

**From Blind Tiger to Prohibitionist:**  
**Henry Regenburg Ham**  
**of**  
**Farmerville & Sadie, Union Parish, Louisiana**  
**&**  
**Union & Chicot Counties, Arkansas**

**by Timothy Dean Hudson**

Henry Regenburg Ham (6 Aug 1868–17 May 1947) was the third son of [Hillory Herbert Ham](#) [Sr.] (1828/1829–12 Apr 1889) and [Samantha Elvyann Scarborough](#) (15 Sep 1842–6 Apr 1922) to survive early childhood [1]. Between 1837 and 1847, both sets of Henry’s grandparents, William Ham and Clarenda Seale, and Noah Lewis Scarborough and Samantha Fowler, settled several miles east of Farmerville, in Union Parish, Louisiana along Bayou d’Loutre. Henry’s parents named him after Henry Regenburg (12 May 1817–8 Oct 1868), a prominent Farmerville attorney and Louisiana Legislator from Denmark who commanded the Confederate Farmerville Post during the Civil War.

During the latter 1860s and early 1870s, Hillory H. Ham became an alcoholic, abandoned his family and children, and slowly lost his farm. Cast out of their home, Elvyann moved her children in with her relatives, and in 1880, Henry R. Ham lived with his mother and two younger sisters in the home of their aunt and uncle, Rhoyan and John J. Flowers. Henry’s other siblings lived nearby with other close relatives [2]. Despite his troubled childhood, Henry Ham’s mother ensured that he received an excellent education, judging from his numerous writings as an adult that illustrate his literary talents.

On 28 May 1896, Henry married Daisy Elkins (21 Apr 1878–28 July 1946) at her father’s residence near Downsville [3]. They had two children born in 1897 and 1899 [4], but in 1897, Henry fathered another child by Betty Gertrude Towns [5]. It appears that Henry and Daisy separated, reconciled, and then permanently separated by 1900 and divorced about 1901. On 27 April 1902, Henry R. Ham married Betty Gertrude Towns (19 Feb 1882–23 Apr 1957), a young woman from the Sadie community north of Marion, near the Arkansas state line [6].

Henry Ham worked near Farmerville between 1896 and 1899, making occasional visits to town like most farm workers. In late February or early March 1900, presumably after his final separation from Daisy, Henry moved to Farmerville and began work in the office of the Farmerville "*Herald*," a Populist newspaper that competed with "*The Gazette*," a staunchly Democratic newspaper. This gives us an indication of Henry's strong political viewpoints which he later articulated very publicly [7].

In June 1904, Henry R. Ham purchased the Farmerville grocery store formerly owned by J. C. Honeycutt [8]. It appears that he bought the grocery store as a front for his more lucrative occupation, the illegal production and sale of whiskey. In August, Farmerville's town marshal arrested Ham for selling liquor without a license, a violation of town ordinance. The mayor heard this relatively minor charge, convicted Ham, and fined him \$50 plus costs. However, the town marshal suspected Ham of running a more substantial illegal operation, so he obtained a warrant to search his store, and

*In an apartment of his ice box, secreted away they found 16 quart bottles of whiskey that were unopened and a few partially filled bottles.*

This resulted in more serious charges filed against Ham for violating local option laws, a substantial offence that led to a District Court trial. In the lingo of that era, Henry had been operating as a "*blind tiger*." Farmerville's newspaper editor wrote of Ham's illegal operation

*...the law-abiding people of Farmerville are thoroughly tired of this blind tiger business, and they are determined to put a stop to it. Let all good citizens fall in line, and drive 'Old Tige' from our midst.*

Ham posted bond while awaiting his trial [9].

