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In from the Cold: The Life and Chess of Magnus Smith

by Myron Samsin

Everyone likes a good rags-to-riches story. They are fun, inspiring, and the best of them leave us feeling like the world is a better place. “You too could be President!” as the saying goes. Chess has them too – stories of people from very meager circumstances who achieved great things over the board through talent and hard work. James Mason comes to mind, escaping the misery of mid-1800s Ireland and learning chess as a streetwise teen in New York.

There is another such story, less known than Mason’s, but just as compelling. Magnus Smith won the Canadian championship every time it was held from 1899 to 1906. He dominated Canadian chess as no one would for a generation. When Canada could no longer contain him, Smith moved to New York and rubbed shoulders with the world class of chess – Lasker, Marshall and Capablanca. And he accomplished this after growing up an abandoned orphan on a windswept, famine-struck island near the Arctic Circle.

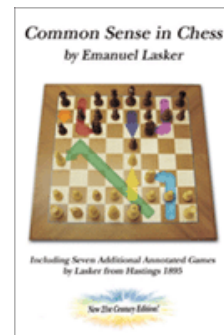
Reykjavik, Iceland, is known to chess players for the Spassky-Fischer match of 1972. But just north of the city, jutting westward into the North Atlantic, lies a rocky peninsula known as Snaefellsnes. Tiny fishing villages dot its edge, and a thin layer of soil offers the promise of a few crops in the interior. Towering over its western tip is the giant volcano Snaefellsjökull, today one of the main tourist sites on the island. Into this landscape, near the village of Raudhamel, Magnus Magnusson was born in 1869. Years later upon arriving in the New World he would adopt the surname Smith, but his original name, following the Icelandic custom of patronymic surnames, meant “Magnus, the son of Magnus.”

Young Magnus appeared at an unfortunate time in his country’s history. For at least a half-century before, the weather had been unusually warm. Because of it, crops were bountiful, the sea was full of fish, and Iceland’s population grew and prospered. Then the weather changed for the worse. Beginning around 1870, it turned cold and stayed cold for twenty years. No crops grew. Harbors were choked with ice, and no fish could be caught. Mass famine set in. Diaries of the time recorded horrific scenes as the island starved, trapped far away in the northern ocean.

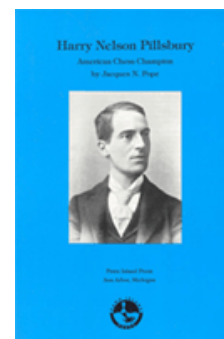
Magnus’ mother Ragnheidur died in the famine when he was six years old. His father being either absent or dead, Magnus had only his siblings for comfort. His sister Holmfrídi was left to care for him, two other sisters, and a brother. Because of her the little family survived the famine years, though Magnus would be frail and slight for the rest of his life, likely due to youthful malnutrition. His sister brought the family to Stadharstad, on the south coast of Snaefellsnes. There Magnus was able to take school lessons with the local parish priest, Thorkell Eyjolfsson. Thorkell seems to have been well connected, as his wife was the daughter of a *Thingmann* (member of the parliament, or *Althing*), his son would become a *Thingmann*, and his daughter would marry one. Perhaps Magnus also learned the rudiments of chess here, from the educated and cultured priest at Stadharstad. He certainly did know something of chess while in Iceland, though only a little, as he would later tell a Montreal newspaper.

After a few years, the adolescent Magnus went on to Reykjavik and trade school. There he would make possibly the biggest decision of his life. At sixteen he left Iceland, never to return. He joined thousands of Icelanders in the emigration of the 1880s. The word “emigration” hardly does it justice, as it was an exodus on a scale the island had never seen. One in five Icelanders left. Mostly ordinary farmers and fishers who had travelled a few miles in their

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entire lives, they were driven by desperation to abandon everything and start over in the New World. Their destination would be the colony of New Iceland, in Canada.

They chose Canada partly because of the familiar northern climate, but also because of the exclusive settlement rights granted them by the government. They were given land in the interior, on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, where only Icelanders would be allowed to settle. A similar request to the United States, for an island off the coast of Alaska, had been refused, so to Canada they came. The Icelanders were spurred on by immigration agents, who would round up prospective settlers and arrange their passage overseas. One of the most prominent of these agents was Johann Einarsson Straumfjord, who appears repeatedly in Icelandic-Canadian history, founding a short-lived colony in Nova Scotia and then serving on the governing council of New Iceland. He also happened to be the uncle of Magnus, the brother of his late mother. Straumfjord offered to fund Magnus' passage. The flood of people leaving, and the scant prospects they left behind, no doubt helped to make up the young man's mind. In 1885 he sailed away for good, heading toward New Iceland to begin life on his own.

