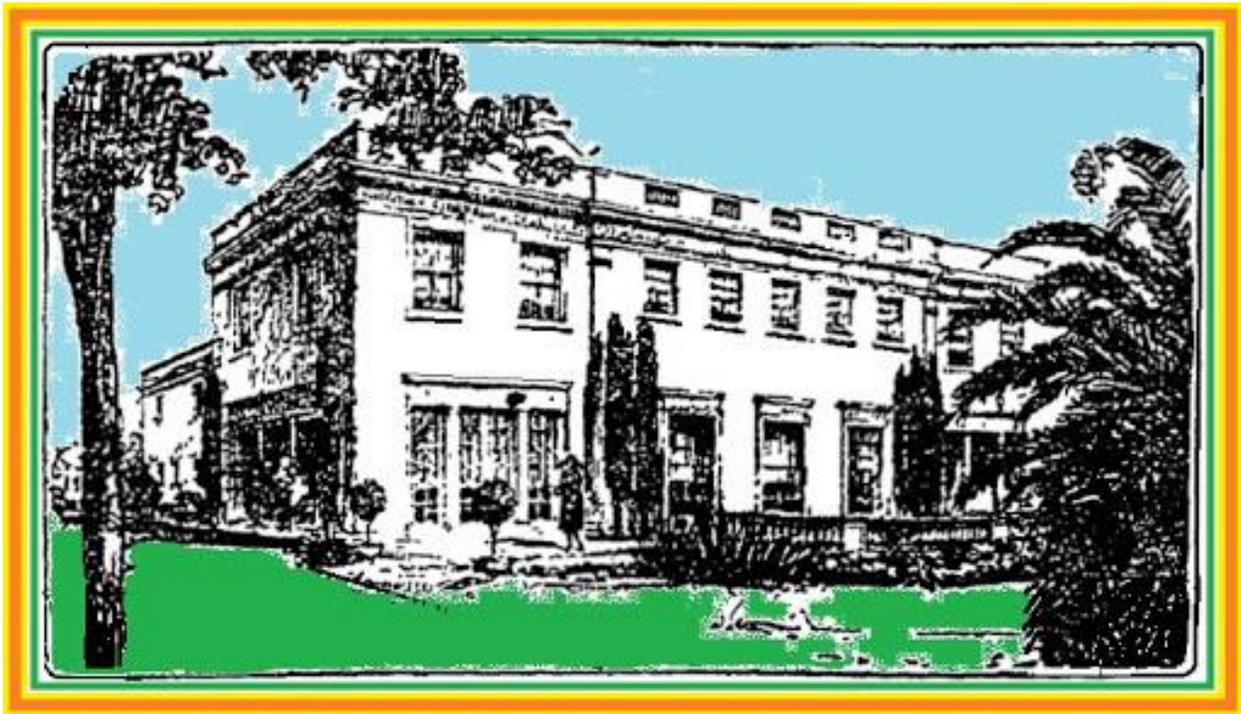


E.M. Smith Story and Berkeley Square

HISTORIC LOS ANGELES

BERKELEY SQUARE

RESURRECTING A WEST ADAMS STREET LOST TO THE FREEWAY



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#33 Berkeley Square:

The E. M. Smith House

Lest you think life at the west end of Berkeley Square was, well, all *square*, the last house—though not the last post—we will see on our tour affords us some of the color of the sharp business moguls and their haughty, bosomy society matron wives one might have seen in films of the era. But first, the odd house numbering of #33 must be commented upon. While there is no record of his having owned Lot 15, it's possible that William Henry Davis next door may have claimed the number #25 as his address for a double plot, later selling the northwesternmost Lot 15. For some reason the house that rose on it would be designated not #27 or #29 or #31—but #33, the sound of which does, I suppose, have a nice ring to it—perhaps euphony is all there was to it. At any rate, flying figured in the new household on Lot 15 (as it would later in the Davis/Ricklefs house next door) when dynamic businessman Edward Morris Smith and his jewelry-mad wife, Marian, spent \$75,000 to build the grand #33 in 1923.

