Ed Smith, Humorous Storyteller
By Donald J. Mabry © 2016

I never knew Ed Smith but I wish I had. I walked or biked past his Neptune Beach lumber store for a few years when we lived there but I had no reason to go inside. I was a teenager and an apartment dweller, thus having no need of what he sold. What a shame! We might have talked. Life is full of missed opportunities, of course. Years later, I read his delightful book, Them Good Ole Days at Mayport and the Beaches which he privately printed in 1974. It's a hoot with lots of wonderful anecdotes peppering the pages. Wow; Smith could
tell a story. I liked it so much that I got permission to reprint it in electronic form on the Historical Text Archive. Here is one of his stories in Chapter 6. Transportation:

The little steamer Hesse left Mayport at five a.m. and headed to Fort George, Gilmore and Fulton. It took four hours to make the trip. I wish I knew how much a round trip cost, but no one seems to remember. It was a wood burner and usually took on wood at Gilmore. This little boat was a lifeline for Mayport as many of the supplies were brought in on that boat. It usually docked back at Mayport around seven p.m. It was a long wait in the city if you did not have much to do, but this was before income tax and time did not mean so much. One man tells of seeing a well-dressed man give a man who was crossing an overflowing street fifty cents to carry him across. Another man slipped the wader fifty cents to drop the man in the middle of the street. That's what you call playing both ends toward the middle. Life was rarely ever dull in those days.
He was christened Edward Barney Smith when he was born on October 29, 1903 in Maysville, Georgia in the northeast part of the state. After five years, his family moved to Bishop, Georgia, a little more than fifty miles south but a considerable distance in the Georgia of 1908. He went to school there until his family sent him to Georgia Military Academy in College Park, now part of Metro Atlanta. GMA was renamed Woodward Academy. It describes its origins in 1900, thusly:

The school opened as Georgia Military Academy, a military boarding school for boys, with only 30 students and one building called Founder’s Hall. By 1910, GMA had 14 teachers, a student body of 150 boys, two more buildings, and a football field. In these early years, teachers and their families lived with cadets in home-like buildings arranged around plazas, playgrounds, and courtyards.

As cozy as the Academy was, he left after two years and went to work in a saw mill. Money was probably a factor. He had to have been in his teens. It was hard, dangerous work that developed muscles on the young man. Steve Wilson quoted him in 1973 as saying that he and a buddy walked to Aberdeen, South Dakota (catching a few rides but mostly walking). They arrived with 52¢ between then so they got jobs pitching wheat. I did not find out whether this experience was before or after he and Mercer University connected, somehow, and the Macon school awarded him a football scholarship. He stayed and played only a year and a half; athletic scholarships were not as plush as they now are. He left Mercer but had met the love of his life, Mary Howard.
He and Mary moved to Jacksonville, Florida in 1926. Their first daughter, Doris, was born there on December 27, 1927, followed by Gwendolyn in 1932. Ed’s brother Frank visited them in 1927. The family photograph below shows us Ed Smith at age 24. He and Mary always valued family.
The four Smiths moved to the beach on September 12, 1934 into a rental house which cost $12 a month except for the four summer months when the rent jumped to $40 a month. He managed Dekle Lumber and Supply Company which was housed in a corrugated metal building at 200 First Street. He was paid $22.50 a week [$1,170 a year]. Eventually, they lived at 533 North Second Avenue, Jacksonville Beach. Both girls graduated from Fletcher Junior-Senior High School, Doris in 1945 and Gwendolyn in 1950.

Dekle Lumber shared the northern end of Neptune Beach with the Neptune Beach City Hall and Pete's Grocery and then bar. Neptune had seceded from Jacksonville Beach in 1931. In May, 1933, the town council authorized Marshall J. L. Burke to build a town hall at the edge of Lemon Street at the Northwest corner of 1st Street for $200 or less. Works Progress
Administration workers laid foundation for the building. Burke, the city engineer, lived in it. Late that same year, the Civil Works Administration sent 150 men to do street maintenance and erecting bulkheads on the ocean front, water works, and sewers. Pete Jensen had a country store where Pete’s Bar is. Live chickens, turkeys, and rabbits were sold as well as moonshine and kerosene. All of this is according to Smith in a 1977 interview. It was important to him to explain what he found when he started working there in 1934.

Dekle became Mason Lumber Company. Smith worked hard, saved money, and became a full partner in Mason-Smith Lumber Company in 1943 when it was organized. Four years later, he and his partner opened a new building where the old one had been. In 1953, Smith became sole owner and the business became Ed Smith Lumber Company.

He was successful in his business because he was a trusted businessman involved in his church and the community.

