CWU LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

MILO SMITH

Lowther: Today we are interviewing Milo Smith. This is May 30, 1995, and the interviewer is Larry Lowther. Milo, before we get into your actual career here at Central Washington University, tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and raised, something of your family and education, and your career background.

Milo Smith: I can preface, Larry, by telling you that in college once we were required to write an autobiography. I entitled mine, “A Rose By any Other Name,” terribly original, but I did that because I was known by five different names in four different towns. I was born in Spokane Washington, and my parents had been on the Pantages Vaudeville circuit. They had been working primarily, well, up and down the west coast, and then when my mother became pregnant she dropped out of the act in San Francisco, and my father did a single then, but he signed with the “Dollar Lines” entertaining on ships going over to the orient, and his contract required him to perform on their ships and then in the Dollar Line’s hotels in China and then on the ship coming back when he would be paid off, and he was going to come up to Spokane to pick us up. We had gone up there to stay with my grandmother. He died in China of, all we have been able to find out, of some Oriental fever for which he had no immunity what-so-ever. In order for us to make a living my mother taught dance lessons in Spokane. And, yes, I took tap dancing lessons until I was about eight, and when the rest of the kids were playing ball I was in there brush-back down, brush-back down.

Then my mother met and married a fellow who was in the mines up in Hecla, Idaho, up in the Hecla Mine in Burk, Idaho, and we moved to Wallace which was the nearest town from which he could commute. A nice little town even then. I went by his name as a matter of convenience. He never legally adopted me, so I did not legally go by his last name, Burmeister. That was my second name. And then my mother died in 1934, and he had not adopted me. My grandmother was by this time quite feeble and couldn’t take care of me. I had no other relatives that the authorities could find. They assumed that some place in Ireland around Limerick, Ireland I probably had some relatives, but they were unable to trace any. I don’t know how much effort they made, but I then went to the North Idaho Children’s Home-Finding Aide Society Orphanage in Lewiston, Idaho.

Lowther: How old were you then?

Smith: I was nine years old. At the orphanage they were trying to find the name that I could legitimately be called. And I had been going by the name of Milo Wright and then I became Milo Burmeister, and the Home, from some place, found the name Watson, and so some people in Winchester, Idaho took me Out of the orphanage to peddle milk for them. I went up, lived there three years under the name of Watson, and back to the home when the people I was staying with became very ill, and could no longer run their business, so they had no need for this extra mouth to feed, and back to the orphanage I went, and I was there for probably two, three months when the superintendent called me in and asked me if I might like to go to a family in the Lewiston orchards just south of town and I said sure, anything was better than living in the institution, though I must defend orphanages. My experience was that we ate better than the rest of the kids in town, I never wore rags, I never wore ill-fitting clothing, I always went to the dentist, I went to the doctor, I had the best of care. But by the same token there were only two things in the whole world that I owned that were my own. I owned my toothbrush, and I owned my shoes. You didn’t have to share those two things with anybody else. And so I went to live with Fred and Irene Smith. They’d been married twenty some-odd years by the time they took me out of the home. They were well established in their life’s habits, as was I, by this time now I’m a little beyond twelve. And they had a truck farm at the particular time they took me out, they had just planted four-and-a-half acres of raspberries, and if you know anything about four-and-a-half acres of raspberries. That’s a lot of work, and it’s a lot of berries. Besides that we raised carrots, and corn, and strawberries commercially, and we sold just about everything that was of the ground. I enjoyed the life. Again, I couldn’t have eaten better. Smiths knew that they were being looked at by all of their neighbors to see how they were going to take care of this new boy in their home, and they also knew that they were under a little bit of pressure so, again, I wore clothes that were too good. In fact, I can still remember, I went up to Smiths to live with them on September 1st and school started on the 6th.
On the 2nd of September, and this had been scheduled before they took me, I went in and had a local operation, local anesthetic, and had my tonsils removed. A very normal operation. The doctor simply said, “Yes, he may start school on the 6th of September, tho I would rather he not do anything strenuous.” Well, Smiths sent me to school with a white shirt and pressed trousers and shined shoes, and a necktie. And all of the rest of the boys were playing football, and goodness knows what else, and I had to stand around because I couldn’t do anything strenuous for fear that I would break a blood vessel. And so instantly, the new boy in school is labeled a sissy. And those were fighting words in my life and have always been. Thank goodness as soon as my throat healed-up I was able to start participating with the rest of them. After living with them for a year, they asked me, “Are you happy here?” And I said, “Yes, I have very few complaints.” My complaints that I would have had, had I voiced them, and it would have hurt the Smiths to hear them, was that he did nothing with me but work. He had no interest in games, or play in any way. Winter sports meant nothing to him. It was work, work, work, work, work! And he was very good at it, and he expected me to become good at it and I had to do a man’s work when I was thirteen years old, and it didn’t hurt me a bit, but life was 99% work and 1% play, and that was all involved with school. And so at the end of that first year they asked me if I would like to be adopted, and I said, “Sure. I’d like to have one name that is legal.” And so, they adopted me. I had to go before the Judge, and he asked me in private, “Are you being forced into this, or are you going into this of your own volition?” And I said, “Yes, it is my choice and I did have an option.” And so they adopted me, and from then on I was Milo Smith. And in the years when our three children were small, since they know that I am of Irish heritage and their mother has some Irish running through her veins, and all of our children have Irish first names. They asked me if by any chance I would go back and pick up my real father’s name, which was McCarty. And by taking it in reverse that’s the fifth name I’ve been known by. So, I said “No, I could not possibly change back to my original name simply because those Smith’s are both dead. I owed it to them to carry their name forward.” For whatever that might mean. But at least they thought enough of me to let me use their name, and it has been to some advantage in that people can spell Smith. I can recall in the Service. Some of my Polish friends and Italian friends could hardly ever recognize their names being called at muster, because they were so brutalized, but Smith always rang right through, I knew who I was.

