

The Smith Family, Part Two

A Brief History

THE DIARY Etta English kept for several months in 1904 provides a record of the 24-year-old's active social life—as well as her loneliness. Her older sister, Maggie, had married a young farmer from the countryside surrounding Munford, Alabama, a man about whom everyone knew about all there was to know, and their younger brother, Bud, was keen on working for one of the railroads that put Birmingham on the map. So, with each passing year, the prospect of becoming an old maid left to tend to their aging widowed father grew all but inevitable. Then, in the summer of 1911, not long after a promising romance had faded to its end, along came Elzer Smith—a man unlike anyone who'd ever come calling. Although the two were barely acquainted, he wasted no time in proposing marriage.

Elzer, then less than one year a widower, lived with a houseful of children in a distant town in an adjoining county. But the 45 miles and wide river that lay between Munford and Wilsonville were nothing compared to their personal differences. Etta had completed high school, Elzer had only a seventh grade education. She was a homebody, a country girl, and all the men she knew were deeply rooted in the land they farmed. He was a *drummer*, a traveling salesman who sold photographic portraits and fancy picture frames, and slept more nights in one town or another than at home. He was also a Baptist deacon, while Etta's father was a Presbyterian elder. And at a time when Alabama farmers voted Democratic, Elzer was a staunch Republican.

He was also the sort of man always on the lookout for ways to make money. Following his wife's death, he began taking in boarders, then started advertising the family's house as "The Drummers Home," a hotel for traveling men like himself who could stand a soft mattress and a home-cooked meal.

During their brief engagement, Elzer occasionally visited Etta in Munford and wrote letters in which he called her "my dearest friend." But as the weeks passed, questions of his character and his relations with other women surfaced, and Etta balked at the prospect of managing the hotel while he traveled. On Sept. 23, he wrote to her:

You said you did not know what I thought of you since my visit up there. I will tell you. I only like you better

the more I see you, and love you harder. What do you think of me? I do not understand what you mean when you said down in your heart you had been afraid. ... Now as to me having a girl at Alpine [a town between Wilsonville and Talladega]. That is something new on me. I do not know who she is. Wish you would tell me. No, I have not been fortunate to have nine. You need not be afraid you will be the 10th. I did not think you was trying to hurt my feelings. I don't believe you would try to do that. Yes, I did enjoy myself so much while I was with you, for you made it so pleasant for me. I will be glad when the time comes when we can stay together, but you will have a time trying to keep me good.

On top of everything, she was still without her mail-order engagement ring. Apparently questioning Elzer's intentions, she postponed the wedding from its original Nov. 1 date. Elzer wrote to her on Oct. 26:

Only 33 days. If you had not changed my time from the first, it would soon be here, but that is all right, as you can't have your way much longer. According to what you say, yes, your head might be like a goat's head, but I hope not, and you like for people to tell you that they love you, yes, we all do. ... Well, I want to tell you we have gone out of the hotel business and have given up our boarders, so when you come, there will be plenty of room for you. ... I hope you will get your ring this week, guess you will.

Hugh Elzer Smith (March 3, 1870, to Aug. 30, 1952)

Georgia Etta English (Oct. 2, 1880, to Nov. 27, 1956)

Their Children

Hugh English Smith (April 16, 1913, to Nov. 17, 1973)

Herbert Allen Smith (Dec. 24, 1914, to Sept. 18, 2012)

Margaret Helen Roberts (Jan. 26, 1917, to March 10, 1980)

James Dent Smith (Sept. 10, 1920, to June 27, 1976)



Elzer and Etta Smith's Wedding Portrait

They were married on Nov. 28, 1911, at her father's home near Munford. A detailed account of the wedding in a Talladega newspaper noted that the Rev. Ira Harris of the Wilsonville Baptist Church "performed the ceremony impressively in the presence of the family and a few intimate friends," that "the parlor had been tastefully decorated for the occasion with ferns and autumn leaves," that Etta "never looked lovelier than when she entered, becomingly attired in blue messaline with velvet and real lace trimmings." The writer described the bride as "noted for her womanly qualities, modest, Christian disposition and so many other amiable traits of character that her friends are numbered by her acquaintance," continuing, "She is such a lover of home that we are sure theirs will be a Paradise and that the sun will ever shine brightly on their hearth-stone." Elzer was described as "a successful businessman" and congratulated "on winning such a prize." A six-course luncheon followed the ceremony. The newlyweds honeymooned in Chattanooga, where, like many tourists to Lookout Mountain, they were photographed sitting atop the remarkable geological formation known as Umbrella Rock.

There is no evidence of Etta having visited Wilsonville, much less meeting Elzer's children, during their engagement. Although his two older daughters attended the wedding, the four Smith girls are remembered as opposed to the marriage, resenting their young stepmother from the start, never showing her much kindness. Despite Elzer's indifference toward the English family and their less than admiring regard for him, Etta's ties to



Etta and Elzer, Umbrella Rock, Lookout Mountain, Chattanooga

her father, brother, sister and other relations would remain close and true despite the miles that separated them.

Etta and Elzer's first child, Hugh English Smith, was born in 1913. When he was barely a year old, his father's first grandchild was born, making the infant Hugh some sort of uncle. On Christmas Eve 1914, Etta gave birth to Herbert, followed by Helen in 1917 and finally Dent¹ in 1920.

With additions to the family inevitable, Elzer had purchased a larger house, the Jesse Taylor home on South Main Street beyond the railroad depot; it was the house his and Etta's children would fondly remember as their childhood home.

Already living as tenants on the 120-acre property were Fred D. Kidd, his wife Rosa and their young daughter Margaret. Fred was mulatto, Rosa was Black, and both were literate. He farmed, and she would serve as midwife, delivering Etta's children safely into the world. (Helen fondly remembered her as "Aunt Rose.") By 1915, Elzer's success as a salesman allowed him to purchase a Model T Ford, one of the first "motorcars" in Wilsonville. Rarely home except on weekends, he was nonetheless a respected member of the community and a devoted Baptist layman. When he applied for a health insurance policy in 1918, he described himself as 48 years old, standing five foot ten and weighing 145 pounds.

Elzer's duteous work ethic and love of travel aligned with the demands of supporting his large family. Inspired by his brother-in-law's career as a salesman for a quarry, Elzer left the photo portrait trade and went to work for the Anniston Marble Vault Company. He also dabbled in real estate, paying \$1,250 cash for a 50-foot wide, 100-foot deep retail property adjacent to the Wilsonville depot in 1919.

