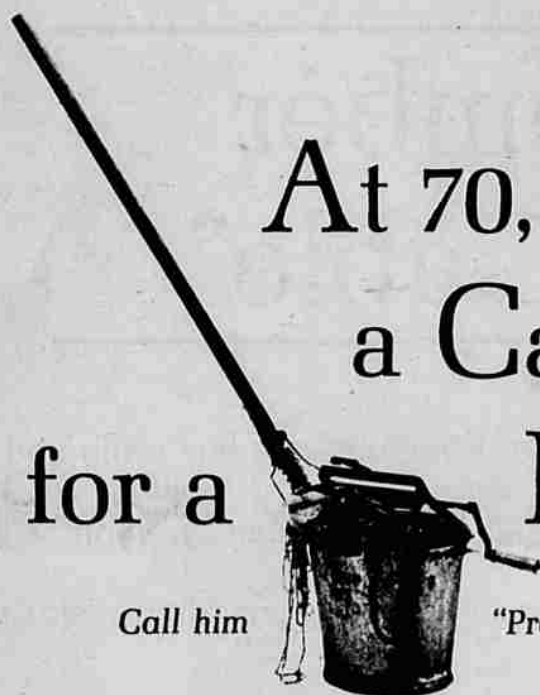




At 70, I Traded a Cap and Gown for a Floor Mop



By JOHN FRANKLIN SMITH
as told to John Ross

Call him

"Professor," "Prof," or "Janitor"—but don't call him "retired"!

MANY LEGENDS revolve about the hallowed grounds of Otterbein College. But when the boys and girls arrive on the Westerville, Ohio, campus for the first time, they're almost certain to hear the story of "Prof" Smith as a part of their orientation.

Smith is one of the school janitors and the oldest relic on the campus. Indeed, according to some versions of dormitory scuttlebutt, he was on hand that day in 1847 when the doors of Otterbein were opened. But the only reason the Smith tale is told at all is because it has a punch line that seems to leave the new freshmen a little stunned.

"And this janitor," the narrator will tell his audience, "used to be a professor at Otterbein."

The story is substantially true. Janitor "Prof" Smith once was known at Otterbein as Professor John Franklin Smith of the speech and dramatics department. His age, however, is grossly exaggerated. He—that is, I—date back only 80 years.

I have often overheard the story told. I have caught the curious stares of our newcomers. But none of this embarrasses me. Indeed, I'm delighted—and, as a matter of fact, quite proud—to be a janitor at Otterbein.

The transition from college professor to college janitor is admittedly an unusual one, but I have never considered it undignified or degrading. In fact, when it occurred some ten years ago, I welcomed the opportunity to continue living as a useful human.

At Otterbein, the mandatory age for retirement is 70. For some, this is a most appropriate time to step down from a job. Others would welcome it at 60, at 65. Still others never are willing to be put out to pasture. I am in the latter group.

In the summer of 1950, when I reached my 70th year, I was not ready to retire. The word simply was not in my vocabulary. I had been teaching

for almost 40 years. I was in excellent health. My mind was clear. And while I respected the rule that required me to bid farewell to the halls of Otterbein, I knew that a large part of me would die as soon as I fell into the arms of retirement and the porch rocker.

Age is a matter of attitude. Instead of retiring I retreated.

The job situation was not attractive. Needless to say, there are few opportunities for a man of 70. I had a chance to sell pens in a store in Columbus, but I didn't particularly relish the long drive back and forth each day. There were one or two other possibilities, but they, too, had unattractive features. Finally, Mrs. Smith and I had virtually decided to take charge of a camp on Lake Erie doing conservation work when I chanced to meet one of our Otterbein officials. We talked about many things before the conversation centered on his difficulty in finding a janitor.

"You wouldn't like to give us a hand in your spare time, would you?" he said jokingly.

Hearty laughter, I suppose, would have been a normal reaction. But there were forces working within me now that caused me to reflect seriously on his words. I had deep roots at Otterbein. I had first stepped on the campus in 1905, and I had learned to love it almost from that very moment. And it was there on that same campus that I'd met my dear wife. Our children followed in our footsteps, too. Yes, Otterbein had been my home—our home.

Would it really matter, I wondered, if I went to work with a mop in the gymnasium rather than with a bit of chalk at the head of a classroom? Not really. It was honest work. And I would still be at Otterbein.

There were other considerations, too. For one thing, the gymnasium was located just across

the street from my home. And the pay was to be \$100 per month—not an unimportant consideration since my only source of income was a small retirement check each month. I took the job.

It is not an easy job. I work about five hours a day, six days a week, scrubbing and polishing floors, scouring water closets and shower rooms, and doing the other usual janitorial chores. But I couldn't be happier. The condition of the gymnasium is my responsibility. When I turn out of bed each morning, I know a lot of people are depending on me to do this work. And I take pride in the glitter of the polished gym floor, almost as much as I did in the pear-shaped tones of my students in speech. This is important to a man of 80.

THERE ARE many other compensations—the companionship of my boys, for instance. They keep me young. I like it when they call me "Prof." It's not aimed at my new station in life. Rather, it's affectionate and warm. I am their confidant, their advisor, their chaplain of sorts. Sometimes I'm Dan Cupid, too. There is just one sad note—four years pass too quickly at college. It has always been so.

There has been an unanticipated security in the switch from professor to janitor, too. As a professor, I did not qualify for Social Security coverage. However, because of my new status, Mrs. Smith and I are now entitled to receive a total of \$103 per month—which helps us a lot.

When my two grandsons recently enrolled at Otterbein I had some uneasy moments. Would they be embarrassed by my new job at the college, I wondered. The answer came quickly. After observing my status with the boys in the gymnasium, both agreed:

"You know, Grandfather, you have a great job in the college because you dignify it."

I couldn't disagree.