OK, that’s enough about the lineage. I graduated from Lewiston High School in 1943, and immediately the Smiths and I moved down to Vancouver, WA where we were, the three of us, were going to build baby flat-tops for Kaiser in the ship yard down there. And I had already signed-up for the Marine Corps, but I hadn’t received orders. And so I had worked one month in the ship yards in Vancouver when my orders came through. And I went down to San Diego to Marine Corps Boot Camp. And that pretty well takes care of my childhood.

Lowther: OK, And you served in the Marines during world War II?

Smith: And again in the Korean War.

Lowther: Oh, twice. And were you shipped overseas?

Smith: In the Pacific. Marines didn’t know much about anything except the Pacific.

And I’ve been reading through the last year now, all of these memoirs of my friends like Dee Eberhart going to Europe. I understand there was a war over there! I thought it was all in the Pacific.

Lowther: Any particular Islands of note that you associated with?

Smith: My baptism came in Leyte, in the Phillipines, and there was frightening because I was not with a Marine Corp outfit. There were twelve of us sent to Leyte to work with the Army 532nd Field Artillery.
They did not have any intelligence teams with radios that could go out in the hills and snoop out radio stations and small encampments and so-forth, and so they borrowed two teams from the Marines, and we went down and... to show you how awkward it was. They gave us an hour-and-a-half briefing, and that was primarily map study. These are the mountains we want you to go into, We’ll be able to take you this far by truck, and then there’s kind of a trail up to the top of the ridge here, and we have reason to believe that there are radio stations out there and there may be munition dumps, whatever you find we need to know about. And then, of course, we asked what do we do when we find something like an active radio station? Well, we have field artillery and we’ll drop a few shells in on them after you have directed us in on them. How do we direct? Well, they say, we will fire a... when you tell us by map grid, approximately the location of the target, we will drop in a smoke bomb, or smoke shell, and then you tell us up, down, right, or left, and of course we were all trained as marines on the rifle range with rifles, and we knew up and down, right and left by a number of clicks windage and clicks elevation. And so the first radio station we found I was calling back and I said.. gave them the map co-ordinates so they dropped in a shell, a smoke shell, and I called back and I said you’ll have to go up a couple of clicks and right a couple of clicks. And in the background while the mike was still live, I heard a gruff hundreds of yards. You know how long a football field is don’t you?” So that’s the way we zeroed in fire, was by giving them 100 yards, or 50 yards, or whatever. From there we went on up to Saipan, Tinian, and Guam, Fairly ineffective stay in there. We were trying to snoop out Japanese that were still back in the hills. That’s what we were doing. And then finally got our orders for the big one at Okinawa. And we were very involved in Okinawa, very involved. That’s where I really grew up, on Okinawa. Met a lot of wonderful peasant people, a lot of very frightened Japanese soldiers who believed all the garbage that they had been taught about the U.S. Marines, that we had to certify that we had killed our grandmother and grandfather with our bare hands in order to qualify. They had been told a lot of absolute rubbish, and so consequently when they found that when they could see the U.S. M.C. or they saw the globe and anchor, they would surrender and then they would hug us around the knees with tears rolling down their cheeks assuming that any moment we were going to disembowel them. It was a growing up experience. And I was on Okinawa when the Japanese indicated that they were willing to sign a surrender document. And that was the night of my life that was the most fearful of all my life, simply because during the day we had been notified by radio from our headquarters that the Japanese are down to their last aircraft, are flying aircraft that shouldn’t even be in the air, they’re running out of ammunition, they’re running out of this, they’re running out of that, they’re running out of personnel. We are expecting gas attacks. Well, we had left that gas mask someplace on the beach, everybody did. And so the question all over the island with Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard was “Do you remember those films about chemical warfare? What they said you could do if you didn’t have a gas mask?” Well, we just didn’t. We knew we were going to die if they dropped gas. The day was normal and the evening was normal and as soon as it got dusk we crept out to our gun pits where we sat every night, and we, I don’t know what time it was, it seemed like it must have been eight or nine o’clock at night. It was pitch black and we were down at the southern tip of Okinawa. Nobody south of us. Nothing but the cliff, and suddenly up island to our north, the whole sky became absolutely, brilliantly illuminated with all kinds of flares and all kinds of tracers. The word had come in that the Japanese were willing to sign a surrender document and the word was passed around that island to the major sized units and the and they were firing every gun they had into the air, and a little bitty unit down on the southern tip of Okinawa didn’t rate notification until after everybody else, and all these anti-aircraft guns with these at least twenty millimeter and perhaps larger shells being fired that were self-illuminating in that they were tracer shells, they were raking back and forth across the sky, so we had these zig-zag patterns of illumination, and any other time it would be beautiful, but we interpreted that they were raking the sky because there were paratroopers dropping, and there were planes all over up there dropping gas cannisters, and we were absolutely petrified because we knew that we had no solution to gas. The human solution we could take care of but not gas, and then finally our headquarters notified the radio man on duty and he stuck his head out of the van and he hollered. “The gooks want to surrender!” And so believing this we got out of our pits and we fired everything we had into the air. But that was the greatest fear I’ve ever felt in my life because there was no way to protect yourself from a harm that you’d thrown your protection away months before a voice say, “What in the hell is a click?” And I said, “Sir, we’ve not been instructed on how to direct artillery fire.” He said, “Well, if you can’t do anything else give it to us in Lowther: You were mustered out soon after that?
Smith: Yes, the services had a point system of course, and the longer you had been in, and the longer you had been overseas, the more points you had and the people with the most points were sent home first, and I didn’t go in until 1943, and so those men who had gone in in the previous years were going home every day, and I came home in ‘46 and came right back to San Diego where I was mustered out, and back up to my parents who by that time were living in Castle Rock, Washington, actually Silver Lake outside of Castle Rock, and I registered at the University of Idaho assuming that’s where all my friends were going to go, and as they kept coming home I found out that instead they were going to go to that little teacher’s college in our home town of Lewiston, and so an education wasn’t something for my enlightenment, an education was a way to be with my friends. So I pulled my money out of Idaho and put it in the little school down in Lewiston and had I not done that, Helen and I would not have met in freshman history class. We were seated alphabetically, Smith and Smith, and I’m kind of lucky then glad that I pulled my money out of Idaho and went to Lewiston to meet Helen. And I got my B.A. there in forty-spring of ’50, spring of ’50. We were married in ’49.

