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EDMUND KIRBY IN FLORIDA

By JOSEPH B. JAMES

Edmund Kirby Smith, who became one of the few full generals of the Confederate Army during the War Between the States, was born in St. Augustine, May 16, 1824.¹ He was the second of Judge Joseph Lee Smith, who had left Connecticut in 1823 to become one of the two judges of the Superior Court of the Territory of Florida.² President Monroe had appointed Judge Smith to that post in the new territorial government that was then being set up by the United States after the acquisition of Florida from Spain in 1821.

St. Augustine, then the principal city in East Florida, was the point to which Judge Smith came in 1823 to select a home and prepare for the removal of his family from Litchfield, Connecticut. He was a graduate of Yale in the class of 1796 and had studied law under the direction of Judge Tapping Reeves in Litchfield.³ This training, curiously enough, parallels that of the great state-rights leader, John C. Calhoun, who was graduated from Yale in 1804 and studied for eighteen months in the law school at Litchfield. Since Joseph Smith was carrying on his legal practice in that locality while the South Carolinian was studying law, it is very likely that they knew each other, at least to some slight degree.

¹ Dwight, M. E., *The Kirbys of New England*, p. 183; memorial tablet in All Saints Chapel, University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn. ; monument in Sewanee Cemetery.

² Dwight, op. cit., p. 176; *Soldiers of Florida in the Seminole Indians, Civil, Spanish-American Wars*, p. 323

³ Dwight, op. cit., p. 176

⁴ Van Holst, H., *John C. Calhoun*, p. 9

The outbreak of the War of 1812 had cut short the legal career of Joseph Lee Smith. He was commissioned major in the 25th U. S. Infantry and served throughout the struggle. After hostilities ceased he continued in the military service. In 1821, when he retired permanently from army life, he was colonel of the 3rd Infantry.⁵

Besides his father, other ancestors of Edmund Kirby Smith were active in military affairs and achieved some distinction as soldiers. His paternal grandfather, Elnathan Smith, took part in the French and Indian War and served as a major in the commissary department during the Revolution.⁶ Ephraim Kirby, his maternal grandfather, volunteered early in the struggle for American independence. He fought in the engagements around Boston and followed Washington in the New Jersey and Pennsylvania campaigns of 1777. This ancestor of General Kirby Smith later became known as an ardent supporter of Thomas Jefferson⁷ despite the fact that he lived in Connecticut, the hotbed of Jeffersonian opposition.

When Judge Smith came to St. Augustine in 1823, the territory of Florida, and even the town itself, was very unlike the more populous and industrially developed state of Connecticut. The mail arrived weekly but communication with points in the North was irregular and not at all dependable. Illustrative of the isolated locality to which Judge Smith came to assume his legal duties is the fact that a letter

⁵ Dwight, op. cit., p. 176. For a contemporaneous portrayal see, *Autobiography of Thomas Douglas, Late Judge of the Supreme Court of Florida*. (New York, 1856) pp. 68, 70-74.

⁶ Dwight, op. cit., p. 178

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174

written by him to his wife in Litchfield on February 25, 1923 was not received until March 18.⁸

After the exchange of flags in St. Augustine, July 10, 1821, the Spanish inhabitants of the old city generally remained.⁹ Although people from other states settled there, this Latin element continued to lend much to the picturesqueness of the place. To Judge Smith, St. Augustine seemed full of gaiety and its social life impressed him as being more extensive than that to which he and his family had been accustomed in Litchfield. He wrote his wife, who soon would follow him to St. Augustine, that the society there was "heterogeneous, transitory and collected from all parts of the world, some with polished intellect and more with neither intellect nor polish. The *fiestas* of the Spanish people formed a large part of the town's social activity. Among these, the carnival *fiesta* which was celebrated before Lent especially interested the newly-appointed judge of the Superior Court.¹⁰

In St. Augustine, as in every town with a large Spanish element, the Catholic Church occupied a place of importance. In a letter to his wife, Judge Smith wrote "We have a Catholic Church but el padre is lately off with a cancer on his tongue."¹¹ The Smith family were not Catholics, but as Episcopalians they appear to have been rather tolerant toward the Roman Church.¹²

