

**HENRY BROWN (1913-1987)** was never afraid to learn new skills to overcome the challenges which life threw at him. After his parents divorced and the Great Depression came, he dropped out of school and became a “wild child” of the streets. Luckily, he had two transformative experiences which set his life on the right path: serving in the Civilian Conservation Corps at a bird sanctuary in Arkansas and meeting and marrying his wife Gertrude. After settling in Bloomington, Henry struggled against discrimination to make a home and support his family. He tried many different occupations: sheet metal worker, mechanic, carpenter, and bricklayer, but he couldn’t get hired in any of those trades. Finally, he became a licensed plumber, owned his own business, and had a long career of 26 years. Through hard work and determination, Henry always persevered.

Henry Brown was born on April 1, 1913 in Russom, Mississippi. He was a son of Whitney and Laura (Johnson) Brown.<sup>1</sup> When Henry was four years old, he and his family moved to Helena Arkansas. His parents divorced sometime after this move and he and his brother spent part of the year in Memphis, Tennessee with their mother and part of the year in Helena with their father. In a 1987 interview, Henry recalled that he spent more time with his mother first, spending the school year with his mother and summers with his father. However, as he got older Henry “switched it around” because he felt that he “got more freedom with” his father.<sup>2</sup>

When the Great Depression came, it greatly affected Henry’s life as it did the lives of most Americans. On Black Tuesday, October 26, 1929, the Stock Market crashed and stock prices plummeted. Soon banks began to close because people panicked and withdrew their money. Many businesses cut back and unemployment was high. The 1930s were a tough time for almost everyone. For Henry, his father lost his job as a dough mixer in a local bakery. Henry then dropped out of high school and lived on the streets. He recalled that “things had gotten rugged...you couldn’t have this, you couldn’t have that. You just lost concern. So many people did.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1935, Henry had his first transformative life experience. A caseworker talked Henry into joining the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was a program designed to put two wasted resources back to work, young men and the land, during the Great Depression. This program was open only to physically fit, young, unmarried men between the ages of 17 to 28. All men who applied to join the CCC had to be unemployed for at least six months and could not be on probation or on parole.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1933, the Labor Department (in charge of recruitment), the War Department (in charge of administering and directing the camps) and the Agricultural and Interior Departments (in charge of organizing and directing the work projects) organized and managed almost 300,000 young men on almost 1,500 projects throughout the United States, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Alaska, and the Virgin Islands. By 1935 (when Henry had enrolled in the CCC) that number was up to over 500,000 men. Each camp had about 200 men living and working there. Each camp was assigned a specific project. Those projects included: building national wildlife refuges and parks, constructing buildings and facilities at national

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<sup>1</sup> “Henry L. Brown,” *The Pantagraph*, June 22, 1987

<sup>2</sup> Mildred Pratt. “Oral history interview with Henry Brown, February 27, 1987,” Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Museum of History Archives, 1

<sup>3</sup> “Oral History with Henry Brown, 1987,” 2

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Sandra Taylor. “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Arkansas, 1933-1942” (Little Rock: Arkansas Historic Preservation Program) <http://www.arkansaspreservation.com/pdf/publications/ccp.pdf> (Date accessed August 26, 2013) 7

parks, planting forests, fighting forest fires, and developing wilderness areas for public enjoyment.<sup>5</sup>

Henry recalled that he did not want to join the CCC, “but the case worker talked me into it saying you don’t want your father around suffering. And she got to the sentimental side, and I gave in and went.”<sup>6</sup> For his work, Henry (like the rest of the young men who joined the CCC) was paid \$30.00 per month (which would be \$511.00<sup>7</sup> in 2013). Most of that amount (\$25.00) was sent to the individual’s dependents (in Henry’s case his father). The remaining \$5.00 was left for the individual to spend as they chose. CCC workers were also provided with living quarters, food, clothing, medical care, and hospitalization.<sup>8</sup>

