

ROBERT SENECA SMITH
(Pastor, Religious Educator, and Author)

BY KINGSLEY SMITH

My father Robert Seneca Smith was born in Clarendon on the Smith farm on November 18, 1880. I presume his early education was in a multigrade school at the Flats. I do know that he commuted to Rutland on the train after walking from the farm to the railroad station at the Flats, a distance, I think I recall, of a mile and a half. If you think of this in terms of two walks a day through all kinds of weather you can see he was pretty eager for an education. He attended a school then known as the Rutland Business and (I think) Professional College.

He and Willard Denno of Fair Haven went on to New Haven, Connecticut, took their entrance exams, passed them and entered Yale in the fall of 1899. They lived together on the top floor of Connecticut Hall, the oldest dormitory on the Yale Campus, worked their way through college and graduated in 1903. Up until almost the time of his graduation he had intended to become a professor of Latin or Greek, which had been his major subjects in college. At the last minute with the encouragement of his mother, he turned to the ministry and decided to do his graduate work in the Yale Divinity School. Simultaneously he was awarded, I think by the student body, the honor of heading Dwight Hall which was an honorary religious organization. Up until that time no man not a member of one of the three famous senior honorary societies had ever been given that honor. During his college years he was a member of Keta Psi Society.

Upon graduation with a masters degree in divinity he became assistant pastor of the Congregational Church in Montclair, New Jersey, and I believe it was that year that he married my mother who was Emma Wyman Kingsley. Before taking up his pastorate in Montclair he preached his first sermon at the Congregational Church on the Clarendon Flats and there is a plaque in the vestibule of that church commemorating that event.

Dad and Mother moved from Montclair to Poughkeepsie, New York in 1911 where he became the pastor of the First Congregational Church on Mill Street in that city. I was born on January 26, 1912. In 1917 he was called to serve as a full professor of religious education at Smith College in Northampton, Mass., and in 1925, following my mother's death in January of that year, he went to Yale as Horace Bushnell Professor of Christian Nurture at the Sterling Divinity Quardrangle. He remained there until his death in January 1939. During his stay at Smith College and Yale he was active in many young people's summer conferences at Silver Bay, New York, Univ. of Connecticut at Storrs and Estes Park, Colorado. He received his PHD from Yale in the early thirties and received an honorary Doctor of Literature from Middlebury College in 1933. He was the author of many books on religious education and worship.