

Ralph L. Smith

1887 – 1968

Ralph Leftwich Smith was born in Galesburg, Kansas on June 5, 1887, the eldest son of Lillian and Matt Smith. Lumber was his father's livelihood and it was in this business that Ralph Smith began his extraordinary career.

Ralph L. Smith entered the M.R. Smith Lumber and Shingle Co., his father's Kansas City wholesale firm, in 1908. He opened an office for the company in Toledo, Ohio in 1914, remaining there until 1917. During 1918 Smith accepted commission as a First Lieutenant with the United States Army, selling spruce from a federally owned sawmill in Vancouver, Washington. After the Armistice he returned to Kansas City to develop an interest in wood products other than lumber and shingles.

As the son of a well-to-do father and recognized as being reliable and hardworking, Ralph Smith was a young man with a future that appeared patently cut out for him. However, in 1924 Mr. Smith elected to enter business for himself, operating as the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Company. His genius as a businessman was soon to emerge.

His new company did business in the manufacture and sale of Port Orford Cedar specialty items to be used in the manufacture of battery separators and venetian blinds. During the first year, exactly 100 railroad cars carried the company's business at an average profit of \$300 per car! Soon afterward the lumber industry plunged into a recession, well in advance of the

Great Depression of the 1930s. Seemingly untouched, Ralph L. Smith emerged out of the depression as the head of two lumber organizations of his own – businesses that grew from infancy while other companies continued to experience financial reverses.

A crisis in the battery separator business came in 1928. Part of the demand for separators was the result of the radio. But by 1928 radios no longer used batteries. Competition was growing more intense and the battery business was looking at cost-cutting practices. Ralph L. Smith convinced the National Battery Company of St. Paul, Minnesota that \$40,000 per year could be saved by producing separators at the edge of Oregon's great Port Orford Cedar stands. With a \$25,000 advance from National Battery Company, Smith established a new manufacturing plant at Coquille, Oregon, producing 40 million separators the first year. The new plant, known as Smith Wood Products, grew steadily under the able management of George A. Ulett and was eventually sold in 1946 for over three million dollars.

In 1942, Smith's other operation, the Ralph L. Smith Lumber Co., expanded its wholesale operations into product manufacturing. The company bought timber and a sawmill at Canby near Alturas, California and later acquired another sawmill and timber in Klamath Falls, Oregon and Elgin, Oregon. Boxes were produced at the Alturas plant while moulding was the specialty at Klamath Falls. Cut stock and mouldings were manufactured at Elgin.

Foreseeing the need of integrating all the lumbering operations, Mr. Smith bought the Deschutes Lumber Co. at Anderson, California in 1947. On the 200 acre sight a modern sawmill, remanufacturing plant, and a box plant were built under the direction of A.B. Hood, vice-president and general manager. These facilities furnished employment for 650 men and turned out some 10 carloads of finished products a day. Considerable additional footage was transported by truck.

There soon followed the acquisition of the Wildwood Lumber Co. at Red Bluff, California, the Castle Creek Lumber Co. at Castella, California, the Dunsmuir Lumber Co. at Dunsmuir, California and Mt. Shasta Pine Manufacturing Co. at Mt. Shasta, California. All included adjacent tracts of timber to assure an adequate supply. Their largest source of timber came from the Walker Agency Lands, as a result of the dissolution of the Red River Lumber Co., in various parcels within convenient distances to the mill and factory at Anderson.

By 1960 Ralph Smith was giving some thought to retirement. Among other interested companies was the Kimberly-Clark Corp. of Neenah, Wis. Their objective was to build a pulp and paper mill at the Anderson site. Extensive studies and public hearings before the Water Pollution Control Board indicated that the locality was suitable. More than 20 local organizations presented resolutions urging the Board to favor the Kimberly-Clark Corporation's pledge that it would adhere to the standards set by the Board on the basis of economic need, greater utilization of forest products, and a broader tax base. By 1961 negotiations with the Kimberly-Clark Corp. were completed and Mr. Smith was able to retire.

Ralph L. Smith worked hard during his younger years building up his business and then spent much of his life helping others. Philanthropy provided deep personal satisfaction. His earlier philanthropies were often the product of sudden impulse and tended to be of unusual nature, often including little known organizations and obscure persons. In his later years Smith "put his house in order" by establishing an unrestricted foundation in Kansas City, Missouri.

The great bulk of his gifts went to the education of blacks, either in grants or scholarships to institutions or direct aid to outstanding students. Smith felt strongly that education was the hope for American Negroes to attain financial and social equality.

Ralph L. Smith savored the fruits of his success with great dignity. Showplace livestock farms on which he raised some of the nation's finest purebred Black Angus cattle and Percheron horses were a particular hobby for many years. He donated his award-winning livestock to Future Farmers of America clubs in several states and to universities in Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Alabama and Georgia.

He was married to Harriet Tomlinson of Kansas City, Missouri in 1914. They had three children; Margaret (Mrs. Thomas T. Denison); Anne Odell (Mrs. Edward M. Douthat, Jr.) and Ralph L. Smith, Jr. After his first wife's death in 1954, Mr. Smith married Evelyn Maran.

Ralph L. Smith, lumberman, farmer and philanthropist died at 81 on August 22, 1968.