Upon enrolling in the CCC, Henry was sent to a bird refuge<sup>9</sup> in Arkansas where he worked for about a year.<sup>10</sup> It was here that Henry developed a great love of nature. Henry remembered that “down in Arkansas in the winter, the geese and ducks would come in that area and winter there.” In his opinion, he and his fellow CCC boys were in a section of Arkansas “that every snake in the world was in that area.”<sup>11</sup> Because he could read and write, Henry was placed in charge of 25 men. He and his men were charged with clearing up the bayous and waterways to keep snakes from eating the bird eggs during the winter months. Having grown up in the city his whole life, Henry knew little about nature and wild life so he would have to learn quickly. “I didn’t know anything about the woods and trees. But we had to cut a right of way through some dense woods...about 25 miles long...I didn’t know any trees. I’d get my orders to cut different trees. They’d give me the names of trees but I didn’t know one from another, but I befriended these boys that had grown up in the country. I was smart enough to befriend them. I would give them orders as if I knew it...”<sup>12</sup> After a few weeks of pretending he knew what he was doing, he broke down and asked the local boys if they would help him learn how to identify trees. Henry recalled that they laughed at him but taught him two ways how to identify a tree: by the leaves and by the bark. Because he was a fast and willing learner, this would help him overcome obstacles the rest of his life. Although Henry worked there for only one year (he left when his father died), he credited the CCC for turning his life around.

After Henry left the CCC, he went to live Memphis where his mother was and returned to the “wild life” on the streets.<sup>13</sup> While living in Memphis, a girl named Gertrude Butcher caught

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Arkansas, 1933-1942,” 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 1

<sup>7</sup> “CPI Inflation Calculator,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, [http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm) (Date Accessed August 26, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> Smith, “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Arkansas, 1933-1942,” 7

<sup>9</sup> While Henry never mentioned the name of the bird refuge in either of the oral histories he gave, from the information he provided, it appears that he worked at the White River National Wildlife Refuge in the floodplain of the White River where it meets the Mississippi River about 42 miles from Stuttgart, Arkansas. The White River National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1935 for the “protection of migratory birds.” It is one of the most important wintering grounds for mallard ducks on the continent and about two-thirds of all bird species found in Arkansas use the refuge. “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987;” “White River National Wildlife Refuge,” <http://www.fws.gov/whiteriver/> (Date Accessed August 26, 2013); “Refuges celebrate 75 years,” National Wildlife Refuge System, [http://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/RefugesCelebrate75Years\\_12132010.html](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/RefugesCelebrate75Years_12132010.html) (Date Accessed August 26, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Enrollment in the CCC was in six month intervals. Henry would have re-enrolled after his initial six month enrollment.

<sup>11</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 2

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> According to Henry Brown’s children, Henry was a “young man in the streets” and was involved with “throwing dice,” (referring to gambling and card playing). Mary Kay Zeter, “Oral history interview with Donise Brown, John

his eye. His brother told him that she was only interested in people “who are right with the Lord.”<sup>14</sup> Then one night after presumably some “wild living,” Henry found himself “going down the railroad tracks and got into a box car.” It was here that Henry asked the Lord to come into his life, that he wanted the Lord as his personal savior. According to his children, Henry called this his “box car” experience. It was from that point on he gave his life over to God and left everything else in the past.<sup>15</sup> He then went and found Gertrude, they fell in love, and after only eight months of courtship, they were married on December 25, 1937 at the Tree of Life Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, TN. For the rest of their married lives, Henry always gave Gertrude two gifts on their anniversary; one for Christmas and one for their anniversary.<sup>16</sup> Henry and Gertrude had five children, two sons and three daughters (Whitney, John, Carolyn, Donise, and Arlene).

At this same time, Henry worked at a trailer manufacturing company in Memphis as a sheet metal worker. Henry recalled that at that time, “they would teach Blacks trades. They wouldn’t pay them the wages of the trades (meaning the same wages as a white worker) but they would teach them, and Blacks would do it. So they taught me.” Henry said he began learning the trade when he was 24 years old and had mastered it by the time he was 26. He said he could “take metal and form anything.” He said he made everything he needed including bread pans (which he still had at the time of his death) a butcher knife, and a medicine cabinet out of iron. By 1942, after the United States had joined World War II, the factory had changed and was now making fire doors. Henry continued to work for the company because “it was easy for me to learn that.” A short time later, Henry transferred to one of the defense plants in Memphis because he could make more money.<sup>17</sup>

After about nine months working at the defense plant, Henry “received greetings” and was called up to serve in the United States Army. He went to Tennessee to be examined and after he passed, he was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia. His tests showed a high aptitude for mechanics so he was sent to the Ordnance School in Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland. Henry said after completing his basic and technical training there, he was sent to California to work in a motor vehicle pool. He subsequently was sent to England as a mechanic but ended up being trained as a dispatcher and that was his job for the rest of the war. Henry said that he “was in charge of 55 vehicles, and I had to keep up with them. I was the boss of them. I had to send them out. I had to give the lieutenant orders—what vehicles to take and when to take them and where to take them.”<sup>18</sup> He decided that the rank which he held (that of corporal) was too low for the position which he excelled at. Henry felt that “he wanted to come home with a little bit more pride.” Henry approached his commander and said that he would like to apply for the rank of staff sergeant. His commander replied that he felt Henry would make an excellent staff sergeant however, he would never make that rank. His commander stated that Henry was the only person he could trust to do that job well and that as long as he was the commander, Henry would be stuck in the motor pool “with a two stripe rank.” Henry was a victim of his own success and was devastated but there was nothing he could do. However, when Henry left the military in 1945 he turned down the separation pay the military offered him. Henry said that he “couldn’t take no

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Brown, and Carolyn Ware, children of Henry Brown, 2013,” McLean County Museum of History Archives.

