

# Vanilla, Politics and Time Are Ingredients In Full Happy Life of Ramsey's Smeltzer

By JAMES RENSENBRINK

RAMSEY — When Chester A. Smeltzer comes down the stairs of his home at 53 Lake St., he passes an old clock that will not change its view that the time is 6 o'clock. And then he goes to the door to get his mail, a far longer journey in terms of time than the few steps actually needed.

Superficially, the trip is short, but it involves historically a movement from 1835 through 1964, to 1966, as evidenced by the postmarked mail.

Nothing is more certain to Smeltzer than the truth that space is relative, and that the length of a step is dependent upon who takes it.

Before leaving the upstairs, for instance, the former politician (who "detests" politics) passes a pile of hand-wrought quilts which has been produced by his wife's family for five generations, dating back to 1835, and which he talks about before area ladies' groups with a great deal of affection and expertise.

## Hands Stand Still

Past this, the 80-year-old former mayor of this borough and former member of the Board of Chosen Freeholders, descends the stairs, and comes upon the impressive Willard Banjo clock, the hands of which will not move from their straight up and down position.

They will not do so, not because the clock is no longer competent, Smeltzer explains, but because at 6 a.m. two years ago, his wife Mary Elizabeth died, and so the hands will stay there like whispers that regretfully insist that time, indeed, does have a stop.

Going on toward the doorway, Smeltzer may however have to move a few paces back. Possibly his eye might light on the wall to the left, for example, where a plaque reminds him of his actual life work with the "Romance of the Vanilla."

The plaque is from the French government and on it are the vanilla stamps that were produced in Madagascar in 1957. The plaque notes that the stamps were:

"Suggested to the postal authorities by C. A. Smeltzer is entirely in the present, ready to answer questions, discuss some phase of county politics over the phone, or to laugh at a joke.

## Forceful Views

At 80, the ex-politician, expert on quilts and vanilla, and lecturer, is hale and hearty physically, and from a mental standpoint definite and forceful in his views. He declared recently:

"Politics is a matter of compromise. In fact, compromise is the by-word in politics. If you want to stay in it you have to play the game."

About the city and the suburbs, he said:

"I love the country. I came here because I loved it and was willing to put up with the country's inconveniences. But now, if someone thinks of moving from an apartment in Brooklyn to an apartment in Ramsey—he might as well stay in Brooklyn. It's almost the same thing. The rural communities are developing into miniature cities."

Smeltzer himself was born in Brooklyn in 1886. The son of a Baptist clergyman, he acknowledged that he was afraid his father was going to try to make him a minister, too, and he enrolled in a business college in Brooklyn, at 16.

After college, he joined an import and export house in New York City, and specialized in the vanilla.

For about 20 years he worked for the firm as its United States representative for the vanilla product. In 1933 he began his own business, importing the vanilla from the producing countries of the world.

## Loves Vanilla Story

The story of the delicate vanilla plant, how the drink made from its flower was discovered by Cortez, and the difficulties encountered in attempting to grow the plant in areas other than Mexico, is a story in itself, and one that Smeltzer tells with a verve and enjoyment.

What emerges though, in addition to his obvious technical grasp of his subject, is the satisfaction and joy he obtained from his work—a work in which he is still involved.

Smeltzer presently acts in an advisory capacity for Garden State Farms in matters relating to the vanilla.

An additional benefit he has derived from his work is the great amount of travel implicit to it. He reported a particular affection for Mexico where he and his wife often spent three or four months out of the year.



CHESTER A. SMELTZER  
Time Does Stand Still

In 1938, Smeltzer started his career as a public official by becoming a member of the Library Board here. In 1944, he became a member of the Borough Council, and in 1949, he became mayor.

He was mayor for three years, when he joined the freeholders. He was a member of the county governing body for six years.

## Defends "Orphan"

During the period before becoming a freeholder and after becoming one, Smeltzer said he was "most vociferous in my demands" for what he felt were some of the needs of "the Little Orphan Annie of the county, Northwest Bergen."

He said very often he felt himself to be someone "hollering in the wilderness; I couldn't be heard. . ."

Some things were achieved however, and Smeltzer said he counted his finest achievement, the bringing of the Camp-gaw Mountain Reservation into the county park program. The 600 acres were purchased for \$150 an acre, he noted.

He declared that he much preferred business to politics but that he had entered politics "because I thought I could do a job."

In politics, he observed, "it's, 'I'll vote for your bill if you vote for my bill,' and maybe you don't really even like his bill, but you do it because you want to see yours get through."

In business, meanwhile, there's the straight back and forth dealing between the business and customer, he remarked.

As for the quilts, this art—and it is an art, Smeltzer emphasized—was begun by Mrs. Smeltzer's great-grandmother, was continued by her grandmother, her mother, herself, and has been passed on to Mr. and Mrs. Smeltzer's two daughters, Dorothy and Marjorie.

The daughters are married and live in New York State.

The good traditions, and the perpetuation of these traditions are among those features of life that immeasurably enrich it, Smeltzer believes. The good in the present, he understands, has its roots in the past—which at most is only a step or two away.

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