He was very active in the Methodist Church as Sunday School superintendent. Mary served as an officer in the Women’s Auxiliary. His men’s
Sunday School class in 1961, pictured below, included D.B. Hartseff, Ed Smith, Russell Hunter, Tim Hayes, Charlie Gum, T. Tyrie Williams, Lester Leaptrott, Jessie Gregory, Earl Reid, Sanford McDaniel, J.T. Wilkerson, Fred Weaver, Grady Holbert and Rev. Donald M. Mackay. Smith and others built the Beaches Girl Scout "Little House "Hut in Neptune Beach.
He served as president of the Fletcher High School Dad’s Club when his daughters were there. Doris attended Florida State College for Women [FSU] and Florida Southern in Lakeland. She married a local man, Doug Franke, and they moved to Pennsylvania. Ed and Mary would visit. Gwendolyn attended Mercer University like her father. She taught at Atlantic Beach Elementary schools for years. She, along with her husband, Paul Chivington, became directors of Ed Smith Company, Inc. Paul became his business partner and then inherited the business.

Smith got involved in a number of civic organizations. He served as a director of the Community Center, as a member of the Jacksonville Beach Planning Board, a founder of the Rotary Club in 1946 and its president in 1950-51, charter member of the Beaches Chamber of Commerce, and a charter member and president of the Lions Club. In the Lions Club in 1945, fellow members included J. T. McCormick, H. A. Prather, Roy Pike, Sonny Hulett, Ethan Proctor, C. H. Wilkerson, H. O. Trezise, and H. L. Rookwood. In 1947, he became a director of the Jacksonville Federal Savings and Loan Association when it was founded.
The Rotary Club was dear to his heart and he devoted much time and energy to it. It was fun. The club invited the famous humorist, Professor Backwards, to speak, both forward and the reverse. The Beaches Rotary Club honored Smith on March 29, 1974, with its highest honor, the Paul Harris Fellowship.

L to R: Dr. Jim Rupert, 1st President, guest Jimmy Edmundson (Professor Backwards) and Ed Smith. July 2, 1946. Courtesy of the Beaches Museum

He was not afraid to speak his mind when he thought a wrong had been done as this August 25, 1950 letter shows. The apartments were the much-needed modern apartments built by B. B. McCormick & Sons along Second Street in Jacksonville Beach beginning in 1947.
His marriage to Mary Howard lasted until he died in 1979. The photo below appears to be of the couple cutting their 50th wedding anniversary cake. He knew very well how much he relied upon her love and support. He dedicated his book to her.
Ed Smith was fascinated by people. His sense of humor, ability to spin a yarn, and love of people stood him in good stead. No wonder people liked him. Freida Ellis reported in 1974 that when Smith had a heart attack in 1957 and was laid up in bed for three months, many customers went to the stores and paid as much of what they owed as they could. He was generous with them; they responded in kind. He began collecting stories from Mayport and the Beaches as well as the ones he created from his own experiences. He was a classic Southern storyteller. Friends began asking him to collect them into a book. Although he was involved in the three Ed Smith Lumber stores in Mayport, Neptune Beach, and Jacksonville Beach, the heavy lifting as done by trusted carpenters in each store to help customers and his son-in-law Paul Chivington to manage them.

Them Good Ole Days in Mayport and the Beaches appeared in 1974 to great acclaim. These were the days when privately-published books were uncommon. On April 20, 1978, he ordered another thousand copies of his book. Since he was only paying $1.92825 for each and retailing them for $5.95, he was making a handsome profit. He was a good businessman. He promoted the books and his stores in The Arlington Shopper of July 12, 1978, depicting his stores
as friendly and accommodating. He included photos of himself at work in the Neptune store.
Ed Smith on people:

For years I had looked at this old cypress log lying in the edge of the canal and had visions of a table for my den being made of it. Finally, my daughter married and I got me a big husky son-in-law to help me get the log and bring it home. Fortunately, my brother-in-law, Charles Creech, was an excellent cabinet maker and was willing to make Paul Chivington, my son-in-law, and me each a table. I have a picture of my table in my office, and it is really surprising how many people think the table (rough as pig iron) is a thing of beauty. There is no accounting for the taste of people, which makes life more interesting and enjoyable. Some people complain about a rainy day.

He and Mary went to visit their daughter, Doris Franke and son-in-law, Doug Franke, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1979. He died of an apparent heart attack on October 10th, nineteen days short of his 76th birthday. He was survived by wife Mary, daughters Doris Franke and Gwendolyn Chivington, sisters Helen Creech and Louise DeVane, brothers Frank and James, and two grandchildren.

The Chivingtons ran the stores until they were no longer profitable enough. The Neptune Beach store ended in 1998. In 2006, his grandson, Doug Chivington, dissolved the corporation.

He lives on in his book, Them Good Ole Days.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Beaches Museum & History Park contains valuable archival materials arranged in folders by subject matter. In addition, it has the best photographic collection for the history of the Beaches. I used those pertaining to Ed Smith. Sarah Jackson and her assistants do an admirable job for the organization of these materials and making them available and I thank them very much. Director Chris Hoffman and her staff always make me feel welcome.

Although most of the essay is based on materials I found in the Smith folder or in the photographic collection. I found additional materials on the Web and also used knowledge gained from my other research on Beaches topics. The main sources for this essay are listed below. My historical writings are listed at djmabry.org/vita.

My talented and supportive wife Paula inspires me.

Don Mabry
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