Center of
Southwest Studies

This interview forms part

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Oral History Interview with DUANE A. SMITH, February 17, 1994, Durango, Colorado, by Todd Ellison for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College

SMITH: I learned an awful lot in them. If I was going to do them again, I would do better. I learned that you had to know the territory. You need to know something about the period of time you are talking to these people about. I expected, I think, to get too much from people, actually concrete facts like in 1885, what do you remember about Caribou. You really can't do that--instead you get an impression or feel. These were youngsters growing up in Caribou. I learned at that time it's good to have some questions in mind, maybe even written down, actually I think I did my first interview by writing down what people said. That's when I decided to go to tape recorders even though they were huge. I don't take shorthand, so I was trying to write down what this person was saying. He was talking a mile a minute, and he talked faster than I do, and I probably missed a lot. I found that it's good to go back the second time and interview people. For example, and, of course, now I do know the territory, Howard Hill would be pleased with me the Music Man as you remember, you've got to know the territory. I can sit down and talk to old timers, in fact, I mentioned this to the class last year. One of the major oral history projects that I did was my local Durango history, and I went and interviewed old timers, all the way back to the 1890s. This was in the 1970s, and I don't know how, because I never lead anyone astray. I always tell them when I arrived and what I'm doing and all those things, but one lady, a friend of mine, heard two of the older ladies in town talking about me, and I had interviewed one of them. She was saying, oh, I remember him when he was here in high school. He was such a nice little boy. I felt like saying, first place you did not remember me because I wasn't here in high school and I wasn't very nice in high school, but I got to the point in Durango, I could sit and talk to the old timers. They would talk about Smiley, I can talk about Smiley because I've talked to so many of them. In fact, I've almost become a certified old timer because the people I've talked to are all dead, therefore, I'm now the person who can talk about these things. That's an awful long answer to a nice question.

ELLISON: That's good; you mentioned that you've learned that it's good to do a second interview. Tell us more about the difference between the.....

SMITH: Well the first interview, and I know you've talked to them about this. I never pop anybody cold. If I don't know the person I'm going to interview, let's say, someone comes up to me and says, you should interview Mrs. Brown over here, well okay, and I don't know Mrs. Brown, and I call up Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Brown doesn't know me. We really don't build bridges. We sit there and sort of shadow box each other, so what I do then is have the person who, somebody who knows Mrs. Brown, call up and say Duane Smith is going to call you, this is who he is, so I don't walk in on

them cold. Then I go talk to the person, the first interview for me is sort of like you've got to find out what these people know, what they can remember, what other things, perhaps, that I haven't thought about, what can we talk to this individual about. I don't go back and do everybody, some interviews don't pan out. Let's face it, they just don't. For one reason or another, they aren't what you expect, but once I get to know a little bit about this individual and the period of time they were living here or the occupation or whatever it is that I was trying to find out about them, then if I can see other questions I need to answer or ask, then I will go back a second time. I find that a lot of these old timers like it because in a sense there future is the past. There is nothing much for them in the future and they sort of feel left out especially if you go to the Four Corners Health Care Center over there. Some of those are pathetic. When they get in there, some of them lose their hope in life, so if you come along and you want to talk to them, well then you can really help them out as much as they can help you out. I feel good about doing this. I've been lucky because obviously you are dealing with senior citizens. When I started out, as I said, back in 1960 I could push all the way back to the 1870s and 80s if I was lucky, but today, the 1990s, a person who is 80 or 90 years old was born in 1903 or 4, so he can't push it back like we once did, so what we are dealing with now are the 19 teens, 1920s, 30s that era of time, and that needs to be done. I'm not saying it doesn't need to be done, but especially, for example, if I find out a person is willing to talk about the Klan, which most people aren't, and I'll go back the second time and we will talk a little bit more about the Klan. The first time they've got to get to know you as well as you've got to get to know them. They've got to have confidence in you, which is why I like to be sure that they know who I am. I like to have someone else tell them, a friend of theirs that they know as opposed to me saying, hey, this is who I am, this is what I'm doing, but yeah I do, I think it's a good idea to go back for a second one.

ELLISON: What other tips do you have in terms of building rapport?

