Joel Bernstein: This is an interview with Mr. and Mrs. Traver “Shorty” Smith at their home in Big Timber, Montana, on June 24, 1977. The interviewers are Joel Bernstein and Glenda Bradshaw.

Why don't we begin, Mr. Smith, with just telling us how you got into the dude ranching business?

Traver Smith: When I was working in the Standard Brands in New York, my family came up to the Van Cleve Ranch. They came out for how many years?

Catherine Smith: Oh my goodness, ’32 to ’43, something like that.

JB: So was it all during the Depression?

CS: Every summer.

TS: —the Depression, and I was left alone in New York, which was a little boring. [laughs] Then finally I would come out here on my vacation and found that the whole family enjoyed it very much so I decided to move out. Fed up with the rat race in New York and just came up here. We bought this ranch. It used to belong to the Beckins (?) on the Lower Sweet Grass. We started to operate it, and then friends from New York had come out because they thought it didn’t cost anything to live on the ranch. So out of self-defense, we went into the dude ranch business, and we had a set up there. I think the most people we ever had was 24. We had these little movable houses. They had the wooden floors and screen doors and a frame. Then we put a canvas over the frame, and we would move those out for the summer and young people would live in those little houses and the grownups would have two cabins—they’d live there.

One day, Paul Van Cleve, which is Spike’s father, wanted me to join the Dude Ranchers Association. We went down to a convention that they held in Billings, and I think, met the finest people that I’ve ever seen at a convention. They were all simply delightful people. So we decided that we would join the association. Shortly after that, there was a problem about a constitution for the association, and for some reason, I was elected president of the association to put over this constitution, which eventually was done. That’s how I happened to get into the dude ranch business.

JB: How big a ranch did you have?

TS: I think it was 13,000 or 15,000 acres.
JB: Did you run cattle on it?

TS: We ran cattle, and we started out with sheep because I checked out in Helena and found sheep with a quarter of the investment. Brought in four times as much money to Montana as cattle did, which was kind of unusual and startling. [laughs] Then also Paul Van Cleve told me that practically all successful ranches here had started off with sheep, and there’s a reason for that because in the spring you sell their wool and then in the fall you sell their lambs. So right off the bat, you get a good turnover. Whereas with cattle, you start out and then it takes nine months to have a calf and then it takes another year before the calf grows up and becomes saleable. [laughs] So we started off with a sheep and then gradually went into the cattle business. Then we got to the stage where we had to decide which one we’re going to do—go into the cattle or go into the sheep—because it wasn’t big enough to go into both of them. The ranch wasn’t big enough. So we decided to do away with the sheep, and we went into the cattle business.

JB: How did you know about ranching? Just from vaguely [unintelligible]?

TS: Yes, well when I had the idea of coming out here we would come out off the dude ranch season. We’d come out early in the spring when they were lambing and calving, and then I’d come out in the fall when they were getting stuff ready for the market—cutting out the cattle and getting rid of their lambs, see, and stuff like that. So in that way, I got a general background about ranching. When I started off, we first had the ranch, I had a very excellent neighbor—Bill Robinson (?) was his name—and it was during the Second World War and I was the only fellow on the creek that had a tractor, because when I bought the ranch the tractor came with it. So naturally I joined the group with the only tractor, but this Bill Robinson taught me how to put everything all together. He was a really wonderful help. When we first bought the ranch, the betting in town here was that here were some Easterners out and they don’t really last five years. The betting was that we wouldn’t last more than five years.

CS: We were there 28.

TS: We were there 28 years. [laughs]

JB: You were coming out here during the Depression.

TS: Yes.

JB: Did you sense that the impression [Depression] had a big impact on dude ranching?

TS: No, I didn’t think so.

CS: I don’t feel it did.
TS: No, I didn’t feel it at all.

CS: Now, the drought years. It was very dry in the ‘30s.

TS: I didn’t feel it had any impact on them at all. The dude ranch business in those days was quite a bit different than it is today. Say, we had no airplanes, or they were just beginning to fly out. People would come out by train which would take them from New York or Boston or Philadelphia at least—

CS: Three days.

TS: What?

CS: Three days.

