

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

American Bicentennial

Personal Experience

O.H. 1350

ROBERT K. SMITH

Interviewed

by

Joseph Paul Alessi

on

December 5, 1990

ROBERT K. SMITH

Robert K. Smith was born on May 15, 1924 in Melrose, Massachusetts, the son of Fredrick H. Smith and Edith Kingston Smith. During his childhood, Mr. Smith moved throughout the state of Massachusetts as a result of his father's work. Mr. Smith attended various schools during this time, and graduated from Haverhill High School in 1942. Following graduation, he enlisted in the United States Army Reserve Signal Corps. During World War II however, Mr. Smith participated as a pilot in the Medical Corps. Mr. Smith was honorably discharged from the Army in 1946. After his discharge, Mr. Smith attended the University of Massachusetts. He graduated in 1950 with a BS in Chemistry, and at the same time, he graduated with a MS in Food tech. Mr. Smith was recalled into the United States Army in 1950 to participate in the Korean Conflict. He was Honorably discharged in 1953.

Mr. Smith has held various jobs throughout his lifetime. However, his main type of employment has been in the role of a college educator. Mr. Smith was a professor at the University of Wyoming from 1956 to 1966. While at the University of Wyoming, he enrolled in classes, and graduated from Wyoming with a PhD in Chemistry in 1966. Also, in 1966 Mr. Smith was hired at Youngstown State University as a chemistry professor. Currently, he holds the same position.

Mr. Smith resides at 7973 Hitchcock Road in Boardman, Ohio with his wife Mary, whom he married on July 9, 1977. Together they have two children, Robert J. and Danielle Marie. Mr. Smith is still active and enjoys teaching, photography, and outdoor sports.

A: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Smith for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Youngstown State University's role in the American Bicentennial, by Joseph Paul Alessi, on December 5, 1990, at Youngstown State University in Room 5025 Ward Beecher Hall, at 6:17 p.m.

First of all, I would like to ask you some questions about your background. Where and when were you born?

S: I was born in Melrose, Massachusetts in 1924.

A: What is Melrose near?

S: It is just north of Boston.

A: What is Melrose like?

S: I have not been there for a long, long time, but it used to be a quiet little community. It is a suburb of Boston. Many of the people commute everyday to Boston to work.

A: Can you tell me something about your childhood, like when you were growing up and in school, or your hobbies and what you liked to do?

S: We moved quite a few times and I went to a lot of different schools, mostly in Massachusetts at that time. Frequently, when the schools changes, the courses do, but that did not seem to pose a problem. I do not recall anything particular about my elementary school, except going. I went to high school in Haverhill, Massachusetts, which was about thirty miles north of Boston, and our graduating class was nearly five hundred. It was pretty big for that time, I guess. My grades, I guess, were just average. Supposedly, I could have done a lot better, but I sort of goofed around a lot and I did not study very hard. But at any rate, at the close of high school I worked for a short time at a department store and did various kinds of work for them. This was in 1941, and the war began and I volunteered for the Army Signal Corp Reserve.

They sent a bunch of us from all over that whole area, as civilians, to a radio school, and we learned all about the radio and how to build them at the time and how to build a transmitter and receivers and that sort of thing, with the idea of us going into the Army Signal Corp Reserve. This, I think, was a period of about nine months or so, and not to long after that we were called to active duty. Then I went into the Signal Corp, but an opportunity came about then to apply for Aviation Training. This is when we had the

Army Air Force. We had a separate Air Force at that time. I went to college for training attachment at the University of Missouri for some months. I went to what they called "On the Line Training," where we worked on B-24 bombers and got to ride in them a little bit, but mostly to clean and fix them and things like that. Then it got time for us to decent to actually flight training and about that time all of us had too many pilots in the program.

So, I ended up flying an ambulance in the Medical Corps. That was kind of interesting for awhile. Here we were, a bunch of medics, but our commanding officer, who had been playing around and trying to get something a little bit more spectacular for himself, got us as an Airborne Field Hospital. So, we went for Airborne training, and we flew and learned how to pack planes and we learned how to set up camp and so forth. It was kind of interesting to hear a bunch of medics. usually you picture them as soft and glasses and so forth. But our sergeant was a big and rugged looking guy and one of the fighting areas we went to was an Infantry camp. There were lines that people were trying to get into our outfit.