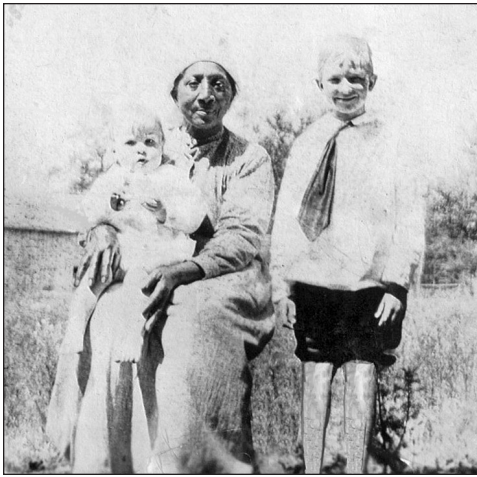
The census of 1920 noted Elzer's profession as "salesman (tombstones)" for the Alabama Marble Co. Its Gantt Quarry outside of Sylacauga, 25 miles from Wilsonville, produced what proved to be the purest grained white marble in North America. Said to equal anything from Italy, it attracted worldwide interest from architects and sculptors. By then, only Rozelle (18) and Clem (11) from his first marriage remained at home, and 40-year-old Etta's hair had gone gray. Her children would grow up with no memory of her natural brown hair.

Travel was in Elzer's blood and being. In February 1923, he wrote to the family from Havana, Cuba:²

I went a country sightseeing yesterday with about 60 or 75. The trip consisted of about 45 miles. We enjoyed it very much. I have been paying \$3.50 a night for a little narrow bed to sleep on and would not have gotten it that cheap but Wallis Colbert and me used the same room. So after he left, I moved to another one. I think it is

1. James Dent Smith was named in honor of both Etta's father, James English, and Elzer's cousin Dent F. Green (1868 to 1945). Elzer and Dent Green were about the same age and had grown up on adjoining farms. Green was a distinguished educator, lawyer, legislator and banker, then serving as State Examiner of Banks as well as secretary-treasurer of the Baptist State Mission Board in Montgomery.

2. Cuba gained its independence from U.S. occupation in 1902, resulting in the construction of marble-clad civic and commercial buildings in the art nouveau and deco styles. Havana would quickly become known as the "Paris of the Caribbean." During the American Prohibition era of the 1920s, the city's casinos, bars and night-club culture attracted American visitors by the tens of thousands. Nothing in Elzer's letter indicates that his visit was work related; he was more likely a tourist traveling with acquaintances who were known to Etta.



Aunt Rose with Hugh and Clem, 1914



Etta, Herbert, Hugh and Clem Smith with the ferryman, Lindsey Bazemore, after crossing the Coosa River near Fayetteville, 1915.

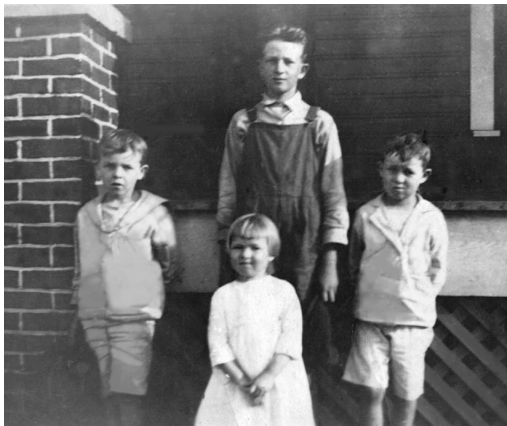
The Smiths of Wilsonville, Alabama 1911 to 1925



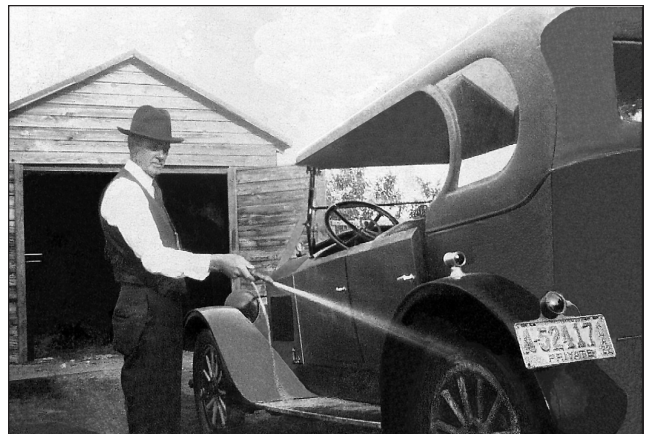
Their Home, 1922



With the arrival of Dent in 1920, the family was complete.



Hugh, Clem, Helen and Herbert Smith, about 1921



Elzer Smith, 1922

a very wicked city. All kinds of gambling, and there is 7,000 bar rooms here. Our spokesman the other day in our city sightseeing trip said every grocery store was a bar, but every bar was not a grocery store. It has been a great experience of my life. I think there is some of the richest people here and some of the poorest surely in the world. I never saw so many beggars in all my life. You can't imagine how many there is. I saw yesterday on our trip not only one or two at a time but maybe two dozen little children from Hugh E.'s size down, running after our bus just begging and some of them perfectly naked. And if you would throw them a penny, maybe they would fight for it when they went to pick it up. There is some of the finest buildings here I ever saw and a sight of them.

Well, this is Sunday afternoon nearly 5 o'clock, and I have just come from the square in town. They are having another big day here. I believe they say it is mogadors day. [Mardi Gras was celebrated two days later.] If it is Sunday, Sunday don't seem to mean any more to them than any other day. That is the day they have the big horse racing and betting. I intended to go to church today, but you could not find out where they was. Don't seem to know there is any church. You never saw such a crowd as there is on the street this afternoon, parading in cars and different ways, dressed in their costumes. I just stood around and looked until I got almost worn out.

There is thousands and thousands and all sorts of fuss. It has seemed like a long day to me. If nothing happens, I will be at the boat landing tomorrow on time. I wanted to stay at Miami and Palm Beach, but I want to hear from home so bad until I don't know whether I will stop long or not.

Elzer had casually warned Etta before their wedding, "... you can't have your way much longer," and it appears he was true to his word. Once married, whatever voice she had during their engagement was silenced. Theirs would be a marriage in which the wife unquestioningly served her dominating husband's interests and needs. She was to manage the home and give him children. To them, she was *Mama*, a warm, loving mother, remembered for her quiet dignity. On the other hand, *Papa* was a stern, no-nonsense father, who demanded obedience from the children. He took pride in maintaining a respectable appearance, always arriving at the breakfast table wearing a white shirt and necktie. (In fact, there hardly exists a photo of him dressed otherwise.) At the dinner table, laughter and light-hearted conversation were discouraged. The respect Etta and the children showed him was perhaps born from fear of his withering glance. His work-related absences provided welcome relief. Etta remained in close contact with her family, and some of the happiest times of her children's early years were visits with their Jenkins cousins in Oxford and English cousins in Birmingham.

