
**University of Wisconsin Professor
Charles Augustus Smith
Receives News During the Great War
1917–1918**

Escalating political and social tensions among various countries worldwide erupted into the brutality of World War I (July, 1914–November, 1918), which resulted in the loss of approximately twenty-one million lives and roughly \$36 billion of destruction. The United States hoped to remain neutral but eventually entered the war in April 1917, under the direction of President Woodrow Wilson, because of Germany's submarine attacks on American merchant ships that killed innocent Americans. President Wilson's vision was to save Europe and create worldwide democracy.¹ During the last horrific year (1918) of the war, the United States faced deadly viruses that spread like wildfire and took the lives of thousands in its path throughout the country. This "flu" epidemic claimed more than six hundred thousand American lives. Historian Lynette Iezzoni pointed out that in four years, three months, and five days, World War I claimed ten million combatants and about eleven million civilian lives respectively; in ten months, the "Spanish Flu" killed between twenty-one and forty million people worldwide.²

The world troubles continued to change rapidly throughout Professor Charles Augustus Smith's life. Letters he received throughout his lifetime reflect upon the unfortunate worldwide destruction and experiences that took place during the 20th century.

Below are excerpts taken from the biographical statement of the University of Wisconsin on the death of Professor Charles Augustus Smith:

Professor Charles Augustus Smith was born on May 1, 1875, on a farm in Mercer County, Illinois, and he died in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on January 10, 1945, at the age of 71. He was the third child of Mr. R. D. Smith and Sara J. Lawhead Smith. His early boyhood was spent on a farm in Illinois and he attended the country school of his home district until between the twelfth and thirteenth years when his family emigrated to Kansas and settled on a farm in Phillips County in 1886. In Kansas, he worked with his father and brothers on a farm and attended the public school of his home district.

On December 23, 1902, Charles Smith married Miss Nellie Gibbons. A couple years later, he entered the University of Kansas, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and graduated in 1908 with major work in history. He entered the Graduate School of Yale University in 1908 to do graduate work in history and remained for three years, supporting himself while there by teaching mathematics in the New Haven high schools. He came to the University of Wisconsin in 1911 as an instructor in history; was promoted to assistant professor in 1912; became Acting Secretary of the Faculty in 1921, and Secretary of the Faculty in 1922, from which position he retired on June 30, 1943. His position as Secretary of the Faculty made him a member ex-officio of all university standing committees and thus he conscientiously kept current the documents of the evolutionary development of university legislation. His position also made him chairman of the Committee of Advanced Standing, where his good judgment, sympathetic

¹ Gerard J. De Groot, *The First World War* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 1, 112-115.

² Lynette Iezzoni, *Influenza 1918: The Worst Epidemic in American History* (New York: TV Books, 1999) 204.

understanding and practical common sense won for him a high regard on the part of the officials of other colleges and universities of the state and nation. As a member of the university Committee on High School Relations, he was responsible to a very large degree for the cordial and friendly relations existing between the public school men in the state and the university. He was a historian and served the University of Wisconsin for thirty-two years (1921-1943). He possessed a strong sense of loyalty to those ideals and institutions, which he adopted as his own.

Throughout his career at the University of Wisconsin, Charles received letters from his brothers: O.L. Smith, who, during WWI, resided in Wellington, Kansas, and worked for the Kansas Christian Missionary Society as the Missionary Superintendent; years after the war, he became a Reverend in Springfield, Missouri. D.O. Smith was a Pathologist in Kansas City, Missouri and during WWI was stationed in the Medical Training Camp in Fort Riley, Kansas on July 14, 1917 and, after training arrived at Base Hospital, Camp Sevier in Greenville, South Carolina on October 26, 1917. After the war, he moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma and continued his medical practices in the Springer Clinic.

