

Gilbert 'Gil' E. Smith & Virginia (Immel) Smith

**Married on August 4, 1941, and arrived in Van Wert
for the start of the 1941-1942 school year.**

The famous Van Wert High School teacher and football coach's full name was Gilbert Emerson Smith. 'Gil' Smith graduated from Defiance High School then from Defiance College in 1928. While at Defiance College he earned four letters in football as a back, four letters in baseball as an infielder, two letters in basketball as a guard and two letters in track. He received his masters degree from Columbia University in 1937 and also attended Ohio State University.

His first coaching position was at Delphos Jefferson High School. His football teams in five seasons won 36 games while losing nine. His baseball teams were 60-5, winning the OHSAA 1931 state tournament and as runner-up in 1933.

He then went to Defiance College as the athlete director and head coach of football, basketball and baseball for three years. His next position was for five years at Defiance High School. He then became the head football coach at Van Wert High School arriving for the 1941-1942 school year. As early as June 1941, an article in *The Daily Times Bulletin* referred to the new coach as "Smitty."

Just before Coach Smith's arrival in Van Wert, he married Virginia Immel of Defiance on August 4, 1941. Mrs. Smith quickly found out how serious her husband was about football. She often recounted how her husband found a way to include football business as part of their honeymoon. They took a trip to Canada and on their way back to Ohio, Gil attended a four-day coaching seminar at the Univ. of Michigan in Ann Arbor hosted by the head football coach, Fritz Crisler. He had not told her much about it in advance, and for four-days she had to stay busy while he went to the camp!

Perhaps the Michigan football coaching seminar was of benefit to Gil Smith, as he had a good first year in 1941 at Van Wert with a 7-0-2 record and a Western Buckeye League Football Championship. He then won the 1942 and 1943 WBL Football Championships – three in a row.

He was the Van Wert High School head football coach from the 1941 football season through the 1959 season. His record at Van Wert for these 19 seasons was 130-30-10. (His overall record for football coaching over 32 years was reported as 187 or 189 wins, 59 losses and 14 ties.) During his coaching era, his record was excelled by very few high school football coaches in the nation.

At Van Wert High School he obtained a winning streak of 47 games without a loss during the 1953 through 1958 seasons. The streak started with the famous next to last game of the 1953 season against an undefeated St. Marys team, a 20-20 tie. 1954 the record was 9-0, 1955 was 8-0-1, 1956 was 10-0, 1957 was 8-0, and 1958 was 8-0-1. The winning streak was ended with the first game of the 1959 season, a 8-12 loss to Bryan. During this era the only program with this type of winning record was the well known football program at a big school, Massillon, Ohio, who achieved 52 in a row.

At Van Wert High School he had eight unbeaten seasons including five in a row. His teams won 11 outright Western Buckeye League Championships. (1941, '42, '43, '49, '50, '52, '54, '55, '56, '57, & '58) A 12th title was a three-way tie in 1947. There were only two losing seasons, 1946 and 1959. This record was accomplished with the single-wing offense, in all of Coach Smith's 19 seasons!

Coach Smith was highly honored for his coaching record. In 1972 he was inducted into the Ohio High School Coach's Association Hall of Fame. He was inducted two years after another famous football coach's induction who was from Convoy, Ohio, Jack Mollenkopf. This was for Mollenkopf's years as a Toledo area football coach, especially his years at Toledo Waite High School. Coach Smith also is in the Defiance College Hall of Fame and the prep division of the Hall of Fame at Rutgers University

Van Wert High School might have lost Coach Smith after the 1955 season as he had made application for the head coaching job at Shawnee High School, on the southern edge of Lima, Ohio. Shawnee needed a new football coach to replace their 10-year coach, Bill Byerly, and were very interested in obtaining Coach Smith from Van Wert. The Van Wert City School Board of Education had granted Gil Smith a substantial increase in salary during this process and while still lower than the Shawnee offer, Coach Smith informed Shawnee High School he would withdrawal his application. It was a smart move by the Van Wert school board as the Van Wert High School's future 47 game unbeaten streak was only at 20 games at the end of the 1955 season.

His assistant football coaches at Van Wert High School during 19 season were Ron Peters (who also started with Smith as a new coach at VWHS in 1941, after both coaches before them, Charles Campbell and Nick Ross had left the year before), Clyde Snodgrass, Michael Kish, James Reeder, Otis Coon, Clarence Cline, Nick Klutka and Jim Stoops.

Players under Coach Smith (at VWHS) that went on to college and became head football coaches or assistants at the college level include Ken Wable, Jim Young, Larry Smith, Ron Dilbone and Jim Dilbone. Jack Lininger, VWHS 1945 (Ohio State University, Detroit Lions) and Roger "Tuffy" LaLonde, VWHS 1960 (Muskingum College, Detroit Lions, New York Giants) went on and played professional football.

While her husband was setting records coaching football at Van Wert in the 1940's and 1950's, Mrs. Smith was the first and second grade teacher at the Marsh Foundation Elementary School. One of the reasons Mr. Smith accepted the Van Wert coaching position was due to Virginia being able to earn a year-round income working at the Marsh Foundation. She also was the Marsh Foundation and the Marsh Elementary School dietitian for many years, continuing in this position after she retired as a teacher for the Marsh.

She was a graduate of Bowling Green State University and had been teaching second grade in the Defiance City School's Fourth Ward for the four years prior to their wedding and move to Van Wert. While Gil and Virginia never had children of their own, the Smith's were often visited by many of the students they had taught and coached – many of them expressing their feelings and appreciation towards the Smiths as their second set of parents.

Since their arrival in Van Wert in 1941 the Smith's had lived on the southwest corner of North Jefferson and West First Streets in Van Wert. This was a large three unit rental home, 339 N. Jefferson St., owned by Dr. C. A. Morgan, who lived next door at 333 N. Jefferson Street. Coach Smith had a short, four block walk to the Van Wert High School.

In 1960 the Smith's built a home on the other side of town on Rosemont Drive. Coach Smith had retired as Van Wert High School's football coach after the 1959 season. He passed away at age 76,

January 1, 1980, at the Delphos Memorial Nursing Home. He had been in failing health the year before his death. Mrs. Smith stayed in the home until her death. She passed away on September 10, 2005. She was born on December 17, 1911 in Defiance County.

Gil and Virginia Smith are buried in Riverside Cemetery, Defiance, Ohio.

Please help expand this article to include more information about the Smiths and Coach Smith's time at Van Wert High School. To add information or advise of corrections necessary, or to tell the story you know, please send an email to Gary Showalter at gbja@vwlocal.net or via facebook, or call 419-203-9146.