Lowther: And then you were called back for the Korean War.

Smith: Called back for the Korean War. I was in graduate school at Stanford at the time. And I had already started making plans for my dissertation and the department got so excited about my dissertation that without my even knowing it, Dr. Philbrick, the chairman of the department, consulted with Stanford University Press and got a commitment from them before I’d even written the book. Which I never did write. Because after the Korean War, when we sat down and started facing a lot of reality we discovered that number one, Stanford was terribly expensive to begin with, and then during the Korean War they had upped the graduate school fees three or four hundred dollars more, and I did not have that much GI. Bill left. I had a little left to get me started, but I pretty well exhausted that, and so we decided to teach for a while and perhaps we could save some money, and I wrote to my old high school principal, who by that time was a principal down in Tillamook, Oregon. I had run around with his son so I knew him as a personal friend and I said, “I don’t want to teach in Idaho; the salaries are dirt cheap. I’ve always admired Oregon and I understand there are decent salaries there for teachers. How do I find a job?” And he provided me the necessary information and I registered with the Oregon Education Assn. Placement Bureau in Portland, and filled out the necessary forms and told them that, please send any notices to my parents, my wife’s parents in Spirit Lake, Idaho and we already had two or three cards waiting for us. And then from there, down to my parents for a short visit, and then while Helen stayed at my folks house I would run down into Oregon and do some interviewing. And finally ended up in the lovely little town of Dallas which was about twelve miles to the west of Salem. Lovely little town. And I got my indoctrination of teaching there, and that has a humorous story associated with it. And it just happened, we lived a block from the high school. We were fortunate, and it was the middle of my first week of teaching, and suddenly I ended up coming in the front door, and Helen says, “What are you doing home?” I said, “I came home to eat lunch.” She says, “It’s eleven o’clock.” “Oh, my God! I should be in class!” So then I had to turn around and run back to school, and here is all of my class dutifully waiting outside the door, unlocked it, went in and had class and then after class went home the second time to eat lunch. But I enjoyed high school teaching. I enjoyed the kids. I enjoyed directing plays with them.

Lowther: I assume your preparation had been in theater, right.

Smith: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

Lowther: And by this time did you have your Master’s degree?

Smith: I... No, I got my master’s by summers, while I was teaching, when I would go down and stay down in Eugene during the week, and come home and see Helen and take out the garbage and go back down to school. Scholars have no dignity when it comes to carrying out garbage.
Lowther: I know!

Smith: And actually I just finished my master’s and assumed I was going back to Dallas High School where I was very welcome, and then suddenly I received a telephone call from Ellensburg, Washington. A place that I had been through on the bus once, going from Seattle to North Idaho. I had played football against Central when I was going to school in Lewiston. But they needed a drama teacher here, and so I found out enough about it that I was interested and we packed up the children and cleared our calendar and we drove up for an interview with Dr. McConnell, and Dr. Wes Crum who was then Dean of Faculty, and Dr. Lyman Partridge, who for that summer, was serving as acting chairman of the Speech, Drama, Radio, Television, and English Dept. Dr. Katherine Bullard was the regular chairman, but she was off that summer and Dr. Lyman Partridge was filling in. I met, well, we came to town late at night and up near, well, up on Eighth St., near the campus, I found out, there was a motel vacancy sign right behind Jerrol’s Book Store, and I stopped and said I have a tired family. Do you have a couple of beds available? And he said I certainly have and right behind the bookstore there is a structure back there yet that has about two motel units. I assume they probably rent them out to students as apartments. The next morning got up and shaved and showered and got ready to go up for my interview and stopped by the office and said, “Excuse me, Sir, can you tell me how to find the college?” He said it’s one block up here on your left. And which building are you looking for? I said, well, the Administration building. He said that’s the second one on your left. So I went in for my interview, and everything was interesting that they told me about the job, except the salary. And I looked it up again, and after all the discussion about my background and so forth, Dr. McConnell said as if he were doing me a great, great favor, “Mr. Smith, we are ready to offer you $3200.00.” Then I said, “I’m sorry, Sir, I couldn’t consider that because I was making more than that when I quit teaching high school to go finish my master’s, and if I were to go back to the same high school this fall where I am welcome, I would make better than thirty-two hundred.” So he turned to Dr. Crum and said, “During the lunch period, I assume you men will be eating lunch together, Dr. Crum you see if you find some way to get this man some more money.” Well during lunch Dr. Crum said, “When you were in the Marine Corps, what did you do?” In the Korean War I was a commissioned officer, an enlisted man in World War II, and I trained replacements and I taught various types of classes. He wrote it all down and he had a book of equivalences in his office. And after lunch went back to his office and he looked up the equivalencies, and he came into our meeting without Dr. McConnell and said, “Well, Mr. Smith, we can offer you $3800.00, and you will be expected to produce two plays per year.” He said that Mr. Norman Howell is here in drama now, but this next year is to be his last. So you will have a year to work with him and he can show you the ropes, and then the next year you will be on your own. And then I went from that first year working with Norman Howell, and it was a delightful experience with a fine gentleman. The next year I was on my own in 1957.

