

A Bloomsburg Boy Makes the Big Time

William Baillie

Sometimes an unremarkable child of Columbia County has achieved great things in the wider world as an adult. Such stories are, in a way, part of our county's history. Since we are again in football season, it is appropriate to tell one such story that hinges on outstanding success on the gridiron.

Donald Grant "Heff" Herring was born September 6, 1886 at Bloomsburg, the son of one of the best-known attorneys in Columbia County. The Herrings were one of the old county families—Donald's immigrant great-grandfather had settled in Orangeville in 1800. His grandfather served as president of Bloomsburg's town council and treasurer of Columbia County. His father served in the Pennsylvania Senate 1891-1894.

Donald was educated in the Bloomsburg public schools, including some years at Bloomsburg High School beginning in the eighth grade. He was instrumental in organizing the high school's first football team in 1899, a story he told decades later in his book titled **Forty Years of Football**. (See excerpts from that book in "Bush League Football" on page 1.)

Herring went on to prep school at Lawrenceville, New Jersey, where he participated in several sports. He was amazed at the difference in the game of football when played with proper equipment, coaches, and referees.

He entered Princeton in 1903 and immediately tried out for football. For his freshman and sophomore years he played on the junior varsity team, but in 1905 and 1906 he played tackle and center on the varsity squad. For the 1906 season he was named an All-American. He was known as a fearsome blocker and tackler in an era which produced the 1905-06 "crisis" in intercollegiate football. Because of the rough nature of the sport and its increasing commercialization, Columbia University and a score of other colleges dropped the sport, and many other campuses, including Harvard and Princeton, considered doing so. The furor led to the creation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the introduction of a new set of rules for college football. Herring played in the last days of the "no-holds-barred" brand of collegiate football—and was among the best of his era.

In 1905 Princeton organized its first varsity wrestling team, with Heff Herring as a prominent member. In the second year of varsity competition, Herring won the national intercollegiate heavyweight wrestling championship in record time, downing one opponent in sixteen seconds and another in thirteen. He was a dapper heavyweight, appearing at professional wrestling matches in Newark sporting tails, white tie, and top hat.

Herring excelled also outside sports. At Princeton he was a member of the senior council and of many of the upper class organizations, and he was master of ceremonies at his class commencement in 1907. As a senior he won Princeton's first Rhodes scholarship for graduate study at Merton College, Oxford University.

At Oxford he entered whole-heartedly into athletics; he made a name for himself at cricket, hockey, and hammer-throwing, and was the first American to play on the Oxford University rugby team. That rugby fifteen beat arch-rival Cambridge by the then-record score of 35 to 3. A letter to the *Varsity*, a sports paper in Oxford, reviewed Herring's stellar career at Princeton and Oxford, and he was even caricatured in a cartoon in *The Tatler*, an English sporting magazine. Meanwhile, he created something of a sensation in America by stating in a 1910 letter to *The Daily Princetonian* that British rugby football was a better game than the American version. This opinion derived probably from his love of rough contact—he was never known as a gentle footballer!

He received his Master's degree from Oxford in 1910 and returned to Princeton, where his alma mater hired him to teach English. Soon he was hired also as a sports writer for the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, and not long afterwards he became its editor. He was famed as a sports reporter whose opinions were widely quoted. He even was featured—for his sartorial splendor and his unrestrained predictions—in a doggerel poem, an account of the 1922 football game at Stagg Field in Chicago which ended in the score, *Princeton 21, Chicago 18*:

Heff Herring's trick hosiery dazzles the eye
As he mounts to the Press Stand the game to espy.
Though dazzling his calves, quite glum is his glance—
In the *Weekly* he's stated we haven't a chance.

(A footnote to this stanza calls Herring "The only professional pessimist whose writings are universally enjoyed.")

In 1912 he was one of five graduates of Old Nassau appointed to Princeton's Football Advisory Committee, with authority over the university's football program.

During World War I Herring won a commission as 1st Lieutenant in the 94th Aero Squadron, a small group of pilots that included America's top ace in the War, Eddie Rickenbacker. They flew many missions over enemy lines in France in their fragile Spad aircraft. The Spad was a French-built biplane that was faster than other fighters at the time but was less maneuverable and more difficult to fly. When he died, Herring held the rank of Colonel, retired, U.S.A.F.

In 1910 Herring had married Jessie Markham of Wheeling, West Virginia, whom he had met through his sister. The couple, after a year's engagement, decided to get married while they were shopping in New York City and were quietly married at the Little Church Around the Corner. In 1919 Herring and his wife bought land outside Princeton which they intended for an equestrian estate; they named it "Rothers Barrows." They built an "extraordinarily elegant stone house" designed by noted architect Wilson Eyre in the Arts & Crafts style. Eyre also designed the landscaping in the "Chestnut Hill" style characterized by native trees; there was a stone-walled sunken terrace, a croquet lawn, and for the horses a show ring and barn and a 960-yard race track. Although the building plan was not completed due to limited funds, the Herrings moved in after World War I and the home became a noted hospitality center of the Princeton area. In 1992 the estate was designated an Historic Site by Princeton Township.

Mr. and Mrs. Herring were featured often on the Society pages of Trenton and area newspapers and occasionally in the *New York Times*. Both were in the wedding party, for example, when the University President's daughter married a faculty member in 1915. In 1924 the Trenton paper printed a "charming portrait" of the Herring family: Heff and Jessie with their four children "spending the winter at Lausanne, Switzerland, where the children are attending school."

Tragedy later struck the family. Their only son, Donald G. Herring Jr., followed his father's footsteps into a starring role on the Princeton football team. But in 1940—the year Donald Sr. published *Forty Years of Football*—the son was seriously injured in a game against Brown University and had to have his lower leg amputated. The incident generated sympathy for the family across the nation and led to the family being awarded the first annual Amos Alonzo Stagg Award for "outstanding services in the advancement of the best interests of football." Two years later Donald Jr.'s youngest sister was killed in Wyoming when she fell into a canyon in a snowstorm; she was twenty-two years old.

The Bloomsburg boy who made it big through football did not return to Columbia County. His father's family had moved to Sunbury, Pennsylvania, where Grant was named to a judgeship. At retirement Donald went to live in North Carolina and died there. But for years Columbia County followed with interest the career of a native son who "made it" in big-time college sports.

SOURCES included:

Anon. *Book of Biographies of the Seventeenth Congressional District*. Buffalo, 1899.

Edwards, William H. *Football Days*. New York, 1916.

Halsey, Frank D. & A. C. M. Azoy, Jr. *Goal Lines: An Anthology of Princeton Verse*. Princeton, 1922.

Herring, Donald G. *Forty Years of Football*. New York, 1940.

Newspapers:

Augusta, GA *Chronicle* July 10, 1910

Princeton, NJ *Daily Princetonian* Jan. 18, 1910

The New York Times Dec. 29, 1912; Jan. 25, 1920

Philadelphia Inquirer Dec. 25, 1910

Princeton, NJ *Town Topics* Dec. 3, 2003

Trenton *Evening Times* Dec 15, 1909; Nov. 15, 1925

Wilkes-Barre *Times* Apr. 15, 1907

Smith, Ronald A. "Harvard and Columbia and a Reconsideration of the 1905-06 Football Crisis." *Journal of Sport History* 8:3 (Winter, 1981), 5-19.

United States Census, Population Schedules: 1900 Bloomsburg, PA; 1910 Sunbury, PA; 1920, 1930 Princeton Township, Mercer County, NJ.

This article first appeared in the CCH&GS *Newsletter*, September 2010, pp. 5-6.