THE FOUNDER
AND HEAD
OF THE
MIGHTY
CHAIN
OF
EMSCO
COMPANIES

EMSCO

EMSCO



T. M. SMITH



EmSCO
AIRCRAFT CORPORATION

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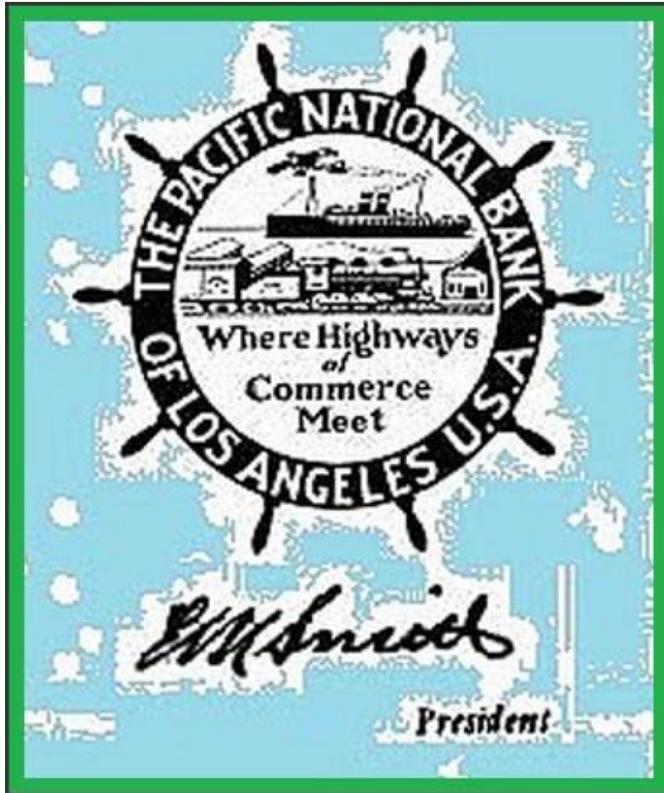
DOWNNEY

CALIFORNIA



AIRCRAFT CORPORATION

E. M. Smith was a Pennsylvanian, born in Pittsburg (as it was then spelled) in 1881. He came west for clean air and room enough for his great ambition. A family fortune derived from an oil-well drill-bit patent allowed him to pursue several ventures before he formed the first of his EMSCO companies in 1911 to manufacture transmission belting, rubber products, and brake linings. The latter line developed into a separate business, EMSCO Asbestos. And then the EMSCOs multiplied like rabbits: There were soon the EMSCO Refractories Company, the EMSCO Derrick and Equipment Company, the EMSCO Aero Engine Company, and the EMSCO Aircraft Corporation. It was his aviation-related units that seemed to capture Smith's interest the most. In the late '20s he bought a 73-acre ranch in Downey and built an airport with two runways and an assembly plant to manufacture a full line of land and amphibious aircraft. Special orders included eight bombers for the Mexican government (bombers for Mexico?) and a stunt plane for a Romanian prince. EMSCO Aircraft was well capitalized and able to attract some of the best talent in the industry, including Gerald Vultee, whose initial would later become the "V" in Convair (the contraction of "Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft"). The Depression, however, slowed orders to the point that it became more profitable for Smith to lease his facilities to other firms. It wasn't as though E. M. didn't have other businesses to attend to, however—not only were there the other EMSCOs, there were now the D&B Pump and Supply Company, the Peerless Pump Company, the National Tools and Metals Company, and his presidency of the Pacific National Bank. Even pushing 40, E. M. would probably have been content to work hard and play the field—but then he met a wily woman with a big bear trap, the woman behind #33 Berkeley Square.