His stay turned out to be very brief, since later the same year he left New Iceland for California. There could not be a greater contrast to everything he had known up to then. It must have been stunning to emerge from the train and breathe the warm scent of juniper and citrus, after barely surviving the vicious wind and cold – not to mention a stomach-churning voyage across the ocean. But he was not the only newcomer. The great Southern California real estate boom was in full swing in the mid-1880s. Los Angeles, virtually a tent city ten years before, had recently been linked to the rest of the continent by rail. The railway companies, eager to profit from their investment, slashed fares to settlers and hoped to sell them its land grants along the new lines. It worked. The settlers came, and when the grant land ran out they kept coming, up to thirty thousand a month. Naturally, real estate prices soared, and this attracted those who came to speculate, driving prices up still more. A perpetual motion machine of wealth lay waiting for anyone who would head west.

One of those who did was a fresh-faced sixteen-year-old bearing the newly adopted name of Magnus Smith. Anyone reasonably industrious could expect to do well in those prosperous times, and we can only speculate that Smith did, too. But as with all bubble economies, the end had to come sooner or later. It came sooner for Smith than for others, as in 1887 the real estate frenzy began to unravel. By 1888 people were cutting their losses and leaving, and Smith joined the tide coming out as he had coming in. That year, he headed north along the coast to Vancouver.

The air was less frantic there, and in due course Smith ventured to open his own shoemaker's shop on Hastings Street. He must have done well enough at his trade to afford some leisure, for sometime in the mid 1890s he once again took up chess, this time seriously. He joined the local club, and here we find his name in print for the first time in connection with chess. Smith was part of the team that contested a two-game telegraph match with the Mechanics' Club of San Francisco in 1895. He was joined by Messrs. Keith, Proctor and Grant in playing White against W.R. Lovegove, A.S. Howe, and V.Q. Quiroga. Unfortunately, none of his fellow Vancouverites seem to have been strong players, as they were completely outclassed on the white side of a Scotch Gambit. Evidently Smith had just returned to chess in 1895, as White's standard of play in the game left something to be desired from beginning to end.

That would change drastically over the next few years. In late 1898 he moved again, to Winnipeg – back to the Canadian prairie, and only a few miles from where he had begun his North American journey in New Iceland. He immediately made such an impression in the chess club that the local newspaper felt compelled to note his arrival in the city. Smith had become astonishingly good. Within days he was giving blindfold displays to the Winnipeggers.



Harry Nelson Pillsbury

This was not because he had moved to some backwater where chess was unknown. Winnipeg then was practically the capital of the Canadian West. Civilization was steaming across the prairie toward the ocean, opening up more land for settlement every year. Winnipeg was the gateway to all of it. Anyone and anything moving west or east passed through the city. Railroad barons and wheat kings made fortunes on the traffic, and built their mansions on Armstrong's Point. Civic boosters deliberately styled their city the New Chicago, and for a time it looked certain they were right. More to the point, Winnipeg was the headquarters for organized chess in the West. For some years it had been home to the North West Championship, an "all-comers tourney" for anyone west of the Great Lakes. Three months after arriving, Smith swept the 1899 event with a perfect 10-0 score. But in late January of 1899 he would play the one game that confirmed to Winnipeggers that they had something special on their hands. Harry Nelson Pillsbury had come to town on one of his exhibition tours. This was the biggest chess event Winnipeg had yet seen, and made headlines for days both before and after. On the 18th of January Pillsbury shook hands with a small row of simultaneous opponents – and fifty-six moves later lost to Magnus Smith.

Winnipeg chess circles were alight. They began passing the hat so that Smith, reluctant to go, could attend the Canadian championship in Montreal. Eventually he submitted to their persuasions. In early April he set off to play, and returned the Winnipeggers' faith in him by winning the twelve-man round robin with $9\frac{1}{2}$ points. Smith returned home to a hero's welcome, bundled around from one banquet to another in his honor. Winnipeg's Icelanders were especially proud. They held their own banquet for him, and ran a celebratory article in the Icelandic language newspaper *Heimskringla*. He was given a gold watch in appreciation – probably a welcome gift, since the entire grand prize in Montreal had been a set of steak knives.

