

# HAL W. TROVILLION'S ROLE IN PRESERVING THE HISTORY OF "BLOODY WILLIAMSON"

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the efforts of Hal W. Trovillion, newspaper editor and private printer, to document the controversial history of his southern Illinois coal mining town in the early twentieth century. As a historical case study, it explores some of the challenges inherent in preserving original documents and cultural knowledge without institutional support, and with active interference from community members who worked to suppress information. Trovillion used his printing presses and contacts in the historical community to ensure that the turbulent events occurring in his town in the 1920s would be preserved in the archival record.

## *Introduction*

This case study explores a collection of papers related to the life and work of Hal W. Trovillion, a newspaper editor, publisher, and private printer who attempted to document and preserve the fascinating history of the southern Illinois town in which he lived. Because that history was often violent and subject to unfavorable national press coverage, many citizens of the town actively suppressed primary documents and refused to speak to historians from outside the community who attempted to collect information through oral interviews. Trovillion used his insider position, his newspaper and private presses, and his extensive network of contacts in the local and historical communities to ensure that the turbulent events that occurred in his community would eventually be documented in the archival record and known not only through the sensationalized picture created by the national news media. This article illustrates some of the issues regarding documenting the history of a small town with a controversial history.

### *Hal W. Trovillion: Newspaper Editor and Local Historian*

Hal W. Trovillion moved to Herrin, Illinois, in 1904, shortly after earning his degree in English from Indiana University. This move followed a brief visit to Herrin, during which Trovillion impulsively decided to purchase the *Herrin News* and begin a long relationship with that mining community. At the time, Herrin was in a state of transition. The small Williamson County community had suffered a period of violent family feuding in the nineteenth century, which earned the area the popular nickname “Bloody Williamson.” The family violence was beginning to dissipate in the first decade of the twentieth century, and Herrin was growing rapidly as the coal mining industry in the area expanded. Between 1900 and 1920, the population of the town increased from 1,559 to 10,986.<sup>1</sup>

Trovillion was born in Norris City, Illinois, in 1879. His father worked for a railroad station, and died in 1900. In the following year, Trovillion moved his mother and two sisters to Bloomington, Indiana, where he enrolled at the University of Indiana. The university had no formal journalism school at the time, but Trovillion received mentoring in the profession from one of his teachers, and wrote for the Bloomington *Daily Telephone* on a freelance basis. When the opportunity to purchase the *Herrin News* appeared shortly before Trovillion graduated, he seized it.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1920s, Williamson County’s reputation for violence and lawlessness was dramatically revived in a series of events that included an organized labor riot known as the “Herrin Massacre,” problems with the Ku Klux Klan, and open warfare between rival bootlegging gangs. All of these events made national news, earning the people of Williamson County a reputation as fundamentally incapable of suppressing or punishing violence, as the *New York Times* reported in 1925:

Unpunished violence has bred unpunished organized violence. The authorities wink. Juries know what is good for their health. Prayer is good for the soul, but the foundations of peace will not be laid in Herrin or Williamson County until public sentiment, active, positive, no longer intimidated, insists on public justice. There is much intolerance in Williamson, but it doesn’t apply to murder.<sup>3</sup>

Hal Trovillion played a unique role in all of these events as a local newspaper editor in the infamous community. He took strong editorial stands on the Herrin Massacre and its aftermath, as well as on the local Klan presence. Many of his opinions were at odds with those of the national press or other local papers. At the same time, he was actively developing an international reputation as the owner and operator of the Trovillion Private Press, which produced limited fine editions of literary works. Though few in Herrin likely knew of Trovillion’s Press, his extensive correspondence, now housed at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, demonstrates that he was fully engaged in the artistic private press movement of the first half of the twentieth century.

At first glance, Trovillion led two separate lives: one as a newspaper editor with an intensely local focus; and another as a private press operator, engaged with an international artistic movement primarily concentrated in cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, and London. These two aspects of Trovillion’s career intersected in

his interest in documenting and preserving the history and culture of Herrin and the surrounding region, even when this work was controversial within the community.

Trovillion began his role as the editor of the *Herrin News* with strong ideals about the importance of newspapers in promoting education and literacy among their readers. In 1910, he wrote and published *An Opinion Journalistic*, which espoused the belief that the newspaper editor should have "the desire to lead his readers to aspire to higher things; to assist their intellectual advancement and at all times to encourage their moral uplift."<sup>24</sup> The pamphlet also suggested that the newspaper should "elevate the taste for good literature" among its readers, and "[open] the door to the world's greatest thought."<sup>25</sup> To this end, he placed a literary quotation at the top of his weekly editorial page in order to expose his readers to the words of writers and thinkers such as Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens, and William Thackeray. Trovillion also believed that the newspaper editor had a professional responsibility to develop his opinions on current events without allowing popular influence to creep in.

