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“The Only Colored Drug Store”: Richard Wirt Smith’s Success Story, 1904 – 1911

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“THE ONLY COLORED DRUG
STORE”: RICHARD WIRT
SMITH’S SUCCESS STORY,
1904–1911



Maggie Mace



IN 1905, SMITH & Co. was a thriving, new business located in the heart of Indianapolis, Indiana. An African American man, Richard Wirt Smith owned this pharmacy store. The racial disparities of the early twentieth century did not slow Richard down, but encouraged him to open his business just a year after graduating from Purdue University. Indianapolis was one of the few cities in which African Americans were allowed out past dark, making the city attractive to them. Richard was an active member of this community and regularly advertised in the *Indianapolis Recorder*, a newspaper created for the African

American community, in which he claimed that his business, Smith & Co., was the “only colored drug store” around the Indianapolis area. His dedication and success led him to a prestigious lifestyle that he enjoyed until he enlisted for military service during WWI. His experiences are a window into the racial climate of the period. In this chapter I trace Richard’s accomplishments as a young man from the time of his graduation in 1904 until 1911, the year he was married and entered a new phase of his life.

Richard graduated with a bachelor’s degree in pharmacy in 1904 from Purdue University. There were two hundred and thirty seniors that year, and thirty-six of them were pharmacy students. There were not many students in Purdue’s pharmacy program, however, because it had been recently created in 1894. Richard was just one of two African American students in the 1904 graduating class. Slavery had been abolished just forty years prior and segregation was still strong; therefore, African American enrollment was extremely low. Richard was not allowed to live on campus or in West Lafayette, because he was an African American student.¹ All African American students who attended Purdue during the early 1900s had to live over the bridge until the 1940s.

Most of the men who attended Purdue during this time were involved in different organizations, clubs, and fraternities, but Richard was not. This could have been because he was not allowed to be involved due to his color, or he just simply chose not to be involved. Neither of the African American students in this class had any extracurricular activities listed in the Purdue 1904 *Debris*.² The short biography written next to Richard's picture in the *Debris* does mention "he is the best baseball player in the class and has had considerable experience along that line."³ It is not specified whether he participated with the class club baseball team or the school varsity baseball team. If Smith was on the actual varsity team, he was never listed on the roster or pictured with Purdue's baseball team during his time at Purdue. His picture and information regarding baseball might not be in the *Debris* because he could have been absent on picture day, or the students who ran the *Debris* and student organizations discriminated against him due to his race. The evidence is not conclusive; the lack of involvement could be a coincidence or personal choice, or it could indicate the early struggles of African American students.

A passage from a letter to the editor in the Purdue *Exponent* in the section labeled "Was it 'Gentlemanly'?" leads me to believe that he was not on Purdue's varsity

team. The letter was written in support of white students at Purdue who had yelled racial taunts at an African American player on the Beloit College team who had come to West Lafayette for an away game. The letter says, "Let us ask the question—does a Negro belong on the football team of any white man's school? No! Football is a white man's game and let us play it, as Purdue does, with white men."⁴ If a sentiment existed among students that African Americans should not play on "their" football team, then it is difficult to believe that white students would allow an African American to play on their baseball team. The only reason his baseball skills were probably documented at all in the *Debris* was because the students created their fellow peers' biographies. It is possible that his classmates noticed his fantastic playing skills and sought to recognize them, although he did not play on the varsity team.

Richard's peers apparently thought it was vital to add that he was somewhat of a "buttinsky" in his *Debris* biography. A buttinsky, or a buttinski, is someone who gets involved with other people's business.⁵ It is possible that they called Richard a buttinsky because of his color and thought he was an intruder at a predominantly white college. On the other hand, the *Debris* editors could have known him well enough to tease him. There is no evidence to show that he was subject

to direct racial discrimination, but this label does tell that he was considered a pushy character.

Attending Purdue during this time was a great advantage for African American students because few of them enrolled in college, and especially not colleges that were almost exclusively white. As the Library of Congress exhibit "America at School" explains, "After 1900, as more African Americans achieved a high school education, high schools gradually took on the ideals of the 'common' school that elementary schools had espoused. Typically only the middle or upper classes could afford to send their children to college or university."⁶ Attending college gave Richard a chance to live the American dream. His decision to pursue pharmacy set him apart from the other students, since the program was fairly new to the University and the majority of Purdue students studied engineering and agriculture. Richard chose a very prestigious major for the time period, and his endeavor paid off.

