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Smith, John, 1904-

Interview with John Smith / interviewed by Hans Karpman. - Valley Stream Historical Society, February 1, 1988.

1 cassette.

NOTE: Mr. Smith talked about his music career in Valley Stream, including topics such as the Harmonica Band, the Marching Band, the Community Band, the Summer Music Program, V.S.H.S. Annual Music Festival, etc.

1. Smith, John, 1904- . 2. Valley Stream (N.Y.) - History. I. Valley Stream Historical Society. II. Karpman, Hans.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:

1. Outline of Interview - Prepared by Helen Dowdeswell.
2. Transcript of the Interview - Handwritten by John Smith.
3. Photograph of John Smith, Indian River, Melbourne, FL, February 10, 1988. *
4. Newspaper clipping of John Sm ith and his wife, Ruth, regarding the celebration of their 60th wedding anniversary, Maileader, 198- ?.
5. Newspaper article entitled, "Mr. Music Calls It A Concert," by Bernard Rabin, Sunday News, Sunday, October 5, 1969, Section Two, p. 1, 88.

*Original photograph is filed in the Valley Stream Historical Photograph Collection.

VALLEY STREAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Dr. John Smith

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(1) Where and when were you born?

I was born in Catasauqua, Pa. Aug 15th 1904.

(2) When did you come to V.S.? When did you leave?

I came to V.S. in Aug, 1928 and left the Village Sept. 1972.

(3) What were the circumstances of your coming?

To apply for my first teaching position. In my senior year as a day student at New York University I joined several teachers agencies. Within a short time, Dr. Floyd Hurlbut, Supt. of schools from Bay Shore L.I. contacted me and after the interview I signed a contract to teach instrumental music in his school district. A week later Mr. Harry W. Gross, dist. principal of the V.S. Central H.S. district, requested an interview with me. I told him I already signed a contract for the Bay Shore position. He said he could get me released from the Bay Shore contract and offer me a more lucrative salary and also offer Mrs. Smith a music teaching position in the Wheeler Ave. elementary school. It was in this same year 1928 that Mr. Gross recommended his former high school teacher Mr. Ira Munment for the Wheeler Ave. School Principalship.

(4) What were your living conditions at first? How did they change over the years?

We first rented a room with a private family at the corner of Rockaway Ave. and St. Marks Place. Finding these living conditions unsatisfactory, within a month we

moved to the home of Elmer Dubble, located on South Cottage St. Here we had a large living room and a bed room. We lived with the Dubble family for a couple of years. Finding my Ruth pregnant, we moved into an up-stairs apartment in a private home, located on Argyle St near Rockaway Ave. While living here our two daughters Sara Mae and Mary Anne were born. We needed larger living quarters so we rented a new 3 bed room bungalow located at Emerson Place and Tomi St. Living here for about two years we found it to be too far from my work at Central high school. We then rented a two story house from Al Vanderclute at 23 Regent St. near Fletcher Ave. We lived here until Oct. 1939 when we moved into our newly built home at 227 East Carpenter St, in the Westwood section of V.S. We lived in this home until we left V.S. for Florida in 1972.

(5) What working conditions did you find here? Describe your early career, your efforts, the obstacles, the successes.

While at college I majored in Music Education with a minor in History. My first teaching assignment included Band, Orchestra, Harmonica Band, Ancient History, Civics and Economics. Concerning Harmonica Band. There happened to be a farmer on the Board of Ed. who requested this to be taught. This was a challenge for

me, I never played the Harmonica. To become knowledgeable of the instrument I visited the Hohner Co. in N.Y. City. They were the makers and distributors of the well known German made Harmonicas. Knowing that I was to instruct and organize a high school Harmonica Band, they recommended I use their small soprano "American Band" instrument which at that time cost 5c & The Hohner Co. had 3×5 cards, on each card was printed the music of a familiar folk song. Under the various notes were printed B for blow and D for draw. With this knowledge and information & practiced on the instrument for several weeks. When knowing I had the ability to perform and teach it I made the announcement about starting a Harmonica Band. To my amazement 106 students (boys and girls) enrolled. Within several months I had the group perform at one of my Band Concerts. They gave a commendable performance and were well received by the audience. Due to the lack of music printed for the instrument, we eventually disbanded. After the group disbanded, it pleased me to learn that a number of students became good performers on the Harmonica, playing by ear, many current tunes of the day.