SMITH: You've got to know the territory.... You don't walk into somebody and say tell me all that you can remember about life in Silverton or life in Durango. You've got to have some questions to sort of open up some things for them, and you've got to be alert enough as when they are talking that you can pick up things to catch up on later, and you've got to watch people, and I didn't really realize this until I was interviewing Nellie Spencer. Nellie was a lady, when I came in 1964, lived down in the little house that used to sit right down next to the fire station, which was the last parlor house in Durango, and Nellie Spencer was the last madam. We can talk about the wages of sin being death, but Nellie Spencer owned everything from the Power Plant down to the present Holiday Inn, but anyway, Nellie wouldn't talk to me. She was rather eccentric. I came in '64 and this is an

opportunity that you don't get very often. It's one of these great myths and legends to get to talk to a prostitute. There are certain types of individuals you would love to talk to, but you just can't get to, but Nellie, I waited until the early 80s, 18 years, and Nellie was up in the Four Corners Health Care, then called Eventide, and the word came down that Nellie wanted to talk. Well Nellie did want to talk and she was a great interview. She was 92 years old and Nellie had a very sharp mind, her body was going to rack and ruin, well I can tell you some stories, but anyway, Nellie was hard of hearing, so she said, but not as hard of hearing as she let on. She said she couldn't see out of one eye, but not as much as she said she couldn't. Anyway, I found out when I was interviewing her that I had to write questions. She wanted me to write out questions which meant in the interview we have, talking, stop, talking, stop, talking because I had to write this out, hold it up, and she's go like this,

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red light district, because Nellie was on the line for 50 years. You stop to think about that for a moment, and Nellie's interview covered everything from pregnancy to abortion to drugs, and it's the type of interview that historians would kill for because this is a very rare opportunity. You might think this guy is sordid, you know, but she was really the exception for what I've done. There's a lot of material in there that people would love to get, well I want to use it, and once I use it, and I have done some things with Nellie, but once I use it, I will let other people use it, but I'm not quite ready to write that yet, and the people, they could use it, then what have I got, I've got nothing. Nellie is now safely up in Greenmount with all the good ladies, and we didn't have an earthquake. There were four people at her funeral, four people, that's all that turned out. Anyway, that's the only interview that I've never shared with anybody, and I've got a whole series of interviews with her, the tapes aren't really too good because I was worried about what she said, if I paused it and then forgot to start it again, I could lose something, really lose a lot, so it's far better to have some blank tape then it would be to turn it on and by Job, there's nothing there. That's what I did on most of them, I didn't fool around with pushing the pause because this was too valuable an interview and I just didn't want to miss, so the interviews are very difficult to listen to because we will talk for awhile. Nellie gets going, she's like me, put a nickel in me and I go for a half an hour at least. Nellie would talk, and she just didn't, wasn't, if you asked her, oh, I don't know, how much did you get paid, she didn't say $5.00, she would sit there and she would--different times, depends on tricks, overnight, all kinds of things involved here, so there will be a period

SMITH: I'll never interview anyone else again, that's what I learned. By transcribing it, I've learned obviously you want the best equipment you can get. Right off the start, I learned very quickly where to put the microphone so it would pick people up because the last thing you want to have is you turn this thing up full volume and all you can hear is a whisper. That makes it really, and sometimes the people you are interviewing do not speak distinctly, and then you've really got a problem because you've got a tone level and you've got a volume level here, and it's always

interviews lead to photographs, maybe documents, letters, who knows what these interviews might lead to. Obviously the interview is getting a foot in the door, but it can be a lot more, but there was a doctor in town, Koplowitz, who was really a screwball and character. Koplowitz was down on the corner of 8th and Main was his office, and he'd been a company doctor at Rico, and I wanted to interview, and that rascal, even though I knew him very well, and I got along with him okay, and most people were scared by him. He was just kind of a gruff guy. He used to live in the Blackstone Apartments, for example, he and his wife were Jews and when they would come around caroling, the kids would come around and want to go in the Blackstone Apartments, he would pay them not to carol instead of paying them for caroling. That was Koplowitz, but he never would do it. He took it to his grave and unfortunately the chance to talk to a company doctor at Rico would have been outstanding. There was another man here in town who had a museum up the valley, Kenny Logan, and he was always convinced he was going to write a book about Durango's history. Therefore, he looked upon me as a rival, and even though he'd been around for a long time, and his father operated most of these coal mines around here, and he knew the coal history, he never would talk to me. He would talk to me but don't bring a tape recorder, so I would just sit down and talk to him and go home and write all this stuff down anyway. You have to do that sometime. You have to train yourself to do that, and it hasn't happened very often, so I did get a halfway decent interview out of him when he didn't know it.

