South Carolina’s Everyman Artist: The Oscar Jackson “Jak” Smyrl, Jr., Papers

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By Edward Blessing

Jak Smyrl is best known for his work as the staff artist for The State newspaper from 1955 until 1986. The South Caroliniana Library’s Oscar Jackson “Jak” Smyrl, Jr., Papers represent the majority of Jak’s oeuvre, bringing together a vast array of materials that provide a unique insight into the life of this prolific artist. Containing his countless newspaper illustrations in draft, complete, and published form, the collection also includes homemade audio recordings, photographs, freelance artwork, World War II and post-war correspondence, personal diaries, childhood sketches, and hundreds of drawings and doodles. Pen and paper may have been the tools of the trade, but for Jak they were also lifelong companions.
The Early Years

Born in Camden, S.C., on May 5, 1923, to Oscar Jackson Smyrl and Mary Ann Davis, Jak was a precocious child whose first drawings were made while sick abed when he was given a pencil and notepad to keep him entertained. He was soon filling notebooks, textbooks and any scrap paper he could find with drawings of cowboys and Indians, pirates and ships, animals, daring aviators, cops and robbers, and other images that filled his young mind. These early drawings provide a keen insight into the foundations of an artistic career; movement, shadow, and expression are all present. By the age of thirteen Jak was taking a correspondence art class which he continued for the next several years.

As a freshman at Camden High School in 1937, Jak immediately began working on the school newspaper, The Bulldog, and was the staff artist of this publication for the next two years. He also worked on the school yearbook, Gold and Black, in 1940. In the fall of 1939, Jak decided to learn to play the trumpet, a decision that was to have lasting effects on his life. In a few months he was playing in the school marching band and by November 1940 he and a few friends had formed a jive band called the “Sentimental Southerners.” It was a popular local group, playing for dances at the Court Inn in Camden and even winning a local amateur contest. Music had become another form of artistic expression for Jak and he was to have a horn near him for the rest of his life.

College, Take One

In September 1942, Jak began college studies at Alabama Polytechnic Institute in Auburn, Ala., where he focused on art and Army ROTC. Almost before he unpacked, Jak wrote to his family describing the rush he felt at the beginning of the first semester of college – a series of fees, tests, and orientation still encountered by today’s students. This letter opened a floodgate of correspondence that would continue until well after Jak’s experiences in World War II. Jak kept all the letters sent to him by friends and family, and Mary Smyrl faithfully collected her son’s letters after they had circulated among his siblings. The result is a circumspect collection that reveals the conversations that took place between a boy and his family. The Smyrls were close-knit, and each letter conveys the distinctive tone of its author: his sisters who were sassy, yet fun; his mother, a woman who missed and worried about her son, soon to be caught up in the global conflict; and his father who sagely admonished his boy to “keep everything in moderation” when faced with the work – and play – offered at college. Jak endeavored to make his family proud, and soon his artwork appeared in The Auburn Plainsman, the school’s student-run newspaper.

In March 1943, Jak received word that he would be ineligible for the Army Officer Candidate School due to poor eyesight. This was a blow, for Jak wanted every possible opportunity to advance through the ranks. Taking stock of his situation, he made a bold decision. His next letter home
to Camden begins, “It now becomes my pleasant duty to inform you that you now have a son and brother in the Marine Corps—I joined up this morning.” Although starting out as a private, Jak was told that after four months of duty he would be able to apply to the Marine Corps Officer Candidate School, and he decided that it was better to have a slim chance at promotion than none at all. In addition, he would be allowed to finish his first year of college and spend the month of June with his family before reporting to Parris Island, S.C., for Basic Training.