In 1925, the family moved to Birmingham in Jefferson County, where Elzer's son Otis Smith and Etta's brother Clarence English resided with their young families. The Smiths occupied a bungalow near East Lake Park temporarily before purchasing a large vine-covered house in the Edgewood neighborhood of Homewood, a newly incorporated town just south of the city. The nearby streetcar line connected Edgewood with downtown Birmingham, while Red Mountain shielded the heavily forested community from the foul air of the industrial city. Their property on the corner of Oxmoor Road and West Glenwood Drive was appraised at \$12,000, roughly twice that of most of the neighboring houses. In March, Etta described it in a letter to her elderly father:

We have a nice place about two miles from town [Birmingham], five lots with fruit, berries, grapes, eight large fig bushes, a pretty yard with flowers. We even have hickory nuts and a pine tree. I wish you could see the place. The house is old, six large rooms, basement with furnace heat. We don't like the house much. We have four bedrooms and no dining room, so when you come, we'll have to eat in the kitchen. We have had the house covered with asbestos and the inside papered, trying to plan for a dining room later... Can you read any? I will send you the Birmingham paper if you can. We get news over the radio. I haven't read the papers much... All the children are in school. The boys work Saturdays.



From *The Owl*, Shades Cahaba High School's Yearbook, 1933-35 (l-r): Hugh Smith, Helen Smith, Herbert Smith and Elizabeth McClendon.

The family had joined Ruhama Baptist Church in East Lake before transferring their memberships to the Edgewood Baptist Church, organized in 1925 and pastored by the Rev. L.O. Dawson. Its handful of charter members met in a home at the foot of St. Charles Street, and in her teen years Helen often played the piano for services.

Barely a half-century old, Birmingham was booming in the 1920s. Elzer still owned real estate in Wilsonville and saw an opportunity to make his fortune by investing in residential rental properties in Birmingham. But in 1929, the American economy began to fail, and he would eventually lose everything except the family's home in Edgewood. In 1932, he transferred ownership of his Wilsonville property to Etta, most likely a move to prevent its being lost to his creditors. The family weathered the Great Depression that followed as best they could.

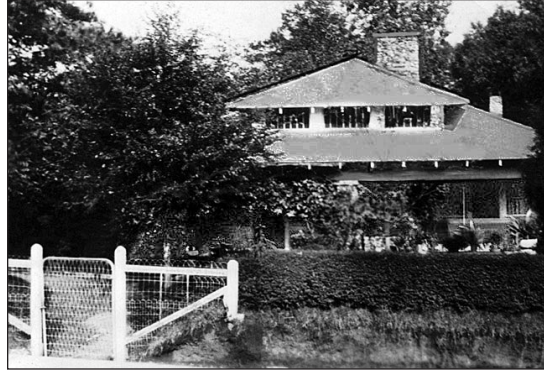
In the 1930 census, sixty-year-old Elzer was listed as a salesman of marble. The older children—Hugh (16) and Herbert (14)—were enrolled at Shades Cahaba High School with Helen (13) and Dent (9) at Edgewood Elementary School. As they reached adolescence, Elzer, no doubt, saw something of himself in his children, all of whom had inherited his slim build and cleft chin. Helen was a beauty, slim and petite, a brunette with hazel-colored eyes and an olive complexion. They came of age during the Great Depression, a time when only the most determined children from middle-class families continued on to college. Elzer, having achieved success with his seventh-grade education, never encouraged the children to strive for more than a high school diploma. As teenagers in the 1930s, they knew their only option was to get enough education to take whatever job they could find. Only Herbert and Helen would earn a high school diploma.

At the height of the Depression in January 1936, the Smiths left Edgewood. Elzer, then 65 years old and employed on commission by the American Marble and Granite Co., rented and later purchased a two-story house at 4272 Second Ave. South, near Birmingham's Avondale Park. (In 1940, the house was appraised at \$2,000.) One of its chief assets was a large front porch, where the family gathered on Sunday afternoons. By then, Hugh was on his own, and Herbert about to marry Elizabeth McClendon, one of Helen's high school friends. Helen and Dent remained at home. Improved roads and advances in auto mechanics had made long-distance travel by car a safe and practical alternative to train transit, and in June, Elzer drove to San Antonio, Texas, for a final visit with his widowed older sister, Amanda Coleman, and her children.

For many Depression-weary Americans, California had become a sort of promised land. Hugh arrived in Los Angeles in April 1936 and landed a job at a grocery store. In November, he wrote to the family: "I went out a few days ago with a friend and saw most all the movie stars' homes. Of the ones I saw outside of Bing Crosby, Richard Arlen had the most beautiful home.... Helen, what month next summer are you and Mother coming out?" He missed them terribly and began campaigning for the rest of the family to relocate there. In early 1937, Clem, then three years into his marriage to



Etta Smith, about 1932



Their Home in Edgewood, 1925



Hugh Smith, about 1928

The Smiths in Birmingham After 1925



Elzer (c) and his Coleman nephews,
San Antonio, 1936



Their Home on Second Ave. South
in the Avondale neighborhood, 1935



Etta Smith, 1941



Clem, Louise and Patty Smith, 1939



Elzer and Etta Smith, 1942



Dent Smith, 1944

Mary Louise Donahoo, traveled to Los Angeles to explore the possibility of settling there. He wrote to the family: "This is the most wonderful country out here I have ever seen. So different from B'ham... Times are also better here and I do not believe they have had as bad here as they were there." In March, Louise and their two-year-old daughter Patty arrived by train. But once reunited, Clem and Louise decided against making a permanent move. In early June, Hugh apparently took leave from his job and drove them back to Birmingham, returning to Los Angeles with his 56-year-old mother. In Etta's absence, Louise took over cooking for the family. For Etta, the long cross-country drive was liberating; it was not only her first travel outside the deep South but also, after 26 years of marriage, her first break from the monotonous, under-appreciated routine of cooking and housekeeping for the large family. In Los Angeles, she enjoyed seeing the sights and spending time with a transplanted Alabama family that had taken Hugh under their wing—in no hurry to return home.