TS: —three days to get out here. Then when they came, they usually brought their family, and they stayed for a long period of time. Today, people come out, and they stay for two or three weeks, which they never used to do in the old days at all. Of course, the airplanes have had a tremendous influence on the dude ranch business because nowadays the family figures that it’s part of the education of the children to show them different places in the world. So they might have two years at a dude ranch, another year over in Europe, another year out in the West Australia, New Zealand, or Hawaii or something like that. So you don’t get that long stay. There are some ranches where they have held on to that. For example, the...where we just were—

CS: Eaton’s [Eaton’s Ranch: Wyoming Dude Ranch].

TS: Eaton Ranch. They have the third generation going there now.

JB: Most of the old ones I noticed that 63 [63 Ranch, dude ranch in Livingston, Montana] has a lot of return people. The Miller’s [Elkhorn Ranch Montana] and (unintelligible) and certainly the Van Cleves do and the Eaton’s Valley Ranch and so on. Did you sense that the dude ranching or the dude ranch vacation essentially was for wealthy people?

TS: No, not necessarily. It is the finest place that you can take your whole family—children and grown-ups—and they’ll all enjoy it, and its very healthy recreation for a family. You can’t conceive in the difference between a family penned up in a city or in some suburb and then coming out here to freedom of the open spaces, which is a good thing in most ways and it’s kind of a bad thing in other ways because a lot of times these girls come out and they fall in love with the country and usually fall in love with some cowboy.

JB: We know a lot of...Well, you know Grace [Nutting Miller] was from Massachusetts and came out here.
CS: Yes.

JB: Jennie Christianson—

CS: She was from New York.

JB: That's right, and we found that to be...Bill Randall's wife came out as a guest at the Randall Ranch [OTO Homestead and Dude Ranch] and married Bill. We found that, a matter of fact, we were surprised that Barbara Van Cleve was the first one we found of the wives and so far isn't and Easterner.

TS: That happens a lot of times and some of those marriages work out, but most of them don't, you see, because they're really not in love with the individual, they're in love with the country.

JB: You don't remember exactly what years you were president of the association?

TS: No.

Glenda Bradshaw: It will be in the magazine.

JB: Yes, we will find it. What was the primary goal of the association?

TS: The primary goal of the association in those days was to keep the dude ranch business so healthy and clean that nobody would hesitate to bring their young children out.

JB: What do you mean by clean?

TS: Well, no bars, see. That's really what I mean, and no association at all with city life. Just to keep it a good healthy outdoor recreation.

JB: Is that in the constitution that there'd be no bars?

TS: It was. I don't know whether it still is. At that time, there was no bars, no signs publicizing the ranch. In other words, they wanted to keep it away from being a commercial operation, and they succeeded quite well. How it's changed now I don't know.

JB: Why did you get out of dude ranching?

TS: Why did I what?

JB: Why did you leave dude ranching? Why did you—

CS: Sell the ranch?
JB: Yes.

TS: Got too old. [laughs]

JB: When did you sell out?

CS: Three years ago.

TS: Three years.

JB: But you had a dude ranch right up to then?

TS: Yes.

JB: Was it the S slash something?

TS: S slash R [S / R Ranch]

JB: Okay.

TS: It was really an operating ranch where we took in a few dudes who were mostly athletes or would-be athletes who wanted to come out and get into condition. They really worked very hard, and they did a marvelous job.

JB: Why are there so many dude ranches in this particular area in the Livingston, Big Timber, Gallatin area?

TS: Why?

JB: Yes, it just seemed that we found some of the oldest and the best ones right over here.

TS: Well, I suppose the old ones that came more successful, and nothing succeeds like success, so other people went into it thinking that they would be successful too. And, it is beautiful country. Beautiful country. You have the Boulder [Boulder River] and beautiful country in the Crazies [Crazy Mountains]. It has everything to offer that any dude would want. Wonderful horseback riding, good fishing, good clean air, good trailing if you want to walk or ride on the trails. It’s got everything that anybody would want.

JB: What kind of problems did you encounter? Everybody always tells us you know it really sounds...it’s fantastic, and we’ve spent enough time on these ranches now to know that it’s terrific. We went out on the ride with Sandy the other day just to see what...She had some
guests, they had some guests...just to see what it was like and help. And it is, it's terrific, but there must be behind-the-scenes problem.

