

The Memorable Haley Smith

By Barbara Glakas

Haley McCool Smith (1917-1994) was referred to as Herndon's godfather of youth sports. Former *Herndon Observer* staff writer, Peggy Vetter, once said, "Smith can fairly be called the pied piper of Herndon. He loves kids and young people, and the affection and respect are returned." Whether it was basketball, soccer, football or basketball, Smith was widely credited with being a preeminent leader of youth sports in Herndon in the late 1960s to the early 1990s, a hero to many of the town's children.

Smith also served several terms on the Herndon Town Council. He was not considered what some may think of as a typical politician, because he never resorted to subterfuge and instead was straightforward and candid. He was called "quite the character" by some. He once told Vetter, "I tell it like it is," and Vetter retorted, "and you knew exactly what he meant," adding, "Haley had a lot of opinions and never hesitated to express them." Tom Grein, Editor of the *Herndon Observer* once recalled,

"He didn't care how big, or powerful, or rich, or poor, or slick or politically correct, or incorrect, or eloquent the people he served with, or those who spoke at public hearings were. Using wisdom only a man like Haley could possess, he would ask and answer the questions with salty words, and pointing a skinny finger while hunched over the table, would make his point perfectly clear."

He called the town's Historic District "The Hysterical District." When he and others lost the battle to have Runnymede Park made into an active recreational area, he said he was "going to mow Runnymede Park and build a ball park there for kids." Having no patience for long planning sessions, the unending talk about downtown revitalization once caused him to advocate that the town, "sow the whole thing with alfalfa and forget about it."

Born in Staunton, Virginia, in 1917, Smith was one of eight brothers. His mother died in 1932. He grew up in the Herndon area since he was three years old, attending grade school in Floris, where he played violin in the Floris Community Orchestra. He graduated from Herndon High School, which marked the extent of his formal education. His father was a dairy farmer and, as a youth, during the Great Depression, Smith was a farm hand.

In the 1930s Smith played basketball on the Herndon High School team. He said, "There were just six of us... we were all in great shape because we were raised on farms." In his senior year in 1936 he was voted the most athletic boy.

Smith married Edith L. White in 1938 and they lived on 3rd Street in Herndon. Their house was on farm land; however, he did not farm. He was a salesman of farming equipment. The Smiths went on to have four children.

In 1940, like most men of his age, he registered for the military, although he did not serve at that time. His registration card described him as being 23 years old, 5'8" with red hair and hazel eyes. However, later, in February of 1945, he enlisted in the Army as a Private, and was

discharged in July of 1946. The 1950 census showed that the Smiths were living in Arlington, where he worked as a gas station manager. Later, the Smiths lived on Grace Street in Herndon.

Former Herndon resident, Ward Sevila, remembered from his childhood how Smith had a red 1939 Willy's Overland automobile in the 1960s that had "Haley's Comet" painted on the side. He also had a 1959 Chevy pickup in which he won 15 drag races at the Old Dominion Speedway in Manassas.

Smith also played soccer for 60 years, which he started playing in the seventh grade at Herndon High. In his mid-70s he still had scars all along his shins from playing soccer. He once said, "We didn't know what shin guards were back then. We just built up scars on top of scars."

Local youth football started in 1969 when Smith and Doug Burger started a team called the "Ankle Biters" for 65-pound kids. The team became very popular, growing to 38 players. In their first year they started by playing against a Vienna team and it grew from there.

In 1973 Smith was named the Herndon Rotary Club's Citizen of the Year. A *Herndon Tribune* newspaper said he recognized for his work the Optimist Club and youth sports, his years of coaching, his service on the town council, his work to purchase and name Stanton Park, and his work to find a piece of land on which to build a community center. Smith said,

"I have a hard head and nerves of steel so I just go plunging right along. I reckon there are a lot of people who think I am on the right track. Being elected Citizen of the Year encourages me to think that I am on the right quest and that my efforts have not been in vain."

In 1974 Smith decided that Herndon youth should learn to play soccer. He bought a couple of rule books and a soccer situation book, and recruited two coaches. This was the beginning of Optimist Youth Soccer, which was born with three teams, Smith coaching one of them. Optimist soccer was turned over to the parents in 1978. By that time there were thirty teams.

He briefly coached Babe Ruth baseball when Herndon and Great Falls had one team and Reston had two. As Babe Ruth baseball grew, he switched to coaching little league.

Smith will probably best be remembered for his work with the Optimist Youth Basketball League, which became a farm league for Herndon High School's girls and boys teams.

In 1978, while refereeing a game in the Herndon Intermediate School gym, he suffered a heart attack. At the time he was the president of the Optimists, commissioner of basketball, Vice Mayor of the Herndon Town Council, and he still worked full time in construction. While at Fairfax Hospital he motioned to his niece, Mary Burger, to come over to his bed and said, "I have a game at 1:30 today and you have to coach my kids." Within 90 days, Smith was back to playing soccer.

In 1991 he was presented with a plaque commemorating his 25 years as a coach and mentor of the Optimist Youth Basketball League. Over the years, Smith had founded four of the Optimist's sport programs: soccer, baseball, Ankle Biter's football, and girls' basketball. After a second heart attack in 1992 he had to give up coaching.

Former Herndon Mayor Rick Thoesen described Smith as a very hard worker who was devoted to his family. He was an auto mechanic, a carpenter, an odd jobber, a politician, and a community volunteer. He was resourceful and practical, being remembered as someone who could fix or build anything, and was known to help people with their home projects. And he had unshakable will power.

A slight wisp of a man, short and wiry and with boundless energy, he could run circles around men half his age. At age 65 he discovered the game of golf, which became his game of choice, developing the ability to beat much younger men. The golf course opened in 1979 and the golf pro at the time said that Smith, “would do anything for us, whether it was fixing something or building something.” He built the golf course’s second maintenance facility and was directly involved in restoring one of the old well houses that still sits on the golf course today.

Haley was also dedicated to the Clothes Closet, finding one of their early locations at the old Herndon Lumber Yard. For many years he travelled to West Virginia to deliver clothing to the less fortunate.

In 1992 Smith retired from the Herndon Town Council after about 22 years of service. At a Town Council meeting he was awarded a lifetime pass to the Herndon Centennial Golf Course. He was also honored during a “Haley Smith Appreciation Night” conducted at the Herndon Community Center.

In 1994, Smith died in his sleep at his home on Grace Street, at the age of 77. The last person known to be carried by J. Berkley Green’s turn-of-the-century horse-drawn funeral carriage, he was buried in Herndon’s Chestnut Grove Cemetery. Hundreds of people turned out to say goodbye to Smith, either standing on the sidewalk and waving, or walking alongside the horse-drawn carriage as it meandered out to the cemetery. The following week the entire front page of the *Herndon Observer*, and many articles inside it, paid tribute to Smith.

Although Haley did not get his ball fields at Runnymede Park, fittingly, the new ball field at the corner of Van Buren Street and Herndon Parkway was dedicated as the Haley M. Smith Park in 1997, which now features two 60-foot baseball/softball fields, a rectangular field, basketball and sand volleyball courts, and a playground for young children.

Thoesen eulogized, “Haley...stood for recreational opportunity for all children... He wasn’t a tall man but, among the children he loved and served, he possessed great stature.”

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the

Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.