CAPTAIN ELLISON ADGER SMYTH

Choice McCoin

Lady Fortune has smiled kindly on Greenville by choosing for her a number of adopted citizens who have greatly enhanced her cultural, social, and economic development and who have made outstanding contributions in their chosen fields. Such a person was Captain Ellison Adger Smyth, a textile pioneer par excellence.

Perhaps influenced by his ancestors' earlier involvement in textiles in Ireland, inspired by William Gregg's development of a mill village at Graniteville Cotton Mill in Aiken, encouraged by the reports of success of Henry Pinckney Hammett at Piedmont Manufacturing Company in Greenville, and in need of employment, Captian Smyth deemed that the textile waters were fine as industrialism took its hold on the United States. Hence, in 1881 he took the plunge, swam exceedingly well, and became "Captain of the team," or as he was more appropriately designated by the New York publication *Commerce and Finance* shortly after World War I, "Dean of Southern Cotton Manufacturers."

For me to give a paper on a Greenvillian whom some of you knew, or are even related to is presumptuous. We look forward to having you share your knowledge with us later. Captain Smyth is represented in Greenville today by four generations of descendents. They are a granddaughter-in-law, Mrs. Ellison Smyth McKissick (Jean) and three great grandsons, Anthony Foster McKissick, Ellison Smyth McKissick, Jr. (Bubbie) and Adger Smyth Reeves and their families, who follow the family tradition of community leadership.

I selected Captain Smyth as a topic to indulge a curiosity that probably began before I was ten years old. It seemed to me that people always said "Captain Smyth" as if the name denoted someone very special and I wanted to know why. Early I learned that he was a rich textile executive who was an ancestor of the McKissicks. Even then I realized that this was not all and the more I researched and began to determine his influence in

textiles and on the region, the greater my desire to know how and why and to have others know what the Captain accomplished and what motivated this achievement.

Unfortunately for the researcher, modesty apparently marked the man, making information hard to secure. His listing does not appear in several biographical collections where one would expect to find it. I am deeply indebted to a number of writers for the information I have gathered, but I am especially obligated to the Captain's gracious grandchildren and great-grandchildren who have shared their knowledge and memories with me, to Dr. Jeffrey R. Willis of the Converse College faculty who did research for me one summer in Charleston and to William P. Jacobs who convinced Captain Smyth that "the public has the right to know what activates servicable lives." Jacobs recorded much about the Captain's life in *The Pioneer,* ublished in 1935. In obtaining permission to tell the Smyth ory, Jacobs apparently had a difficult task, but he had the istinct advantage of being able to interview his subject. Dr. acobs performed a great service for researchers and his work is generally a source for much of what has subsequently been written about Smyth. In their book, *The McKissicks of South Carolina,* Nell Graydon, Augustus Graydon and Margaret McKissick Davis have made a valuable contribution about Smyth and his ancestry.

Joseph Ellison Adger Smyth was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on October 26, 1847. He was the eighth child and youngest son of nine children of the Rev. Mr. Thomas Smyth II and Margaret Milligan Adger Smyth. The Ellisons, Adgers, and Smyths all immigrated from the same small area of County Antrim in Northern Ireland where protestant and Scotch traditions were strong. It seems the Ellisons, Adgers and Smyths whose families originally came from County Antrim tended to gravitate to each other over the years. There are five recorded marriages between the Ellisons and Adgers, with none of the spouses being related by blood.

The Ellisons were the first to arrive and settle in Pennsylvania in 1740. Robert Ellison, the Captain's great-grandfather, and his two brothers immigrated to South Carolina. Robert was a

major in the Continental Army, a state senator, and a founder of the Mt. Zion Society which later merged with the College of South Carolina.

While we do not know what motivated the Ellisons to emigrate from Ireland, we do know that depressed economic conditions prompted the moves of the Adgers and Smyths. But do not picture dirt poor farmers. Both families had enjoyed previous prosperity and educational advantages and at least one person in each family had been in textile ownership. James Adger started a linen mill at Duncan and Samuel Smyth operated a mill at Brandon, near Belfast. The Adgers came to America about 1800 and James Adger II soon found success as a banker and merchant in Charleston. The Rev. Mr. Thomas Smyth II immigrated with his parents in 1830 to join brothers and sisters who had already sought better opportunities here.

In 1832 the founder of the South Carolina Smyth family moved to Charleston, where he served as supply minister at the Second Presbyterian Church and was admitted to the Charleston Presbytery. That same year a call for permanent service was made by the church but poor health made Smyth postpone acceptance of the offer until the next year, which was also the year that he married Margaret Adger.

