ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

CHATTANOOGA AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Chattanooga, Tennessee

# FIRESIDE CHAT

Chattanooga Regional History Museum

By

Ruth Holmberg

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Ruth Holmberg needs no introduction. I've really agreed to do this so I could get a reserved seat. This really is a record crowd for an event at the History Museum. Many of you are personal friends of Ruth, some of you are professional colleagues. All of you, I am sure, as I have been, are intrigued by the story that began 115 years ago when Adolph Ochs came to Chattanooga to enter the newspaper publishing business. This picture over here and the picture upstairs in the terminus exhibit is a picture of him when he was probably 20 or 21 years old. I think it was well chosen because we often forget how young he was when he was here. The mustache he grew because his editor, well-known Union officer and editor, Colonel John McGowan was over 25 years older than he was, and his children were older than Adolph Ochs. So in order to present a more older dignified appearance, he grew a mustache.

The story that Ruth is going to reminisce with you from a personal point of view today is the fascinating tale of two cities and two newspapers and the family which unites them. Dr. Livingood's books tell the story of Adolph Ochs coming to Chattanooga from Knoxville in 1877 at age 19 to enter the newspaper business; the quick demise of the first venture which was a newspaper jointly being published and edited by the man who was the publisher and editor, I think, of the Chattanooga Rebel during the Civil War; of the quick demise of that first venture; of his enterprise in researching and publishing the first city directory which tells us that at this time, the estimated population was 11,448 persons; and of his purchase a few months later in 1878 of a half-interest in another struggling newspaper; his enthusiastic involvement in all phases of the young city's life; and his departure in 1896 to begin publication of the New York Times. The part of the story that is so intriguing and so meaningful to Chattanoogans is the interest and support of the family that has continued for three generations.

Adolph Ochs' personal involvement with this city did not cease when he moved to New York. He was involved in many important things that happened up in the 20th century into the thirties. I think the one that you might know most about is his involvement with the purchase of the property at Point Park and the land under Point Park where the Point Hotel was, and of organizing a group of citizens to purchase hundreds of acres on the side of Lookout Mountain, and all of this was put into the park system in the thirties.

Ruth's parents, Iphigene and Arthur Sulzberger, continued this interest and involvement as have their children, Marian, Ruth, Punch and Judy. Ruth also came to Chattanooga as a young person; she was a little older than 19, not too much. She had graduated from Smith College, had worked during the war in the Red Cross, and had married. But she was a young woman who became quickly and deeply involved in all aspects of the city's life. I've known Ruth since the mid-fifties, and I think of her first as a friend, but also I secretly kind of think of her as "first woman" because -- the first time I thought of her in that way she was the first woman president of the Chattanooga Symphony Association. Since

that time she has been the first woman on more boards than I could possibly imagine, and culminating in her job as president of the Chamber of Commerce, a job, incidentally, that Adolph Ochs would have approved of because he and the Times were very strong boosters of the business growth and diversification in Chattanooga during those early years.

Ruth is known for -- like her grandfather -- for her intelligence, integrity, her sense of humor, and her generous commitment of spirit and substance. That generosity here at the History Museum is on view in the permanent collection which appropriately is called "The New South" since Mr. Ochs was an advocate of a diversified economy in the New South. When we were calling around for personal momentos of members of prominent families in Chattanooga, I called Ruth to see if she had some kind of personal object from her grandfather. And she said, "Well, the only thing I have I'm not sure I'd want to give up. It's a leather bound copy of the first city directory, which when you look at it bears a striking resemblance to the present one, except it's smaller." And a few weeks later she told us that she wanted us to have it. So it's up there along with the picture of the young Adolph Ochs. Without any more, I want to turn this over to Ruth to share with us some of the fascinating stories she has. (applause)

Thank you. Aside from her very generous comments about me, Lynn has told you my whole story. So, I'll just take questions. (laughter) I really am amazed and embarrassed and horrified to see so many of you here on such a pretty day. Those of you who normally take a nap on Sunday, please feel free. (laughter) I had no idea there would be so many, I had been told this would be a Fireside Chat. And here's the fireside and here, incidentally, is another chair. So, someone should make themselves comfortable. I am amazed at this audience. There are people in this audience that know far more about my subject than I do. Jim Livingood, for instance, could tell you the history of the Chattanooga Times, inside out and backwards. Hello, Jim. Norman Bradley was our editor for many years, and Bob Sudderth back here ran the circulation department in amazing fashion for eons. I saw Raymond Cooke, I don't see him now, somewheres. There he is -- who kept our composing room going. And then even here in the audience today is Paul Neely, the deputy publisher today, who will lead the paper into the future in excellent fashion. So, you are all excused now. (laughter)