Because the small wooden Central H.S. building couldn't have all the subjects taught in it, all my classes were held in the adjacent Wheeler Ave. Elementary School.

Mr. Gross, principal of the high school and a former World War I veteran enjoyed seeing and hearing Marching Bands. Up until my coming to H.S. in 1928 they had no

Band in the high school. He requested that I have a Marching Band perform at the football games during the first semester of the 1928 season.

To have a band perform so early in the school year was quite an assignment. I made announcements and placed posters throughout the school soliciting those students who play a band instrument, meet in the Wheeler Ave. auditorium at a specific time. Only 3 boys attended that first meeting, namely - Arthur Fare, alto sax Albert Bergson, cornet and Charles Wood, drum. This was quite discouraging; not having more students attend or possibly not interested in playing in a high school band. It was at this meeting I learned why the poor attendance. The year previous to my coming to P.S. they had a music teacher who proved to be unsuccessful. This made my job more difficult, however with perseverance and with the help of Art Fare, Al Bergson and Charlie Wood in giving me the names of 17 other students to contact, I was about to make progress. Each one of the 17 owned a band instrument. I contacted some of these fellows at school, others I visited their homes in the evening to talk to them along with their parents. Good fortune came to me. I now had a group of 20 good and faithful boys to work with. Mr. Gross' request was fulfilled. I had a Marching Band perform at the last two football games of the season.

Along with my heavy teaching assignment I travelled into New York City several evenings a week

to further my education at New York University. One evening I fell asleep with book in hand — preparing lessons for my Ancient History - Civics and Economic high school classes.

Starting my 2nd year, I was relieved of teaching the academic subjects. We went into the newly erected Central H. S. bldg. on Fletcher Ave. Sept. 1929. My wife Ruth was transferred from the Hoyt Ave. Elementary School to that of teaching Jr. H. S. Music in the new bldg.

It was with much disappointment to us in learning that the person or persons in planning this new bldg. didn't know what physical facilities were needed in which to operate an up-to-date large and growing Music Dept. I am referring to the size and correct placement of rooms in which large Bands - Orchestras, and Choruses rehearse. These rooms should be placed adjacent and have easy access to the auditorium and much thought of acoustical treatment be given in all music rooms.

In the new bldg the one and only room given for the teaching of all types of music was inadequate — referring to its placement on the third floor, far from the auditorium. It was small in size, with poor acoustics. The sound carried through the ventillation ducts to other classrooms in the bldg. We eventually had to leave this so called "Music Room" and use the aud. stage for our rehearsals. Concerning the aud. stage.

It too was inadequate. When presenting concerts we had to have temporary platforms added on to the apron of the stage. The orchestra pit was not functional. We had to have it filled in and removed entirely. The first two rows of seats in the auditorium were too close to the stage, they were removed.

The main switchboard for the stage lighting in the new bldg. was brought in (used equipment) from a former old N.Y. City theatre. We had many problems with this switchboard.

With my constant complaints and recommendations to the administration and to the B of Ed (most were voiting) these problems were eventually rectified. Even at a much later date we were successful in having a large serviceable music room built along side of the aud., All music rehearsals can now be held in this new addition.

There was no definite plan for a Music Dept. office in the new bldg. I requested to have one and it was granted - on the second floor front of the aud. The office also housed the students musical instruments. We used the cloak room on the first floor entrance to the aud. for the larger instruments (sousaphones + tubas). From my 2nd year teaching through the year in which I retired the school board granted me a private secretary.

