

Herring, Harriet Laura ^[1]

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By Katherine F. Martin, 1988

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Harriet Laura Herring, social science researcher and student of socio-industrial relations in the South, was born in Kinston, the seventh and last child of William Isler Herring and his second wife, Laura E. Loftin. Members of the Herring family were among the founders of [Johnston](#) ^[2] and [Lenoir](#) ^[3] counties. A member of the class of 1913 at [Meredith College](#) ^[4], Harriet spent a year as a high school teacher in Scotland Neck (1914–15), then two years on the staff of [Chowan College](#) ^[5] (1915–17). She went on to receive a master's degree in history from [Radcliffe](#) ^[6] in 1918 and a special certificate in industrial relations from [Bryn Mawr College](#) ^[7] the following year.

Beginning what was to be a lifelong commitment to the industrial community and the welfare of its workers, Miss Herring in 1918 took a position as employment manager with the [Roxford Knitting Company in Philadelphia](#) ^[8]. Returning to North Carolina, she became a community worker for the [Pomona Mills in Greensboro](#) ^[9] and in 1922 personnel director for the Carolina Cotton and Woolen Mills, a division of Marshall Field and Company, in Spray. There, with the support of [Luther H. Hodges](#) ^[10], then personnel manager for Marshall Field in the Leaksville-Spray area, she instituted the first comprehensive employee welfare system for cotton mill workers in the South.

In 1925, she accepted the invitation of director Howard W. Odum to join the staff of the [Institute for Research in Social Science](#) ^[11] (IRSS) at The University of North Carolina ^[12]. Her appointment as a research associate charged with examining reports of social ills connected with the industrialization of the South was sought by Odum in the belief that, having been "born here of the same folk," she would be an investigator acceptable to mill owners and others in positions of power and influence. The institute's projected study of the wide-ranging effects of paternalism in the textile industry was, however, rejected by the North Carolina Cotton Manufacturers Association and attacked by [David Clark](#) ^[13], editor of the *Southern Textile Bulletin*. As a result, Miss Herring's initial research focused on the company's role in shaping life in the mill village. Published as *Welfare Work in Mill Villages: The Story of Extra-Mill Activities in North Carolina* (1929) ^[14], this was but the first of many investigations of the textile industry in particular and the industrialization of the region in general she would conduct as the institute's specialist in industrial research. During her forty-year association with the IRSS, she wrote numerous articles and reports on these subjects and two more books, *Southern Industry and Regional Development* (1940) ^[15] and *Passing of the Mill Village: Revolution in a Southern Institution* (1949) ^[16].

She also contributed to the institute's research in other areas. During the 1930s, with Odum and T. J. Woofter, Jr., she directed a group of related projects on "A State in Depression." She was coauthor of *Part-Time Farming in the Southeast* (1937) ^[17], a research monograph prepared for the Works Progress Administration, and one in a series of IRSS studies on the plight of the southern farmer. With George L. Simpson she wrote *North Carolina Associated Communities: A Case Study of Voluntary Subregional Organization* (1953), one of a number of community surveys prepared during the directorship of Gordon W. Blackwell. Throughout this period Miss Herring also served on the faculty of the [Department of Sociology](#) ^[18], teaching a course on the industrial community.

Her continuing investigation of social welfare questions and her commitment to the industrialization of the state and the region influenced her activities outside the institute and the university. She participated in the work of the [North Carolina Conference for Social Service](#) ^[19], serving as secretary from 1928 to 1931. She was frequently a consultant to the state government of North Carolina. On leave from the IRSS, she served as state superintendent of reemployment during the 1930s, and later she produced a section-by-section study entitled *Industrial Development in North Carolina*, issued by the State Planning Board in 1945. Governor William B. Umstead appointed her to the Commission on Reorganization of State Government (1953–57). With other members of the institute staff, she provided the leadership for the state Commission on Revenue Structure's Conference on Economic and Social Factors in the Development of North Carolina (1955–56). In addition, Miss Herring was active in politics at all levels; in 1960 she was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention.

After retiring from the university in 1965, she continued to live in Chapel Hill for several years as professor emeritus of sociology. She then returned to the Kinston area. At the time of her death at age eighty-four, she was working on a social history of industrial communities through the ages.

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Talmage C. Johnson and Charles R. Holloman, *The Story of Kinston and Lenoir County* (1954)

Minutes of the Faculty Council, University of North Carolina, 18 Feb. 1977 (University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill); *Raleigh News and Observer*, 12 Aug. 1933

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Additional Resources:

Harriet Herring Papers, UNC: http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/h/Herring.Harriet_L.html [20]

Harriet Laura Herring Clippings, UNC: <http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/ref/clip/herring.html> [21]

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