In many large cities where the poor and sometimes uncultivated Irish have poured in, all Irish are frowned upon, but, as Nell Graydon writes, in "the city by the sea" it is a "mark of distinction to be an Irishman who belongs to the Presbyterian Church, the Hibernian Society **and** the St. Cecelia." Exactly what material blessings the Adgers and Smyths brought with them we do not know; but they were obviously rather meager. However, like a number of Irish who immigrated to South Carolina around 1800, the Captain's forefathers came equipped with a wealth of business acumen, cultural and social leadership, and that famous Irish political know-how that soon lifted them to a place of prominence and significance in the life of Charleston.

Thus lack of social status had no place in motivating young Ellison, who also had a pleasant boyhood enjoying sports

associated with lowcountry life. However, life in that day was hard even for those with social advantage and some financial means. There was no running water nor sewer system, no electricity, no paved streets except those covered with cobble stones, and, of course, none of the conveniences and sources of entertainment which electricity provides. As William Jacobs points out, individualism was forced upon the young, and self-reliance and resourcefulness were instilled by intuition and by the hard knocks of life. While nothing in Ellison's early years prepared him specifically for a career in textiles, certainly life itself gave him good preparation for pioneering in any field and for wanting to try all of the improvements that technology could muster.

There is no evidence of that well-known motivator, extreme poverty, in young Ellison's life. But the poor health for most of the life of his preacher-writer father indicates an absence of financial ease which might well have enhanced the young man's ambition to be a rich man even before the Civil War took its toll on the finances of the South. With their house struck twice during the bombardment of Charleston and the head of the household ill, the Smyths faced a dismal time when Ellison returned from service in the Confederate ranks.

Educated in private schools, he had attended the South Carolina Military College for only a short time before he left for war service when he was sixteen. Entering the Army in 1864, he served there until Johnson surrendered the next year. Ellison was in the Cadet Corps in the State Troops when combat ended so that he was part of a group that never surrendered.

Out of the Army and without funds for further education, the young man entered business as a junior clerk in the wholesale house of J. E. Adger and Company of Charleston. In 1869, Smyth became a partner in this firm and also married Julia Gambrill. Of the twelve children, including one set of twins, born to the couple only five reached maturity. They were Mrs. Anthony Foster McKissick of Greenville, whom many of you remember; James Adger Smyth II, Mrs. Lewis deVeaux Blake, Mrs. John A. Hudgens, and Jane Adger Smyth.

During the days of Reconstruction, Smyth's leadership,

determination, and sheer physical endurance were demonstrated in the work of the rifle clubs. He helped organize and was vice president of the Carolina Rifle Club and in 1876 was elected captain of the Washington Artillery Rifle Club. This title stayed with him all of his life and surely can be considered an earned one since he spent uncounted hours, ususally in the night, quelling and preventing riots and confiscating guns so that they would not fall into the unfriendly hands of uncontrolled Negroes. Sometimes the trouble was caused by the Negro policemen shooting into harmless crowds. On one such occasion a young member of one of the rifle clubs was killed. After his body had been carried home, Captain Smyth and eleven of his associates who had all seen the shooting reported the next morning to the home of the deceased. By law, the coroner had to appoint to the jury the first 12 men whom he saw. Hence, they were waiting on the piazza when the coroner made his visit and were duly appointed. They reached a verdict naming the three policemen they saw firing as the guilty ones. The coroner, a Black named Aaron Logan, refused to receive the verdict. From that time in November until the next March 4 when Rutherford Hays took office, each day except Sunday, the same jury convened in Logan's office and rendered the same verdict which Logan likewise refused to accept.

Standing in Charleston today are some of the cannons that Smyth secured for use by the Washington Artillery Rifle Club. They were reputedly activated in salutes to show strength. One of these cannons was a rifle cannon which was the first of its kind ever made in the Confederate States and was probably the first made in the United States. It was manufactured in Charleston by Archibald Cameron from iron from the celebrated "Low Moor," first locomotive of the South Carolina Railroad. When the rifle clubs disbanded, this rifle cannon was placed in the Confederate Museum in Market Hall in Charleston where it stands today. Two of the other cannons, presented to the Citadel, guard the site where the Cadets parade every Friday afternoon and over the years have been called "Dixie" and "Pixie" by the Citadel men.

Smyth reportedly felt the lack of formal education all of his life and sought to compensate for it by reading prolifically. Up

to the end of his life at almost 95 he read one hour each evening. One of the writers who commanded his early attention was William Gregg, a former Charleston jeweler, who purchased the Graniteville Cotton Mill about 1844 and led the way in the development of the mill village. Gregg urged the establishment of such villages to provide employment for the South's white tenant class. According to Smyth's own statement, it was the "specific beckening call" of Gregg which led him into the textile field. Jacobs contended that "If William Gregg did nothing else but start Smyth on his way to cotton manufacturing, Gregg could claim one of the greatest contributions in the development of the industrialization in America."

