



Edward H. Little

1881-1981

Founder of the
Edward H. Little Memorial Trust in

The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

At the turn of this century, Mecklenburg County outside Charlotte, North Carolina was, as much of it still is today, farming country—a patchwork of rolling hills, tobacco and cotton fields. For most of the people who earned their livelihoods from the land, farming life was hard work, and the rewards were modest. Many families had been there for generations, but for those who were young, bright and ambitious, Mecklenburg County—though a fine place to come from—was not the place to stay. One such individual was Edward Herman Little, who in his own words, “was determined to make good.” His ambition, dedication, and belief in the integrity of his work propelled him from the rural South to the top of an international corporation—a corporation that experienced extraordinary growth under his leadership.

Edward Herman Little was born April 10, 1881, the fifth of 12 children born to a cotton farmer, George W. Little and his wife, Ella Elizabeth Howie Little. Home was a cotton plantation not far from Charlotte, and all the children were expected to do chores. “Herman,” as his family called him (to others he was “Edward” or just “E.H.”), attended public schools in Mecklenburg with his brothers and sisters; he also attended Grey’s Academy in Huntersville, North Carolina.

George and Ella Little were devout Presbyterians and saw to it that their children received religious instruction. They sent their eldest son (E.H.’s brother) to college because they wanted him to become a minister. But that was an exception in the Little family—and a sacrifice, for George Little just managed to keep his farm going and his family clothed, fed and sheltered.

By the time he was fourteen, Ed Little was an accomplished horseman. He competed in local tournaments modeled after medieval jousts. With a spear in one hand, the horseman rode at breakneck speed, piercing rings suspended from posts placed at intervals around a course. Young Edward nearly always won, but the reward—placing a crown on the head of a young girl chosen as “Queen”—so embarrassed him that he gladly relinquished the honor to other boys.

By the time he was sixteen, E.H. had decided to leave the farm. (Eighty years later he remembered how he reached that decision: “I plowed with a mule so stubborn that when the dinner bell rang at midday, he would stop still. I had to take him home and feed him before he would work again. I got so tired of looking at the rear of that mule I was glad to get off the farm. I left when I was seventeen.”)

He left the farm in 1898 to take his first job. For room and board, plus ten dollars a month, he went to work for J.S. Withers, a Charlotte grocer who happened also to be the official elected cotton weigher for Mecklenburg County. Edward’s intention was to learn enough to eventually become a cotton broker, and he must have worked diligently, because he became known to a Charlotte businessman, Clarence (“Booster”) Kuester—who later became known locally as Charlotte’s “Mr. Chamber of Commerce.” In 1902, Kuester recommended Ed for a job traveling through the Carolinas for Colgate & Co., selling Octagon soap and toilet articles. Ed took the job and quickly proved to be a skilled salesman. He traveled from town to town in a horse-and-buggy, and in each community he hired young boys to distribute soap samples and premium lists, door-to-door. Since some of the soap wrappers could be redeemed for Colgate products, Ed would then go to store owners, inform them that customers would be coming to purchase the products . . . and sell a supply.

Four years after he began selling for Colgate, Ed Little’s sales manager beckoned him to New York to attend a special meeting on the occasion of

Colgate's 100th anniversary. The year was 1906. When he got there, he received a promotion and was sent to Memphis, as the new district manager for Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi.

The twenty-five year old "country boy" checked into one of Memphis's finest hotels, the Gayosa. His room there served as his base; from there, he traveled by train to sell Colgate products throughout his new territory. His professional life was blooming. And so, too, was his personal life.

Suzanne Trezevant was a debutante who came from an aristocratic family of Memphis attorneys and judges. She was considered a "local beauty;" those who knew her admired her dark hair and her dark eyes. She and Ed Little met. Soon he began courting her.

At about the time it was becoming apparent to their friends and families that Edward and Suzanne were in love, Suzanne's mother said to her, privately, "If you think much of your young man, you had better send him to a doctor about that cough."

"That cough" — a persistent one — was diagnosed. It was tuberculosis, Ed's doctors told him, and the only effective prescription was a treatment of complete rest. The location: a facility in Denver, Colorado.

In 1910, Ed Little resigned from Colgate, left Memphis, and arrived in Denver. Suzanne followed him there, in time for Thanksgiving, and they were immediately married, on November 24th. Edward was then twenty-nine years old. It took him more than three years to regain his health. His full recovery, he always insisted, was all because of Suzanne. "For three years," he said some years later, "she left me only twice for as long as thirty minutes — once to see a friend and once for a crochet lesson." That was not all he attributed to his wife. "She was," he went on, "the most beautiful, the most talented, the most courageous. Without her, I would not have lived and I would never have achieved anything."

