

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Anti-War Movement at YSU

Personal Experience

O.H. 1369

ROBERT K. SMITH

Interviewed

by

Matthew T. Butts

on

October 11, 1990

## DR. ROBERT K. SMITH

Dr. Robert K. Smith was born on May 15, 1924, in Melrose, Massachusetts, the son of Frederic and Edythe Smith. As a child, Dr. Smith lived in a number of small towns to the north of Boston, Massachusetts. He completed his secondary education at Havarhill High School, graduating in 1941.

Following high school, Dr. Smith was drafted into the United States Army for service in the Signal Corp during World War II. He was eventually transferred to the Army Air Corp for pilot training, but was reassigned to the Medical Corp, before his training was completed.

Dr. Smith entered college, after being released from the Army. He attended the University of Massachusetts, where he received both his bachelors and masters degrees in 1950. At this point, Dr. Smith was recalled into the Army from 1951 to 1953, during the Korean War.

After his return from the service, Dr. Smith worked (as academic staff) on several research projects in food technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology while pursuing a PhD degree there. However, a year and a half later, he switched back to chemistry when hired as a member of the Chemistry Department at the University of Wyoming, where he pursued, and finally obtained, his PhD degree, while teaching full time.

Dr. Smith then moved to Youngstown, Ohio, to serve as an Assistant Professor in the Chemistry Department at Youngstown

State University. He soon moved into administration, serving as Assistant Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, for 17 years. It was during this period that Dr. Smith witnessed many of the events that concerned the Vietnam War, such as protests on the campus of Youngstown State. He also became familiar with the Youngstown State's administration's reaction to the anti-war movement at this university.

Presently, Dr. Smith remains an integral part of the Department of Chemistry at Youngstown State University. He resides with his wife, Mary Lynn, at 7973 Hitchcock Road, Boardman, Ohio. They have two children. Robbie, age nine, and Danielle, age eight. Dr. Smith spends much of his free time hiking and participating in outdoor sports. He is also an avid photographer.

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INTERVIEWEE: DR. ROBERT K. SMITH

INTERVIEWER: Matthew T. Butts

SUBJECT: Vietnam, Youngstown, Dr. Pugsley, Kent State, the anti-war movement at YSU and the university professors and their roles in the movement

DATE: October 11, 1990

B: This is an interview with Dr. Robert K. Smith, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the anti-war movement at YSU during the 1960's, by Matthew T. Butts, on October 11, 1990, at Ward Beecher Science Hall, Youngstown State University, at approximately 12:30 p.m.

Where did you come from? Where were you born?

S: I was born in Massachusetts in 1924. I lived in a number of places, mostly north of Boston. I did most of my public schooling in Havarhill, Massachusetts and worked for a short while, then [I] went into the service for World War II. I went into the Signal Corps, initially. I was in the reserves, going to school first; then was called to active duty. However, it wasn't long before I had an opportunity to get into what was then the Army Air Force, before it became a separate entity. [I] got all the way up to pilot training, but by then they had enough pilots, so they dumped us all out. I got sent to the Medical Corps and drove ambulances and trucks and so forth, most of the rest of the war.

B: Tell me something about your family, from your childhood to present, [and] a little bit about your parents.

S: My father was born on Cape Cod, Massachusetts at the end of the last century. He was one of the early telephone operators before they changed to women, because they were easier on the language. He married my mother, it must have been somewhere around 1920, 1921, I guess. They lived, when I was born, in Melrose, Massachusetts, just north of Boston. He worked for Minneapolis Honeywall as a salesman and engineer, up until World War II, when he went into the Naval Ship Yard in Boston and worked there during the war, where he felt he could be of more use. After the war, he did similar work. He went out on his own from Minneapolis Honeywall. My mother, for the most part, was at home. She was a volunteer during the war and did some civilian work in connection with the war effort. After the war, we moved to Springfield, Massachusetts. I went to the University of Massachusetts and got my bachelor's degree right after the war and my master's [degree] in Food Technology, which, my undergraduate work was in Chemistry; and then, I switched to Food Technology and then, back to Chemistry, after wards.

