

**Selections from Ellison Smyth memoirs, complete document
sent by Susan Smyth Lindenberger, August 2007**

Notes from the memoirs of E. A. Smyth IV, 1991, selected by Susan Smyth Lindenberger, 2007

(Ellison Smyth's father, also Ellison Adger, came to Blacksburg in 1891 as professor in biology. He played the organ for the Presbyterian Sunday School and Church every Sunday for 25 years and also served for many years as a ruling elder.)

Dr. David Junkin Woods was the pastor of the Blacksburg Presbyterian Church from 1898 to 1918. He was highly respected by both students and faculty members. Dr. Woods was a bachelor. He had been a civil engineer and so fit in well at VPI.

The pulpit was centered on a raised platform in front of the choir. The members of the choir were located a little higher and were hidden behind a curtained rail when seated. On top of the railing was a sloping book rack. I recall most of the members of the choir at the time. There was the rumbling bass of Mr. Dunlap (the postmaster;) Mother sang alto; Aunt Meta (wife of Col. J. S. A. Johnson, graduate of VPI, Commandant, Mechanical Engineering professor and Father's younger sister) was lead soprano. Mrs. Carol M.. Newman, Mrs. Tutwiler, and Mrs. Faulkner sang whatever was needed. Jimmy Johnson was first tenor and there were usually some students who filled in either tenor or bass. Dr. Woods couldn't carry a tune - but he made a noble effort. Mrs. "Tut" had a whistling whisper, and often carried on a conversation behind the curtain. On one occasion, Dr. Woods stopped his sermon turned around, and addressed the choir saying, "When you ladies stop whispering, I will go on with the sermon." They did, and he did!

. . .

Dr. Woods was very energetic and a great walker. He would walk down to the Roanoke Valley church to preach in the afternoon, visit among the families down there, and then walk back up to town. No one could keep up with him. Dr. Woods not only led their congregation in the building of our big church on Roanoke Street, traveling around the Synod to raise funds, but he also built a fine big manse - all paid for before he left . . . As children, we were always delighted when he dropped in and stayed for supper.

Our church on Roanoke Street was the largest in town. Cadets pretty well filled the galleries on three sides of the sanctuary, and quite a few upperclassman sat in the center block downstairs among the faculty and townspeople. Nearly twenty percent of the faculty were members of the Presbyterian church. Father taught a good-sized class of cadets at Sunday School. They met under the back gallery separated from the body of the church by roll-down

partitions. Sunday School classes for children and young people met in cubicles under the side galleries separated from each other by roll-down partitions and from the body of the church by heavy green curtains.

Mrs. Randolph was the teacher of boys my age when I was about five or six years old. Sam Prichard, Kenneth Faulkner, Tom Newman, White Connor, Francis Wilson, Charlie Tutwiler and I were in that class. Charlie Tut found that he could stick a pin through the edge of his shoe, thus making a wonderful weapon. He tried it on me, and I responded by taking a poke at him. Mrs. Randolph reached over to separate us and her hand came in front of my mouth - so I bit it. She called Dean Campbell, who picked me up by my shoulders, bringing my feet opposite his shins, so I let him have it with both feet. He carried me in to where Father was teaching the student class. Father took me around the side of the church and warmed up the seat of my understanding.

When I was in the Sunday School for youngsters, Mrs. Prichard had a bunch of us meet in her home on Sunday afternoons. We were called the Willing Workers Society. I don't remember any work we ever did, and the only reason we were ever "willing" was because of parental pressure and because of Mrs. Prichard's delicious ginger cookies - the best I ever tasted. She always gave us one after the meeting. I learned that she made those delicious cookies nearly every Friday afternoon, so it was a good idea to be playing with Sam in their back yard on Friday afternoons about cookie time. . . .

Mr. Jimmy Johnson was our next teacher. He was an instructor in the machine shops. When he had been a VPI student in the 1890s, he had been a pitcher on the VPI baseball team. As far as I can remember, the Sunday School lesson according to him was mostly about baseball.

After Dr. Woods was succeeded as pastor by Locke White, White taught our class. We were now in high school, and under him we got some biblical content. I was quite shy, and when he challenged our class to take part in a Christian Endeavor program one Sunday night, I was really frightened. He gave us clippings which we were to study during the week; Sunday night we were to stand when our turn came, and express the clipping's content in our own words. I didn't sleep much that week, and when my turn came at the Christian Endeavor meeting, I managed to pull myself to my feet by holding tightly to the back of the pew in front of me, and with my hand shaking so I could hardly see the clipping, I managed to read it. Then I sagged into my seat convinced that I would never again try to talk in front of a group. When I stood up, my brains sat down. . . .