We were sent to the Pacific and we took off from San Francisco by ship. We stopped along the way at New Guinea, then to the Philippines. We went there and two months afterward, a couple of ships got torpedoed. That happened and I do not know anything about it. We set up as a field hospital on an island in the Philippines. There was a little bit of Japanese activity there, but not too much. We were pretty busy simply as a hospital.

But then we were scheduled for the invasion of Japan and we were getting prepared to move on. About that time in the war there was a lot of excitement. They sent us on up to Japan, and when we got there we were about seventy-five miles from Hiroshima. For the moment I cannot think of the name of the tunnel we were in. There were about a quarter of a million people. But you drove there and their houses were not there and the downtown was completely flat, no buildings just all empty space that had been bombed to death. We were there for quite some time. In fact, we stayed there until I came back to the United States. We had a chance to go north. Again, I cannot think of the town it was in, but it was the headquarters unit.

On business, we happened to be in the Major's office. We were in on what was scheduled. It turns out that there were seven American divisions, there was supposed to be one with two more in reserve, and they had thought that there were twelve to fourteen Japanese divisions on the island. Cliffs were twenty feet high right out of the water. At any rate, we were scheduled as a hospital outfit to break up into smaller units, to be one hour behind the initial wave, and they figured that we would have about 85% casualties for a field hospital. We are suppose to stay behind the line and take care of the troops and so forth. Fortunately, we did not have to do that. When we got there, they found that these twelve to fourteen Japanese divisions were really twenty-eight.

It was quite an experience. I was glad that it all happened, and I was also glad to get back home. About a mile off of the shore, I heard radio commercials for the first time in the whole time that I had been away, and that way a long time. They sounded pretty good. Then we went through the channel and landed in New York and [I went] through the discharge process.

In the fall, I went to the University of Massachusetts, but it turned out that there were so many returning veterans to the University of Massachusetts at the time, that they sent a large group of veterans to Fort Devens in Massachusetts, which had been deactivated. This was sort of an extension of the University of Massachusetts, until they could absorb us. So for two years we were there, and I got some excellent teaching on the way. Then, prior to this, we moved to the main campus. I started my first year and signed up as a Chemical Engineer. After a year I changed to Chemistry, and I am not quite sure why, but that was the case. At any rate, I finished up about the end of my third year and I was about ready to quit. I do not know. I was doing alright, but [was] just bored with it or something. My mother talked me into going the rest of the time, which I did.

I completed toward the end of my senior year. I found out that I could switch to Food Technology and it kind of sounded interesting. Perhaps [I could] get my master's degree in a year. So, that sounded good, and because of how things worked out, I got both degrees, my bachelor's and master's, at the same time in 1950. It was just how they scheduled their graduations, but it seemed funny to have them both at the same time. I left there and worked for a few months and then was recalled because of the Korean situation.

Because of my Food tech. background and I had my masters I got sent to Virginia and taught a service course. Then, later took the course that I was teaching. Then I was sent to Europe, to Germany down in the Bavarian Alps, south of Munich. It was a beautiful country and I really enjoyed it. In the meantime, I had gotten married and my wife was over in Germany.

I came back and walked into MIT looking for a job in the food service department and was accepted. I worked there full-time as a technician and worked on my master's degree there. That, too, did not really appeal to me all of that much. Some years before World War II, I spent a summer in Yellow Stone National Park. I really loved the west. So, I looked for a job in the west. I had been at MIT for a little over a year and I had a chance to go to the University of Wyoming. I taught there full-time and I worked on my Ph.D. I had a couple of dubious records there. I took my language exams both in French and German. I took them the same day and I passed them both the first time that I took them. I did not do too well, but I passed. No one in the University had ever done that until that time. The other dubious record was that, because I worked there full-time, I took longer than anybody else to complete my degree. So, it took me a full ten years, but I finally completed it and came here in the fall in 1966. So, I have been here for quite awhile.

A: Since 1966?

S: Yes.

A: You have had an interesting adolescence and early years. Why was the reason that your family moved so much in Massachusetts when you were younger?

S: My dad worked for many years as an engineer, though he never had college training. He was moved a couple of times and then he decided to go on his own working for them still. So, we moved a couple of places. My dad said that we moved to a home that was in a better location. Then after that World War II came along and he felt that he should join the war, he worked for the shipyard for a number of years. Then he worked for different heating companies near Boston. So, we just moved around and finally we moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, because he was offered a job in a plant there. He had jobs all over the place.

