

Dec 1987?

City & State

Greensboro News & Record

Obituaries, Business



Landmark News Service

Thomas W. Lambeth, executive director of Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, with portrait of Smith Reynolds

Smith Reynolds: The man and the mystery

By MASON PETERS
Landmark News Service

Time has gentled memories of that sultry midsummer night in 1932 when a pistol shot in a bedroom caused a murder so mysterious that even today it echoes across half a century, but with a message of help and hope instead of horror.

Zachary Smith Reynolds' tragic slaying has had a happy ending for thousands of North Carolinians far removed from the tormented life of the 21-year-old heir to a tobacco fortune.

It was half a century ago this past August that Smith Reynolds' older brother, R.J. Jr., and two doting Reynolds sisters, Mary Reynolds Babcock and Nancy Susan Reynolds, began the work of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to memorialize their lost sibling.

In 1986, the foundation handed out \$7.8 million in 173 grants.

And Nov. 14, at a meeting in Charlotte, the trustees gave away another huge sum — the 1987 grants for North Carolina. The trustees convene each spring and

autumn to spend about 94 percent of the \$150 million fund's annual earnings. Since 1936 they have spent \$133 million.

For 14 years, Thomas W. Lambeth, 52, the executive director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, has steered the foundation amongst the 10 strong-willed Reynolds family trustees.

Benefactions of Reynolds' trustees are always eclectic and sometimes eccentric: In addition to Durham lesbians, who got \$16,000 last year for an AIDS program,

the University of North Carolina Center for Public Television received \$25,000 to put on a show called "Infamous Love."

That was cutting close to the bone.

Z. Smith Reynolds was the lonely, youngest son of old Richard Joshua Reynolds — RJR — a grim and godlike father that Smith, the boy, hardly knew. R.J. Reynolds died in 1917 when he was 68 and Smith was 6. "Old Dick" marketed

(See Reynolds, B11)

Reynolds

From B1

86 different brands of chewing tobacco before everything turned to gold in 1913 when he put a picture of a one-humped dromedary on a pack of cigarettes and sold them as two-humped Camels.

In his will, the elder Reynolds left each of his four children \$20 million, but Old Dick stipulated that the two sons and two daughters must reach 28 before they got their share.

Zachary Smith Reynolds never did. He died when a bullet tunneled through his brain.

In the sticky summer months of 1932 the whole nation briefly forgot the Great Depression and watched with morbid fascination as the tragedy of young Smith Reynolds' slaying unfolded.

Reynolds owned a Mauser automatic. A bullet from this small handgun killed him soon after midnight on July 6, 1932, in the second-floor master bedroom of Reynolda House, the vast family mansion on the northwest outskirts of Winston-Salem. When the gun went off, Reynolds was involved in a jealous argument with Libby Holman Reynolds, 28, his torch-singing Broadway bride of a few months.

Libby Holman married Smith at the peak of her musical-comedy success. Neither New York nor Hollywood has since had a star quite like her — "rotten ripe" was the way she was described by Clifton Webb, a co-star.

In 1929 "The Little Show" brought stardom to Libby and her gritty ballad "Moanin' Low," made her nationally famous. Even greater triumph came a year later when she sang "Something To Remember You By" and the classic "Body and Soul" in the musical "Three's a Crowd." "Body And Soul" became one of the biggest-selling records of all time.

Libby swore before the coroner's jury that she couldn't remember how her young husband had died. She told jurors that Smith shot himself, then fell across her on the bed, his blood drenching her negligee. She couldn't offer details, she said, because her mind had gone blank.

"I remember the pistol at his head," Libby said.

"Do you remember anything after that?" asked Forsyth County prosecutor Carlisle Higgins, who later became an aide to Gen. Douglas MacArthur and a justice on the N.C. Supreme Court.

"No," Libby answered. "Nothing. I have this feeling that Smitty was in my arms and I felt his blood. But it is a haze ... it is blurred."

And then Libby said she was pregnant.

The coroner's jurors, awed by Libby's lush appearance and the stunning presence of an unborn Reynolds heir, knew they had a mess on their hands. They were told that the red and white lounging pajamas Libby wore on the fatal night were found on a downstairs sofa, and her slippers were under the bed in a room occupied by Albert "Ab"

Walker, Smith's best friend.

Walker, a handsome and husky 19-year-old, told the inquest that at the time of the shooting he was downstairs cleaning up after what a Winston-Salem newspaper called a "wild barbecue and corn whiskey bash" for a group of Smith's friends.