Below are various excerpts from the letters O.L. Smith and D.O. Smith wrote to Charles while Charles resided in Wisconsin; these excerpts provide a vivid description of their experiences during WWI, the flu epidemic of 1919, the Great Depression, and a number of their political views during this period. —Elizabeth Limburg

Source: *Papers of Charles A. Smith*, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

[1] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, October 26, 1917*

We are over run with work in the laboratory. We have to make cultures from the posterior nasal regions of about 5,000 men and make differential cultures and strains on each, besides the regular work which is heavy.

There are about 27,000 men here now and more coming all the time. We are too busy to know much about the outside world and there is little of local news that is of interest to an outsider.

The Negroes and poor white are mighty poor. Illiteracy is common among the whites. The poor white is not of a very high type and the Negro is very little above slavery times.

I hope I go through some of the cotton mills soon. There are a number here that have the largest single mill in the world. One of the smaller mills has five hundred of its loans working on a French contract making surgical bandages. They say that the mill hands are a pale, undernourished and unmoral lab. The houses for them are small with four small room, divided into two parts for two families, each family having two small rooms. Among the better class they depend on Negro servants. A family to have any standing must have a servant or two even if they can't buy coal or pay their grocery bills.

[2] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from O.L. Smith, Wellington, Kansas, November 28, 1917*

Truly we must win over Germany, or the future holds some dreadful issues. The news from Russia [about the Bolshevik or communist revolution] are very disgusting. Our task is greater

than at first indicated. I hope the western front can be pushed forward toward German soil. The issue will be more forcible when that arrives. The barbarity of Germany is beyond all thought of anything in civilization.

[3] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, December 27, 1917.*

The epidemics are under control and everything is in good shape over the camp. We examined over six thousand cultures from different men to detect carriers of meningitis. It seems to be headed off completely. The treatment of cases gave a fine showing. The death rate is below that of Pneumonias.

Since being promoted my department has been made an independent one. It was formerly under the medical department. That makes me one of the three chiefs of service, coordinate with the chief of surgery and chief of medicine. It is a good sized job and also fine experience.

[4] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, January 20, 1918.*

There is little time for letter writing. We are running a laboratory not only for the hospital which is running over capacity all of the time, but also for the whole division.

I have been at the laboratory all day and have some work to do yet this evening. It is hard anywhere to get sufficient help for the laboratory and the army is no exception. We have been more successful than most of the camps in combating the meningitis cases our mortality has been about one in four where formerly it used to be three in four. My former office woman was back east recently and while there met a woman who works in the department at Washington. The latter remarked that she had heard the board of inspectors speak very highly of the laboratory at Camp Sevier. We may need that to draw on when things go wrong some day.

I lectured to the medical men of the division last Tuesday evening on Meningitis confining myself almost entirely to the work in our own comp. Our results were all tabulated so that the charts served as text.

I soon will have been in the army eight months and have had no time charges against me. During that time I have not asked for any favors nor volunteered any information on how to run the army. I hope that maybe in my favor in asking the first one in the form of a leave. We are entitled to two and a half days a month when such can be had without injury to the service. Guess that my services are too negligible to be considered in granting the request.

The winter has been server here. There has been a lot of snow and cold weather. One night the thermometer reached six below at midnight and must have gone lower before morning. The coal situation has been much the same here as elsewhere. Wood is plentiful and that has helped the poorer classes a great deal. Houses are built for hot weather only. There are no basements, no stoves excepting cook stoves and dinky fireplaces are a poor substitute when winter comes. I have no knowledge of my fate when the division breaks up. Am hopeful that I shall be needed here until affaires at home get in better shape to leave.

[5] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from O.L. Smith, Wellington, Kansas, February 2, 1918*

I note your words about [Theodore] Roosevelt. He has started in to capture the next Republican nomination. The Kansas City Stone has featured him for that purpose. It is doubtful if he can win the nomination. Senator Stone helped him to get a dramatic entrance, a thing he always seeks. He is going to [expose] the military program. It will take some and alienate others. Wilson is as good a politician, and has the power in hand. Victor Murdock will support Wilson and oppose Roosevelt. There are many Republicans who will not support him. I regard Roosevelt as a dangerous character on account of his insane personal ambitions.