On June 30, Elzer wrote in response to one of her letters:

I was getting uneasy about you, as you was looking for a beauty shop. You must be trying to look pretty. Anyway, I hope you will look pretty when you come home.... I am enclosing you 2⁰⁰. I want you to take it out riding the streetcars. I'm sure you get lonesome every day while Hugh is at the store, so you get on the streetcars and see the town, But don't get lost. While you are there you had as well have a good time. We are getting on fine.

In fact, Etta was hardly lonesome and Hugh apparently encouraged her to remain in Los Angeles indefinitely. After two weeks, her absence proved unsettling to Elzer, who wrote on July 17 in hopes of hastening her return:

We have been looking for a letter [from you] every a.m. this week, but have not heard a word, and we know you have plenty of time to write, so it's pushing us all to know what is the matter. I'm sure if I had been out there, you would have heard from me. We hope you are going to leave there next Tuesday a.m. The fast train leaves there at 8 a.m. Don't you think you have stayed long enough? I thought if you did not stay too long, maybe you and I might drive back out there about Oct. and stay 2 or 3 weeks.... If you knew what I have gotten you, you would want to get home quick. I did not think I would tell you, but I have got you a new gas stove. You may know it is a nice one. Well, I will quit and expect to meet you at the train next Thursday night. Louise seems to be getting tired, and I know she thinks you should come home. You know you have been gone a long time, and we want to see you.

Helen wrote to her:

Louise is a pretty good cook but she just can't get the coffee strong enough (for Papa). We just have ice cream about twice a week. That's enough for me but not for Dent and Herbert. ... We're getting along fine. I got a negro girl to help Louise with the ironing. Clem's painting the house and it's the yellowest yellow you ever saw. It hurts my eyes to look at it—they think it's pretty. ... We surely do miss you but we want you to stay a long time and have a good time.

Etta ignored Elzer's pleas and made no plans to hurry home. After she had been away five weeks, he and 20-year-old Helen traveled to Los Angeles to retrieve her. Driving day and night, they covered, by his account, a thousand miles a day, only slowed by one punctured tire, and arrived on July 23. After a few days of touring Southern California and crossing the border to visit Tijuana, Elzer returned to Birmingham with Etta.

Helen remained in Los Angeles, "cooking, washing, ironing & keeping house" for Hugh. She had taken time off from her furniture store job with the understanding that she'd return by September 1. In a letter to Etta, she wrote that an acquaintance in Los Angeles "said I was a sissy to even think of going home." Even so, she returned.

Clem Smith had been closer in age to Hugh, Herbert, Helen and Dent than to his biological brother and sisters. To



Elzer and Etta with their grandchildren: Donna Smith, 1945, and Donny Roberts, 1948

Etta's children, he was the big brother. They had warmly welcomed his wife Louise into the family, and everyone delighted in their daughter, Gale Patricia. Employed in Birmingham as a house painter, Clem was at work in April 1940 when an automobile struck the ladder upon which he stood, hurling him to the ground. He died, age 31, survived by Louise and Patty. Louise gave birth to their son, Jerry Clem Smith, two months later.

No sooner had the United States recovered from the Great Depression than it faced the possibility of going to war. Although the nation had maintained a neutral stance on the war raging in Europe, young men were required to register with their local Selective Service draft board. Each of the

Smith boys did so in 1940. Then, after Japan attacked the U.S. Naval base at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the country entered World War II. Only Dent would enlist.

In 1943, with all the children out on their own, Elzer and Etta moved to 5404 5th Terrace S. and a year later to 7810 7th Ave. S., both modest bungalows in the Woodlawn and East Lake neighborhoods. Then, in 1947, they moved to Sylacauga,, fifty miles southeast of Birmingham, where they purchased a house at 216 East Hightower St. Described in its early years as an "elite town," this Talladega County city of just under ten thousand residents was the center of the state's marble industry. From there, Etta wrote to her sister Maggie: "H.E. has been in bad shape for some time. Has palsy in left side, can't sleep at night, is feeble. I am afraid to ride with him." Despite his health, Elzer traded their 1941 Chevrolet for a new Super Deluxe Ford Tudor sedan. He and Etta lived in Sylacauga for a couple of years before returning to Birmingham. There he purchased a modest two-bedroom house at 715 79th St. S. in the East Lake neighborhood. This little house with Etta's treadle sewing machine and a climbable chinaberry tree is the one their grandchildren would remember as Mimi and Papa's home.

As the decade ended, Elzer's health began to fail, and he walked with the aid of a cane. He spent his final days in a Southside nursing home, where he died in August 1952, age 82, three months before the birth of his 23rd and final grandchild, Susan Kay Smith. Elzer was buried beside his first wife in Wilsonville. In settling his estate, the Sylacauga house that had become a rental property was sold. Etta and each of his surviving eight children received \$615, with Clem's share split between his two young children. Etta would continue to live at their home in East Lake. On June 1, 1954, she sold her one-third interest in the approx. 110 acres that remained of the English family farm in Talladega County, to her brother-in-law Clarence Jenkins for \$950.

After Hugh's marriage ended in divorce, leaving him in Birmingham with four of his five children (ages two to 13) to raise, he turned to Etta. Then in her early seventies, she was as devoted a grandmother as she was a mother. They moved across town to a much larger house, where in 1955 she slipped and fell, breaking her hip. The resulting surgery left her bedridden, unable to walk, in constant pain and barely cognizant. She lived with Helen's family for the better part of a year, tended by a live-in nurse, before being transferred to a Southside nursing home. There, she died in November 1956. Mimi, the dearly loved mother of four and grandmother of eleven was buried at Elmwood Cemetery.

Hugh English Smith (April 16, 1913, to Nov. 17, 1973)

Mary Frances Rogers (March 6, 1918, to March 12, 1977)

Their Children

Hugh Eugene Smith (b. June 27, 1939)

Barbara Frances Valdez (May 6, 1942, to May 2, 1970)

Karen Elaine Wynne (b. Sept. 10, 1945)

Linda Carol Riker (b. Dec. 21, 1948)

Robert Wayne Smith (b. May 27, 1952)

Hugh was born in Wilsonville and was entering his teen years when the Smith family moved to Birmingham. He struggled in school and dropped out of Shades Cahaba High School around 1932 to take a job at a Homewood grocery store. He is also said to have worked as a helper for George Ward, the former mayor of Birmingham, at Vestavia, the 20-acre estate he'd built in a remote area on the edge of Shades Mountain. Ward's landmark circular home overlooking Shades Valley was designed after the Roman temple of Vesta, and its gardens were decorated with classical statuary. A bachelor, Ward was known for lavish entertaining there. On some occasions, he employed young men costumed as Roman soldiers to serve his guests.

