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Henrietta (Robinson) Herndon Memoir

H431H. Herndon, Henrietta (Robinson) (1899-1989)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 90 mins., 13 pp.

Henrietta Herndon, lifelong resident of Springfield, discusses the Springfield Fire Department and the horse-drawn fire equipment; 1917 Dome Building fire at the Illinois State Fair Grounds and other fires, including the State Armory fire in 1930.

Interview by Barbara Herndon, 1972

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Bobbe Herndon for the Oral History Office on November 18, 1972.

Henrietta Robinson Herndon was born in Springfield, Illinois on April 15, 1899. As a life-long resident of Springfield, Mrs. Herndon recalls some famous fires in Springfield's history as well as the horse-drawn fire equipment.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Henrietta Herndon, November 18, 1972, Springfield, Illinois.

Bobbe Herndon, Interviewer.

Q. This is an interview with Mrs. Richard Fleetwood Herndon, who is my mother-in-law. [Mrs. Herndon's maiden name was Henrietta Robinson.] Mrs. Herndon was born April 15, 1899 and raised in Springfield and has been a life-long resident.

Do you have any additional information to add to your brother, Stuart Robinson's account of the Dome Building fire of 1917?

A. Yes, I don't believe he had it clear that the dome was built of glass! It was quite beautiful. Of course, I'm sure that it was reinforced with metal but the whole dome was of glass. I understood that this was brought down from Chicago from their World's Fair in 1893, although it could have been a copy of the one up there. I'm not sure about that, but I do know that the one in Chicago was a copy of the Crystal Palace in London. This is interesting background history. I didn't believe it could ever burn because it looked so very strong, but I suppose that all the wood inside made it burn like a great furnace.

Many of us remember that night. I was down with my family at the station waiting for my brother Langdon to come back from his officer's training school, Camp Pike down in Arkansas. Jay Hill from Little Rock was with him, they had just been made second lieutenants and of course, expected to have the red carpet treatment when they got off the train. Well, there was lots of red in the sky but not much on the ground because immediately we went out to the fairgrounds to see the fire. The crowds were so great that we couldn't get very close to the fire, but it was a very exciting welcome to the boys who had just been made real soldiers.

I think it was an important day and many of us remembered it. When we were talking the other evening, Polly Tupper, Mrs. Henry A. Tupper, she was Polly Lloyd, was about to be married on the 20th of August just a few days after the fire. There was a big important party that night in honor of her and her beloved, Henry Tupper. It was given by Carrie and Burt Hatcher, that was the Johnson Hatcher, Hatcher. They were going to have this lovely party for her and of course, the fire was much more important than any party and it broke up; everybody went out to see the Dome Building burn. So you see, it made a great impression on lots of us at that time.

Q. When did you first see the fire? At the train station?

A. I think at the train station was the first time we noticed it. You could see the glare, it was tremendously red in the sky.

Q. Were your mother and father with you at the train station to meet Lang?

A. Yes, and my brothers Stuart and Henson were with us. We all had gone down to meet them. Lang was the hero returning you see, with his new award which was very exciting.

Q. How long did the fire last? Can you remember?

A. No, but people did go out the next day to the fairgrounds. What I remember was the great mess after the fire was over, glass and metal--it was such a mess. Of course, we have never had as beautiful a building in the city since then. It was a beautiful building.

Q. Did you hear rumors that the fire had been set?

A. No we didn't. I don't believe so. I don't know what the cause of it was. I should think there would be some records in the newspapers of the day.

Q. There are newspaper accounts but what we are trying to gather is the more living account from people who actually went to the fire.

A. Well, I think everybody in town went. There isn't any doubt about that. We had a Chalmers and went out by car. That was our first car, a Chalmers; soon after that we bought a Hudson, but the Chalmers was a touring car with windows that you could let down. In the tin shop, they had built a trunk to go on the back of it because of course, there were no trunks in that day. When we had gone East in this car, Father put all our suitcases together, not only our suitcases but our dusters and our veils and hats because, you see, we had to wear dusters. They all went into this metal trunk that he had built and fastened on the back of the Chalmers car. It was a touring car, an open car.

Q. It had no roof at all?

A. Oh yes, it had a roof, but no glass; it was just isinglass, those little curtains that you let down if it rained hard. Of course, if it rained, you stopped. You couldn't manage the road, certainly Illinois roads were impassable, because we didn't have hard roads. We had mud.

Q. When you say the tin shop, you mean Henson-Robinson Company?

A. Henson-Robinson's tin shop built this trunk.

Q. Do you remember your father's consternation about the fire since he was doing all the work on the building at the time? Were things a little tense at your house?

