

THE LIFE OF EDWARD H. HARDING

Edward Hoyt Harding was born on 16 July 1896 in Washington, North Carolina. He was the ninth of eleven children born to the Reverend Nathaniel Harding, and the first of three children produced by the union between the Rev. Harding and his second wife, Marina Brickell Hoyt (the former Mrs. H. C. Handy), his first wife, Mary Elizabeth Hughes, having died on 5 January 1887.¹ Through both of his parents Edward Harding's ancestral roots were linked to some of the oldest and most distinguished families of Beaufort County, including not only the Hardings and Hoyts, but also the Crists, Grimeses, Worcleys, Keaises, and others.

His father, the Rev. Nathaniel Harding, had by the time of his birth been serving as rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Washington for nearly three decades. Born at Chocowinity in Beaufort County on 6 March 1847, the Rev. Harding was the son of Nathaniel Harding and the former Elizabeth Ann Patrick. Their marriage of about 1830 eventually produced a total of ten children. The elder Nathaniel Harding is thought to have been the first member of the Harding family in North Carolina to have embraced the Episcopal Church, and for many years prior to his death in 1864 he was a staunch supporter of historic Trinity Parish, Chocowinity. He had been born in 1790 to the union between Israel Harding and Annis Clark; and Israel Harding was the son of the Stephen Harding who is believed to have been the first of the Hardings to come southward from Rhode Island and settle in the Beaufort County area in the early decades of the eighteenth century. According to family tradition, this Stephen Harding is supposed to have been a shipbuilder who established his first residence at Fork Point on the Pamlico River near present-day Washington.²

The Rev. Nathaniel Harding enlisted in the Confederate Army on 20 August 1864 at the age of seventeen, and thereafter served until the end of the Civil War. He then taught school in Beaufort County and in Wilmington, and subsequently served as commandant at the Cheshire Military Academy in Connecticut. He had received his early education at Trinity School, Chocowinity (which his son Edmund would later attend), and later matriculated at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where he was prepared for the Episcopal ministry. Ordained by Bishop Thomas Atkinson in St. James Church, Wilmington, on 13 July 1873, he delivered his first sermon two weeks later in the Beaufort County Courthouse in Washington. On 14 September 1873 he participated in the opening service of the new St. Peter's Church, and on the following Sunday he was called to the rectorship of St. Peter's Parish, a position in which he served with quiet distinction and dedication for his entire ministry of forty-four years.³ According to Edmund Harding's own account of his father's ministry at St. Peter's, "there were many trying times during his Rectorship and many things to upset the peace of the congregation on account of a former Rector's defection to Rome."⁴ Nevertheless, the Rev. Harding seems to have kept in check the elements of extreme low-church reaction within his parish, and to have retained within it the "beauty of holiness" which was until recently viewed as an essential characteristic of Episcopal worship:

Out of all this there came an understanding between priest and people which is seldom found. Mr. Harding was a 'Prayer Book Churchman' and the service was always the same. His people were ever loyal and during the years which followed the church grew in numbers and the Parish became one of the leaders of the diocese.⁵

It was undoubtedly in accordance with the Book of Common Prayer's instructions and formulations that the Rev. Harding performed the baptism of his son

Edmund on 7 September 1890, lovingly and carefully placing the holy water between and above the still small cars which would one day grow to majestic proportions.⁶

The house in which Edmund Harding was born and reared, along with his numerous siblings, was the St. Peter's rectory on Harvey Street in Washington. It was not until 1906, when Edmund was sixteen years of age, that a new rectory was built on East Main Street, and the Rev. Harding moved his large family there.⁷ By this time, however, young Harding had nearly completed his education, and had begun to chart the course which would eventually lead him to a celebrated career as an entertainer, humorist, and public speaker.

Edmund Harding received his early education in the public schools of Washington until he was eleven years old, at which time it was felt that his outgoing and somewhat mischievous nature might benefit from the rather severe and demanding regimen of Trinity School, Chocomaity. This church-affiliated school had been founded by the Rev. Nathaniel Harding's predecessor at St. Peter's, the Rev. N. C. Hughes, had been attended by the Rev. Harding himself, and by the time of Edmund Harding's enrollment in 1901, was being operated as a military school.⁸ A contemporary advertisement presented the following general statement of the school's aims and programs:

Trinity School

A Preparatory School for Girls and Boys Prepares for all Colleges and Southern Universities

The aim of the school is to develop all manly and womanly traits in boys and girls as to make them true Christian men and women. Its educational principles are to set a high standard of intellectual attainment; to do thorough work; to note and develop individual benefit. Military drills and discipline are adopted both as affording excellent means of physical training and inculcating good habits and manly tone. To the same end out-door sports are heartily encouraged and promoted. We believe that our play grounds are not to be surpassed by any

in the State. Boys and girls recite together in their classes but are provided with separate session rooms in the school building and with separate residences that do not adjoin.

