

## **Richardson, J[acob] Henry Smith** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Richardson, J[acob] Henry Smith**

by Norris W. Preyer, 1994

**19 July 1885–11 Feb. 1972**

See also: [Lunsford Richardson](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, [Lunsford Richardson II](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, and [Smith Richardson Foundation](#) <sup>[4]</sup>.

J[acob] Henry Smith Richardson, president and chairman of the board of the [Vick Chemical Company](#) <sup>[5]</sup> (now Richardson-Merrell, Inc.), through his sales and marketing techniques and his long-range corporate planning was responsible for much of the expansion and lasting success of this international pharmaceutical firm. The eldest child of Lunsford and Mary Lynn Smith Richardson, he was born in [Greensboro](#) <sup>[6]</sup> in the home of his maternal grandfather, [Dr. Jacob Henry Smith](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, a Presbyterian minister for whom he was named. His father, at that time a druggist in [Selma](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, moved his family to Greensboro in 1890. As a boy, Smith (as his family called him) performed daily tasks assigned by his father, such as hoeing the garden and milking the family cow, and then was free to roam with his friends in the nearby Fisher woods. On Sunday the family attended morning and evening church services, and Smith was expected to memorize the catechism and Bible verses.

After attending local schools, he entered, in 1902, [Davidson College](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, where his uncle, Dr. Henry Louis Smith, was president. During his sophomore year, Richardson persuaded his reluctant parents to let him go to the U.S. Naval Academy. He passed the competitive examination and enrolled at Annapolis in 1904, but the following year he was dismissed for various disciplinary offenses such as chewing tobacco and hazing. Not wanting to go home, he worked in New York successively as a railroad clerk, streetcar conductor, sales clerk at Gimbels and Wanamakers, and salesman for a blanket company. In 1907 he returned home to become sales manager for the Vick Family Remedies Company, which his father had started two years earlier.

Smith Richardson persuaded his father to concentrate sales efforts on the most successful and unique product of the firm, a medicated salve for colds, and to call it Vicks VapoRub to stress its unique characteristics and to distinguish it from other "salves" on merchant's shelves. Merchants, if they bought a certain quantity, were given free samples to give to selected customers on condition that they report the results. By 1910 a surplus was available for advertising and throughout the rural South signs and billboards were placed along the roads for all to see.

When VapoRub was introduced into the middle-sized cities of the North after 1912, advertising was done through the local newspapers using the same style type and copy as the news articles and positioned preceding, following, or alongside the local news. A coupon in the advertisement promised a free sample from the local druggist while the supply lasted. In New York and the larger northeastern cities with various newspapers but a concentrated population, advertising was done through signs placed on streetcars. In 1917 the company began a widespread distribution of samples on a house-to-house basis in many areas of the Northeast, and when postal regulations were changed allowing mail to be sent to rural free delivery boxes, it sent millions of samples to the vast but diffused population lying west of the Mississippi—the first distribution of samples on such a large scale. Vick was probably also the first drug company to hire a doctor to review the medical accuracy of all its advertising copy. During the influenza epidemic of 1918–19 Vick advertisements claimed no cure, only "relief to difficult breathing when used as directed."

In 1915 Richardson was made general manager of the business (now known as the Vick Chemical Company), in 1919 he became president upon the death of his father, and in 1929 he was named chairman of the board. Until his retirement in 1957, he was the dominant influence in the decisions of the company as it expanded internationally and diversified into different products and fields. By 1923 sales in America had grown to \$4.5 million, and in 1924 the first attempts to open foreign markets were made in Mexico and Great Britain, with Richardson personally heading the British effort. By 1929 sales had expanded to more than 60 foreign countries and by his death to 120. In 1931 the first expansion from a one-product company started with the introduction of nose drops, cough drops, and a gargle for colds. Seeking diversification into other fields Vicks merged with Bristol-Myers, Life Savers, Sterling Products, and United Drug (Rexall) in 1930 to form Drug Inc., but the alliance did not work out and Vick was "de-merged" in 1933. During these years headquarters were moved to New York to better handle the export business and advertising. Starting in 1938 with the purchase of the William S. Merrell Company, an ethical drug company making prescription products for doctors, the company moved outside the cold medication field and in the years that followed acquired additional companies in the ethical drug, veterinary medicine, chemical, plastic packaging, and toiletry fields. To reflect this, the name of the parent company was changed to Richardson-Merrell, Inc., in 1960.

The Great Depression brought home the mortality of businesses, and Richardson in his later years devoted most of his time to long-range planning to ensure "an enduring enterprise." The key elements, he decided, were adequate capital funds, stockholder control through family solidarity, and identification and attraction of creative leaders into top management. In pursuit of the last goal, he established in 1937 the Vick School of Applied Merchandising, which provided

training in marketing to men who simultaneously worked as salesmen for a two-year period. At the end of that time, the company promised that for those it hired training would be continued to prepare them for top management positions. Other programs were devised to ensure that behind each key executive was an equally talented replacement, and it was made a company policy that the president retire at age sixty, though serving as a member of the board for five more years, to make room at the top for the ambitious while providing insurance should the new executive die or not work out. In 1935 the Smith Richardson Foundation was established, the bulk of whose expenditures have gone to programs for the identification and development of innovative leaders.

In 1957, after fifty years with the Vick company, Richardson suffered a slight stroke and retired. During that half century he had seen the company grow in sales from \$25,000 to nearly \$95 million and by the time of his death to approximately \$450 million. Richardson was the largest individual stockholder in Richardson-Merrell and held stock in several smaller family companies that had been established in the real estate, insurance, and financial investment fields. With his family he donated funds for the L. Richardson Memorial Hospital in Greensboro, and through his foundation (valued at over \$90 million at the end of 1971) grants have been made to educational institutions, historic preservation projects, and other philanthropies, mostly in North Carolina and South Carolina.

Richardson married, on 16 Dec. 1914, Grace Stuart Jones, of Danville, Va., who died on 7 Feb. 1962. They had two daughters, Grace Stuart Stetson and Mary Keene Jackson Lange, and three sons, J. Henry Smith, Jr., Robert Randolph, and John Page. Forward thinking in his ideas and loving the outdoor life, he remained physically active into his eighties, riding horseback and fishing on western ranches, hunting on land he owned in South Carolina, and swimming in the waters of Long Island Sound at his home in Greens Farm, Conn. He was buried in the Green Hill Cemetery, Greensboro.

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