

**SEWING  
WHEN MOTHERS THOUGHT DAUGHTERS  
NEEDED TO KNOW HOW**

By Mary Jo Denton: Herald-Citizen Staff  
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**Cookeville Sewing Club: 1911**

This sewing club met about 1911 in Cookeville at the home of Rutledge and Graeme McGregor Smith on N. Washington Ave. The girls are, front row, from left, Roberta Price, Lillian Young Brown, Dollie Smith Williams, Julia Neal Matheney; back row, from left, Rozelle Pendergrass Clark, Rosalind Algood Vaden, Nyta Marie McDaniel Miller; Marian Jellicouse, and Marie Davis. Three of the group are living: Mrs. Williams (daughter of the Smiths, who lives in Putnam County); Mrs. Brown of Nashville; and Mrs. Miller (Dickerson).

All dressed up with bows in their hair, they sit solemnly holding scissors, needles, and thread. They grace the front porch of one of the city's finest houses on N. Washington Ave.

They were members of a girls sewing club organized by prominent Cookeville citizen Graeme McGregor Smith in the early 1900's, and their photograph – nine little girls looking proud and important – was published earlier this year in “Victoria,” one of those nostalgia magazines.

One of the girls in the photo is Nyta Marie McDaniel Miller, the great-aunt of a Dickson, Tennessee, woman who submitted the photo to the magazine.

Another one of the girls is someone who still lives here and whose influence on lives has been at least equal to that of Graeme McGregor Smith; Miss Dollie Williams, whose family has owned and operated children's summer camps near Monterey for decades.

Miss Dollie is the daughter of Graeme McGregor Smith, and in the photo, made around 1911, she is about eight years old. Today, she is 92 and is just as lively and alert as her mother must have always been.

The publication of the photo in the magazine caught the attention of several Cookevillians, and some – including Gene Evelyn Warren and Eleanor Drake Mitchell – took the trouble to track down more information about it, including the names of each of the sewing girls, three of whom are still living.

Miss Dollie (in the photo, third from left in the front row) told the Herald-Citizen in a telephone interview that she remembers very well the little sewing club.

“It was just something my mother thought we should learn, sewing,” Miss Dollie said. “So she started a club for us, and we learned it. Those girls in the picture were my friends. My mother was a very interesting person.” That’s to say the least.

Graeme McGregor Smith was a busy woman interested in many artistic, cultural and educational events in Cookeville in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And besides that, she was apparently a wonderful mother and a colorful character.

According to Putnam historian Mary Jean DeLozier, her husband, Rutledge Smith (Miss Dollie’s father), fondly referred to the lady as a “battle axe” and once commented, “Peace disturbs her mind.”

Both the Smith’s were prominent leaders here in the late 1800’s and on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century publishing a newspaper (the *Cookeville Press*) for several years, working for various political, civic, and education causes, and hosting lively parties in their fine home, which was the first brick house in Cookeville and which still stands on N. Washington Ave. The Smith family moved into it on July 4, 1904.

Miss Dollie remembers that house well.

On its third floor was a ballroom, and it was there that Graeme and Ruthledge Smith and their friends held great costume parties, “little shows, play acting, and all that.”

And on Friday nights, the Smith children were allowed to invite their friends for roller skating parties in the ballroom.

“My brother and I would walk up to the Courthouse square to meet our friends and walk them back to the house for the skating party,” Miss Dollie said, “then at 9o’clock, we’d walk them back up to the square and they would walk on home.”

Behind the house in those days were the stables and the Smiths had horses and ponies and would sometimes go riding, usually up to the Buck Mountain and back, Miss Dollie recalled.

About the girls in the old photo, she said, “In those days, everybody had one big sash and a hair ribbon to match. We enjoyed dressing up.”

She recalls taking the train to Monterey one day for a big event: the war hero Alvin C. York and his new bride were to be there, and Miss Dollie’s mother wanted her to meet them.

“In those days, Monterey was quite a little town, with seven or eight hotels, and whole families would come on the train from the larger cities for the cool mountain air. Some would even bring their milk cows on the train.”

She remembers when her mother managed to get the famous politician and orator, William Jennings Bryan, to come to Cookeville. He spoke on the stage at the Cookeville City School at 2 p.m. that day.

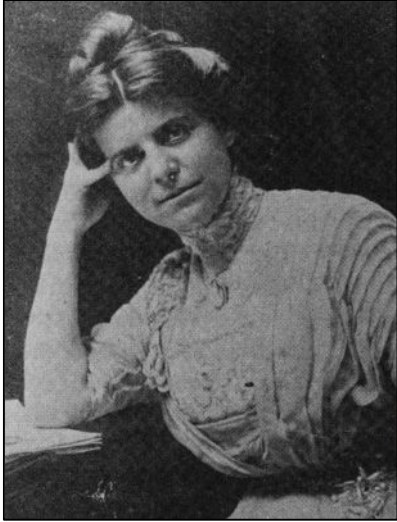
“People came in their wagons from everywhere around to hear him speak.”