Hugh, the firstborn of four children, was particularly close to Etta, but his failure to meet Elzer's high expectations strained their relationship. This contributed to his leaving home at age 21 in 1934. A year later, after wandering from Chattanooga to Louisville to Nashville to Miami, he arrived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to train as an airplane mechanic with the 31st Division of Aviation of the Alabama National Guard. Trainees could secure release from active service anytime, and Hugh didn't stay with it for long. He loved aviation and would eventually learn to fly a small plane, without becoming a licensed pilot.

Hugh was one of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who migrated to California during the Great Depression, arriving in Los Angeles in May 1936. There, he took a job at a grocery store and boarded on Vineyard Ave. with the Smiths, an unrelated Alabama family. Clean, sunny, carefree Los Angeles was nothing like Birmingham during those hard times, and in letters to the family, Hugh begged them to join him. Only his stepbrother Clem heeded the call. Much to Hugh's delight, Clem, Louise and little Patty relocated to Los Angeles in early 1937. Hugh had a way with children and doted on the young girl, who was charmed by his attention. But they only lasted a couple of months before Hugh drove them home to Birmingham that summer. He returned to Los Angeles with Etta, who spent more than a month with him, perfectly happy.



Hugh English Smith and Mary Frances Rogers

In June 1938, Hugh took a couple of weeks for a vacation in Birmingham. On this return trip, he was accompanied by 20-year-old Mary Frances Rogers. They had possibly become acquainted through her sister's husband, who worked at a Homewood grocery store; there is no evidence that they were in contact prior to Hugh's visit. After crossing the state line into Mississippi on July 2, they were married at the courthouse in Columbus. The Smith family had reservations about welcoming Frances into the family. She was from a respectable Edgewood family—her father worked as a motorman on the streetcar line—but Frances was a divorcee, having married Alvin Horn in rural Clay County at age 15 and

given birth to two children there. (After that marriage ended, the children were reared by Horn's mother.)

Hugh and Frances made a home for themselves in Los Angeles, where in June 1939, their first child, Hugh Eugene, was born. Theirs would be a tempestuous marriage. Before the year ended, Frances returned to Birmingham with Gene. Hugh wrote to his mother in January 1940, "Have been getting along alright I guess. Sure get lonesome for Frances and Gene and all of you. Mother, I think everything will work out fine. I sure hope I can get them out here soon." This was the first of the couple's numerous separations. Frances and Gene would return to Los Angeles, and that year, 29-year-old Hugh was supporting the three of them with his \$1,200 annual salary as a grocery store clerk. As the family grew in the years that followed, he and Frances moved back and forth between California and Alabama. In 1942, their daughter Barbara was born in Birmingham before the family returned to Los Angeles, where Hugh and Frances struggled to support the family. He wrote to his mother:

Frances is working now ... She goes to work at 6:45 AM and gets off at 3:15 PM. I go to work at 3:30 PM and get off at 12:00 AM. When I get home at night, she is in bed asleep. When she gets up to go to work, I'm usually asleep. (I got up a little before six so I could write this letter.) It sure keeps us hurrying. I watch after the kids in the morning. Frances looks after them part of afternoon and night.

Frances is working at North American Aviation. Helping make airplanes. She seems to like the work. But she sure works hard. The help problem out here is something. Some of these airplane plants have cars with billboards on them asking people to put their applications in for a job. There are just more jobs than there are people to fill them. So, come on out and get you a job.

Mother, would you like to come out and stay with us? We are just tied down to where we can't even go to the store without taking them [the children] with us. The weather a little later will prevent us from doing that. You would sure be a lot of help to us just to keep your eye on them. We have a nice yard that Gene plays in most of the time. He sure is growing fast. So is Barbara. She's about the best thing you ever saw. You can just leave her in her bed about all day and she never puts up a squawk. Just lays there and plays and jabbers. She's also cute as she can be. Whenever you talk to her, she kicks, waves her hands, laughs or jabbers, and sticks her tongue out at you. Well, mother, seriously, we just wish you would come out. It would do you good, the change and all. I know you worry about Dent [who was serving in the U.S. Army]. But you shouldn't. So, how about dropping us a line saying you will come. Then we'll get busy and scrape up your expenses out here.

Mother, tell Helen I sure had intended to write her, but just hadn't had time. I know she picked her a good husband, and we wish her all the happiness in the world.



Easter 1952: Gene, Barbara, Karen and Linda Smith

Etta, then 62 years old, declined Hugh's invitation.

Frances gave birth to Karen in 1945, the year when a brief stint in the U.S. Merchant Marines helped Hugh avoid the wartime draft. Two years later, the family of five returned to Birmingham. That February, Etta wrote to her sister: "Hugh and family still in woods. So anxious for them to get out. So hard to get a house. If could get a house somewhere, could get work. I guess you heard about him getting his truck wrecked, stuck in crossing railroad. Couldn't get train to stop. ... He has had quite a time since moving back here. Am so glad he did not get hurt." In 1948, their third daughter, Linda, arrived. Home was a modest house in Birmingham's West End neighborhood. Hugh was working sixty-hour weeks as a salesman for a bakery. Dissatisfied, they returned to Los Angeles in 1952, where Robert, their fifth child, was born that summer.



Hugh Smith, in Flight, in his Middle Years

Doomed by alcohol-fueled conflict, the marriage ended in divorce in Birmingham in Sept. 1954. Only 15-year-old Gene would return with Frances to Los Angeles, where she married again two months later. Hugh and the four younger children, ages two to thirteen, lived with Etta, then widowed, in her tiny East Lake home. Hugh worked at a grocery store and, in time, rented a large old house in the Druid Hills neighborhood. Etta joined them and cared for the children until a fall resulted in her becoming bedridden. The children were then placed at the Baptist Children’s Home for “needy, neglected, and dependent children” in Troy, 140 miles south of Birmingham. They would eventually end up with Frances in Southern California, where they were baptized in the Mormon faith.

Hugh was a gentle, good-hearted man—also a loner whose wandering left him with limited prospects. Although he never received a pilot’s license, he was at home in the cockpit of an airplane, unencumbered and free to soar. In 1961, he turned up in Orlando, Florida, where his brother Dent’s family took him in. It was another new beginning. He went to work at a service station and eventually moved into an apartment, seemingly settled before suddenly departing without a word of farewell. He died in Tucson in 1973 at age sixty and was buried in Los Angeles.

