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The "Megaphone Man": The Curious Story of J. Henry Smythe, Jr.

At eight o'clock on Saturday evening in Philadelphia, December 15, 1900, the Hungarianborn master and *Philadelphia Ledger* chess columnist Emil Kemeny gave a simultaneous exhibition against nineteen players, finishing 14-1, with 4 draws. Play took place at the Mercantile Library, home of the Mercantile Library Chess Association, Philadelphia's second strongest chess club, behind the well-known Franklin. Among Kemeny's victims that evening was a youth named J. Henry Smythe, Jr.

Smythe had succumbed to Kemeny's play at board five, losing in what Kemeny's own column reported as a "Nordish" Opening. Such simultaneous exhibitions by local talent were common in Philadelphia at the turn of the century. A little over two weeks later, on December 31, 1900, another of Philadelphia's finest players, Hermann G. Voigt, who had earlier that year defeated Thomas Francis Lawrence while playing board six on the American team in the AngloAmerican Cable Match, helping secure a 6-4 victory for the Americans, gave his own simultaneous performance. His took place at the Franklin Chess Club, and resulted in record of 10-0, with 8 draws. Smythe, at board eleven, this time managed a draw on the Black side of an Evans Gambit.

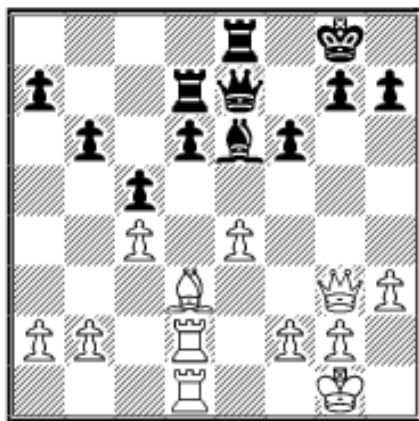
Little is known about Smythe's earliest years. Even Jeremy Gaige's monumental *Chess Personalia: A Biobibliography*, while recording information on over 14,000 chess players, largely of by-gone times, is silent concerning Smythe. From an unidentified article appearing in one of Walter Penn Shipley's scrapbooks, however, we learn that J. Henry Smythe, Jr., was born in Philadelphia on October 16, 1883, and so had turned seventeen not long before playing against Kemeny and Voigt. Interestingly enough, he only learned the moves of chess the year before, at age sixteen. He would soon attend the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he would do well against college opponents over the next several years, and where he would be elected chess club president for three years.

As something of a prodigy despite coming relatively late to the game, Smythe would gain more publicity the following May when world champion Emanuel Lasker arrived in the city. Lasker played a twenty-board simultaneous exhibition at the rooms of the Franklin Chess Club on May 17, 1901. According to Reichhelm, writing in the *Philadelphia Times* for May 26, 1901, it was Lasker's first appearance in Philadelphia in seven years, at which time he had won three games off Steinitz in their 1894 world championship match. On May 17, Lasker finished 13-2, with 5 draws. One of those draws was against the young Smythe.

Emanuel Lasker – J. Henry Smythe, Jr. [C45]

**Franklin Chess Club Simultaneous Exhibition (1:20), Bd. 19
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, May 17, 1901**

1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.Nf3 Nc6 Giving us, through a slight transposition of moves, our old friend the Scotch. **4.Nxd4 Bc5 5.Nxc6 Qf6 6.Qf3** A move peculiarly Laskerian. There is nothing the Champion loves so much as to bring about an exchange of pieces early so as to reduce the situation to a gigantic endgame. **6...Qxc6** If **6...Qxf3 7.gxf3 dxc6 8.Be3** etc. **7.Nc3 Ne7 8.Bg5 0–0 9.Bxe7 Bxe7 10.Nd5 Re8 11.Bd3 d6 12.0–0 Be6 13.Rad1 Rad8 14.c4 Qd7 15.h3 b6 16.Qg3 c6 17.Nxe7+ Qxe7 18.Rfe1 c5 19.Rd2 f6 20.Red1 Rd7**



