
In Memoriam

Eldson Coles Smith, 1903-1996

In 1976, The American Name Society honored Mr. Smith with a Festschrift (*Names*, 24, 3). Now, 20 years later, we mourn his death.

He was a very successful attorney, specializing in estates and probate law and serving over the years as a partner in several law firms in Chicago, where he began practice in 1930 after having been graduated from Harvard University Law School. Earlier, he was awarded a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Illinois and obtained teacher certification at the University of Chicago. From 1933 to 1935, he was a faculty member of the Chicago Law School. While attending Harvard, he met Clare Irvette Hutchins, who became his wonderful wife of more than sixty years and his survivor. They were married on December 23, 1933. Their daughter, Laurel Gleda Miller, died with her husband of only a short time in a car accident in 1962. He and Clare never recovered from this terrible loss.

The members of the American Names Society knew little about his successful law practice, other than that he was listed as the attorney for the Society for more than 30 years. They knew, however, that he was a student of names, especially personal names. He said that his fascination and later avocation came about rather naturally: He was born in Virginia, Illinois, and his name was Smith; hence, names took on a kind of mystical attraction. Yet, in the Foreword to his *American Surnames* appears a statement of frustration that must be endemic to all who try to interpret the origin of names: "Preparing a book on American surnames with all their forms and different national derivations is not quite so difficult as trying to eliminate the oceans by dipping the water out with one hand, a teaspoonful at a time, but both tasks seem to be endless. One cannot logically compare the length of two infinities."

The Book of Smith (Nellen Publishing Co., 1978) epitomized his passion for names, his own included. It also showed his humor when he wrote that the nearly 3,000,000 Smiths in the United States have very

uncommon names to offset their most common name and he listed many of the bizarre ones: Five Eights "5/8" Smith, William McKinley Louisiana Levee Bust Smith (born during a flood), Smith Smith, Alpha Smith, Omega Smith, Rj Smith, Jar Smith, Thyrza Smith and Christ Smith, among many others. While an undergraduate at the University of Illinois, he found a book on names in the library; from then on during business visits to US cities and European countries, he made lists of books and articles, with annotations and ratings, on the subject which led to the standard reference work on personal names (*Personal Names: A Bibliography*, New York Public Library, 1952; reprinted by Gale Research Co., 1965). This work is indispensable for the student of personal names; furthermore, in each entry is the name of the library where the item (book or article) can be found. He kept it current through an annual bibliography published in *Names*.

Eldson Smith is listed as a co-founder of the American Name Society (1951), but in fact his was the guiding force behind its founding, he having urged the forming of such an organization many times. A gracious man, he always allowed others to stake their own claims. As an attorney, he wrote the Constitution and Bylaws for the Society, arranged for its first meeting (December 29, 1951), and served as its first president in 1951-1954, and again in 1970. He invited the then leading scholars in onomastics to join; these included George R. Stewart, whose *Names on the Land* had stimulated many to study placenames, and Erwin S. Gudde, a professor of German at the University of California at Berkeley and compiler of an excellent dictionary of California placenames. Smith, Stewart, and Gudde formed the unlikely triumvirate that literally forced together the new organization in face of opposition from many who believed that the study of names should remain under the jurisdiction of the American Dialect Society, which had nurtured onomastics within its fold since its own beginning and still remains closely allied.

Although he published books and articles on personal names, Mr. Smith was not connected with any academic institution, but he was able to persuade leading academics to join the Society and become active as officers. A reading of the minutes of the first few years will indicate some of the difficulties he had in keeping amicable working conditions with some great scholars who had egos that had to be constantly soothed and calmed. Perhaps only an attorney of Mr. Smith's abilities could

have kept the Society together in those early years. He worked well, and carefully, with others. His onomastics colleague, Dr. Stewart, besides being the placename theorist, proved to be an outstanding recruiter who invited many of the members during the first year of the Society, while Dr. Gudde immediately gained the infant organization international recognition. And always, Mr. Smith guided the organization in all legal matters, such as incorporating, filing income tax reports, and showing academic treasurers of the Society how to make a balance sheet.