In figure 1, a picture of one of Purdue's pharmacy classes, we see Richard located in almost the very center of the picture. I would expect him to be toward the back or near a corner based on my assumptions about racism at Purdue during this time period. His centrality is almost ironic, since he was mentioned as a buttinsky in his *Debris* excerpt, and here we find him

in the middle of all of his fellow classmates. This depiction hints at the somewhat confusing relationship between African American students and their white counterparts of the time period. Although history often suggests that discrimination was strong in such situations, evidence, such as the pharmacy photo, shows African American students may have been close and comfortable with classmates.



FIGURE 1. RICHARD PICTURED CENTER (*Debris* 1904, 56).

Born in Indianapolis on September 27, 1884, Richard moved back to his hometown after graduation, where he would live the rest of his life. Richard's pharmacy degree took him far in life, considering that a lot of African Americans during this time did not experience great success and usually did not have good pay-

ing, steady jobs.⁷ Between the years of 1894 to 1915 most African Americans were also generally limited in their work opportunities. According to "America at Work," "In Northern cities, African Americans generally held a better economic position than did their Southern peers. Still, their options were limited, as the majority performed labor or service work. Common occupations for men were janitors, servants, and waiters. Women were housekeepers, servants, laundresses, and waitresses."⁸

Shortly after graduation, Richard beat the odds by opening Smith & Co. His business was located in the greater African American community of Indianapolis. Richard appears to have lived above his pharmacy during the first couple years after it opened. His business, along with several other African American-owned businesses, was on Senate Avenue.⁹ The African American community had its own groceries, churches, barbers, theaters, restaurants, drug stores, pharmacies, clothing stores, and so forth, and Richard's pharmacy was an important part of the district.

Indianapolis was a popular city for African Americans, because it was one of the areas where African Americans could be out after dark and actually live as full citizens. By contrast, there were several cities surrounding Indianapolis in which people of color could

not stay out after dark. James Loewen, the author of *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, says, "From Maine to California, thousands of communities kept out African Americans (or sometimes Chinese Americans, Jewish Americans, etc.) by force, law, or custom. These communities are sometimes called 'sundown towns' because some of them posted signs at their city limits reading, typically, 'Nigger, Don't Let The Sun Go Down On You In ____.'"¹⁰

Since Indianapolis did not enact a similar law, the city became somewhat of a safe haven for African American people. The city's acceptance of the population allowed African Americans, and Richard, to build a strong and active community that was uncommon for the time. The strength and success of the community was well documented by a local newspaper.

In addition to the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the city also had two other African American weekly newspapers, the *Freeman* and the *World*. The *Indianapolis Recorder* kept the African American community extremely close and informed, which helped create a strong bond. The newspaper reported on politics, elections, celebrations, and meetings in the African American community. The *Indianapolis Recorder* usually ranged from about four to eight pages of information regarding the African American community.

Underneath the title was its motto: "A Weekly Newspaper Devoted to the Best Interests of the Negroes of Indiana." The *Indianapolis Recorder* was not only focused on the greater Indianapolis area, but also the entire state of Indiana. There are notes from each city in Indiana that discuss various occurrences.¹¹ In this way, the wider African American communities were able to support and know each other.

Although Indianapolis was progressive by the standards of the time, it was by no means a perfect union. Carolyn Brady writes, "Although some white-owned businesses did solicit black customers by advertising in the *Recorder*, many other white storekeepers and restaurant and theater owners refused to serve African Americans or attempted to drive them away by rude treatment or inflated prices."¹² Consequently during this time, African Americans only patronized African American businesses, and the whites patronized white businesses. Therefore, although not legally mandated, segregation still existed and each group experienced separate success. The majority of African Americans were new to the Indianapolis area from the South. The surge of African Americans wanted their own businesses to grow and succeed, and this spirit effectively strengthened Indianapolis.