<sup>14</sup> “Oral history interview with Donise Brown, John Brown, and Carolyn Ware, children of Henry Brown.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 4-5

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

handout.”<sup>19</sup>

After the war ended in 1945, Henry began looking for work. He first went to Memphis and then to Philadelphia. Henry left his wife Gertrude, and their two children at the time (Carolyn and Whitney) in Memphis while he searched for work. Finding no work in Philadelphia, Henry came to Bloomington to visit his mother in about 1946. His mother had moved to Bloomington around 1942 or 1943 and was living with her husband George Meaderds, whom she had married some time before.<sup>20</sup> Henry recalled that his mother came to Bloomington looking for a brother of hers who “had become lost from the family.” After staying in Bloomington for about six to nine months, she had “gotten used to the town” and decided to stay.<sup>21</sup>

Henry continued to struggle against discrimination in finding work and housing in Bloomington like he had in other places in the country. He tried to get a job with his training as a sheet metal worker but he was told that Blacks could not be sheet metal workers in Bloomington. He then went to school to learn the trade of carpentry but had to settle for work as a janitor, which he had never done before.<sup>22</sup> Henry worked as a janitor and assistant shipping clerk at G.C. Heberling Company (located at 217-223 East Douglas) and later First Federal Savings and Loan on Prairie Street. However he was not satisfied with remaining a janitor<sup>23</sup> and he decided to learn another new trade. He began to study brick-laying and received a certificate from the Midwest School of Building Trades in November 1950. He tried to organize a chimney repair business “because I could see all over this town they were in bad shape.” Henry wanted to tear them down past the roof line and then build them back up. To do this, he would have to build “all kinds of scaffolding.” But he could not get any help. He tried to do the work himself but it was too hard and too much to do for just one man so he decided that he would have to choose a different career.<sup>24</sup>

In 1953, because there were already a few black plumbers in Bloomington, Henry decided to learn this trade. He knew a man named Arthur Garrison who told Henry to go talk to his father, Louis Garrison, a well known plumber in town and the first African American plumber in Bloomington.<sup>25</sup> Henry (and Louis’s son Arthur) began working for Louis, learning the plumbing trade. Henry said that he learned the trade by “watching and fooling around. And sitting up at night and trying to learn how to attach lead joints and reading all the books and different things like that.”<sup>26</sup> After a five year apprenticeship under Louis Garrison, Henry went to Springfield to take the state examination to become a licensed plumber in November of that year. However, before Henry could even take the test, Louis Garrison had to sign paperwork to prove that Henry had completed the required five year apprenticeship.<sup>27</sup>

After Henry passed the test and received his license, he continued to work for Garrison

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<sup>19</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 6

<sup>20</sup> Mildred Pratt. “Oral History with Henry Brown, Luther Watson, Frances Gaines, and Leslie Smith,” April 19, 1985, Bloomington-Normal Black History Project, McLean County Museum of History Archives, 2

<sup>21</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 6

<sup>22</sup> “Oral History with Henry Brown, Luther Watson, Frances Gaines, and Leslie Smith,” 28-29

<sup>23</sup> Henry kept working as a janitor as a side job to supplement the family’s income. His daughter Donise recalled going to work with him as a little girl and helping him dump trash at First Federal Savings and Loan. “Oral History with Donise Brown, John Brown, and Carolyn Ware about Henry Brown.”