Lowther: So you were hired in 1956?

Smith: 56, right. The fall of ‘56 was my initiation at Central. And I became a one man theater department in 1957 and I stayed that way...

Lowther: You were the only one in theater.

Smith: I was the only person in drama. Then we had a department that, as I say, was under the English chairman and we were known as speech, drama, radio, and television. Now speech was public speaking and speech correction. We had a small department even though we may have had the largest name on campus. And I was a one man department in that I cast, I selected. I cast, I built, I painted, I wrote Ad copy, I rehearsed, I choreographed, I designed sets, I designed costumes, I did some sewing. Thank God I’d had a good costume class at Stanford where I had to sew, and I really had trained for a job where I could do it all, assuming I’d never find one. Well, I found one and it was nineteen hours a day; I seldom saw my family and I loved every minute of it. Until third or fourth year I discovered that I was not satisfied with what I, with the quality I was turning out. In my classes or in my production work, and it was partly because I had too many duties. Well, finally in 1963 on the thirteenth of December, on the fourth floor of Barge I was giving a final exam and I had just passed out the exam papers and given instructions and I sat down and started to get dizzy. I bent over to tie my shoes trying to get my head down below my knees if I could
because I thought surely I was going to faint. And I continued to be more faint, and so I asked a student sitting in the front row, happened to be a member of my stage crew, would you please help me out in the hall, I think I’m about to faint. Well, out in the hail I sat down with my head down and he said, “You look terrible.” And I said I do not have the car here. We were a one car family then. I said, “Will you please go down to the Business office and see if Mr. Kenny Courson, the business manager is there. And ask him to take me to the hospital.” He took me down and they strapped equipment on me and I was right in the middle of a heart attack of some sort. They didn’t know what kind. Well, I was in the hospital all through Christmas vacation and finally when school resumed in January I was allowed to go back, but I had to move my office from the tower in Barge Hall down to a ground floor dressing room backstage. I couldn’t go up and down steps. I had to move slowly until such time as they found out what happened to me. Then I had to go down to a doctor in Yakima for a series of tests, they’re going to find out, and finally in the end they discovered I had an exceedingly strong heart. It would easily last a normal lifetime, but my timing mechanism had screwed up due to a low threshold to anxiety. And that was directly traceable to my job. Well, I remembered that in 1958 it became obvious to my chairman that I was doing two men’s work, I was teaching a full load, and I was directing plays and doing all these other things, rehearsing ‘til ten o’clock at night five or six days a week, and it wasn’t just that I was missing my family, but I was abusing my health and didn’t even realize it because I liked what I was doing and finally this doctor in Yakima said, “You’re not going to make it in a career if you don’t learn to relax. I want you once in the morning, once in the afternoon, don’t do a thing just sit down, put your feet up on the desk, push your chair back, tell them at the office that you are not to be disturbed for fifteen minutes. Don’t answer the phone.” Well, In ‘58 they had started telling me that we know Milo, you’re doing two men’s work and we’re going to find money for that second person. and I kept hearing that and kept hearing that until I had the heart attack. President Brooks, Jim Brooks, who was then President, came down to visit me in the hospital and he sat around, and sat around until one by one my guests were leaving and he obviously was trying to wait out the last one. When the last one moved out he came over and sat on the side of the bed and leaned over near my ear and said, “For God’s sake Milo, don’t die! I think we put you here.” And he said, “As soon as you get out, we’re going to have a meeting.” And we did. My division chairman, Dr. Rhinehart was there and my department chairman, Lyman Partridge was there, Wes Crum was there, and Dr. Brooks was there and of course I was there. And the first thing Dr. Brooks said, “Three of you men have been assigning duties to Milo. I want you to describe the job you think Milo is doing.” And he started with Wes, then he went to Keith, and then he went to my chairman, and each man was hearing duties they didn’t even know I had because I’d been getting them from these other sources. And when we went through the third one, Brooks looked at ‘em and said, “Do you think we need another man?” And we immediately sent out notices, and we hired a fellow named Chuck Lauterbach who would have stayed and he was a very good man, but his wife was a journalist, professional journalist. There was nothing for her in town and she was a big city girl. She was not happy doing nothing here and so they had to leave and he later, of course, ended up down at Boise State College and she got her professional Journalism job in the Boise newspaper. But that is kind of a blow-by-blow up until I got my first help.