Whether Smyth would have entered the textile industry had the mercantile business in Charleston continued to prosper is purely academic. The young man was becoming restless and this discontent might well have been caused by an inability to expand the business he was in. Adverse freight rates and the presence of wholesale houses in towns previously supplied by Charleston were limiting the potential for the jobbing business there. At any rate, when J. E. Adger closed its doors, Ellison Smyth knew what he wanted to do. He selected the textile industry as his destination without ever have been in a cotton mill. The very cessation of his business worked to Smyth's advantage by giving him another opportunity to prove his ability. When the wholesale house went out of business, J. E. Adger banking operations suspended payment. Appointed to wind-up the affairs of the banking firm, Smyth paid off dollar for dollar. No wonder Charlestonians were willing to invest in Ellison Adger Smyth. And investing in Smyth is what purchasers of Pelham Mill Stock were doing.

To give you the impression that Smyth entered the textile field soley to provide a better standard of living for poor Southern whites would be a terrible error! Early in life he had proclaimed a desire to procure wealth. When his father asked him his ambition, he answered, "To be a rich man, to have a big house, and to have my family and friends come to see me there." His philantrophic spirit probably developed with maturity leading him to see advantage in that which serves others as it serves oneself. None of us would be so naive either to suppose that

better workers could not be attracted and kept with suitable places to live. Nevertheless, the housing and welfare supplied by the villages served both employer and employee in a day when even the best transportation was slow and unavailable to prospective mill employees.

With the business sagacity for which he was to become known, Smyth realized that the price of land and the shortage of water power in Charleston made the living of his dream there impractical, if not impossible, and he knew too that it was going to be hard to move capital to the Piedmont where land, power and labor would be adequate.

The Captain's plan was to buy Fork Shoals Manufacturing Company to pursue his textile dream. Small and far removed from a railroad, this firm would probably not have been suitable, but one wonders what a person with Smyth's capabilities might have done there. However, he was fortunate in having a life-long friend, Mr. F.J. Pelzer of Charleston who provided capital and counsel and advised against the Fork Shoals purchase.

At that time, Pelzer was an extremely successful Charleston businessman and a large investor in cotton mills, other industrial enterprises and banks. In 1881 Smyth and Pelzer joined forces to organize a cotton manufacturing plant to be built on land Pelzer owned on the Saluda River near the Columbia and Greenville Railroad. Captain Smyth undertook the sale of stock for the proposed venture. Captial of $400,000 was over subscribed with Smyth and his relatives, Pelzer and his friends purchasing all of it. With 10,000 spindles, the success of the first mill quickly required expansion and the construction of three other plants at later dates increased total spindles to 136,000 and captial stock to $1,000,000. Since nothing succeeds like success, Captain Smyth's talents, and no doubt sometimes his cash, were much in demand for organizing and re-organizing textile endeavors. Witnessing the instant success of the Pelzer operation, the citizens of Belton urged Smyth to start a mill in their town. In 1889, he helped start Belton Mills which he long-served as president. In 1920, Smyth sold his controlling interest in these mills to Woodward, Baldwin and Company, a New York commission house, on the basis of $700 per share for $100 par value.

For forty-three years, Smyth headed Pelzer Manufacturing Company until it and its entire village were sold to Lockwood, Greene and Company for almost nine million dollars.

A pioneer in organizing and building mills, Smyth also pioneered in a much broader sense. He showed remarkable foresight and courage in initiating the use of technological developments. For example, in 1881 he installed in the Pelzer plant the first incandesent lighting system ever used in a textile mill. It is worthy of note in a day when we are told that almost everything is hazardous for our health, that, of the few workers who left employment at the Pelzer Mill, some claimed the incandescent lighting was injurious to the health of their families. In 1895, Smyth led the way in the use of electric drives and of automatic looms. He bought the first 1000 automatic looms ever sold by Draper. The Captain also purchased the first automatic tyeing-in machines ever produced. When he wholly electrified the Pelzer No. 4 plant by transmitting current over four miles from downstream, people were sure that Ellison Smyth had gone too far. This radical departure from the usual practice depressed the Pelham stock on the Charleston market. The innovation did cost the company money as General Electric used it for a tester and the G.E. engineers stayed on the site for some time in an effort to effect sound operation, but in the end, the system more than paid for itself. Again Smyth had been right. If Smyth even knew about the decrease in the stock's market value, it probably did not worry him because, according to Jacobs, he was willing to take a risk when his intuition made him feel that the potential justified the chance. History has proven Smyth right in a number of cases. He no doubt made some errors in judgement because he was human, but his rate of success was high. His risk-taking proved immensely helpful to the textile industry which benefited from his example.