One of the older houses of St. Augustine, a part of the Segu estate, was selected by Judge Smith

⁸ Judge J. L. Smith to his wife, Feb. 25, 1823

⁹ Fairbanks, G. R., "St. Augustine, the Oldest Town in the United States," *Historic Towns of the Southern States*, p. 578

¹⁰ Judge J. L. Smith to his wife, Feb. 25, 1823

¹¹ Judge J. L. Smith to his wife, Feb. 25, 1823

¹² Interview with Dr. J. L. Kirby-Smith, July 22, 1934

for his future home.¹³ Here he brought his family which at that time consisted of his wife, nee Frances Kirby, and three children. The oldest child, Ephraim, was a cadet at West Point. Frances, a girl in her teens, and Josephine, who was five, accompanied their mother on the long journey to the Florida frontier.¹⁴ A second son, the subject of this narrative, was born the following year.

Edmund Kirby Smith passed the first twelve years of his life in St. Augustine. This time-worn city, although full of the memories of a European settlement more than two centuries old, was still a frontier town. Indians continued to make up a large part of the population of the Florida territory. Old Fort San Marcos, now known as Fort Marion, housed a garrison of troops at all times and lent a military atmosphere to the town. The view of that grim old fortress and an acquaintance with at least some of the officers and men stationed there were among the influences under which young Edmund grew.

Judge Smith, having retired after nine years service in the army, only three years before his second son's birth, doubtless had friends on garrison duty at Fort Marion. It is but natural that in a frontier town, men with much in common should associate a great deal with one another. It is thus likely that Edmund came at an early age under the influence of military men. Added to other forces that seemed always drawing him toward an army life was his brother's example. At the time of Edmund's birth, this brother was a cadet at West

¹³ Bills for rent and communications relative to the purchase of the house by Judge Smith signed by administrators of the Segui estate.

¹⁴ Dwight, *op. cit.*, p. 176

Point where he was graduated in 1826.¹⁵ As an officer in the army during his younger brother's boyhood, Ephraim was constantly exerting an influence toward a soldier's career.

Edmund Smith seems to have lived the well rounded life of the usual healthy, wide-awake boy. He rode his horse, Rocket, about the town and adjacent country, gaining an early training in horsemanship that added much to his later ability to endure and even enjoy the rigorous riding that was to be demanded of him as an army officer on the Texas frontier. On his excursions into the nearby country, he sometimes picked wild berries.¹⁶ On other occasions he participated with boyish enthusiasm in scheming enterprises to obtain watermelons and oranges from the fields and groves of the neighborhood without the owners' permission.¹⁷ Like most boys, he thoroughly enjoyed the privilege of going barefoot. We have record of Edmund's returning home one day after a swim in the ocean, forgetting the shoes that he had worn before entering the water.¹⁸ Obviously wearing shoes had not become a habit to him at that time.

Certainly the youthful Edmund was a normal boy in most of his interests. He seems to have had the usual boyish enthusiasm for military trappings and guns. It was in a very evident tone of disappointment that he wrote in the summer of 1835 when he was eleven "We had a miserable fourth of July and there were no guns fired except Capt. Southwick's [the militia and the barracks soldiers did not march nor fire the large guns.

¹⁵ Cullum, G. W., *Register of Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy*, p. 138

¹⁶ Edmund K. Smith to his mother, June (July) 25, 1835

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, March 1, 1849

¹⁸ Edmund K. Smith to his mother, June (July) 25, 185

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

During these early years of boyish pleasures, Edmund was subject to another influence which was to mean a great deal to the mature man. Although somewhat irregular in attendance, he was a pupil in Sunday School. For a time he was a member of a class taught by a Mr. Dice.²⁰ The church which he probably attended was the Trinity Episcopal Church the construction of which was begun in 1827.²¹