The view presented in *An Opinion Journalistic* suggests an image of the newspaper editor standing apart from, or even above, those in his community. It is certainly true that Trovillion's editorial voice was strong and he used his press to express his opinions, whether or not they were popular in the community. In addition to his editorials, he often documented events in the community from a minority perspective, ensuring balance in the historical record on these issues.

A good example is his involvement with the local chapters of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) before and after the Herrin Massacre. In 1915, Trovillion printed copies of the UMWA's "Ready Manual and Business Guide" under the *Herrin News* imprint, presumably for the benefit of local members. In 1922, the UMWA local achieved infamy during a nationwide strike. One Herrin mine owner, W.J. Lester, resumed operations a few months into the strike by bussing in outside strikebreakers. The infuriated UMWA miners laid siege to the mine, resulting in an armed standoff. When the strikebreakers finally exited the mine, believing that they would be allowed to leave in peace, 22 were killed.

Trovillion maintained a pro-labor stance in his editorials even after the massacre, as thoroughly documented in Edmund C. Hasse's 1956 thesis, *The Newspaper Editor and Community Conflict: Williamson County, Illinois: 1922-1928*. Trovillion considered his paper to be "the only voice raised in behalf of organized labor in this section of Illinois."<sup>26</sup> While the national press lambasted the UMWA members for their violence and depravity, and other local papers largely kept silent, Trovillion argued that the striking miners had been provoked by the terrifying atmosphere established at the mine as the armed strikebreakers were bused in. While Trovillion never condoned the massacre, he wrote that the crowd had likely been whipped into a frenzy by a few individuals under previously unimaginable circumstances. The *Herrin News* published a series of pro-labor articles after the massacre and distributed a pamphlet titled *The Other Side of Herrin*, which told the story from the UMWA's perspective. Trovillion also repeatedly criticized the national press for their lack of understanding. He even paid part of the bond for some of the UMWA members who were arrested for participation in the violence. By printing and distributing the UMWA's writings and perspectives on the

events, Trovillion ensured that their side of the story would be documented, even as the national media condemned them.

When the Ku Klux Klan appeared in Herrin a few years later, Trovillion's stance as newspaper editor put his business as well as his personal safety at risk. The Klan gained popularity by exploiting nativist sentiment and actively opposing the production and distribution of illegal liquor in the area. They conducted raids intended to enforce prohibition laws, claiming that local authorities were corrupt and unwilling to address vice. Although the Klan did not publicly express any ethnic or racial agenda in Herrin, their raids tended to target Herrin's Italian-American community. A favored tactic was to force their way into private homes to search for illegal wine.

Trovillion strongly opposed the Klan in his editorial pages. He was especially critical of the support local churches offered the group. By taking this stance, he risked losing readers and advertisers, as the Klan was increasingly popular in the community; many in Herrin agreed that the local police had not done enough to stem the flow of liquor in the area. Trovillion also received threats from the Klan and their local leader, S. Glenn Young. In late 1924, Young entered the *Herrin News* offices with several armed men, demanding to see Trovillion. He was not in, so the men proceeded to threaten those who were present, and even hit a linotype operator over the head with a walking stick.<sup>7</sup>

Eventually, violent confrontations with local law enforcement officers and bootleggers alike took their toll on the Klan. In 1925, Young was shot and killed in downtown Herrin by Deputy Sheriff Ora Thomas. Harassed by bootleggers, the Klan's influence waned, ending the conflict.

In documenting each of these events, Trovillion used his press to create and distribute firsthand accounts in pamphlet form. In addition to *The Other Side of Herrin*, he also wrote, printed, and distributed *KKK Experiment in Journalism*, which described the local Klan's attempts to distribute their own newspaper, and to intimidate other local papers when they published material unfavorable to the Klan. Some of the material in these pamphlets was reprinted from articles that originally appeared in the *Herrin News* or one of Trovillion's other papers, but separating it out in pamphlet form emphasized the importance of firsthand accounts of these events.

