

Fleming, Charles

"Chick," Jr.

(1915–2005)



DENNIS PETTIBONE

Dennis Pettibone, Ph.D. (University of California, Riverside), is professor emeritus of history at Southern Adventist University. He and his first wife, Carol Jean Nelson Pettibone (now deceased) have two grown daughters. He is now married to the former Rebecca Aufderhar. His published writings include *A Century of Challenge: the Story of Southern College* and the second half of *His Story in Our Time*.

Charles "Chick" Fleming, Jr. was the business manager who, according to Frank Knittel (president of Southern Missionary College from 1971 to 1983) did "more for SMC as an individual than any other several men put together."¹

Charles Fleming, Jr. was born on September 25, 1915 in Abbotsford, Wisconsin. His parents were J. and Cora Fleming.² He received his bachelor's degree in business administration from Emanuel Missionary College in 1937 and completed his master's in business administration from Northwestern University in 1940 while working as the business manager of Forest Lake Academy.³ In 1941 he joined the faculty of Southern Missionary College (SMC) as assistant business manager and instructor. Later that year he became the treasurer of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference.⁴ About that time he also married Willna Jean Shadel (1919-2004), who went by the name Betty.⁵

Southern Missionary College

Returning to SMC as business manager in 1946, he continued working there until he retired in 1975.⁶ He set about creating for the college new business and industrial enterprises in order to enable more students to earn their way through school.⁷ The new industrial program was so successful that it was celebrated in a *Reader's Digest* article entitled "College With a Built-In Pocketbook."⁸

Charles "Chick" Fleming

From "Fleming, Charles Case 'Chick,'" Obituary.

<https://www.chattanooga.com/2005/12/7/76945/Fleming-Charles-Case-Chick.aspx>.

When preparing for SMC's reaccreditation, Fleming and the other college leaders send copies of the article to the people on the accrediting team. Consequently, as Fleming recalled, when the team arrived on campus "they were very eager to see our industrial program." At the broom factory, "they all wanted to make brooms to take home to their wives." He suspected that "they were more interested in our industries than they were in our educational program."⁹

Two of the most profitable of the new businesses during the early 1950s were the purchasing agencies. The Southern Mercantile Agency sold large appliances such as refrigerators and television sets. Collegedale Auto Expeditors sold automobiles.¹⁰

Not all new enterprises were successful, but those that were consistently losing money were usually terminated rather quickly, and their losses were outweighed by the profits of the successful businesses.¹¹

Despite the profitability of these enterprises, the need to keep reinvesting in the businesses to maintain their profitability resulted in a cash flow problem. The General Conference policy limited the size of debt that denominational institutions could carry. That, along with the changing tax legislation led Fleming to reluctantly conclude that the college needed to privatize most of its industries. At first he was able to persuade the new owners of many of these businesses to remain on campus and to employ students.¹² However, with the passage of time, all but one of the college's previously owned privatized businesses moved off-campus.¹³

Fleming also saw oversaw a building program necessitated by rapidly expanding enrollment.¹⁴ An example of his astute management is seen in the fact that a new library with an estimated value of \$1,211,504 was built for \$638,000.¹⁵

In 1962 Fleming and a group of other Adventist professionals organized the Committee of 100 for Southern Missionary College. Their fundraising efforts as well as annual dues of \$500 per member, financed over \$10 million worth of building projects. One of these projects, the College Plaza, which featured a grocery store, an Adventist Book Center, a post office, and various other stores and businesses, was renamed Fleming Plaza in 1986.¹⁶

Eager to develop positive relations with Chattanooga's community leaders, Fleming joined several civic organizations,¹⁷ including the Rotary Club and the Better Business Bureau.¹⁸ He also sought opportunities to bring these leaders onto the SMC campus. He used a vehicle called the Purple People Treater to take these people on campus tours, calling their attention to the college's industries as well as the classroom and office buildings. This vehicle was a repurposed school bus with its top removed. Painted white, its sides were covered with purple and pink polka dots.¹⁹

