

HOW WILLIAM ALEXANDER SMITH BECAME AMOR DE COSMOS

The thousands of men who nearly eighty years ago were drawn to the colonies of British Columbia and Vancouver's Island by the discovery of gold on the Fraser River, may be divided into two classes: those who came and went and those who came and stayed. While many were mere transients, fortune hunters who made the most of the occasion, and, after a few years or months, returned whence they came or departed elsewhere, many others remained in the colonies and became bulwarks of development and progress.

Among those who came and stayed was a young man who arrived in Victoria in June, 1858, bearing the peculiar name, Amor de Cosmos. Destined to play an important part in the public affairs of the West, he soon became one of the island colony's prominent men. He established the *Colonist*, now British Columbia's oldest newspaper, went into politics, and led the movement for confederation with Canada. After confederation he became premier of the province of British Columbia and member of the dominion parliament.

Born in Windsor, Nova Scotia, in 1825, of parents named Smith, he was christened William Alexander. How he was changed from William Alexander Smith to the name he bore upon his arrival in Victoria is an incident both noteworthy and amusing.

In 1851 young Smith left Nova Scotia and joined the gold rush to California, travelling overland and enduring many hardships and some close encounters with Indians. His journey was slow and broken by long stops at various places, including Salt Lake City where he stayed for over a year, so that it took two years to reach his destination. Upon arrival in California he set up in business as a photographer, travelling about the mining districts taking pictures of the miners and their properties. For a time he lived at Mud Springs, a mining camp of some note and one of the first in the country, its name being changed later to El Dorado. Smith found this place crowded with goldseekers—men of all sorts and conditions—a motley throng gathered from the four corners of the earth. Among them he found there were several other Smiths, some William Smiths, and probably at least one other William Alexander Smith. Identification of the various Bill Smiths was difficult; there were no streets and no local addresses; everybody was simply "of Mud

Springs." Considerable confusion resulted, especially with regard to post-office mail.

Smith didn't like other people getting his letters and opening them (and perhaps not bothering to turn them over to him), so he consulted a lawyer. The lawyer was State Senator Gaven D. Hall, who represented the county (El Dorado) in the California Senate. Senator Hall advised Smith that the difficulty could be overcome by having his name changed by act of the State legislature, this course having been followed in similar cases. Accordingly Smith decided to petition the legislature to change his name to Amor de Cosmos. There was no danger of that name being confused with Smith or any other name. A combination of three foreign languages—"Amor" from the Latin, "de" from the French, and "Cosmos" from the Greek, meaning "lover of the universe"—it would give a touch of distinction which would be useful and perhaps profitable—good advertising! So Senator Hall prepared the following bill for passage:

"An Act to change the name of William Alexander Smith to Amor de Cosmos.

The people of the State of California, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

Section 1. It shall be lawful for the person heretofore bearing the name of William Alexander Smith to change said name to Amor de Cosmos.

Section 2. This act to take effect on its passage."¹

This brief but explicit bill accompanied by Smith's petition praying a change of name was presented to the senate by Senator Hall on January 28, 1854.² A copy of the petition is not available, careful search in the archives of the California state capitol having failed to find it. Evidently petitions for changes of names were not carefully preserved, as only one could be found among the several presented to the 1854 session of the legislature. Strangely enough, the one found was a petition of George Alexander Smith of San Francisco to change his name to George Smith Townsend, because "there were four other gentlemen of the same name at San Francisco who received and read his letters.")

In presenting the petition Senator Hall must have pronounced Amor with a broad "a," so that it sounded like "armor," for we find that Senator Mager moved to refer the bill to the committee on mil-

¹ *Statutes of California* (Sacramento, 1854), 5th sess., chap. lix.