For special information or catalogue apply to

Rev. N. C. Hughes, Principal⁹
Chocomaity, N.C.

Of Trinity School Harding himself would later write: "Too much cannot be said in praise of this institution that did untold good for the Church in East Carolina."¹⁰ It is of interest to note that even at the age of thirteen, while at Trinity School, Edmund Harding was already showing promise as a speaker and humorist. For the Saturday afternoon recitations customarily required of the public speaking classes, young Edmund habitually chose brief and humorous selections; and in 1903 he is recorded to have won the medal for declaiming, even though competing against much older boys.¹¹

Harding graduated from Trinity School in 1907 at the age of seventeen, and, lacking the money to go on to college, took his first full-time job as a salesman in Brook's Shoe Store in Washington. Here too were exhibited early signs of his flair and showmanship. On 15 March 1910 a local newspaper article called special attention to the outstanding millinery display at Brook's Shoe Store and praised the "unique and catchy" styles designed by the establishment's "artistic milliner," young Edmund Harding.¹²

After leaving Brook's Shoe Store, Harding next found employment at the Washington Horse Exchange on West Second Street, working for the colorful Jewish immigrant, B. L. Susman, dealer in horses, mules, and farm supplies.¹³ Many years later, Harding's close friend and fellow Washingtonian, Carl Goersch, would recall that "there was scarcely a day that Edmund didn't have some new anecdote to tell about Mr. Susman."¹⁴ Goersch and others also claimed that a warm and sympathetic relationship developed between young Harding and the mules which were under his care. Immediately upon the sound

of his voice, it was said that "every mule in the stable would start baying lustily and regarding him affectionately." For the rest of his life, and despite his great success, Harding would delight in referring to himself as "a former mule salesman."¹⁵

In 1912 Edmund Harding was commissioned an ensign in the North Carolina Naval Militia, serving aboard the good ship Elfrida which was stationed in Washington.¹⁶ But at the time of America's entry into World War I, he was exempted from active military service. One reason for his exemption was that he was sightless or nearly so in one eye; another reason was that he had taken Katherine Bragaw as his wife just prior to the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. Katherine Bragaw had been born on 3 April 1893 and was the daughter of prominent Washington businessman, William Bragaw. Her mother, the former Katherine Blount, had passed away when she was only two days old, and to a great extent she had been raised to maturity by her grandparents, Dr. and Mrs. William A. Blount. Edmund Harding and Katherine Bragaw were married at St. Peter's on the morning of 3 June 1914; and the local newspaper reported that their honeymoon was to be "an extensive tour of northern cities," including New York, Niagara Falls, Toronto, and Montreal.¹⁷ For the next forty years Harding would be devoted to "Miss Katie."

For a good many years after their marriage, the Hardings resided in William Bragaw's home on East Main Street in Washington, together with numerous other family members. It was while living in this house that their two daughters and only children were born: Katherine Blount Harding on 14 June 1915 (now Mrs. Harry L. Hodge) and Rena Hoyt Harding on 17 July 1916 (now Mrs. Julian Devonport). On 15 May 1925, however, the Hardings purchased a river lot in Washington which was to be the site of their permanent home for the remainder of their married life. The house on this lot was com-

pleted four years later, in January of 1929, and during the next month the family moved in. By the time of this move, Edmund Harding had progressed slightly from the selling of wool to the selling of fertilizer and insurance; but most of the money for the new house had come from William Braque, his father-in-law and present employer. Indeed, Harding habitually referred to his house--the original "Sunnyside" at 701 Short Drive--as "Miss Katie's House." Several years later the Hardings purchased a second house, several miles below Washington and in a beautiful location on the banks of the Pamlico. This farm house, thoroughly remodeled by the Hardings, served as their summer home for many years; and with the passage of time it gradually appropriated the name "Sunnyside" formerly attached to the permanent residence in Washington.¹⁸

The Braque house and later the two Harding houses were the scenes of almost constant activity. An ardent family man, Edmund Harding loved and felt a great loyalty to both his own relatives and those of his wife. For many years it was not at all unusual for several generations to be represented within the same household. The house on Short Drive was especially lively as the two daughters, Katherine and Rena, passed through their teen-age years; and their parents not only supervised but actively participated in the frequent parties, visits, and other activities. A man of boundless energy and gregariousness, Edmund Harding was forever instigating and encouraging family and social activities of every description, always with a flair for originality and flashiness.¹⁹ This remained a feature of his personality and character throughout his life; and it was to prove invaluable when the time came to promote the enormously expensive and difficult job of restoring historic Bath.

