

'Swear I Won't Be Here Long' HENRY SPAULDING

by Chris Smith



Henry Spaulding's 'Cairo Blues' (Brunswick 7085, 9th May 1929) is widely, and rightly, regarded as one of the finest St. Louis blues recordings from the interwar years, and 'Biddle Street Blues', on the other side of the disc, is also an outstanding performance. Brunswick released the disc nationally on 19th July 1929, but thought it would do well locally, giving it a special release in St. Louis on 10th June. A note on the file card reads 'St. Louis sold 573 in June'. The high quality of Spaulding's tiny discography has naturally generated interest in his biography, and this article summarises the results of past investigations, and presents new information about a person, not hitherto noted, who seems likely to have been this much admired musician.

In the notes to 'St. Louis Town' (Belzona [later Yazoo] L-1003), Don Kent states, without giving a source, that Spaulding was 'from Mississippi (and) vaguely remembered as having worked in and around the Cairo area'. Pete Welding's notes to 'The Blues In St. Louis' (Origin OJL-20) claim that 'Big Joe Williams and Henry Townsend have both recalled that Spaulding was from Future City, Illinois'. Kent says that Spaulding died 'in the 30s', and Welding that he died 'shortly after' his recording session.

Welding's statements are based on a July 1967 interview with Townsend, at which Big Joe Williams was present. Extracts which appeared in *Blues Unlimited* 57 do not entirely support what is said in the Origin notes:

"When I knew Henry Spaulding he was on 19th and Biddle (Streets) and when he died that's where he was. That's all I know. No, I don't know where Henry Spaulding was from really (Big Joe suggested that he was from Future City). Yeah, I think it was Future City, Illinois; I'd heard that, yes. I guess he died somewhere in the 1930s, wasn't it? Round about 1930, it wasn't too long after he made his recordings that he died. At the time he made those records he was an older man than I was, so I guess he would have been about 28 or 30 then (Big Joe concurs)."

The Future City suggestion is not a matter of two independent recollections, as Welding implies in his album notes. Nevertheless, if Cairo, Illinois had personal significance for Spaulding, it is quite likely that he lived in Future City before arriving in St. Louis.

Future City is a small community two miles north of Cairo, and historically almost entirely African American. Local folk etymology derives its name from Richard Futrell, supposedly the area's first settler, but it seems more likely that the settlement was founded in the 1900s by people from Cairo, perhaps seeking some safety in distance from the racially tense town where William 'Froggie' James had been lynched in November 1909. In 1912 and 1913, Future City was devastated by flooding; in the latter year, not one of the town's 214 buildings was on its original site after the waters receded. Future City seems never to have made a comeback, and today is home to a handful of residents.

Being 'from Future City' does not necessarily mean being born there, but in 'Blues: A Regional Experience', Bob Eagle and Eric S. LeBlanc make that suggestion, having first raised another possibility. One notes that their 27 words ('Arkansas' below is my addition) include four adverbs of uncertainty:

Henry Spaulding (v/g) (possibly Henry Spadling [sic],) (possibly Vaugine Township, Jefferson County [Arkansas], about 1903 – Spaulding reputedly died about 1930.) He was reportedly born at Future City, Illinois.

Henry Spadling appears in the 1910 census aged seven, the adopted son of Doney and Lue Spadling, and said to have been born in Arkansas. In that state, a township is a division of a county: Vaugine Township includes Pine Bluff, and it seems certain that Henry Spadling (coloured), dishwasher, living at 322 South Barraque in Pine Bluff in 1931, is the same person. This appears to rule him out as the St. Louis recording artist. Can anything more be learned about Spaulding from statements by St. Louis musicians?

Reverend Joe Dean, former blues pianist, fellow Brunswick recording artist, and a minister by the time he was interviewed, recalled that: "Henry Spaulding was a barber by trade, yeah, eventually I think eventually he opened his own shop there on Leffingwell and Franklin some years later and he was a very popular guy with that guitar."

In the 1970s, Henry Townsend said that: "I was aged about nineteen (born on 27th October 1909) and then I started working around a little bit picking up a few things from Henry Spaulding – he was a barber – he had done a recording for some company, 'Cairo Blues', and I fooled around with him for quite some time and of course I stole what I could from him. He and I used to do house parties together. He was an older musician than me – so I followed him around a bit."

Interviewed by Bill Greensmith from 1986 onwards, Townsend added that: Henry Spaulding "... didn't want a weekend to pass him unless he was playing at somebody's party ... he would have been about five or six years older than me, something like that."

