

Reminiscences of Oswald Edgar Smith

by his elder brother Ernest Alfred, & younger brother Alan Eustace.

The third son, and third child, of Richard and Anna Smith, Oswald Edgar Smith was born on 20th August, 1869 at 10 St. George's Road, Regents Park, in the parish of St. Marylebone, London, N.W. (Birth registered at 14 Granby Street).

As he grew up into boyhood he developed a personality of his own and early displayed a strong liking for all things mechanical. When old enough he went, with his brothers, to the North London Collegiate School, Camden Town, and later to Hillmarton College, Holloway, started by one of the masters of the Collegiate School. At school he was an average boy in most subjects, but showed marked skill in drawing, and this was encouraged by his masters by allowing him to draw engineering subjects.

As a small boy he was slightly bow-legged and to straighten his limbs he was obliged to wear irons for some years. These retarded the actions of so lively a boy, but in spite of this disability he was quick in his movements and managed to enjoy his share in school games. The proximity of his home to Regents Park was a great joy to him as he delighted in the open air and was a true lover of nature. Here he spent many happy hours playing cricket, and in later days rowing on the lake. His happy disposition and loveable nature made him a great favourite at school, and "Ossy" was very frequently in demand, especially if some special prank was on the programme. Several times he got himself into nasty corners when on holiday with his brothers. On one occasion he innocently walked into some boggy land at the roadside and gradually sank to above his knees. He seemed less concerned however about his position than his father, who was very relieved and thankful when a burly farmer appeared on the scene in top boots and bodily lifted the boy out. Later on another occasion he went alone for a walk on the sands but suddenly found himself cut off by the incoming tide. Finding it too deep to wade without a good soaking, he surveyed the situation and then patiently sat in the middle of the sand island until the tide turned and set him free. Then he made his way home in the dark, late at night, and arrived safely much to the relief of his anxious parents.

His keen interest in engines deepened as he grew older and very frequently when he did not arrive home to dinner a brother sent to look for him invariably found him glued to some spot where a steam roller or some other machine was at work. When at school he made several beautiful cardboard models of engines that were accurate in detail, and he was delighted when a friend gave him the metal parts with which to build up a large model locomotive for himself. When the family removed to Oval Rd., Regents Park, where the long garden adjoined the main line of the L.N.W.R. he spent many happy hours watching the passing trains and recording the numbers and names of the express engines.

On leaving school the problem of his future career gave his father much anxious thought; but it was solved simply and unexpectedly by his headmaster, Mr Vernon, who showed some of Oswald's drawings of engines to his friend Mr Johnson who was chief of the drawing office of the Engineering Dept. of the Great Northern Railway at Kings Cross. The result was that Oswald was asked to go for an interview and was engaged on the spot and started work in October 1886. It so happened that Mr Johnson was a keen musician and Oswald always said that the interview consisted mostly in discussing the mechanism of organs. This mutual interest deepened with

ucceeding years and led to a lasting friendship and esteem for his chief.

In the office he was soon recognised as a draughtsman of no mean ability and when specially accurate work was required it usually fell to Oswald's lot to do it. Later when he did some of the illustrations for Ernest's first book the publishers said that in all their long experience they had never seen such fine and beautiful work. He quickly mastered the art of surveying required in his work, and later he was frequently sent to different parts of the country where reconstruction of the line was necessary.

His most important piece of work was surveying and replanning the whole of the tracks at Doncaster Station, one of the most important in the country owing to the great influx of people during the racing season. He also did some important work in the reconstruction of the Finsbury Park Station, London. His surveying frequently took him into dangerous spots and on one occasion when working in a tunnel he only just stepped back in time after a warning shout that a train was near. He seemed to be more concerned about his surveyor's chain being cut in pieces than in escaping a similar fate for himself.

Music was always a ruling passion with him and later he took lessons to cultivate his strong baritone voice, and also lessons on the piano and organ. Subsequently he became a member of the Royal Albert Hall Choir - one of the most famous of the day - and he very much enjoyed his days with them besides recognising the honour of being a member. He was very fond of Handel's music and made a speciality of The Refiner's Fire which he sang remarkably well. On two occasions he was especially invited as one of the principals to sing it at Lincoln Cathedral, and he was always well received and much appreciated. His singing took him to many church and other concerts, and to the homes of his friends who always considered it a great treat to hear him.

When he had reached his majority, the death of his father in 1891 was a great blow to him, but he did all he could to help his mother and relieve the financial strain which resulted from this sad loss. When later Ernest got married and subsequently removed to Sheffield, Oswald had greater responsibility in the home, and did all he could to help his younger brothers and only sister. When he was old enough he took a delight in attending Craven Congregational Chapel, Regent Street, and the Sunday School, with his parents and brothers, and where in due course he became a teacher. After his marriage (1899) he attended Bowes Park Congregational Church, and was later elected a Deacon. In all his worship he was sincere and devout and was conscientious in all his duties.

On 27th December, 1899, he was married at the Axminster Congregational Chapel, Devon, to Louise Elizabeth Tapscott. Whilst on holiday at Axminster he had a somewhat severe attack of influenza from which he never completely recovered. All those who saw him on his return and during the following years agreed that he was not enjoying his usual good health and had lost some of his characteristic cheerfulness. Subsequent years proved that the influenza had left some inherent weakness which eventually led to his untimely death from paralysis in the prime of life at the age of 40, on 2nd May, 1910. He was buried at the Finchley Cemetery in the same grave as his father.

After his marriage he lived at 80, Marlborough Road, Bowes Park, where his two boys, Harold and Richard were born. In August 1905 he removed to 1, Lancaster Road, New Southgate. When in the later days of his illness he had to be wheeled about in a bath chair he was always very grateful to his brothers and others who gave him the pleasure of visiting friends and enjoying the fresh air in Broomfield Park.

He bore his long trying illness with fortitude and with great patience and cheerfulness. His loss was deeply felt not only by his family and relatives, but also by his office colleagues and his many friends. It can be said with considerable truth that his two boys never knew their father at his best, as his illness began to take a more serious turn about the time they were old enough to appreciate his companionship and love and interest in them.

Memo. Oswald's father Richard Smith was Director of the Metallurgical Laboratories at the Royal School of Mines, London, being one of those who took part when the School was founded in 1851. He was well known both as a scientific man and an efficient and patient instructor; and practically all the men who in later years occupied important posts in mining and metallurgy in all parts of the world had been students under him. He died in London on August 6th, 1891, at the age of 61, a few months after his retirement on account of ill health following an accident which led to paralysis.