It was Suzanne who saw an advertisement in a Denver newspaper for a new soap. It was called Palmolive and had been developed by the B.J.

Johnson Soap Company. She encouraged her husband to apply for a job. Bolstered by her support and by her confidence in him, he sent in an application. He got the job and in January, 1914 — three-and-a-half years after he had come to Denver seriously ill — he began selling Palmolive soap in the area west of the city. One year later he was made district sales manager for the Pacific Coast, and he and Suzanne moved to Los Angeles. In 1917 the B.J. Johnson Company became the Palmolive Company. At that time, Ed Little was one of eight district managers working across the country for the company, and his sales routinely led the others'. According to E.H., there was "... this one fellow, always at the bottom, who rationalized that somebody had to be at the bottom and my reply was, 'Not me!'"

In 1919, E.H. was appointed District Manager for New York, and he and Suzanne moved East. In 1922, at the age of forty-one, he brought home \$60,000 for the year: \$10,000 was salary; the rest was his percentage of corporate profits. Two more promotions quickly followed. In 1926, the Palmolive Company acquired Peet Brothers and became known as the Palmolive-Peet Company. E.H. was appointed General Manager of foreign sales and advertising, with headquarters in Paris. In less than two years, he developed markets in every European country and bought a soap factory in Germany. His efforts more than doubled Palmolive-Peet's business and paved the way for its merger in 1928 with the Colgate Company — the same company Ed Little had worked for twenty years earlier.

In 1933, E.H. was elected vice president of the Colgate-Palmolive-Peet Company, in charge of sales and advertising.

Five years later he was elected president of the company. He was fifty-seven years old. The year was 1938 and the Depression was still on. For fifteen years he served as president, until 1953, when he became chairman of the board. In the years 1953 to 1960 he sometimes served as both president and chairman of the board. He remained board chairman until his retirement at the age of



The dapper driver on North Tryon Street in Charlotte, N.C., is 21-year-old Edward H. Little. The year is 1902 — the year he went to work selling Octagon Soap for Colgate & Company. Photo © The Charlotte Observer

eighty.

E.H. Little's accomplishments during nearly sixty years of service (twenty-two of them as head of the company) were impressive. Annual sales stood at \$100 million the year he became president; when he retired, they had climbed to \$600 million. During that period, company plants in the United States and overseas were expanded and modernized. E.H. Little had guessed correctly that there would be an increased demand for soap and toilet articles after the second World War.

As head of the company, his approach to advertising was aggressive. He was personally involved in negotiations to assure Colgate-Palmolive's visibility during the early days of television. The result was The Colgate Comedy Hour,

a prime-time Sunday evening program that showcased entertainers like Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin, Jimmy Durante, and Ed Sullivan.

In 1938, his first year as President, E.H. visited a company plant in New Jersey to wish his employees a Merry Christmas. He came away determined to do something more for them and, within a year, he had begun to institute changes. A pension plan was adopted for all employees, and benefits were added several times over the years. Subsequently, life insurance coverage was increased, a hospitalization plan was adopted and a savings and investment plan for employees was approved by stockholders.

While Little was head of the company, the number of employees nearly trebled, from 9,600 to 26,000.

Although E.H. Little did well for, and by, Colgate-Palmolive, he maintained publicly that money was never his driving ambition. "I would have made more if I'd been more interested in

money," he explained. "But I was interested in building up the company, and that's what I worked for. It just so happened that while I was building up the company, a lot of money was being made."

E.H. once said the secret of his success, quite simply, was that "I told people, 'Take a bath, get your clothes clean.'" He was only half-joking, for Ed Little had a real faith in the value of the products he sold. Another thing he had was persistence. If a potential customer did not buy his products, Salesman Little would go back and ask what he had done wrong. He summed up his philosophy about work in this way: "I was determined to make good. I always believed in work and that you could do whatever you were determined to do. I liked to take on tough jobs."

When E.H. and Suzanne came to New York in 1938, they made their home in the old Ambassador Hotel on Park Avenue at 51st Street. Since Colgate-Palmolive's head office was in Jersey City, E.H. commuted from Manhattan to New Jersey by chauffeured limousine. During the summers in the '30s and early '40s, he and Suzanne escaped the City's sweltering heat and stayed at the Hotel Montclair in Montclair, New Jersey, and every August they visited a health spa in Battle Creek, Michigan. E.H.'s bout with tuberculosis had convinced him that taking special care of his health was something he would have to do, and for the rest of his life he did. If he felt a cold coming on, he stayed home. (He made phone calls from there.) He carefully watched his diet. And he refused to allow himself to be pressured into things: If an advertising agency executive wanted a decision immediately following a presentation, E.H. was likely to respond, "Let me sleep on that one, young man."