The history of the Chattanooga Times really is mostly the history of a remarkable man and the vision that he had for journalism that has inspired the continuing generations of his family, along with many other people, of course. But I will have to start this story by telling you something about Adolph Ochs. As Lynn said, he came to town here in 1877 when he was 19 years old. Prior to that he was born in Cincinnati, and the family then moved rather quickly to Knoxville. He came from interesting

parents; his mother was born in Bavaria and when she was a young girl, a close classmate of hers was executed in the uprising and the revolution, and she and another friend of hers protested. They dipped their handkerchiefs in the executed woman's blood and were brandishing them and causing a demonstration. And so, her parents were told that she was in some jeopardy and they should get her out of the country. And so that's how she happened to come to America. She was sent to Natchez, Mississippi, where she lived with an uncle. And it was there in Natchez that two things happened. One, she became very strongly a southern sympathizer and she rebelled against injustice in Bavaria, but slavery in America didn't seem to trouble her. And she also met Julius Ochs who also lived in Natchez and had a variety of careers. He was a salesman and a shopkeeper -- anyway, they were married.

And right after the war broke out, the Civil War, he enlisted in the army and was very quickly made a Colonel. One of his responsibilities was to keep rebel troops, or rebel sympathizers, from moving supplies across the lines. And at the same time that he was doing that, his wife was smuggling medical supplies in a baby buggy to the rebel troops. But somehow this marriage survived and when Julius Ochs died he was buried with some fanfare by the army under a Union flag. When his wife died some years later, she had been a founding member of the Daughters of the Confederacy, and at her request she was buried under a Confederate flag. And they are buried side by side at the Mizpah Congregation cemetery out on Third Street. But anyway, this was the atmosphere of his family. They had seven children and six of them survived, and Adolph was the oldest surviving child.

Julius Ochs was a charming man; he spoke seven languages and he played a musical instrument, and even wrote some light opera, and he taught French for a year. And he did all these things, but he was not particularly good at making a living, and his family had a great struggle. When Adolph was nine years old, he started delivering newspapers. And his younger brothers -- as the years went by, the younger brothers would also help. And Julius had to accept, of course, these few pennies that they were bringing in to help the family income, and felt badly. Apparently he went down with them every morning at 3 a.m. in the morning and helped them fold and sort the papers before they started on the route. Adolph was a pretty raggedy looking kid apparently in his thin breeches, and one of the members of his route felt sorry for him and gave him a pair of heavy trousers to keep him warm, and he never forgot that kindness. After he had bought the Chattanooga Times and it was prospering, he sent that family some shares of stock as a thank-you for those warm breeches which they had in their family for many many years.

When he was 14 years old he dropped out of school and went to the Chronicle office in Knoxville, the Chronicle Newspaper and asked for a

job. The editor kind of asked him what he could do, and he said, "Well, I could start by cleaning up the place," which was pretty much a mess, the way newspaper offices are. So he polished up everything in sight, and endeared himself to the owner who gave him a job. Well, he told my mother years later that his newspaper career really started because he was afraid of ghosts. He had to walk past a cemetery at night to go home and he didn't get off work until midnight. And that was when the spooks rise, at midnight, and he didn't want to walk by the cemetery by himself. Well, the composing room foreman lived just a few blocks beyond his house, and he worked till 2 a.m. So Adolph hung around the newspaper until 2 so that he could walk home with this man, and he learned a good deal, of course, about the newspaper business in that way.