The next year, Pillsbury was back in town. He no doubt knew what to expect in Winnipeg this time and paid careful attention to his games against Smith. Still, he came away with two wins and a loss. The moves of Smith's win are not preserved, unfortunately. The game frequently given as a win for Smith in a fifty-six-move Ruy Lopez is, in fact, one of Pillsbury's wins, but the players' names have been subsequently reversed erroneously.

In any case, Smith settled into life in Winnipeg, plying his trade as a shoemaker as he had in Vancouver and, presumably, in California. He also settled into place as the leading player in the West, carrying off the North West Championship in 1900, 1903, 1904, and 1905, as well as numerous other local events. Describing his style, the *St. Paul Dispatch* would say, "Smith is an aggressive chess player; brilliant and snappy chess is the game he likes." Only a handful of players managed to keep up with him, one of them his great rival Charles Blake. A 23-year-old newcomer from England, Blake arrived in Winnipeg in 1903 and soon showed that he could stand up to the champion. The two traded blows in one event after another – Blake came a close second in the 1904 North West tournament, lost a match to Smith that same year by $7\frac{1}{2}$ - $4\frac{1}{2}$, and won a return match in 1905. For a time it seemed that the two were intent on dueling with each other until one of them expired.

M. Smith-C. Blake, Winnipeg 1904

(notes by the winner)

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 f5

How many of us do not cast a kindly eye upon this move as a possible relief from the difficult defence to the Ruy Lopez.

4 d3

I believe this to be the best move; it is endorsed by the *Handbuch*.

4...Bc5 5 O-O d6 6 Nc3 f4

This is premature, Nf6 is the usual move.

7 d4 exd4 8 Nxd4 Bd7 9 Bxc6 bxc6 10 Bxf4 Qf6 11 Be3 Ne7 12 Nce2 O-O 13 c3 Rab8 14 Qd2 Ng6 15 f4 Rbe8 16 Ng3 Rf7 17 Rf2 h6 18 Raf1 Rfe7 19 Qd3 Nh4 20 a4

Bad, yet it is interesting to note the trouble that this wasted move gave White.

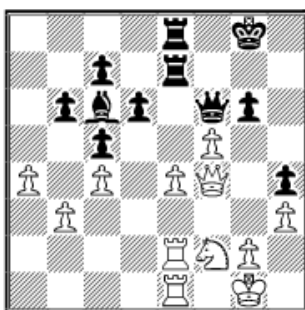
20...Bb6 21 Nf3 Nxf3+ 22 Rxf3 Bg4 23 R3f2 h5 24 Bxb6 axb6 25 h3

The only way to save the center pawn.

25...h4 26 Nh1 Bd7 27 Re1 Bf5 28 Rfe2 Bd7 29 Qf3

All this manoeuvring on White's part is necessary to hold the position.

29...e5 30 b3 Bc6 31 c4 Qd4+ 32 Nf2 Rf8 33 f5 Rfe8 34 Qg4 Qf6 35 Qf4 g6



Black's case was getting more desperate with every move, but this did not improve matters. Evidently he overlooked that he could not win the KP by Qd4+ after White's Ng4 on account of Nf6+ winning a piece.

36 Ng4 Qd4+ 37 Kh1 Rf8

The best move.

38 Qg5 Rh7

Not good, but with the best continuation White would win easily.

39 fxg6 Rg7 40 Nh6+ Kh8 41 Qxh4 1-0

(*Checkmate*, March 1904)

The national, or Dominion, championship in those years was not an annual affair – it was, if anything, somewhat haphazard. If some city decided to organize a tournament, then there would be one that year; if not, there wouldn't. Montreal had hosted the Dominion tournament seven times already, the most of any city, so all eyes were on it to arrange the next one after Smith's victory in 1899. It became evident in the next few years that this would not happen, so the organizers in Winnipeg, Blake among them, took it upon themselves to hold the next Dominion tournament in 1904. They meant business, subscribing \$250 for the prize fund together with a large trophy donated by a local brewer. Smith was the favorite coming in, and did not disappoint. He went undefeated with nine wins and two draws, two points clear of second place and, incidentally, four points clear of Blake.

Smith's eye now began to look southward, at bigger and better competition in the United States. The Western Chess Association had been holding its annual tournament since 1900 in either Chicago, St. Louis, or Excelsior, Minnesota. This tournament would gradually evolve into the U.S. Open, but already it was drawing the strongest talent from across the Great Plains. Smith's victories had caught the notice of organizers, and he was invited to play with the full rights

and privileges of an American. He came in 1905 together with Blake, which would prove somewhat fateful toward the end of the tournament.