Henry R. Ham remained incarcerated in Farmerville's jail for several days prior to his release on bond. From his jail cell, he wrote his first public letter in late August, sending it for publication in Farmerville's "*The Gazette*" [10]:

*A Warning to Blind Tigers.*

*Editor Gazette:*

*In prison I find myself to day and justly so for "whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." Locked behind the prison doors away from dear wife and children I now repent, but too late.*

*I want to remind all "blind tigers" that some day you will bitterly regret that you ever sold the vile stuff. Some day you will have to part from wife and child, mother and father, sister and brother and go behind the prison doors and there you will remember their warnings that you heeded not.*

*Ah! I can see my wife, mother and sister pleading with me to quit selling that vile stuff.*

*It seems that there should be no mercy for me, for as much warning and pleading that I turned a deaf ear to would justify them to let me work out my own salvation.*

*But I want to ask them to forgive me and let me start life anew. I would ask the good people of Farmerville to not frown down on me for verily I am determined to live for a noble purpose. I want to warn all "blind tigers" that some day you will have to part from a loving wife and go behind the bars of steel. Yes you will break her heart and cause her to come to poverty and rags and dependent upon the neighbors for support. And let me warn you further, every time you sell a man a bottle of "blind tiger" whiskey you give him a knife to cut your throat. Yes, when some vile person that you have sold whiskey to wants to work you for a few dollars he only has to remind you that he once bought whiskey from you and you must shell it down or be "stopped."*

*"The way of the transgressor is hard", yes, when you have broken God's laws as well as mans you may expect to live an uneasy life, when you lay your head upon a pillow at night you may be woke up by an officer before day.*

*As for myself, I have enough, and the only hopes I have is in the good people who have taken that noble step to put a stop to this miserable business.*

*Some men never realize the true situation of things until he is ruined for life. I would give all I possess for my liberty and to blot out that stigma of "blind tigerism"*

*"Yes!" Whatsoever a man soweth that will he also reap and I am now reaping a full harvest of what I have sown and were I not to feel guilty I would only add more sin to that overloaded burden of mine. So "blind tigers" take warning from one who has reached the end. H. R. Ham*

At Henry Ham's trial the week of September 12<sup>th</sup>, in exchange for dismissing three cases against him for the illegal sale of liquor, Ham pled guilty to one count of selling liquor without a license. Several days later, Judge Robert B. Dawkins sentenced Ham to serve six months in the Union Parish jail and to pay a fine of \$100 plus costs [11].

Due to his incarceration, Henry R. Ham could not produce sufficient income to pay his debts. This caused him to default on mortgage payments for his Farmerville store. He could not even pay the 1904 taxes of \$6.75 on his house and lot near Union Sawmill. His default on his debts resulted in judgements against him in the District Court, and he lost his store. The sheriff soon sold his house and town lot for nonpayment of taxes [12].

After serving his sentence, Henry left Farmerville and joined Gertrude and their children at her parents' home in the Sadie community. In October 1905, Henry wrote his second letter to *"The Gazette,"* this one further reiterating his change of heart regarding the illegal sale of alcohol. It seems that his arrest and incarceration prompted him to speak out strongly against the common practice [13]:

*Editor Gazette: it has been some time since I startled the people through the columns of your most esteemed paper.*

*Ever since ye humble scribe "put up" six months in parish jail for retailing spiritous liquors, I have had an abhorance [sic] for those that handle the vile stuff, and in this connection I will say that we, of this neck o' the woods are infested with the "blind tiger" in all his force. It is no trouble to see men and boys drunk, and the empty bottles scattered around tell the tale. I have no enemies to punish, for mine was a just retribution for crimes that I had done, and want to say that a jail sentence for the "blind tigers" will do more to put him in the paths of civilization than all the fines that can be imposed, for had your humble scribe got off with only a fine he would have never realized that the "way of the transgressor is hard."*

*The good people owe it to themselves and to civilization to put a stop to "blind tigerism." It can be done, and I believe it will be, but the jail sentence in my opinion will be the only selection; there he can while away the time thinking of loved ones at home, there he will think of the times his mother or wife warned him of his present position. Yes, and more than that, he will realize that those who called him a "jolly good fellow" and got his whiskey on a credit, will be the last ones to call around and see about his welfare, and still more, he will realize that one good honest, sober and upright man can do him more good than all the drunkards in the state.*

*Nor let me warn you "blind tigers" that if you don't halt on your downward road, you will meet a just retribution.*

*You may have escaped with a fine and think that it was easy made and you can make it against in a short time by going back to your "old tricks," but patience will cease to be a virtue, and you may find yourself in a prison cell where you come to your senses, if you have any.*

