

ROBERTS

Interview with Mr. Thomas J. Roberts, Manager, 2 / 8 / 4 0  
Eastman Kodak Stores, Inc., New York City

Mr. Roberts' first contact with Mr. Eastman was in the Eastman-owned Boston store (Roby-French Co.) at the time when he was the mysterious "Mr. Smith." Mr. Eastman was much amused at the public mystification as to "Smith's identity, and he had Mr. Roberts collect clippings from the Boston newspaper bearing on this subject.

Mr. Eastman came into the store frequently and stood for many minutes, presumably looking at framed pictures hung on a very large display board, in the middle of the store. When a salesman came to wait on him, he replied he was "just looking." Perhaps he was quietly "looking" about the store, as well as at the pictures on the display board. He often visited the retail stores unannounced. He did this possibly because he disliked a fuss being made about him, or possibly to make observations of conditions as they normally existed.

He was not annoyed when the cashier of the Boston store, who did not know him (and who was not enlightened as to his identity by Mr. Eastman himself), declined to cash a check for him until he was identified. He approved of caution and, possibly, he deliberately tested the caution of his employees.

An instance of Mr. Eastman's modest refusal to make a fuss and show he was "the boss" occurred in the Chicago store (Sweet-Wallach Co., on Wabash Avenue) in 1906. Mr. Frank Noble of Eastman Kodak Company and Mr. <sup>Charles</sup> Milton Markus, manager of the store, were con-

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sulting when Mr. Eastman came up to the window where Mr. Roberts was working on the books (Mr. Roberts didn't know him at the time.) He asked for Mr. Noble and Mr. Markus, and when Mr. Roberts said they were in conference he inquired if they would be busy long. Mr. Roberts replied he thought not, and Mr. Eastman sat down on the visitor's bench. He read a newspaper while he waited, and he sat for about a half hour before Mr. Noble and Mr. Markus came out of conference. Mr. Noble was upset because he had kept Mr. Eastman waiting, and suggested he might have broken in on them. Mr. Eastman replied he "didn't feel he should do that."

Mr. Roberts was disappointed on an occasion when he expected Mr. Eastman to take him to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to get acquainted. Mr. Eastman hurried into the Boston store one morning in 1918 and said "I want to get to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology." Mr. Roberts said he would be glad to go along with him. Mr. Roberts phoned for a taxi and, while waiting for its arrival, finished the morning mail, upon which he had been working. He then said "All right, Mr. Eastman, if you're ready, there will be a taxi outside." Mr. Eastman said "Wait a minute, wait a minute," and Mr. Roberts wondered what was coming. Mr. Eastman continued "How would you go to M.I.T. if you were going alone?" Mr. Roberts replied he would go by street car. Mr. Eastman said decisively "We will go that way." He had Mr. Roberts cancel the taxi and they went by street car which crossed over the Charles River. They chatted cordially, but when they got to the door of the M.I.T., Mr. Eastman took

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off his glove to shake hands with Mr. Roberts and said "Good bye, Mr. Roberts" and did not invite him to accompany him in.

In his correspondence, Mr. Eastman was terse but cordial. He used a fine grade of bond paper, without monogram, for his own letters. He insisted that the paper used for stationery by his retail stores be of good quality and in good taste. His letters were typewritten and his signatures were written in a bold, clear hand. Oftentimes he signed his name in green ink. (Mr. Roberts has a number of letters from Mr. Eastman, written many years ago.) Mr. Roberts often obtained pictures of the buildings and grounds of Massachusetts Institute of Technology from friends and he forwarded them to Mr. Eastman. At the time Mr. Eastman was interested in M.I.T. and he always wrote letters of thanks to Mr. Roberts and to the other persons who sent him photographs.

Mr. Eastman believed every effort should be made to satisfy customers with the quality of goods sold and to have in stock every product a potential customer might legitimately request, even if this entailed extra expense to the store. If an item had been called for and was not in stock Mr. Eastman was annoyed. He took a personal interest in new products, and was very interested when the home-motion-picture projectors were introduced in 1923 or '24. He examined motion-picture machines in the New York store and compared them, and compared the images projected by various machines. If a projection screen were not absolutely straight on the wall, he noticed it and had it straightened.

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Mr. Eastman (when he was in his 'seventies') occasionally wore rather loud vests. He had two or three of them, which matched the gray or brown suits he usually wore. Mr. Roberts remembered a loud Scotch-plaid vest which Mr. Eastman wore when he visited the store in Boston. Apparently, he liked color and liked to display it without distinctly violating good taste.

He seldom smoked on his business trips, Mr. Roberts says. Mr. Eastman (in 1920 or thereabouts) came into the Boston store one day and Mr. Roberts, who was then manager, was smoking a cigar. He disposed of it as soon as he could for he felt that since Mr. Eastman did not smoke during office hours, he might not like to see others smoke.

Mr. Eastman was not a man to "treat" people. He never took Mr. Roberts to dinner when he was in town, even though he stayed overnight at the hotel (the Parker House in Boston). Perhaps this was just as well for persons sometimes felt, when they talked with Mr. Eastman on small matters, they were boring him.

Mr. Eastman was not talkative when called upon for a public speech, and he seldom was asked to make one. When the Society of the Genesee gave a dinner at Hotel Commodore, in New York City (1928) in Mr. Eastman's honor, he responded briefly to the eulogy given by Thomas J. Watson, the chairman, and spoke modestly as he always did, publicly or privately.

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