Lowther: Now before we move on I’d like to move back a bit...

Smith: Sure...

Lowther: . . . and, at the time you came here was it possible for a student to get a major in drama?

Smith: Yes, you could get a major in it; however it was not a worthwhile major...

Lowther: Did that mean you would have to teach all the courses?

Smith: . . . from one faculty member. I kept saying, “You know, we’re kidding these students. We’re lying to them. This isn’t a major. I can’t teach all these classes, I’m not a specialist in all these areas. I’m competent in them, but I’m not a specialist, so we’re lying to these kids.” And so I frankly, if I found a student who was really serious about learning theatre and drama, I said, don’t kid yourself. I can only take you so far here. And I will help you find some place else to go. And I didn’t mean it to be treasonous. I
didn’t it to turn against the hand that was feeding me. It’s just that I did have some people who were making decisions above me who weren’t as honest as they could have been. They were interested in numbers of students. They weren’t interested in the quality of education the student was getting, and I was very self-conscious that I was traveling under a false banner.

Lowther: About how many majors were there at that time?

Smith: We would have had only fifteen or twenty that we could call our own. There were quite a few people who were taking theater and drama in consort with, perhaps music, or some other program. Anticipating that they were going to eventually combine this into some kind of a separate program elsewhere. A little bit the kind of thing that we have done on our campus where if a student is truly interested in philosophy and interested in drama, they can petition to be allowed to take a major that does not exist in the catalogue. And that’s pretty much what we were doing with these students at that particular time.

Lowther: Do you have an impression of the quality of the students at that time? Were they pretty good theater students?

Smith: Basically. They were good students. Comparable to the students that I had gone to school with. Comparable with students that I had sat in class with many other places. There was an area which most of us had, on campus, were very embarrassed. We would have and every faculty member would face this, if he or she would have asked the class, “Have any of you flunked out of the University of Washington?” There would be a few of those in every class. We were one of the places where flunkouts from the “U” came to school, and we were very embarrassed by that, and I can recall a lot of faculty meetings when we discussed that very problem. There was grade inflation even back then, part of it do to the fact that we had students on the G.I. Bill. And the students on the G.I. Bill had to maintain a certain grade point, or they would lose their G.I. Bill. And there were faculty members who were soft-hearted, and didn’t want them to lose the G.I. Bill and so they would inflate the grade in order to help them out. And we were, it was academic hypocrisy right down the line. It was something I’d been opposed to since the day I got into academia, and I still am very opposed to academic hypocrisy. You either tell the truth, or you don’t tell anything.

Lowther: Were most of the students thinking of becoming drama teachers since most were majors?

Smith: Yes. Two kinds. Either in the area of creative drama, which indicates immediately that you want to work with small children, elementary school age children, or secondary school drama. We didn’t have any students of my memory that had any interest in teaching in community college, or eventually in a four-year institution or graduate institution. That came later, as we improved our program, then we started getting more of those.

Lowther: We’ve seen one impact of on result of, this layered system of organization, department, division, and so on up the line. You we’re getting assignments from different people which, of course, would contrast with the system today where you’re just responsible primarily, to your department chair. Were there any other consequences, good or bad, to this layered system that you’re aware of And what was it like really, being a single drama teacher in this speech, etc. department and this language arts division, and so on?

Smith: It was uncomfortable, but it was made so primarily because I became known immediately on campus as the kind of guy who doesn’t look at the clock. And you know what happens to those people. They get more and more to do. And my department chairman, Lyman Partridge, thought that I was an absolute plum because I didn’t complain, I did my job, and I did other people’s work, and he liked the shows we were doing. He liked the fact that I had some popularity with the students. And he gave me as many breaks as he could give me. He didn’t have many to give. I was unhappy; however, that my division chairman and my department chairman didn’t see eye-to-eye on many things at all. It wasn’t necessarily
over me, although they got into it over me many times, and not with my knowledge. But, for example, one time... Oh, we functioned those years, much as they do now with most of the budget being allocated from the student government. And we request funds under subject headings and one of the subject headings, under which... (End of tape I)

Tape II

Lowther: Milo, do you think that the change from the division to the department system meant that faculty members would no longer talk across disciplines the way they used to?

Smith: It is my observation, Larry, that through all of my years that you can’t develop an organization that is going to encourage cross discipline discussions if the people in those disciplines don’t want to discuss. And if they want to discuss, there’s no organization that’s going to stop them. I think that the big mistake we made as far as my discipline is concerned is that the dean, my dean always had far too many disciplines under him whether it was Zoltan Kramar, or who it was. There were just too many disciplines for them to handle. And now, of course, you know in the last couple of years there’s been a lot of fuss up there, and now there have been some divisions made so that the dean of language and literature doesn’t have quite the breadth that he used to have and now there is a lady that is working also in that area in the capacity of the deanship. And it’s got to be better. I think with what I said a little bit ago, the fact that administrators simply can’t be expected to be conversant for all of the areas that they administrate. I think Bob Brown probably did more to try to inform himself of all the areas that he was responsible for, not only did he call us all in to have heart-to-heart talks every once in a while, just to simply inform him. How do you do this? How do you do that? What are your problems? What are the solutions? He was very good about that,... probably of the deans I worked under, he’s the only one who went to that extent to try to become knowledgeable of those disciplines that he was responsible for.