*I have seen enough of blind tigerism. Men will spend their last cent for whiskey when their family at home may be in rags and living on scant food. Yes, he will pawn his coat on a winter day for a bottle of the vile stuff and then go home and "raise cane" because some worthless article had got lost.*

*The blind tiger breeds liars and teaches dishonesty. He brings poverty and misery at home. He shuts the gate to fair dealing and trembles at seeing an honest man.*

*Now, in conclusion, I want to say, it will not be pleasing to me to see our jail filled up with blind tigers, but as it taught ye scribe the path of peace, I only advocate it as the only remedy that is guaranteed to cure, and hope that some wayward inclined will read and heed the warnings of one who has been through the fire, for we of this section are determined to put a stop to the peddling of whiskey, and ask the aid of all good citizens throughout the parish.*

Soon after writing this letter, Henry R. Ham moved his family to Texas and spent a few years there. He returned to Union Parish by about 1908, and in 1910, he operated a rented farm in the Sadie community [14].

True to his word, for the remainder of his life, Henry R. Ham farmed, raised his children, and by all accounts lived an exemplary life free from the illegal activities of his young adulthood. Between 1912 and 1915, Ham wrote numerous letters to the editors of Farmerville's "*The Gazette*" on a variety of political issues of his day, including the evils of socialism and the political situation

in Mexico. Ham also voiced his strong support of the first Southerner elected as United States President since 1848, saying,

*In my opinion President Wilson is a man who had but few equals...and if congress will only back him there will be more relief for the people enacted into law...than there have ever been made in so short a time.*

Wilson opposed the ideals of the Bourbon Democrats just as Ham had when he supported the 1890s Populist Movement, and Ham rejoiced in the rejuvenated Democratic Party that finally seemed ready to implement some of the old Populist principles of the past. Ham wrote [15]:

*A corrupt government cannot stand long and our government had become so corrupt by granting special favors to a few and frowning upon the poor that the climax had about been reached. There is no plausible excuse why the farmer and other hard working class of people should not have plenty of the necessities of life and there is no reason why five per cent of the population of this country should control the finance of the country and shape legislation so as to shut out all competitions to their lustful gain....*

*The Democratic party lost one opportunity to help the people in 1892-96 but it cost her dearly for that blunder and now she seems a renovated party ready to do the will of the people. She is turning a deaf ear to the mutterings of the few who have so long been specially favored.*

*The democratic party will take the tariff from the necessities of life, such as the poor man needs and will put it on such things that the rich will use and the poor can do without. And now, along with the better days that are to come will come extravagant living and this is where we poor fall down. Even when crops are good we fail to realize that a drouth is coming some day and try to live too much as the rich do.*

*We have the grandest country on the globe and live extravagantly but our day is coming to save a few hard earned dollars. Will we make good?*

Henry Ham wrote many letters railing against corrupt elections and the importance of honesty in politics. In July 1914, he wrote,

*There is neither glory nor good sense in a man spending more to be elected to office than the office pays; and when such is the case the officers elected either have an evil intent or go bankrupt. It is all folly to start eighteen months before an election to get worn over politics, for it generally ends in mud slinging. Let every man that aspires to office stand or fall on his own merits. We cannot, and will not have a good, honest government, county state or nation, when the dollar makes the officers, for it will kill all aspirations that the honest but poor man may have to become a candidate.*

His letters reveal the careful attention he paid to various political issues of his day, and his way of expressing himself shows a keen intellect and firm grasp of the English language. Although written as letters to the editor, his astute observations on political issues led the editors to often print them as guest editorials, oftentimes on the paper's first page [16].

As the possibility of the United States becoming embroiled in a European war began following the conflict between England and Germany in 1915, Henry R. Ham strongly blamed England for attempting to draw American on their side. He claimed that, *"England is shrewd in getting out of tight places, and she has been successful in getting what she wants in this war."* He said that England had *"used the American flag to shield her cargoes,"* and confiscated American cotton sold to Germany. He claimed the American people's true grievance should have been towards England, not Germany, and strongly advocated peace [17].

