Zach's News

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Walter Harrison of Millen (1899-1985) became involved in the Rural Electrification Administration (REA; now a part of USDA Rural Development) as soon as it began in Georgia in 1936, at a time when the idea of providing electric power for all rural areas seemed unthinkable. “A lot of folks thought we were selling lightning rods,” he recalled in later years. Only 1 percent of Georgia farms had electricity, and it was not in the interest of private power companies to extend their lines to remote and lightly populated regions. By the time Harrison retired in 1975, 99 percent of rural households had power and 95 percent had telephones. But Harrison’s REA activities were hardly confined to the local or state level. He served on the Board of Directors of the national REA organization for over 30 years and as President twice.

But as great as Harrison’s contribution was to REA, that alone does not encompass him. His REA papers reside in 19 boxes of a collection that reaches 65 boxes. The first series, “Local and Personal,” is contained in 24 boxes. These papers cover his activities as an important citizen of Millen, Jenkins County, and Georgia. He was mayor of Millen from 1930-1950, and during those years and later, he was involved with local organizations such as the American Legion, the Board of Health, the Boy Scouts, the Chamber of Commerce, the City Council, the County Commission, the Georgia Baby Chick Association (predecessor to the Georgia Poultry Laboratory Network), the Georgia Forestry Association, the hospital, the library, the Red Cross … and many other groups. He was for decades the editor of the Millen News. He was the moving force behind the establishment of Magnolia Springs as a state park. On a statewide level, he served in the State Senate for 8 years, in the House for 14. During these years in Atlanta, he formed relationships (attested by extensive correspondence) with US Senators George, Nunn, Russell, and Talmadge; both Governors Talmadge, as well as Griffin, Sanders, Harris (and fellow-Millenite Melvin E. Thompson), and various members of Congress, mayors, and commissioners from around the state.

The collection also contains lengthy records of the aspects of the Walter Harrison Company in Millen: loans, insurance and real estate. Other series cover his long involvement with the Methodist Church and Rotary International, on local, state and national levels.

Harrison was in many ways a man larger than life, and his papers illuminate a large and important part of the history of his times.

(Brought to you by Marvin Goss, Special Collections Department Head. Thanks to Marvin for coordinating and completing this major project! Thanks also to Steve Hooley, Technical Support Specialist, for the screen captures on this page, which are from the video “Walter Harrison: A Great Georgian,” Georgia Center for Continuing Education, 1980, also in our Special Collections.)