

Million-dollar cartoonist got start in Bloomington

Although nearly forgotten today, Bloomington-born artist Sid Smith was a towering figure in American popular culture. From 1917 until his untimely death in 1935, Smith's newspaper comic strip "The Gumps" was a cultural touchstone, read by millions each day from coast to coast.

Robert Sidney "Sid" Smith was born February 13, 1877, in Bloomington. His father, Thomas H. Smith, was one of the city's earliest and most successful dentists. Thomas also operated a sawmill outside the city limits.

Sid Smith lacked his father's academic and entrepreneurial drive, and when he was around 12 years old (or so the story goes) a teacher gave him the following advice: "You go home young man. You're not fit for anything but a cartoonist." Smith, as he recounted years later, felt "morally insulted" because he had no idea what a cartoonist was.

Apparently, Sid Smith attended but never graduated from Bloomington High School, though he later related stories of taking classes at Illinois Wesleyan University. "My father wanted me to be a dentist," he recalled. "But to be a dentist I had to study, and school and I never agreed: they didn't teach drawing where I went. I was about 17, I think, when I saw a schoolroom for the last time."

Let it be noted, though, that one of the brothers, Thomas H. Smith, followed his father's footsteps and enjoyed a 30-year career as a Bloomington dentist.

Let it also be noted that Sid Smith's artistic talents were never in question. When he was 18 or so he began contributing sketches and cartoons to The Sunday Eye, an illustrated weekly newspaper published in Bloomington. "From the start I was crazy to draw pictures and see how they would look reproduced in the newspapers," he remembered.

Failing to land a full-time position he became an itinerant "chalk talker." He would travel from town to town, entertaining audiences with light chat and whimsical sketches. When money was short, he would hop a freight train to the next town.

"My only equipment was chalk, a blackboard, and nerve—chiefly nerve, no money," Smith said of his year-long, cross-country tour. "I saw life in a thousand aspects and got used to drawing under all conditions." One such talk, in November 1898, was at the Bloomington YMCA, then located at the corner of East and Washington streets. The 21-year-old Smith's "crayon drawings are full of interest and his rapid sketches are a continued surprise," noted Bloomington's Daily Bulletin.

Smith then bounced from one newspaper to another in places like Indianapolis and Pittsburgh before settling down in Chicago, first with the Examiner and then, in 1911, the

Tribune. Smith enjoyed success with “Old Doc Yak,” a Sunday-only strip that celebrated the gentle misadventures of the goat-headed Doc Yak.

In 1917, Smith unveiled “The Gumps,” a strip featuring the chinless patriarch Andy, his wife Minerva (or “Min”), their son Chester, and a cast of lovingly rendered supporting characters, ranging from Tilda the maid to wealthy Uncle Bim.

“The Gumps” was said to be the first major strip to move away from the “joke-a-day” format toward one with a narrative flow. “As another cartoonist once told me,” Smith recalled, “You don’t draw cartoons, you write ’em.” Guided by Tribune publisher Joseph Medill Patterson, Smith fashioned a comedic soap opera of domestic life carried by storylines that stretched for weeks. It was a revolutionary advance in the comic strip medium that proved wildly popular with the reading public.

Andy Gump represented “a kind of everyday philosopher,” Smith once said. “He tries to voice the sentiments of everyday people. My idea is to make him the sort of chap so that people can hold a mirror in front of themselves and say truthfully: ‘There’s Andy Gump.’” According to Smith’s lengthy obituary in the Tribune, “gump” was a word for an odd character. Other sources maintain that the Tribune’s Patterson referred to the unwashed masses as “gumps.”

In the spring of 1922, Smith signed a \$1 million contract—\$100,000 for 10 years guaranteed—with the Tribune. That was a heck of a lot of money back then, and it’d be a lot more today. Adjusted for inflation, \$1 million in 1922 would be the equivalent of nearly \$15 million today! At the time, the highest paid comic strip artist was Bud Fisher of “Mutt and Jeff” fame, who was paid \$50,000 a year. The Tribune also gave Smith a Rolls-Royce, and as if that wasn’t enough, he lobbied for, and eventually received, an oriental rug for his office.

Two months after signing the contract Smith motored through Bloomington in his Rolls, with The Pantagraph reporting that “the new machine attracted much admiring attention on the streets.” His license plate number was “348,” the same as Doc Yak’s and Andy Gump’s.

Smith liked to live the high life, and he divided his time between a Gold Coast residence in Chicago; an estate on the south shore of Lake Geneva, Wisc.; a smaller place he called “Forty Acres” near Genoa City, Wisc.; and a 2,200-acre farm in the northern Illinois community of Shirland. During the 1923 Christmas season, Smith barreled through Bloomington in a “big yellow roadster,” taking time to drop by the police station to donate a silver-mounted ashtray to “the best police force in the best town in the best state in the United States.”

In 1929, he killed off supporting character Mary Gold, and this act of artistic fratricide caused such an uproar that the Tribune hired additional help to handle the deluge of mail and phone calls. Almost ninety years later, this death is regarded as a seminal event in the maturation of the comic strip as a popular art form.

In the early morning of October 20, 1935, Smith was driving to his 2,200-acre Shirland farm when he was killed in a head-on collision, just south of the McHenry County community of Harvard.

Robert Sidney “Sid” Smith is one of many local residents featured in the McLean County Museum of History’s exhibit “Working for a Living,” which opens Saturday, September 8. This new exhibit will examine the many challenges and choices local workers—even cartoonists!—faced over these many years, from the arrival of the first settlers in the 1820s into the 1990s.

Back in 1935, two days after Sid Smith’s death, the Tribune printed a one-panel John T. McCutcheon cartoon titled “Some of the Mourners.” It depicted an endless sea of newspaper readers sitting down to enjoy “The Gumps.” “Some of the twenty million daily readers,” read the caption, “who have smiled with Sidney Smith for eighteen years.”