Despite the wide range of topics that he covered in his writings between 1908 and 1915, Henry R. Ham frequently returned to the issue of alcohol sales as the prohibition movement gained steam in the political environment of the 1910s. In 1913–1914, Louisiana began debate on a statewide prohibition of the sale of alcohol, and Ham wrote several front-page editorials in which he strongly advocated for prohibition. In January 1913, he wrote,

*Young man if you will only drink one bottle of whiskey less in 1913 than you did last year and give the price of the one bottle to some deserving subject you will feel better when the year 1914 rolls around...Whiskey drinking and pistol toting is our two worst evils of to day and lets see if we can't drink less of John Barley corn and tote less pistols in this year of our Lord than we did last.*

In March 1913, Ham wrote, *"It is too easy for our young men to get whiskey by ordering it shipped by express."* A few months later, he wrote a religious-themed epistle that condemned alcohol consumption and socialism. He encouraged the *"awakening of God's spirit"* to decrease crime to lead *"you safely through this world of sin to a home of eternal bliss."* Ham wrote:

*Dear young people, you, who are proclaiming God as your saviour [sic], it is you who will be tried in various ways. Satan is ever alert and will make believe that the dance hall should be your place of amusement and that its [sic] no sin to play cards and drink whiskey. But do not believe him. Ask God to guide you...Read the bible and it will teach the straight and narrow way, for you might get out of the path were you to read nothing but socialism and risk it for earthly and eternal life.*

In December, of whiskey sales, Ham wrote, *"Let us profit by experience and when our conscious tells us that a thing is wrong let's quit it"* [18].

As the statewide debate on prohibition heated up in 1914, Ham wrote another letter that *"The Gazette"* published as a front-page editorial. He railed against legislators who hesitated to support prohibition in Louisiana, asking

*But why is it so hard to stop an evil business? The people would vote it out of the State if they had a chance. Why should anyone ponder over killing a serpent that was about to send its fangs into their flesh? Is there any persuasion from the upright, honest people of Louisiana for the sale of whiskey?*

Ham's stint in the Farmerville jail seems to have permanently imprinted upon him the evils of alcohol, transforming him from a bootlegger into an ardent prohibitionist [19].

Between 1910 and 1915, Henry R. Ham farmed in the Sadie community north of Marion in northeastern Union Parish, living near his wife's family. He made regular trips to Farmerville during this period, visiting the office of Farmerville's "*The Gazette*" while in town [20]. About 1915 or 1916, he moved north across the state line to the Lapile community in Union County, Arkansas. It appears that his move caused his letters to cease, as he wrote his last known letter in August 1915. It is unclear if he tired of writing, or if he sent his letters to a paper closer to his new home.

Henry and Gertrude Ham spent the remainder of their lives farming in Union and Chicot Counties, Arkansas.