As a kid, there was never any debate on whether or not we would go to Sunday school and church unless one was sick in bed; we went. Father played the organ both for Sunday

School and church for 25 years. Until 1923, when we got a model T Ford, we walked or rode our bikes to church. Dean Campbell was the superintendent of the Sunday school and led the singing from old Moody & Sanky song books. He used to try to make us children sing.

"I can't sing," I complained.

He would say, "Oh yes you can; you were just out there yelling at the top of your voice in the churchyard!"

When Mother couldn't be at church, I would sit in a chair up in the choir loft. Father played the two manual reed organs that he had given to the church. He used foot power, and there was a handle to the bellows that moved up and down as he pumped. I used to wonder what would happen if I took hold of the handle and try to pump it faster - but I never had the nerve to try. I had a pretty good idea that something unpleasant would happen!

Sundays were usually good days. We walked a mile to and from church come fair weather or foul unless we were sick. When I was in my teens, I would hurry home from church and churn the ice cream. We usually had one of two students in for dinner. After a round of the Shorter Catechism Father would read to us . . . Father would read until he dozed off, and if repeated punches failed to arouse him sufficiently, he would say, "Let me take forty winks, and then we will take a walk." Those Sunday afternoon walks were among my most cherished educational experiences. . . . We always had family prayers in the evening just before the younger ones went up to bed. Sometimes it interfered with a baseball game on the front lawn or a game of hide and go seek, but it was a wonderful heritage. Father would read from the Bible, lead us in prayer, and close with the Lord's prayer in unison. . . .

And I registered for my freshman year at VPI, I was puzzled at some of the questions on the registration form. I knew that I was a Presbyterian, but I didn't know how to spell it! Cadets were marched to the church of their preference on Sunday morning. . . .

(After two years with General Electric, Ellison responded to his inner calling to the ministry.)

When I reported at (Union Theological in Richmond) seminary . . . I had not yet met with the session of the Blacksburg church. I had not been approved by them or by Montgomery Presbytery. I was put into a group of similarly unprepared man for examination by a group of seminary professors - members of Hanover Presbytery and empowered by the presbytery to pass on such cases. . . it was a shock to have Hebrew, Greek, Church history, biblical exegesis, Christian education and English Bible thrown at me all at once. I never got to bed before one or two o'clock in the morning. . . .

(Following graduation from UTS, Ellison did graduate work at Edinburgh University, served churches in Nitro, West Virginia, Lexington and Warrenton, Virginia, and Hartsville, South Carolina. In 1937 he married Mary Linda Vardell, who was then teaching biology at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. She was the daughter of the Rev. Charles G. Vardell, president of Flora McDonald college in Red Springs, North Carolina, but more crucially, the sister of Dickson Murray, wife of Ellison's senior colleague at the Lexington church. After his parents' deaths, Ellison made a trip to Salem in connection with settling their estate.)

Dean C. P. "Sally" Miles called me (while I was settling my parents' estate in Salem.) He asked me to supply one Sunday in the Blacksburg church. . . I made the trip on November 16, 1947, and on my return to Hartsville Dean Miles called.. He told me that he was the chairman of the pulpit committee, and he wanted to put my name before the congregation as the candidate for pastor. I look back now and those who were on the pulpit committee some 37 years ago: (Sally Miles, Martha Hillman, Lank Dunton, Cornella Dyck, Charlie Bill Moore.) They were all good friends who stuck by me, even when times were not so good. I talked with Dr. Lacy (president of UTS) about a possible move back to my childhood church. He pointed out that I had been away for twenty-three years and had a good background. Dr. Lacy said that if he were my bishop he would say, "Go!" There were now around 6000 students at VPI, many of them returned veterans from the war who were not in the cadet corps. Lacy said that he considered the Blacksburg pulpit to be one of the most important in the state and a place for rendering constructive service. (Then pastor) Jim Gregory had secured an assistant in charge of the student program. I felt that I had made what contributions I could at Hartsville and needed new challenges. So we accepted the call to Blacksburg to take effect in February 1948.

(Mary Linda took our four children to a friend's in Florida while I moved back to the cold and snow of the Virginia mountains.)

Snow was piled up everywhere. Sally Miles had shovel off the sidewalks. I had asked him to get someone to clean up the dirty mess in the basement and when I got there a very grimy Paul Dyck came up from the basement. He was chairman of the church property committee; the other members had told him that as the chairman he would clean things up and they would approve it.