Life as a Leatherneck

Although life as a “boot” at Parris Island was tough, Jak’s letters home show a burgeoning admiration for the Marine Corps. “They are tough on us,” he penned in a spare few minutes, “but they keep us clean as [a] whistle, stuffed with plenty [of] good food – they watch us better than we watch our-selves.” Emerging from Basic Training in September 1943, Jak stayed on at Parris Island for another year, first as a Drill Instructor and then as coach on the rifle range. Although glad to be near his family, at times Jak grew anxious to join the fight. In September 1944, he was transferred to Camp Pendleton in California, to prepare for active duty in the Pacific. Enjoying Los Angeles on the weekends, he remembered meeting Gary Cooper (who was attending a fair incognito) and hearing Tommy Dorsey. Jak finally shipped out in December 1944, headed for the Pacific islands. First stopping at Pavuvu, located in the Russell Islands, Jak eventually participated in the Battle of Okinawa. In a letter dated April 14, 1945, just days after the battle began, Jak wrote of this time as “the greatest adventure of my life.” The descriptions of bombs, strafing, and death seem somewhat cavalier even for a young man of 22. Only later, after the surrender was finalized and military correspondence censorship completely lifted was he able to reveal the true horrors of war.

Once the fighting on Okinawa had stopped, Jak turned his mind back to art and considered future possibilities that the Marine Corps might offer. Artwork he submitted to Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines, as well as sketches and drawings he had done for fellow soldiers had caught the attention of his officers and his post-war duties shifted. In September 1945, Jak was stationed in Tientsin, North China, where he worked on the publications The North China Marine and the Marine Tiger. With these assignments Jak had his first close interactions with professional journalists. The skills he acquired during this time in China along with the camaraderie he found in the newsroom combined to whet his appetite for newspaper work.

College, Take Two

Returning home to Camden in March 1946, Jak attended the University of South Carolina from that fall until the next May. Although his studies focused on fine art and one of his paintings was displayed in New York, Jak’s heart was still in the newsroom and he devoted time to The Gamecock,
the University’s student-run newspaper. Due to his artistic success and at the urging of his professors, Jak transferred to the Art Institute of Pittsburgh the next year, where he felt lonely, isolated and cold. His letters from this time lack their usual sunny outlook, and Jak returned home in the spring of 1948 to finish his degree at USC. Only two months into the fall semester, however, Jak was encouraged to apply for a position with the State-Record Company. At first hesitant about foregoing his bachelor’s degree, Jak finally decided to accept the job he was offered and thus began his career as a commercial artist.

The State

Jak’s early years with the State-Record Company were spent working on The State Magazine, a Sunday supplement over which he and colleague Eugene B. Sloan held free reign. This period completed Jak’s education in the steps needed to produce a newspaper since he and Sloan were responsible for weekly design, development, and layout. Jak often produced a piece that occupied the front cover of the magazine. Some of the most-well-loved of these illustrations were those he drew for the annual Carolina-Clemson football game played on “Big Thursday.” Jak worked on The State Magazine until it was discontinued and then transferred to The State news department in 1955. Here he remained for the next thirty-one
years, producing the humorous artwork that the newspaper’s readers came to love.

Jak’s official title at the paper was “Staff Artist,” and his responsibilities covered every conceivable meaning of that phrase. Not only was he the artist on the staff, he was the artist for the staff. A reporter working on a big story would tell Jak a little about the piece, and Jak would use his imagination to fill in any gaps. He often took days or weeks to produce a single drawing, such as his illustration of the 1964 Democratic National Convention, but, more often than not, requests came at the last minute and Jak would hurriedly sketch something off. Fortunately, a spirit of office camaraderie pervaded and Jak enjoyed working on a deadline. Although happiest when drawing, Jak also retouched photographs – a delicate art in the age before personal computers and powerful software – and he worked with the color separations used by the paper when not producing black and white images. In this process the original artwork was separated into cyan, magenta, and yellow components. These colors were then inverted and a black key was produced from the image to improve shadow and contrast. This was a time-consuming and often difficult procedure, requiring a delicate and artistic touch to achieve good results. Jak was a master at this process.
BETTY THE JET SETTER READY FOR TAKEOFF
WISELY EMPLOYS THE "TRAVEL LIGHT" THEME

SUGGESTION: IF HUSBAND AVAILABLE, BRING ALONG TO CARRY LUGGAGE,
FIGURE EXCHANGE RATES, CONFIRM FLIGHTS, PAY CABS, DO GUARD DUTY, ETC.
JAK'S RECOMMENDED OUTFIT FOR THE
WELL-EQUIPPED MALE GLOBE TROTTER

