

William Kelly Smythe, M. D.
Bemis, Madison County, Tennessee
By Joel Jackson

William Kelly Smythe was born near the little town of Cato in the County of Pulaski in the State of Arkansas to **Charles Webb Smythe** and **Rebecca Jane Farris Smythe** on October 13, 1881. They had a little farm which caused him to miss a lot of school.

He moved to Jackson, Tennessee, at age 20 (1901) and entered the seventh grade and graduated from Jackson High in 1905, thus doing six years of studies in four years. He then enrolled in Union University while working with Dr. **Ambrose McCoy** (1858-December 26, 1920) at 105½ East Main Street and stoking the furnace at the old Southern Hotel. Dr. McCoy was a partner in the McCoy & McDonald Sanitarium located at the corner of Market & Sycamore. Could Kelly have spent some time there working? He received his pre-medical training from Union University. He then enrolled in Medical School at Vanderbilt University where he graduated third in his class in May 1909 and received his license to practice medicine on June 1, 1909. The Bemis Mill Village Museum has his framed diploma and his diplomas for eight post-graduate courses at Vanderbilt.



His first practice was in Spring Creek, just 12 miles north of Jackson on Highway 70. There he had an office with a stable just 30 feet away. This is where he kept a horse named “Old Charlie” to make house calls. His medicine saddlebags are on display at the museum. There is also a lot of his office equipment there. He remained in Spring Creek until 1913.

At this time Mr. **J. B. Young**, Bemis town manager, decided Dr. **A. E. Brown** needed some help; so, he recruited 32-year-old Kelly Smythe. Dr. Smythe took an office over the Bemis Company Store while Dr. Brown remained at the corner of Missouri Street and First Street. Dr. Brown was 52 years old at this point, and we find him still practicing in 1940 at the age of 79. How much longer is still being researched. They were both very busy taking care of the approximately 3,500 citizens. Bemis had a young population which meant many babies were born during this time. Dr. Smythe delivered approximately 2,000 before his death in 1964. Also, the Spanish flu hit in 1918-1921. Nationwide, about 28% of the people were affected and about 675,000 died. I am sure Bemis was similarly affected. According to **Kelly Holmes**, caretaker of Bemis Cemetery, in 1918 there were 11 burials; and in 1919, there were 11 burials; but in 1920 there were 21 burials (about twice the normal). So, the doctors were extremely busy caring for the sick. My research revealed that this was the same strain that hit the U. S. in 2009, being the H1N1 influenza.

On March 28, 1918, Dr. Smythe was married to **Alice Victoria Smith**. This would have made him 36 years and 5 months old. His bride was 14 years and 8 months his senior or 51 years and 1 month old. She was born February 15, 1867, in Haywood County. They were married at the Royal Street Presbyterian Church in Jackson. It was a Cumberland Presbyterian, located at 465 North Royal Street. They were married by **James D. White**. Miss Alice owned a fashionable hat store in Jackson. In the 1901 Jackson City Directory, I found Alice selling millinery (hats) at Brown & Hays Company at 116 North Liberty Street and living at 239 Orleans Street. By 1916, I found her as proprietor of “The Novelty,” a millinery and ready-to-wear store located at 213 North Church Street and rooming at 120 East Lafayette Street, just a block and a half away. The museum has a copy of a bill she paid for hats for \$29.89 to James Louis & Sons in Bridgeport, Pennsylvania, on December 18, 1916. After her marriage, I couldn’t find her in a store; so, it seems she stayed home with Dr. Smythe.

They never had children; but on January 12, 1920, friends **Lucius and Leona McBroom Tubbs** had a son. Leona contracted the flu and died shortly, leaving Mr. Tubbs with a baby and five other children. They were **Maggie Lee** (age 12), **Gene** and **Geena** (twins, age 8), **Mary Lou** (age 6), and **Jesse** (age 2). This was more

than Mr. Tubbs could handle. Mr. Tubbs and Dr. Smythe worked out a solution which involved taking the baby, who was five weeks old, home for Mrs. Alice to care for him. When the baby arrived at Dr. Smythe's home, he had no name; but soon the good doctor named him Charles Jackson (Jack). This resulted in Dr. Smythe petitioning to adopt on July 23, 1921, with official adoption taking place August 10, 1921. The proceedings are recorded in Book 33, Page 201 of the Madison County Court with Honorable **J. T. Rothrock, Jr.** presiding. Jack's daughter, **Mary Alice Smythe Dickson**, provided the Museum with a copy and gave permission to publish these details.

"Pawpaw Tubbs," as Jack called him, married again about two years after Jack's mother died. Mary Alice said Jack always thought of the kids by the second wife as cousins rather than half-brothers and half-sisters. Mary Alice said Jack always thought of Dr. Smythe as his REAL DAD.