A lot of the newspaper space was used for advertisements of all of the African American-owned businesses. Richard put out several advertisements in the *Indianapolis Recorder* promoting his pharmacy on North Senate Avenue. Many of the advertisements Richard placed in the newspaper publicized different medicines that he carried, how genuine his business was (he would “give money back if unsatisfied”), and his claims that his was the only “colored drug store” in Indianapolis.¹³ One of the first advertisements Richard ever put in the newspaper in 1905 reads, “Stop, for constipation and all stomach troublers take California Prune Wafers. A sure cure guaranteed or money refunded. R. W. Smith Pharmacist. 13 Senate Avenue.”¹⁴ The line that caught my eye is “or money refunded.” Smith was aware of standard business practices early on in his career. And more, the advertisement perhaps shows that African Americans were looking out for each other and cared about their community.

In 1907, about two and a half years after Richard opened his business, he attended what seems to be a very important meeting. The *Indianapolis Recorder* published a list of several people around the state who were part of a program to be held at Jones Tabernacle, an Indianapolis church. The article’s headline read, “A Great Meeting, Business Men of Indiana to Or-

ganize State League, Attendance Will Be Large—Interesting Program to be Presented.”¹⁵ The mayor of Indianapolis, Charles A. Bookwalter, was at this important meeting for the businessmen and women of Indianapolis. The African American community had extremely successful businesses; the white mayor would not have come to open the meeting if businesses were not thriving. Richard was at this meeting representing his pharmacy. Richard not only attended the meeting, but he also spoke about his business. There were several other African American business owners present who all gave speeches. Many different businesses were represented, such as a barbershop, market, garden business, tailor, hair salon, and a confectionary store. This again speaks to the strength of the Indianapolis African American community.

Another advertisement Richard placed in the *Indianapolis Recorder* said, “Greatest care used, and pure drugs only. The only colored drug store in Indy. Your trade is solicited on Merit. Cor. Senate Ave & 13th Street. New phone 410.”¹⁶ This particular advertisement is an interesting source of information for two reasons. First, Richard claims that he is the “only colored drug store” in his area, which means his business faced little competition and African Americans with pharmacy degrees were a rarity. Also, Richard must

have bought a telephone for his booming business. Fortunately, Richard's business was doing well enough for him to afford a telephone. Purchasing the telephone may have changed the rest of his career, because he now had access to quicker business communication that he lacked before. A lot of the other businesses advertised in the *Indianapolis Recorder* listed that they had telephones as well. His telephone purchase kept him up-to-date with the other local business practices. It also gave him more of an advantage, since, as he again claimed, he was operating the "only colored drug store" in Indianapolis. On the other hand, during my research I kept seeing another druggist's advertisements in the *Indianapolis Reporter* promoting the Carter Rheumatic Cure, although Richard said he was the "only colored drug store" in Indy. It is unclear if the other advertised druggist sold different types of medications, if he was in a city other than Indianapolis, or if the other pharmacy was a white-owned business interested in attracting African American customers.

In 1911, Richard's life changed once again. As the *Indianapolis Recorder* noted, "Richard Wirt Smith, the pharmacist, and Miss Dove Bertha Barbour, a teacher in the public school were quietly married at noon, June 20. Only the relatives and several intimate friends were present. Mr. and Mrs. Smith will be at home to their

friends, at 622 Drake Street.”¹⁷ Dove was a school-teacher in the greater Indianapolis area, but she soon resigned after their marriage.¹⁸ The *Indianapolis Recorder* suggests that Richard and Dove were actively involved with the African American community. They both attended important meetings to benefit themselves and the community as a whole. They were a spiritual couple, meaning they attended church and found it important to live by the word of God. Dove attended concerts, benefits, and gatherings that took place in the churches throughout the African American community.

Over the next few years, Richard still had a few advertisements published in the *Indianapolis Recorder*, but the archival trail runs cold after this point. It is known that he registered for military service on September 12, 1918, but I have not been able to locate any service records.¹⁹ If he did serve, his return to Indianapolis may have been difficult. When African American veterans came back from war, relationships between them and the whites was not in good standing. Sadly, a lot of returning African Americans were murdered and lynched. The war was almost over by 1918, so one wonders why he decided to register so late. During a few months of 1918, men were drafted into the war, which could have been the reason Richard registered.