The Blacksburg church was about the same size as the Hartsville church and the salary was the same. But I had to pay my own moving expenses. I unpacked the moving van and placed stuff where it might belong by guesswork. Aunt Meta told me that Floyd Plank was driving down to Florida, and that maybe I could get a ride with him. . . . We left Blacksburg in a freezing drizzle, which got worse the further south we drove. . . . Floyd said we had better quit

before we wrecked we stopped at Concord, North Carolina and Floyd said he would take the train back home. I took a southbound train (met the family) and then we all took the train . . . to Christiansburg. Sitting in front of us was Dr. Frank Price our missionary from China. It was good to see someone

I knew. He shared a pack of lifesavers with the children. On the train home we met a member of the Blacksburg church - Helen Connolly - going home from college. Her father Bob Connolly was on our session.

Sally Miles met us at Cambria, called Susan "Towhead," and drove us to the manse. The members of the church had put lots of food in the kitchen cabinets, and I had asked Aunt Meta to have an electric stove installed in the kitchen. There was a coal stoker in the basement and an old hot water heating system in the house.

In the church next door, they still had the old hot air furnace with the big grills at several places in the aisles. In place of classrooms, under the balconies they had old discarded oak mess hall chairs from VPI. Also they had a Mohler organ, with the console on the main floor to one side; Mrs. Don Kelsey was the organist. Other than that the church was as I remembered it as a boy. There were still a few people I knew: Mrs. Carrie Newman, Mrs. Faulkner, the Holdaway's, Hunts, Harry and Frances Moore, the Schoenes, Planks, Bunker & Dibby Hill, and Mrs. Tutwiler.

The cadets were no longer marched church, but a good many came. The civilian students were in greater evidence. The main floor was usually filled all the way under the back balcony, and many of the chairs under the side balconies were filled as we all. The center balcony was usually packed, and some people sat in the side balconies.

The ministers of the five local churches were listed in the VPI catalog as chaplains; we each got about \$163 a year for our services. Jim Gregory had gotten Dennis MacCall Brown as an assistant minister in charge of student work. Funds left over from the General Assembly's Defense Service Council gave \$1200, and synod put up \$300, and the Blacksburg church put up the balance. We were put on notice that the funds from the assembly would be exhausted in the next year, and we had to find other sources of help.

Mac Brown was the son of Dean Brown of Roanoke College, and had been in Mother's Sunday School class as a boy in Salem. He offered to resign so I could pick my own assistant. I told him, "Not on your life! I need you to break me in!" He was a good working partner, and before he left to head our student work in Atlanta, he married Helen Hillman. She was the daughter of Martha and Verne Hillman, our faithful friends and fellow workers in the church.

Mary Linda had her hands full with four small children, but took on Sunday School, and later Cub Scouts; she had a Girl

Scout troop for 10 years, (and was involved in the Womens' Circles.)

Walter Newman was installed as president of VPI after our arrival, and I gave the invocation prayer at his inauguration. For some 50 years, VPI's presidents had been Presbyterians; it was not an unmixed blessing. Over 18% of the faculty and staff were members of the Presbyterian church, a fact that gave rise to "Polly" Parrot's statement that VPI stood for "Virginia Presbyterian Institute," and Silas Minter's statement that one Sunday he started to go to the Presbyterian church, but it looked like a faculty meeting, so he didn't go in.

Hallie Hughes got after me right away to help with a Sunday School, which she, Janet Cameron and Clara Sloope Underhill had started over in Potlikker Flats (North Blacksburg) in Helms Linkous's house. Also Mac Brown and some of the students were running both Sunday School and church services in the Roanoke Valley church. There were only six members left down there and no officers, but several new families. When they asked me to help in the Valley, I assented because I knew some of the older families there - like the Hendersons and the Bennets. When I was in college some of us used to go down there to teach Sunday School and sing. I tried a night service in the Valley but that didn't work; I had too many meetings in town at night. In 1949 and 1950 my schedule was like this: I preached down in the valley at 9:30 a.m., in the town church at 11 a.m., and at Potlikker Flats at 6:00 or 7:00 p.m. I filled the afternoons and evenings with various meetings; usually I had about nine engagements on Sundays. My day finished around 10:00 or 11 p.m.

(Dad's Memoirs as far as the church is concerned stop about 1954, although he writes about the D.D. he received from Hampden Sydney in 1954 and his retirement in June 1968. In his "A History of the Blacksburg Presbyterian Church" he writes about the Civil Rights years and the new church building. His was the longest pastorate in the history of the church - 21 years if you count the six month interim he did after Jesse Hutcheson's death. In a separate document I will send my own memories of growing up in the Blacksburg Church, taken from my journals.)

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