GEORGE T. SMITH

has grown accustomed to standing out in a crowd

By Janet Jones Kendall

At the age of 13, Smith's father, George Cleveland Smith, became seriously ill, making it necessary for the then seventh grader to drop out of school to work on the farm and help support his family. Under those circumstances, Smith notes, most teens during that time would have never gone back to school. However, thanks to his mother Rosa Gray Smith, who was "bound and determined that I was going back," Smith re-entered school, starting the eighth grade at the age of 18. And, despite being taunted by his younger classmates (who referred to him as "Grandpa"), Smith did indeed get his high school diploma when he graduated at the age of 21 as valedictorian of his senior class from Camilla's Hopeful High School, in south Georgia.

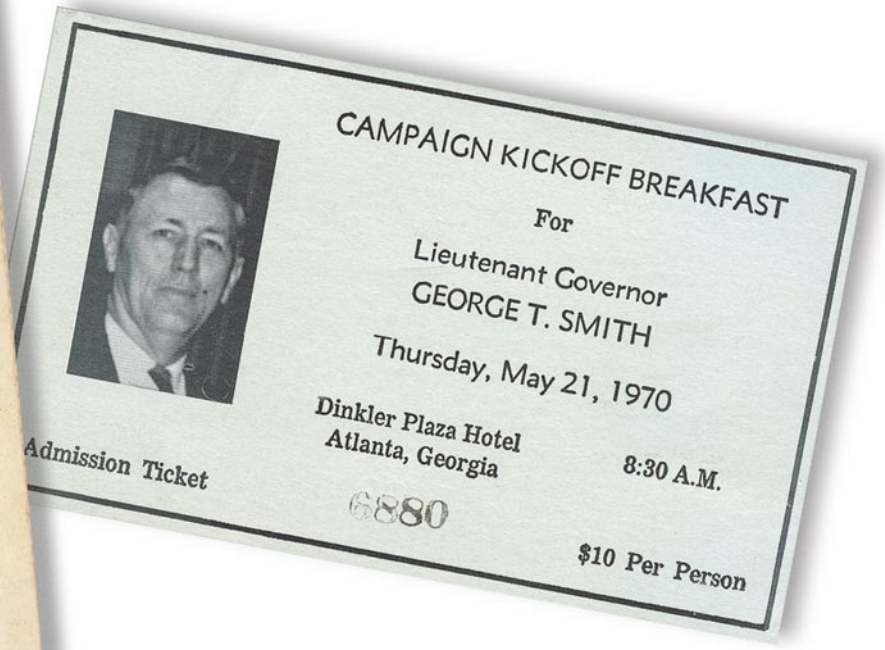
George T. Smith in front of his portrait hanging in the State Capitol in Atlanta. Photo courtesy of Laura Heath Photography.

But it was the time away from school that inspired Smith and shaped his future. "During those five years I was out of school, I got to where I wanted to go back to school because I realized that on 125 acres of sand land in southwest Georgia, there wasn't much of a future. I noticed the lawyers in Camilla had the best cars and were the best dressed and when I realized that I said, 'I want to be a lawyer.' From then on, I wanted to go to law school. But I had no idea I'd actually be able to go. It was a dream come true for me that I did."

Not only did Smith become a lawyer, graduating from the University of Georgia School of Law in 1948, he went on to make Georgia history by becoming the only person to win contested elections in all three branches of state government.

After graduating high school, Smith went on to attend Middle Georgia College and Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, where he managed to go all the way through with only two pairs of pants and a plentiful supply of charm.

"I had registered for my last year at Abraham Baldwin without one



It's All About Being in the Right Place at the Right Time for George T.

- The only Georgian to win contested elections in all three branches of the state government

cent in my pocket. But I knew the registrar well – Ms. Tilley was her name. She called me up to her desk during registration and she said, 'Thornewell,' – that's what the 'T' stands for – 'your courses will be $15. And I said, 'Ms. Tilley, I don't have $15.' And she said, 'Well how do you think you'll get in?' I just looked at her and said, 'I wondered if you might could arrange that, Ms. Tilley.' She looked at me for a minute and said, 'Come on in.'"

In 1940, Smith joined the U.S. Navy where he attained the rank of Lieutenant Commander and received the Naval Merit Unit Citation. After his military service, Smith entered the School of Law from which he graduated in 1948 with his LL.B.

"I always loved the University of Georgia," Smith said, who went through law school with other notable Georgia politicians including his personal friend, former Gov. Carl Sanders (J.D.'48). "I was a UGA fan back when [Vernon] Catfish Smith played end for the Dogs. Even when I was a young boy, I would see folks with those University of Georgia rings and I always wanted one. Well, in December 1947, I got one. … I really don't have the words to express what it means to me to have graduated with a law degree from the university and to have done all of the things I was able to do."

After graduating from UGA, Smith returned to his rural roots and began to practice law in Cairo, GA. "I got my job because I told my boss I had no desire to get into politics," Smith said with a laugh. "And I really didn't intend to. It just all ended up happening, kind of by accident."

In 1958, Smith decided to run to represent Grady County in the Georgia House of Representatives – mainly because, he admits, he wanted to make contacts that would eventually be able to help him secure his dream job of justice on the Supreme Court of Georgia.

After winning that election, Smith served as a state representative for eight years – four of which he also served as Speaker of the House after being elected to that position by the membership of the House with the help of his old college friend Carl Sanders, who had been elected governor, and Charles Pannell Sr. (LL.B.'37), who would later become a judge on the Georgia Court of Appeals.

Then, in 1966, Smith crossed over into the executive branch of government when he ran against incumbent Peter Zack Geer for Lieutenant Governor of Georgia. "Everybody thought I was stupid to run against an incumbent but I did and I won," he said.