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## Notes

1. 1870 Union Parish LA Federal Census, Ward No. 1, P.O. Farmerville, p. 20b/47, Dwelling #312, lines:
  - #1: Hillory H. Ham (age: 41; Farmer).
  - #2: Elva Ann Ham (age: 27; House Keeper).
  - #7: Henry Ham (age: 2).
2. 1880 Union Parish LA Federal Census, Ward One, ED #84, p. 400b/23, lines:
  - #29: John J. Flowers (age: 33; Farmer).
  - #30: Frances Flowers (age: 27; wife; House Keeper).
  - #32: Ella Ham (age: 36; sister in law; divorced; general work).
  - #33: Henry Ham (age: 11; nephew; general work).
  - #34: Bettie Ham (8; Niece).
  - #35: Rosa Ham (6; Niece).
3. Union Parish LA Marriage Book 9 (1894–1900), p. 319 (H. R. Ham to “Dosie” [sic] Elkins, 28 May 1896). *“The Gazette,”* 3 June 1896, p. 3, column 1. The newspaper reported on Wednesday, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, that, *“Last Thursday Mr. Henry Ham and Miss Daisy Elkins were married at the home of Mr. J. W. Elkins, the bride’s father near Downsville.”*
4. Riverview Cemetery (Monroe, Ouachita Parish LA), tombstone of “Birdie Ham Gabriel” (26 Feb 1897–7 Jan 1896). Damascus Cemetery (Lindale, Smith County, TX), tombstone of “N. J. (Jack) Ham” (3 Dec 1899–1 June 1976). *“The Gazette,”* 22 May 1947, p. 1, column 4. *“Tyler Morning Telegraph”* (Tyler, TX), 4 June 1976, p. 4, column 3. The 1947 obituary of Henry R. Ham listed among his survivors as, *“two children by a former marriage, Mrs. Birdie Gabriel, Monroe, and Noah Ham of Hobbs, New Mexico.”* The 1976 obituary of Noah J. Ham listed among his survivors, *“two sisters, Mrs. Birdie Gabriel of Monroe, La.”*
5. All evidence suggests that while still married to Daisy, Henry had an affair with Gertrude Towns in 1897 when she was fifteen that resulted in birth of Mittie Ham (21 May 1898–26 Dec 1977), who married in 1917 to Moses C. Walker. It appears that Henry and Daisy reconciled in 1898 or 1899, resulting in the birth of their son, Noah Jasper Ham on 3 December 1899, but their relationship and marriage ended shortly afterwards. In 1902, Henry married Mittie’s mother, Betty Gertrude Towns. This evidence is:
  - The 1910 Federal Census documents Mittie Ham Walker as a daughter of Henry R. Ham [1910 Union Parish LA Federal Census, Police Ward 2, ED #132, p. 41b/20, Household #263, #51: Henry R. Ham (age: 40, Farmer), #53: Mittie Ham (age: 11, Daughter)]
  - Mittie’s marriage record documents her as a daughter of Henry and Gertrude Ham: Union Parish LA Marriage Book 19, p. 129; the marriage license listed her father as “Henry Ham” and her mother as “Gertrude Ham.”
  - Henry’s obituary [*“The Gazette,”* 22 May 1947, p. 1, column 4] omitted any reference to Mittie, presumably a mistake. However, after his other children with Gertrude, his obituary also listed among his survivors, *“two children by a former marriage, Mrs. Birdie Gabriel, Monroe, and Noah Ham of Hobbs, New Mexico.”* [*“The Gazette,”* 22 May 1947, p. 1, column 4].
  - The obituary of Gertrude Towns Ham listed *“Mrs. M. C. Walker, Felsenthal”* as one of her daughters [*“The Gazette,”* 25 April 1957, p. 1, column 6]. This obituary made no mention of Henry’s two children by his first marriage, Birdie and Noah Jasper (Jack) Ham.
  - The obituary of Henry’s first wife, Daisy Elkins Skates list her son, *“N. J. Ham,”* and daughter, *“Mrs. Birdie Gabriel,”* as well as her children by her second marriage as survivors, but it made no mention of Mittie Ham Walker [*“The Monroe News-Star”* (Monroe, LA), 29 July 1946, p. 5, column 7].
  - Mittie’s obituary listed her surviving siblings as Raymond Ham of Houston, Texas, *“Mrs. Gertie Walker”* of Felsenthal, Arkansas, and *“Mrs. Rosa Bradley”* of Monroe, all of whom are documented children of Henry R. Ham and Gertrude Towns [*“The Monroe News-Star”* (Monroe, LA), 27 December 1977, p. 6, column 1].
  - The obituaries of Mittie’s brothers, Emmett, Hughey, and Grady Ham, listed her as one of their surviving sisters [*“The Gazette,”* 4 May 1950 (p. 1, column 4) and 26 May 1955 (p. 1, column 6); *“Arkansas Gazette”* (Little Rock, AR), 15 September 1969, p. 12, column 2].
6. Despite his having moved to Farmerville in March 1900, Henry R. Ham cannot be identified on the 1900 Federal Census, nor can his young daughter, Mittie, born out of wedlock in May 1898. Henry’s eldest daughter, Birdie, lived with his eldest sister, Nancy Alice Ham Roan, in Farmerville, while Daisy and their son, Noah, lived with her parents near Downsville. Gertrude lived in her parents’ household near Ouachita City in eastern Union Parish:
  - 1900 Union Parish LA Federal Census, Ward 1, Precinct 1, ED #115, p. 7a, Household #114, line #20: W<sup>m</sup> J. Roan (Dec 1858; Farmer); #21: Nancy Alice Roan (Mar 1863; wife); #28: Berdie Ham (Feb 1897; Niece).
  - 1900 Lincoln Parish LA Federal Census, 2<sup>nd</sup> Precinct Ward 5, ED #62, p. 143b/7, Household #102, line #85: John W. Elkins (Aug 1849; Farmer); #88: Daszie E. Ham (Apr 1879; daughter; widowed; *“Inviled”*); #95: Nora J. Ham (Dec 1899; *“Gr Daughter”*) [Noah was mistakenly recorded as a female, and Daisy was not widowed but separated].

