



what's in a **SMITH,** anyway?

They march on and on, in ever-increasing numbers. Right now, as you read this, there are more Smiths than there were a minute ago

BY AL HIRSHBERG

IF A NOSE-COUNTING drill sergeant shouted "Smith!", one out of every hundred Americans would yell back, "Present!" There are almost two million Smiths in the United States, making them far and away the most prolific clan in the nation. The second-place Johnsons are so far behind that there's no contest. The Smiths spread-eagle America the way the New York Yankees spread-eagle baseball. Nobody else is in the same league.

There are nearly a million and a quarter Smiths on the Federal Social Security rolls alone. In major metropolitan telephone directories, the Smiths lead all the rest everywhere except in Chicago, where they trail the Johnsons, and in the predominantly Scandinavian Minneapolis-St. Paul area, where they are outnumbered by Johnsons, Andersons, Nelsons and Petersons.

Close to 76,000 Smiths served in the U.S. armed forces during World War II. Twenty Smiths die in the United States every day, to be replaced by twenty-two newborn Smiths. Last year, there were 491 Smiths covering over 27 pages, in *Who's Who in America*, and the blood of more than 300 Smiths was blue enough to rate mention in New York's *Social Register*. There's

OldMagazineArticles.com

SMITH

one Smith in the United States Senate, and five more in the House of Representatives. During the past century, there has rarely been a session of Congress without a Smith.

Every state in the Union has a town, a county, a street or a square called Smith. For years, until Alaska became a state, the geographical center of the continental United States was Smith Center, in Smith County, Kansas.

There are Smiths all over the place—in jails and in universities, in symphony orchestras and hog-calling contests, in hospitals and in health centers, in police stations and in gangs, in labor and in management, in show business and in sports. There are good Smiths and bad Smiths, interesting Smiths and boring Smiths, carpentering, plumbing, building-up, tearing-down, teaching, learning, stupid, smart, ordering, obeying, real and phony Smiths.

There are Smiths who acquired the name yesterday and Smiths who can trace their ancestry all the way back to King Arthur's Court. In 1949, *The American Genealogist*, a monthly publication, devoted an entire issue to the name Smith. It contained 79 pages of closely jammed type, and was one of the fattest issues ever put out by the magazine.

H. Allen Smith took enough time off between best-sellers like *Low Man on a Totem Pole* and *Life in a Putty Knife Factory* to write a book called *People Named Smith*. He did it, no doubt, on the theory that he'd have the greatest bonanza since the Bible if every Smith in America purchased a copy. Even though it was passed up by hundreds of thousands of non-reading or non-caring Smiths, the book did very well indeed, and Smith never

SMITH

had reason to be sorry he wrote it.

The first Smith was undoubtedly a metal-worker in England. But although the original Smiths worked with metal, it became standard practice with the passing of the years to tack the name onto people who made things out of almost anything. Thus Smith became the biggest of all English occupational names, of which there were scores (Taylor, Walker, Turner, Cooper, Baker, Cook, for instance).

There are about 40 smiths (blacksmith, jokesmith, jobsmith, etc.) listed in Webster's Dictionary, and the suffix has been appropriated for facetious descriptions of everything from alcoholic (drinksmith) to a ballplayer (hitsmith).

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW used it both in the title and the first two lines of one of his best-known poems, "The Village Blacksmith." Fanny Fern, a writer of some note in another era, once—perhaps in desperation—penned these immortal lines: "When Adam got tired of naming his numerous descendants, he said, 'Let the rest be called Smith.'"

The name is used as an alias so often that every officer of the law in America, be he an F.B.I. agent or a village constable, automatically suspects everyone who says he's called Smith. Some quarter of a million Smiths are arrested every year. More than half of them are phony Smiths, according to the best police estimates. On one occasion, all the girls picked up in a raid on a house of ill fame pleaded in court as Betty Smith. They would normally have pleaded as Jane Doe, but there was a real Jane Doe in the town—and no Betty Smith.

Some Smiths are proud of the name, some hate it with such a passion that they change it at the first

SMITH

opportunity. There are at least a dozen variations, the most common of which is Smythe. Very few real Smiths have much use for a Smythe, or for anyone else who refuses to accept Smith as Smith. One of the most ingenious alterations was invented by P. G. Wodehouse, who wrote a book called, *Leave It to Psmith*. The leading character, while anxious to be different from others of his ilk, insisted his name was pronounced Smith.