21.Bc2 In a more serious game White would have played on Black's backward d-pawn without exchanging off. **21...Bxc4 22.Ba4 b5 23.Bxb5 Bxb5 24.Qb3+ Kf8 25.Qxb5 Red8 26.Qc6 g5 27.Qd5 Qf7 28.Kh2 Qxd5 29.Rxd5 Ke7 30.Kg3 Rb8 31.b3 Rb4 32.f3 a5 33.Kg4 a4 34.bxa4 Rxa4 35.R1d2 Ra6 36.f4 gxf4 37.Kxf4 Ke6 38.Kg4 Raa7 39.Kf4 Ra6 40.g4 Rg7 41.Kg3 Ke7 42.Kf4 Ke6 43.Rh2 Raa7 44.Rf5 Rg6 45.Rh5 Rgg7**

[*Checkmate gives only 45...R-Kt2—JSH*] And Black was gratified to find that he had drawn

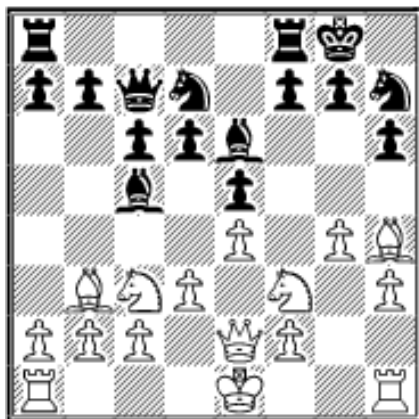
against the champion of the world. $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ (Unattributed annotations *Checkmate*, July 1901, pp.118-9)

Summers rarely allowed for serious chess competition in Philadelphia during the hot, humid days, but the following fall Smythe made his presence known once more in city chess circles. On Saturday evening, October 19, 1901, the first rapid transit team competition of the season took place at the Franklin. Four teams of five men each were formed, with play requiring them to move every thirty seconds. Smythe played for D. Stuart Robinson's team, and although he lost his first round game, he won his last two, helping his team to reach $9\frac{1}{2}$ – $5\frac{1}{2}$, a score good enough to take first place by a full point. Smythe's second round win appeared in *Checkmate* magazine, which wrote that "We append a sprightly specimen from the rapid transit, and very good from the standpoint of a move every thirty seconds."

J. Henry Smythe, Jr. – J.P. Blakemore [C26]

**Franklin Team Rapid Transit Tourney
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 19, 1901**

1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.d3 d6 5.Nf3 Be6 6.Bb3 0–0 7.Bg5 h6 8.Bh4 c6 9.Qe2 Nbd7 10.h3 Qc7 11.g4 Nh7



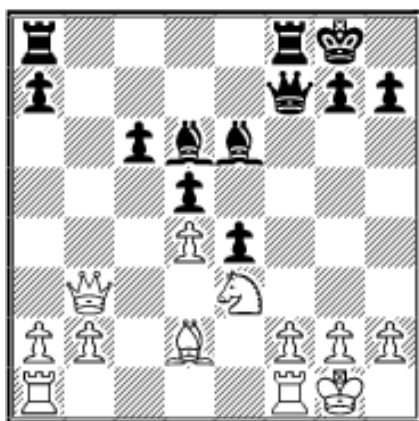
12.g5 hxc5 13.Nxc5 Nxc5 14.Bxc5 Bxb3
 15.axb3 f6 16.Bd2 Rf7 17.h4 Bd4 18.h5 Nf8
 19.Rg1 Re8 20.Nd1 Bb6 21.Ne3 Bxe3
 22.Bxe3 b6 23.0-0-0 Qb7 24.f4 Qa6 25.Kd2
 Qb5 26.f5 c5 27.Rg2 Qd7 28.Rh1 a5 29.h6
 Nh7 30.Qh5 Re7 31.hxc7 Rxc7 and White
 mates in three moves. 1-0 *Checkmate*, Nov.
 1901, p. 203