ELLISON: Other than having someone who knows the person talk to them before you interview them, what other means have you found work for selling the interview?

SMITH: I always approach them that you are part of this history, and I would like to have you help me make this history come alive and save it, and most people are very willing to go along with that. They think it's just wonderful. Most people are, shall we say, vain or egotistical enough that they want to be remembered. When we got the photograph, we all became eternal because you could deal with an 1861 picture of a Civil War veteran, well there he is, but you don't see this from the War of 1812, the Revolutionary War. You might see a painting of some general, so Americans have this bent, and in the sense they want to be recovered from what could be called the scrap heap of history, and I'm not that blunt, but that's been one approach that has worked very well with me. In fact, I do quote a lot of these people, and I do put them in histories, and they can see themselves there, and I think they feel good about it. I really think they do, so really I've never had much problem. I'll call people if worse comes to worst, and I'll go over and just talk to them, won't take a tape recorder, just sit down and talk to them, so they know I'm not trying to save anything, and that

way will lead to another interview with a tape recorder. Another thing you've got to do is you've got to convince them not to be scared of this [the recorder]. I've never used a video camera, some people don't even want to talk to a tape recorder. You've got to walk them through it. A video camera might even be one step harder simply because you've got to have someone else there to operate the video camera, and you've got some more equipment to do, and so even though some people say you ought to do a video on this, sometimes it's hard enough to put it on tape, so I never have. It would be nice to have some videos of some of these people. If you can't get that, well at

remember that. So what I use the oral history for is not particularly to say well, let's find out what happened on this date. I can look in a newspaper for that if I need to, rather, let's get the flavor, let's get attitudes, feeling about this era, about how life was. I like to give people a sense of place and a sense of time and there's no way better to do that than to use interviews, and I'll weave them into the story in many different ways. It's like, you know, this story you hear, if there's an automobile accident out here, you can get eight people, or seven people, or three people to look at it and tell you about it, they'll, first hand accounts, sit them right down after the accident, they will all have different ideas of what happened, and that's true of history. When you are doing oral history, you've got to remember that. What you are after is how they felt, how it affected them, they can probably

and what they might have been doing, and once you get them to open up. I've never had anybody who was continually cryptic like that. I mean, they will start out that way, and then if you kind of hit them with a little different question, then they will come back and pretty soon, some you can't shut up. The other side of the coin is can't shut up. Okay, the other side of the coin is, that person you start right here, give them a question and they start talking, and they are back around here circling about five or six times and you've got to get them back to the topic. There was one guy in town by the name of Art Wyatt. He was a state representative and because he was a politician, you know he got going, whoops, he was over here, over there, everywhere around there, didn't answer the question, so you had to bring him back. Those are the alphas and the omegas, people who are very cryptic and people who won't shut up. Most people fall, fortunately, somewhere in between and once they get to know you, it becomes just like we are talking.

Scott Cuckow [another student in the class]: I want to ask a question along that line, when you know the territory and you ask them like that, it helps stimulate the memory, don't it.

S

SMITH: Oh, geez, good old Ms. Smith. The King Coal mine out there was run in the 1960s and 70s by Mr. and Mrs. Smith, really, she just passed on here, I can't remember, three or four or five years ago, but anyway they got into a real big fight with what's now known as OSHA, the government safety thing. They just got into a real donnybrook of a fight with them, and she became famous. He was kind of an interesting character. She'd say, Smith, here comes this little guy, his wife could have made [pro football player] Karl Mecklenburg look fairly small. Anyway, she became really kind of a folk hero, they made bumper stickers out of her fight at King Coal. She could just cuss a blue streak, but she was the type of person, not a Hollywood beauty, but if you wanted to cross the plains in a covered wagon in the 1840s, she's the one you wanted because she was tough as nails, an outdoors woman, and she chased, one of the OSHA folks showed up or one of the forerunners of OSHA, and she met him the, yeah, King Coal mine is out here by Hesperus. It's out in Hay Gulch, and they are still mining coal. That's where the coal comes for the railroad, and she met 'em at the gate with a shotgun. She said, if you set foot on this property, I'm going to blast you into eternity, and I mean she would have done it. To put it mildly, with this shotgun leveled right square at his chest and Violet Smith, who was commonly called violent, sitting behind the shotgun, and she said, ha, ha, ha--pardon me--he pissed in his pants and he did. Violet thought that was pretty funny, but that was the kind of person she was, but just to show you what they've done, they were a hard working couple. They had a ranch out there by the King Coal mine, this is the type of person, woman she was, they would work all day at the ranch and then they would go into the mines when they opened it up, and they worked at night in the mines, and they would take their babies and put them in coal cars and put them in a side drift and then they would work there until

