

The bullet-proof casket

We continue our regular series of instalments from the book "60 years with men and machines" - the autobiography of US machinist and author Fred Herbert Colvin (1867-1965). His first-hand experiences of those bygone days are sure to give us unique and fascinating insights into the era which laid the foundations of the industry. Here, Fred relates his experiences with a "prophet" during the 1890s

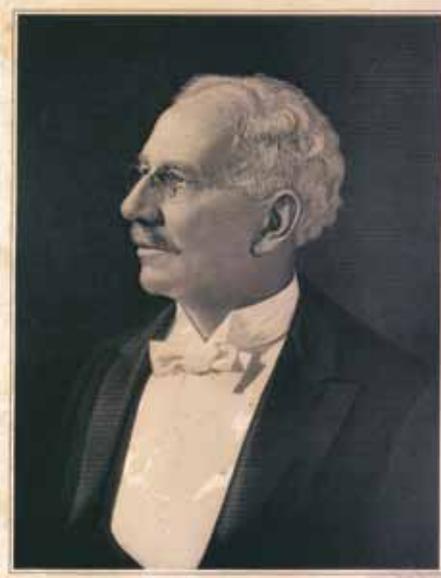
By Fred Colvin

The dashing figure of Oberlin Smith rises before my mind. Not as he delivered a profound paper on the subject of drawing presses, but as he tripped the light fantastic during the gay 90s, with a fair partner at one of the early A.S.M.E. dances. For even in his late 70s, Oberlin loved to dance almost as much as he loved to tinker with machinery. My first contact with Oberlin was through an article I had written, which caught Oberlin's eye and he sent me a very flattering letter of commendation, raising my ego to new heights.

Being an official of the Ferracute Machine Company of New Jersey, he cordially invited me to visit his plant, and gave me more than one personally conducted tour of the several shops, answering my endless questions with patience as well as clarity.

The punch and coining presses made by the Ferracute Machine Company, after his designs, were very well known at the time, not only for their efficiency but also for their unusual size, as well as for the uses they were put to.

On one occasion he invited me to his plant to see a new type of drawing press in operation, which he said was designed for making a highly essential product that every member of civilized society would sooner or later have to buy. Interested at once, I asked him what this highly essential product was. "Come down to the plant, Fred," he replied, "and see for yourself." When I arrived, Oberlin pointed with pride to what was then the largest drawing press I had ever seen. "Isn't it a beauty?" he beamed, while I stared at the huge machine. "It certainly is big enough," I replied. "What is this indispensable article of consumer goods you intend to turn out with it?" "Coffins. One-piece steel coffins. Can you imagine the pos-



Oberlin Smith
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sibilities? Seamless-steel, corrosion-proof caskets, guaranteed to last a hundred years even in the worst type of subsoil. Can you imagine anybody wanting to be buried in an old-fashioned wooden casket once these are on the market?"

I said I couldn't imagine.

It turned out later that the company which had expected to manufacture these durable items had considerable difficulty in disposing of them to prospective purchasers, who may not have relished being thus encumbered on resurrection day, and went on favoring the old-fashioned method of interment.

In any event, a considerable number of these steel caskets accumulated in their warehouse, and no one had any idea what to do with them, until it was discovered during the First World War that these caskets were ideal for storing and shipping loaded shells and other types of ammunition. Thus, with fitting irony, the caskets were eventually put to a specialized use in the field for which they had been originally designed.

Oberlin Smith was a man of many parts, for besides being the author of a standard text entitled "The Press Working of Metals," he was also an inventor of considerable talent and possessed keen foresight as to the possibilities of future mechanical developments. As early as 1891, in a lecture given before the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, he predicted the tremendous expansion of the automobile industry that was to take place forty years later, the widespread use of electricity for light and power, and prophesied many of the inventions and technological developments of our present era, such as electric refrigeration, air conditioning, long-distance telephony, and even network radio. For those who may not realize that these things were practically unthinkable in the 'nineties, I should like to point out that Oberlin turned out to be an exceptionally accurate prophet.

Oberlin Smith's flair for labor saving gadgets together with his sound practical knowledge of what the machines of his day could be made to do was demonstrated to me quite dramatically one day, on one of my first visits to his home. He was driving me thither in one of the latest model horseless carriages of the day, and as we turned in to the driveway he stopped, reached out, and pressed a button in a corner post of the porch. I thought at first he was ringing a doorbell to announce our arrival, but instead I was surprised to see the garage doors opening by themselves as Oberlin serenely restarted the buggy and drove it into its stall.

To be continued...

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