Herbert Allen Smith (Dec. 24, 1914, to Sept. 18, 2012)
Elizabeth Alma McClendon (June 4, 1917, to May 4, 2012)
Their Children
Donna Gay Anderson (b. Feb. 14, 1943)
Herbert Allen Smith II (June 13, 1945, to Feb. 27, 2022)

Herbert was the quiet, reliable, obedient son. He was about eleven years old when the family left Wilsonville for Birmingham. Later, in the woodshop at Shades Cahaba High School, he developed his talent and lifelong passion for building things. As a member of the senior class of 1935, he was pictured in the school annual, *The Owl*, with the motto “To go places and do things” and the ambition “To work my way to the top in the business world.” After graduating, he took a job with Southern Bell, the telephone company, and on Dec. 19, 1936, married Elizabeth McClendon, one of his sister Helen’s high school friends. Elizabeth had grown up in Irondale, the daughter of a blacksmith, and was working as a “beauty operator” at the time of their marriage. Where his older brother had wandered

into adulthood alone and without direction, Herbert took the safe, straight path, accompanied by Elizabeth, a woman as grounded and practical-minded as he. Their personalities would always be at odds—he was as reserved as she was opinionated and outspoken—but their commitment to each other would never waver.



Herbert Smith with daughter Donna, 1945

In 1940, Herbert (25) and Elizabeth (22) lived in a rented house in Trussville, a small town a few miles northeast of Birmingham. He remained with Southern Bell and was then employed as a dial-equipment switchman with an annual income of \$1,300. When the United States finally went to war in 1941, Herbert’s job apparently deferred his being drafted into the armed services. Elizabeth would give birth to two still-born infants before Donna arrived on Valentine’s Day in 1943. After Herbert’s promotion to switchman, they purchased their first home, 120 Ridge Road in Homewood, only a few blocks from the house where he had spent his teen years and a short distance from the schools and church he’d attended. Their son Allen arrived in 1945, completing the family.

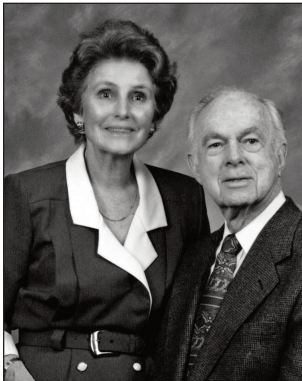


Herbert, Donna, Allen and Elizabeth Smith, Christmas 1952

In 1952, with Donna and Allen both in elementary school, Southern Bell transferred Herbert to Gadsden. After three years apart from family and friends, he happily managed to rejoin Southern Bell's Birmingham division, and they purchased a newly constructed house at 1805 Saulter Road. The children enrolled at Shades Cahaba Elementary, his and Elizabeth's high school alma mater, and the family joined Dawson Memorial Baptist Church, the church of his youth, It would become the nucleus of their social lives. Community-spirited Herbert also joined the local chapter of the Optimist Club, a fraternal organization dedicated to improving the well-being of children.

At their new home, Herbert set up a workshop and honed his home-improvement skills. While he finished the basement as a den and mastered cabinet building, Elizabeth sewed. She was an accomplished seamstress and saw to it that she and Donna were always fashionably dressed. Discipline, temperance and frugality defined Herbert and Elizabeth's marriage. They lived comfortably, but carefully. The Great Depression had cast a dark shadow over their adolescent years, and they were determined to provide their children with a stable, happy childhood and then finance their college educations. Donna thrived at Shades Valley High School, where her classmates and the faculty were drawn to her beauty and charm. Allen distinguished himself as a Boy Scout; he would always be "trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent." When Donna graduated from the University of Alabama in 1964, she was the very first of all the Smith descendants to earn a college diploma, followed by Allen as a graduate of Samford University in 1968. Both married locally soon after graduation; Donna to Tom Anderson and Allen to Laura Berthon.

Herbert's sister Helen Roberts and her family lived nearby and were also active members of Dawson Memorial Baptist. The two families shared many Sunday dinners and always gathered at Thanksgiving and Christmas. This deepened their relationships. But Herbert and his two brothers were rarely in touch. He would accompany Helen to their funerals. Herbert continued his career with the telephone company, progressing through the ranks, and Elizabeth supplemented their income with jobs as hostess at the high school cafeteria and later as receptionist in a doctor's office. With their savings, they purchased three wooded acres on Cahaba Valley Rd. in Shelby County in the mid 1960s. There, Herbert built the spacious, brick country home he designed for Elizabeth. By the time it was completed in 1970, Donna, Tom and their two children, Craig and Amy, had settled in faraway Wayzata, Minnesota, and Allen and Laura in Birmingham's southern suburbs. Allen and Laura's two daughters, Julie and Karen, arrived in the early 1970s.



Herbert and Elizabeth Smith, 1998

Having retired after 47 years with the telephone company, Herbert kept busy with gardening, woodworking (dollhouses for his granddaughters were a specialty) and making endless upgrades and alterations to their beautiful home. Elizabeth doted on the four grandchildren and, in time, their great grandchildren. Into their eighties and beginning to slow down, the couple moved to a lower-maintenance townhouse in a new Vestavia Hills development. It was closer to the church activities and old friends they still enjoyed, as well as medical facilities. In their tenth decade, Elizabeth had become less steady on her feet, while Herbert's memory faded away. Their well-being was largely in the faithful hands of Allen and Laura. By the time Herbert and Elizabeth moved to an apartment at Mount Royal Towers, a comfortable senior living and care facility, they had outlived their siblings and most of their contemporaries. Both died in 2012, four months apart, after a married life of 75 years.

Margaret Helen Smith (Jan. 26, 1917, to March 10, 1980)

Edwin Donald Roberts (Dec. 15, 1917, to Nov. 15, 1982)

Their Children

Edwin Donald Roberts II (b. Dec. 13, 1946)

Joe Michael Roberts (Oct. 14, 1948, to Feb. 10, 2007)

Of the Smith children, it was Helen who most aspired to complete her education with a college degree. She was a good student, with beautiful, precise handwriting and an aptitude for math. She graduated from Shades Cahaba High School in 1935, and that year's school annual, *The Owl*, noted her motto as "Eventually, why not now?" and her ambition "To do as I please." After high school, she was employed in the office of Duke Bos. Furniture, a retail store in downtown Birmingham, across the street from the Alabama Theatre. This led to her studying typing, stenography, shorthand and accounting at the Birmingham Business College. By 1940, her job was described as a "time keeper," and her annual salary of \$2,040 exceeded each of her brothers' earnings, a testament to the value of her business college diploma.