A: What do you recall about the 1970's?

S: Okay, I was here. Of course it followed the upheavals of the late 1960's, but it settled down and people became much more conservative than they are opposed to, students and so forth. It was a pretty quiet time that way. I think that students were a little bit more interested in school and worked a little bit harder. It was a time of growth here because the University was building and it was kind of nice change because when I first came here. We had nearly nine thousand students. We had proper room for four thousand. There used to be an old hotel across from where the School of Business is and we had our classes in the basement. Every once in awhile rats would come out and scare the classes. There were some old left over Army barracks on campus when I first came. Those were torn down shortly after. So, again, they built up the campus to try and make it look more like a campus and attract more attention from town. And, of course, that led up to the Bicentennial time.

A: Now, in the late 1960's and early part of the 1970's, during the Vietnam War, you had a lot of almost Anti-American feelings by the American people. I mean, in the 1970's you have this almost rebirth of patriotism. What can you account for it?

S: Well, I think so many people in the late 1960's saw the uselessness of the Vietnam struggle and felt that it was such a waste to get a lot of people killed for no apparent reason. Actually, it is more complex than that, of course. Many adults never thought through enough to see any reason for it. They were certainly not in favor of the war, but some people were upset. But I think that they grew up a little bit. Part of it, rather than getting over the feeling, I think that they got busy because they got through with school and had jobs and had responsibility, getting married and having kids. That sort of just gradually changed.

I do not think that the patriotism grew back very fast. I think that the earlier generations had the patriotism and they still hold on to it pretty much. My present wife is much, much younger [than I am] and grew up in that era. Even though her mother is very patriotic, she says that if there is ever a war again and our kids are going to be drafted, she would move out of the country. I cannot see that at all. I certainly would not like for my kids to be in the war if they did not have to, but I feel that way. I think that patriotism is coming back now but I do not think that it did very much in the 1970's. I think that it was

mostly the students and people from the late 1960's that began to grow up and have responsibilities and start to settle down.

A: Describe your personality. What is Robert Smith like? What is he about?

S: I am not quite sure. I think that I get so involved sometimes in doing all kinds of things, that I just do things. I enjoy teaching very much. I was the Assistant Dean to the Arts & Sciences for seventeen years and I enjoyed that, but I enjoy teaching even more and that is why I came back to teaching. I am glad that I did. I enjoy being around students and younger people. There are older people that tend to act older too, and maybe I just do not want to grow up. I like the outdoors.

I feel kind of frustrated around here. I like my job. I like people that I come in contact with, and I can care less about this area. I would like to go back out west to the mountains and open space. The trouble is, my wife does not think too much of that. When I was at the University of Wyoming most of the years that I was there, I lived out on a ranch. My former wife raised horses and trained and taught riding. I used to help with that. I used to ride a lot and help the neighbors with there cattle drives. That kind of life gives me much more. I love hiking in the mountains. My favorite place is Glacier Park. Until recently, I used to go up there every summer for at least two or three weeks and sometimes in the winter. I have two sisters that live in Montana. So, that is a little bit more incentive to get out there. I really enjoy outdoor things. For instance, skiing and climbing and that sort of thing. I love to travel, but it is nice to have a place to come back to. I really enjoyed traveling. I do not know if I have told you anything or not?

A: Well, you can tell somebody a lot more than what you think. How did a professor of Chemistry at the university and the Dean of Arts and Sciences getting involved with a project like the Bicentennial?

S: I think they wanted somebody from the administrative purpose to be in charge because it would be easier to get around all over campus and communicate with people in different departments. I think that they look for someone that they felt could handle it. It was such an important position and the time could not be spared, but it was rather time consuming. So, I just think that they look around for some administrative people and just narrowed it down to somebody that they thought would probably get along well with other people.

A: Now, a lot of people here like Clingan Jackson and the Bicentennial Committee for the Mahoning County, like the Mahoning Valley Colonial Brigade, but not too many people here, know about what Youngstown State University did. How was Youngstown State University involved with the Bicentennial?