I have two sisters. One [is] a year and a half younger than I am, who went west when we were still in Massachusetts. [She] worked in Yellowstone Park, worked in Arizona, came back, and then, went back out west again, where she married a fellow out there and has lived in Montana ever since, where she has raised her family. My other sister was 13 years younger than I. When my dad died, shortly after the Korean situation, she and my mother went west, with the intent of moving to California. They didn't like it, so they went back to Montana and stayed there. My mother passed away some years after. My sister, though, went with North West Air Lines in their reservations office. While they wanted to transfer and promote her, she preferred to stay in Montana. She is still in Montana. She has been there for 30 years, I guess, and loves it out there.

I got married. After the war, I went to MIT for a while to do additional graduate work. I worked there full time in research and took courses towards a Ph.D. in Food Technology. My first summer out of the service, I had gone west and worked in Yellowstone Park, at my sister's urging. I liked it very much out there. I had been through some of that country in the service. I liked it so much that I looked for opportunities to get out there. After I was at MIT about a year, I had a chance to get to the University of Wyoming in their Chemistry Department and teach. I was there for 10 years, during which I finally obtained my Ph.D., while

I taught full time. I have a dubious distinction, or at least, at the time I left, [and] probably still. Also, [I was] the only one, at that time at least, who took both language exams at the same time and passed them both. I didn't do all that well, but I passed them anyway.

When I was out there, I lived on a ranch with my first wife. It was about 29 miles out of town, and I commuted back and forth daily. It was at the foot of the mountains. And if it snowed in Laramy, where the University was, it would snow much more out there; and yet, even when other faculty members from town couldn't make it to the University, I made it everyday. After the first semester I was out there, I had eight o'clock classes and never missed a class, never was late, despite the fact that, occasionally, the road was closed during the day. Usually, I'd get in before they closed it, and then, they'd reopen it again at night, and I could go back home. When we lived on the ranch--my former wife has always loved horses--we raised horses. It was part of the reason why my Ph.D. took so long. She trained horses and, eventually, started a riding school, which is still going at this time. Interestingly enough, she teaches--I think she still does, and did for many years anyway--riding at the University of Wyoming. What seems strange is that she comes from the East and teaches westerners how to ride horses.

When I completed my Ph.D., my former wife wanted to stay there. We had agreed to separate by that time, and I came here with the intent of staying maybe a year or two; and then, try to find my way back out there again. After I'd been here a year, I was getting ready to teach in the summer. I was called to the Arts and Sciences Dean's Office. Former Dean Dikima interviewed me. He talked with me as he talked to all the new faculty. It was easier then, there weren't so many of them. He thought perhaps I could help him out. He checked me out that summer when I helped him with registration and things in the Deans Office and took over when he was gone. He then asked me to be his Assistant Dean. I was in that position for 17 years. I tried a time or two to leave, but during much of that time, there was a surplus of people in academic positions. I had no chance to return to the West, as I had hoped. I thought at one time, I could, and it was at that time that Dean Dikima became very ill and passed away. I became Acting Dean for a year. I refused the deanship because I had hopes of returning to the West. I still would like to go back after all these years. When Dean Yozwiak became the dean, I continued as his assistant dean for a number of years. Finally, though--I thought about it for quite some time--about

six years ago, I came back to the department because, while I liked what I did in the dean's office, I enjoyed teaching even more. I'm pleased to be here, instead. It has worked out very well.

I was remarried about 12, 13 years ago. We have two children. Robbie turned nine in August. My daughter, Danielle, will be six next month. My schedule, being more flexible, I find that I have more time for them, which I enjoy very much. My present wife is in the catering business and runs a catering facility. She puts in many, many hours and is attracting quite a following, now. That is one of the reasons why I am about 30 pounds overweight.

B: What was YSU like in the 1960's?

S: When I first came here--this was in the fall of 1966--I drove up Wick Avenue, looking for the University. I got as far as Ursuline and I said, "No, that doesn't look like it, it looks like a high school," and saw the name Ursuline High School. So, I came back down the street. I stopped in front of Jones Hall and asked somebody where the University was, and they pointed out that was most of it. There was more behind Jones Hall. We still had old Army barracks between this building and Jones Hall. The Engineering Building had just been built. Most of the rest of the land over there was still houses that didn't belong to the university. We had an old hotel across the way, where the School of Business, Williamson Hall, is. It was rather rat infested, and used for classes. We had a lot of night classes, because we couldn't fit everybody in the day time. It was quite a bit different. Registration that people complain about now, it's nothing like what it was then. There would be long lines, waiting outside the buildings to get registered. The facilities were much more limited. When I first came, we had almost no instruments of any kind in the Chemistry Department. We went state [turned into a state organization] in a year, and then the state funds. . . . We could build more, we could get more equipment, and so forth. Then, we began to see progress. Things grew by leaps and bounds. So, it's quite something to see, now. It seems strange, after the years that we've been here now, that Bryson Street used to go right up passed this building. When I first came here, they had built the new wing, but they were finishing the inside. It wasn't until that following spring that we got to use it. It's been here for 20 odd years now. It was brand new and shiny, then.