finally died--and Violet moved in town and she ended up out at Four Corners Health Care, and she got it right with God as Billy Sunday used to say, stopped swearing, was not as colorful, and forsook her previous career and past and I never interviewed her after that. She was really a colorful, you don't hit those very often, that type of person, but she was just the nicest person that you ever hoped to meet. I mean, as long as she liked you, and the story she had, I just gave you the idea of some of the things she did, but this is how people opened up this country. They were the Violet Smiths of the world, they weren't the Hollywood types. I mean, she just whipped them in the dust, you know, and just the kindest, lovingest soul but tough as nails and could cuss like a trooper, and I mean, she could have plastered anyone of us through that wall, and might have done it. I mean, if you had offended her, she just didn't, she would wade right into you. Some people thought, probably some men thought they should never hit a woman, but that's probably when they picked themselves up off the floor, she decked them. She had some classic, just classic, she was always going around to the county commissioners, but that must have been. This was before I got here, I didn't know about this, but she had some stories, but that's the type of person, that type of story. I knew that was going to be good because she wouldn't let people interview her, but again it was a friend of mine who opened up that door, and once I opened the door, boy it was just like the dam unfolded. She just really talked and talked, and Violet Smith, yeah, she was. I've gotten some excellent interviews with women, just tremendous interviews with women. In fact, I'm going to use three of them as the basis for an article, women in the 1920s and 30s in the county because two of them were homesteaders. The last homesteaders in the county, see they stopped homesteading in the middle 1930s because the federal government ended the homesteading program, and there were more women homesteaders than you realize, but the last homestead in the county was out almost by the Ute Mountain Ute reservation out there, if you know where Marvel and Kline are, and if you go down that road past Hesperus, past the old Fort Lewis, you hit Kline, and Marvel and Breen. Well they were west and south of there, really smacked up against the [Southern Ute] reservation and it's just a darn good series of interviews. I'm going to use Violet because she's just so interesting and these other two, one is a teenager and one is a wife, homesteader.

ELLISON: What other interviews stand out?

SMITH: Some interviews with the Cub players, simply because it just was enjoyable to do. Some of the early ones, I interviewed two Cornish ladies, Cornish, the cousin Jacks and cousin Jennies came over from Cornwall, England, and interviewed two of them who had been born in

Oral History Interview with DUANE A. SMITH, February 17, 1994, Durango, Colorado,

time the milkman came by and he would leave your milk out in front. None of you remember that,

breadth and depth of an interview.

Cuckow: Along the topic of young people, do you think this oral history is a good project in a high school setting?

SMITH: I think it's excellent. It's that kind of Foxfire concept that they had in North and South Carolina. I think oral history, I think it's great. In fact, in our middle school, we are just finishing up, some of you know that I'm not teaching this year, I'm on sabbatical. I've been on sabbatical since May of last year, grand time, grand time, but one of the things that we just finished up was a middle school history, Colorado history, and at the end of every chapter, things that you can do, activities that you can do, and we hammer at this oral history, talk to your grandparents. It gives kids roots, it gives them a sense of belonging to something. Let's face it, my daughter doesn't think anything happened really important before 1968, and you might think that's really pretty far back in the days, I remember when Caesar invaded England about that time, and it does give you, it lets them have a sense of something beyond, and they can find out, hey, what I'm going through today, maybe it's a little bit different and maybe in some ways it's worse, but it's not really that much different than it was 40, 80, 100 years ago. For example, the first drug bust in Durango was in August of 1881. That's 113 years ago, and sure we are all worried about nuclear bombs or atomic bombs or missiles, they were worried about small pox, they were worried about T.B. and they were worried about the common cold, sure we've got AIDS, but you couldn't cure syphilis and gonorrhea 100 years ago. You could cure the outward symptoms, but you couldn't cure it. Once you got it, you had it. Nellie and I talked about that. I just finished a medical history, medicine in mining camps, and social ills were one of the problems. Sure we have gang fights today, but you realize in one month in Denver in 1919 they arrested three hundred and some juveniles for crime, everything from robbery to attempted murder to shoplifting. I'm not saying we should--hey, we have nothing to worry about gang, we've lived through all this before so let's not get all that concerned--but I think it allows you interviews, especially for younger kids, it allows them to see that these things, hey, it really isn't the first time that we've ever done this, yeah.

