

Smithton



James A. “Jim” Smith, for whom Smithton was named, was an entrepreneur and lumberman. He was born in Ireland in 1847, came to the United States in 1867, and arrived in Clark County in 1873 as a construction worker on the Iron Mountain Railroad. He entered the mercantile business in Gurdon in 1879, and also opened a mill with B.F. Van Dorn in 1883 at what would become known as the town of Smithton. The Smithton Lumber Company would become one of Arkansas’s largest lumber and planing mills.

A community sprang up around the mill facility. Smithton was growing, and according to Arkadelphia’s Southern Standard in September of 1885, the place was “now assuming the shape and proportions of a cozy little village, where a bit ago only the upward curling smoke of one sawmill and a siding for the reception of its product distinguished the spot from any other of the lonely stretch of undeveloped country.” Commenting on the significance of the “great lumber and planing mills of Van Dorn & Smith,” the paper mentioned that “They make and fill enormous bills for far-distant parts of the country, and their lumber is unsurpassed by any.” Smith also had a two-story general merchandise store and was in the process of building a “comfortable and spacious two-story hotel for the accommodation of the traveling public.” J.A. Smith not only engaged in the previously-mentioned endeavors, but he also constructed a number of miles of railroad leading away from the mill. As further evidence of growth in the area, a post office was established at Smithton in the early 1880s, and it remained in operation until 1955. Among those to serve as postmaster were Francis Brown, James Brown, James A. Smith, William Norman, Mary Smith, William Young, Lou Ella Young, Martha Young, Calvin Wilkie, William Wilkie, Tobe Fowler, Minta Robertson, and Bobbie Allen.

In 1887 Smith closed his mercantile business in Gurdon. Sadly, he died January 11, 1889, one day before his forty-second birthday. It seems James A. Smith fell ill after working outside in extremely cold weather helping load a railroad car with lumber. Arkadelphia’s Southern Standard reported his cause of death as “congestion of the lungs.”

Smith’s wife, Mary Norman Smith, continued the successful mill operation for years afterward. In fact, she is believed to be Clark County’s first lumberwoman. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat called her one of the wealthiest women in Arkansas, “identified with numerous railway, steamboat, and real estate interests” around the state. Mary Smith became the first female to become a member of Gurdon’s famed Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo, a fraternal organization for those engaged in the forest products industry. The 1895 St. Louis paper proclaimed that Smith was the only woman in the United States to attend a regular meeting of the Hoo-Hoo as a “full-fledged” member. According to the report, “If the present constitution of the Hoo-Hoos remains unchanged, Mrs. Smith will be the first, last, and only woman member.” The paper explained how she was admitted to the association under a constitution that made no provision concerning women’s membership, but at the organization’s most recent national convention, a clause was inserted barring women from joining the group! The rule remained in place until the Hoo-Hoo’s by-laws changed in 1993.

Over time, a huge pile of sawdust that started with Smith’s mill was enlarged by the waste from other mills in the area. By the 1930s it grew to be so large that it was recognized as the largest sawdust pile in the world. Based on information provided by the Rev. M.D. Williams, it was featured in Ripley’s “Believe It Or Not” column, and is pictured above.