Ellison was a leader in other developments — in recruiting workers from the foothills and mountains, in providing organized training programs for operatives and in building mill villages. Captain Smyth lived in Pelzer while the mill and village were under construction and carefully planned all moves. He had chosen one-and-a-half story houses for the village because they provided more rooms under less roof. However, the

mountain people who came to work at Pelzer would not go upstairs. Thus, the mill village houses that Smyth later built had only one story.

Village schools and libraries were of special concern to this executive who felt that they not only benefitted the workers but in turn brought advantage to the mills. Funds allocated for all "welfare work" compared favorably with those of other textile plants in the state, according to statistics in August Kohn's *The Cotton Mills of South Carolina*, published in 1907. Also provided by the mill were night schools, kindergartens, six churches, YMCA and YWCA directors, self-improvement classes, dancing facilities and amusement parks. I regret that Kohn does not provide a good example for illustration. No mills that had both the approximate capital and number of operatives as Pelzer furnished complete information for Kohn's study.

One place where Smyth did not pioneer was the company store. None of his village had mill-owned stores because he feared paternalism and felt that the company stores would be conducive to paternalistic or exploitive tactics. With employees leaving their savings with the mill for safekeeping, Smyth feared the temptation to use them might be too great when the firm's cash flow was short and might result in the loss of the entrusted monies and so he founded Chicora Savings Bank with initial capital stock of $25,000. When the mill and its village were sold, there were savings deposits of over $600,000 owned almost entirely by the Pelzer employees. The practice of establishing savings banks for workers was followed by other mill management.

Althought Jacobs claimed emphatically that Smyth was never paternalistic, I did come across one claim of paternalism just as I finished this paper. This charge came as the result of the savings bank established to avoid any exploitation. Wages at the Captain's plants were usually a bit better than those offered elsewhere and it seems that at least some of the workers at Belton felt that they were paid better and encouraged to save for their future so that the mill could borrow the money at a low rate of interest. Workers said that when they withdrew funds they were called in by a superior and reprimanded for being

careless with their finances. The extent to which Captain Smyth knew of this kind of thing, we really do not know, of course.

One feature of the Pelzer village which must have been more of an annoyance than a benefit was a twelve-hundred pound bell which acted as alarm clock, time piece and fire alarm. Each evening beginning at seven o'clock, the bell tolled the hours throughout the night. At 4:30 each morning it rang continuously for five minutes "to wake the help." At 5:30, it rang again and at 5:55, it tapped each minute until 6 o'clock when the plant began to operate.

All in all the workers seemed to have been well-satisfied and a large percentage of his operatives were faithful to Smyth throughout their lives. Jacobs reported that while facts could not be secured to support the statement it was generally believed that the Captain enjoyed a smaller percentage of labor turn-over than most Southern cotton textile executives. When he started the Balfour Mills near Hendersonville in the mid-1920's, a number of former employees sought work at his new plant.

With satisfied labor, handsome profits, model mill villages, and successful technological testing to his credit, it is no small wonder that Ellison Smyth was called upon to organize or re-organize Grendel Mills, Ninety-Six Cotton Mills, Riverside Manufacturing Company, Toxaway Mills, Dunean Mills and Anderson Phosphate and Oil Company. The first four of these he also served as president. Other mills of which he was a director were Brandon, Monaghan, Woodruff, Williamston, Watts, Saxon, Victor, Moneynick Oil, Conestee, Alice Manufacturing Company and Union Bleachery. He was instrumental in developing the Belton Power Company and held office or directorship in a broom and mattress company, three insurance firms and eight banks. At one time he was a director of 36 different corporations, some of which had originated in connection with the mills.

Captain Smyth was president of the Cotton Manufacturers Association of South Carolina for fourteen years, president of the American Cotton Manufacturers Association, a representative in the National Council of Cotton Manufacturers

and a member of the National Industrial Conference Board. For 35 years he was chairman of the Traffic Department of Southern mills. He served as the only Democrat on the National Industrial Commission for two years, spending one week in every month except August in Washington, D.C. Appointed by President McKinley in 1896, the Captain accepted when the Commission was to last only two years. When he found out that the life of the commission had been extended, he resigned, suggesting a replacement whose appointment McKinley announced simultaneously with Smyth's resignation.