I think I stated before that Mrs. Smith taught vocal and general music in the Jr. H.S. during the 1929-30 school year. A most happy event - our twin daughters Sara Mae and Mary Anne were born May 14/1931.

Mrs. Stuart the wife of Mr. Clinton Stuart, Asst. Principal was in the hospital the same time Mrs. Smith was. I will never forget when Mr. Gross the principal made the announcement that Thursday morning to the student assembly. He said Mr. Stuarts wife gave birth to a baby boy and Mr. Smith's wife did one better. She gave birth to twin girls. The student body roared with glee.

The Jr. + Sr. H.S. student population was growing rapidly. Sr. H.S. students occupied the bldg. in the morning. The Jr. H.S. noon to 4:30 P.M. Some academic teachers found extra employment on their ½ day off. The music and physical ed. teachers taught the two sessions - the full day. I should add with no extra remuneration. Vera Roesch and Arthur Fare were added to the music teaching staff. As director of the V. Stream H.S. Band during the 30's and 40's our out of school engagements were — performing annually at the Mineola Fair — gave concerts at the 2 N.Y. Worlds Fairs; - appeared in concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and at Carnegie Hall in New York City. - 5 years Radio broadcasting on the Children's Hour (station WJZ) in N.Y. City. - Marching Band appearance for the Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbetts Field and performing many years, our Marching Band performed for the All Queens County N.Y City Annual Sunday School Parade. - all the V.S. Sunday School and Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion parades.

Our band gave a "Send OFF" celebration to the 2nd World War draftees, - performing at the Long Island R.R. station 7 to 8 A.M. This occured each time a new group of draftees were recruited.

One of the happiest events in my teaching career was appearing in concert with my Central H. S. Band at State Teachers College, West Chester, Penna. I received my B. S. degree from this school. The band played to a full and appreciative audience. The music critic of the "West Chester Daily News" stated in his paper - quote - "The C. S. H. S. Band presented an outstanding musical performance equal to that of many top rated college bands". He elaborated on how well these young musicians performed. The operatic and classical selections were performed flawlessly. He mentioned about the well balanced program given, one that held the interest of the audience throughout the entire concert. The part of the write up I enjoyed reading was how the conductor had his group play with such finesse and fine intonation, seldom heard in high school bands. The blending of his brass, woodwind and percussion sections was controlled with great skill.

It was during the 1930's and 40's that the C. S. Central H. S. Band received recognition as one of the finest bands in the country. The following noted national musicians attested to this fact - namely composer and pianist Percy Grainger, Edwin Franko Goldman, director of the Goldman Band in N. Y. City, Lt. Col. Resta, director of the West Point Military Academy Band, William Bell the United States most noted Tuba player with the N. B. C. orchestra under the direction of Artuo Toscannini, Lieut. Charles Benter conductor of the U. S. Navy Band, Washington D. C. and Erik Leidzen, nationally known composer and arranger of band music.

I extended an invitation to each of them to perform as Guest Conductor of my Central H.S. Concert Band. They rehearsed the band during the afternoon of the concert in which they performed.

Valley Stream was the first high school to introduce Baton Twirling on Long Island. While attending a National Music Educators Conference in the city of St. Louis, Mo. I first learned of this art. I was so interested, I started to take baton twirling lessons from a much talented and professional teacher by the name of John Totilas who lived in Hartford, Conn. I travelled to Hartford every Saturday morning for approximately one year to take private lessons. Upon completion of my studies, I organized and taught classes of Central H.S. girls. This being a new venture, many girls were very interested and they enjoyed the art of baton twirling. As time went by and to be relieved of baton teaching, I selected the most talented girl in all the classes to carry on the instruction. Her name was Dorothy Post, now Dorothy Sheridan who presently lives at 169 E. Carpenter St. in Valley Stream.

