to one of Huntsville's earlier "boys who made good."