In the strongest event he had yet played, Smith could not quite keep up with the leaders. He would finish with 11/17, 2½ points shy of first. Blake, on the other hand, was having an excellent tournament. Trouble was brewing, though, since one of the players had withdrawn after a few rounds. Blake had drawn with him, making the question of whether to count this game crucial to the final result. It seems the matter was not handled in the best way.

“These games the committee at once decided to cancel, as is usual in such cases. In the last round, when Blake and Schrader were tied for first place, the committee called another meeting and reversed their decision, giving Schrader, who had not met Roosen, the game by forfeit, thus increasing the latter’s lead by half a point. The decision was vigorously combatted by Judge H.D. Smith, Lawyer Fitzgerald and others, but was carried, the Canadian Champion, Magnus Smith, voting against his colleague.”

(*Saint John Globe*, Sep 22, 1905)

Final score: Schrader 13½, Blake 13. The *Globe’s* implication was clear: Smith had stabbed his rival in the back, and out of pure spite, since he himself could gain nothing. This would be totally out of character for Smith, and all the more shocking because of it. To ward off any controversy, Smith took the step of writing to *Lasker’s Chess Magazine*:

“[W]hen it was found that the number of entries was greater than expected it became necessary to either extend the time or play the tourney in sections. But both these being unsatisfactory to the players they decided to play three games a day, an innovation that proved still more unsatisfactory... I believe the play generally speaking was of a high order for the first part of the tourney, sadly declining towards the last however, as was natural when men were playing 12 and 14 hours a day... [D]esperate chances were taken to win a game at a sitting, thus many games were below par... As the results of the tourney, to quote a battle scarred veteran, present, ‘Each one of us can absolutely prove that he should have won first prize.’ An opinion which we heartily endorsed, with the exception of one gentleman, whom we had grave reasons to suspect of holding heretical views on this point, but as he did not play in the tourney he may be pardoned for his lack of faith...”

(*Lasker’s Chess Magazine*, October 1905)

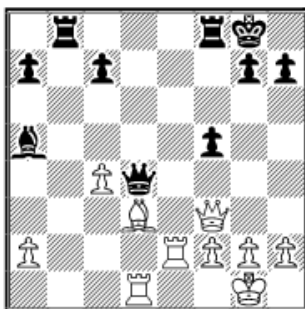
Perhaps the only controversy was that stirred up by a disgruntled chess journalist, after all. Interestingly, there is no evidence that Blake himself held a grudge. Or perhaps, he was too much of a gentleman to say so.

No one bothered to bring up old ghosts at next year’s WCA tournament in Chicago – although they had learned from previous mistakes and arranged the players in sections. Smith and Blake were back again. Both sailed through their preliminary group and into the final round-robin.

M. Smith-G.H. Wohlbrecht, Chicago 1906

(notes by the author and Fritz)

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nf6 3 Nxe5 d6 4 Nf3 Nxe4 5 d4 d5 6 Bd3 Nc6 7 O-O Be7 8 Re1 f5 9 c4 Be6 10 cxd5 Bxd5 11 Nc3 Nxc3 12 bxc3 O-O 13 Bb2 Bd6 14 c4 Bxf3 15 Qxf3 Bb4 16 Re3 Bd2 17 Re2 Nxd4 18 Bxd4 Qxd4 19 Rd1 Ba5 20 Qxb7 Rab8 21 Qf3



21...Rfd8?

Hoping to exploit White’s first rank after 22 Qxf5 Qxd3, but after 23 Qe6+! Kf8 24 Qe7+ Kg8 25 Rxd3 Rb1+ 26 Re1 Rxe1+ 27 Qxe1 Bxe1 28 Rxd8+ there are no more tricks. Still, it is preferable to the move that the discouraged Wohlbrecht chose.

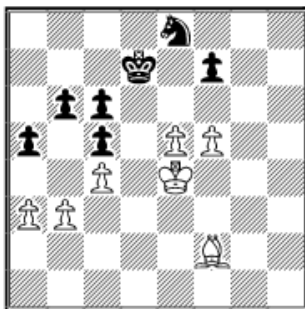
22 Qxf5 Bb6? 23 Qxh7+ Kf8 24 Re3 Qc3 25 Qh8+ Kf7 26 Qh5+ Kf8 27 Rf3+ Ke7

(*American Chess Bulletin*, October 1906)

This year it was Smith's turn to edge ahead, and in the final round he was a point clear of the field. Just when he had almost clinched victory, H.F. Lee defeated him in a hard-fought game to create a three-way tie for first. Smith, Lee, and Wohlbrecht then played a round-robin playoff, and Smith and Wohlbrecht ended up tied again. The matter went to sudden death, and after all the games played it took another eight-hour struggle to decide between them. Smith laboriously defended an Exchange Ruy Lopez for nearly sixty moves, then decided to go for broke.