I think Wick Motel, which is torn down now, of course, was an active motel at the time. The homes on the corner of Spring [Street], on the other side of Wick

Avenue, were being used as classrooms. We had an old home where the present library is, and old wooden home that was used as offices and classrooms and so forth. It no longer exists, of course. [There were] no parking decks. If you weren't familiar with it, it was hard to find the university, then. The only thing was that, by the time you had been here for a year, everyone knew everyone else. When I was in the dean's office, I kept up fairly well because I got around over campus. But now, if I go to a meeting with faculty or something, half the faces I don't even know anymore. It's kind of disappointing that way, although at the same time, the improvement in the quality of the university was certainly worth it all.

B: What was the composition of the student body like in the 1960's here at Youngstown?

S: There were, of course, about a little over half as many. There was somewhere around 8,000 students at the time. There were very few older students. There were quite a lot of night students, still, and as now, their evening program was very important.

In the late 1960's, when we began to have all the student unrest, we found that there was a pretty fair number of rather radical students on campus. We were lesser known, and so, we didn't have the radicals coming to campus. They'd stop at Kent, which was much better known, and of course, the incidents there had been partially as a result of it. There was unrest here. President Pugsley, who had succeeded Dr. Jones, handled it extremely well. The students wanted to see him late one afternoon, and he quietly went out. It was a house then, where the president's office was, about where the walkway is, just to the north of the library. He faced some hundreds of students and very calmly, explained how things were.

Everything was going pretty smoothly. Most of us stayed back. We were told to. Although we circulated among some of the students and tried to find out what was going on, we were trying to keep things settled down. While this was going on though, down in the hollow, which wasn't developed then, there were a whole bunch of Youngstown police in all their riot gear, just in case. They intended to stay there, but some student happened to come up through the hollow and see them and let the others know. That stirred things up a little bit. At that time, a few of them decided to demonstrate by sitting in Wick Avenue and not letting traffic by, and they got carted off. It was really very minor compared to most places. There was unrest, but it was kept low key, compared to other universities. I think it seemed to have been very well handled here.



Our chief of security, at that time, had experience on the Youngstown police force and had a wide knowledge of the area and knew all kinds of people. So, he had people out, checking. There was a time that there were quite [a few] radicals from Kent on their way over. He was able to find out ahead of time and get officers out [to] turn their busses around and send them back to Kent. We probably avoided a problem at that time.

It was an interesting time. Students tended to be a little bit destructive during that time and shortly after. It was about that time, too, that Kilcawley was expanded, enlarged, built up. Yet, we managed to instill enough pride in them, in the growing university, that relatively little damage was done. Phil Hirsch was in charge of Kilcawley. If there was something damaged or destroyed, he'd replace it right away, so that they didn't get the idea, "Well, look, that's already done. I can do it, too." I think this helped by keeping it looking nice. Making that effort helped to instill a little bit more pride in the students, so they were willing to take care of it. That sort of got us out of that period, I think.

B: Do you remember the name of the chief of security?

S: I can think of his first name, [it's] Paul. I can picture him, and I should know his last name; but I can't remember it at the moment. I'm sure that Mr. Earnhart, who has been here longer than I have, can tell you that. [Paul's last name is Cress]

B: What was your position on the Vietnam Conflict?

S: I, perhaps, didn't feel as strongly. I thought it was wrong for us to get in it in the first place, but since we were in it and involved, it seemed to me that we had to make the best of it. I think it was just as well that we got out, as we did. I think, back then, the older generation perhaps had a little bit more pride and willingness to fight for the freedom of this country, as compared with younger people. I know my wife, who is much younger than I, swears that if ever there is a conflict again, she'll take our kids to another country to avoid getting [them] into the service. I don't feel that way at all. I certainly would not want anything to happen to my children. I'm certainly not in favor of war, but we're at a stage where sometimes that seems to be the only way to proceed until we get people a little bit more grown up. I wasn't in favor of the war, but at the same time, I wasn't going to demonstrate against it, as was done so much, because I felt that we had to support our country. Even though I thought it wasn't the wisest thing, we sort of had to muddle through it, anyway.