Upon graduating from H.S. Dorothy became my secretary and baton twirling teacher.

(6) <u>What people in V.S. are outstanding in your memory? Why</u>

There were many people in V.S. who helped me in my work. Too numerous to recall over a span of 41 years. All the Boards of Education and the Village Boards were most receptive to my suggestions as were 3 out of 4 top

school administrators I worked for.

These were 4 outstanding persons in my memory. namely Harry Gross Principal of the V.S. Central H.S. I owe more to him than any other person. He brought me to V.S. He counselled and gave me the best advice. He displayed great faith in my ability. I prospered and became a better teacher under his guidance.

Richard Udall, Central H.S. district Principal. It was during his administration that North and South H.Sch were built. He allowed me to engage 16 music teachers for the entire high school district. He also allowed me to engage 6 extra instrumental specialists to instruct pupils from the 4th through 12th grades. He made it possible for me to organize an All District Music Festival which produced an outstanding band, orchestra and Chorus. It was in his administration that the orchestra and band summer concerts held on the Village Green were cooperatively sponsored by the high school board of education and the Village Board. On Oct 9, 1951 through his recommendation I became District Coordinator of Music. This was an administrative and supervisory position, with no classes or teaching assignments.

Arthur Fade He was one of my first students and a member of my first V.S. high school band. Recognizing his talent and love for music I recommended that he should further his education in this field. Upon graduating from Ohio University he became a member on my teaching staff. He worked diligently with me

all through the years. He became assistant conductor of the V.S. Community Band when it was first organized. Upon my retirement he was appointed District Chairman of the Music Dept.

Henry Waldinger Mayor of V.S. When learning that the construction of the Village Green was to include the Village Hall and the Library, I contacted him about the possibility in having summer band and orchestra concerts on the Village Green. He and the Village Board were receptive to the idea. I was instructed to contact the Fred Wiedersum architectural firm to discuss what type of shell to be built. They requested me to do research in this matter that is writing to various cities and towns throughout the United States, collecting ideas and plans concerning their band shells. With this information at hand, the architect and I finally came up with the present plan for our shell. At the last Band concert I conducted and at my retirement Aug 1969 the Village Board dedicated the Band Shell to me. I was completly surprised, but happy to have this honor bestowed upon me.

(7) What changes in V.S. did you see over the years?

Living in V.S. for a period of 44 years we saw the village grow from a small farming one into a large thriving community. Fletcher Ave. was a narrow dirt road until Central H.S. was opened Sept. 1929. Our friend Mr. Wilbur Rehl supplied us with fresh vegetables

grown on his farm, now the sight of the V.S. Memorial Jr. H.S. Merrick Road & Sunrise H'y Way were very narrow roads. The Curtis Wright Airfield is now the sight of the Green Acres Shopping Mall. The Long Island Railroad station was a small wooden bldg. on the ground level as were the railroad tracks. After my interview with Mr. Gross in the small wooden high school bldg. situated along side of the present Wheeler Ave. elementary school, I had lunch at the Theatre Restaurant in the Theatre Bldg on Rockaway Ave. May 1928. I have the Restaurant name card on which is printed Luncheon 65¢ Dinner 85¢ Sunday chicken dinner $1.00 Children 65¢. The main food stores for the Village were Krug Kullen, located at the southwest corner of Merrick Road & Rockaway Ave., and the A & P store on the North side of Merrick Road near Rockaway Ave. There were many vacant lots located throughout the Village.

(8) <u>What are you most proud of in your career?</u>

My largest accomplishment was to have instrumental music teachers employed in the three elementary school districts. I needed to have instrumental teaching - start in the 4th grade. Valley Stream had and still has a school system different than most communities throughout the nation. Grades Kindergarten through the sixth are administrated seperately from 7th through 12th grades. Each division has its own Board of Education and Supt. of Schools.