TS: Well, I understand, I've been told that the dude ranch business is the only industry that wasn't developed. It was forced on them. People have a ranch and guests would come out—on the working ranch—and they would go back and talk about it and more guests would come out, then more guests. That finally they just had to do what I did—I was self-defense [laughs]—go into the dude ranch business. From there, it started and developed into an industry. It's a little bit like farming or ranch. Ranching is the only industry I know of that buys everything at retail and sells it wholesale. [laughs]

JB: Did your business background...You were with Standard Brands?

TS: Yes.

JB: Did your business background help you very much?

TS: Not a bit, except for the business experience—the business side—but that was all. Helped nothing in the dude ranching business.

JB: How did you first come out to the Van Cleves?

CS: We were looking for a ranch and, you know, motoring around and looking at all the different ranches, and we came out here first.

JB: Oh, you drove out here just to look around.

TS: Before, yes.

JB: This was '30s, '31?

CS: '32.

TS: We drove out, and we drove right down to Texas and looking and we liked Montana better than any state we'd ever seen. [laughs] That's why we moved out here. Came back, and then went up to the Van Cleves. It was a funny way we happened to go to the Van Cleves. There were some people on Great Neck Long Island where we lived that had reservations. Their names Zinsers (?), and they were going out to the Van Cleve Ranch but they couldn't go at the last minute. They told us that they had these reservations and recommended it, so we came out and took their reservations and just enjoyed it. Enjoyed it tremendously.

JB: How long did you before you decided...Did this happen slowly that you just decided to get out of New York and give up your business career or did it—
TS: Well, we came out to the—the family did—to the dude ranch business for a number of years. We went to Van Cleves, and then we went up to—

CS: Mrs. Allen (?).

TS: Mrs. Allen’s ranch [K Bar L Ranch]. That’s over in the primitive area of Montana west of Great Falls. She died.

GB: On the Bob Marshall?

CS: Yes.

TS: Yes. Wonderful fishing on the north fork and south fork of the Sun River, and that was known as the ranch “beyond all roads”, and that was true. You had a 14-mile ride on horseback in order to get in there.

JB: Certainly (unintelligible) good conditioning right away.

TS: Yes, more or less. [laughs]

GB: Or out of condition right away!

TS: Yes! We were up there a couple years and then came back to Van Cleve. The whole family liked it, and at that time, the government was just starting to get into interfering with business. Living in New York, my god, you couldn't give an increase in salary without getting permission and so forth, and we came out here and—

CS: You didn’t have a salary.

TS: The resistance to the government interference, really, was a tremendous surprise to me and the relief from what we had to put up with in New York. One time, I remember, with Spike’s father—I came out early in order to get training for going into the ranching business—and a government man came up and said, “You’re not allowed to have these pigs.” That was the time the government was trying to control the overproduction of pigs, and Paul Van Cleve said, “Why not?”

This fellow says, “Well, the government doesn't want you to do it.”

Paul went into the house and came out with his rifle, and he said, “You get off of this ranch, or I'll shoot every damn tire you got out.” [laughs]

JB: That sounds like Paul.
TS: Yes. Then later after we went into the ranching business, there was an auction sale east of our ranch just off the Yellowstone. It was down at Greycliff, wasn’t it?

CS: Yes.

TS: I think it was. No, it was further east than Greycliff.

CS: Three Forks or somewhere.

TS: They were auctioning this thing off, and this government man said, “You know there’s a price fix on this thing, and you can’t go above the price.” Well, nobody paid any attention to him, and they bid according to how seriously they needed the equipment for ranching. This fellow kept it up. So finally somebody got up and said, “The next time that man opens his mouth what do you say we take him down and thrown into the Yellowstone,” and they meant it and he knew they meant it. So he just faded out of the picture. Then after that at every auction sale, they had some beautiful girl come out to try and control it. Well, she couldn't control it any better than the man. That is the whole spirit of this country, which I like and admire very much, and it's funny I can't understand why the other states don’t have a little bit of it.

CS: Well, Wyoming probably does.