Marian McGuire Fether is described by a great-granddaughter as a kind of gender-bender, possessing "a man's mind in a woman's body." Further characterized by her descendant as "a very self-determined woman" who nevertheless determined that "her only way of pushing ahead in business was through a man," it seems that she sent Mr. Fether packing when longtime bachelor E. M. Smith came into her orbit. While her social ambitions are clearer in available records than any interest she might have had in business, divorcée Fether would be getting a twofer in E. M. Smith if she *had* wished to gain a foothold in industry; whatever her motives, love or money or the front office, Marian managed to get her new prize to the altar by 1919. The couple at first lived on Budlong Avenue and then near the beach in Venice with her two sons by Frank Fether, Kenneth and Donald; later in 1919 the latter would be charged and acquitted of murder in the Dreiserian lake drowning of an Ithaca, New York, girl while he was at Cornell. Donald Fether's story made *The New York Times* and just about every other paper in the country, echoing as it did the famous 1906 Chester Gillette case in the Adirondacks upon which Dreiser based *An American Tragedy*. His mother's exploits were covered by the various Los Angeles papers of the day and provided a break from the usual recitation of club activities, teas, and card parties of more circumspect matrons.

Over her early life Marian seems to have transmogrified from the very Irish Mary Ann McGuire, born over her father's Ohio tavern, to Marian and then to Mimmie. By the time she married E. M., she had also shaved five years off her age. In what easily could have been an inspiration for a later Joan Crawford

movie, Mimmie altered her past, and, now funded by E. M., quickly adopted a Society mien and became adept at finding ways to spend E.M.'s business profits. Her focus would become serious jewelry. But first, not to be outdone by former telephone operator and equally Irish Estelle Doheny of Chester Place, she needed a suitable new house—there would be no more bungalows for Mimmie. In 1922, just as there was the bat's-squeak of a hint that fashion beginning to turn away from Berkeley Square, the Smiths commissioned one of the prettiest and most distinctive houses—certainly one of the most formal and expensive--ever built on the street. The couple's religious persuasion led them to hire local talent Merl Lee Barker, architect of many Catholic institutions including Mount Carmel High School on South Hoover (demolished) and the Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverly Hills (still standing) to do a rare private house. Though every American city had its copies during this period and there were others in Los Angeles, Barker came up with Berkeley Square's only Petit Trianon for the Smiths in 1923—a 14-room, \$75,000 palace complete with the Pompeiian breakfast parlor that had supplanted the Japanese tea room as the must-have for matrons of fashion. And if one was given to wearing jewels while having morning coffee, what better way to show off them off than in a clean white toga against a mural of Vesuvius? All the baubles Mimmie was collecting would certainly have looked better so displayed than against a busy kimona in an ersatz pagoda at teatime. Whatever the national backdrop, Mimmie had Marie Antoinette ideas, including little sense of discretion. And so #33 became the source of much tabloid fodder during the Smith years.



The interior of #33 was featured in the *Los Angeles Times* on October 12, 1924

Mimmie didn't confine the wearing of her many stomachers, headache bands, chokers, and fetishes to home. On October 27, 1925, Mimmie and two chums, Mrs. J. M. MacAdam of North Arden Boulevard and Mrs. H. H. Clark of Victoria Park Drive, were ambushed as they arrived home from the theater. While the more understated mesdames MacAdam and Clark were relieved only of their reticules containing a total of \$185, and James the chauffeur lost his wallet containing \$13, Mimmie was forced to surrender her dowager's-hump-inducing burden of \$58,000 worth of diamonds and pearls to the gun-wielding bandits. The Smiths seemed not to understand that if one was to allow multiple interior photographs of one's lavish Berkeley Square home to appear in the *Los Angeles Times*, as they had in 1924, it was probably not a good idea to be seen standing out like a Fabergé egg downtown at the Philharmonic Auditorium. To be fair, one suspects that E. M. wasn't much interested in society and that it was Mimmie who felt that when you've got it, flaunt it. Perhaps she felt that the occasional run-in with the yeggman or the porch-climber was just the cost of doing a society matron's business.

In a particularly dramatic and even brutal episode on May 11, 1933, Mimmie, returning home from luncheon at the new Perino's and an afternoon of shopping at Bullock's-Wilshire, was again ambushed and stripped of finery. This time she was bound and gagged in her bedroom, her head covered in one of her monogrammed pillowcases—by the way, where *were* the *domestiques*? She was then badly beaten, and the plunderers made off with \$30,000 worth of jewelry, cash, ermine, and mink. In spite of yet another of her serious encounters with footpads and prowlers, the notion that she might be making herself a target apparently had still not occurred to Mrs. E. M. Smith.