I note that the Russian Revolution is having an affect upon the German people. It may drive for peace efforts. I hope it does. England will be slow to move for peace when she has such an advantage in the German colonies. It is sad that an ideal state of internationalism cannot be reached.

[6] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, February 18, 1918.*

I could ask for a ten day leave only as there is a new organization in camp and they brought everything from lice to meningitis. I may get called back before my stay is up. I shall enjoy the change aside from getting home as I have been going on high speed and long hours since October first. Got off work last night at 12:20 and 11:30 the night before.

A new assistant directly from the course at Rockefeller Institute and one borrowed from the Field Hospital and one borrowed from the medical service have relieved the pressure very much.

I now have five officers under me and ten enlisted men and all are busy. We are soon [given] a survey of about thirty thousand men for hook warm infection. We hope to finish that in a month's time by putting a squad of eight men with six microscopes and eight helpers, out in the field. You can see that we do business on a big scale.

[7] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from O.L. Smith, Wellington, Kansas, February 22, 1918*

The war situation seems to look grave for all. Germany has cleaned up the Eastern situation to a negligible place in military demand. If the central powers wait for us to attack it will cost a lot of life sacrifices. The Germans may not attack the west. I hope they do. It will settle the issues sooner. The war strain with light crops is letting upon us in all lines of public work. I find the collections in my work coming slower.

[8] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from O.L. Smith, Wellington, Kansas, March 19, 1918*

I am glad to note that Governor Phillips can not rise upon Lafollette's breakdown. I hope the Governor will also go into defeat because of his treachery acted out through his own personal ambition. I understand that you are to have your primaries in today. It may be that the Republicans will be defeated even after the primary. Does the National Prohibition issue enter into any Wisconsin discussions? I believe that will be accomplished by 1920.

If Holland is forced into the war, and she goes in the side of the Central Powers, it will put Wisconsin more and more upon the wrong side. I suspect the big German element is with Germany, and add the Dutch will make Wisconsin strictly anti Wilson at this present time.

[9] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, March 24, 1918*

The Germans have dented the English lives badly but so far have not gone through. They are more afraid of the French and Canadians than the new English army and evidently struck at what they thought to be the weakest place. The encounter attack may show the English [of] better advantage.

[10] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, May 11, 1918*

Judging from the way the camps have been cleaned out we must be putting troops into France. We are filling up with a new division. It looks like France needs them, but if transportation can be maintained and factories meet the demand we should be able to beat the Germans to a finish before a great while.

The submarine problem appears to me to be the biggest danger at present. If Ford's flivers can beat them we can put enough men over there to turn the trick. If we do not we shall be in a predicament that generations will not overcome.

[11] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, July 2, 1918*

We have a new division here now. The old one has "gone over." The new recruits and the subnormal of the old crowd have been unloaded on us. There is an effort to take out the able men and supplement them in the hospitals by cripples, conscientious objectors and the physically unfit. Women are being put into laboratories as technicians and men withdrawn. You may judge that it adds a lot to the load carried by the chief of service who must be responsible for all that is done.

The Germans are doing things this summer, but probably have shot their bolt. It seems to me that Austria is the weak place that will have to be the way of approach. The U.S. has more men and material over there than the public suspects and will give an account of themselves.

[12] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, 1918*

We are having a terrible epidemic at camp. There are several hundred cases of pneumonia and it is very fatal. Every man is on the job day and night. Two nurses have died. We have taken over an adjoining camp and filled it with patients. If you can get it I would advise that you get some influenza vaccine and have some physician give it to the whole family as a prophylaxis. It works well as a preventative. If I can get some made I'll send it.