- 1900 Union Parish LA Federal Census, Ward 2, Ouachita [City], ED #117, p. 44b/32b, Household #254, line #51: Dick Towns (Dec 1851; Farmer); #52: Francis Towns (Oct 1855; wife); #55: Gertrude Towns (Feb 1882; Daughter).
- 7. *"The Gazette,"* 26 October 1898 (p. 3, column 1) and 7 March 1900 (p. 3, column 1). In October 1898, the *"Gazette"* reported that, *"Mr. Henry Ham informs us that the five-year-old child of Mr. John Spurlock, of the 10<sup>th</sup> ward, died last Friday."* In March 1900, they published that, *"Mr. H. R. Ham has moved to Farmerville. He has connected himself with the publication of the Herald."*
- 8. *"The Gazette,"* 15 June 1904, p. 3, column 1.
- 9. *"The Gazette,"* 31 August 1904, p. 2, column 5.
- 10. *"The Gazette,"* 21 September 1904, p. 2, column 4.
- 11. *"The Gazette,"* September 21 (p. 3, column 2) and 28 (p. 3, column 3), 1904.
- 12. *"The Gazette,"* February 22 (p. 2, column 7), May 24 (p. 4, columns 3–4), and June 14 (p. 4, columns 4–5), 1905. On 18 February 1905, the Ward One Justice Court ordered property of H. R. Ham seized and offered for sale to satisfy judgements in the lawsuits of J. C. Honeycutt vs. H. R. Ham and J. T. Block vs. H. R. Ham.
- 13. *"The Gazette,"* 1 November 1905, p. 2, column 4.
- 14. 1910 Union Parish LA Federal Census, Police Ward 2, ED #132, p. 41b/20, Cecil and Sadie Road, Household #263, line #51: Henry R. Ham (age: 40; Farm Operator); #52: Gertrude Ham (age: 28; wife); #55: Hewie Ham (age: 6; son; born: Louisiana); #56: Henry G. Ham (age: 4; son; born: Texas); #57: Jewel Ham (age: 1; son; born: Louisiana); #58: Girtie Ham (age: one month; daughter; born: Louisiana). This shows that Henry R. Ham and his family moved to Texas about 1905 and remained there for Henry's birth but had returned by about 1908.
- 15. *"The Gazette,"* 21 May 1913, p. 1, column 4.
- 16. *"The Gazette,"* April 17 (p. 5, column 3), June 5 (p. 8, columns 1–2) and 19 (p. 1, columns 2–4), July 24 (p. 1, columns 2–3), 1912; January 22 (p. 4, columns 2–3), March 19 (p. 4, columns 3–4), April 23 (p. 4, columns 1–2), May 21 (p. 1, column 4), September 10 (p. 1, columns 3–4), December 10 (p. 1, columns 3–4) and 31 (p. 4, column 3), 1913; July 1 (p. 1, columns 1–2) and 29 (p. 4, column 4), and November 11 (p. 8, column 3), 1914; and April 28 (p. 4, column 2), August 8 (p. 4, columns 2–3) and 25 (p. 8, column 3), 1915.
- 17. *"The Gazette,"* 18 August 1915, p. 4, columns 2–3.
- 18. *"The Gazette,"* January 22 (p. 4, column 2), March 19 (p. 4, column 3), September 10 (p. 1, columns 3–4), and December 10 (p. 1, column 4), 1913.
- 19. *"The Gazette,"* 1 July 1914, p. 1, column 2.
- 20. *"The Gazette,"* 24 May 1911, p. 5, column 1.

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