The following week the Franklin held a
 sixteen player knockout event, again
 involving rapid transit chess. Smythe entered

the First Class, which also saw participate Jacob Elson, Hermann Voigt, Charles
 Newman, Charles Martinez, and Julius Kaiser, all well-known Philadelphia area
 masters. Although Smythe lost in the first round to Voigt, the fact that he was
 permitted to enter in the First Class had to be considered an accomplishment in
 itself. The same report by Reichhelm indicated Smythe was also involved in a
 whist tournament held at the Franklin, where in fact he was holding his own,
 remaining a point ahead of Reichhelm himself. He was also scheduled to play in
 the monster interstate correspondence match arranged between Pennsylvania and
 New York players on 254 boards. And before the month of November was over,
 Smythe would have his revenge in a simultaneous against Emil Kemeny.
 According to the *Chicago Tribune*, which also published the game in its
 December 1, 1901, issue, the contest, played at the chess club of the University of
 Pennsylvania, was of much interest. Kemeny finished 14-2, with 1 draw.

Emil Kemeny – J. Henry Smythe, Jr. [C40]
Simultaneous Exhibition (1:17)
Houston Hall, Univ. of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 1901

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f5 An agreeable variation to relieve the monotony of the ordinary
 openings. 3.Nxe5 Qf6 4.d4 d6 5.Nc4 fxe4 6.Nc3 Qg6 7.Ne3 Nf6 8.Ncd5 Nxd5
 9.Nxd5 Qf7 10.c4 c6 11.Ne3 d5 12.cxd5 cxd5 13.Qb3 Be6 14.Bd2 Nc6 15.Bb5
 Bd6 16.0-0 0-0 17.Bxc6 bxc6



The forces are still even, but the threatened
 menace of the combined Black bishops makes
 White's position untenable. 18.f3 Qh5 19.Ng4
 [A blunder only hastening White's
 resignation.—JSH] 19...Bxc4 and wins. 0-1
Philadelphia Times, November 24, 1901

Not to be outdone by Kemeny, Smythe
 himself gave simultaneous exhibitions, with a
 six board event at the Gambit Chess Club
 followed by a nine board simultaneous
 exhibition the next week, at his own Houston

Hall, where he finished 4-0, with 5 draws.

The next year saw Smythe active in chess play in the area as well. On February 22, 1902, Washington's Birthday, Smythe finished fifth in the Pennsylvania State Championship, won that year by Shipley. Early in March 1902 Smythe would have his revenge on Voigt when the latter gave a twenty-one board simultaneous exhibition, finishing 8-2, with 11 draws. Only Shipley and Smythe were able to defeat the Cable Match player. In November 1902 Smythe was mentioned as one of three "brilliant" junior players at the Franklin, where in time no doubt great things were expected of him. Smythe was active in club team play, and also intended to give an eighteen board simultaneous event himself that December.

Early 1903 saw Smythe playing just as frequently. On January 23, 1903, Smythe was scheduled to play Shipley during a team match between the Junior Chess Club, to which Shipley belonged, and the Mercantile Chess Library Association, for whom the younger man was playing. The next month Smythe drew with Voigt in yet a third simultaneous exhibition. He played as well for the Gambit Chess Club in a match against Princeton University. Smythe's game was published by Reichhelm in his new column in the *Philadelphia North American*, where the elder statesman of chess in Philadelphia added that "The game [was] a typical game of the present system of attack, and is well conducted by Mr. J. Henry Smythe, Jr., as to prove that he would be an ideal addition to the cable team in the inter-university match between America and England." Reichhelm noted too that the Gambit Chess Club was "now a strong factor in local chess," and thus its win over Princeton by a score of 3½-1½ was not surprising.

**J. Henry Smythe, Jr. – C.S. Richardson [C25]
Gambit Chess Club vs. Princeton Chess Club, Bd.1
February 1903**

1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 In latter day play the Queen's knight preface is an important preliminary to the King's Gambit. **2...Nc6 2...Nf6** is allowable, but the Queen's knight play is considered best. **3.f4 exf4 4.Nf3 g5 5.h4 g4 6.Ng5** The regular Allgaier Gambit development, plus the introductory moves. **6...h5** An old line of defense. **6...h6**, forcing the sacrifice of the knight, would lead to the Gambit proper. **7.Bc4 Nh6 8.d4 Be7 9.Bxf4 f6** Always an alluring move, but never a good one. Black had already the worse game.