Germany seems to be getting enough of war and would gladly quit while she controls central Europe. Wilson's attitude will be watched with interest and Hope he stands firm.

[13] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, September 22, 1918*

The camp is filling rapidly and the new men bring in contagious diseases and into fertile soil, especially among the southern troops. The morbidity rate and mortality rate is very much higher among southern troops than northern. They are physically and mentally much less active.

Hay fever has been less severe this year, owing probably to a vigorous course of pollen vaccines. The old men are being taken out rapidly from the hospital and new ones sent in. So far I am still on the job. Col. Russell, head of all laboratories, told me that he is short of laboratory men. That probably means that I shall not be put in command of a hospital. Personally, I do not care very much as that would put one out of touch with medical things. Would like the promotion and pay of course but can make out without it.

The western front looks better than it has at anytime. The morale of the English and French was practically gone when we got into the fight. America has surprised the European countries in the use of the rifle. Our infantry tactics has baffled the Hun and they do not care to meet our rifle fire. All the armies there need very little use of rifles. That was what set the Germans back on the morne and it did the business at St. Michael. American explosives excel all others and if they want gas we can give it to them. If the French get into German territory, I think they will be hard to keep from retaliation.

I autopsied a case of pneumonia today. We had a new case of meningitis yesterday and that requires a survey of the company for carriers.

[14] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from O.L. Smith, Wellington, Kansas, October 12, 1918*

Roosevelt has been to Wichita. He ridiculed a future League of Nations, and advocated the strongest standing army of the world. The people by a great majority seem to want to follow Wilson's lead.

[15] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, November 5, 1918*

The speed with which the allies have cleaned up the central powers has been beyond anything expected a few months ago that it now looks as though the rest of the work will be to police some of Europe for a time especially Russia and the Balkins. If we go over it will be to relieve some older units over there and help out the exhausted countries.

The "flu" was bad here. Before I left the base hospital we were getting from two to three bodies an hour into the morgue. We did post mortems on all we could. There were about 5000 cases of influenza and about seven hundred cases of pneumonia. It was a trying time for the doctors. None died from the disease here, the quarantines are all off now and conditions are normal.

[16] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from O.L. Smith, Wellington, Kansas, November 7, 1918*

Word has just come over the war here since noon that Germany has signed the Armistice. If is so, then we'll soon come to a conclusion.

I was interested in your analysis of the 29th. It showed me a new angle of Roosevelt came to the front so fast. But he has always played to the [business] interests wherever it was needed by them. I see Wilson curbed for the next two years. But the Republicans will have to be in the defensive for a part of the campaign of 1920. Big interests will try every way possible to shift the durations of taxations after the war. Of course a high protection tariff will be their cry.

[17] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from O.L. Smith, Wellington, Kansas, November 28, 1918*

Someone reported to me, from some source that Wisconsin had elected ten Republican congressman, and ten Germans, Pres. Wilson will have a load to carry both in Europe and in Washington. The interests are already attracting his constructive policies. The toy interests of England are anxious to trim this program of democracy, while France may want more spoils than the future can insure.

The issue of government ownership of railroads, telegraphers and [fuel...] appeal forcibly to the west. But our handicap is the absence of a press to present the issues. The Wichita Eagle is the only big paper in Kansas that is supporting the president. No one can just tell the changes that will come with the war readjustments. My own work is all "shot to pieces" with the "flu" conditions. I am anxious to get to work on constructive lines again.

[18] *Letter to Charles A. Smith from D.O. Smith, Base Hospital, Camp Sevier: Greenville, South Carolina, December 12, 1918*

Our base hospital unit is under orders to demobilize. Some of the officers and men have gone and the rest will be transferred to other organizations. An order came to headquarters yesterday directing that all men over 45 or over one years service should be discharged provided that they wished discharge and their services could be spared. My name was among a few that were expected. Don't know just what it means but I am making strenuous efforts to get out very soon. Would like to beat the crowd home for business reasons.

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