The Captain's influence extended to social legislation. He was an early advocate of compulsory education, child-labor laws and of legislation to require the registration of marriages and births.

For 11 years, the Captain was a publisher of the *Greenville News* in which he acquired 75% of the stock without any intention on his part, according to Jacobs. (Somewhere that I cannot remember, I read that he took it to prevent a foreclosure, but now I can't find the reference.) At this time the paper had a circulation of 7,000. Obviously this was not one of the best of his business ventures because even though Smyth took no salary and the earnings of the company were invested in improved machinery and enlarged facilities, the organ was not doing well financially when Smyth talked B. H. Peace into becoming part-time business manager. Mr. Peace had a successful printing business in the *Greenville News* building and was not at all interested in assuming duties for the paper. But Smyth was a good salesman and Peace reluctantly agreed and the paper prospered. Quick to recognize a good thing, Smyth donned the salesman's uniform again and Mr. Peace, with some misgivings, purchased a white elephant which his expertise turned into a treasure for the region and for his family. Perhaps the Smyth foresight was working again, this time for the benefit of the buyer, the seller and the community.

Apparently, Smyth had super-human energy and stamina as well as able assistance because in addition to all his business activity, he gave service to his community and church, was a good family man, and led an active social life.

In 1886 the Smyths moved to Greenville and lived on Rutherford Road, near the site of WFBC Radio for a time. According to family sources, they moved here to present their oldest daughter Margaret as a debutante. Since the Captain founded the Cotillion Club on the order of the St. Cecelia in 1888, the year the future Mrs. A. F. McKissick was 18, one would assume that the purpose of starting that organization was to present Margaret Smyth and other young ladies to society. In 1890, the Captain organized the Greenville Musical Association to provide concerts for the town.

The Smyths had apparently moved back to Pelzer by 1895, but they remained active in Greenville where Captain Smyth was president of the Cotillion Club for a number of years. About 1906 or 1907 they returned to Greenville and built a large home at the approximate site of 119 Broadus Avenue. A man of deep faith, Smyth was instrumental in the founding of Greenville's Second and Fourth Presbyterian churches, was a founding member of the Downtown Greenville Rotary Club, and charter president of the Sans Souci Country Club in 1905 and of the Poinsett Club in 1909. (That Poinsett Club expired in 1930 and has no official connection with the club that bears that name today.) Benefactor of many charitable efforts, the Captian was a member of the original Greenville Water Commission and a member of the board of directors of Textile Hall Corporation.

From what I have heard, the Captain and his lady were themselves assets to Greenville. Their family and friends did visit them at their big house on Broadus Avenue and at "Connemara," the house they bought at Flat Rock, N. C., about 1900. Family members looked forward to weekly Sunday night suppers with the Captain who was a stimulating, delightful conversationalist who had a pleasant sense of humor. Living grandchilren testify that overnight visits with Grandma and Grandpa were wonderful treats although strict discipline and manners were enforced. Cookies, cakes and pies were plentiful, and Grandma and Grandpa Smyth were loving and lovable souls who laughed at harmless, childish pranks. Grandma is described as a lady with a mind of her own who 100% backed "Mr. Smyth," as she called her husband

throughout their 58-year marriage.

Farming at "Connemara" was apparently the Captain's main hobby, although he did have a golf course there and might well have played golf. Turkeys, apparently the favored farm animal for Smyth, wandered where Carl Sandberg's goats were later to graze.

Having divested himself of his main financial holdings in South Carolina, Smyth sold his Greenville home about 1925 and "Connemara" became his and Mrs. Smyth's permanent home. A few miles away he built Balfour Mills with its lovely mill village. Many feel that even in his late seventies the Captain was not happy without a mill in his life. Actually, he had planned for his son, James Adger Smyth II, to run the plant, but assumed the presidency when the younger Smyth died in 1928 when the Captain was over eighty. Whatever the reason for building the mill, the Captain was certainly happier for its presence, especially after Mrs. Smyth and their only unmarried off-spring, Jane, died in 1927.

Honor including honorary degrees came in large measure to Smyth but it is said that no title ever pleased him as much as that of "the Captain."

Captain Smyth dreamed a dream which he lived through extensive pioneering in and enlarging of the textile trail which had been earlier blazed by such men as William Bates, Hammett, Josiah Kilgore and Thomas Hutchings. He left the trail far better than he found it. A son, two sons-in-law, four grandsons, one great-grandson and at least one great-great-grandson have followed the trail, each making his own contribution as the path becomes increasingly difficult to navigate.

A man for all seasons and a captain of his times, Ellison Adger Smyth, who died on August 3, 1942, helped create Henry Grady's new South, which his example and his descendants have continued to improve.