Judge Smith was a well educated man for the time in which he lived, when college training was the privilege of very few and was out of the question for the majority of men. There is no way of determining what books nor how many made up the Smith family library in St. Augustine. However, we can say with a great degree of certainty that included in this collection were certain volumes now in the possession of General Kirby Smith's children and bearing on their flyleaves either Joseph Lee Smith's or Ephraim Kirby's signature. Among these works are Cornelius Nepos' *Lives of Excellent Commanders*, Rev. William Beloe's *History of Herodotus, Public Characters 1801-2* and *The Works of Lady Montagu*. To this collection we may add the Bible which undoubtedly was one of the greatest literary influences in the life of General Kirby Smith. It is not likely that a man of ordinary means living in an isolated territory would own a large library. It is safe to say, however, that what few books there were in Judge Smith's home in all probability were read more than once. Although hardly suited to the interests of a pre-adolescent boy, the above-mentioned works were

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Fairbanks, op. cit., p. 580

probably read by Edmund because of the scarcity of reading material.

In those days, private instruction was customary in the South. Like so many other boys, Edmund studied and recited his lessons under the direction of a member of the family. Frances, his older sister, was his teacher.²² Judging from his later record as a student, both in preparatory school and at West Point, we can say that his early training must have been of good quality.

The old Segui place, which had become the Smith home, seems to have been a very comfortable residence in spite of occasional difficulties with a leaky roof.²³ A "magnificent multiflora" shaded the back balcony. In this delightful retreat, some of the meals were served. Many years later, General Kirby Smith's mother fondly recalled a breakfast on that balcony when Josiah Tatnall had been the guest of honor. This distinguished naval officer had taken young Edmund on his knee that morning and called him "a handsome lad."²⁴

Edmund liked to climb an old fig tree located near the house and from a vantage point high in its branches enjoy himself immensely not only by eating the fruit but by "stoning old Gould's²⁵ chickens til the Deacon wished his Devils had the little imp of Satan." This tree, the yard in which it grew, and the old home itself were scenes of many happy experiences and were so indelibly impressed upon the

²² Mrs. L. B. Webster to Edmund K. Smith, May 24, 1844

²³ Edmund K. Smith to his mother, March 1, 1849

²⁴ Mrs. F. K. Smith to Edmund K. Smith, Dec. 2, 1861

²⁵ Elias B. Gould (?). County judge, mayor, member Leg. Council. Estab. *Florida Herald* (St. Augustine) 1822; hence probably the allusion to printer's devils.

youthful mind that they were always the center of many treasured memories.²⁶

At the age of eleven, Edmund felt for the first time the sorrow that a death in one's immediate family brings. In November, 1835, his sister Josephine died in Brownsville, New York²⁷ where she and her mother were visiting. The boy was very fond of Josephine,²⁸ who was six years his senior, and must have felt his loss deeply.

At about this time there occurred the first of the Indian massacres that introduced the long, drawn-out encounter known as the Seminole War. Not long after these first terrors and before Edmund was twelve, he accompanied his father on a trip to Tallahassee, the capital of the Florida territory. That very January in 1836, sixteen plantations located south of St. Augustine were attacked and devastated. Refugees were entering the town daily for the supposed protection of the fort. Troops were arriving from nearby states to supplement the small garrison at Fort Marion.³⁰ These military preparations and the tense excitement that prevailed must have vividly impressed the young soldier-to-be.

The shorter overland route to Tallahassee was made too dangerous by the warring savages. For ease of travel as well as to avoid the danger, Judge Smith and his son made the trip by steamer around the peninsula to St. Marks. From that busy port they would travel the remaining distance to Tallahassee over a much-frequented road.

²⁶ Edmund K. Smith to his mother, March 1, 1849

²⁷ Dwight, op. cit., p. 177

²⁸ Edmund K. Smith to his mother, June (July) 25, 1935

²⁹ Fairbanks, G. R., *History of Florida*, p. 295

³⁰ Young, R. W., "Fort Marion During the Seminole War," Florida Hist. Soc. Quarterly, Vol. XIII, p. 194

Leaving St. Augustine in January, 1836, they sailed down the Florida coast. They halted at Indian Key where fresh tales of recent massacres were heard. But war, exciting as it was, did not prevent Edmund from being much interested in the coconuts that grew in wild profusion. Much to his delight, he was allowed to pull some of the more accessible ones. Other tropical fruits that he found there, bananas, papaws, and tamarinds, were novelties to him.³¹