S: Well, actually, they did quite a bit. They set up a committee and we worked some what with the committee. I was the representative for the Bicentennial Unit up at Youngstown State University. We talked about certain things in conjunction with and anything we

scheduled we tried to work it out. We did quite a bit. We started sending out notices to everyone, to departments and to individuals and urged them to get involved in some way. We helped them to write proposals to the State and to the Federal Government for grants and succeeded in getting quite a few thousand dollars in grant money through some of these projects. We had regular meetings and we went around and talked to people at various things to get involved. Different departments of course. The History Department for example, could present a pretty good case and show the changes in the two hundred years. Show what it was and what the background was. They did that better than anybody else. Some of the science departments, as I recall, tried to show the advances in the area of sciences. The art and music department showed changes through exhibits and conferences and concerts. We were able to put it through WYSU and work with other local radio and television stations to get some programs presented through media that way.

Somewhere back in my files I have a thick stack on the Bicentennial. I did a composite and I haven't had a chance to go through it and know the specific details. We had a Bicentennial open house on the campus. By this time the campus had gone to be quite respectable and we attracted twelve or thirteen thousand people. We had all kinds of programs and demonstrations and displays for them. It turned out to be beautiful weather. The people were able to walk around campus. They probably never realized how the place had grown and maybe that their kids would go here instead of going off to Ohio State or some place like that. So, it did make quite an impression on a lot of people and actually we did quite a lot and each department on campus had something. It was spectacular.

A: Did you ever work hand in hand or in conjunction with the Youngstown Bicentennial Committee on any of these projects, such as the John Young's Memorial?

S: Yes. I cannot remember what specific things we did, but there were several things that we did in conjunction with them. They gave us ideas for projects and in turn, we helped them with some things that we could do. I cannot be anymore specific than I am right now.

A: Did you give financial aid to the Bicentennial Committee at all? Through grants or fellowships or anything?

S: I do not recall that we gave them. I do not think so. I think that we had our own money and they had their own money. YSU has its own money through State and Federal funds.

A: Did you ever have, other than the open house, did you ever have any other Bicentennial events? I think I recall that you had a reenactment up here at one time.

S: Yes, I think so. I do not remember anything specifically, but there are quite a number of things that went on on the campus through various times throughout the year. It is just simply that the Bicentennial Open House was the biggest single event involving everyone

in the university.

A: How was it received by the departments? Was it just another thing that they had to do?

S: Well, there were some departments like that and some individuals, but for the most part they were quite enthusiastic and worked very hard and made a tremendous impression, I think, on the people who saw it.

A: Why do you think that they were so behind it?

S: I think, as educators, they felt that this was important.

A: Was this just a job for you or did you really enjoy it?

S: Oh, no I enjoyed it. Most of it. At times it was a hassle, but of course, most things are. They had us running pretty hard sometimes. Then I still had my duties as an Assistant Dean. I had a little bit more time available then and devoted quite a lot of hours outside of the regular 8:00-5:00, but I really enjoyed most of it and that was an opportunity for me to get around and know more people on the campus than I already did before, and I became familiar with people from town. I thought that it was very worthwhile and other people were very enthusiastic and the results were pretty rewarding.

A: How do you feel that the Bicentennial, or what effect did the Bicentennial have on your imagery of Youngstown State University?

S: Well, I think that it improved it tremendously because so many people saw the university for the first time when they walked around. Many people saw it and many, many more heard about it. I think that it made a tremendous impression.

A: You told me that you loved the openness of the outdoors and you love Yellow Stone National Park in Wyoming. If you think about it, history was actually made there with a mountain and the Indians, and you love that openness and freedom. Do you feel that there was a little bit of that interest in the Bicentennial? Do you actually feel that you were almost reliving a part of history?

S: Perhaps a little bit yes. I do not think that I thought consciously like that, but I suspect that it probably entered my mind somewhere.

A: What was the Bicentennial to you?

S: Actually, much of it was a learning process, because I learned an awful lot of what I was not aware of before. I think it helped to bring me my patriotism a little bit and I am sure that it helped a lot of other people. So, the level of patriotism perhaps improved during

that period and started raising it up again.

A: What effect, other than the improvement of YSU's image, do you think the Bicentennial had on the different departments?

S: Well, I think that at least many of them worked together better. They tend to stick to their own departments. When I was in the Dean's Office they would come in the Arts & Sciences Department and seldom saw the other departments. I think that it helped to make this more of a community than it had been before.

A: Can you recall the History Department's role in the Bicentennial and what they actually did?

S: Not in detail, no. I remember that they were quite involved and did quite a bit of presentations about the whole period, but I do not recall the details right now.

A: If you had to do it all over again would you?

S: I suppose.

A: Why?

S: I am not sure, but I probably would.

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

End of Interview