

A Minor Mystery Solved

by Clay Nordan

In our Fall 2012 newsletter, we had a story about a photograph of a 1920's era International Harvester Model "S" motor truck owned by Perfection Mattress and Spring Co. of Birmingham. (You can find the complete story on www.alabamaih.org under "Chapter Stories").

The photo was shot beside what appears to be an IH branch house building of that time. In an effort to discover where the photo had been shot, I found another photo in the McCormick-IH Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society that was cataloged as the Birmingham branch house around 1925. The catalog information also showed that the building had been on the corner of 10th Ave. and 24th Street North. Mr. Ivy Jackson, whose grandfather owned Perfection Mattress, provided the address of the mattress factory, so that proved that both businesses were only blocks from each other in downtown Birmingham.

Because the cameras used to shoot both photos were set up to take different views of the buildings, it was not possible to confirm that both were the same. To further complicate the problem, close scrutiny of the lettering on the sides of the buildings showed that they were not an exact match.

The original story left us with an unanswered question as to whether or not we are viewing the same building in the two photos. I asked any reader who might know something more to share that knowledge with us and help resolve the uncertainty.

Two Chapter #23 members, Randy Bodine (#171) of Auburn, and Shaun Small (#430) of Mobile, working independently of each other, came to the same conclusion and reported their unscientific, but convincing answer to our mystery.

Randy and Shaun gave both photos a lot of scrutiny and concluded that both photos are of the same building. Their study revealed a complex of three buildings, each smaller than the other. The IH building photo with the truck was shot from the south side of the complex looking north, while the IH archives photo was shot from the north, looking south. They

This photo from the O.V. Hunt collection at the Birmingham Public Library confirms that the Perfection Bedding truck photo was definitely shot in a lot adjacent to the Birmingham IH branch house, downtown at 10th Avenue and 24th Street.

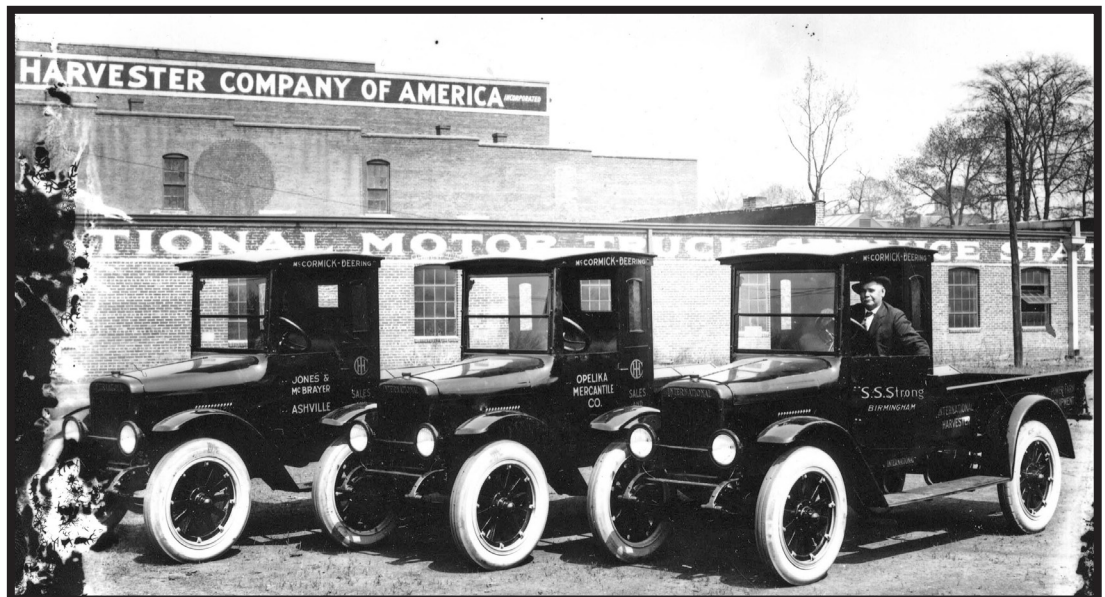


This is the photo of the Perfection Bedding IH model "S" truck that was shot at an unidentified location.

noted similarities between rooflines and windows, but the thing that was most convincing was that both Randy and Shaun pointed to a common rain gutter on the front of the larger building in both photos.