Louise McGuire Butler told me this story. Around 1926, little Jack and little Louise McGuire, later Butler, both about six years of age, slipped off to the sand ditch which was forbidden. They fell on some barbed wire and cut themselves. Dr. Smythe suspected where they were and parked his car at the end of Young Street. They were caught. He chased them back home with a cane fishing pole. He was always very protective of Jack.

The museum has an obituary for **Rebecca Jane Farris Smythe**, age 68, the mother of Dr. Kelly Smythe. She was a member of Frenchman Mountain Methodist Church in Cato, Arkansas. It stated she had been in Bemis only 16 months. Her other two sons listed were **Oscar** and **Booker**. Her daughters were **Helen Smythe** of Bemis who lived with Dr. Smythe, **Mrs. A. B. Talmage**, and **Mrs. C. W. "Wells" Clements**. She had one sister, **Mrs. L. J. Lumkin**. The funeral was held at the home of Dr. Smythe with the body being shipped on NC&StL Railroad back to Little Rock, Arkansas, and on to Cato just 10 miles to the north. Jack Smythe's birth father, L. F. Tubbs, served as one of the pallbearers along with Dr. Smythe's doctor buddy in Bemis, Dr. A. E. Brown. After extensive searching, we found the date of her death was April 1, 1925. Bourne-Griffin Funeral Home was in charge.

After her death, each year the Smythe family gathered in Cato at the Frenchman Mountain Methodist Church for a family reunion, according to Mary Alice.

From time to time, Dr. Smythe took in different people into his home. In the 1930 census, we find **Rebecca Lumpkins**, age 66, listed as a boarder. Was she Mrs. L. J. Lumkin in the above obituary? On this same census, his sister Helen was listed as "sister" and still living with him since 1925 when their mother died. She was five years younger than the doctor. In the 1940 census, we find **Betty McGuire** listed as a boarder at age 74. Betty was a nickname for Elizabeth. We find she was a schoolteacher (probably in Bemis) and died at age 83 on December 21, 1948, from a broken hip. She was buried in the McDaniel Cemetery near Medon on Parkburg Road. One boarder that I am familiar with is **Freddie Tosh** who worked at West Drug Store. For a couple of years while going to Union University and before going to University of Tennessee Memphis for Medical School, he stayed with Dr. Smythe. This provided a quiet place to study after a day at school and work. Freddie became a doctor with the Public Health Service and is now retired. Thanks to Dr. Smythe's encouragement.

Dr. Smythe's wife died on November 25, 1946. After her death, Dr. Smythe's sister, Helen, moved back from Texas and became lady of the house.

During the Depression, the Mill was on "short time" working 24 to 30 hours per week. Money was scarce, but doctor bills kept coming. As a Christmas present, Dr. Smythe sat in front of the Company Store and passed out "paid-in-full" receipts as Christmas presents.

I remember him coming to our house when I was sick. He had a gruff, matter-of-fact manner. After the temperature and a look in the mouth and ears, his next question was, "How's your bowels?" He would leave

some liquid medicine to be dropped onto a spoonful of sugar and say, “You’ll be OK; it’s going around. Give it a week.” He was always positive. Folks in Bemis loved him and he loved Bemis. This concern for bowels was probably brought on by a popular book of the times by **John Harvey Kellogg** of Corn Flake fame. Dr. Kellogg advocated “a cleansed body will heal itself.”

When West Drug Store was closed in 1990, **Merline Kelly Coatney**’s daughter, **Sandra Coatney Holley**, donated a lot of old “patent medicine” to the museum. At least 75% of it was some sort of laxative. **Harold West** had to stock what the doctor prescribed. Another thing Dr. Smythe advocated was “drink lots of water.” I remember seeing him come in the drug store and go to the soda fountain and serve himself a drink of cold water. He would finish it off with a BIG AHHH! It made me want a drink.

Another cure of his was for “the worms.” Kids in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s played outside in the dirt and barefooted. This caused worms in kids; and according to Dr. Smythe, they could be diagnosed by “being skinny” and “picking the nose.” I fell victim to both. The word around town was that Dr. Smythe said “rub turpentine around the navel each night until the nose picking stops.”

When Dr. Smythe moved to Bemis in 1913, he immediately saw the need for a car to make house calls. The museum has a photo of him with a 1913 T Model Ford. Later we find him driving a 1928 Model A Ford and later a 1939 Chrysler. People all over Bemis knew what he drove and always let “The Doctor” have the “right of way” at intersections. There were no stop signs. Dr. Brown had started this tradition by backing into traffic at the Company Store and causing many wrecks. So, when anyone saw a doctor, they let the doctor have “right of way.”