Eight years later, while practicing law in Marietta, GA, Smith decided to run for governor in the 1974 election but lost to

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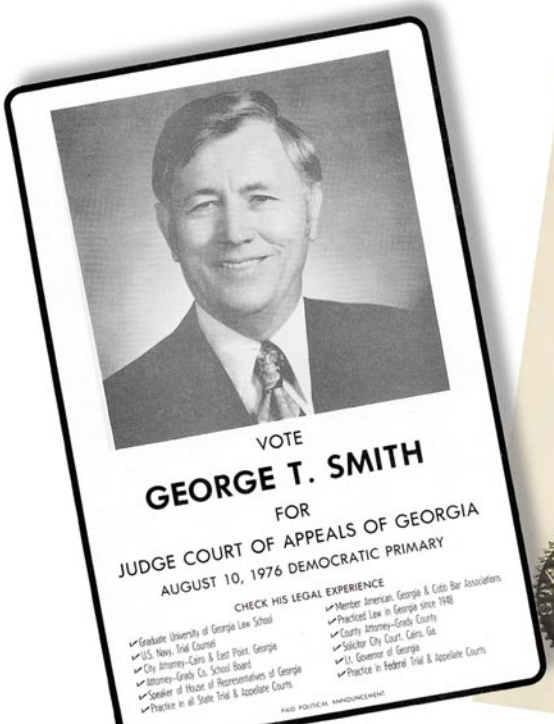

In the Name and by the Authority of the
State of Georgia

I, David B. Poythress, Secretary of State of the State of Georgia, do hereby certify that at the General Election held on Tuesday, the fourth day of November, 1980,

GEORGE T. SMITH

Having received 860,407 votes was duly elected to the office of

Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Georgia

Witness my hand and the seal of my office this TENTH day of DECEMBER 1980.

Secretary of State

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George Busbee (LL.B.'52) in the Democratic primary. (Busbee went on to win this post.) However, the loss wasn't a huge disappointment for Smith. "I ran for governor because there was nothing else to run for. Turned out I shouldn't have run because that didn't turn out so well," he said with a laugh.

In 1976, Smith was elected to a six-year term as judge on the Georgia Court of Appeals. It was at that point in time he made history, becoming the only Georgian ever to win contested elections in all three branches of state government - legislative, executive and judicial. A few Georgians before Smith served in all three branches during the 1800s but they were appointed to some positions and ran unopposed for others.

Despite the fact he had made history, Smith still had his eye on the one position he had desired to hold during his entire political career – that of Supreme Court justice. Finally, in 1980, Smith's dream came true when he was elected to the Supreme Court of Georgia. Even then, though, Smith continued to aim higher. "I always wanted to be at the top of whatever I was doing. So when I finally got on the Supreme Court, I then wanted to be chief justice," Smith said. However, Smith reached the mandatory retirement age of 75 before reaching the top position.

In 1991, Smith resigned from the Supreme Court as presiding justice after serving the state of Georgia for more than 30 years. At that time, he accepted a position of counsel with former Gov. Roy Barnes' (J.D.'72) Marietta law firm, Barnes, Browning, Tanksley and Casurella (now Browning and Tanksley, LLP) where he still works today. In spite of all of the accolades he has received (including having his portrait hung in the state Capitol and the School of Law, having a state highway in Mitchell County named in his honor and receiving the Law School Association's Distinguished Service Scroll Award), Smith has a very humble explanation for the reason he was able to make Georgia history. "It was all a matter of being in the right place at the right time," he said. "Things just happened for me to be able to do what I did and I just took advantage of every opportunity I had. It's almost a miracle that I was able to do what all I've done."

Smith's advice to present-day law school students who are interested in entering politics is simple: "Keep your record clean. I would caution young people to protect their health and their reputation and go to school and if they do, they'll never regret it," he said. Adding with a laugh, "One reason I kept my record clean is because we didn't have a car in my family until I was 27 years old. You can't get in trouble with a mule, I'll tell you that right now."

Smith also cautions young politicians to do what they're doing for the right reasons. "Public service is a great thing. If you're doing public service because you love to do things for people, it's a great thing. But if you're doing public service because you want to get rich, you're either going to get disappointed or get put in jail," he said. "But if you're in public service because you love serving your fellow man, you are guaranteed to live a fulfilled life." ■

Salute to Alumni in the Military

The School of Law salutes the men and women serving in the United States armed forces. We appreciate the dedication, sacrifice and sense of duty these individuals have demonstrated over the years. Below please find a list of alumni who are currently serving our country.

Norman F.J. Allen III (J.D.'85)

Margarete P. Ashmore (J.D.'90)

Stuart G. Baker (J.D.'95)

Bailey W. Brown III (J.D.'00)

R. Bradley Carr (J.D.'89)*

Wendy S. Carroll (J.D.'90)

William B. Carver (J.D.'99)*

Shannon L. Drake (J.D.'00)

Andrew P. Grant (J.D.'97)

Natalie L. Griffin (J.D.'80)

Margaret N. Guerrero (J.D.'75)

Harry M. Hughes (J.D.'91)

Angela O. Martin (J.D.'99)

Catherine J. McFarland (J.D.'99)

James R. Moye (J.D.'76)*

Joseph A. Neurauter (J.D.'73)

Charles E. Orck (J.D.'75)

Vincerina Palmore (J.D.'02)

J. Branson Parker (J.D.'91)

Robert L. Shannon Jr. (J.D.'91)*

Jack L. Rives (J.D.'77)

Jocelyn S. Urgese (J.D.'00)

Kenneth R. Waldrep (J.D.'73)

Murry S. Whitt (J.D.'99)

Laurel L. Wilkerson (J.D.'88)

* The School of Law has been notified these individuals are serving (or have recently completed service) in the country's most recent conflict with Iraq.