G.H. Wohlbrecht-M. Smith, Chicago 1906

(notes by the author and Fritz)



If Black tries to maintain a fortress White will eventually break through it – though finding the right plan is tricky. For example: 58...Ng7 59 Be3 Ne8 60 Kf4 Nc7 61 Kg5 Ke7 62 Kh6 Kf8 63 Bg5 Na8 (63... Ne8 64 Bd8, or 63...Ke8 64 Kg7) 64 Bh4 Nc7 65 Bd8 Na8 66 f6 Ke8 67 e6. Therefore, Black tries to create complications on the queen side.

58...Nc7 59 Be1 Na6?! 60 Bg3 Ke7 61 Bh4+ Kd7 62 e6+ fxe6 63 f6

Now the white king will infiltrate Black's pawns and win material.

63...Ke8 64 Ke5 Kf7 65 Kd6 b5 66 Kxc6 a4 67 bxa4 b4 68 axb4 cxb4 69 Be1 e5 70 Kb6 b3 71 Bc3 e4

71...Nb8 may have held out longer. Now 72 a5 e4 73 a6 Nxa6 74 Kxa6 e3 75 c5 e2 will turn out much like the text, except with one less pawn for White and good chances to draw. 72 Kb5 Kxf6 73 Kb4 Nc6+ 74 Kxb3 Ke6 75 a5 Kd6 lets Black's king back into the game. White has to find 72 a5 e4 73 Kb5! combining both ideas.

72 Kxa6 e3 73 c5 e2 74 c6 b2 75 c7 e1=Q 76 Bxe1 b1=Q 77 c8=Q Qxe1 78 Qc6 Qf1+ 79 Kb7 Qf5 80 Kb8 Qd3 81 Kc8 Qe3 82 a5 Kg6 83 a6 Qh3+ 84 Kd8 Qd3+ 85 Ke7 Qe3+ 86 Qe6 1-0

(*American Chess Bulletin*, October 1906)



Montreal 1906

1906 would be a busy chess year for Smith, and not just because of the marathon at Chicago. Perhaps the Montrealers had felt upstaged by their western cohorts in 1904, as they set themselves to organize a Dominion tournament that would truly challenge Smith. They chose quality over quantity, arranging a 4-man quadruple round robin among Smith, Joseph Sawyer, Robert Short, and W. Kurrle. Sawyer in particular was a serious threat for Smith, one of the few apart from Blake. The two had never seen each other, but were hardly strangers at the chessboard. Since 1903, Winnipeg and Montreal had played an annual telegraph match, Smith and Sawyer a fixture on first board. Now they had four games between them to show who would best the other.

Their games were tense and the two traded wins, but Smith emerged victorious in the end at 9½-2½, Sawyer in second at 8-4. He had now won three Dominion tournaments in a row, the first person ever to do so. He might have won four, had he not moved to the United States next year.

Smith's move to bigger and better things happened because of Emanuel Lasker, and one chess game. Lasker was passing through Winnipeg in June of 1907 on an exhibition tour, and Smith made sure to take this chance to sit down against the world champion.

M. Smith-Em. Lasker, Winnipeg 1907

(notes by the author and Fritz)

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 Nf6 4 O-O d6 5 d4 Bd7 6 Nc3 Be7 7 Re1 exd4 8 Nxd4 O-O 9 Bxc6 bxc6 10 f4 Re8 11 b3 Bf8 12 Bb2 c5 13 Nf3 Bc6 14 Qd3 Qd7 15 Rad1 Qg4 16 Bc1 Re7 17 Re2 Rae8 18 Rde1 Nh5 19 f5 Nf6?



Now that Black has provoked f5, all his pieces except the king bishop are trained on e4. However, his queen is vulnerable to harassment. 19...Nf4 20 Bxf4 Qxf4 would prevent the trouble that follows.

20 h3 Qh5 21 Bg5! Rd7 22 Bh4 Be7 23 g4 Nxe4 24 hxg4 Qxg4+ 25 Rg2 Qf4 26 Nd5 Bxd5 27 exd5 Kf8 28 Rge2 Qg4+ 29 Rg2 Qh5 30 Qe4

30 f6 forces a win after 30...gxf6 31 Re4.