I was employed by the Central H.S. district. All I could do was to make suggestions and recommendations to the authorities in the three elementary districts Habits, attitudes and skills are developed at an early age Up until my coming to V.S. no instrumental music was taught in the elementary schools. Other accomplishments I was proud of - To organize and conduct the V.S. Community Band. We were one of the first on Long Island to develop a string program, thus putting the emphasis on orchestra work equal to that of the Band. To have the Shell built on the Village Green. To get the Central H.S. Board of Ed. and the Village Board cooperatively sponsor Band and Orchestra concerts on the Village Green. To organize the Instrumental Summer Music School including all the School Districts Grades 4 thru 12. To organize the V.S. H. School District Annual Music Festival. This included the most talented music students, giving them the opportunity to perform in an All District Band - Orchestra and Chorus. I received a Life Membership to Rotary Club I was given a "This is your Life" John Smith program at the V.S. SYNAGOGUE in which many residents and school officials attended. I was also proud to receive the "Veterans of Foreign Wars" Citizenship medal. The highest honor conferred upon me was to receive an "Honorary Doctor of Music" degree from the New York College of Music, an affiliate of New York University.

(9) Do you have any regrets concerning your efforts here?

I never regretted staying in Music Education and working 41 years in V.S. Naturally, I had my ups & downs. Never did I have a defeatest attitude. I started my teaching career in 1928. The following year came the stock market crash, then the Great Depression. During these difficult economic times, farmers as well as residents complained during the annual voting on the school budget. They said -- During these hard financial times we think it necessary to delete the teaching of music. In those days, voting on the school budget was done by signing YES or NO on a small piece of paper, then placing your ballot in a box. Regardless of hard times during the depression years, the entire high school budget, including Music, was met with favor. It always made me feel good when people stood up at the annual budget meetings and spoke in defense of the Music program.

At various times during my teaching career I was requested to apply for a principalship position, both in elementary and senior high schools. My reason not to apply was - I was most happy to remain in my chosen field. My love for music took preference over everything. Why should I go from the known to the unknown? I consider myself most fortunate in having the privilege to remain in V.S. during my entire professional career.

To-day at age 83 in my 18th year of retirement, I am and have been receiving many letters from former students - telling how I have enriched their lives through their participation in the Valley Stream Central High School Music program.

The name VALLEY STREAM will forever live in my memory.

JOHN SMITH, INDIAN RIVER, MELBOURNE, FL, FEBRUARY 10, 1988.

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JOHN M. SMITH, former music teacher at Valley Stream Central High School, and for whom the village bandshell is named, celebrated his 83rd birthday on August 15. Smith, and his wife Ruth, 81, celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary on Sept. 1. They are living "a content and happy life spending the winter in Florida and the summer months in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains in Western North Carolina," according to a letter he sent recently to the Central High Alumni Association. He is in his 17th year of retirement, enjoying twin daughters, nine grandchildren and ten great grandchildren.

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NEWSPAPER CLIPPING OF JOHN SMITH AND HIS WIFE, RUTH, REGARDING THE CELEBRATION OF THEIR 60th WEDDING ANNIVERSARY, MAILEADER, 198-?

Sunday News, Sunday, October 5, 1969, Section Two, p. 1, 88.

The Smiths look over their songbook

Mr. Music Calls It A Concert

By BERNARD RABIN

On a warm Tuesday evening a few weeks ago, several thousand listeners crowding around the bandshell of the Valley Stream Green clapped, whistled and cheered at the end of a song that had never before been presented publicly and probably won't ever be again.

The music would have fallen flat in Philharmonic Hall, but the lyrics obviously struck a special chord for the listeners.

"Who's the leader of the band?
"He's spry, he's frisky,
"We think he's nifty,

(Continued on Back Page)

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE ENTITLED, "MR MUSIC CALLS IT A CONCERT," BY BERNARD RABIN, SUNDAY NEWS, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5, 1969, SECTION TWO, PAGE 1, 88.