A. Yes, because of course, it would have been so easy to blame any of the tinnners. Fortunately, it was not apparently started in the same place that his workmen had been working, which cleared him. Of course, Father was superintendent of the Exhibition Building which was a great treat for all of us, it was right next to the Dome Building. I think

the Exhibition Building is probably still there, that's where all the people brought their exhibits. He had an office there during the fair season. Of course, it was wonderful because we had free entrance to the fair with a ticket on our car or on our carriage. We used the car though by the time of the Dome Building fire because we bought that car a couple of years before that.

Q. Was it one of the first cars in Springfield?

A. Oh no, my no. There were lots of automobiles by 1917. It was a big enough car so that all seven of us could get into it because Auntie Miss Margaret Robinson always went with us on our trips and we drove as far east as Rochester, New York, once in this car. Of course, you held your breath until you got out of Illinois. We had gravel roads in Indiana at this time and some pavement in Ohio, so you were safe if you could get out of Illinois because Illinois was just mud until we got to Chrisman, Indiana. We made a bee line for that. And of course you see, we had a Blue Book, put out by the Automobile Association and it told you exactly what to do and where to go. But it was by "turn right at this church" and "turn left at that school house" and "go past the red barn"--that kind of direction, because of course there were no road signs in those days.

Q. What else do you remember about the Dome Building?

A. I chiefly remember the Dome Building for the floral shows that they had. Of course, as Stu mentioned they had all of their cooking and agricultural displays for contests. But the flowers were simply beautiful that they displayed in there. And of course I think because of the glass dome the light filtering in on them made them more glamorous probably than they really were. It was very effective.

Q. Could flowers be grown in the Dome Building?

A. No, no, these were all flowers that were there to win prizes. The fair is still an effort to improve our agricultural and industrial things in the state, and so of course, there were prizes and awards for all. I have some of those awards, a big medal that Mary Lewis, my husband's aunt, won for a flower arrangement at the fair. So you see, it was the big occasion in the city.

Q. What did the glass look like?

A. It must have been opaque. I do remember the sun coming in gave it color. It was pretty, very pretty.

Q. You mentioned the other day that we should do something on other fires in Springfield.

A. Yes, my goodness gracious, we had some beautiful fires. I think the best one was the Myers Building fire and then all of the fires at the Johnson-Hatcher Company, they were spectacular. One of those fires I remember especially. I was, oh maybe five or six years old and I was

taking my little brother Henson who was a year and a half younger down to do his Christmas shopping. We lived at Eighth and Edwards and we went past the Johnson-Hatcher and there were two big windows in the front. In one of these windows was a Santa Claus with all these toys around and a speaking tube so you could stand out in the street and talk to Santa Claus. Of course we had to talk to Santa Claus and tell him what we wanted. I didn't know that their toy department was on the third floor at Johnson-Hatchers.

From there we walked over to the ten cent store which of course was on the west side of the square and did our Christmas shopping. I even remember what Henson bought for his father. It was a beautiful shaving stand with a little stand and a mirror about two or three inches in diameter and a little brush you know to mix up your soap and suds and a little cup. Oh, it was very fancy and he thought that was wonderful for his father. Well, it took a great deal of time and by the time we came out of the ten cent store and went up to Henson-Robinson Company which was just on Fifth Street in the 100 block north, all the clerks were out and they were so excited to find us because Johnson-Hatchers had caught on fire and the family was sure we were on the third floor. Of course, it was a dreadful fire, the walls fell in and people were hurt. And here we had just been in the ten cent store perfectly safe, but you see, we were just little bitty tykes. Now, just think, it was all right for little children to go uptown by themselves.

Q. Was Johnson-Hatcher a toy store?

A. It was a furniture department store, rugs and furniture. I don't think they sold any china but they did sell rugs and all household things. Just at Christmastime they also sold toys but I had no idea they sold toys. I didn't know where Santa Claus had come from but anyway there he was. But we were perfectly safe.

Q. Where was the Johnson-Hatcher store?

A. On the corner of Adams and Seventh, the southwest corner. I don't know what's in there now, but for a long time Suttons was there. They had as many as three fires. It was a beautiful store, but as I say, they were inclined to have fires. Of course, Myers Brothers had a couple of fires, too.

Q. Was Myers Brothers where it is today?

A. Yes, it is still on the same corner.

Q. When did it burn down?

A. Oh, a couple of times, one real good one I remember standing in the square watching. But the best fire was when the Armory burned, that was the very best fire.