At the time of Peetie Wheatstraw's death (on 21st December 1941) I think Henry Spaulding had passed on, because he wasn't in that ring. He was there part of the time, then he disappeared out of it. So I'm thinking, Spaulding, he died somewhere in the 1930s."

Greensmith adds a footnote that "Spaulding, who was reputedly from Mississippi, worked as a barber with a shop on Biddle Street. He is thought to have died in 1938." The location of the barber shop presumably deduced from Townsend's statement to Welding, quoted above, about where Spaulding was 'when he died,' and may not be correct.

However, Kevin Belford's research in St. Louis city directories, summarised in 'Devil At The Confluence', confirms that Henry Spaulding was a barber: living on Division Street in 1929, he's listed "through the thirties - working at a number of different barber shops around Deep Morgan. His last listing is in 1941 when he was working for John Taylor's barbershop on Jefferson Avenue and living at 2705 Lucas Avenue."

Henry Townsend was not an infallible witness (he told Bill Greensmith that he had seen Carl Rafferty, who died in September 1941, 'four or five years ago'), but there is no reason to doubt his belief that Spaulding was a slightly older man, 'about 1928 or 1930' in 1929. It appears, however, that he was wrong to believe that Spaulding had died by late 1941; his absence from the scene seems more likely to have been the result of poor health.

On 15th February 1942, Henry Hezekiah Spaulding, 5' 9" and 145 pounds, registered for the Second World War draft in St. Louis. Born in Madison, Arkansas on 7th May 1901, he said that his place of residence, 911 Elliott [sic for Elliott], was also his place of work. Significantly, his employer, Emil Collins, was the owner of Collins Barber Shop.

A note on the draft card: 'Deceased 6/16/42', leads to the death certificate of Hezekiah Spaulding, who died of pulmonary tuberculosis on 16th June 1942 at Homer Phillips Hospital, where he had been admitted ten days earlier. Spaulding's date of birth is given as 5th May 1900 in Arkansas, and his time in St. Louis as 26 years (that is, since 1916). He was married, but separated at the time of death, living at 2035a Carr Street, and working as a labourer. His parents' names are listed as William Spaulding and Benetter Womack, both born in Mississippi. The information on the certificate comes from hospital records – the address of the informant, Shirley Smith, is that of Homer Phillips Hospital – which indicates that the details were supplied by Spaulding himself when he was admitted.

Hezekiah's parents, William and Benetta Spaulding, born in Mississippi in 1853 and 1870 respectively, had married in St. Francis County, Arkansas on 16th July 1887, and were living there in the 1900 census. They had five children on the census day, 1st June 1900, but Hezekiah was not among them. We can therefore assume that he was born in May 1901, as stated on his draft card. Neither he nor his parents



Burial permits from the St. Louis Star & Times. Courtesy Chris Smith.

BURIAL PERMITS
 Frances Grove, 70, 4739 Ashland.
 Gustave A. Green, 79, 1217A N. Seventh.
 William Siman, 5, 3238 Minnesota.
 Henry Charles Beckmann, 80, Glendale.
 Margaret Engelmeyer, 61, 5839A Lotus.
 Benjamin Louis Brooks, 9, 4009 N 23rd.
 Armin Meier, 44, 4937 Eichelberger.
 Joseph Graf, 43, 3509 Halliday.
 Frank Heppelman, 79, 3225 N. Florissant.
 Linda Garber, 42, 540 Eiler.
 Margaret Bross, 75, 5800 Arsenal.
 Joseph Fogler, 37, 5406 Delmar.
 Minnie Reis, 58, University City.
 Daniel Coleman, 41, 8453 Lowell.
 Jessie Minnie DeMonsapert, 60, 2129 St. Louis.
 Carol Ann Jungmichel, 6, 2723 Osage.
 Edward Albert Raithel, 61, 108 N. Kings-highway.
 Alice Visor, 47, 318 Montrose.
 Hezekiah Spaulding, 42, 2035A Carr.
 Norma Lee Medaris, 4, 1838A Dolman.
 Helen Mildred Griggs, 40, 4309 Frieda.
 Celeste Jennerjohn, 32, 3926A N. 21st.
 Harold Whisnant, 22, 1420 Dillon.

can be traced in 1910, but by 1920 he was in St. Louis, where he was enumerated as Hezekiah Spaulding [sic], a labourer aged 20. He was married to Hazel Wilson, said to be 18, but probably 15 (the date of birth on her death certificate is 7 December 1904), and they were living with her parents, Dave and Sadie Wilson. Hezekiah and Hazel were the parents of Hezekiah, Jr., one month old on the census day, 1st January 1920. (Hezekiah, Jr., who died on 15th November 1970, gave his date of birth as 1st December 1919 when he registered for the draft in 1941.)

