

Harding, Edmund Hoyt ^[1]

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Edmund Hoyt Harding, salesman, humorist ^[2], and promoter of historic restoration, was born in Washington, N.C. ^[3], the ninth of eleven children of the Reverend Nathaniel Harding and the first produced by his second wife, Marina Brickell Hoyt. His father was for forty-four years rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Washington.

Young Harding received his education in the public schools of Washington and at Trinity School, Chocowinity, from which he was graduated in 1907. His first jobs were those of shoe salesman and later mule ^[4] salesman in his native town, but he soon began to exhibit signs of the showmanship and infectious humor that would one day bring him national recognition as a speaker and entertainer. From 1924 to 1940 he was a fertilizer and insurance salesman for the Washington firm of William Bragaw and Company.

After 1940, Harding devoted most of his time to speaking engagements, his first speech having been delivered in Newport News, Va., on 6 May 1937. From 1940 until his death, he entertained groups in each of the fifty states, Canada, and Mexico, and gave nearly 5,000 talks. As a speaker and entertainer, Harding combined the qualities of storyteller, clown, and homespun philosopher. His imagination was remarkable, his presentations animated, and his stories seemingly without number. Beginning with Governor R. Gregg Cherry ^[5] in the late 1940s, he was designated by each governor of the state as "North Carolina's Ambassador of Goodwill."

In 1955, Harding assumed leadership of a nascent movement to preserve and restore historic Bath ^[6], North Carolina's oldest town (incorporated in 1706). His production of the pageant, "Queen Anne's Bell" ^[7], in October of that year gave lasting impetus to this movement. As president of the Beaufort County Historical Society ^[8] and chairman of the Historic Bath Commission, it was he who made the eventual restoration of Bath a reality.

On 3 June 1914 Harding married Katherine Bragaw of Washington. To this union were born Katherine Blount (14 June 1915) and Rena Hoyt (12 July 1916). Harding's first wife died on 29 Dec. 1954. On 5 July 1969 he married Nina Carolyn Whitley of Aurora, who survived him.

A natural extrovert, Harding was active in numerous clubs and organizations ^[9], including the Masons, the Shriners, the Washington Chamber of Commerce, and the Rotary. In 1961, he was president of the North Carolina Society for the Preservation of Antiquities ^[10]. A lifelong Episcopalian ^[11], he served as organist ^[12] at St. Peter's Church for nearly forty years. He died in Rome, Ga., while returning from a speaking engagement, and was buried in Washington's Oakdale Cemetery.

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