Q. Tell me about that one.

A. I think it's a shame that we don't have movies of that fire because we could have sold them to D. M. Griffith. They were really spectacular because you see the building was stone and it had towers on the four corners like a castle. When the Armory caught on fire, it was on a Sunday and it was after church so it was one or two o'clock in the afternoon. The ammunition caught on fire inside, and they apparently had a lot of ammunition in there because it was just sky rockets and boom and bang. Oh it was wonderful. I stood over there on the Capitol grounds; Lewis Herndon, my brother-in-law and I stood there. I don't know where everybody else was but, oh it was wonderful. Why we didn't take pictures of it, I don't know. I'm sure someone must have.

Q. The Capitol grounds were where the state Capitol is today?

A. Yes, and the Armory was where the Armory is today, between Monroe and Adams, the building went all the way through you see. We were close and it's a good view from the hill there.

Q. Did all the fire trucks come out to fight the fire?

A. Oh yes of course! They couldn't do a thing because you see the fire was on the inside and the stone stood. The stone held up fine but everything inside burned up.

Q. What kind of stone was it?

A. Well, it was culver stone. There still is a culver stone building on Mason and Ninth, I think right along there by the railroad. It's big block stone and makes fine castles. We used to have a lot of it around but I don't know where it's all gone. I guess they've been torn down. It wasn't smooth, it was kind of rough on the outside. At least it looked rough, I've never felt it.

They also used to drill in there. It was a much bigger open place than the present Armory. It didn't have as many offices as I remember, because I remembered the boys drilling inside for the First World War. So I'm sure that it must have been a much bigger open place than the present Armory. And it was much more of a barracks-looking place. It was a block from north to south and easily a half a block, almost three-fourths of a block east and west, it went clear to the power plant. We always have had the power plant there, I guess it's still there. I forget when things are torn down. But I believe the power plant is still there, they used it to heat all the state buildings. And then the greenhouse was there too.

Q. What greenhouse?

A. Well, the state greenhouse. It was north of the power plant. Is it there anymore? (laughs)

Q. I don't know, I'll have to go look. Why was the state in the greenhouse business?

A. Well, they furnished all the flowers for the gardens around the Statehouse I guess. But they did have a greenhouse there.

Q. Was it affected by the fire?

A. I don't know, I remember the building. I'm sure it must have broken the glass in the greenhouse because it was a hot fire and as I say it was like sky rockets shooting out the top.

Q. Were any people hurt in the fire?

A. Not that I know of. Of course, there's always rumors of why it burned, you know.

Q. What rumors have you heard?

A. I didn't know if any of them are true, so I can't say.

Q. You must have heard some.

A. They always say sabotage, but I don't believe so.

Q. By whom?

A. I don't know what would be the reason because we were still in the depression then.

Q. About what year was this?

A. It had to be in the early 1930's sometime, but I wouldn't know the exact date on it, but it was a good fire.

Q. Can you remember where the rest of your family was?

A. No, I can remember being there with Lewis and I don't know whether he took me down there in his car. I wouldn't have any idea why I was with Lewis but I was because we both bemoaned the fact that we didn't have cameras because it would have made such a splendid movie--just a splendid movie because there was not only all the people but the shooting. It would have to be a sound movie, of course, a sound track. It was real good stuff.

Q. Would the store buildings be rebuilt?

A. Yes, they were rebuilt. They were big buildings; they were three-story high you know. The Myers Building, the first one, wasn't as high and when they rebuilt they put the offices in.

Well you know, we always went to fires. You'd hear the fire alarm and it didn't make any difference what was going on, you went to the fire.

Q. Did we have a paid fire department at that time?

A. Oh sure, and half the fun when I was growing up was to go at eight o'clock or just before eight, down back of City Hall. Number one fire department was there on Monroe, between Seventh and Eighth. And if you went down a little before eight you could stand there and watch the drill. Of course there were horses you see. Oh it was wonderful because you could watch them do their drill. They would ring a bell and then the men that were upstairs would slide down the post and the horses knew how to get into their places quickly and they did, and all the reins and everything were snapped on and they dashed out the firehouse. Wehy, it was just wonderful! And of course they did it supposedly, in record time. It was more fun if you were a little kid to go down there and watch them do it. Of course, I just lived down at Eighth and Edwards so it was only a short walk for me. That was a great way to spend the summer evening was to walk down and watch.

Q. Oh, this was in the evening?

A. Eight o'clock in the evening. They always had a drill at eight o'clock in the evening.

The fire department was really about where the Municipal Building is, you see it was back of it. The old building was where the fountains are and this was right in back of it facing on Monroe, so the horses would dash onto Monroe Street. And of course, we had a double line of streetcars then too, so that was pretty exciting because they might run into the streetcar you know. Oh, dear!

Q. Did they ever?

A. (laughs) Not that I ever knew of but it was pretty exciting and we kept hoping.

Q. Would there be a little crowd there every night to watch the show?

A. Oh yes, yes. It was a good show.

Q. Did they have a dog with them?

A. I don't remember a dog, but I do remember the men sliding down the post. That was wonderful how they would slide down. Why they were upstairs in their bedrooms, I don't know about it but that was part of the deal because they were suppose to answer the fire at any time you see, day or night.