Lowther: OK. Looking back over your teaching years, I think you retired in 1991 was it?

Smith: Actually it was ‘91 when I taught my last class. I retired officially in ’90. And then my phased retirement took me into one assignment in the following year, and I discovered I didn’t need the phased program. I thought I was the kind of emotional person that needed a weaning period, and I didn’t need it at all. The only part of the job I’d missed were the students. I didn’t miss the politics and the fighting for a dollar here and a nickel there, I didn’t enjoy those things at all, so I don’t miss them. I do miss the students.

Lowther: Well, as you look back over these years are there certain, significant changes in the drama, or now the theater arts department and program that you think were particularly important?

Smith: There has been a change in the last two years that I think is important, and I’m not totally in sympathy with it. The particular group of people that are representing theater arts now on campus, represent a production area and a less academic emphasis than we once had. I think that they are going to place a few students in television. They’ll place a very few in the movies, and even fewer in live theater. They might get a few people into some stage crew work professionally in one of the media. But I can predict right now; they’re not going to get a lot of outstanding graduate students out of what they’re now teaching. My discipline, I used to teach four theater history classes, and I was a trained historian..., they’ve had a very nice fellow teaching history, two courses a year since I left, and he’s not a historian. He had history in his master’s, and that’s what he’s got. I worry about programs that are built like that. But, boy they have lots of good practical experience in acting and directing and technical work. It’s just that we had to years back, make a decision, how are we going to use the few dollars we have? Well, we decided twenty-five years ago, And I started talking it when I was by myself Let’s try to become the best four-year teacher-training institution in theater and drama, in first Washington, and then the Pacific Northwest, and then the West. But we can’t be all things to all people. Let’s work for teacher education, and those people, of course, are the ones who are eventually going to end up in college classrooms. Those are the ones who are going to keep going back to graduate school. The professional scene worker isn’t going back to graduate school. The professional actor isn’t going back. Those people get what they’re going to get here, and then
from then on, it’s on the job training. We wanted to try to provide an academic background so that those kids would not be embarrassed in class at Oregon, or Stanford, or up at the University, or Indiana, or wherever they went. They had a good solid background. And that we thought was our responsibility. Now, the production part was the last part of all the classes we taught. We taught classroom acting, and you did it in plays. We taught scenic design in classes, but you did it for plays, and you used it with an audience and a cast and crew. Our productions were purely the laboratories for all of our classes. Now they have laboratories that are the tail that’s swinging the dog up there now. It’s not wrong. It’s just a different philosophy of a drama department. And there are a lot of both across the country. I would not feel comfortable up here now at faculty meetings because I would keep preaching, “We’ve got to give these people more of an academic background.” I don’t feel that the Bachelor’s degree is the place to try to make...try to turn out journeyman workers of any kind. You don’t turn out journeymen at the Bachelor’s level. I think you should turn out journeymen at some other level, but the Bachelor’s degree should be where you concentrate on learning the tools, and learning how to use the tools. And learn the sources. Where do you go to for information? Why... I want every theater student to have a head full titles of books so that they say, “I’ve got a problem. I know where I can find the answer.” They go to the library and they go to a particular book, but that’s a book oriented academic background in theater arts. And this is a production oriented background. The pendulum will swing back, I’m sure. But it depends on whom you hire, and the kind of support you give them. I’m jealous. I was chairman five different times of the drama department, and I know the budget problem up there. These people have had more money to spend in drama in the last three years than we had in...they’ve had each year more money than we had in any one year, any three year period. And I don’t know how they did it. They’ve done well. Really have.

Lowther: Has the Laughing Horse Summer Theater had much of an impact on the drama department and what was the relationship between these two entities?

Smith: You need to know first that we had an active summer school drama program with students coming back to Central and bringing new students with them who wanted to be in plays at Central in the summer. And that was very beneficial, We even started to get a few graduate courses for summer programs, so those people would have something, and we in the department would have an opportunity to teach one notch above where we always used to have to stop. When you’re teaching in nothing but a four year program part of what you’ve got to give, nobody wants. If you have a graduate program now you can dig down and you can give more of what you’ve got to give. And we did that for a long time and it was, I think, very good. And under Richard Leinaweaver, he decided that we needed to go off campus, so made some contacts up in Chelan and found a place to perform, and for whatever was worth a couple of summers we took a group of students up and we performed in Chelan. There was no opportunity for returning students to be in a production because the production company was already formed from last year’s students and they were clear up in Chelan. Well, then a few people started talking about the possibility of developing a more professional program on campus. I object to the use of professional as Laughing Horse uses the term, Professional in my field of study only means you get paid for what you do and to that extent Laughing Horse is a poor professional theater because they have poor salaries for their people. The salaries are tokens. They’re symbols. Laughing Horse has done some very good work. I’m sorry that Laughing Horse took the place of a teaching program in the summer for all those returning people. Now they’re trying to find room for summer people who are returning to work in the scene shop and learn some technical skills. They’re trying to find some room for returning actors and actresses to at least get walk-on parts in summer plays. But that’s not the same. I’d like to go on record as believing and I’ll say it honestly, I think Central needs a good academic theater program of productions in the summer utilizing the students who come back from wherever they are. I don’t want to see Laughing Horse close. I think that Laughing Horse, probably, could never had existed any place else. They could not have existed without a collection of costumes that I gave blood, sweat, and tears to develop over the years and furniture that I begged, borrowed, and stole from all over the community and this part of the state, and properties that we made and bought and borrowed. Laughing Horse had the benefit of a long existing, producing theater so they could move in, the tools are in the shop, the furniture is there, the scenery is there, the props are there, the costumes are there, and Laughing Horse absolutely could never have started had there not been all of that kind of support. Now, Dr. Putnam well knows the truth behind the whole program because she was in the position one time of having to help finance part of Laughing Horse out of one of the many budgets that she controlled at the time, so
I’m not saying anything that everybody doesn’t know that was on the inside. I have never worked with Laughing Horse. I was asked in the early years, and I simply couldn’t, at one time, give of my services to Laughing Horse, and at the same time try to beat the drum for an on-campus academic production program. I wanted both. I would like for half the roles in Laughing Horse to go to good returning people. Now, if there’s any question about quality, I would ask you to look at the productions that are being done upon that campus now. They’re of the quality of Laughing Horse almost right down the line. Helen and I worked as actors in Grapes of Wrath. We know what the approach is. We know those student actors. We know it is work and they go about it to do a good job. And they do a good job. The quality of the work that is being done by Laughing Horse is not professional quality if you get out of Ellensburg and go see what professional theater is doing. And you know that for the last five years we’ve spent ten days every May seeing plays in New York. We know what’s being done. And we know the quality that’s being done. Not that we haven’t seen an occasional stinker. We have, but, so the professional in professional theater really means you’re being paid. In New York it means the best the country has to offer. Just as in the West and in London that professional theater is the best theater that, with the exception of the National Theater Cross the River, the theater west-end in London is the best England has to offer. And it’s professional.