In an email that provided his family's connection to the truck photo, Mr. Jackson mentioned that there might be more to learn about the picture and Perfection Mattress at the Birmingham Public Library. Once I became convinced that Randy and Shaun were on to something, I did a simple search of the Library's website for "IH trucks" and easily located a similar photo of three IH trucks that was clearly shot in the same location as the Perfection Bedding truck.

The library's cataloging information stated without any question that the subject of the photo was "International Harvester Company of America





This photo of the Birmingham branch house is from the McCormick International Harvester Company Collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society. With a little effort you can see that there are three buildings in the complex.

(Birmingham, Alabama) and they describe the photo as a “black and white photograph of the motor truck service station at International Harvester Company and three trucks destined for different parts of Alabama, including Jones and McBrayer in Ashville (St. Clair County), Opelika Mercantile Co. (Lee County), and S.S. Strong in Birmingham.

The library also listed the photographer as O.V. Hunt and that the photo is part of the library’s Oscar V. Hunt collection. It’s very easy to explore the O.V. Hunt collection from within the library’s website and discover that he shot many photos similar to the Perfection Bedding photo and for Birmingham dealers other than IHC.

The library’s digital copy of the photo was made from a glass negative, which was still in wide use by professional photographers in the 1920’s. The black “clouds” that intrude into the image from the sides and bottom were caused by the silver “emulsion” on the negatives peeling up and deteriorating due to neglect over time.

While the Jackson family does not know for sure that the photo was shot by O.V. Hunt, it would be logical to conclude that it was, given how many similar examples there are in the collection. The Perfection Bedding photo was not a part of the O.V. Hunt collection before Ivy Jackson’s son, Ben, brought it to my attention, but in working with Jim Baggett and Don Veasy at the Birmingham Public Library, we are all in agreement that the chances that it is a Hunt photograph are better than 99%. As such, the Jackson family asked that the library accept a digital copy of the photo and that it be added to the Hunt collection.

So, our mystery is solved and we now have confirmed proof of where the IH branch house was in downtown Birmingham and how it looked from three sides. This was an interesting piece of detective work that has resulted in expanding the legacy of IH and our knowledge of where and how the company worked in our home state.

Birmingham Photographer Oscar V. Hunt

From 1898 until his retirement in 1953, Oscar V. Hunt documented with his camera the emergence of Birmingham, Alabama as the boomtown that it became just before the turn of the 20th century. Prior to going into business for himself as a professional photographer, Hunt was the chief photographer for the *Birmingham Ledger*, which was later absorbed by *The Birmingham News*.

According to an account of his life in *Birmingham Magazine* in 1996, Hunt and his pilot set a world altitude record of 5600 feet for a two-passenger bi-plane when they went airborne to make an aerial photograph of downtown Birmingham.

The following account of this adventure, from his editor at the time, appeared in the *Montgomery Advertiser* in 1947:

Oscar did my photographic work when I was city editor of the Birmingham Ledger. One day Oscar came to the office and I gave him an assignment that I did not think he could fill. I told him I wanted an aerial photograph of Birmingham centered on First Avenue and 20th Street where each corner was decorated with a skyscraper.

“I’ll get it for you” said Oscar. I didn’t think he could do it. At that time no aerial picture had ever been taken from the skies over Birmingham or any other Southern city. And my memory says no American city at that time had ever been photographed from an airplane.

To make a long story short, Oscar took the picture and it appeared in the paper, the first aerial photograph of a Southern city and I believe of any American city. The picture was taken in 1912 in the month of April. They were having an aerial circus at the Fair Grounds. The aviator was named Heath. The first day the attempt was made it was too smoky but the next day it was a success. Oscar is still taking pictures. And he is a whiz bang at it. His first aerial picture was taken with a brand new Graflex camera, the best and latest thing on the market in those days. It took nerve in those days to go up in an airplane.



O.V. Hunt died in 1962 and left approximately 1300 photographs which are now housed at the Birmingham Public Library in the O.V. Hunt Collection.