When he was 17, he decided he had nothing more to learn where he was, and he took off as a tramp printer and ended up in Louisville, Kentucky, at the Courier-Journal. And he worked there and finally was made composing room foreman, but they missed him at home and he was very homesick, and he finally returned to Knoxville. He then took a job at the Knoxville Tribune, and the business manager there, Paul Frank, had big ideas about publishing a newspaper of his own. And he prevailed on Adolph to go with him to Chattanooga, and also with an editor that men refer to as Colonel McGowan. So the three of them went on to Chattanooga to start a newspaper. Well, Chattanooga needed a new newspaper like a hole in its head. It had about seven or nine depending on what day it was, when they were coming and going. But they came down here, and that was in 1877 when he was 19 years old. And they launched the Chattanooga Dispatch, which lived up to its name and was quickly dispatched. It simply didn't last any time at all, and Adolph took on the responsibility of assuming the debts and trying to get rid of them.

He was left with the press which was helpful to him because as Lynn told you, he began assembling the first Chattanooga directory. In the process of publishing the city directory, of course, he got to know the business community and got to know the community itself very well. So at that time, a year after that, in 1878, the Chattanooga Times which was then nine years old was struggling. It was in terrible debt, it had 250 readers, and Adolph Ochs thought he could make a go of it, but he had no money. So he went to a banker in town. We're not quite sure whether that banker was a Mr. James or a Mr. Montague, but one or the other. He went to them and asked for a loan of $300, and the banker asked him what collateral he had, and he said he had none. And the banker asked who could sign his note. And he said, "Well, I don't believe there's anyone in town that knows me any better than you do." And the banker signed his own note and loaned him $350. Well, he paid $250 for a half-interest in the Times and the arrangement was the second half would be determined -- the worth of the second half would be determined by an impartical arbiter after a period of time. Adolph had to have his father, Julius, come from Knoxville to sign the papers because he

had not yet reached his 21st birthday. The plant was located right across from Proffitts downtown, where that parking lot is at the moment, Eighth and Cherry. And it didn't appear to be much of a bargain; it was a tiny little building with delapidated equipment. Adolph persuaded the much older Colonel McGowan to come to work as editor for $1.50 a day. And there were four unemployed printers that were available, and one reporter that signed on. And between all of them, I don't think they had more than $35.00; well, they had $37.50, I believe. And of that money he spent $25.00 to maintain his association with the Associated Press, which of course brought the news from everywhere that he needed to put in his paper. So his father stayed on with him to keep the books. And they had a struggle, but every night Adolph sent $2.00 to Knoxville to his mother to help maintain the other children.

It wasn't long after that that the yellow fever epidemic broke out, and people fled out of town. The circulation, of course, plummeted, and the paper went down to one page. But it did survive. And it was a rocky road for several years. He wrote a quote which I think is interesting; it tells you how things were going from a letter that he wrote in 1881. He said, "Mr. Suiter paid me $108, a godsend; borrowed from Ewing Brothers $125 for a few days; asked Mr. Z. C. Patten for the loan of $200 for a few days, but he couldn't do it. He was going to the bank to try and get some for himself." Well, it was in those very early days that his declaration of policy about the kind of newspaper he wanted to publish was determined. He wrote, "We shall give the people a chance to support that which they've been asking for, a newspaper primarily devoted to the material educational and moral growth of our progressive city and its surrounding territory." And this was apparently what people wanted because the paper prospered, and in four years the purchase price for the second half was determined to be $550, no, excuse me, $5,500. The paper was making a very good profit, and the Ochs family had all moved to Chattanooga. And Adolph had his two brothers working at the paper and his father was also there.

Subsequently, he built the Dome Building, which of course was then the Times Building, the one that was so beautifully restored by Gordon Street. And in the late 1880s they moved into that building, which was the most progressive newspaper plant in the Southeast. Many years ago when one of my children was about nine years old, we were driving down the street, and he pointed to the Dome and said, "What's that?" And I said, "That is a building that your great-grandfather built to publish the Chattanooga Times. And when he built it, it was the biggest building in town." And Michael looked at it and he said, "Well, then how come it's littling?" (laughter) It hasn't littled a whole lot, though; it's a beautiful building.

In the 1880s the land craze hit this part of the country, as it did a good many other places, and Adolph started buying up land. And pretty soon it became clear that that was not a marvelous thing to have

done. And he was over his head in debt with worthless land. At one point, though, he did offer a lot to every new subscriber of the Times (laughter), out of a parcel of land known as Times Hill, which you may remember up on the back of Signal Mountain, and I like to think you still get a lot when you buy the Times. (laughter and applause) But because he was deeply in debt he was looking for other investments. And that's what took him to New York in search of financing and also in search of perhaps another property.