The members of the American Name Society, from its beginning, have been largely divided between students of placenames and students of personal names. This division, as we all know, has caused much dissension at times, especially in recent years as the placename enthusiasts have found a more receptive audience for their research and publications. Personal name students have moved away from etymology and into social fields, particularly psychology, sociology, and literary criticism and, consequently, the study of personal names has been somewhat diluted, while the study of placenames has remained empirically stable and certainly intensely active. Mr. Smith, whose books are major contributions to general onomastics but more so to personal names, always supported name studies in any field and under all circumstances. Looking through the numerous reviews in *Names* during his many years as Book Review Editor, we can see that he made no distinction among those that were to be reviewed. He also selected the reviewers he considered most qualified for the books being reviewed. His balance here is indicative of the evenhandedness in all his work with the Society from the 1950s into the 1980s.

Whenever a crisis began to develop, Mr. Smith was always the one who advised the secretary and treasurer what action should be taken. His work with the officers of the Society no doubt contributed to its early success and helped keep it healthy during the years he participated actively in all its aspects. He had an understanding of how organizations must be operated to be successful, and he had insight into the way different personalities work. With these abilities, he combined a very personal with a very pleasant approach. He was a wonderfully exceptional person with whom to work. He was also an excellent conversationalist. He listened.

And now I would like to be very personal. I was fortunate to have worked with Elsdon for nearly 30 years. I have known him since September 1958 when we met at the Modern Language Association at

the University of Wisconsin, the only occasion in modern times when MLA met on a campus. I read a paper at the meeting and was more in awe of George Stewart than I was in anyone or anything else, for I had not heard of Elsdon at the time. I had read several of Stewart's books and had been influenced strongly by *Names on the Land*. Elsdon wrote me a nice note praising my presentation, which I had assumed no one really heard. Then, in 1959, he asked me if I would serve as Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the Society. At the time, I had published an article in *Names* on the subject of names of Thomas Nashe's devils, a seminar paper which my professor suggested I send to the new magazine. Other than some work on names for seminars taught by Dr. Thomas Pyles, I had no great interest in name study, being much more concerned with collecting the dialect of Perry County, Tennessee, and writing a dissertation on 17th century English literature.

I accepted the offer to be nominated and, given the way ANS had until recently handled nominations and elections, I was duly brought into the Society in December 1959, at a meeting in Elsdon's office on LaSalle Street, a most imposing board room, more imposing than any college or university board room I have seen since. I was more than impressed by the way Elsdon presided over the meeting and how well he was respected by the officers of the Society. That was the beginning of his strong influence on my career, which from that time on was directed toward finding out all I could about names. He and I corresponded by mail and talked by telephone on all matters concerning the Society and about names. I visited him and Clare in their home then in Evanston. He, Clare, and I usually met for dinner at least once at the annual meetings, and they would stop by my home in Youngstown, OH, during their trips to New York. More and more I recognized what a remarkable man he was and how much I depended on him personally and academically. And I am sure that others have also been strongly influenced by him.

On one of my visits to Elsdon and Clare's home, Professor Mamie Meredith, who accompanied me, and I were privileged to see Elsdon's collection of books on names. He possessed about 1,500 titles, many of them rare at that time (1962) and now more so. Included were several first editions by "antiquaries" from England (Baring-Gould, Yonge, Bardsley, Black, Weekley, Lower, and many others) and an early edition of *Etymological Dictionary of Family and Christian Names* by

William Arthur, father of Chester A. Arthur, President of the United States (1881-85). Most assuredly, it was and still is the best collection of books, owned by one individual, on personal names in the world. Although the books were rare, they were also used by him, referred to, studied. Elsdon was not a collector just for the sake of collecting, but his books were fountains of information and were also tools to be used in his own work. For anyone who loves books and especially books on onomastics, these shelves of historical sources held wonders.

As I wrote in the Foreword to his Festschrift:

By his example, many young scholars have been persuaded to devote research time to onomastics, both in the United States and in other countries. His devotion to the furthering of onomatology has seemingly been tireless and selfless. In the American Name Society files, there are more than 1,000 pieces of correspondence from Mr. Smith. Multiply this by the numerous other correspondents he must have and then some concept of his dedication becomes more than merely apparent.

I appreciate having been given this opportunity to write these few comments about my good friend and mentor. I miss him very much.

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Bibliography

This list, copied mainly from *Names* (24: 143), includes only the major works by Mr. Smith. All articles and reviews, and they are numerous, have been omitted, as well as the annual bibliographies on personal names that have appeared in *Names* since 1953.

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