It seems now that those times, long before television and modern mobility, were the never-again days of innocence. Days of sewing clubs, sashes and hair ribbons.

Source: Putnam County, Tennessee 1850-1970 by Mary Jean DeDeLozier, pg. 189-190.

### **Social and Cultural Development, 1890-1920: Literary Societies, Books and Newspapers**

Among a small number of Putnam County residents from 1890 to 1920 there was a remarkable interest in the arts. A few women deserve much of the credit. They did not serve on school, church, or corporation boards, vote, or hold political office; they worked instead through women's clubs (most of which were socially exclusive). By their enthusiasm, determination, intellectual curiosity, and boundless energy, they fostered appreciation for education and the arts. **Graeme McGregor Smith** and **Clara Cox Epperson** were only two of the number of such women.



(Pictured: Graeme McGregor Smith).

Graeme McGregor, a native of Lebanon, received her M. A. degree from an annex of Cumberland University in 1893 and moved to Cookeville to teach. In 1896 she married Rutledge Smith, publisher of the *Cookeville Press*. She was always busy. Her husband fondly called her "Old Battle Axe." "Peace," he claimed, "disturbed her mind." Until she and her husband moved to Nashville during World War I, she was active in the Pierian, Literary and Social, and Current Topics clubs; she helped found the national Parent-Teacher Association; and she was a leader in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Although her name did not appear on its masthead, she edited the *Cookeville Press* for ten years. She also served as president of the Tennessee Woman's Press and Author's Club and the Southern Writers' League. She was long a member of the Board of the Tennessee Federation of Women's Clubs.

Mrs. Smith valued history. She wrote articles for historical magazines, helped raise money for the building of a new Tennessee Library and Archives building in Nashville, and served as state regent of the Daughters of the American Revolution and historian of the Tennessee American Legion Auxiliary.

The Smith home was the scene of lively parties for people of all ages. Politicians, businessmen, educators, and artists were welcome there. Along with all these activities Graeme Smith found time to fulfill her duties as a wife, the mother of two sons, a daughter, and a foster son.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES**

#### **Rutledge Smith**

1870 August 1, born in Cookeville, Tennessee, the son of Walton and Marion BlackSmith.

Educated by private tutors and attended Washington Academy at Cookeville.

1888-1917 Owned and operated the *Cookeville Press*.

1894 Secretary to Congressman Benton McMillin in Washington, DC.

1896 May 14, married to Graeme McGregor of Lebanon, Tennessee.

1900-1906 Assistant superintendent of public instruction in Tennessee. Served on the Executive Committee of the Tennessee Bankers Association.

1910 Industrial agent for the Tennessee Central Railroad Co.

1913 Promoted to executive general agent for the Tennessee Central Railroad Co.

1917 President of Tennessee's Council for National Defense; commissioned a major in the United States Army.

1921 Moved to Donelson, Tennessee, where he bought a farm and bred Jersey cattle and Tennessee Walking Horses.

1930-1947 Assistant president of Tennessee Central Railroad Co.

1940 Appointed by Gov. Prentice Cooper as advisor to the Tennessee Preparedness Committee.

1947 Retired to Miami, Florida.

1962 May 31, died at Coral Gables, Florida, and interred at Cedar Grove Cemetery, Lebanon, Tennessee.

#### Organizations

Rotary Club

American Legion

Tennessee Forestry Association

American Mining Congress

Tennessee Society of Engineers

Southern Association of Military Engineers

#### **Graeme McGregor Smith**

1875 March 1, born in Lebanon, Tennessee, the daughter of Andrew and Eudora Anderson McGregor, and a great-great-niece of Rachel Jackson, wife of President Andrew Jackson.

1893 Received a Masters of Arts degree from Lebanon College for Young Ladies, an annex of Cumberland University.

1893-1896 Taught in Linwood and Cookeville, Tennessee.

1896 May 14, married to Rutledge Smith in Washington, DC.

1897 Took part in establishing the National Parent-Teachers Association in Washington, DC.

1907-1917 Edited her husband's newspaper, the *Cookeville Press*.

1943 Responsible for placing Rachel Jackson's portrait in the White House.

1948 September 11, died in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and interred at Cedar Grove Cemetery, Lebanon, Tennessee.

#### Organizations

National Parent-Teachers Association—Charter Member

Daughters of the American Revolution—State Regent and State Chaplain

Daughters of 1812—President

American Legion Auxiliary, Nashville Chapter—President, Historian, Chaplain; compiled records for WWI veterans in Tennessee.

Women's Christian Temperance Union—Publicity Chairman and member of Executive Committee.

League of Southern Women Writers—Organized and President

United Daughters of the Confederacy—President of Nashville Chapter

Tennessee Press and Author's Club—President

League of Pen Women—State Librarian

American War Mothers—President of Nashville Chapter 5

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