Well, in 1896, the New York Times was a failing newspaper very much the same way that the Chattanooga Times had been. Of course it was a much larger city, so it had more than 250 subscribers. It had about 9,000 which is not very much, and it was heavily in debt. There were 15 newspapers in New York at that time; these are the days with the big newspaper barons. There was the Pulitzer's World, and William Randolph Hearst's Journal, and these were huge newspapers, three and four and five hundred thousand circulation. James Gordon Bennett's Herald, and the Tribune and the Sun, and a lot of those names I am sure are familiar to you. He felt that -- Adolph felt that he could change the fortunes of the New York Times very much as he had the Chattanooga Times. And what he had done here was, as I said, determine that people really wanted the news, and given the news, they could form their opinion about matters, and that they needed to be informed. The Times in New York was following the same patterns that the other newspapers of that day followed, and they were filling their paper with syndicated stories and with rumors and gossip. They weren't as bad as the supermarket tabloids, but they weren't a whole lot better.

He visited with the people who were running the Times, and they offered him a job as manager with a salary of $50,000 a year, which was an immense salary in those days, but he wasn't interested in that kind of a deal and said he wasn't looking for employment. He knew that they had extreme debts and that the circulation was as low as it was. And he proposed a refinancing that would give him an interest in the company and an option to acquire a majority interest as soon as the paper turned a profit. And it turned out that happened in less than four years, and he had his control, then, of 5,000 shares of the New York Times stock.

The newspapers of Hearst and Pulitzer and the rest of them are no longer published in New York. All those giants have gone by the wayside for one unhappy reason or another. The last one to depart the scene, or one of the very last, was the Herald Tribune, the result of the merger between the Herald and the Tribune. And I think what spelled the death of that paper during World War II when newsprint came in very short supply, and of course the war was going on: Newspapers had to make a determination about how to allot their space, whether they would fill their papers with news, or whether they would curtail the news and continue with their advertising and their profits. The Herald

Tribune chose the route to curtail the news, and the New York Times limited their advertising and filled their paper with news. And that really turned the table there. That, of course, being in direct response to Adolph Ochs' theory about what should constitute good journalism.

This paper has been in the same family here since 1878. And the relationship between the Chattanooga Times and the New York Times has always been mysterious to people in Chattanooga, and I guess to people in the rest of the country as well, who don't know that the Chattanooga Times is the mother of this rather larger child.

Adolph Ochs married Effie Wise, who was the daughter of Rabbi Isaac M. Wise in Cincinnati. He was the father of reformed Judaism and the founder of the . . . college. They married and they had just one child, my mother whose name was Iphigene, a mysterious name. Her mother's name -- Effie's real name was Iphigene. Rabbi Wise was a reader of Greek mythology, and he was busily engaged in that pursuit when they came and told him he had another daughter, and so he said, "Name her Iphigene." She shortened it to Effie, while my mother went through her very long and wonderful life with the name of Iphigene.

She married Arthur Sulzberger and he became publisher at my grandfather's death. And since then, his son, my brother, Punch, succeeded him as publisher. And just last Thursday, his son succeeded him. So we have a new publisher at the New York Times. My grandfather, to continue his story just briefly, was always devoted to Chattanooga. When anyone asked him what was home, even all the years that he lived in New York, he said his home was in Chattanooga.

And he was very seriously affected by Hitler's rise in power, and he suffered quite a serious nervous breakdown and illness. And then he got better. This was in '35, and he decided he wanted to pay another visit to Chattanooga, and he wanted to bring one of his grandchildren with him. So he took my oldest sister, Marian, and they came down to Chattanooga, and he had a wonderful visit. Everybody stopped and spoke with him and he had a grand time. He was ordering lunch up at the old Coffee Shoppe where the Brass Register is now, and simply went to sleep and died in the hospital right across the street, which was at Newell's Hospital. I made a terrible boner one time when I first moved to town and I was at a dinner party and sitting next to Ed Newell. I said, "You and I have a lot in common." And he said, "What's that?" "My grandfather died in your hospital." (laughter) Well, he didn't think that was wonderful.

