The Story of Oberlin Smith

Local historian Arthur Cox has discovered information about the father of Bridgetton’s Ferracante Machine Co. that proves the substantial contribution Oberlin Smith made to developing the technology we take for granted today. Cox is looking for an author to tell the story.

Smith’s importance not recognized here

By JEAN JONES
Staff Writer

BRIDGETTON — With a name like Smith it’s easy to get lost in the crowd, but Oberlin Smith was a familiar name to area residents in his time and today is still considered important by those interested in the industrial heritage of our area.

His impact was worldwide, though the extent was never really appreciated in his hometown.

The original inventor of magnetic recording, without which there would be no VCRs, CDs, telephone answering machines, video or other elec- tronic devices, and miracle of class and process that were important in the development of industrial music production, he patented numerous other inventions for a wide variety of items, ranging from an egg- holder to a remote controlled security system that was the forerunner of the video jukebox.

Born in Cincinnati on March 28, 1846, of English parents, he moved with his family to Shiloh when young, living on the Howell farm, then Bridgetton, where he attended school and church. He con- tinued his education at the Philadelphia Polytechnic Institute, where he learned drafting, paten- tumming, blacksmithing, the making of gas and steam lighting, and other skills of his trade.

In 1868, he established a business that involved invent- ing and the design of fire and explosion safety equipment. In 1877, he formed Ferracante Machine Co.

Arthur Cox, published a book in 1989 “Ferracante, The History of an American Enterprise,” devoting a chapter to the milestone in the company’s history. In his book, he writes about the advent of the jukebox, he had built the record changer and remote control that allowed him to select any of 10 records from a case in another room by simply pushing a combination of buttons.

When Smith saw a new invention, he immediately looked for ways to improve upon it. It was what he saw Edison’s first phonograph that he invented the new method of recording, using a long wire to

“History has been rewritten and Smith has been forgotten... There would be no extensive research. It would be so much easier to do than starting from scratch. Cox said of a possible biography.

Much of the information Cox gathered for his book is now in the Hagley Museum, but there is much more new from Cox’s collection, he said.

Smith often worked on inventions, then moved on, before relying on those as his active mind forced new prob- lems to solve.

He adopted systems of time management, efficiency stud- ies and inventory charts. He worked for standardization.

A pencil drawing by catalog designer P. Kenneth Reeves of a "genealogical" chart showing various products of Ferracante Machine Co.

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A pencil drawing by catalog designer P. Kenneth Reeves of a "genealogical" chart showing various products of Ferracante Machine Co.
Ferruccio shop floor, with rows of machinery ready to be shipped out to major industries.

(Continued from Page A-4) Many areas of manufacturing were interconnected and advanced simplified spelling.

Oberlin Smith was not just an inventor who spent all his time hunched over a drawing board at his desk. He was multi-talented, individual, who liked to entertain and had an appetite for being an expert dancer up until his death of a heart attack, at age 86, in 1956. He also enjoyed swimming, rowing and golf and driving one of the first motor propelled vehicles in the area.

Smith had invented a steam-powered auto before 1889 and in 1874 last drove an auto powered by a marine engine, which went out of control and derailed itself in Eastlake.

He designed elaborate gardens for his home, including a rockery garden created from the site of the original factory buildings, which had burned. The home itself did not escape his continuing efforts to improve everything that captured his fancy. Ideas were constantly being conceived, then reevaluated, before his interest turned to something new.

A button on his bedside table and his bedroom window and his bathroom had a disspointing sign. Clocks popped out of the walls to announce the time. As fascinating as his life and the man himself were, it was for his inventions of skill and prowess for metal-working that his name will be known.

He was a prolific producer of his ideas. He had a love for beautiful buildings and his home was one of the largest in the country.

He designed and built more than 600 types of presses, including machines to make items ranging from the first case for the packaged oil to presses for manufacturing Chinese coins.

He designed improvements for Norwalk automatic bean presses for the De Beers Corporation for the New England Test Market, and designed a key for the lockout always after for some new challenge.

He knew "please produce anything you could think of that was stamped from metal, from flying press to bell book curl to billing sheets for the Spanish American War. He was important to the whole history of the industrial age, to the second bility.

Cox had a further explanation.

There were many published stories, but they were never told by Oberlin Smith, "No one ever put together the whole story."

Cox, a retired educator and curator at the Louisiana Museum of the Cumberland County Historical Society, naturally the life story of a qualified person in an admitted writing the biography. He may be contacted at (805) 453-6520 or by writing to the Chinese National Mint, Chentu, China, with Ferruccio coin press.

(Left) A view of the Ferruccio offices building with the line it was run. (Right) Probably the last photo taken of Oberlin Smith, shown with his improved version of the automaton, similar to a jigsaw but invented by Smith years earlier. (Above) View of the Chinese National Mint, Chentu, China, with Ferruccio coin press.