Lowther: So you supported the concept of Laughing Horse. You had hoped that it had been operated in conjunction with the summer program.

Smith: I wished that they could have operated with assistance until we got them rolling after the first four or five years, and now start weaning yourself away. Use the space for rehearsal and performance. I don’t have objections for that. There’s space up there that two groups could use. They’re not apt to be doing the same kinds of plays, though they might.

Lowther: But you couldn’t have, in this small community, could you, a summer program for the drama department, and also a Laughing Horse program. This wouldn’t...

Smith: Not at the scale that they have gradually moved. No, the money simply isn’t there. The ticket price would have to be scaled down. You’ll notice, for example, that the University productions during the year don’t charge nearly what Laughing Horse does in the summer. Now in the summer, you’re told the reason the price is higher is because, “This is professional theater.” Well. I beg to differ.

Lowther: OK. Now also as you think back over your thirty-five years, do you feel that you were adequately rewarded in terms of promotion and salary, and what do you think of the system of determining these perquisites for faculty members?

Smith: I had no complaints. I knew, I edited the faculty code several years, so I know what was in it, I knew that when Jim Brooks sent out a letter to the faculty shortly after he came, maybe it was the second year, and he said in that letter there will be no more promotions for people who do not have the requisite degrees. And that the requisite degree is a master’s for this area at this level, and the doctorate at this. Once I saw that letter I knew I had to get back to summer school. And that’s when I started going, and that’s why I applied for the sabbatical. And to that extent I finished the degree and I came back and I spent a lot of years with the degree hoping to give back to Central, some of what they had given me. I cannot say I suffered. Now, an area that has always been at question is that problem of merit. What is merit, and who is meritorious? And I don’t care how many administrators say it, you’re going to have one hell of a time getting faculty members to believe that if they don’t get merit, they must not have been meritorious. And yet the deans say, “No, that doesn’t mean you were not meritorious, it just means there wasn’t enough money to go around and we just thought that these people deserved it a little more than these people did.” Well, I don’t know how we’re ever going to do that as long as we’re going to make judgments using people. It’s like casting a show. Human beings cast; human beings grant merit. Until we have a booth that you put the person in there and you turn some dials, and punch a punch, and it comes up and says, “Merit!” Or it says, “No merit!” Until that time comes we’re going to have to put up with the human element, and.. .Yes, there are frailties, and we all have to face in academia.
Lowther: Now, Milo, did you have any particular stones that you wanted to tell, or observations on other aspects of the University that I haven’t covered?

Smith: I’ll just say for the tape. I will have a small booklet of memoirs of things that I haven’t told to the tape. Memoirs, serious and humorous and about problems and about solutions. All are things that as a historian, and I think it needs to be recorded. And I will turn that in, and it can go in with all the rest of the printed materials that we’re collecting and go in too. I would like to mention here that two years before I retired, I did an evening of one act plays called “You Know I Can’t Hear You When the Water’s Running.” Helen and I played the fourth play in that little series of plays, all intended to be done as an evening’s entertainment. The fourth play was a little play about two old people that’s called “I’m Herbert.” And we were well received. And after, after we retired we have had all kinds of requests to do it in the community, and some outside the community. And we decided then-and-there, OK, we’ll do it for anybody for $200.00, if they’ll write the check to the drama scholarship fund. As of right now we’ve earned a little over $5,000.00 for the drama scholarship fund, doing that silly little play that the only problem is that each time we do it, we forget and have to go back over and rememorize all over again. But drama is an area in which you find very, very, very seldom is there any kind of outside money. Those of us who labored in the vineyard have to, in our glory years, probably turn a little something back to the discipline, and though Helen’s discipline was English, we work together in plays in college and she’s worked with me in many capacities. Back when I didn’t have a seamstress, she was making costumes at home.

Lowther: OK. Well, thank you very much.

Smith: Is there any time left, Jean, on the...