10.Qd2 The true way to take advantage of the position. **10...Bf8** If **10...fxg5 11.hxg5 Ng8 12.0-0** with a great game. **11.Nd5 d6 12.Rf1 Bg7 13.0-0-0 Ne7 14.Rde1 c6 15.Nxe7 Qxe7 16.e5 dxe5 17.dxe5 f5 18.e6 Qc5 19.Nf7 Qe7 20.Bg5 Qc7 21.Nd6+** and wins. White's play throughout is without a flaw, and shows a mastery of this Gambit. **1-0 Philadelphia North American**, Feb. 22, 1903

Thus ends our chess knowledge of J. Henry Smythe, Jr., and if this were all there was to the story, it would be a rather conventional one of a young man who played some entertaining college chess but who no doubt quickly learned that playing games,

or rather certainly the game of chess, in turn-of-the-century America, did not pay the bills, and who thus drifted off into other more worldly pursuits.

Smythe clearly did follow other pursuits, though his break with chess was not as quiet as most might have hoped. For in the pages of the August 14, 1903, issue of Kemeny's *American Chess Weekly* we learn almost in passing that "J. H. Smythe, Jr., a Philadelphia youth of nineteen has temporarily succumbed to excessive chess playing. It is hoped that he will speedily recover."

If there was any confusion as to what "excessive chess playing" might have meant, Kemeny quickly dispelled the confusion in his August 29, 1903, editorial: "The unfortunate incident of a Philadelphia youth succumbing to excessive chess playing," Kemeny wrote, "has created quite a stir and was extensively commented on. In all probability it is the first instance that mental disorder could be traced to chess directly."

Kemeny continued, noting that "The boy played a pretty good game and received more than due recognition in local newspapers. If he attempted to fully justify the flattering comments, his task must have been an extremely difficult one. He was placed on the local team and suffered defeat, which must have hurt him badly, subsequently he succeeded in squaring accounts with his opponent and the joy overwhelmed him."

Kemeny left the discussion of Smythe at this point, but did dwell on the role of chess in society and especially in relation to the stress it could place on the youthful practitioner. As the words were written by a man who had played a relatively close, though losing, match with Jackson Whipps Showalter in 1896 for the United States Championship, there may well be value in allowing Kemeny to speak at length to modern readers: "It is needless to say that moderate chess playing is a harmless pastime and beneficial, for it offers a pleasing diversion. Serious chess contests require a severe and often prolonged mental effort and tax heavily the nerves. In numerous instances such a struggle causes insomnia and in a general way is apt to be injurious. This of course relates principally, if not exclusively, to professional players, leading exponents of the game struggling for supremacy and devoting their entire attention to chess. Presumably even they would be in no danger, could they from time to time enjoy a much needed rest. Unfortunately, however, the returns for such exacting efforts are very slim, and after meeting numerous and formidable opponents, the exponent of the game eventually faces poverty. Whether such exponent is to blame for not abandoning the fascinating game and adopting a more lucrative occupation, or whether fault rests with followers of the game who take delight in expert contests, but do not give adequate support, is a question not easily decided, and its discussion would be quite useless. The situation quite likely will remain unchanged for some time and in all probability there will be victims in days to come as there were in days gone by."

While Kemeny's words may be heavily weighted with the notion, quaint to today's readers, that chess, directly, could be responsible for insanity, no one can doubt the sincerity with which he uttered his concluding points, overly paternalistic as they might sound when heard with today's ear: "What can be

done, and should be done, is to try to save the youthful enthusiast. Advice, warning, etc., to a youth already a full-fledged expert, aspiring to championship honors is quite useless. The more effective method is to lessen his chances to become a celebrity. He ought not be admitted in Chess Clubs ere through with his studies and ere of age. He ought not have a chance to fully develop his chess strength ere ready in some chosen occupation in life. Prominence obtained in the game handicaps him seriously and hinders him from overcoming the difficulties of the start of almost any other occupation. Truly at the slightest provocation he is apt to abandon such occupation, drifting towards the fascinating game. The late Steinitz had an exalted opinion regarding the professional chess player, in fact he placed him above all others. No doubt he was sincere, and though poor, he was content and proud. Quite likely he had compassion for the late Kolisch who abandoned such noble profession just for the sake of becoming a millionaire. But all exponents do not display the same enthusiasm, do not entertain the same opinion and truly not all of them are happy.” What Kemeny, and no doubt many amateur players of the period, would have thought of the emergence of the Soviet chess machine in years to come, let alone the likes of a Bobby Fischer, can be left to private conjecture.