<sup>24</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 9

<sup>25</sup> Conversation with Lewis A. Garrison, son of Louis Arthur Garrison, on September 21, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 9-10

<sup>27</sup> Conversation with Lewis A. Garrison, son of Louis Arthur Garrison, on September 21, 2015.

for a time but then decided to venture out on his own.<sup>28</sup> He was able to start his own business because in the early 1950s Illinois plumbing laws were changed so that a person no longer had to be a master plumber to own and operate his own plumbing business. Prior to this, journeymen plumbers (like Henry) could not operate their own plumbing business until they themselves became a master plumber.<sup>29</sup>

The 1957 City Directory lists Henry L. Brown's occupation as plumber, and in the business section he is listed as a plumbing contractor. He received certification as a plumbing contractor in April 1958. He built a shop two doors down from his home (at the site of where his mother had lived). He had a large and successful plumbing business, so much so that he was able to hire others to work for him as well. Henry's daughter Donise recalled when she was a little girl, that people would call him on a Sunday in the winter time with plumbing problems when he was getting ready for church. Henry would take his suit off and say "tell em I'll be there." He would never turn down a person in need.<sup>30</sup> Henry was a plumber for 26 years. He retired from plumbing in 1975 because arthritis hit him in both knees. He still operated his business for some time after his retirement.<sup>31</sup> Henry was proud to say that at one time there were more Black plumbers in Bloomington than anywhere south of Chicago and north of St. Louis.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to his work as a plumber, Henry became a licensed real estate agent. Henry felt that "one of these days I'm going to falter in plumbing because of physical fitness. I should start now to lay the ground work for something else to do." He studied for the exam and passed it. While he never sold any houses, he never intended to get a real estate license to sell houses. In Henry's own words, he got it just in case he had to ease out of plumbing.<sup>33</sup> At the time of his death in June of 1987, he was affiliated with the Robert Ball Real Estate Co.<sup>34</sup>

Housing was another obstacle that Henry had to overcome. When he came to Bloomington in 1946 he could not rent a house. No one would rent houses to African Americans in town at this time. That meant that Henry (like other African Americans in the area) had to buy a house. Henry used the G.I. Bill he earned from his military service to purchase a small home located at 1207 West MacArthur Street. Henry recalled that the government did not advance any money, they just guaranteed the loan. If he would have failed to pay it back, the government would have paid it off (which he never needed). After he purchased his first home, he sent for his wife and two children to come and live with him.

As Henry and Gertrude had more children, Henry added on to the house. There was no bedroom left for their last daughter when she was born in 1957 so they had to put her in a crib in the living room. This weighed heavily on Henry. He said "this was just like sticking a knife in me." He wanted to buy a larger house but he could not find anyone to sell him one. He then decided he would buy a lot and build a bigger house. However he recalled that he "couldn't buy no lots in this town. I went all over this town and couldn't buy a single lot. The only one I could

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<sup>28</sup> "Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987," 9-10

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with Lewis A. Garrison, son of Louis Arthur Garrison, on September 21, 2015.; "People vs. Brown," November 27, 1950. <http://law.justia.com/cases/illinois/supreme-court/1950/31701-5.html>, Date Accessed, September 21, 2015; "Study Plumber License Upset by High Court," *Chicago Tribune*, December 13, 1950. <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1950/12/13/page/43/article/study-plumber-license-upset-by-high-court>, Date Accessed September 21, 2015

<sup>30</sup> "Oral History with Donise Brown, John Brown, and Carolyn Ware about Henry Brown."

<sup>31</sup> "Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987," 11

<sup>32</sup> "Oral History with Henry Brown, Luther Watson, Frances Gaines, and Leslie Smith," 6

<sup>33</sup> "Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987," 16

<sup>34</sup> "Henry L. Brown"

buy was this one right here [at 1116 West MacArthur Street.]. It was owned by Anna Clark [Lue Anna Sanders Clark] and she sold it to me. I thanked her so much.”<sup>35</sup> He then “drew up the plans and laid it out.” Henry built the house just as he wanted it to be.

One of Henry’s goals in building this new house was for each room to have access to the central hallway. He hired contractors to dig the basement and to put up the walls and put on the roof. He then did all the rest of the work himself using all of the skills of carpentry, metal work, brick masonry, and plumbing he had learned over the years. In 1958, after eleven months of working on the house himself, Henry and his family had a new home. He lived in this house on MacArthur Street for the rest of his life.<sup>36</sup>

Henry was dedicated to his family. His children remembered him as an extremely hard worker. He was able to accomplish so many things because he was very organized. Everything in his office or truck had its place. He was head of the home but ruled it with a loving hand. He read his Bible and encouraged his children to read their Bibles too. He encouraged them to save money and opened a savings account at the First Federal Bank for each one of them.<sup>37</sup>