For historians, these pamphlets provide easy access to information about unique and compelling events. It is unknown whether Trovillion was explicitly interested in facilitating such research when he published these pamphlets, but his later life showed that he was willing to help historical researchers. This is particularly important, given the Klan's attempts to capture the local press through intimidation and through the publication of their own newspaper. Had Trovillion acquiesced to the threats of violence, the Klan's propaganda might be the only primary documentation of this time in Herrin.

Throughout the local turmoil of the 1920s, Trovillion had another passion: his private printing press. Private printing had developed into an artistic and literary movement in the 1890s, when William Morris founded his Kelmscott Press to revive the art and craft of hand-press era printing. By the time Trovillion moved to Herrin in 1904, several organizations had begun to promote the book arts and provide printing enthusiasts with opportunities to meet and exchange ideas. One was the Caxton Club, founded in Chicago in 1895. Many private press books, such as those produced by the Kelmscott Press, were expensive to print because publishers used special papers

and fonts. Trovillion, however, was inspired in his own work by Thomas B. Mosher, of Portland, Maine, who made small, affordable, and aesthetically pleasing books in limited editions. As Trovillion described it, Mosher's books made him want to produce "beautiful books, beautifully printed and filled with choice selections."<sup>8</sup>

Trovillion printed his first book, *Thoughts from R.L. Stevenson*, in 1908. He described his difficulties in founding a press in an essay he published in 1960:

Under what trying hardships this first little cheerful book was produced! In between issues of getting out a small weekly paper in a wild, booming mining town, with a cursing foreman and a periodically drunken printer who was always getting his unanchored, long, grease-spotted necktie mixed in the fountain of dabby black ink, I managed, as if by miracle, to bring to completion the first attempt in real book-making.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these initial setbacks, Trovillion continued to produce small books, refining his craft. For 30 years he distributed the books to friends and other printers, usually as Christmas gifts or in exchange for examples of work from other private presses. He also donated examples of his work to libraries that collected private press books. Eventually, he started selling the books through catalogs and select booksellers. He continued to print and publish books until 1960, at which point he believed his private press to be the oldest in America.<sup>10</sup>

Operating the private press gave Trovillion a way to build relationships with many outside of southern Illinois and an avenue for interacting with the world beyond Herrin. His correspondence and travels associated with the press were international in scope. An acquaintance once wrote,

Half the fun of operating a printing press for Trovillion lay in the contacts he made in the world of books, which was a world that does not normally impinge closely upon the city of Herrin. Hal carried on a correspondence with printers and artists and men of letters all over the world, and in his travels he made a point of visiting as many of these as he could.<sup>11</sup>

Trovillion's correspondence certainly demonstrates his level of activity in the book arts world. He exchanged numerous letters with typographers, binders, and other printers, asking and offering advice. At least one private press operator, James Weygand of the Private Press of the Indiana Kid, wrote that he was inspired to start his own press after seeing an example of Trovillion's work.<sup>12</sup> Several literary figures also exchanged letters with Trovillion, including Daphne Du Maurier and Llewelyn and John Cowper Powys. The Trovillion Private Press even published Llewelyn Powys' *A Baker's Dozen*.

Trovillion only published one local history title under the Trovillion Private Press imprint: *When Lincoln Came to Egypt*, a chronicle of Abraham Lincoln's visits to southern Illinois by George W. Smith, a history professor at nearby Southern Illinois University. Yet Trovillion was also strongly interested in documenting regional history and culture in print. In addition to the pamphlets documenting violent events in Herrin, he also published lighter historical material. In 1910, he published a pamphlet titled *Old Times in Herrin* under the *Herrin News* imprint. As distinct from the Trovillion

Private Press imprint, Trovillion did not concern himself with aesthetics when producing the *Herrin News* pamphlets. *Old Times in Herrin* consists of anecdotes written by longtime residents about life in Herrin prior to the mining boom. Despite mention of violent family feuding in Herrin, the focus of the stories is mainly positive and light-hearted. Trovillion's decision to publish such a volume indicates a shrewd marketing sensibility. Similar "Pioneer Days" local histories were popular in the early twentieth century, especially among older readers eager to reminisce about earlier, simpler times. Trovillion continued to publish material documenting Herrin's history throughout his career, even when it was controversial with some in the community.

In 1876, Herrin lawyer Milo Erwin wrote *A History of Williamson County from the Earliest Times Down to the Present*, documenting the local family feud commonly known as the "bloody vendetta," and lamenting that the perpetrators were never punished. The book angered many in Herrin who felt that the town's problems should not be aired in print. Shortly after it was published, Erwin left the community, never to return. Copies were purchased by locals and hidden to prevent their circulation.