Smythe’s personal tragedy, however, came to somewhat more than a simple vehicle for Kemeny’s dissertation on protecting youth from premature success at the noble game. Nor was every writer sympathetic to the kinds of statements Kemeny, and no doubt several other writers, had made of the young man’s collapse.

Certainly Stanley P. Johnston, the strong Chicago amateur and chess editor of the *Chicago Tribune* had great pleasure in writing in his September 20, 1903, column, that “Some months ago a spasm of sermonizing swept over this country because a chess player named J. Henry Smythe Jr. had been confined in a sanitarium, and chess and craziness, suicides and suicide were declared to be Siamese twins. Editorial owls lugubriously declared that sacrificial combinations were a menace to sanity and that the Lopez transmuted lucidity into lunacy. And now the ‘text’ of these anti-chess screeds has ‘fully recovered from his late indisposition.’”

Whether Smythe truly ever “fully recovered” from his mental breakdown in 1903, however, can certainly be debated, given the little more the passing of time has left us to ponder. It turns out that Smythe gained his fifteen minutes of fame on two separate occasions, curiously enough, neither of which had to do with chess. The first, and happier time, was in Chicago in 1904, when he surprised the Republican National Convention in that city by jumping on the platform with a megaphone and starting the cheering for President Teddy Roosevelt. Smythe’s audacity earned him not only the sobriquet of “the Grand Old Party’s Megaphone Man,” but also earned him, according to a clipping attributed to the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, the honor of attending the notification exercises at Oyster Bay, where the president of the United States greeted him with what might most aptly be called executive irony: “I am pleased to meet such a typical first voter.” Smythe had just turned twenty-one, then the legal age for voting, the month before Roosevelt’s reelection.

One may well wonder how typical of anything Smythe ever was, though he did try to extend through more conventional means his role in politics by subsequently giving a number of political speeches, several at his alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. According to the local press he was then attending classes at the Wharton School of Business in Philadelphia. In June of 1908 he attempted to repeat his 1904 success by traveling once more to Chicago for the Republican National Convention, megaphone in hand.

His reception, however, hardly matched the ovation he drew four years earlier. Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Chairman of the 1908 Convention, did not take kindly to Smythe's attempt to restage his 1904 convention theatrics. Under the headline "Megaphone Man' Met His Waterloo," the newspaper account of Smythe's reception at the 1908 convention noted that once the University of Pennsylvania student had jumped on the stage, "Facing the huge crowd he began, 'Now then—all together—three cheers for—!'" Behind him in a jiffy was Nemesis in the shape of Mr. [Henry Cabot] Lodge. J. Henry didn't see him—and therein rested his fate. The Massachusetts Senator grabbed his man by the scruff of the neck and the slack of the serge. The next instant Smythe and his megaphone were whirling off the platform, Mr. Lodge was breathing harder than usual, and the cheerleader's effort was over."



Smythe told a slightly different story in the *Philadelphia Bulletin* for June 20, 1908: "I had commanded three cheers for Taft and Sherman and they had been

given by the delegates when Senator Lodge interrupted the ovation. Had I continued, I would next have called for three cheers for the Grand Old Party of Lincoln, Grant, McKinley and Roosevelt," followed by more cheers for the President, for Taft, and for the Republican party, more specifically "its brilliant record of achievement and its platform of promise."

No doubt with mixed feelings from the Grand Old Party, Smythe intended to help campaign in the fall for the Taft-Sherman ticket, which, with the help—or perhaps in spite of the help—of J. Henry Smythe would go on to victory in the national elections.

And so ends the brief but eventful story of J. Henry Smythe, Jr., one-time belated chess prodigy and two-time cheerleader, the latter, however briefly, on the national stage. Whether Smythe ever continued on with chess, or politics, is unknown. Nor can anything be learned about his subsequent mental stability. One senses, though, that whatever he put his mind to, the young man from the University of Pennsylvania would, for better or worse, have given it his all.

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