TS: Well, I don't know. But the [U.S.] Constitution was set up to keep government control out of the individual life of the person, and the states were even giving the militia to keep government control out of it. Well, now the government is just as faulty and crooked as the people they claim are crooked. Now, they try to control it through money, not by laws, but through money. Why has the government in Washington any right to say that you should have a 55 mile an hour speed limit? It might be too fast in the East. You get on those terrible thoroughfares between Boston and New York and the speed limit ought to be 35 miles an hour, but that doesn’t mean that we ought to have it. My gosh, if everybody drove 55 miles an hour out here, they’d spend the whole vacation trying to get crossed Montana. [laughs]

JB: What year did you buy this ranch now? The one you had out here.

CS: ‘43.

TS: ’43.

JB: And why did the guy sell out?

TS: What?
JB: Why did the fellow sell you the ranch in the middle of the war [World War Two]? You would think that he needed the food and everything.

CS: No, it was a [unintelligible].

TS: They didn’t sell it really. It belonged to the Beckins, and Mr. Beckin died and left no will and Mrs. Beckin died and left no will. The children all wanted it, and they all wanted the prize areas of the ranch. They were up against it, so at that time, we moved into town and took an apartment. It took us about six months or seven months to get the ranch because one week I’d act as the buyer, the next week I’d act as if I was selling it. The children were scattered from Seattle all over the place. I’d write out to the kids and get them to consent to this or consent to that. It was an awful lot of maneuvering. In the meantime, the kids were all bound up because of their internal struggle. They finally said, well, it’s easier to distribute the money than it is to fight out...fight it out from the land.

JB: You kept that ranch until...what? ’70?

TS: I kept it right up until—

CS: ’73 or ’74.

TS: —three or four years ago.

CS: It was over 28 years.

JB: And you had guests coming out pretty much all that time?

TS: Yes. Guests came out to work.

JB: What do you see as the future of dude ranching?

TS: I think the dude ranching business will change an awful lot.

JB: In what ways?

TS: Well, in the old days, they originally appealed to what was considered the elite of the country. There’s no longer an elite in this country. Today a lot of companies are giving vacations to employees that win competitions and sending them out to a dude ranch, which is all right. No question about it, but it’s going to change the old basic formula of the operation of a dude ranch is now going to be a temporary award basis. I think that’ll continue for a long time.

JB: We’ve been told by some of the ranches that people, as you said before, they come out and vacations are shorter. But you came out for the whole summer then.
TS: Yes.

JB: Barbara was mentioning yesterday, Barbara Van Cleve, that people come out maybe now for a couple of weeks. Or Jenny and Sandy were mentioning that sometimes just for a week now, and then they might want to stay over. They find that, hey, that's terrific, but the place is booked and they can't even stay that extra week. So that's changed quite a bit. They have a much tighter turnover which I imagine cuts down in the profit when you have that constant change of guests.

TS: Well, when we first went to the Van Cleve Dude Ranch, Paul wouldn't permit any automobiles on the place. No automobiles were allowed because he said, “You get an automobile up here, and the kids will want to get down to town go to the movies.” [laughs]

JB: How much did it cost when you went out there originally, do you remember?

CS: Well, I think we got a good rate because we were there for two months, you see. I think something like 35 dollars a week at the home ranch about per person. But we worked hard, you know, then it finally went up to about 55 dollars.

JB: How big a families did you have?

CS: Just two. A boy and a girl.

TS: At that time, it was really...Living in New York, it was cheaper for me to send the family out to a dude ranch and much better for the family than it was to keep them in New York. You take them down to a golf club, and you have to pay a lot of money. Take them...they'd want to go out to the movies and go out the theater and stuff like that, which is very expensive.

JB: So good judgment then, really, a dude ranch vacation is a pretty economical one.

TS: It was in those days very economical. My gosh! I don't know where you'd get more for your money. You get free fishing, free riding, good food, and nice accommodations. I mean, what more do you hope to have for a family?

JB: Most of them go around 235 dollars, which when you really figure it out is about 35 dollars a day, which is not as much it would cost to stay in a fancy motel and you couldn't buy your food.

TS: No, no.

JB: So it's not a bad vacation even now.