After passing near several villages, deserted because of the recent ravages of the Indians, they stopped for six days at Key West. Edmund thought the place a "handsome town." Of special interest to him was the light-house and, farther down the beach the salt works where the salt-making process caught his attention.³²

It is likely that on arriving at Key West, Edmund Kirby Smith, future general of the Confederacy, saw the future Secretary of the Confederate States Navy, Stephen R. Mallory. At this time, Mallory was a young man of twenty-three and inspector of the customs at Key West. Though young Edmund makes no mention of Mallory, such a meeting is not only possible but probable since Judge Smith, with whom his son was constantly seen, was one of the most prominent men in the territory.

While in Key West, Edmund enjoyed an experience to which almost any boy would thrill. It so happened that the famous frigate, *Constellation*, with full war equipment in arms and men was anchored there. President Jackson's forceful foreign policy had severed diplomatic relations with

³¹ Edmund K. Smith to his mother, Jan. 31, 1836

³² Edmund K. Smith to his mother, Jan. 31, 1836

France and war with that country was expected by many. According to young Edmund Smith, the crew of the *Constellation* was eager for such a conflict. Commodore Dallas, who commanded the vessel, spoke kindly to the boy who was more than pleased with both the commodore and his ship. Edmund so impressed with the tidy appearance of the naval craft that he wrote "the decks were cleaner than the parlour of any house."³³

Continuing their journey, Judge Smith and his son cruised along the west coast of Florida making no more stops before reaching their destination. The captain considered it too dangerous to enter Tampa Bay even though it would have made a convenient stopping point. Before reaching St. Marks, the steamer on which they were passengers spoke a cutter of sixteen guns and a sloop of war, the *Vandalia*. During the last night before making port, their ship caught fire and the alarm was sounded. However, no great damage was suffered.³⁴ All this must have been very exciting to a boy of eleven.

Indian troubles were becoming more serious and by now were developing a more personal interest for Edmund. It was expected that his brother, who was now an officer in the army, would be sent to Florida for active duty against the Seminoles. Also at about this time, Major Putnam, an old friend of the family, was wounded while leading an expedition of two militia companies against King Philip, a hostile chief.³⁵

At St. Marks, they found the population in a state of nervous excitement. An Indian attack was

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Edmund K. Smith to his mother, Jan. 31, 1836

³⁵*Ibid.*, Fairbanks, *History of Florida*, p. 295

LETTERS OF WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT FROM FLORIDA

CHARLES I. GLICKSBERG

In 1843, on the invitation of William Gilmore Sims, Bryant had taken a journey to the South. He visited Richmond, watched the sale of tobacco, and inspected a typical tobacco factory. Later, while enjoying the hospitality of some planters in the Barnwell district of South Carolina, he had the good fortune of witnessing a corn shucking and attending a racoon hunt. But of far greater interest to him was the life of the negro observed at first hand. He listened to negro ballads and the lively music of the banjo and heard, perhaps for the first time, the hearty, extravagant laughter of the slaves on the plantation. From personal observation he judged that the blacks of that region were "a cheerful, careless, dirty race, not hard-worked, and in many respects indulgently treated."¹

In Picolata, East Florida, what impressed him immediately was the luxuriance and fragrant freshness of the vegetation. Beneath the window of his lodging flowed the waters of the St. Johns, one "of the noblest streams of the country." Much interested even then in botany and horticulture, Bryant studied the pine barrens and the fruits and plants that grew on them. He visited St. Augustine,² whose ancient appearance made him think of some Dutch towns. The old fort of St. Mark impressed

¹*Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant*. Edited by Parke Godwin. (New York, 1884), 11, 34.

²*Florida Herald*, St. Augustine (April 10, 1843): "William C. Bryant, Esq. Editor of the New York Evening Post, one of the ablest democratic papers in the country, and one of the sweetest of American poets, arrived in this city on Saturday last. He holds a proud place in the literature of his country. He has taken lodgings at the Florida House."