On October 13, 1947, his birthday, Bemis had a big potluck dinner at the skating rink. They had a big program and gave a bonnet to all the folks that he had delivered. This was about 500 of his 2,000 deliveries. At the conclusion, he was presented a New Dodge Club Coupe. It was light blue, really pretty. The people of Bemis had taken up a collection and bought it for his birthday and 35 years of service, although he had not completed 35 years.

When I moved on the next street over from Dr. Smythe in 1953, I was just across the hedges from his back yard. I remember his chicken house. He still had a little country in him. Another leisure he enjoyed was skeet shooting. He was one of a few who could afford shot gun shells. Bemis Company built a skeet range just before you get to the Bemis Cemetery. He had a teenager throw for him. He would shoot in the late afternoon – a real change of pace from doctoring.

In 1953, **Mrs. Neva Woodson**, J. B. Young High School English teacher, was listening on WDXI, Mutual Broadcasting Company, to the program “Wonderful City” when she decided to enter Bemis as a “Wonderful City” with Dr. Smythe as the main character. She titled her essay “The Good Samaritan.” Her essay won over 8,000 submitted; and by January 1954, she was flown to New York to read it live to the nation. All of Bemis listened as Dr. Smythe’s story was told.

Also in 1954, the Tennessee Medical Association honored him with “Practitioner of the Year.” At age 72, he was still working 12 to 15 hours a day. At the presentation, he lamented, “If only I could live those 41 years over again and use the tools doctors have today, think of the lives I could have saved.”

There are many stories about his shots; none were pleasant. I remember sitting in his office getting a physical to get married in 1961. As he talked, he would take a needle from the glass needle dish, dip it in alcohol and sharpen it on a whet stone. Obviously, this recycling left something to be desired, because everyone thought his shots hurt. He practiced until 1964.

What I think of as a funny story happened to **Marshall Collins**, father of **Patsy Collins Hale**. Marshall had a severe toothache. He went to Dr. Smythe’s office for relief, but “The Doc” was out on a house call. So, Marshall was going to drive around Bemis and find him. But then “The Doc” arrived and parked right next

to Marshall. Marshall explained he needed the tooth pulled. Doc said he had not pulled a tooth in years and did not even have pliers. Marshall said he had a pair in his overalls. So, Doc said, “Lay back on the fender of your truck and put your feet on the running board.” Marshall did as he was told and Dr. Smythe pulled



the tooth out. Marshall said he was reaching for 50 cents to pay him when Doc said, “No charge; anybody that would let me pull a tooth out on the fender of a truck shouldn’t have to pay.”

The Good Doctor was an avid reader and subscribed to all the medical journals of the day to stay abreast of the latest medical news. He had one of the finest private libraries in the state with over 3,000 volumes. His donation of books to Pinson School helped them qualify as a State Certified School Library.

Dr. Smythe died January 30, 1964, at age 82. He practiced until just weeks before his death. He died in his favorite hospital, Webb-Williamson Hospital. He also had patients in Memorial Hospital and Doctors Hospital. The Good Doctor was a proud member of the Sons of Confederate Soldiers and kept the certificate of membership on

his office wall. He was also a 50-year member of Woodmen of the World. He was recognized for this in 1959. He was also given the title “Arkansas Traveler” by Governor **Orval Faubus** of Arkansas. This was an “Ambassador at Large” position for his home state. He represented them well. He was also an Elk and belonged to the Odd Fellows Lodge.

I must mention his son, Jack Smythe, who followed in his father’s footsteps by being in the health field. Jack was a pioneer in the blood bank business by founding the Jackson Blood Bank in 1947. He sold it in 1972 to the West Tennessee Regional Blood Center, but he remained on the Executive Committee until 1986. Jack also brought the Miss Tennessee Pageant to Jackson in 1953 and served on its board for 38 years. He was the first Civil Defense Director in 1957, and he brought Babe Ruth baseball to Jackson. Jack passed away May 26, 2003. Dr. Smythe was very proud of Jack and rightly so. Both were very community minded. West Tennessee was blessed to have Dr. Smythe and his son Jack.

Sources

- “William Kelly Smythe, M. D.,” *Family Findings*, Volume XLV, Number 4, October 2013, author Joel Jackson, published by Mid-West Tennessee Genealogical Society, editor Kathy Haney Williams
- US Census 1920, 1930, 1940 for Madison County, Tennessee
- Marriage license 1918 for Kelly Smythe and Alice Smith in Madison County, Tennessee
- Obituary 1964 of Kelly Smythe from *The Jackson Sun* in Jackson, Tennessee
- Records from Bemis Mill Village Museum in Jackson, Madison County, Tennessee
- Dr. Smythe’s portrait courtesy of Neil Morris from the collection of his mother, Edith Brinkley Morris
- The photo of Dr. Smythe and Carolyn Eason from the booklet “50 Years in the Life of a Community”
- FindAGrave memorials #83091810 Kelly Smythe, #83141956 Alice Smythe, <https://www.findagrave.com/>