Valley Stream's 'Mr. Music' Calls It a Conce t

Dr. Smith Plans To Take It Easy

(Continued from page 1)

"John M. Smith, we think you're kind of grand."

The gentleman being serenaded was Dr. John M. Smith, 65, the coordinator of music for the Valley Stream Central High School District.

He's a Mr. Music

His impending retirement had just been announced—it went through last week, bringing to a close a 41-year career as Mr. Music.

Smith leaves much to be remembered by. The very tradition of Tuesday evening summertime concerts in Valley Stream was built by him; the music floating up from the greensward came from singers and instrumentalists taught by him—a couple of generations of them. The bandshell, which might never have existed without him, was named the John M. Smith Bandshell at his retirement.

In 1928, when he and his bride, Ruth, arrived from the little town of Catasauqua, Pa., music as a school activity for youngsters was nonexistent and looked on with some suspicion, Smith soon found out.

Valley Stream was a sleepy village of about 5,000 persons, many of them produce and dairy farmers scattered in the outlying countryside. The population of the high school district was 6,000, including those living in North and South Valley Stream and parts of Elmont, Franklin Square and Malverne.

No Interest in Music

The 150 students in the old frame Central High School building at Wheeler Ave. and Rockaway Parkway showed no interest in Smith's new music program until he began a house-to-house, farm-to-farm one-man selling campaign. He finally convinced 35 kids to train for that first band in 1928.

Smith's credentials were a diploma from Westchester, Pa., State College and proficiency at the clarinet and violin. He subsequently picked up a master's degree in music from New York University, an honorary doctorate from the New York College of Music and skill in playing the trumpet, percussion, woodwind and other instruments.

The school district now has 80,000 residents of whom 7,000 are students in the four large modern high schools. And more than 4,000 of these are orchestral, band or choral musicians in school organizations under Smith's direction. The coordinator, whose staff at first consisted only of himself and his wife, was finally heading a 22-teacher music department, highly reputed throughout the state and a frequent prize-winner.

Smith's unflagging enthusiasm radiated outward through the community and in 1953, some teachers and a number of students began extending what had become a regular winter series of concerts into the summer months. The first programs were given on the high school grounds, but by the summer of 1954, it was apparent that the space was too limited for the througs who attended.

The village and school boards decided that a bandshell should be built on the newly established Village Green.

Crowd Outgrows Facilities

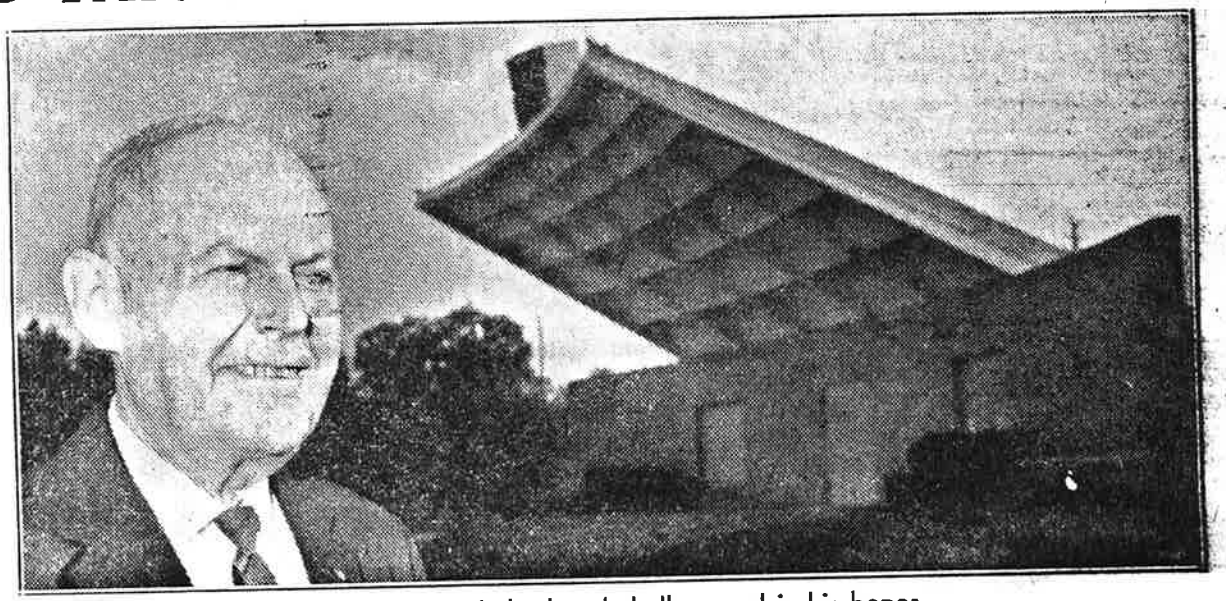
The Valley Stream Community Band, made up of former and current high school musicans, began giving summer performances in 1955. Bleachers had been erected, but there were so many listeners that it was decided they should simply spread out over the grass on blankets or folding chairs.