30...f6 31 Rh2 Bd8 32 Qxe8+ Qxe8 33 Rxe8+ Kxe8 34 Re2+ Kf7 35 Be1 g6 36 Nh4 Be7 37 Rg2 g5 38 Nf3 Bf8 39 Re2 h5 40 Kg2 c6 41 c4 cxd5 42 cxd5 Re7 43 Rxe7+ Bxe7 44 Kg3 Kg7 45 Nd2 Kf7 46 Nc4 Ke8 47 Na5 1-0

47...Bd8 48 Nc6 Bb6 49 a4 and the a-pawn will have to fall.

(*Lasker's Chess Magazine*, July 1907)

The two men probably got to talking, perhaps while looking over this very game. Smith may have mentioned that he wrote a chess column in the local newspaper. Lasker, ever in need of staff for his own magazine and suitably impressed by Smith's chess skill, sensed an opportunity. Smith, becoming talkative, may have gone on to express his disappointment in Winnipeg's chess scene of late. Lasker then coolly made his move: He suggested Smith come to New York and join the staff of *Lasker's Chess Magazine*.

We don't know the content of Smith's thoughts as he considered the offer. But it was a hard one to refuse: working for the world's champion, in America's chess metropolis, with the chance to meet the continent's best players every day. More than a young boy in Raudhamel would ever have dared to dream of. Smith closed his shoe shop and headed south.

On arriving in New York, he promptly set to work over the board as well. He joined the Brooklyn Chess Club, and six months later in early 1908, won its tournament on his first try. The previous year's champion, Charles Curt, finished a half point behind and may have taken exception to this, since the two began a match in July of that year. After fifteen games, it was declared drawn at four wins each. Smith was still the champion unscathed.



William Ewart Napier

Things were not going as well at the magazine, though. The autumn of 1907 had seen a credit panic tear through America's financial system, not unlike the current home loan crisis exactly a century later. Only it was worse. Several banks failed, stocks fell by a half, there was ruin on the streets of New York. The magazine noted that "December was a quiet month in American chess," and perceived "a gloom hanging over the Manhattan that is only explicable by that club having so many rich members, and by the comparative if temporary poverty of rich men these days." Lasker himself put words into action and sailed for Europe, virtually abandoning the day to day business of the publication. Things must have gone from bad to worse at the magazine, since by June of 1908 Smith, W.E. Napier, and Charles Nugent had jumped ship and started their own journal, *The Chess Weekly*. In announcing the new venture, the *American Chess Bulletin* noted that all three were graduates of *Lasker's Chess Magazine*. They were more like defectors – or perhaps refugees.

After they left, Lasker's magazine went into full panic mode. Walter Penn Shipley in Philadelphia received a letter from Lasker himself in Berlin, pleading for someone to take it over. When no takers materialized, it ceased operation the following March. Smith, Napier, and Nugent craftily offered to send *LCM* subscribers copies of the *Weekly* for the remainder of their terms.

While they surely felt no glee at the demise of their old home, their abandonment by Lasker when things got tough must have left some traces. Smith, in particular, had travelled the farthest and risked the most to join the project. From then on a certain testiness on his part was noticeable when the topic of discussion turned to Lasker. The *Weekly* wrote in late 1909:

"We have received from Dr Lasker a circular in which he calls for volunteers to come to his rescue in the matter of reviving his chess magazine. He desires to have the labor of indexing, proof-reading and book-keeping taken off his hands and done by volunteers, who will receive as their reward his grateful thanks. The doctor gently suggests that some chess club might undertake this work. He does not say anything about the annotating of games, but from our general knowledge of the World's Champion, we feel quite sure that any of his friends who may feel like exercising their talents along these lines will not have their efforts rejected. The doctor is quite impartial in accepting such small favors from subservient souls who like to bask in the smiles of greatness."
(*The Chess Weekly*, October 23, 1909)

Smith was, by this time, the editor-in-chief of the *Weekly* – Napier and Nugent having disappeared from the masthead – so the words are his own. We don't know if he ever got over his grudge against Lasker.

He was too busy editing the *Weekly* to dwell on it, in any case. Smith had to skip the 1909 Brooklyn club tournament and give up his title. He would receive some help toward the end of the year, when a young Capablanca joined the *Weekly* in the capacity of game annotator. It would feature his name in progressively larger print on the masthead as time went on, in an attempt to capitalize on Capablanca's star status in American chess after his stunning win against Marshall that year. It is hard to tell if this move was born of confidence or desperation. The *Weekly* seemed to be prospering, as its physical format grew from a 4x6-inch booklet to a healthy 6x8½-inch volume. The layout became more sophisticated, and of course, Capablanca's presence added layers

of quality all by itself. Yet, the *Weekly* ceased publication abruptly in March of 1910.