Q. Oh, that's wonderful. What happened after the drill?

A. Well, they would ride around a few blocks and come back and it was very tame.

Q. Did they ever let you get rides?

A. No, no.

Q. Did they wear uniforms? Dark blue?

A. Oh sure, sure. They stood on the back of their hook and ladder.

Q. How many horses pulled the hook and ladder?

A. Two.

Q. Oh, just two?

A. Two pulled the, oh what do you call the thing that had the hose on it?

Q. The hose wagon?

A. Well, it had a pump on it too you see that would force the water higher so it had some kind of a motor.

Q. So there was a whole cavalcade by the time you got there? Four horses and two wagons, about how many men?

A. Well, I imagine there were probably four on each wagon, at least I know there were four on the hook and ladder, because there two stood in the back and two sat in the front. I imagine at least two, maybe four on the--there's a word for that other contraption they had with the hose.

Q. Were the horses stabled right inside the fire house?

A. Yes, oh yes. They were big horses, they were beautiful horses.

Q. Did they have names, did you have favorites?

A. Oh no, I never did go that far. Course you see, horses were so common. We had our own horses and a cow, so they weren't quite such a treat. Today now, horses downtown would be quite a sensation but it wasn't then. It was just that these were so well trained. They knew their business. They were fire horses, really I mean it. Just exactly like, you know, the beer horses that they trained to pull the beer wagons; those were specially trained horses and these were specially trained for the fire engines. They knew when the bell rang that that was their signal.

Q. Someone would let them out of their stall and they would get them . . .

A. A lot of that was pretty automatic because it happened so fast. To me it was just, oh my it just seemed like it was a miracle.

Q. What was the last fire you can remember seeing with the horses?

A. With the horses? Oh heavens, couldn't tell you. You see, when things change you don't even remember they change.

Q. Were they there for this Johnson-Hatcher fire?

A. Oh, I'm sure they were. Oh course you see, we had lots of fire houses around. I don't think we have as many fire houses as we used to have. We used to have--one on Fourth Street, on Fourth and South Grand Avenue, and there was one on North Grand and, North Grand and Sixth, and there was one on West--well now let's see where that was. Well, I know exactly, the Vrett place, it was on Edwards and MacArthur on the northeast corner. The fire house is still the same building. And of course there were some in the east part of town, those were right, you know, within a radius of a mile. But of course, with horses you didn't get around as fast as you do with a motor.

Q. Number One Fire House was your favorite?

A. Oh sure, that was nearest. But of course, all of them would come to a big fire.

Q. Would they blow a whistle? You said that when there was a fire you all came. How did you know there was a fire other than seeing the smoke?

A. I think there was a whistle like our sirens, that kind of a whistle. Because we certainly knew there was a fire. We always chased the fire engines. I don't mean just us, everybody did.

Q. Could you get out of school?

A. Oh no, no, no, my gracious no! But we certainly could go to the fire. Some boys were especially fire bugs. They would keep records and they would go to every kind of a fire, silly little fires like garages burning, no I mean barns burning, they weren't garages then, they were barns. But they went to every fire, even trash fires.

Q. There were no volunteer firemen in Springfield then?

A. Not that I remember.

Q. It was really a big city then.

A. Oh, yes, oh we had hydrants. We are probably using the same ones today. Then there was the Leland Hotel fire.

Q. When was that?

A. That was in 1908. I was nine years old, just a little girl. There's one Johnson-Hatcher in 1907 I glimpse down here. (looking at list) Here's another one in 1913. Oh, the Boston store fire too--that was a good fire.

Q. Where was the Boston store?

A. It was on the east side of the square on Sixth Street. It was in there about where Stern's is. No there was a jewelry store on the alley there. The Boston store was south of that.

Q. Was this built before the Illinois Building was built?

A. Yes, oh yes. Oh, the Illinois Building is new.

Q. What did you hear about the governor's mansion fire?

A. That was Matteson's fire. Well, we all knew that that's where the mansion had been and that this was, oh a dreadful thing. I'm trying to think what I did hear about it because it was more than just a dreadful fire. I can't remember. Isn't that terrible? I'll think about that because there was some--I can't remember whether it burned up some of their things or whether there was some scandal connected with it.

Q. Do you think Springfield had more fires than other places?

A. Oh no, no.

Q. You just enjoyed them more?

A. Well you see, we did use lots of wood as well as brick. We used lots of wood and we didn't have any fire fighting . . . you know, there were no sprinkler systems or anything like that.

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