Jean: Um huh, You’ve got about fifteen, ten to fifteen.

Smith: I’d like to just simply say, for the record, that at one time in my career at Central I was appointed chairman of the art department for five quarters. There was a problem arose and the chairman resigned in the middle of the year and there were three people in the department, all of whom had been chairman at one time or another and the administration found out that there were three armed camps. Two camps wouldn’t accept the third, and so forth. So they had to go outside the department and I had been chairman of the drama department two or three times as of then, and I knew the job. And I had a sympathy for the discipline, and so I went up, and as you can imagine, I was well received by...(End of dialogue)

Lowther: Well, thank you, Milo.

Smith: Oh, it’s my joy.

Lowther: And I want to thank also Jean Putnam and Helen Smith for operating the equipment.

Smith: Good.

Jean: Done. Did. Can’t think of anything else.

Lowther: OK, well, you always think of things after the interview is over, but you’re going to write your memoirs so that’s...

Smith: I already have 100 pages or so written. Some of them are serious, some of them are humorous, and some of them are embarrassing like my office mate who urinated in the utilities sink.

Lowther: Oh, yes, I suppose that wouldn’t be a good one for the tape would it?

Jean: Probably not!
Lowther: I wasn’t sure whether you wanted to tell the story of that last class.

Smith: No! Poor Dr. McConnell. I’m really sure that Alma, who is a very bright lady, Alma never really knew how niggardly, for example, her husband was with little things.

Lowther: Course you have to remember he came during the Depression.

Smith: Oh, absolutely.

Lowther: He probably got his habits, you know, right there.

Smith: Well, I was raised in the Depression, so was Helen, and we both reflect that to this day. We can’t stand it, for example, we have a couple of granddaughters who have never eaten a whole plateful of food in their life. They throw out half of her plate full of food. And no, we don’t say, “Think of the starving Chinese.” Which our parents said to us. ... But waste is something we have trouble justifying.

Lowther: Well, our next interview is June 19th, and you’re going to be doing it, and you’re going to be interviewing me. We’ll be up in the alumni-

Smith: Now, invariably, I would have to ask you about your tam o’shanter,

Helen or Jean: That is a trademark you know.

Smith: I have three tams that are multi-colored. I have one that is British Marines, and one that’s U.S. Marines, and one that is, I simply bought it in England because I like to wear berets. The advantage I find with berets, Jean, think of this, nobody steals stuff. Nobody will steal your beret. I have on my Marine Corps beret, I have a beautiful bronze Marine Corps emblem, like the old Corps. I wear that in foreign countries because in variably, I will meet foreigners who served with the Marines, or I’ll meet other Marines. I met a Marine in down-town Dublin, Dublin, Ireland. He’d been in the Marine Corps, but he liyes in Dublin and he said, “Oh, my God, it’s good to see someone that was a “Girene!”

Lowther: Well, do you know where I got my berets?

Smith: I’m guessing Victoria or Vancouver.

Lowther: Nope, Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Smith: Is that right?

Jean: Is that right?

Smith: I’ll be darned. Yea, I remember seeing them in Victoria, the knitted ones, in multi-colors, and I thought a lot of people think that my berets are affectations, anyway. This favorite thesis and dissertation advisor name of Horace Robinson from Oregon. He once gave the best speech I have ever heard about theater people. It was at a national convention, and he was a key-note speaker, and in the course of his speech he said, “The minute people find out that you are a devotee at any level in the theater arts, they’re going to expect different conduct from you. Some of you, they’re going to expect you to be effeminate. Some of you are going to have to put on airs, and act all the time.” We said, “Damnit! As long as they expect it, let’s give it to ‘em!” I never told him that I also boxed in the Marine Corps and I boxed in college, and I boxed in high school. And there’s only one reason I ever took up boxing.

Lowther: What’s that?
Smith: In high school that and football was the way I could protect my masculinity from reputation because I was in radio, I was in debate, I was in plays. And then when I got into college, you know, that being a new guy in the dorm and say, “Oh, I understand that you’re a drama major, huh?” Then I’d say yes, and if you’d like to talk about it behind the dorm, we can go talk about it right now. I really did get forced into it. And I also know the only reason I really got my PhD is that I still have friends, well, my class that I graduated with, just two years ago we had our fiftieth reunion in Lewiston. And so occasionally I go back for reunions and I’m always meeting people from Lewiston that knew me as a little boy in the orphanage. And just for the hell of it, they’re so nice to me. I’d say, “What did you anticipate I was going to do for a living?” Oh, Milo, remember all those sheep herders up the Snake River that used to go up on the mail boat and then they’d come down, they’d get drunk, go to the whore houses and go back broke, remember that? Yea, We thought that was all you’d be able to do. Sheep herding on the Snake River. And I said, you know that’s what I knew that you folks... People didn’t use to expect anything from an orphan in the way of creative endeavor or anything that was beneficial to mankind. We were supposed to be pick and shovel, menial labor, but I was never totally happy. Now, God knows this place is menial labor enough. But I know that I had something to prove to people that are still over there who absolutely never believe that some people call me doctor. And I’m willing to go operate on them anytime.

Jean: Yea, right. They do sometimes get mixed up don’t they. Here are the two tapes. The top one is number one and the bottom one is number two.

Smith: OK, good. We’ll label them and bring them to our next meeting. And when Helen isn’t here I’ll put it on, so I can cuss.

Jean: That was well done.