She and Edwin Donald Roberts married on Oct. 2, 1942, quietly exchanging vows in the pastor's study at South Avondale Baptist Church. Both were 25 years old. Donald had completed three years of high school before dropping out and taking a job as a machine operator at Continental Gin Co., a manufacturer of cotton gins in Avondale. Once married, they rented an apartment at the Berkley on Highland Ave. near the Five Points Circle and later on the upper floor of the Linwood on Caldwell Ave., a block off Highland Ave. one block from Caldwell Park.



Donald and Helen Roberts
Cherry Point, North Carolina, 1945

Donald had registered for the draft in 1940 and was described as six feet in height, weighing 155 pounds, with brown hair, blue eyes and a "ruddy" complexion. In March 1944, when his being drafted finally became eminent, he joined the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. Assigned to the First Marine Air Warning Group, he trained as a motor machinist in Omaha, Nebraska, that summer. Helen sublet their apartment and traveled with him, living in a hotel and working as assistant to the city's statistician. In October, they moved to the Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station near New Bern, North Carolina, living in couple's housing and awaiting his overseas assignment. The camaraderie of so many young couples who'd been uprooted from their homes, careers and families made military service a positive experience for them. Helen worked on base as a secretary, and on March 30, 1945, wrote to her "dearest Mama and Papa":

We heard that the war was over. I went to the next office and they told me that somebody had called in and told them. I didn't believe it—in fact I had forgotten about it when I came back to our office. When I remembered and told them about it they almost shouted—one of the girls whose husband is in Germany started crying. We called down to the station and found out better.

The war finally ended on Sept. 2, before Donald could be shipped out, and he was discharged as a corporal at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, in July 1946. The couple returned to their apartment on Caldwell Ave. in Birmingham, where Donald took a clerical job at Continental Gin. They were then expecting their first child. Across the hall lived an older couple, Wally Youngblood and his French-born wife Jeanne. That December, on Friday the 13th, Edwin Donald Roberts II was born at nearby St. Vincent's Hospital. Helen would say his birth was "the happiest day of my life." Jeanne Youngblood doted on the baby, giving him the nickname Butch. Otherwise, he was called Donny.



Newborn Joe Michael Roberts,
with Donny and Helen, 1948

Free of the distractions and uncertainty of wartime, it soon became clear to Helen how little she and Donald had in common and how at odds their goals were. She was a social creature who loved to laugh; he was a man whose happiest times were spent in a stable or on horseback. Their incompatibility came to a head after Donny's birth, when Helen began to consider divorce. But its feasibility was put to rest when she learned she was expecting another child. Joe Michael Roberts entered the world at the South Highland Infirmary on Oct. 14, 1948, twenty-two months and one day after his brother. Helen wrote to her mother in Sylacauga:

We named the baby Joe Michael. I want to call him Michael but everybody calls him something different. He's a cute little thing. Donald says he's a prettier baby than Butch was, but I don't know. He has a head full of hair. Butch is still the baby. Can't keep him away from the baby bed.

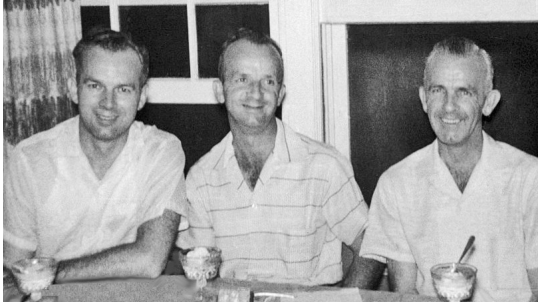
For a woman with a toddler and a newborn, the Southside apartment's single bedroom and steep flights of stairs proved a challenge, and the search for a new home got underway. Helen had grown up in Homewood, and in her mind, that over-the-mountain town lived up to its name. It was home. They purchased a lot at 3514 Ashley Rd. in a wooded area above the Montgomery Highway–Lakeshore Drive cloverleaf and built a spacious three-bedroom house. Helen had given up working in order to care for the boys, and as construction neared completion, they realized they couldn't afford to live in this house they'd built, so it was sold. What they could afford in 1949 was an older two-bedroom house at 306 St. Charles Street in the nearby Edgewood neighborhood. There, on that congenial street, their life as a family truly began.

Helen relished being a mother, but the homemaker role was not for her. She was of the first generation of American women who felt less than compelled to choose between children and a career, and intended to resume the secretarial work she loved when the boys reached school age. Motherhood would always mean seeing that Donny and Mike had a secure and loving home life, that they enjoyed every educational advantage and knew right from wrong.

Shaded by enormous oak trees, St. Charles Street was a balanced mix of friendly young families and elderly couples. Its three residential blocks, bounded by a retail district at one end and the deep woods of Red Mountain at the other, provided a safe haven for around sixteen playful children. One block away, the sanctuary of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church (the Edgewood Baptist of Helen's youth) was under construction, and Edgewood Elementary School was within easy walking distance.

It was then that Donald gave up his office job and became a long-haul truck driver, transporting freight to and from New Jersey twice a week. At age five, Donny entered first grade at the All Saints Episcopal private school, with Mike, nearing his fourth birthday, enrolled at the adjoining nursery school. Hiring a maid enabled Helen to return to work.

After Etta's fall, Helen assumed responsibility for her care, and the search for a house with a third bedroom got underway. In early winter 1956, Helen and Donald purchased 112 Edgeview Ave., three blocks from St. Charles Street. The house had been expanded to become the largest on that quiet dead-end street. In addition to the three bedrooms, there was a sun parlor, a den and a downstairs playroom. Its rear hedge marked Homewood's border with Birmingham, and just beyond were the Hillcrest Country Club's nine-hole golf course and the Red Mountain forest.



Helen's Brothers: Herbert, Dent and Hugh Smith, 1956

Etta would never recover from the surgery to repair her broken hip, leaving her barely cognizant and in constant, severe pain. Confined to the bed in an unfamiliar setting, she lived with the Roberts family without ever becoming a part of it. Helen hired a full-time attendant to care for her. Etta's three sons had drifted apart, with Hugh in Arizona and Dent in Florida. That summer, as her condition continued to deteriorate, Helen urged them to return for what would be the brothers' final visit with their mother—and with each other. In the fall, Etta was moved to a nursing facility, where she died a few days after Thanksgiving.