The family has been very much involved, all of us, we are a close family, I'm happy to say. Let me illustrate that with a . . . story. My brother was in Hawaii at the time of the Bingham family breakup in Louisville. I imagine you have all read about that; that was quite a

to-do. And someone came into a meeting where my brother was and said that Sally Bingham was selling her stock. My brother got up and started out of the room, and someone said to him, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going to send flowers to my sisters." (laughter) My mother and father had four children, and the four of us have 13 children between us, and there are 24 grandchildren. As Paul pointed out in his column yesterday, and I imagine you saw, all 57 were here in Chattanooga for a family reunion last October. It was wonderful, we had a great time. In addition to my nephew, Arthur, that's the new publisher of the Times, my oldest son, Stephen, is the vice-president of the company in charge of . . . product and my second son, Michael, is the senior vice-president and general manager of the Women's Division magazine group. My younger sister, Judy, has a son who is in charge of circulation sales development, and my older sister has a daughter who's in charge with continuing the New York Times' history and archives.

The Times has grown considerably since the days that Adolph bought it as a struggling paper in New York. The company now owns 24 newspapers, daily or weekly, throughout the Southeast, and some in California and one in Maine. They have 17 magazines including Family Circle, McCall's, and Child magazines, Golf Digest, Tennis, Cruising World and other sporting magazines, five television stations, WQXR that is Am-Fm radio station in New York, and also a news service and a syndicate service. They have interests in Canadian newsprint mills and in a super-calendar mill in Maine which is the mill that makes that glossy paper that the magazines are printed on. They also have a half-interest in the International Herald Tribune in Paris; the other half is owned by the Washington Post company. I really would welcome your questions. I know this has been awfully rambling, but I was expecting 12 people around a fireplace. (laughter) So if you do have questions I would love them.

Question: . . .

Answer: No, his home was on Fifth and Cedar and the freeway is there now. But it's the house some of you may remember that Selmon Franklin lived in. It was a beautiful brick house with white columns, which he built; he built this for his family, and they all lived there. It was like Dallas. (laughter)

Question: . . .

Answer: He wasn't there, that was his brother, no. He had a brother by the name of George Washington Ochs, who after the war decided -- Well, at the time of the war, he decided that the name Ochs was too Germanic, and so he changed his name to Ochs-Oakes, so he was Ochs-Oakes all his life, and then when he died his sons dropped the Ochs and their name was Oakes.

John Oakes was editor for the New York Times for a number of years, but it was he who was mayor of Chattanooga. And then Milton Ochs, his other brother, lived on Missionary Ridge for many, many years, well all of his life.

Question: . . .

Answer: Well, I was in the Red Cross during the war in Europe, and I met a soldier who came from Knoxville. And he was with the TVA and we were married and we moved to Knoxville. But we didn't stay there long, and that's the way to do Knoxville is not to stay long. (laughter and applause) He was offered the opportunity to go to work for the Chattanooga Times. And then he was publisher of the Chattanooga Times for a few years, Ben Golden. And then we were divorced.

Question: . . .

Answer: The power and the glory? Well, I thought it was mostly fiction; well, that's not quite fair. I think it's very difficult for -- he was reporting conversations in a room with two people. It was full of all these conversations of who said what to whom. My mother often said that our family wouldn't make a wonderful story because there wasn't enough juicy gossip. But I don't think . . . was really very gospel. You think that's fair, Jim? . . . Oh well, I didn't mean to because Chattanooga is where I live, I'm happy to report. He loved it very much and so do I.

Question: . . .

Answer: Adolph Ochs -- you know there's a lot I left out. You see, I didn't make notes. He built the Ochs Temple as a memorial to his parents, which is a very beautiful building. If any of you have not been in it, I encourage you to go; it's really lovely. And then as Lynn said, he was very interested in the park and helping to secure land to preserve Point Park and to create that drive, the Ochs Highway, up Lookout Mountain.

Question: . . .

Answer: That particular edition is published in Gwinnett County, north of Atlanta. The New York Times national edition is going very well, and it's published in six or seven

locations around the country. It's wonderful to have it, isn't it? Yes.

Question: . . .

Answer: There's a plaque in Knoxville. I can't explain that. No, I don't know anything about that.

Well, I thank you-all so much. (applause)

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