By the time Trovillion arrived, it was nearly impossible to find a copy of the book, though he heard rumors that some copies still existed. He searched for two years and was eventually able to purchase one, as he described many years later in the *Egyptian Republican*, adding that the unnamed man who sold him the book was shot to death a month later, having been implicated in the feud.

Trovillion reprinted the book under the *Herrin News* imprint. Although feelings had cooled since the 1870s, he still faced resistance. He described one encounter with "the town's wealthiest man," who burst into the *Herrin News* offices shortly after the book was published, shouting, "It ain't fitten for this generation to read sich books. You had no right to print it again and reopen old sores that have been healing up." Trovillion's response was to point out that Old Uncle William, as this irate citizen was known, himself owned two copies of the book, and was known to loan them to "select friends" after extracting a promise that they would tell no one.<sup>13</sup> This seemed to mollify the older man, and Trovillion never faced serious retaliation for reprinting Erwin's notorious book. Because so many copies of the first edition of the book were actively suppressed, Trovillion's republication ensured that this valuable historical account would survive. Indeed, it has been reprinted several times since, most recently in 2006 under the title *The Bloody Vendetta of Southern Illinois*.

Trovillion's pamphlet publications and printing of *A History of Williamson County* demonstrate his interest in documenting both the positive and negative aspects of southern Illinois history. While singling out significant events and sources for monographic publication, he also solicited and published historical articles in his newspapers. For example, his *Egyptian Republican*, a monthly paper focused on state and regional political issues, often included purely historical articles such as "Shawneetown—The Oldest Living City of State," "Chester to Cairo Highway Rich in Indian Lore," "The Story of Old Stone Fort," and "Southern Illinois' Forgotten Heroes Recalled." The latter was even printed as the leading headline article for the month.

Trovillion also played a significant role in the production of the most comprehensive work ever written on Herrin's troubled history. Paul M. Angle's *Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness*, published in 1952 by Alfred A. Knopf, is a classic

example of regional history and a staple of college syllabi. Trovillion and Angle became acquainted through a mutual interest in Abraham Lincoln. The Trovillion Private Press printed several interesting pieces of Lincolniana, copies of which were donated to the Illinois State Historical Society, where Angle was state historian. Trovillion and Angle corresponded regularly and visited one another when possible. In 1947, Angle considered writing a book about the troubled history of Williamson County, but first deferred to Trovillion: “. . .if you yourself are seriously considering doing the book I wrote about, tell me that frankly and I will stay home and turn my mind to other projects.”<sup>14</sup> Trovillion had no plans to write such a book, but offered “to assist. . . in every way” possible.<sup>15</sup>

Angle promptly embarked on his research. Trovillion loaned him copies of rare pamphlets related to Williamson County history and a complete file copy of the *Egyptian Republican*. The two corresponded regularly as the book took shape, and Angle relied on Trovillion’s personal knowledge and experience to describe many of the people and events in the book. His letters are filled with questions: “Who was ‘Old Uncle William? Crain, Bulliner, Henderson?’”<sup>16</sup> “If there was a [labor] blow-up in 1910, or in any other year between 1899 and 1922, can you give me the dates?”<sup>17</sup> “Are there small outline maps of Williamson County? If so, could you mark the following places on one of them for me?”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to answering Angle’s questions, Trovillion introduced Angle to various participants in Williamson County events, sent rare primary source material (even soliciting copies through classified advertisements in his paper when he did not own them himself), and suggested avenues for further research. One of the richest sources documenting the Williamson County troubles in the 1920s is a set of newspaper clipping scrapbooks compiled by Oldham Paisley, another southern Illinois newspaper editor. The scrapbooks, deposited in Williamson County’s Marion Carnegie Library, formed the backbone of Angle’s research on that period. They were so useful that he arranged to have them microfilmed and a copy placed in the Chicago Historical Society (CHS) collection, preserving them for future researchers. The Bloody Williamson Research Collection in CHS also includes many of the materials sent to Angle by Trovillion, so these records entered a system in which they could be professionally preserved and described. The climate in Williamson County at the time was such that local historical societies might have been unwilling to do the same, given the sensitive nature of the material.