Thousands are now drawn to the concerts—as many as 10,000 have attended some programs. The song in Smith's honor starts: "Tuesday at the bandstand, friends meet friends; we share a dream, that's the night we hurry to the green at Valley Stream."

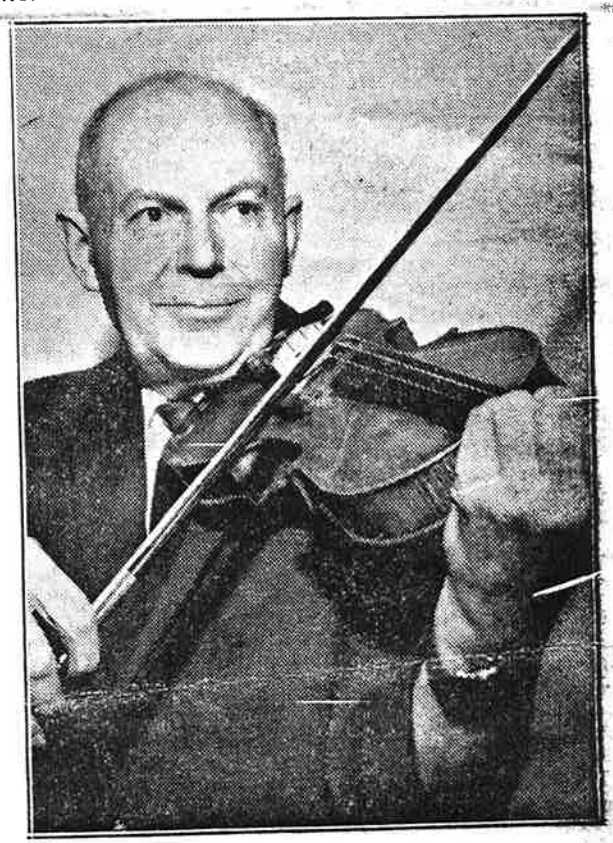
One of the more touching tributes to the music-makers—at least so the legend goes—is paid by certain motormen on the Long Island Rail Road. When their trains pass on the line's tracks, about 100 yards in back of the bandshell, they slow down to lower the noise nuisance and, perhaps, to listen. This may explain why some trains are late?

In their retirement, Smith and his wife will keep their lifetime home, although they may do some traveling and take up new hobbies like golf and fishing. Mrs. Smith's teaching career stopped when their twin daughters were born in 1934. As girls, of course they played in the band, but now Mrs. Mary Anne Munch and Mrs. Sara Mae MacNab are busy, each with four children.

Replacing Smith as district music coordinator will be a former student, Arthur Fare, a teacher in the high school.



Dr. Smith and the band shell named in his honor



Dr. Smith and his magic violin