TS: Yes, that's really right.

Traver “Shorty” Smith and Catherine Finney Smith Interview, OH 028-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
JB: Were you involved in the association when the transportation system was still involved? In other words, was Burlington Northern and Northern Pacific and Northwest Airlines, were they still very active in helping to promote it?

CS: Yes, yes.

TS: They were very active, yes, because it was just the beginning of air transportation out here, and they were naturally trying to build up business just like a tourist agency is today. My god, they’ll give you a week’s trip, you go to Europe, you go to London, Paris, Rome, and back, because they are primarily interested on their commissions on the airline tickets. Today, it’s getting... which we go to Mexico every winter and this man told us that when you can’t get reservations through an agency, just write them direct yourself, and they will take you because they don’t have to pay a commission. [laughs] Which I think is perfectly true.

CS: You haven’t looked up Burt Cummings (?) have you? He was with Northwest Airlines in the very beginning, and he was an associate member.

JB: Burt Cummings?

CS: He’s in Billings.

JB: Does he live in Billings now?

TS: Yes.

CS: He’s connected with the AAA. He still goes to the office every once in a while, and he has been in there since the very beginning.

JB: Who else? Do you remember any other people we might look up?

CS: You could get this (unintelligible).

JB: (unintelligible).

CS: C-u-m-m-i-n-g-s. The AAA office, you know where that is in Billings?

JB: Yes, yes I do.

CS: Now, he usually doesn’t come in until the afternoons, but he might be a good one because he was very interested in it through the airlines. He was with Northwest Airlines.

TS: Have you been down to Eaton Ranch?
JB: No, not yet we plan to go down there maybe later this summer and give them a call.

TS: Well Patty is really one of the old-timers and she’s just as cute and attractive today as she ever was. She’s about 80.

CS: Eighty-six.

TS: Eighty-six years older. She’s got a mind like a steel trap, good memory, and she’s just fascinating.

JB: Did you know the Eaton through the association?

TS: She could tell you a lot about them.

JB: Is there anything that we’re not...that we haven’t asked you about that you might, you think would be worth sticking in here?

TS: I don’t think so.

CS: We covered the water front.

JB: Okay.

[Side A]
JB: We’ll add this.

TS: That is, the dude ranches have done a lot of good—a tremendous amount of good—in the development of this country. In the first place, they were very selective in the choice of people that they took in as dude ranchers, and in the second place many of those people that they took in enjoyed it so much that they eventually bought ranches and settled out here, which has really been a very important side of the dude ranch business. I wish I’d had some statistics that would show how much land those ex-dude ranchers have. I imagine that it well surpasses the amount of land settled by the dude ranchers themselves. [laughs]

GB: Probably so.

TS: Yes.

JB: From what we hear I wouldn’t be surprised.

TS: Yes, because a lot of dude ranches have very small acreage setup, and they’re sometimes located against a government forest or a park or something like that. Then they entertain their guests by taking them into the parks or into the forest or into the primitive areas and stuff of that kind. Whereas when their guests settle, they usually buy spreads that are large enough to run cattle or sheep or something else. I’m a good example of it myself. I came here because of our original connection with the dude ranch business.

JB: You know, that’s a good point, because we’ve heard a lot of stories people—ex-dudes—who had come out here and then settled, including professional people like dentists and doctors.

TS: Yes, absolutely.

CS: There are quite a few around Sheridan.

JB: Yes, I would think so. Do you know that Bar 13 Ranch [Flying H Ranch] down there? It’s not a dude ranch. It’s down in Big Horn [Wyoming].

CS: Oh, that was the Fordyce’s?

JB: No, it’s right next to the Fordyces—the Fordyces of the Tepee Lodge.

CS: Yes, oh, that’s right.

JB: This is the Bar 13. It’s a working ranch owned by Jim (unintelligible) who...I don’t know. He owns Ohio Pipe Company or something like that, but they really work it. I mean it’s a working
ranch. It's not a hobby for him. He's out there all the time really running his business. I just thought maybe you’d come across him down there. They've been helpful. They know a lot of the Fordyces and the Eatons and people like that. They were kind of sending the word out.

Okay.

[End of Interview]