Trovillion read a draft of Angle’s manuscript, making suggestions and answering Angle’s numerous final fact-checking questions. Yet despite his invaluable assistance, Trovillion is not acknowledged anywhere in the published book. The explanation for this is documented in their correspondence. Even before the book was finished, Trovillion warned Angle that it might not be well-received in Herrin:

Understand that one of the duties assumed by the Lion’s Club here is to defend and protect the reputation of the Herrin of today—so the[y are] going after the writers who bring up the city’s past and let her skeletons out to get an occasional airing.<sup>19</sup>

Shortly before the book was published, Trovillion explicitly asked Angle not to mention him:

I think that I can plainly see that my name would class me in a rather embarrassing spot at this time and the fact that I have no newspaper, as I once had, to tell my side of the story, I would be caught as Old Jessie James was [when] he pitched his holster and his gun on the bed and the next moment was floundering in his own blood—sounds funny, but it ain't funny.

It presents itself to me at the moment that the old axiom offers safest refuge—that discretion is the better part of valor. I believe if you were wearing the same shoes that [Paisley] and I have to walk about in on our streets that you would feel the same way about it.<sup>20</sup>

Despite his reservations, Trovillion refused to distance himself from the book entirely, even after Angle suggested that they publicly part ways in order to protect Trovillion's reputation in the community. Trovillion even decided to sell copies of *Bloody Williamson* in the community, despite the fear that some residents would strongly object:

No, I shall not deny anything or part company with you. If it is a matter of standing alone, I've always been used to that. I look for a big sale here in this city. I have a number of persons who have already placed orders with me and unless someone gets a court order, I shall be very glad to serve them.<sup>21</sup>

He later wrote that he even defended Angle when possible. Many in Herrin were upset about the book's sensational title, but Trovillion mollified them by explaining that the choice was made by the publisher rather than the author.<sup>22</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Trovillion died in 1967, having lived in Herrin for almost 60 years. Despite his level of involvement in community affairs, it appears he may not have developed many close relationships with the people of Herrin. In his 1956 thesis, Edmund C. Hasse relates this anecdote about a stop in a Herrin barbershop during a research visit:

Seven men were present when Trovillion's name was mentioned by one of the customers who noted how dissimilar Trovillion's English-style home was from the others in the community. Discussing Trovillion's current interests in the private publishing field, none of the group was sure whether he "wrote books or just printed them" although the former editor has been engaged in private printing since 1908. In view of the uncertainty it was finally concluded that "no one knows Hal very well."<sup>23</sup>



Trovillion may not have been well known in the town, yet he served as its ambassador through his broad and wide correspondence, such as this 1928 letter from Henry Lewis Bullen, then librarian at the Typographic Library and Museum:

I have read about an awful Herrin, never dreaming that sweetness and light might prevail against evil things even in Herrin. Henceforth Herrin is another and better place, the home of friends with fine feelings, exquisite taste and creators of beautiful things.<sup>24</sup>

Similar sentiments are found in many other letters to Trovillion about book arts and literature. And Trovillion performed an invaluable service by documenting and publishing Herrin’s history. Angle’s scholarly *Bloody Williamson* could not have been written without Trovillion’s local knowledge and access to primary source information and actual participants in the events.<sup>25</sup> As David V. Felts wrote in his review of the book in the August 1952 issue of the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, “the book brings into proper perspective a succession of events that had been reported only in contemporary accounts, often colored by rumor and prejudice.”<sup>26</sup> He also wrote that “residents of the southern counties. . . may deplore this new interest in unsavory chapters in their local history. But this book is a work of research, not a sensational recital of rumor and partial information.”<sup>27</sup>

Without *Bloody Williamson*, the unique history of Herrin might be known only through those sensational or prejudiced contemporary accounts. Now, as scholarly interest in the history of the southern Illinois region increases through the work of several dedicated local historians, new investigations are aided by the archival and published records created or facilitated by Hal Trovillion’s interest in documenting history in the face of controversy.

The Trovillion Private Press Records offer an example of the tension between the desire to document, preserve, and provide access to history, and the competing desire to suppress sensitive and controversial information. With the professionalization of archives, this tension is often addressed through formal donor agreements, with temporary access restrictions offered to reluctant donors in order to protect their privacy during their lifetimes. Trovillion’s experience represents an historical example of a citizen dealing with these same tensions. While he bravely published material that others might have preferred to forget, he also had to publicly minimize his role in the research process of a scholarly work on these controversial subjects, obscuring himself as the source of much of the material in *Bloody Williamson*. However, he left his imprint on the archival record in his own collection at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and in the Bloody Williamson Research Collection at the Chicago Historical Society. Without these records, it would be difficult or perhaps even impossible for historians to verify the accuracy of Angle’s *Bloody Williamson*, or to conduct new investigations into these significant and unique events in American history.

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## NOTES

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