Prominent among the numerous and varied activities which Edmund Harding participated in during his lifetime were those related to his beloved St.

Peter's Church in Washington. Here, as elsewhere, he demonstrated an almost limitless capacity for work and service to his community and fellow man. On 1 March 1911, during the thirty-eighth year of his father's rectorship, he was chosen to serve the church as organist and choirmaster, a position which he occupied for many years, until at length his extensive travels as a professional humorist and entertainer brought about his formal resignation in November of 1962. On 7 March 1920, less than three years after his father's death, Harding rendered a recital on the new organ which was being dedicated to his father's memory, and which had just been purchased by the congregation at a cost of \$10,000.²⁰ Harding had had no musical training, but he had learned to play the instrument as a boy because, as he put it, his "preacher daddy needed somebody to play the hymns."²¹ After forty years as organist at St. Peter's, he was gratified to say that he had provided the music for more than 200 weddings, and that only two of these had ended in divorce.²²

In addition to serving as organist and choirmaster at St. Peter's, Harding was intensely interested in the history of the Episcopal Church in North Carolina in general, and in the history of St. Peter's and other Beaufort County churches in particular. Through the years he gathered numerous materials relating to these subjects, and in 1922 he published a short history of St. Peter's which was both well researched and lovingly written. The concluding paragraph reflects the reverential spirit in which the history had been written:

I close this sketch of St. Peter's Parish with the prayer that those who are permitted to live today as members of the Parish and those who may come after us, will serve God and his church as faithfully and earnestly as those who have finished their work and gone to their reward, so that the Church may continue to go forward in the extension of the Master's Kingdom.²³

When the parish house at St. Peter's was destroyed by fire during his early years as organist and choirmaster, Edmund Harding took primary responsibility for raising funds and laying plans for a new parish house. Ground was broken by his daughter Rena on 21 March 1926 and on 21 February 1927 the completed structure was officially opened--a credit to both its builders and to Harding's leadership. On 4 June 1958 this parish house too was destroyed by fire, and although Harding relinquished primary responsibility for its rebuilding to younger members of the congregation, his support and work behind the scenes contributed much to the success of the project.²⁴

In 1924, and after fifteen years of employment with Ben Suman and the Washington Horse Exchange, Harding became, as has already been mentioned, a fertilizer and insurance salesman. The firm with which he was now associated was that of William Bragaw and Company, a business operated by his father-in-law and the latter's brother John. There were two general divisions of the firm, with William supervising the fertilizer division and John in charge of the insurance division. Edmund's considerable sales talents were put to work in both areas.²⁵ He was to continue as a salesman of insurance and especially fertilizer for many years before embarking upon a full time speaking career, having, as one wag put it, finally "exchanged humor for humor." Indeed, even at the time of his death in 1970, Harding remained a partner in what was then the insurance firm of William Bragaw and Company, even though both William and John Bragaw had long since passed away.²⁶

Closely related to Edmund Harding's long involvement in the fertilizer business was the position which he held for more than thirty years as sales supervisor for the Washington Tobacco Market, a job which occupied his time and energy for approximately three months each year and which nurtured his talents as an organizer, entertainer, and showman. Indeed, between 1924 and

1954, Harding's promotional and sales activities were at least partially responsible for the fact that Washington's tobacco sales increased from two million to more than fifteen million pounds annually.²⁷

Throughout his adult lifetime, Edmund Harding was an avid joiner of clubs and other groups; these provided a natural outlet for his gregarious nature and civic mindedness. Fraternally, he was a member of Orr Lodge No. 104 of the York Rite Masons in Washington, and he was raised to the Master Mason's degree as early as 11 March 1917. Four years later, in 1921, he was chosen as Master of his lodge, and long years later he received the Grand Lodge Veterans Award for more than a half century of continuous service.²⁸ Harding was also a member of the Sudan Temple of Shriners in Washington and he remained an active member of this fraternal group for many, many years.²⁹ In 1946 he was made an honorary member of the Washington Lions Club and of the International Association of Lions Clubs. For a long period of time, he was secretary of the Washington Chamber of Commerce, only relinquishing that position when his speaking engagements made it necessary for him to be frequently out of town. Harding was, moreover, an honorary life-time member of both the Washington Chamber of Commerce and Junior Chamber of Commerce. Indeed, by the time of his death he had been made at least an honorary member of most of the civic clubs in Washington.³⁰