Helen compensated for the loneliness of her marriage by keeping busy. When it came to helping with school or church activities that would benefit her sons, she never said no, and she cherished the resulting friendships with other mothers. She encouraged the boys to take part in after-school sports, church youth choir, summer school and private art classes, ballroom dance lessons, summer camp, winter swim team, school trips by bus and train, as well as performances by the Birmingham Symphony and the children's theatre. "It will be good for you," she often said. By word, she taught them the do's and don'ts of gentlemanly manners, and by example how to get along with all sorts of people. In those racially-charged times, she forbade them to speak the N-word that their father uttered so freely. They knew that Mary Emma, the Black woman who was occasionally paid to help with the housework, was not a maid, she had worked for Helen's mother and was counted as an old friend. When the PTA neglected to give the school's custodian his Christmas gift, Helen and the boys delivered it to his home in a poor community that very few white people dared enter.



Donny and Mike Roberts, 1955

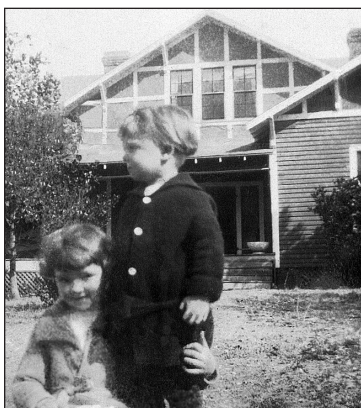


Helen Roberts with Granddaughter Emily, 1979

As the years passed and the boys made their way through adolescence and into college, Donald and Helen grew further apart. In the mid 1960s, she took a job as bookkeeper for Gorrie-Reagan & Assoc., a respected provider of mechanical timekeeping devices to businesses. She was eventually appointed company treasurer. This proved to be the job of her lifetime, the culmination of her career, and she rarely came home at the end of a day without her adding machine and several hours more work. (Of her sense of duty and influence, Mike would say, "You know how we are, we work like we own the company.") Having lopped three years off her age when she was hired, she resisted retirement. Donald retired in the late 1970s, welcoming the time to tend to the horse he boarded at nearby Shannon. Helen and Donald lived into their early sixties, past the joyful birth of Mike's daughter Emily, before succumbing to inoperable cancers. They were buried at Elmwood Cemetery.

James Dent Smith (Sept. 10, 1920, to June 27, 1976)
Lillie Mae (Tut) DuVal (April 21, 1922, to Oct. 5, 1974)
Their Children
James Lynn Smith (b. Jan. 16, 1949)
Susan (Suzan) Kay Bunn (b. Nov. 29, 1952)

Dent was the happy-go-lucky child. He was six years old when the family moved from Wilsonville to Jefferson County, where his education began at Edgewood School in Homewood. Within a few years, Alabama schools would be hard hit by the Great Depression. While many reduced their hours or closed, families in the Birmingham suburb rallied to keep theirs open. Dent was sixteen years old when the family moved from Homewood to Birmingham's Avondale neighborhood. Given his outgoing personality, he easily made new friends there.



Helen and Dent Smith, 1923

In childhood, Dent and Helen developed a particularly affectionate and enduring relationship. He loved to make people laugh, and she loved to laugh. The son of a stern father never known to inspire levity, Dent was irrepressibly lighthearted. Each of the Smith children was assigned a chore, and his was dishwashing. He was sixteen when his mother visited Hugh in Los Angeles. In a letter to Etta, Helen reported: "Dent is going to school. I don't think he's studying very hard though. He says he comes [home] at about three o'clock every afternoon and they still have the lunch dishes waiting for him. He thinks he's so mistreated. He said tonight that he'd never raised such a lazy bunch of children before in all his life." In another report on Dent, Helen wrote: "Dent is trying to write to you again. How did you like his other letter? I just hollered when I read it. He said he'd be glad when you came home so he could have some ice cream." Several months later, Helen was in Los Angeles, writing home: "How's Dent? The little brat might write to me. I guess he's too busy washing dishes though."

Dent came of age in hard times, when his apparent truancy led to his dropping out of high school without graduating. This was not uncommon during the Depression years, when unemployment was high and family incomes low. At the time of the 1940 census, he was going on twenty years old, still living with his parents and Helen in Birmingham's Avondale neighborhood and working at a filling station. While he may not have completed his high school studies, Woodlawn High School had been the source of several enduring friendships that would have a major influence on the direction his life would follow.



Tut and Dent Smith

Of the three Smith sons who registered for the military draft that year, only Dent would serve during World War II. He was employed at a Birmingham company that produced "structural and ornamental metal work" when he enlisted as an Army private at Fort McClellan in September 1942. According to his induction papers, he stood five foot six inches tall and weighed 120 pounds. By then, he had been briefly married to Lillie Mae (Tut) DuVal, an Avondale girl who was two years younger. Her older sister, Sookie, had wed his high school friend George Strickland in June 1941, which may have prompted Dent and Tut to tie the knot. But it had proved to be loosely tied. Shipped overseas, he served in France, Luxemburg and Germany, and at war's end returned home a sergeant. During those years, Tut remained in close touch with the Smith family before marrying a returning Navy veteran in April 1946. They soon divorced, and Dent and Tut resumed their relationship, older and wiser. It was a happy day for the Smith family when they remarried in November 1947.



Tut and Jimmy Smith, 1949



Jimmy and Susan Smith, 1955

Once again a civilian, Dent returned to his former job before going to work for Bama Foods Co., a popular local brand of jams, jellies and peanut butter. Like his father, Dent found his calling as a salesman. He and Tut shared her mother's duplex house in Avondale before buying their first home at 6904 Division Ave. in the East Lake neighborhood. Their son James Lynn Smith was born in early 1949. He was named for his father and great grandfather, James S.C. English, and in part for his Linn ancestors. Susan Kay Smith followed three years later. She was the last-born of Elzer and Etta Smith's eleven grandchildren.

Another of Dent's friends, Robert Turner, had relocated with his wife to Orlando in central Florida, where he started a janitorial supply business. Orlando was then a growing city of 55,000, dominated by two Air Force bases and related military operations, and in 1955, Robert offered Dent a sales job. It was an opportunity he and Tut could hardly afford to pass up. Florida's more casual way of life suited them perfectly, and Tut eventually went to work in the office of an insurance and real estate agency there. Their ties with home remained strong over the years that followed with regular visits with their sisters and Tut's mother. Jimmy would spend many a summer in Birmingham, at play with his cousins and at work at his grandmother's husband's Texaco service station.

Dent is remembered as a man slow to anger, always ready with a joke or tease. Tut was just as lighthearted—sometimes laughing until tears flowed—but she was also an intelligent, responsible woman, and the more serious matters of family life fell to her. In 1974, after both Jim and Susan had graduated from college and married, Tut suffered a massive heart attack and died. Dent was devastated and never recovered from his loss. This man who so readily made people laugh and smile took his life 18 months later.

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