With the closing of the *Weekly*, Smith's short tenure as a budding opinion-maker in American chess came to an end. While it lasted, though, it was as good a chess magazine as any in existence. It appeared four times as often as its monthly rival, the *American Chess Bulletin*, and could compare with it in terms of material over that month. The only regrettable thing about Smith's venture with *The Chess Weekly* is that it is not better known today.

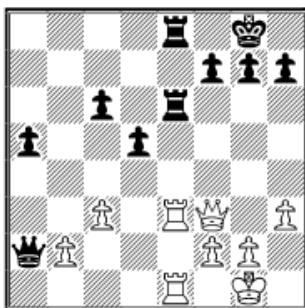
After the *Weekly* closed, Smith had time to play chess again. He evidently had plenty of it, since that autumn he won the Brooklyn club's quarterly handicap tournament with 143 wins and 24 losses. He also came within a half-point of snatching back the full Brooklyn championship tournament, but was edged out by Roy Black, who had also taken away the honors a year before in Smith's absence.

But Smith had returned to the board in earnest, and was making his presence felt in a way he had not in three years. It would lead to the toughest challenge of his career. In January of 1911, the *American Chess Bulletin* was to hold a National Masters Tournament in New York. Among the players: Frank Marshall, U.S. Champion and living legend; J.R. Capablanca, on the eve of his famous win in San Sebastian; Oscar Chajes, former WCA Champion; Albert Hodges, the veteran New York master; Paul Johner, who would win the Swiss championship six times; champions Wolcott from Boston, Black from Brooklyn and Tenenwurz from the Rice Chess Club – among others. Even to be thought of together with this group was an honor; Smith would face each of them in turn over the board and try himself against the strongest collection of American players in a generation.

Two-thirds of the way through, he was holding his own with an even score. One of his wins was this game against Hodges.

A.B. Hodges-M. Smith, New York 1911
(notes by the author and Fritz)

1 d4 e6 2 e4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Be7 5 Bxf6 Bxf6 6 Nf3 c5 7 exd5 exd5 8 Bb5+ Nc6 9 O-O O-O 10 Bxc6 bxc6 11 h3 exd4 12 Nxd4 Qb6 13 Nb3 a5 14 Na4 Qb4 15 Nbc5 Bf5 16 c3 Qf4 17 Qc1 Qh4 18 Qe3 Rfe8 19 Qf3 Re5 20 Nb6 Rae8 21 Nbd7 Bxd7 22 Nxd7 R5e6 23 Nxf6+ Rxf6 24 Rae1 Rfe6 25 Re3 Qa4 26 Rfe1 Qxa2



27 Qg4?

Better was 27 Rxe6 Rxe6 28 Rxe6 fxe6 29 Qe3 Qb1+ 30 Kh2 and now Black's e- and c-pawns are weak. The text allows Black to disrupt White's intentions.

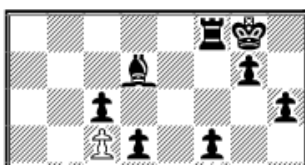
27...h5 28 Qf5 g6 29 Qc2 Rxe3 30 fxe3 a4 31 Qf2 Qb3 32 Rf1 Qb7 33 Qh4 Qxb2 34 Qf6 Qb7 35 Ra1 Ra8 36 h4 a3 37 g4 a2 0-1

(*American Chess Bulletin*, March 1911)

Smith also found himself a pawn up against Marshall early on in their game.

M. Smith-F. Marshall, New York 1911
(notes by the author and Fritz)

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 e6 3 d4 d5 4 exd5 exd5 5 Bb5+ Nc6 6 O-O Nf6 7 Bg5 Be7 8 dxc5 O-O 9 Nc3 Be6 10 Bxc6 bxc6 11 b4 a5 12 a3 h6 13 Bf4 Nh5 14 Be5 axb4 15 axb4 Rxa1 16 Qxa1 f6 17 Nd4 Bd7 18 Bg3 f5 19 Be5 Bf6 20 Nf3 Bxe5 21 Nxe5 Nf4 22 Nd3 Qg5 23 Nxf4 Qxf4



White can now play the aggressive 24 Qa7 Rd8 25 Qb7 and press his queenside advantage. Instead he allows Black into the game over the next few moves.