In addition to his civic club activities, there were numerous other ways in which Edmund Harding shouldered the responsibilities of citizenship. Beginning in his late twenties, he served for many years as an active member of the Washington Fire Department; and he was later made a lifetime member of this organization. For many years, also, he was a member of the Washington School Board.³¹ Even after the demands of his speaking tours caused him to be out of town frequently and for protracted periods, Edmund Harding found

the time, when he could, to visit rest homes, hospitals, schools, and even jail houses in and around Washington, sharing his infectious good humor and his optimistic outlook on life.³²

Whenever a special event or celebration of any kind was called for in the town of Washington, Edmund Harding naturally sprang to mind as the man who could organize the affair with efficiency and flamboyance. And, not infrequently, Harding's showmanship and talents as an entertainer also led him to become an active participant as well as its organizer.

As early as the evening of 4 September 1910, Harding had demonstrated to his fellow citizens of Washington the good natured theatrical flair which was to remain with him always. The occasion was a benefit performance of the opera "Isabella" in the Washington Opera House; and his performance in the starring role drew forth special praise in the following morning's edition of the local paper:

The opera Isabella was the attraction at the opera house last night under the direction of Mr. L. O. Tyler of Richmond. . . . Some of the city's best histrionic talent was in the cast and reflected credit not only upon themselves but the entire city.

There were over 30 people taking part. Mr. Edmund Harding as Queen Isabella was the center of attraction. He played this difficult role in a way to make Mr. Stewart, the first impersonator, envious. His solos were well rendered, bringing forth much applause from those present. He is a born actor, and as a mimic stands high up.³³

No less well received was Harding's performance three years later, on the evening of 21 November 1913, when a "Society Vaudeville Show" was produced in a local theater.³⁴

On a subsequent occasion Harding both wrote and produced a show which was performed at the John Small School auditorium in Washington, and which demonstrated not only his showmanship but his nascent interest in Beaufort County's history as well. This production was billed as an "historical review

of Washington's citizenry and history from colonial times to the World War." The audience was estimated at between 1,500 and 2,000 people, and the newspaper review of the following day gave due credit for Harding's manifold efforts:

Mr. Harding, besides securing the facts for the pageant, writing the review in blank verse, and attending to many details of staging the production and keeping within the bounds of historical accuracy so far as possible, also read *l.e. - narrated* the review . . . and supervised the staging of the pageant. . . .³⁵

Here can be seen a foreshadowing of "Queen Anne's Bell," which was to be written and produced by Harding in 1955 and would launch the long and tortuous movement for the restoration of historic Bath.³⁶

On 20 March 1919, following the conclusion of World War I, Edward Harding was primarily responsible for the celebration which welcomed the return of Battery B to Beaufort County. His efforts included the design and erection of the massive arch through which the parade passed at the corner of Main and Market streets in Washington.³⁷

Four years later, Shriner Harding served as chairman for the Sudan Temple's Spring Ceremonial, which was held in Washington on 16 and 17 May 1923, the first and only Shrine Ceremonial ever to be held in Washington. Never content with doing anything on a modest scale, Harding placed an enormous replica of a camel in front of the Turnage Theater and literally bestriding Main Street. In addition to handling the decorations and arranging the dance, parade, and other festivities connected with the Ceremonial, Harding made bold to send a personal invitation to President Warren G. Harding. President Harding was unable to attend the Ceremonial, but his warm and personal regrets were sent to Edward Harding and became a part of his voluminous scrapbooks.³⁸

On the occasion of Washington's sesquicentennial of 22 February 1932, Harding again demonstrated his interest in local history, his talents as an

organizer, and his showmanship. As the centerpiece of this celebration, he placed on the lawn of the Beaufort County Courthouse an imitation birthday cake which was five feet high, twenty feet in diameter, and contained 150 candles. Represented as the proud recipient of this huge birthday cake was an appropriately scaled figure of General George Washington, for whom the town of Washington had been named.³⁹