"The p," he explained, "is silent, as in phthisis, psychic and ptarmigan."

Perhaps because their own name is so short, Smiths have a tendency to pick unwieldy names when they form organizations. Someone started the Benevolent and Protective and Completely Universal Order of Fred Smiths of America in 1936. The first meeting, in New York, attracted several hundred Smiths, many of whom later admitted they took the name "Fred" especially for the occasion. One Smith Frederick also appeared. He was permitted to back into the banquet hall and eat out of his lap with his back to the table.

The National Society to Discourage Use of the Name Smith for Purposes of Hypothetical Illustration was conceived by a disgusted college student named Smith, who got sick of hearing one of his professors use the name Smith every time he wanted to illustrate a point. Any Smith is eligible for membership in TNSDUNSPHI, provided he promises to produce his membership card whenever someone says, "Take the average man—let's call him John Q. Smith."

One of the proudest of all Smiths was Sophia, a spinster who founded a girls' school in Northampton, Mass., in 1871, and gave it her name. She would have been gratified to

SMITH

know that Smith College became one of the finest in America. It's a good bet that she would have been even more gratified to hear that, in one glorious year, the place boasted 18 students and four faculty members named Smith. There's always a Smith at Smith.

WHAT SOPHIA was to the pro-Smiths, Henry F. Durant was to the anti-Smiths. Like Sophia, Mr. Durant, who founded Wellesley College in 1870, started a girls' school which became one of the most widely known in the world. But unlike Sophia, he couldn't stomach the name he was born with, which was Henry W. Smith. Sophia must have hated him.

Sophia and Henry were not the only Smiths to start American institutions of higher education. The full name of Hobart College in Geneva, N. Y., is "Hobart and William Smith Colleges." It was founded in 1822. And in 1867, Johnson C. Smith University, for Negroes, was established in Charlotte, N. C.

There has never been a President of the United States named Smith, but Alfred E. Smith, New York's "Happy Warrior," was the Democratic candidate in 1928. Smiths who shudder at the memory of Al Smith's monumental defeat at the hands of Herbert Hoover can take solace in the fact that there were two First Ladies whose maiden names were Smith.

Abigail Smith Adams was not only the wife of a President, but also the mother of one. Her husband, John Adams, was our second President, and their son, John Quincy Adams, became the sixth President. The former Margaret Mackall Smith married Zachary Taylor, "Old Rough and Ready," the twelfth President of the United States. Unlike Abigail, however, she failed to make much

SMITH

of a mark on American history.

Although Margaret Chase Smith of Maine is the only Smith in the present Senate, she was one of three during the early 1950s. The other two were H. Alexander Smith, of New Jersey, and Willis Smith, of North Carolina. The Senate record for length of service was once held by "Cotton Ed" Smith, of South Carolina, who served 35 years before he was defeated in 1944.

There was no Smith at the Constitutional Convention, but James Smith, of Pennsylvania, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Robert Smith served in the cabinets of both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Caleb Smith was Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of the Interior, Hoke Smith was Grover Cleveland's. The Postmaster-General under William McKinley was Charles Smith.

THE MORE THAN 1,335,000 Mormons still recognize Joseph Smith as the founder of their church, even though he broke with the parent church before his death in 1844. His son, Joseph Smith, Jr., established a splinter group, which still flourishes in Missouri.

There have been scores of literary Smiths. H. Allen is one of the better-known Americans of modern vintage, along with Betty (*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*), Thorne (the *Topper* series), Lillian (*Strange Fruit*) and F. Hopkinson (*Colonel Carter of Cartersville*.)

The most famous writing Smith of all was Adam, British economist and author of *The Wealth of Nations*. Kate Douglas Wiggin, who wrote *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, was a Smith before her marriage. Walter W. (Red) Smith, syndicated sports columnist of the New York Herald-Tribune, is the acknowledged leader of his profession. And the late Sidney Smith was the crea-

SMITH

tor of the comic strip, "The Gumps."

THE SMITH Brothers, William (Trade) and Andrew (Mark), are known wherever people cough. In medical parlance, there is a Smith Cramp, a Smith Fracture, a Smith Reaction for Bile Pigments and a Smith Dislocation of the Foot. Dr. Austin Smith is a former editor of the *Journal* of the American Medical Association, Dr. Nathan Smith founded the Yale Medical School and Dr. James J. Smith is a former director of research on alcoholism at Bellevue Medical Center.