² *California Senate Journal* (Sacramento, 1854), 109, Jan. 28, 1854.

itary affairs.³ However, this little joke did not prevent the bill from receiving three readings and being passed by the senate. There seems to have been much misunderstanding about the new name. One newspaper reported it as "Armor Debosmos,"⁴ another, "Amor de Bosmas,"⁵ another, "Amor de Casmos,"⁶ another, "Amos de Cosmos,"⁷ and still another "Amos de Bosmos."⁸ Even the official legislative journals had difficulty with it, one of them printing it "Amor de Cosmer."⁹

Having passed the senate, the bill went to the assembly. Here it passed the first reading without difficulty¹⁰; but the second reading was not so easy. The legislators saw an opportunity to have some fun. This little bill was a pleasant diversion from more weighty and disturbing questions such as the adoption of the Maine Liquor Act and the location of the state capital (whether at Benicia or Sacramento) on both of which the legislators were bombarded with lengthy petitions and given much concern. Yes, the liquor question was to the fore even in those early days.

So we find Mr. Stow moving that the "de" be struck out as being aristocratic and "too much of a furrin title to be conferred by this legislature,"¹¹ followed by the proposal of Mr. McBrayer that "Muggins" be substituted.¹² "In this manner," wrote a newspaper correspondent, "the time honored Smith family was compelled to become a target at which no man felt himself bound to refrain from discharging a sarcasm at."¹³ However, both motions were ruled out of order by a more serious minded presiding officer,¹⁴ and Smith was saved from the name, Amor Muggins Cosmos.

The bill was given a second reading and referred to the delegation from El Dorado for consideration and report.¹⁵ This delegation consisted of the senators and assemblymen, about twelve in number, representing El Dorado County. They acted as a committee with regard to legislative matters affecting their locality. In a few days this committee reported "that they have had the subject matter under consideration and having good and sufficient reasons adduced to satisfy them of the justness of the proposed change of name,

3 San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Jan. 29, 1854.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Sacramento Daily Union*, Jan. 30, 1854.

6 *Ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1854.

7 San Francisco *Daily California Chronicle*, Feb. 1, 1854.

8 *Ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1854.

9 *California Assembly Journal* (Sacramento, 1854), 161. Feb. 1, 1854.

10 *Ibid.*, 156. Jan. 31, 1854.

11 *Sacramento Daily Union*, Feb. 2, 1854.

12 San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Feb. 2, 1854.

13 *Sacramento Daily Union*, Feb. 2, 1854.

14 San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Feb. 2, 1854.

15 *California Assembly Journal*, 161. Feb. 1, 1854.

have the honor to report the bill back to the House and respectfully recommend its passage."¹⁶

The presentation of this report to the Assembly was the occasion for more sport and considerable argument. Mr. Jones objected to the bill because he considered the "de" a title of aristocracy, which under the constitution could not be conferred.¹⁷ Mr. French replied that more than fifty of his neighbors in San Luis Obispo had names containing the "de."¹⁸ Mr. Talmadge moved to amend the proposed name by adding "Caesar," making it "Amor de Cosmos Caesar."¹⁹ Mr. Ashley wished to know what Mr. Smith desired by having the "de" included; he thought the only object could be to produce an effect among the ladies²⁰; he considered it too much a *love* of a word and thought it would make Mr. Smith in their estimation too much of "a love of a man."²¹ Mr. Gordon could see no title in the simple monosyllable "de" and explained its meaning.²² Thus ran the argument.

Smith, who had heard of the previous criticism of the proposed name, had written a letter to one of the assemblymen, Mr. Ballou, explaining the reason for its choice. Mr. Ballou now read the following excerpt from this letter:

"I desire not to adopt the name of Amor de Cosmos because it smacks of a foreign title, but because it is an unusual name and its meaning tells what I love most, viz: Love of order, beauty, the world, the universe."²³

This lofty ideal seems to have helped the matter along; Mr. Green stating that they already had too many common names and he hoped new ones would be created,²⁴ while Mr. Hubbard understood the "de" to signify about as much as "don" did in Spanish.²⁵ Ashley, however, was not satisfied and upon the vote upon the passage of the bill he demanded that the ayes and nays be taken, the result being ayes forty-one, nays twenty.²⁶ The bill was duly reported to Governor John Bigler and was approved by him and became law on February 17, 1854.²⁷

16 *Ibid.*, 179. Feb. 7, 1854.