Hezekiah and Hazel Spaulding's marriage ended soon after the 1920 census: on 20th June 1922, she gave birth to Dollie Abernathy, whose father was Silas Abernathy, born in Cape Girardeau, Missouri in 1888. By 1930, still (or again) living with her parents, Hazel had reverted to being Hazel Wilson, and said she was a widow. Silas Abernathy died on 22nd May 1933, and was described as single on his death certificate. In 1940, Hazel Abernathy [sic], described as a widow, was sharing her home with two siblings and her 17-year old married daughter, Dolly Pryor. Hazel Abernathy died on 11th April 1944. It seems inevitable that Dolly Pryor was Dollie Abernathy when she died in 1997, and described as 'never married' by the informant, her son, Michael Montique, Sr. All this takes us some way from Henry Spaulding, but it offers an insight into the entanglements that family reconstruction research can involve.

As for Hezekiah Spaulding senior, he seems to have been missed in both the 1930 and 1940 censuses. It is extremely fortunate that when he registered for the draft, not long before his death, he declared that his full name was Henry Hezekiah Spaulding. One assumes that 'Henry' was a moniker which he used informally, and by which he was known around St. Louis to friends, musicians, party-goers, and men in need of a haircut.

Label shots: Chris Smith

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
 MISSOURI STATE BOARD OF HEALTH
 STANDARD CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
 File No. 20028
 Registration District No. 791
 Primary Registration District No. 5452
 Registrar's No. 5452

1. PLACE OF DEATH:
 (a) County: St. Louis, Mo.
 (b) City or town: St. Louis, Mo.
 (c) Name of hospital or institution: Homer Phillips Hospital
 (d) Length of stay: 10 days
 (e) In this community: 26 years

2. (a) PRINT FULL NAME: Hezekiah Spaulding
 (b) If veteran, name war: No.
 (c) Social Security No.:
 (d) Sex: Male
 (e) Race: Negro
 (f) Age of husband or wife: 42 years
 (g) Date of death: May 5, 1900
 (h) Birthplace: Ark.
 (i) Usual occupation: Laborer
 (j) Informant: William Spaulding
 (k) Address: 2601 N. Whittier
 (l) Signature of funeral director: [Signature]
 (m) Signature of physician: [Signature]
 (n) Signature of coroner: [Signature]

3. USUAL RESIDENCE OF DECEASED:
 (a) State: Missouri
 (b) County: St. Louis
 (c) City or town: St. Louis
 (d) Street No.: 2035A Carr St.
 (e) If foreign born, how long in U.S.A.: 25 years

4. DATE OF DEATH: June 16, 1942
 hour: 4:25 P.M.
 I hereby certify that I attended the deceased from June 16, 1942, until June 16, 1942, and that death occurred on the date and hour stated above.
 Immediate cause of death: Pulmonary Tuberculosis
 Duration: Indef.

5. MEDICAL CERTIFICATION:
 (a) If death was due to external cause, fill in the following:
 (i) Accident, suicide, or homicide (specify):
 (ii) Date of occurrence:
 (iii) Where did injury occur?
 (iv) Did injury occur to or about horse or farm, or industrial plant, or public place?
 (b) If death was due to internal cause, fill in the following:
 (i) Cause of death:
 (ii) Date of occurrence:
 (iii) Where did injury occur?
 (iv) Did injury occur to or about horse or farm, or industrial plant, or public place?

6. SIGNATURES:
 (a) Registrar: [Signature]
 (b) Physician: [Signature]
 (c) Coroner: [Signature]

7. JUNE 25 1942

Henry Spaulding's death certificate. Courtesy Chris Smith.

SERIAL NUMBER: 1577
 ORDER NUMBER: 11653
 NAME: Henry Hezekiah Spaulding
 PLACE OF RESIDENCE: 911 Elliott, St. Louis, Mo.
 MAILING ADDRESS: Same
 AGE IN YEARS: 40
 DATE OF BIRTH: May 7, 1901
 PLACE OF BIRTH: Madison, Ark.
 NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS: Emil Collins, 911 Elliott
 PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS: Collins Barber Shop, 911 Elliott
 I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE
 D. S. S. Form 1 (Revised 1-1-42) (over) ☆ GPO 16-21630-2

Henry Spaulding's Army registration card. Courtesy Chris Smith.



Future City after the 1913 flood. Source: American Red Cross Bulletin of 1914.

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