24 Rb1 Re8 25 b5 d4 26 Qa4? Qd2 27 Qc4
+? Be6 28 Qd3 dxc3 29 b6 Qxd3 30 cxd3
c2 31 Rc1 Be8 32 g3 Re2 33 Kf1 Rd2 34
Ke1 Rd1+ 35 Rxd1 cxd1=Q+ 36 Kxd1
Kf7 37 Kc2 Ke6 38 d4 Kd5 39 Kd3 Ba6+
40 Kc3

40 Ke3 only puts off the inevitable after 40...g5 41 h4 gxh4 42 gxh4 f4+ 43
Kxf4 Kxd4 44 Kg3 Kxc5 45 f4 Kxb6.

40...g5 41 f3 g4 42 f4 Ke4 0-1

(*American Chess Bulletin*, March 1911)

Years before, the *St. Paul Dispatch*, writing about Smith's performance at the 1905 WCA tournament, had commented upon his one apparent weakness: "His temperament is essentially nervous, and unlike Blake and Schrader, a lost game seemed to affect his ability to win the next one, instead of making him stronger for the fray." Perhaps his nervous temperament now hobbled Smith at the critical moment. Three losses to Johner, Capablanca and Jaffe would seal his tournament. Smith finished in the middle of the pack at 5-7, tied with his Brooklyn rival Black. Interestingly, he defeated everyone below him in the score table while losing to everyone above – a symmetry rare in round-robin scores.

The 1911 Masters Tournament was the climax of Smith's career. He never again would play in an event as strong. From then on he limited himself to club tournaments and matches – no small thing, of course, given the strength of New York chess. And his record in those is nothing to be scoffed at: He tied for first with Roy Black in the 1911 Brooklyn tournament, then switched his allegiance to the Manhattan Club and won its tournament the next year, and again the year after that. But there would be no more events of national significance like the Dominion, WCA, or Masters tournaments. After 1915 his participation in local events dwindled too, and soon his name disappeared altogether from the journals.

Around this time Smith had gotten married, to Adel Steinbuhler, daughter of an industrial family from western Pennsylvania. Perhaps family life began to take his time, perhaps at the age of 45 he felt his chess days were behind him, perhaps both. The last full game of his we have is from 1916, and then no more.

The Steinbuhlers would be responsible for the last big move in his itinerant life. In 1920, Smith was out of work and in need of help. His brother-in-law William came to the rescue by offering him a job in the family silk mill. His in-laws hoped that Smith's chess sense would translate into mechanical aptitude, and that he would design innovative machinery for making textiles. Smith packed up and left New York for the tiny village of Titusville, Pennsylvania.

Titusville was the site of America's first oil strike in the 1850s, and had long been a frightening roughneck town. Desperate to diversify – and civilize – the place, its city fathers had offered to build a factory for anyone who would hire women, and by the time of Smith's arrival Titusville had a small industrial base. Still, it was a long way, both geographically and otherwise, from Manhattan.

There was, of course, no chess to be had there. The nearest real competition would have been in Pittsburgh, 80 miles due south, where Howard Dolde held court as champion of western Pennsylvania. But Smith was loath to travel for tournaments – he had to be badgered into playing in Montreal in 1899 – and there is no record of his playing in Pittsburgh. He did not give up chess altogether, as he ventured into giving chess lessons in his home. This was something of a departure for Smith. While he had been a communicator in his capacity as chess journalist, he had never faced the challenge of explaining chess wisdom directly to another person. His reticent nature probably hampered him, and teaching may have felt awkward to the shy and retiring Smith. The chess school was less than a rousing success.

His work at the mill was somewhat less than successful, too. No great technological breakthroughs flowered from his mind, which must have been a

disappointment to both him and the Steinbuhlers. But they kept him on, and he found a place in the machine shop of the mill. The arrangement must have worked out for both, since Smith would stay in Titusville and the mill for the rest of his days.

Toward the end of his life, he became good friends with the local Episcopal minister. Perhaps their friendship included long evenings playing games of chess. It is tempting, and heartening, to imagine Smith ending his days playing chess with the Reverend Broadhurst in Titusville as he had begun them playing with the Reverend Thorkell in Stadharstad. Chess was the only constant in his life. Nothing else remained stable from its beginning through to its end – not even his name. Smith died on September 12, 1934, and was laid to rest in the presence of friends and family. But it could be said that his oldest friend and family all along had been chess.

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