Education was important to Henry. He encouraged his children to study hard. He kept all their report cards. After his children had received their diplomas, he obtained his GED. Then he began working to obtain a college education. He wanted to become a lawyer and was accepted at Illinois State University in the fall of 1966. But, in Henry’s own words, he “forgot he was a human being” and he got sick. Henry was pushing himself too hard by trying to rear a family, operate a business, build a home, advance his education, and remodel a church. It took its toll and damaged his liver, which forced him to abandon his plans for attending college.<sup>38</sup>

Henry worked hard to make Bloomington-Normal a better place and was very active in the community. In the 1950s, African Americans could attend Illinois State Normal University but could not live in the dorms or eat in the cafeterias. African American students ate at the Chat and Chew on the edge of campus and lived with African American families in the community. Each year the Dean of Women at ISNU, Anna Keaton, would call the Browns and other African American families in the community to find rooms for African-American students.<sup>39</sup> They and others in their neighborhood would do their part to help the students and took student boarders in for many years.

The spiritual awakening which Henry experienced in a Memphis box car remained a strong factor in his life. He was a devote Christian and member of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church (then located at 701 S. Lee Street). For many years he was a deacon at Mt. Pisgah and served as chairman of the board of deacons. He served as treasurer and building and fund drive chairman during the four-year drive to refurbish the church from 1961 until 1965.<sup>40</sup> He also taught adult Sunday school classes up until shortly before his death in 1987.<sup>41</sup>

In 1973 he was a co-founder of the Bloomington-Normal Minority Voters Coalition, Inc. Other founders and members of the first Board of Directors were Marguerite Jackson, Eva Jones, Charles E. Morris, and Robert Gaston. The purpose of this organization was “to foster and cultivate a social, educational and citizenship relationship of its members and to broaden their

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<sup>35</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 7, 12

<sup>36</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 8

<sup>37</sup> “Oral History with Donise Brown, John Brown, and Carolyn Ware about Henry Brown.”

<sup>38</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 17

<sup>39</sup> “Oral History of Henry Brown, 1987,” 13

<sup>40</sup> “Henry L. Brown”

<sup>41</sup> “Bloomington man to be honored,” *The Pantagraph*, April 13, 1987

interests in pursuit of good citizenship and to improve relationships among and between members of various political, social, cultural, religious, ethnic, and professional groups in the community.” The organization also encouraged its members “to participate in matters of local, state, and federal government offices, issues, programs, and campaigns.”<sup>42</sup> Henry served as president of the organization for many years.

Henry was a member of the Bloomington Police and Fire Commission for six years and director of the weatherization program for McLean County Economic Opportunity Corp. He served on the McLean County Regional Planning Commission for 13 years. While serving on the Planning Commission, it was Henry who suggested the idea to turn the old McLean County courthouse into a museum and turn it over to the McLean County Historical Society.<sup>43</sup> Henry also served on the advisory council for Bloomington Schools in 1977 and was a member of AMVETS (American Veterans).

In recognition for his many years of hard work and contributions to the community, Henry received several awards in the last ten years of his life. In 1978 he received the Bloomington Illinois Mayors Commission on Human Relations award and in 1985 the Culture Fest Service to the Community Award.<sup>44</sup> On April 12, 1987, the congregation at Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church honored his years of dedication and services to the community and the church with a special service. At the service Jesse Smart, mayor of Bloomington, presented Henry with a key to the city and read a proclamation declaring the day officially as “Henry L. Brown Day.” The program was attended by 130 people. Henry’s 6-year-old grandson Aaron Stevens recited some Bible verses which he had memorized, and his wife Gertrude sat beside him.<sup>45</sup>

On June 20, 1987, Henry L. Brown died peacefully at his home on MacArthur Street. His funeral was held at Mt. Pisgah Church. Many people in the community mourned his passing. In a letter to the editor of *The Pantagraph* written about a month after his death, the author stated that Bloomington’s black community had lost one of its “stalwart and energetic citizens.” The community as a whole had lost one of its leaders who fought hard for . . . “decency and respectability where all people white, black, religious, political, and all other racial groups can live side by side in peace and contentment.”<sup>46</sup> Henry Brown was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington.

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<sup>42</sup> “Articles of Incorporation Under the General Not for Profit Corporation Act, November 21, 1973 for the Minority Voters Coalition, Inc.,” Bloomington-Normal Black History Project Collection, McLean County Museum of History Archives

<sup>43</sup> “Oral History with Donise Brown, John Brown, and Carolyn Ware about Henry Brown.”

<sup>44</sup> “Henry L. Brown”

<sup>45</sup> “Bloomington man to be honored.”

<sup>46</sup> Pauline Evans. “Black community lost two leading citizens,” *The Pantagraph*, July 26, 1987