



HENRY BLACKMAN SELL, a man who in the course of the past thirty years has been quite a figure in literary criticism, interior decoration, advertising, magazine editing, couture, vitamins, and the manufacture of a line of tinned meat pastes, stews, and hashes known as Sell's Specialties, his present preoccupation, was born in Whitewater, Wisconsin, on November 14, 1889. Whitewater, which is in the southeastern corner of the state, is a small town that had then, and still has, a population of about thirty-seven hundred. Sell's father was the Reverend Dr. Henry Thorne Sell, a high functionary of the Congregational Church, the editor of a Congregational magazine named the *Advance*, and a big Sunday-school man. He is one of the men whom millions of American children can thank for the present-day short, informal Sunday-school sessions, in which finger painting, sex talks, and group play have replaced responsive readings, recitations, and half-hour doses of hymns. He was also a lecturer on the old Chautauqua circuits and the author of "Sell's Bible Study Text Books," a monumental work of twenty-one volumes, cross-indexing the Holy Scriptures. Few men, before or since, have tried to do such an all-out cross-index of the Bible. The work is still in print, and the name of Sell is still an honored one among the harassed clergymen who anxiously grope through it on Saturday nights for texts. Revolutionizing Sunday schools, competing with musical-saw artists and talking horses on the summer circuits, and rubricating every common and proper noun from Genesis through Revelation left the Reverend Dr. Sell little time for family affairs, but his son saw enough of him to acquire a deep respect for him. Although the younger Sell's attitude toward tradition is one of

PROFILES

SPECIALTIES

II—FROM WHITEWATER TO A HOMBURG

such thoroughgoing contempt that he has become known in the meat industry as the iconoclast who dared to make a hash out of corned pork instead of corned beef, he sometimes seeks the comfort of continuity by comparing his career in meat with his father's career in theology. "Sell's Specialties and 'Sell's Bible Studies,'" he will say. "It's almost as though Father and I were an act. My products are supplemental feeding for the body. His were supplemental feeding for the soul."

Sell's mother, the former Mary Blackman, was the daughter of the richest man in Whitewater, the president of the local bank. "Grandfather *was* Whitewater," Sell says. "He was the Old Man there, the one who lived in the Big House on the Hill." Sell's mother was gay, careless about money, and a bit scatterbrained. It is possible that Sell's urge to improve the lot of mankind with good reading, good clothes, and good food is a variant of his father's liberal evangelism. His urge to improve the lot of Sell and to enjoy himself in elaborate and generally expensive ways could be a legacy from the Blackmans, who loved luxury as much as he does. Although the family was a pioneer one, having settled in Whitewater in the middle of the nineteenth century, and although Mrs. Blackman was a first cousin of Buffalo Bill, the life the Blackmans led followed an Eastern seaboard rather than a Middle Border pattern. They travelled a lot, visited for long periods in Boston and New York, and patronized most of the polite arts. Even in the cheese country, Sell says, they always managed to look as if they were on their way to Sunday dinner at Delmonicos. When, eight years ago, Sell learned that Howard Lindsay and Dorothy Stickney were rehearsing in the parts of Mr. and Mrs. Day for "Life with Father," he sent them a batch of photographs of his maternal grandparents. Sell is convinced, though nobody else seems to be, that the costumes and makeup for everyone who has played the roles, right down to William Powell and Irene Dunne in the movie version, have been modelled on those in the photographs of the Blackmans of Whitewater, Wisconsin. "Every time I see a picture of Father Day," Sell says, "he

looks more and more like Grandfather Blackman."

Sell went to high school for five years, but he did not graduate. His formal education was really the only unsuccessful project he has ever undertaken. He was a quick-witted boy but impervious to the current educational methods. "I've never had any head for organized knowledge," he says. "I don't think I ever passed an examination in my life. I crumpled up whenever I took one." After the public schools had washed their hands of him, he was sent, in 1906, to Culver Military Academy, where he stayed until 1909, when he was nineteen. Except in his studies, nearly all of which he failed, he did well at Culver. He eventually became president of two or three societies, editor of the student newspaper, and the school's official guide and greeter. He was good-looking and rather courtly, and whenever celebrities or the parents of prospective students visited the campus, he was shown off to them as an example of what nice, clean-cut, well-spoken boys went to Culver. It was never explained that this over-age paragon was in his fifth year of first-year Latin. In the spring of 1909, the commandant sent Sell's father a friendly but candid letter. "I regret having to say that the end for Henry is still nowhere in sight," he wrote. He said he doubted that Henry could ever be admitted to Yale, for which he had been intended, or to any other self-respecting college, and that while he was a decorative and engaging fixture at parties and receptions, it was well known that money came hard to a clergyman and it seemed inadvisable to sink any more of it in a lost cause. Dr. Sell took the advice, and Henry left Culver that June with an indeterminate academic status. Culver has nevertheless used him as a kind of advertisement, claiming him as a distinguished alumnus of the Class of '10. This pleases Sell, who has shown that he is not against education for others by helping subsidize university projects for nutrition research and by recently establishing a scholarship in sociology at Syracuse University.

FOLLOWING his emergence from Culver, Sell had a series of newspaper jobs. He and a boyhood friend,