McMaster: Where did your passion for the history of Colorado come from and how many books have you written about Colorado?

SMITH: About Colorado, solely about Colorado. It's a good question, I don't know, 17, 18. I really can't say. I've never really looked at it quite that way. Colorado is in almost all of them some

Durango, the New Deal legislation. You've got to know what that is and how it impacts other

to get, and I get a lot of things I don't expect to get, but, I think, like right now I know if I went back and interviewed the Todd sisters, that's those two ladies in Caribou, that I would do it differently. I would have different approaches, I would know more atly, bnk

APPENDIX

BOOKS BY DUANE A. SMITH (AS OF 1994):

An Archaeological and Historical Investigation of an Historic Cabin at Site 5LP1259, by Jonathon C. Horn, Gary M. Matlock, Duane A. Smith. Montrose, Colo.: Nickens and Associates, 1984. 65 leaves.

The Bank that Built Durango. Durango, Colo.: Durango Herald, [1981]. 32 pages.

The Bank that Built Durango: Commemorating 110 years of service to the people in southwestern Colorado. Durango, Colo., [1991]. 36 pages.

The Birth of Colorado: A Civil War perspective

176 pages.

A Colorado Reader, by Carl Ubbelohde, Maxine Benson, Duane A. Smith, editors. 2nd ed. Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Pub. Co., 1982. 309 pages.

The Crested Butte National Historic District, Gunnison County, Colorado: A review and evaluation, by Steven G. Baker, Duane A. Smith and Martha Sullenberger. Montrose, Colo.: Centuries Research, Inc., 1981. 115 leaves.

Dolores Project Cultural Resources Mitigation Program 1978, fieldwork report, volume 1: historic studies: Historic resources research, inventory, and evaluation in the Dolores Project area - 1978, by Steven G. Baker and Duane A. Smith. Montrose, Colo.: Centuries Research, Inc., 1979. 140 pages.

Fortunes Are for the Few: Letters of a forty-niner

Rocky Mountain Boom Town: A history of Durango. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1980. 215 p.

Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The urban frontier. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1967]. 304 pages.

Rocky Mountain West: Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana, 1859-1915. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992. 290 pages.

Sacred Trust: The birth and development of Fort Lewis College. Forward by Joel M. Jones. Niwot, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 1991. 173 pages.

Secure the Shadow: Lachlan McLean, Colorado mining photographer. Golden, Colo.: Colorado School of Mines Press, 1980. 82 pages.

Set Our Feet on Lofty Places: Centennial of Durango Methodism. Durango, Colo.: Durango Herald, 1981. 32 pages.

Silver Saga: The story of Caribou, Colorado. Forward by Robert G. Athearn. Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Pub. Co., [1974]. 269 pages.

Song of the Hammer and Drill: The Colorado San Juans, 1860-1914. Golden, Colo.: Colorado School of Mines Press, 1982. 181 pages.

A Taste of the West: Essays in honor of Robert G. Athearn, edited and with a contributiojn by Duane A. Smith. Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Pub. Co., 1983. 186 pages.

A Thousand Tongues to Sing: Methodism in Durango. Durango, Colo.: Tri-State Printing Co., 1970. 22 pages.

When Coal Was King: A History of Crested Butte, Colorado, 1880-1952. Golden, Colo.: Colorado School of Mines Press, 1984. 144 pages.

Oral History Interview with DUANE A. SMITH, February 17, 1994, Durango, Colorado, by Todd Ellison for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College

INDEX OF TRANSCRIPT

(Editor's note: page references are to the original printed guide and do not exactly correspond with actual page numbers of the transcript in PDF file format.)

Oral History Interview with DUANE A. SMITH, February 17, 1994, Durango, Colorado, by Todd Ellison for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College

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