His manner was dignified: he stood about six feet tall and his posture was erect. His suits were custom-tailored. His voice bore traces of his Southern accent. He was fair with those who worked for him, but, as one employee put it, "He demanded a full day's work for a full day's wages." He expected no more of them than he expected of himself: complete dedication to the company and an intrinsic belief in the Company's products. He

commanded respect, and to everyone at Colgate-Palmolive — except two older senior executives — he was "Mr. Little." E.H. Little enjoyed the respect he was shown.

Though Ed Little lived in New York City forty years, he always considered himself a Southerner. "Home" was Charlotte and Mecklenburg. Once, when the company limousine broke down near the Holland Tunnel, E.H. hailed a taxi. As the cab headed toward Colgate-Palmolive headquarters in New Jersey, E.H. began to chat with the driver and discovered that he, too, had been born in Mecklenburg County. When they arrived at Colgate-Palmolive, E.H. who was carrying no money, asked the driver to come in. When the driver left, he carried away not only his fare and a generous tip, but also two large boxes of Colgate-Palmolive samples.

As E.H. Little's fortune increased, and since he and Suzanne had no children, he devoted much time and interest to philanthropic activities. Again, his heart was in the South. He developed a special interest in Davidson College in North Carolina (where his eldest brother had been educated) and while he was alive made gifts to it totaling, by his estimate, nearly two million dollars. Davidson awarded E.H. Little an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws in 1953, and dedicated the Edward H. Little Dormitory in 1957. He later provided half the financing for the college library, which was also named after him. The man who never attended college contributed to 19 other colleges and universities in the South. He gave generously, as well, to southern schools, including country and mountain schools for poor children. And he made donations to hospitals. In Memphis — his "second home" — he contributed to St. Jude's Research Hospital and Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center.

In 1964, Suzanne Trezevant Little died. E.H. maintained his New York apartment (by this time the old Ambassador was no longer standing, and he had moved into an apartment at the Waldorf Towers); but he began spending more and more time in the south — wintering in Naples, Florida,



Happy and spry at 97, Edward H. Little greets well-wishers at Davidson College, the North Carolina school to which he contributed generously for many years and helped build a dormitory and library.

and visiting brothers and sisters and their families in Charlotte. One of the funds that E.H. established in The New York Community Trust contributed \$1 million for the construction of an Episcopal retirement home in Memphis. It was called the Trezevant Manor Retirement Home — named after Suzanne — and after completion of the high-rise building, E.H. moved into one of the apartments.

E.H. kept himself busy with his philanthropies; in the last decade of his life, he was donating a million dollars every year or so to various charities. And, though he no longer had an executive position at Colgate-Palmolive, he still had a large block of stock. His interest in the Company never waned. He attended the annual shareholders' meetings and had every intention of attending the meeting on April 22, 1981— the year of his 100th birthday. In the end, though, he was too weak to make the trip.

Twelve days before, however, he had celebrated his 100th birthday at a party he had taken a great deal of time and pleasure in planning. "One

hundred is a nice round figure," he told a visitor before the party. "If I had another hundred years, I'd still be an optimist. I've always believed that things were going to turn out all right — and they have." When asked whom he had most admired throughout his life, he answered, Dale Carnegie and President Grover Cleveland. And when asked whom — in his 100th year — he most admired, he grinned and said, "E.H. Little."

Guests came to E.H. Little's 100th birthday party from New York and New Jersey, from North Carolina and even Europe. There were 141 all together, and they included Colgate-Palmolive executives and former associates; the president of Davidson College; Memphis businessmen and educators; friends and family. The champagne flowed as toast followed toast.

In one testimonial speech, the Chairman of the Distribution Committee of The New York Community Trust said:

Giving away money well is almost as hard as making it. It is not just handing out a dollar here and ten dollars there; it is making an investment in the future of mankind. E.H. has treated it as such . . .

The word "philanthropy" comes from the Greek word "philos" meaning friend and "anthropos" meaning man. I give you Edward H. Little, superb philanthropist and friend of man.

Three months later, on July 12, 1981, E.H. Little died.

At his death, it was reported that he left more than \$3 million in direct charitable bequests. The remainder of his estate went to create a fund at The New York Community Trust to benefit a great many of the same educational, medical, and religious institutions he had supported so generously during his lifetime.



The New York Community Trust is a publicly supported community foundation that provides centralized management for many charitable funds. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for the Edward H. Little Fund is Citibank, N.A.

Cover photograph by Fabian Bachrach.