From 1916 to 1940 Edmund Harding was a prime mover in the annual Tulip Festivals which were held in Washington and the surrounding area. Here again he proved to be an effective and imaginative organizer; and his lifelong appreciation of flowers doubtless added an extra dimension of enjoyment to the work which these festivals entailed.⁴⁰

During and following World War II, Edmund Harding was able to draw upon his talents as an organizer and showman in his promotional activities for the Washington Tobacco Market. From 1941 through 1948 he led the colorful Washington Caravan--a motley troupe of "hill-billy musicians, quartette singers, monologists, and other talent" which visited various communities in Beaufort and surrounding counties, putting on shows which also featured local talent. During its final year the Caravan toured seven counties in northeastern North Carolina and performed before an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 people. Edmund Harding also put on his own radio show as a part of his promotion of the Washington Tobacco Market. This popular show, operating in conjunction with the Caravan, was called "Washington on the Air."⁴¹

Both publicly and privately, Edmund Harding was long an enthusiastic observer of Christmas. Indeed, he was sometimes referred to as "Mr. Christmas" by his fellow Washingtonians. Even before the organization of the Washington Chamber of Commerce, he was instrumental in organizing a group known as the Washington Community League, which, along with numerous other activities,

sponsored an annual Christmas parade. Harding was instrumental in persuading the city fathers of Washington to decorate the streets of Washington for Christmas, and he designed many of these decorations himself. It was Harding and his wife "Miss Katie" who displayed the first electrically-lighted outdoor Christmas tree in Washington; and Harding received the first prize ever offered in Washington for Christmas decorations. Since the nineteenth century it was a perennial part of Washington's observance of Christmas to have the bells rung at historic St. Peter's Church; and from the age of sixteen to the age of fifty it was Edmund Harding who faithfully rendered these "Christmas Peals."⁴² During one Christmas season Harding displayed on the front lawn of his home on Short Drive the figure of a man with prodigious ears seated before an organ; and through the use of recordings and a system of speakers, the figure appeared to be playing Christmas music on the instrument. According to the recollections of friend Carl Goerch, "One look at the ears was enough to identify the figure as representing Mr. Harding."⁴³ Among Washington residents and his numerous friends throughout the nation, Harding was known for his highly individual and imaginative Christmas cards. These were expensive and handsomely-produced cards with color photographs depicting Harding in various outlandish costumes from different periods of history. It is recalled that Harding regularly sent about 3,000 of these cards each year.⁴⁴

It was through his numerous civic activities, especially as a Rotarian, that Edmund Harding began his remarkable career as a professional speaker and entertainer. When the Washington Rotary Club was organized in 1920, the thirty-year-old Harding was a charter member; and in the years which followed he emerged as a prominent and enthusiastic leader of the group. In 1929 he was elected president of the local club by his fellow Rotarians; and in 1936

he was chosen to serve a one-year term as governor of the fifty-seventh Rotary District. As district governor, it was incumbent upon him to make personal visits to each and every club in the district, and to deliver a speech wherever he went. In the event, these visits and speeches formed the launching pad for his career. His first speech, entitled "The Rotarian," was delivered on 6 May 1917 at a Rotary conference in Newport News, Virginia. Literally thousands of speeches would ensue during the thirty-three years which followed. After his term as district governor ended in 1937, Harding continued to receive invitations to address the various Rotary clubs of his district; and he was soon receiving invitations from other groups as well.

During the early years of his speaking career, Harding asked only for reimbursement of his expenses. No fee was asked. Moreover, he was only able to schedule his appearances during the evenings or on weekends when they would not interfere with his regular duties as a salesman of fertilizer and insurance. Gradually, however, he found that the groups and organizations to whom he spoke were more than willing to pay substantial fees for his services; and more and more of his time and energy was given over to his speaking engagements. In 1940, three years after his first speech, Harding all but gave up his former occupation as a salesman and began to devote himself almost entirely to his new and more invigorating career.⁴⁵ Later recalling this pivotal change in his life, Harding would say, "I stayed in the fertilizer business for more than thirteen years before I found out that anybody would pay anybody for just talking."⁴⁶

And talk he did. From 1940 until his death in 1970, Edward Harding kept up a dazzling pace, traveling extensively and delivering an average of between 150 and 200 speeches a year. In May of 1944 an article in the State Magazine commented upon the meteoric rise of his career:

Our mutual friend Edmund H. Harding, of Washington, D.C., is certainly going places as a speaker. In the past few years he has spoken in every state on the Atlantic Seaboard from Maine to Florida. He has been as far west as Missouri and Texas. Right now he is extending his territory even farther west, for he is on a two-months' trip through Montana, Wyoming, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico.⁴⁷