Smith drank only sparingly, but there was testimony that Libby and Walker were drunk by 9 p.m. Libby wandered off on a late-hour stroll through the grounds of Reynolda House and returned, her lounging pajamas grass-stained, shortly before midnight and soon was involved in the bedroom shouting match with her young husband.

Libby's amnesia remained impenetrable. The inquest evidence grew murkier. Finally, the jurors rejected suicide. They said Smith met death at the hands of a "person or persons unknown." Legally, that made it murder.

On Aug. 4, 1932, a Forsyth County grand jury made it official:

"On or about the 6th day of July, 1932, Elizabeth Holman and Albert Walker with force of arms ... did unlawfully, willfully, feloniously, premeditatedly of their malice or forethought wound and murder Z. Smith Reynolds."

But how?

Nobody ever found the ejected cartridge case from the Mauser. Several Reynolds family retainers hastily called to the midnight murder scene said they searched but couldn't find a gun in Smith's and Libby's bedroom. But after Ab Walker returned from the hospital where he and Libby had carried Smith to die, a new search revealed the Mauser in plain sight at the foot of the blood-drenched bed.

Then Carlisle Higgins suddenly dropped the murder charges.

It was soon learned that William N. "Mr. Will" Reynolds, Old Dick's brother and the senior member of the RJR family, had written a pointed letter to Higgins:

"Knowing Smith as I did and realizing the many fine traits of character he had, I am convinced that his attitude toward life was such that he would not have intentionally shot himself. ... But it is true in my mind and in that of Smith's brother and sisters that the evidence fails to prove conclusively that Smith was murdered. ... If you deem it right and fair and in the public interest that the case be dropped, then the action will evoke no open criticism from me or other members of Smith's family," the elder Reynolds wrote.

Higgins didn't have to be reminded that Libby's unborn baby created a legal situation that might win for the actress all of her late husband's wealth. Without a compromise that would avoid a messy trial, the scandal-dreading Reynolds family — and Smith's first wife and baby daughter — could spend a lifetime in court fighting over the estate.

There was little surprise in the Reynolds family when Carlisle Hig-

gins got up and said he didn't think he had enough evidence "to justify the state going to trial. If the defendants are not guilty, the least the state can do now is to stop the prosecution."

After she was freed, Libby left Winston-Salem. In Philadelphia seven months after Smith died, she had the baby — named Christopher. Meanwhile, lawyers for Libby and the Reynolds family politely battled over the division of Smith's share of Old Dick's money.

The compromise sought by "Mr. Will" Reynolds to avoid a scandal directly resulted in establishment of the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (with a more than \$7 million endowment) as well as, later, the Christopher Reynolds Foundation, named for the son Z. Smith Reynolds never saw (and who also died as a youth in a mountain-climbing accident).

Smith's brother and his two sisters put many millions more into the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. Subsequently a trust established by "Mr. Will" added \$39.5 million. At the close of business in 1986, the market value of the memorial to Smith was \$150,533,923.

In 1937, five years after Smith Reynolds was killed, the first grant by the Reynolds Foundation set a pattern for the unusual that has remained in effect ever since.

The initial beneficence was for

\$100,000 to publicly fight venereal disease in North Carolina — and 50 years ago that was a startling move by the rich Reynolds family trustees.

In the beginning, the trustees built and abetted hospitals on a heroic scale. As manners and mores changed, so did the mood of the Reynolds board. Civil rights has now become a major concern, as has rehabilitation and a more compassionate jail life for criminals — particularly pregnant women prisoners.

The Reynolds foundation was also responsible for a most unusual educational hegira.

Wake Forest College — now university — was moved from its namesake community north of Raleigh to a new homesite 110 miles to the west in Winston-Salem primarily with Reynolds money.

How? Why?

"Mr. Will" Reynolds headed a group of Winston-Salem citizens who wanted an institution of higher learning in the area; in 1956 a transplanted Wake Forest University was dedicated. The move at first drew resistance from Baptist leaders who operated the Wake Forest institution.

But guarantees of enormous annual support from the Reynolds Foundation overcame objections. Endowments to Wake Forest in 1986 were \$2,370,000.



ZACHARY SMITH REYNOLDS

1911-1932

THIS BUILDING WAS ERRECTED IN MEMORY OF
Z. SMITH REYNOLDS WITH FUNDS GIVEN BY THE
FOUNDATION WHICH RELAYS ARE HONORS HIS NAME