

I Wasn't Like the Cautious Man: the Life of Roy C. Smith As Told to Robert B. King

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1989 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"I Wasn't Like the Cautious Man: the Life of Roy C. Smith As Told to Robert B. King." *The Annals of Iowa* 50 (1989), 319-320.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol50/iss2/39>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

dards for later ships, such as long range, high freeboard, and turrets with sloping armored faces. In a dramatic demonstration of its capabilities, the *Wisconsin* joined Theodore Roosevelt's famous Great White Fleet on its forty-six-thousand-mile voyage around the world. Zeitlin justifiably devotes even more attention to the second *Wisconsin*. One of the famous "Iowa" class built in World War II, this ship, along with her sisters *Iowa*, *New Jersey*, and *Missouri*, were the fastest, best armed, and most damage-resistant battleships that the United States ever constructed. Having fought in World War II and Korea, the *Wisconsin*, fitted with new missiles and anti-aircraft defenses, recently returned to active duty in the fall of 1988 as one of the most cost-effective measures taken by the Reagan administration to rebuild American naval power.

A few minor factual errors diminish only slightly the high quality of this work. Zeitlin writes clear prose and bases his account on authoritative sources such as naval archival materials and interviews with many of the personnel who manned the battleships. The illustrations, fresh and clearly reproduced, aid the reader immensely in grasping the salient points of a most interesting story.

I Wasn't Like the Cautious Man: The Life of Roy C. Smith as Told to Robert B. King. Introduction by H. Roger Grant. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987. xiii, 161 pp. Illustrations. \$15.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ERIC G. PETERSON, DES MOINES, IOWA

Roy C. Smith was born in 1896. His father, a restless Iowa farmer, moved the family often but never prospered; by 1906 (in Kansas) they were near starvation. Young Smith, despising his irresponsible father, struggled to improve his own lot; he became a miner, farmer, auctioneer, grocer, and salesman. In 1925 he founded a Davenport petroleum products company that flourished through the Great Depression and had 150 employees. Later he was a banker, operated an airport, and owned a two-thousand-acre farm.

This volume relates the experiences of Smith's youth and the problems and methods of his small-business career. It also concerns the people who were important to him. Interesting anecdotes reveal the life of the times and Smith's energetic, combative, yet kindly character. H. Roger Grant asserts in his introduction that these memoirs reflect common themes of the transition from the agricultural frontier to industrial society: the prevalence of poverty; the frequent mobility between states and occupations; and the reality of Horatio Alger-type accomplishments.

Unfortunately, the text consists solely of Smith's memories "as told to" Robert B. King. Since King, a newspaperman, says nothing about his own role, we can only guess about his influence on Smith's story, or whether he has exercised a historian's caution. Smith recalls events, some of them more than eighty years old, without the aid of documents except a few photographs. The text contains no notes or bibliography; even its title is a line from a poem which is printed in full but not attributed to anyone. Nevertheless, Smith's simple, lively narrative is believable, and at times compelling.

A. V. Sorensen and the New Omaha, by Harl A. Dalstrom. Omaha: Douglas County Historical Society, 1987. iii, 359 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE H. LARSEN, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI, KANSAS CITY

Axel Vergman Sorensen was born in Denmark in 1903 and died in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1982. He never graduated from high school, but founded a successful regional electrical products supply firm. He became an Omaha civic leader, and in the 1950s headed a charter convention that produced a new city charter for Omaha that voters ratified in 1956. The "Home Rule Charter," which changed Omaha's city government from a commission plan to a strong mayor and council arrangement, got off to an uncertain start amid charges of corruption. In 1965 Sorensen ran for mayor, defeating an incumbent charged with various unsavory dealings. During his four years in office, Sorensen promoted pro-business government. This traditional method ignored minorities, and severe racial disturbances followed. However, Sorensen's leadership ability and common-sense pragmatic approach to municipal government struck a responsive chord with many of Omaha's citizens. After retiring from office, he resumed a role as a civic leader that he maintained for the rest of his life.

Harl A. Dalstrom, a professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, through prodigious primary research fortified by his own deep knowledge of the history of Omaha, has produced an excellent book that places Sorensen in the larger context of the development of post-World War II Omaha. Of special interest is Dalstrom's analytical observation about Sorensen's managerial style: "As a business executive and as a Mayor of Omaha Al Sorensen identified people who he felt could do a particular job and as long as they gave evidence that they were performing their responsibilities diligently and properly, he gave them the latitude they needed to accomplish their tasks" (1). Using methods that had served him well in the

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.