In the fullness of time, Harding's speaking engagements took him to every state in the union and to Canada and Mexico. Moreover, he was frequently invited to make return appearances before the same groups, in some cases, five, six, or even more times—ample testimony to his rare gifts and engaging personality.⁴⁸

As a speaker and entertainer, Edmund Harding combined the qualities of storyteller, clown, and homespun philosopher. Often he was compared to Will Rogers; and he undoubtedly felt both honored and humbled by the comparison. His imagination was remarkable, his presentations animated, and his stories seemingly without number. During the early years of his speaking career, Harding, the virtuoso, would also perform on the accordion as a part of his program, while rendering a solo or leading the group in song. With the passage of time, however, the instrument was taken up less frequently, and the musical portions of his program gradually gave way to the telling of additional stories. In the course of a forty-minute speech, Edmund Harding would tell an average of about one and a half jokes per minute. Skillfully intermingled with these jokes were nuggets of common sense and light-hearted inspiration, so that often his talks were a memorable blend of the comedic and serious. The vast majority of Harding's material was drawn from the people and events of Washington and Beaufort County. His family, his relatives, and the home folks provided ample material for his humor; and most of his stories, no matter how ludicrous, had a basis in fact. Moreover, Harding generally kept his talks informal, relating his stories just as if he were telling them to a group of friends on a Washington street. Many of his

stories were completely original, though drawn from local events and characters; some were gleaned from humorous books or magazines; and others were voluntarily shared by well-wishers and admirers who had heard and enjoyed his speeches. Like Will Rogers, Harding also kept abreast of current events as a means of obtaining material for his humor.⁴⁹

It is of interest to note that Harding maintained a rather elaborate and carefully contrived filing system for the several thousand stories which he collected and told over the years. Each story was kept on a separate filing card, and many of them could be readily identified and recalled by Harding simply by referring to a key word or phrase. Records were kept of every group to whom he had spoken, together with the date, the place, the general topics covered, and a list of all the stories told on the occasion. It was a point of considerable pride with Edward Harding that he never or seldom repeated a story before any group, except for those numerous occasions when he was specifically requested to do so.⁵⁰ The general workings of his system were both colorfully and succinctly described by his friend, Carl Goerch:

When he is asked to talk to the Chitlin Eaters Association, Inc., of South Texas, he goes to his file, discovers that he spoke there two years ago, looks over the nature of the talk he made at that time, and then plans a new speech which is different in every category.⁵¹

In his early years as a professional speaker, Edward Harding was able to respond personally to the ever increasing number of invitations, and to personally schedule his appearances and arrange his travel and accommodations. This at length became impractical, however, and through most of his professional career his bookings and other arrangements were handled through the Executive Clubs organization headquartered in Topeka, Kansas. But even at the height of his celebrity and extensive travels, he continued to make

numerous appearances in Washington and throughout North Carolina; and wherever he spoke there was always loving, albeit amusing, reference to his hometown and native state.⁵²

In addition to the humorous nature of his many stories and the skill and vigor with which they were delivered, Edmund Harding's abilities to win affection and excite mirth were aided by his personal qualities and amusing appearance. It was with no hint of insult or ridicule that his good friend, Carl Goerch, commented upon the visual aspect of Harding's humor: "Just to look at him makes people smile; sometimes they laugh right out loud. He has a wide mouth and twinkling eyes, and ears that might cause Peter Rabbit to claim kinship." Goerch then went on to draw parallels between Edmund Harding and others whose business it was to make people laugh:

. . . many of our leading humorists have some outstanding facial characteristics to distinguish them from the run-of-the-mill people. Eddie Cantor, eyes; Jimmy Durante, nose; Martha Raye and Jay E. Brown, mouth; Groucho Marx, mustache; and Edmund, ears.⁵³

Harding's delivery and effectiveness as a speaker were also aided by his loud and distinctive voice--the same voice which had allegedly assisted him many years earlier in working with E. L. Suman's mules:

Edmund has a voice that can easily be heard above the noise made by a hardhat passing through a krotty log, or a riveting machine next door.