17 San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Feb. 8, 1854.

18 *Idem.*

19 *Idem.*

20 *Idem.*

21 San Francisco *Daily California Chronicle*, Feb. 8, 1854.

22 *Idem.*

23 *Idem.*

24 San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Feb. 8, 1854.

25 San Francisco *Daily California Chronicle*, Feb. 8, 1854.

26 San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, Feb. 8, 1854; *California Assembly Journal*, 179. Feb. 7, 1854.

27 *California Senate Journal* (1954), 169.

Thus did William Alexander Smith drop that name and take the name Amor de Cosmos. He could now have his letters addressed to him under a name which would ensure privacy. It must have caused considerable amazement to the folks at the old home in Nova Scotia when they learned how they must address their letters to him. One wonders whether they began their letters with "Dear Amor" instead of "Dear Will."

This unusual change of name and the argument upon it seem to have brought up the question as to whether this was the proper method of changing names, for we find that when George Alexander Smith's bill came before the Assembly for passage some weeks later, it met serious opposition.²⁸ Although the bill had been favorably reported on by the committee to which it had been referred,²⁹ it was moved that the bill be referred back to the committee with instructions to bring in a general bill—a bill which would lay down the procedure for any change of name. This was followed by several amendments and considerable debate, winding up in a motion to lay the whole subject on the table. While this motion was lost and the bill passed,³⁰ it had yet to go to the senate as it had originated in the assembly; and the senate pigeon-holed or killed it, for it was not passed.³¹

But the practice of changing names by act of legislature continued in California for several years. In fact the legislative dockets according to a later historian, were "lumbered with bills of that character. There did not appear to have been much discretion exercised in some of the changes made. In 1854, for instance, a man dissatisfied with being called William Alexander Smith had his name changed to Amor de Cosmos. Efforts were made for a general law on the subject but in 1856 the judiciary committee gave its opinion that persons could call themselves what they pleased and such a law was unnecessary. But this brought out an opposition report that persons had not the right to change their names: that there was a law of society that forbade it, and that no one should be permitted to do so, except in very special cases and not then unless authorized by statute. The bill did not pass, and yet people found they could not very well change their names without legislative sanction."³²

Even women tried the legislative name-changing method, evidently preferring that to marriage. This brought an observation

²⁸ *California Assembly Journal*, 221. Feb. 20, 1854.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 209, 312. Feb. 16 and Mar. 22, 1854.

³⁰ *Sacramento Daily Union*, Mar. 23, 1854.

³¹ *California Senate Journal*, 520. May 12, 1854.

³² Theodore Henry Hittell, *History of California* (San Francisco, 1897), IV, 182.

from Governor John B. Weller in 1858 that he "could spend his time more profitably than in examining bills passed to gratify the taste or fancy of men and women in regard to names; and he added, that as the males in the state far exceeded in number the females, it was to be hoped that the females in general would not let it be necessary to resort to the legislature or the courts in order to change their names."³³ The legislature continued the practice of changing names until 1866 when the power was given to the county courts.³⁴

De Cosmos seems to have fared well under his new name. He prospered in business, leaving photography for mining, trading and speculation, and in the next few years accumulated some money and property. But there came the call of a newer El Dorado. The discovery of gold in the gravel beds on the Fraser River caused a tremendous sensation in California in the early part of 1858. The gold rush of the "Forty-niners" had subsided and many of them were ready for new fields. The result was that within a few months over thirty thousand men left San Francisco for the British colonies to the north. De Cosmos joined in the exodus, arriving at Victoria in May, 1858. After a brief investigation he returned to California, sold out his business, and in June returned to Victoria, to stay for the rest of his life.³⁵

A. G. HARVEY

³³ *Ibid.*, IV, 234.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 183.

³⁵ For articles on de Cosmos see: *Washington Historical Quarterly* (Seattle), XXIII, 110; *Fourth Report of British Columbia Historical Association* (Victoria, 1929), 54; *Vancouver Daily Province* (British Columbia), Feb. 15, 1921; *Toronto Saturday Night*, Oct. 14, 1930.