Millions of secretaries have transcribed dictation on L. C. Smith typewriters, and thousands of bad-men have been knocked off by Smith and Wesson revolvers. Cyrus R. Smith is president of American Air Lines, which, at last count, had more than 100 Smiths in its employ. It once was possible to buy an American ticket from a Smith, have your bags carried by a Smith, be ushered to a plane by a Smith, be ministered to aboard by two stewardesses named Smith, and be piloted and co-piloted by Smiths. However, in the interests of avoiding confusion, the Smiths have since been scattered around, but American Air Lines passengers still bump into them everywhere.

Captain E. J. Smith was skipper of the *Titanic* and went down with his ship after it hit an iceberg in 1912. Another famous ship, the *Mayflower*, got all the way across the Atlantic without a single Smith aboard. This bothers the Smiths, not one bit, for the *Mayflower* was beaten to America by the Roanoke colony, led by Captain John Smith. John won everlasting fame when the beautiful Indian princess, Pocahontas, prevented her father, Powhatan, from lethally using a tomahawk on him.

Three of the highest-ranking American officers in World War II

SMITH

were Smiths. General Walter Bedell (Beetle) Smith was General Eisenhower's Chief of Staff. General Holland M. (Howlin' Mad) Smith, Marine commander in the Pacific, and the Army's Major General Ralph Smith, invaded Saipan together, but they didn't stay together long. Howlin' Mad thought Ralph was too cautious, and fired him, thereby setting off one of the classic rhubarbs of the war.

John Stafford Smith is supposed to have composed the music of "The Star Spangled Banner," although there is some controversy on the point. But there is no doubt that Samuel F. Smith wrote the words to "America." Irving Berlin's stirring "God Bless America," which already ranks as an American classic, was introduced and is still often sung by Kate Smith.

SHOW BUSINESS is loaded with Smiths. Gladys became one of the most famous movie actresses of all time under the name of Mary Pickford. The stately Alexis never bothered to change her name. Neither did Kent, or the British actor, Sir C. Aubrey Smith.

The hot-jazz and blues world has always jumped with Smiths. There were saxophonists Willie, Tab and Buster, violinist Snuff, trumpeteers Jabbo and Joe, and blues singers Mamie, Bessie, Laura, Clara and Trixie. Vaudeville buffs will never forget Joe Smith of the comedy team of Smith and Dale, and veteran radio listeners well remember the husky-voiced singer, Whispering Jack Smith.

SPORTS RECORD books are crawling with Smiths. Six world's boxing champions carried the name to the top of their profession, and one, Walker Smith, dropped it on the way up

OldMagazineArticles.com

SMITH

because he liked the name Sugar Ray Robinson better. The latest issue of *The Ring Record Book* lists 16 active boxing Smiths.

Big league baseball is rarely without a Smith. Mayo managed the Philadelphia Phillies for several years before switching to the Cincinnati Reds last winter. The latest *Baseball Register* also lists six players and one umpire. Two Smiths once opposed each other in a World Series. In 1920, Elmer, a Cleveland outfielder, hit the first grand slam home run in series history, and Sherrod, a pitcher, won one of Brooklyn's two victories.

So many Smiths have played college football that there wouldn't be room to list them. In 1935, there were three on Grantland Rice's All-America team. Smiths have been swinging golf clubs for years. Horton, Macdonald and Alex were all great in their day, and Wiffi is one of the better women golfers on the current professional circuit.

Last year, Garvin Smith was the national collegiate rope climbing champion, William Smith the U.S. Alpine downhill ski king, and Zinneford Smith a member of the Pittsburgh indoor intercollegiate championship mile relay team, proving that the Smiths are as versatile as they are prolific.

There is no clan more prolific. Smiths may stop doing many things, but they won't stop multiplying. They march on and on, in ever increasing numbers. Right now, there are probably more Smiths than there were a minute ago. ■■

PAGEANT

July, 1959: p. 45

SMITH**KNOW YOUR SMITHS**

(on the last page)



- 1. Bedell Smith**
- 2. Alexis Smith**
- 3. Kate Smith**
- 4. Margaret Chase Smith**
- 5. Sir C. Aubrey Smith**
- 6. H. Allen Smith**
- 7. Smith Brothers**
- 8. Horton Smith**
- 9. Betty Smith**
- 10. Walker Smith**
(Sugar Ray Robinson)
- 11. Mayo Smith**
- 12. "Howling Mad" Smith**
- 13. Al Smith**
- 14. John Smith**
- 15. Red Smith**