 Not only can an audience of a thousand people or more hear him distinctly, but people half a block down the street stop and either laugh at his jokes or try to figure out their meaning.⁵⁴

Because of the natural volume of his voice, and because, too, of personal preference, Harding seldom if ever used a microphone during the course of his long speaking career.⁵⁵

Also contributing to Harding's great success as a speaker and entertainer were his incurable optimism, his boundless energy, and his sincere love of

people. His memory too was an important asset to him in his professional career, as it was in his social and civic activities. His detailed recollection of faces, names, events, and circumstances is said to have been remarkable.⁵⁶

It should be noted that the very personal kindnesses which Harding rendered throughout his lifetime in other areas were also rendered in the course of his professional career. When, for example, a young man from Greensboro was attempting to establish himself as an "after dinner humorist" in the mid-1960s, he evidently had found the old master to be both a willing and unselfish adviser:

Just a line to say thanks for the kindness you showed me when I was by /to see you/ last week. It was sure nice of you to be willing to answer so many questions. It was a help to me to know some of the things you are doing.

I am looking forward to the day that I will be able to hear you speak. I have sure heard some nice things about you and now that I have met you I know that they were all true. ⁵⁷

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Edmund Harding's love for people, travel, and activity prompted him to organize several group tours "for the young of all ages" to far-flung areas of the globe. Convinced that he could conduct more interesting and entertaining tours than the ones he himself had been on, Harding took his groups to the Mediterranean, Scandinavia, the Orient, and Hawaii. Although these tours netted only small profits, they did produce the fun and good fellowship for which they had been primarily designed.⁵⁸

It was almost inevitable that Edmund Harding's speaking career, personality, and civic involvements would lead him into close association with numerous people of wealth, initiative, and influence--just the sorts of people who were to prove invaluable when the tremendously expensive and difficult work of restoring historic Bath was finally begun in the mid-1950s. At length, many of these individuals, from the local to the national level, would be

proud to call him their friend; and they would, moreover, be eager to lend their assistance and financial support to his endeavors. Nor would Harding be the slightest bit timid in seeking their help when it was not offered freely, for he was not only at ease but forceful and persuasive in any sphere in which he chose to move.

On 29 December 1954 Edmund Harding suffered a great personal loss with the death of "Miss Katie," his wife of four decades. During the early years of his career as a humorist and entertainer, Mrs. Harding had accompanied him on some of his speaking tours; but with the passage of time, her failing health had gradually curtailed and finally ended her traveling. Deafness had struck her as a young woman, and during the last eight years of her life she was deprived of her sight as well. Her passing left a sort of vacuum in Harding's life; and it may well be that the restoration of historic Bath, begun during the following year, was at least partially an attempt to fill that vacuum.⁵⁹

Through the course of his long career as an entertainer and humorist, Harding's success and celebrity brought him many honors and tributes, ranging from the impressive to the absurd. Beginning with Governor Gregg Cherry in the late 1940s and without fail thereafter, he was aptly designated by each governor as "North Carolina's Ambassador of Goodwill," a title which he richly deserved and bore with pride. In 1954 he was chosen by the Saleigh News and Observer as "Far Neel of the Week," a distinction of which he was also justifiably proud. Among his fellow residents of Washington and Beaufort County, he was affectionately dubbed "The squire of the Pamlico" or the "Old Boss of the Pamlico"--nicknames which in time followed him elsewhere. Other titles, tributes, and nicknames were conferred upon him across the nation; he was, among other things, a Kentucky Colonel, an Arkansas Traveler, an

Admiral in the Alabama Navy, a Texas Ranger, an officer in the Confederate Air Corps, and an honorary chief among the Kiowa Indians of Oklahoma.⁶⁰

Perhaps the greatest and most gratifying tribute to Harding was the observance of "Edmund Harding Day" in Washington on 6 May 1966--an entire day filled with festivities in his honor. The day was marked by a parade, open houses, parties, speeches, a boat race on the Potomac, an abortive hot-air balloon ascension, and numerous other activities. Unveiled at the corner of Main and Market streets was a massive bust of Harding, which had been sculptured by an East Carolina art student and featured ears of gigantic proportions. In conjunction with this unveiling was the dedication of Harding Fountain Square at the foot of Market Street on the banks of the Potomac.⁶¹ The Washington Daily News put out a special "Edmund Harding Day Edition" which briefly recounted numerous important events in his life, celebrated his achievements, and exhibited the affection with which he was regarded locally.⁶² Also in conjunction with Edmund Harding Day came messages of congratulation from across the state and nation, including the following telegram from President Lyndon B. Johnson:

Senator Sam Ervin has told me that the City of Washington is planning a day of honor for you. He has told me also of the impressive list of accomplishments reflected in this well earned tribute. His enthusiastic account of your exceptional public service makes it a pleasure for me to join him and your many friends in warm admiration and good wishes. May the ensuing years bring you the happiness and satisfaction of a lifetime of worthwhile achievement.