B: What was the position of the YSU administration towards the Vietnam War?

S: I'm not sure. I think it was pretty much non-committal. I don't think anyone came out with a firm position on it at all. I think, likely, because the faculty were an earlier generation, they would probably have felt less strongly than the students about the situation.

B: Who were the students that were active in the anti-war movement on this campus?

S: I don't remember their names. I had two or three in my classes. One, in particular, I helped him with a science experiment when he first came here. Larry something [was his name]. I can't tell you now. I'm sorry. I don't remember their names.

B: Do you remember what they were like, what organizations they would have belonged to, or. . . .

S: No, I'm not sure. I sort of got along with them, helped them, was willing to talk with them, but I sort of avoided whatever connections; and so, I often didn't know. When I did, by this time, I had forgotten who that was quite a few years ago.

B: Do you remember Mark Shutes at all during this period?

S: Well, I remember him more recently. I remember him vaguely back then, but that's all.

B: What was the Youngstown community's belief in the war? Was there a position on the war?

S: I think they tended to be, on the whole, much less radical than most of the students seemed to be. Many of them, I suspect, didn't really pay much attention, didn't care as long as it didn't affect them directly. I suspect that they were willing to support the war effort because we were in it. I don't think a lot of people were really in favor or thought it was a right decision in the first place. But often times, people, if they weren't involved directly, they didn't pay much attention. It was just one of those things that was going on.

B: What events stand out as major and significant during the period of the anti-war movement?

S: You mean, locally?

- B: Locally and nationally. What do you remember from that period that stands out in your mind?
- S: Well, the most impressive local picture at that time, was when the students gathered together and the president addressed them. Incidentally, I mentioned President Pugsley, when that Kent State situation happened [and] the students held a vigil to support Kent students, and our president was with them the whole time. You have to give him credit for that. The Kent State affair, of course, stands out quite strongly. Simply, the pictures that we get from television, what we hear and see in the newspapers, writing and so forth, stand out throughout that period. I don't recall specific things that stand out, just in a more general way.
- B: Do you recall what year it was or the time of year when the students went to see President Pugsley?
- S: It was in the spring. I think it was 1969. You'd probably better double check that with somebody else. It seems to me it was in the spring of 1969.
- B: What effect do you think the Kent State shootings had on the anti-war movement in Youngstown or on the student body in general?
- S: Well, some, I'm sure, were very angry about the whole thing, and at the same time, saddened. I think, though, that while they were affected, it wasn't as strong here as in many places. A good many of the students, as now, worked either full or part time. Many of them had families. They were so busy with that sort of thing, they--I think as a group--didn't feel they had time for this stuff. So, while they were angered at the way things worked out and saddened by the deaths, I think many of them just left it at that. At least, that's my impression.
- B: Did you have any specific role either with the administration or with the anti-war movement during this period?
- S: Not really in connection with that. I just performed my normal duties as assistant dean. I was, much of the time, involved with students in one way or another. Often, [I] talked with them and sometimes got into discussions about this. There was no specific, formal role that I had.
- B: I've heard references. . . . At this point, were you assistant dean in, say 1969? Did the administration have you going around to the various classrooms to make sure professors were holding classes as scheduled?