Amazingly, on August 5, 1934, it happened yet again. It's a wonder that insurance could be found to cover her constant losses, but nevermind. Crooks bound and gagged Mimmie once more, absconding with another \$30,000 worth of jewelry and furs. Of the \$114 taken from her pocketbook, she asked for the return of some money for her stakes in a card game planned with the girls the next afternoon; \$14 was tucked back into her cleavage. After the accommodating robbers left the house, Mimmie managed to inchworm her way to the telephone, loosen her now-naked ring finger, and dial the operator. One imagines the desk sergeant who answered the call covering the mouthpiece and announcing to the squad room, "That dame on Berkeley Square has gotten herself rolled again!" Apparently, Mimmie spent so much on jewelry and furs that she had to run #33 on a skeleton staff. No servants ever seemed to be around in madame's moments of bondage. Neither were her sons. And by this time E. M. probably spent whatever time he took away from his offices on the links or with Mrs. Biederhof.



Glimpses of the E. M. Smith house are seen in *Mary, Queen of Tots* (1925), with Mickey Daniels and Joe Cobb, above, and in the 1926 Charley Chase comedy *Crazy Like a Fox*, below. These views are from [#22 Berkeley Square](#), home of the films' producer, Hal Roach. Difficult to discern is Mimmie Smith standing on her steps; neighborhood opinion varied as to whether she was shaking her finger at the cameras for invading her privacy or in objection to Mary Kornman having been cast as queen.



After this third major armed robbery, Mimmie seemed to enjoy courtroom appearances as much as Hazel Glab. On August 3, 1935, while speaking to the grand jury about the 1934 robbery—thought to be the handiwork of a ring of thieves operating in and around the Wilshire district and in San Marino—Mimmie complained of tactics used by the LAPD to investigate the prior incidents at her home, and was further agitated when she discovered that a Dictograph was being used surreptitiously to record her testimony. Four days later, a police radio car was summoned once again to #33 Berkeley Square. (Who, by the way, knew that Dictographs and "calling all cars" were in operation in 1935?) Returning to the Hall of Justice, Mimmie told the grand jury that her family had been awakened by the sound of the front-door lock being broken by an intruder—"JURY TOLD TERRORISM," the *Times* reported. The next morning wires were found in the Smith drawing room that Mimmie recognized as the type used to connect a Dictograph. Though the grand jury (whom Mimmie suspected of the bugging) and LAPD detectives denied that they had anything to do with any recording activities at #33 or at the Hall of Justice, following this latest intrusion, a police guard was placed on duty at #33. It was removed a week later, though the house continued to be monitored "from strategic points

of concealment." Detectives later reported that during this time "mysterious and intimidating happenings had occurred," without elaborating.

Soon after, the leader of the gold coast burglary ring, one Vahan Rejebian, was apprehended. Mimmie's jewelry stolen in 1934 was eventually recovered in locales as various as Tijuana, Chicago, and San Francisco. At this point, probably uninsurable and a squad room punchline, Mimmie either hired J. J. Gittes as her shadow or took a vow of poverty and sent all her jewels to Rome, for there were no more recorded incidents involving their unauthorized removal from the pirate's treasure chest at #33. Her future was less glittery—sadder, certainly, but not without drama.

Mimmie's sons Ken and Don had lived in Downey for some years; perhaps their residency there was due to their stepfather's employment opportunities. Don's Cornell engineering degree would have helped him at Emsco, though Ken, married with four children, was known to be in the insurance business at one point. It is hoped that he bought very good life and fire policies for himself: On September 11, 1939, the *Los Angeles Times* reported "FLAMES FATAL TO BED SMOKER: Slumped behind his burning bed Kenneth W. Fether, 39-year-old son of Mrs. E. M. Smith, wife of the head of Emsco Refractories, was found dead early yesterday at his home in Downey." It was the third recent call to firemen regarding a smoking incident in the same bedroom. An unused fire extinguisher was mounted on the wall near the head of the Fether bed. Four of Mimmie's grandchildren were asleep in the next room, but unharmed; Mrs. Fether was spending the night with friends in L. A..... A sad story, one with all the makings of a James M. Cain novel, one to sit alongside the Dreiser tale of his brother.

E. M. appears to have been an unsnobbish man, disinterested in the clubs or cliques or formality of the local haute bourgeoisie, or, perhaps, it was they who were disinterested in him, thanks to his wife's gaucherie, hauteur, and too-public profile. Mimmie's propensity for drama must have grown tiresome, not to say expensive. At any rate, by 1941, E. M. wanted out. The Smiths were divorced after 25 years together. The 1942 L. A. city directory lists E. M. as living in Whittier near his Downey offices, with Mimmie listed at #33 with her current chauffeur, Raoul Adams. Next to her name is the notation "wid E. M."—a distinction perhaps in error, or supplied by Mimmie herself to indicate her wish for E. M.'s state of health. But E. M. was far from dead. According to one extended family member, he either had a new squeeze or possibly even a new wife, a woman known to the source only as Katherine, who was to later die in an automobile accident. E. M. lived out the 1940s in Newport Beach and on his Arizona ranch, the Bar Hart, until his death in Los Angeles at age 69 on St. Patrick's Day, 1950.



Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Downey

The cinematic life of Mary Ann/Marian/Mimmie McGuire Fether Smith, her jewels and furs and card playing and Petit Trianon on Berkeley Square, as well as the sad end of her second marriage, was tempered by a degree of compensatory Catholic piety shared with E. M., demonstrated in their attendant attempt to become the Dohenys of Downey in 1929. While Mrs. Smith never attained the rank of papal countess as had her bog sister Mrs. Doheny, her Chester Place counterpart, she did persuade E. M. to fund Downey's equivalent of St. Vincent de Paul Church that the Dohenys had built at Adams and Figueroa. In a style termed "Italian Romanesque of the Transition Period with Gothic touches," the \$100,000 Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church was completed in 1931 and dedicated to the memory of the Smiths' mothers; curiously, Merl Lee Barker, designer of #33, was not given the commission—was designed instead by architects Henry Newton and Robert Murray. Also curious is that the 450-seat church was expanded in 1951 by slicing it in front of the nave, moving the sanctuary 47 feet back on tracks, and inserting a 65-by-47-foot addition.



The Los Angeles Times, December 7, 1947

Though Mimmie appears to have received #33 in her divorce settlement, by the mid 1940s the big house was probably a lonely place for her, and, with less cash than before to buy jewels and have them stolen, a less exciting one too. The house was put on the market and its contents on the auction block. The *maîtresse de maison* would be moving down in square footage but up in address—Berkeley Square was slipping precipitously in terms of prestige, and, after all, Mimmie was really a Beverly Hills girl at heart. It is not known how she spent the last decade of her life, but it is known that she called it a day in her apartment on Olympic Boulevard in 1954. One hopes that when the end came she was merrily playing cards with the girls, a Don Loper on her back with a big string of pearls, a Chesterfield in her card-holding hand, a highball in the other, having just called "Gin!"

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Retired Army officer Robert J. Kennedy and his wife Madeleine are listed at #33 Berkeley Square on voter rolls of late 1944. Although her belongings weren't to

be auctioned off until 1947, it seems that Mimmie may have been gone by this time and that the Kennedys were renting the house. By 1948 the Goldmans—Abraham and Agnes along with Melvin and Bernice—were in residence. Bernice was married at #33 in 1948; the family stayed in the house until 1953. Later that year, Dr. and Mrs. R. M. Cruzat moved in. Their daughter, Marie Cruzat Berry, was married on November 1 to Airman 1st Class William Henry Craighead III at St. Agnes Catholic Church, with a formal reception taking place at #33. Both the Cruzats and Craigheads remained in the house until 1961, when the rumble of bulldozers could be heard in the distance. The Cruzats moved to 4864 Vista de Oro in View Park. The empty house that saw so many intruders during E. M. and Marian Smith's time was to see one more, this time a deadly one, when those bulldozers arrived to take down #33 Berkeley Square and the grand gate at Gramercy Place for the coming Santa Monica Freeway.



Mr. and Mrs. William Henry Craighead III cut their cake at
#33 Berkeley Square on November 1, 1953.