Lyndon B. Johnson
President of the United States⁶³

During the evening of Edmund Harding Day there was a special presentation in the Washington High School Auditorium entitled "This Is Edmund Harding," a program which recounted memorable characters and events from his life and which was dedicated to him "For His Love and Devotion to His Community."⁶⁴

Three years after the hometown celebration of Edmund Harding Day, and some fifteen years after the death of his first wife, Edmund Harding once again entered the nuptial state. Again he chose a woman from his native Beaufort County. She was Nina Carolyn Whitley, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Willard N. Whitley of Aurora. Her father had died during her girlhood, but she had gone on to graduate from Duke University and had taught for a while at Chatham Hall in Virginia before returning to Beaufort County. Subsequently she had worked for five years with the Texasquill Company and later joined the Beaufort County Welfare Department.⁶⁵ Carolyn Whitley and Edmund Harding were married on 5 July 1969 in the small chapel of the diocesan house in Wilmington. The ceremony, attended only by members of the immediate family, was conducted by the Rt. Rev. Thomas H. Wright, Bishop of East Carolina, assisted by the Rev. Irwin Hulbert, rector of St. Peter's, Washington.⁶⁶

Shortly after their marriage, Edmund Harding built for his bride a new house on the Pamlico at Sunnyside, just next to the house he had purchased and remodeled for a summer residence in the early 1930s.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the marriage was to be of short duration, for the Old Boss of the Pamlico, now nearly eighty, had little more than a year to live.

Throughout the last few years of his life, Edmund Harding kept up a pace which would have taxed the vitality of a man of any age--this despite the fact that he had developed a rather serious heart condition and now traveled and delivered his hilarious talks with a container of nitro-glycerin in his pocket. Rejecting the advice of doctors to slow down, Harding insisted on remaining active to the end.⁶⁸ Late in the afternoon of Saturday the 19th of September, 1970, he was stricken by a heart attack near Rome, Georgia, while returning with his wife Carolyn from a speaking engagement he had kept in Tryon, Georgia, only a few hours before. Shortly thereafter he passed away

in a Rome hospital. The talk which he had delivered that afternoon had been the 4,999th of his long and remarkable career.⁶⁹

Edmund Harding's funeral was held at his beloved St. Peter's Church in Washington on the morning of 22 September, with the services conducted by the Rt. Rev. Thomas H. Wright, Bishop of East Carolina, the St. Rev. George Henry, Bishop of West Carolina, and the Rev. Irwin Hultbert, rector of St. Peter's. Burial followed in Washington's Oakdale Cemetery. Surviving Harding were his wife, Mrs. Carolyn Whitley Harding, his two daughters, Mrs. Katherine E. Hodges and Mrs. Vera S. Davenport, and his sister, Mrs. Harry G. Walker. Also surviving were four grandchildren and two great grandchildren.⁷⁰

Numerous tributes followed the death of Edmund Harding. As an entertainer, humorist, home-grown philosopher, and Christian gentleman, he had made himself known and loved throughout the entire nation. Nevertheless, his accomplishments and spirit were probably best summed up in the editorial tribute by his close friend Ashley B. Putrell, editor and publisher of the Washington Daily News:

The North Carolina Ambassador of Goodwill . . . , the 'Old Man of the Panllico,' and Washington's super salesman has well earned his rest.

Edmund Hoyt Harding, a young 81 years of age, humorist, churchman, story-teller, historian, world traveler, musician, and hometown builder, "made-em" laugh, but he also "made-em" think. He entertained people but he also challenged people. With all his many talents, he never once lost sight of the fact that human kindness had no substitute. And he was saturated through and through with that quality.

As a story teller and humorist, he was truly one of America's greatest. He made heroes out of everyday people, and he loved every one of them and every minute of the experience. If ever a man lived life to the fullest—every hour of it—Edmund Harding was that man.

This community has lost a great American. Washington has lost a leading light, and Colonial Bath has lost its quarterback. And somehow every single one of us who knew and loved him have a personal feeling of great loss.

Right now he must be standing there at the gate telling St. Peter a few of his choice stories. At least he'd never go through that gate quietly.

Truly, all of us loved Edward Harding because Edward Harding loved all of us.⁷¹