SUGGESTION: HAVE WIFE CARRY HEAVY LUGGAGE TO CONSERVE ENERGY.
Freelance Work
In addition to his work at the State-Record Company, Jak also did freelance commercial artwork for a number of companies and groups including the South Carolina Savings and Loan League, the South Carolina Beer Association and the Connie Maxwell Children’s Home. His most iconic freelance piece is the original University of South Carolina “Fighting Gamecock” that was, for many years, featured on the floor of the Carolina Coliseum. Lovers of jazz music may recognize the album covers he designed and drew for the Larry Conger’s Two Rivers Jazz Band. These covers reflect the smooth sounds contained within and one imagines that during sessions (the musicians playing while Jak drew sketch-notes) Jak had to resist the temptation to jump in with his trumpet.

Around the World with Smyrnl
In the winter of 1969, Jak and his wife, Betty, made a spontaneous decision to travel around the world. Several weeks later they were on a plane bound for Tahiti, the first stop on a whirlwind tour that would take them through the Pacific islands (including Okinawa, nearly thirty years after Jak had last been there under entirely different circumstances); across Australia; to Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore; on a photo-safari through Kenya; and through Egypt, Greece and Europe before hopping the Atlantic and returning to Columbia ninety-odd days later. With paper, pencil, camera, and Betty by his side Jak documented the entire trip. Then he and Betty worked together on a fifteen-part series which was published in The State the following spring. In 1972, the couple completed their goal to visit every continent when they toured South America, producing a corresponding series of stories. Filled with alliterations, illustrations, and humorous anecdotes, the stories were educational, too, as they often included the historical background of the locations visited.

Retirement
After thirty-one years of working in the newsroom, Jak decided to retire in 1986. The paper threw a party; Jak played
his trumpet; and candid pictures reveal that a good time was had by all. He and Betty moved to Camden, and Jak devoted his days to music, poetry, wood carving, and, of course, drawing. Jak often revisited old pieces, retouching and updating some drawings while personalizing others for friends. Near the end of his life, one final project remained: to combine his love of poetry and drawing. He was able to realize the dream of completing a book of illustrated ballads, *Random Rimes*, before he died in August 2007. *Random Rimes* was published by Betty after his death. It is filled with Jak’s folksy humor and creative imagination.

**Legacy**

By the time he retired, Jak’s artwork, instantly recognizable for its distinctive style, was being seen by more than 100,000 people daily and its passing from the pages of *The State* was universally mourned by readers and staff alike. Columnist Bill McDonald memorialized the event by writing, “he rode off into the sunset with his pen, ink, sketchpad and erasure…leaving behind a trail of warm memories of a zany talent. To call Smyrl creative would be to call one of those Internal Revenue forms slightly taxing.”

In June 2007, the South Carolina General Assembly honored Jak’s creativity by passing a concurrent resolution thanking him for “lightening the hearts” of newspaper readers while giving them “insight into important issues,” highlighting the fact that Jak not only entertained, but in fact illustrated the history of South Carolina as it was happening. Researchers at the South Caroliniana Library will find that within the Smyrl collection personal and professional intertwine because its materials contain not only the artwork but also the memories and vibrant creativity of South Carolina’s everyman artist.

— Edward Blessing is an archivist at the South Caroliniana Library.
At a gathering to celebrate the acquisition of Jak Smyrl’s papers by the South Caroliniana Library are, left to right, Bill McDonald, Betty Smyrl, Henry Fulmer, and Edward Blessing. They are shown with one of Smyrl’s best-loved drawings called Jazz Combo which was created about 1947.

Editor’s Notes:
Edward Blessing is working with Betty Smyrl to produce a book entitled Jak Smyrl: His Art. Joan A. Inabinet and L. Glen Inabinet are writing a biography of Smyrl called Jak Smyrl: His World. Both books will be published by the University of South Carolina Press.

An exhibition of Jak Smyrl’s work is currently on display in the Olin D. Johnston Room at the South Caroliniana Library.

On July 13, the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections will feature materials about Jak Smyrl in an Open Gallery exhibit at the Ernest F. Hollings Library.