Richard Wirt Smith
REGISTRATION CARD

NAME: Richard Wirt Smith
RESIDENCE: 602 Drake St Evansville Marion Ind
DATE OF BIRTH: 33 September 27 1884
PLACE OF BIRTH: 33 September 27 1884
OCCUPATION: Druggist
EMPLOYER'S NAME: Self
RELAT: Dave Bertina Smith (Wife)
RESID: 602 Drake St Evansville Marion Ind

REGISTRAR'S REPORT
13-3-13-6
DESCRIPTION OF REGIMENT: _____
REGIMENT: _____ BUILT: _____ COM: _____ CO: _____
RACE: Black
HAIR: Black
EYES: Black
COMPLEXION: Black
DATE OF REGISTRATION: Sept 12/18
SIGNED: George H. Hamilton

FIGURE 2. RICHARD'S REGISTRATION CARD (ANCESTRY.COM).

Perhaps his business began to suffer, and his solution was to move on and serve his country.

Whatever the reason for his registration, from this point on I have been unable to locate more information about him. More information about Richard's success and community involvement awaits a time when I or someone else can continue to pursue the topic. There are many more questions that could be asked. Richard Wirt Smith lived a very successful life even though circumstances were difficult for African American men in this time period. Although his life story as chronicled by this chapter is incomplete, what we do know speaks to the climate of the time. Smith's experiences as a university student and practicing professional show that African Americans were making gains at the turn

on the twentieth century. Furthermore, Indianapolis's liberal approach to African American integration appears to have in fact boosted the city. The community worked very hard to be as successful as possible. Finally, much of Richard's good fortune can be accredited to his pharmacy degree that he earned from Purdue University in 1904. If he had not had a college education, I am not sure how far life would have taken him. In whatever way Richard left this world, I am confident he left in peace.

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Notes

1. His address while attending Purdue was documented as 223 Main Street. 223 Main Street is now a Downtown Bar and Pub named the Black Sparrow.

2. It’s illuminating to compare Smith to some of the white students who were involved while on campus. Irwin Emory Artz’s affiliations were listed as “Sigma Alpha Epsilon; Tau Beta Pi, Wilbur Scholarship; *Debris* Staff, Advertising Manager.” Another white student, Roger Victor Brewster’s affiliations read “Civil Engineering Society; Class Baseball Team; Minstrels; Band; Athletics.”

3. *Debris*, 1904, 110.

4. "Was It 'Gentlemanly'?" *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Oct. 7, 1903.

5. *Merriam-Webster On-Line*, s.v. "buttinsky," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/buttinsky>.

6. "America at School," *Library of Congress*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awlhtml/awlscho.html>.

7. "America at Work," *Library of Congress*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/awlhtml/awlwork.html>.

8. "America at School."

9. His business is longer there. 1301 North Senate Avenue is now an intersection in the Downtown area.

10. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (2005). This book talks about all of the Sundown Towns in the United States during this time.

11. Advertisement for Pharmacy, *Indianapolis Recorder*, Feb. 25, 1905, 2.

12. The passage continues, "Indiana's civil rights law of 1885 stated that places of public accommodation had to serve all people 'regardless of race,' but African Americans who tried to challenge discriminatory practices in court could lose when judges resorted to very literal interpretations of the law." Originally published in C. M. Brady, "Indianapolis and The Great Migration, 1900-1920," *Black History News & Notes* 65 (Aug. 1996), <http://www.carolynbrady.com/indymigration.html>.

13. A note from the city of Lafayette on May 12, 1906, said, "R. Wirt Smith of Indianapolis was in the city this week." "Lafayette," *Indianapolis Recorder*, May 5, 1906, 3.

14. Advertisement for Pharmacy, *Indianapolis Recorder*, Feb. 25, 1905, 2.

15. "A Great Meeting," *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 27, 1907, 1.

16. Advertisement for Pharmacy. *Indianapolis Recorder*, Feb. 29, 1908, 4.

17. "In Club Circles," *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 24, 1911, 4.

18. "Resignations." *Indianapolis Star*, June 15, 1912, 11.

19. Richard Wirt Smith, Registration card, September 12, 1918, Ancestry.com, *U.S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918* (Provo, Utah: Ancestry.com Operations), 2005.