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Oral History Number: 443-001

Interviewees: Zane Smith and Betty Smith

Interviewers: Clark Grant and unidentified female speaker

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Zane Smith: My name is Zane Smith, and I'm in the class of 1955 at the University [University of Montana]—well, then Montana State University College of Forestry. I'm a third generation Forest Service retiree, so growing up on ranger stations, I had my mind made up very early that I would be a forester and work for the Forest Service. I had a couple of places in mind as I grew older. Colorado A & M [Colorado State University] where my dad graduated, and by the way Mel Morris who was one of his instructors who later became a primary faculty member here, and Montana. It was a little bit easy for me to make up my mind because my dad became forest supervisor at Lewis and Clark [Lewis and Clark National Forest] out of Great Falls so it made me a resident of Montana and we came here.

Montana had some other features that appealed to me and one was that they were a great feeder to the Forest Service. The Forest Service had a working relationship with the school of forestry at that point. They also stressed work programs rather than summer camps. I wasn't too interested in going to summer camps but I was interested in getting seasonal work which the College of Forestry was very quick to help students and I think they still are—so those are the kind of reasons why I chose this place.

One of the advantages I didn't realize at the time was the college of forestry was on a liberal arts campus. Now, that is unusual in terms of looking at nationwide forestry schools, they are usually at the land grant schools, which would have been down at MSU [Montana State University] at that time, where they concentrate on engineering and agriculture and that sort of thing. Here we had exposure to a somewhat different culture within our nation that I think helped foresters because foresters have to talk to people as well and deal with communities. That turned out to be quite a plus in that respect.

The time we were here in the '50s—I graduated in '55—it was kind of a transition period where there were quite a number of veterans from World War II. In fact my original roommate was a navy veteran from World War II. Several of them were married and even had families, and they lived in the student facilities down at south campus which is kind of World War II temporary buildings. Maybe it wasn't half veterans, but there was a number of veterans and the ones that were not. We didn't have any women in our class, but in a class of 30, probably a little more than half of us were non-veterans, but we were all subject to the draft. So, a good number of us tacked on ROTC—at that time it was Air Force and Army—onto a schedule. That was really tough because the SAF, Site American Foresters, had required that to be accredited you had to have all these requirements. I ended up taking—we were on the quarter system at that time—21 or 22 credits per term. So, that was sort of the atmosphere that we were in.

It was a transition too in that when I came there were still people like Tom Spaulding, a former dean. There was Fay Clark. Fay Clark was a forest supervisor of the Helena National Forest and with this influx of veterans, the University wanted somebody with on the ground experience. Fay Clark was a very colorful, interesting guy. A tall German fellow who wore a monocle—one eye—and he was really something else. He would drop that monocle if he was surprised or disappointed in what he was hearing from you. There's a lot of stories about Fay Clark that if you interview people in the '50s you'll hear about.

Chuck Waters was probably the finest professor that any of us ever had in terms of learning about forestry and botany and entomology and that sort of thing. He was never quite the favorite of Dean Ross Williams, who was here during the entire '50s, but he was nonetheless, I think, regarded by the student body as the finest.

Other folks were there that represented kind of the old times and they were gradually moving out, so by the time that we left in 1955, there was a number of newer people that had come along.

I think as you look at my career it was really quite good. It was probably too technical at the time, but the Air Force ROTC broadened us and the continuing education emphasis at the University here had really helped us a lot in advancing our career. Betty and I have been all over the place—Montana, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Washington D.C.

Betty Smith: Twice.

ZS: (laughs) Betty says twice. Betty is now managing her 32nd house in our career, most of which was Forest Service, but also a lot of Air Force stuff.

Well, those are kind of the highlights and I really have appreciated the growth of the College of Forestry here as it transitioned from a highly technical type curriculum based on range management and forest management to a much broader natural resource concerned with wildlife and fire and recreation and so forth. Let me just advance one little incident and we probably will be out of time by then, but Fay Clark, our monocled German, was famous for his tests. We would have tests in mensuration and valuation—measurements and so forth—over at the economics building on the oval. You came at 1:00 o'clock with your slide rule, thermos bottle, and supper because they lasted all day. He'd give you 11 questions—10 plus a bonus question—and we were there until well after dark. One of the funniest incidents, though, was in our scaling test. He and our graduate assistant scaled a bunch of logs at the Bonner Mill at the Anaconda log deck and numbered them and wrote it all down. Then we had to go out there. We loaded up in a six-by Army truck and went out to do our testing. Just as we rolled onto the deck, the cat skinner was pushing the last log into the water. Faye got out of the truck, dropped his monocle, and said everyone get back in the truck. We went up to Blackfoot, had a beer, came back to campus, and everybody passed.

Betty do you want to add anything?

BS: Not a whole lot; you say it very well. It's been a wonderful ride, it really has. I think one of my jobs was packing and unpacking as we'd go from house to house. We lived back in Washington-area two times and then we went to Ithaca, New York, and spent a year there, didn't we? It just went on and on and on, so my education was packing up and unpacking half of our married life. It was very educational and I was always taking classes here and there and so I never felt out in that regard either. I can't think of anything that I would consider an unhappy time except leaving friends. Leaving friends was very hard for me.

ZS: This is kind of like one of Ivan Doig's stories about the forest ranger marrying the rancher's wife, the rancher's daughter. Betty was raised on ranches out of Chinook, Montana, and my dad was a forest supervisor in Great Falls and we met here. Actually, under Corbin Hall at the cafeteria where she was serving. I just developed that relationship and she's kind of timid. She was a ranger's wife and a lot of forest supervisors' wives, the regional forester's wife, really organized the wives in the Forest Service into a real family.

So, we probably went over time a little bit.

Clark Grant: You were just about right actually.

ZS: (laughs) Okay.

CG: I actually have one more question, if you're willing. Was it something other than your father's career that originally introduced you to forestry? Do you have a love for forests?

ZS: I was raised on ranger stations and my granddad was also a retiree, Forest Service, so my grandfather and grandmother were involved in the very early days. In fact, my granddad responded to that famous yellow recruitment sign that said, "Forest rangers wanted." You got to be able to shoe a horse, pack a saddle, and this and that and everything else, and at the end it said, "Invalids need not apply." Quite the contrast to today's outreach to invalids, minorities and women and so forth. I had that background and I didn't really know anything much different. I went to grade school in a one-room school with eight grades and one teacher. I was always directed that way.

CG: We could easily go on all day (unintelligible).

ZS: Well, I hope it does. You got several people signed up? Oh good, good.

BS: That was very nice.

ZS: Thank you, both of you, for doing this.

Unidentified female speaker: You two have a lot to say. You could fill up several hours.

ZS: Well, it was a good life.

BS: It was fun. I think the most important thing is we really enjoyed people. I did, and Zane did too, but we went separate ways because I was either packing or unpacking. We always met— Forest Service people were wonderful. Always made you feel welcome, so that it was not like I was the stranger. Just really nice people.

[End of Interview]