- S: Not in connection with the demonstrations and so forth, no. We did do that, sometimes, at the end of the semester during final exams, because there was some who would give their exams a week early; and they weren't supposed to. I remember one case, specifically: Jack Frangberg, who worked for me at the time and is still over there. I went charging outside to all Arts and Sciences classrooms in a pouring rain [and] got completely soaked, including Clinger Waddoll Hall, which then housed the Art Department, and classes in what is now the Board of Education and various places. But that was only at the end of the semester. We did that just enough times so word got around, and it balanced out a little bit more reasonably. I'm sure a few [are] still giving early finals, but we had most of them giving their exams when they were supposed to.
- B: Do you remember any faculty members who were extremely active with the anti-war movement?
- S: There were some fairly active. I'm not sure who, now. We used to have Dean's meetings, a couple times a year with the other state universities in Ohio. There were a couple of the deans who were quite strongly involved. I'm trying to think. I can picture one of the deans with shoulder-length hair. I never was sure if it was because he felt that way himself or he did it to work in better with the students. But he was with the students many times on his campus during unrest. I'm trying to think whether it was Cincinnati. I'm not sure, now. There was some involvement of faculty members on this campus, but I don't think it was a really strong involvement that I recall. I can't think of specific names at the moment. I'm trying to think who it might be, but I just don't remember. At that time, the deans office had moved to the Wick Motel. We were off the edge of campus, so a lot of the stuff that went on missed us, because we were at our desks quite a lot. I suspect some of the other faculty, who had been here longer than I, remember better about that.
- B: Would the name Dr. Alice Budge. . . .
- S: Alice Budge. Oh, yes. That's right. She was someone involved and has been involved since then.
- B: How about Dr. Chap Morrison? Would that. . . .
- S: Yes, I had forgotten about him completely. I remember him now, yes. They were . . . I think Morrison's wife, too, as I recall. I can't think of her name. I can't picture her. I can picture him. While they were involved, I don't know how deeply they were involved.
- B: Do you remember anything of the Peach Moratorium held

in the fall of 1969 on this campus? It was a gathering of approximately a thousand students.

S: Well, that probably would have been the time that I thought was in the spring, then.

B: Do you remember any individuals from the community who spoke openly against the war?

S: Not really. No. Students on campus and some of the faculty members [did], of course, to some extent. But I think, often times, we didn't pay a lot of attention. One expects that sort of thing on campus, anyway. It's part of the process of growing and learning. You can't suppress that sort of thing unless it gets harmful to people, so I think we sort of let it go and didn't pay an awful lot of attention to it.

B: Do you remember any students who were pro-war, or was there a number of students who were pro-war on the campus?

S: I don't think that there were a lot. I don't think that they were very outspoken. I suspect that there were some. One would probably find a number of ROTC students who felt more that way. To the best that I can recall, they kept relatively quiet because there were a greater number of students who felt strongly the other way.

B: What would you say was the peak of the anti-war movement at YSU?

S: I think it was probably about that time, middle to late 1969, because after that, things began to settle down and become quieter; and they began to pay more attention to classes and settled back into a more moderate frame, being more concerned with getting a job and that sort of thing.

B: Dr. Shutes, when I interviewed him, made mention of the business community being extremely opposed to the anti-war movement. Would you feel that was true, or . . . ?

S: Well, I suspect, to an extent, and particularly near the campus, I think many of them were concerned for their safety and for their business. Probably many of them, being a little older, felt less strongly about the war and were among the generation that tended to support the government, regardless. Mark may have had more of a direct connection or more awareness, but it didn't seem to me that it was really a strong thing. I'm sure the community was concerned about the activity on campus and on other campuses. They had seen some of

this erupt, of course, in violence and damage and so forth. I suspect some of them were concerned from that point of view.

B: Do you remember what the YSU's administration's response was to Dr. Jones closing the library in supporting the Moratorium in 1969?

S: I don't recall that there was very much comment. It didn't seem to me that there was much objection to it. I think [there was] more support for it than anything.

B: After the close of the war or the student activities in opposition to the war at YSU, do you think YSU's administration tried to eliminate any of the faculty members who were active in the anti-war movement?

S: If they did, it didn't get down to my level, because there was never any comment. I'm sure it would have been opposed by Dean Dikima, while he was here, and by Dean Yozwiak, after that, and so, if there were some comments made--I think perhaps when Morrison left they weren't sorry, but I don't think they made any strong effort to make him leave. No, I didn't hear of any. I'm not aware of any direct efforts by the administration to get rid of someone. There may have been talk, "It would be nice if he wasn't here," or something like that. But to my knowledge, that's about as far as it went.

B: The anti-war movement on this campus, do you think it had any impact on the greater scope nationally or the awareness of the Youngstown community to the war?

S: I suspect that it made the Youngstown community more aware while things went on and seemed important enough. I think the activities here that were much less spectacular than many other colleges or universities, and as a result, I doubt that there was national or even wide impact. But I'm sure it helped to bring more awareness of the war and the situation to many community members.

B: Is there anything else that you think is important to add at this time that we didn't cover?

S: I don't think of anything at the moment. Of course, what always happens is after it's all over, you think, "I should have said something about such and so."

B: Well, thank you very much for your time.

S: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW