The Story of Oberlin Smith

Local historian Arthur Cox has discovered information about the father of Bridgeton's Ferracute 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

BRIDGETON — 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 country.

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 TVs, CDs, telephone answering machines, video or other electronic devices, and inventor of dies and presses that were important in the development of industrial mass production, he patented numerous other inventions for a wide variety of items, ranging from an egg boiler to a remote controlled sound system that was the forerunner of the first jukebox.

Born in Cincinnati on March 22, 1840, of English parents, he moved with his family to Shiloh when young, living on the Howell farm, then Bridgeton, where he attended local schools. He continued his education at the West Jersey Academy, then the Philadelphia Polytechnic Institute, where he learned drafting, patternmaking, blacksmithing, die making, gas and steam fitting and other skills of his trade.

In 1863, he established a business here for metalworking and the design of dies and presses, incorporated in 1877 into Ferracute Machine Co.

Arthur Cox published a book in 1985 "Ferracute, The History of an American Enterprise," devoting a chapter to Smith. Now, new information discovered since the publication of the book proves that Smith was much more than a local industrialist and inventor. He was a contemporary and equal of some of the greatest inventors and industrial movers and shakers of his time.

Cox wants someone to expand that chapter into a book, a biography, exploring more fully the man who first envisioned magnetic recording. True, someone eventually would have discovered the process, but the fact that the first prototype was conceived and built here was a discovery that came through the efforts of Jay Gandy, president of the Oberlin Smith Society, formed in the late 1980s to try to preserve what remained of Ferracute. The property was tied up in bankruptcy proceedings and the effort failed.

Gandy had gathered documents, records and personal correspondence, which he shared with Cox. More than 600 letters provided intimate glimpses into the life and times of the man who rubbed elbows with presidents and inventors, such as Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell and Sir Henry Bessemer.

"In Bridgeton, he was the owner of Ferracute. When he got on the train and went to New York, he entered the world of some of the most famous men of his time. He was their equal and in them, he found others with whom he could discuss his work," Cox says with growing excitement as he warms to his subject.

He wants somebody to use the available information to permanently record the greatness of a man whose inventions spanned everything from the mundane to the magnificent. In his home, years before the advent of the jukebox, he had built the record changer and remote control that allowed him to sit in his chair and select any of 50 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 after he saw Edison's first phonograph that he invented the new method of recording, using a long wire to record music and another wire, on a silk or cotton thread impregnated with metal, to play it back.

Smith didn't patent many of his inventions. Instead, he would draw a diagram, write a description and file it in a sealed envelope with the county clerk. This was how his magnetic recording invention was recorded.

"He made endless little sketches on scraps of paper and filed them in the courthouse. Some he patented, some he just filed away," Cox said.

Smith later wrote an article in an 1888 issue of Electrical World, describing his device, making the information available to others. It was the basis for an improvement 20 years later by a Dane, Valdemar Poulsen.

He received no credit from Poulsen and wrote him a letter rebuking him for the omission. The proof of his prior invention came when he had the county clerk open two sealed envelopes he had filed in 1878, describing the recording device and the method of playback.

That was only one of what Cox describes as "gee whiz" moments in Smith's life. As he displays copies of letters, articles and numerous photographs of the early days of Ferracute, Smith's home, Lochwold, which burned in 1934, and the man himself, his excitement grows. As he lists Smith's many achievements, it is easy to see why Smith was an important part of the industrial revolution in the U.S.

"History has been rediscovered that was long 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 now from Gandy's collection, he said.

Smith often worked on inventions, then moved on before refining them as his active mind found new problems to solve

He adopted systems of time management, efficiency studies and inventory forms. He worked for standardization in

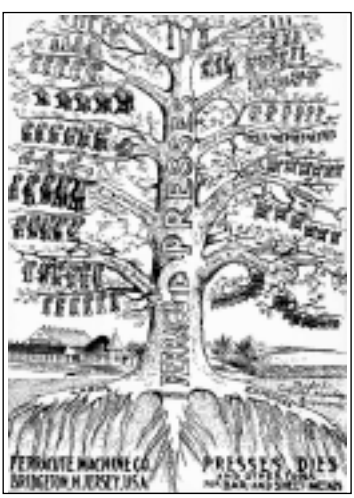
(See SMITH, Page A-7)

Images courtesy of Cumberland County Historical Society

(Above, left) A 1917 illustration from a Ferracute catalog, with vignettes of earlier factories in the corners. (Above, right) A formal portrait of Oberlin Smith, taken around 1890. (Below) Ferracute executives, left to right, Henry Janvier, P. Kennedy Reeves, William Ware and Luther Meyers, with Percival Smith and his father, Oberlin.

Staff Photo by BRYAN LITTEL

Arthur Cox sits at his research desk in his Bridgeton home.



A pencil drawing by catalog designer P. Kennedy Reeves of a 'genealogical' chart showing various products of Ferracute Machine Co.