Louisa Peters, who worked at SMC as assistant treasurer²⁰ for many years, considered Fleming "the best leader I've ever known."²¹ He could "mingle with the kings and feel perfectly at ease, but he also [could] mingle with the common person and make them feel comfortable," according to the late Bill Hulsey, a postwar SMC student

²² and an owner of one of the privatized businesses previously owned by SMC.²³ Fleming also had “a natural affinity for relating with students,” according to Bill Wohlers, former vice-president for student affairs at Southern Adventist University, previously known as SMC.²⁴

Retirement

After he retired in 1975 Fleming participated in several successful business ventures. He continued living in Collegedale and remained active in Chattanooga civic organizations, in the Collegedale community²⁵ and in the life of Southern Adventist University. For example, he chaired the committee that organized the inauguration of Donald Sahly in 1986 when Sahly became president of Southern Adventist University²⁶ and, from 1989 to 1992, he was a member of the committee that supervised the writing of Southern’s centennial history.²⁷

His wife of 62 years died on August 27, 2004. Fleming only survived his wife by a few months. He passed away on December 2, 2005. He was survived by two daughters, Karen Mallernee and Sandra Howell, two grandchildren and several great-grandchildren.²⁸

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale, TN: The College Press, 1992), 197.
2. "Obit: Fleming, Charles Chase (1915-2005)," accessed June 14, 2021, www.usgennet.org/usa/wi/county/clark//6data/134/134745.htm.
3. "Wilna Jean Fleming," accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.chattanooga.com/2005/12/7/76945/Fleming-Charles-Case-Chick.aspx>; Elva B. Gardner, *Southern Missionary College: A School of His Planning* revised by J. Mabel Wood (Collegedale Tennessee: Southern Missionary College Board of Trustees, 1975).
4. Sean Reed, "Former Business Manager Dies," *Southern Tidings*, February 2006, 22.
5. "Wilna Jean Fleming," accessed June 18, 2021, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/63621245/wilna-jean-fleming>. The year of the marriage was deduced from the fact that at the time of her death they had been married for 62 years. "Fleming, Charles Case 'Chick,'" Obituaries, December 7, 2005, chattanooga.com., accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.chattanooga.com/2005/12/7/76945/Fleming-Charles-Case-Chick.aspx>.
6. Reed, 22.
7. Pettibone, 189-192.
8. Cecil R. Coffey, "College With a Built-In Pocketbook," *Reader's Digest*, March 1956, 123-126.
9. Garrett Nudd, "No Better Friend," *Southern Columns*, Winter 2003, 9.
10. Pettibone, 191.
11. *Ibid.*, 197-199.
12. *Ibid.*, 199.
13. Author's recollection.
14. Gardner, 218.
15. Pettibone, 264.
16. Nudd, 10.
17. *Ibid.*

18. Fleming was a member of the Rotary Club for over 50 years. He was twice elected president of the Chattanooga Better Business Bureau (<https://www.chattanooga.com/2005/12/7/76945/Fleming-Charles-Case-Chick.aspx>, accessed June 11, 2021).
 19. Nudd, 10-11.
 20. Gardner, 310.
 21. "On Chick..." sidebar for the Nudd article, *Southern Columns*, Winter 2003, 11.
 22. Ibid.; "Fleming, Charles Case 'Chick'," Obituaries, December 7, 2005, chattanooga.com., accessed June 11, 202, <https://www.chattanooga.com/2005/12/7/76945/Fleming-Charles-Case-Chick.aspx>.
 23. Author's recollection.
 24. Nudd, 10.
 25. Ibid., 11.
 26. Pettibone, 292.
 27. Author's recollection.
 28. "Fleming, Charles Case 'Chick'," Obituaries, December 7, 2005, chattanooga.com., accessed June 11, 202, <https://www.chattanooga.com/2005/12/7/76945/Fleming-Charles-Case-Chick.aspx>.
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