



Center of  
Southwest Studies

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# **Oral History Interview**

**with**

**DUANE A. SMITH**

**February 17, 1994**

**Durango, Colorado**

**by Todd Ellison**

**for the Center of Southwest Studies, Fort Lewis College  
Fort Lewis College Oral History Project**

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## PREFACE

Fort Lewis College has a distinctive history in the field of public education and, notably, Indian education. For over one hundred years, it has been a first-string player in helping to educate Native American students. Qualified Native Americans attend tuition-free.

Fort Lewis has its origins in a military post established in 1879 two miles south of Parrott City, on the banks of the La Plata River. A year after the Fort was ordered closed in 1891, an Indian boarding school was established at the site. Nearly twenty years later when the school was no longer needed, it was given to the state for use as a high school. In 1956, Fort Lewis College--which had begun offering only college-level courses at the old Fort in 1933--moved to Durango and six years later became a degree-granting four-year college.

The Center of Southwest Studies was established in 1964 to serve as a museum and a research facility and to develop an interdisciplinary Southwest curriculum. The Southwest curriculum draws from courses in Anthropology, Art, Literature, History, and Sociology. Two of the more recent Southwest Studies course offerings are oral history and archival theory and practice. An oral history project is an important component of the oral history course and of several other Southwest courses. The Colorado Commission on Higher Education has recognized the Southwest Studies Center as a program of excellence in state-funded higher education.

The Center's holdings, which focus on the Four Corners region, include over 8,000 artifacts, more than 15,000 volumes (cataloged in INNOPAC along with Reed Library holdings), numerous periodicals (listed in the Reed Library periodicals holdings printouts), and nearly 400 special collections dating from prehistory to the present. These include more than 2,000 linear shelf feet of manuscripts and unbound printed materials, over 7,000 rolls of microfilm (including about 3,000 rolls of historic Southwest region newspapers), over 600 oral histories, and more than 35,000 photographs. Strengths in the Center's collections of artifacts (which, with Anthropology Department holdings, amount to more than 4,000 linear shelf feet of objects) include more than 2,000 Anasazi ceramic vessels, 150 Navajo textiles, 140 items of Southwestern basketry, numerous military objects from the days of the old Fort Lewis, and about 200 pieces of antique photographic equipment. Most of the materials in the Center's collections were donated, from more than 500 documented sources. The collections are a resource for every member of the community and beyond. The Center's mission includes preserving and making accessible this resource for all who are interested in the history of our region.

This is one of many transcripts of Southwest Studies oral history interviews. The oral history collections are located at the Center of Southwest Studies in the Reed Library building on the campus of Fort Lewis College. They are accessible by subject, name of interviewer, name of narrator, place name, by years covered, and by interview date. Interested researchers should phone the secretary at 970/247-7456 or the archivist at 970/247-7126, or send electronic mail to the archivist at: [archives@FortLewis.edu](mailto:archives@FortLewis.edu). Our website URL is: <http://swcenter.fortlewis.edu>

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**INTRODUCTION**

This interview was conducted as part of Todd Ellison's 1994 winter trimester course in oral history at Fort Lewis College. Professor Smith had spoken to the oral history class the year before, and graciously consented to a tape-recorded interview in class (breaking one of the "rules" of oral history, that the interviewee and interviewer should be the only ones present) which would serve two purposes: to document and learn from his extensive experience with oral history, and to serve as a sort of model for oral history interviewing. The interviewer is the College archivist and on the Southwest Studies Department faculty.

Would that every interviewee were as full of useful knowledge and great stories as Duane Smith's is! His experiences and reflections add a unique dimension to our understanding of how to "do" oral history and of the history of our region. We--and all today or in the future who study the use of oral history and write histories of our region--can learn from this man who so graciously consented to being interviewed.

The interview tape and transcript are deposited with the Center of Southwest Studies here at Fort Lewis College where, with the consent of both the interviewer and the interviewee, they are accessible to researchers. This is Special Collections accession number 940204. As is the custom of the Center, the transcription was sent to the interviewee for his review before being made available at the Center.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Duane Smith has one of the longest tenures at Fort Lewis College. He joined the History Faculty in 1964, having completed three degrees at the University of Colorado (B.A., 1959; M.A., 1961; Ph.D., 1964). He is the sole author of around twenty books, and editor and/or co-author of another fifteen or so (see appendix for listing).

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**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

This is an interview with Professor Duane Smith of the History Department and with the Center of Southwest Studies at Fort Lewis College. Dr. Smith lives in Durango, Colorado. Professor Smith is known as "Mr. Colorado" because of the many books he has written on our state's history. The interview is being conducted on February 17, 1994 in the classroom at Hesperus 146 on the campus of Fort Lewis College. The interviewer is Todd Ellison representing the Center of Southwest Studies at Fort Lewis College, Durango, Colorado.

**ELLISON:** Duane, there are many subjects which you would be well qualified to talk to us about, and today we want to focus on the subject of oral history interviewing. As we start, I would like to ask you to tell us something about your personal background regarding your education in history and your training as a historian, and we'd like to ask you to talk to us about how you got started doing oral history, and how you got your three degrees all from the University of Colorado in Boulder with your B.A. in 1959.

**SMITH:** I got my B.A, M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of Colorado, and while I was working on my master's thesis, it was on a mining camp at Caribou, I was fortunate to find some people who had lived at the little town of Caribou, which had burned down finally in 1905, but they had lived there, actually some of them back as early as 1880, so I started doing oral history. I just simply jumped into it. You talk about being nervous. I just put a note in the paper, which never works, but it did work this time, and I smoked out some folks, and I called them up and showed up and was every bit as nervous as you are, except in those days the tape recorder was about this much bigger than that, and it was a physical exercise. I still have mine at home. That's how far we've come. I remember one time in snowy Denver about a week before Christmas day, I was walking down 16th Street to go interview a guy, and I thought my arm was going to fall off. Anyway that's when I started to do oral history was in 1960-61. I moved down here in 1964 to teach at Fort Lewis and since that time, I've done a lot of oral history. I've never taken a class on it, so you guys are much more fortunate than I am, but I've done several oral history projects along with the histories that I've written.

**ELLISON:** What do you remember from those first interviews at Caribou?

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**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

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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

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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, and she would read it, then she would start off. Well, I found out that Nellie was a very polite lady, and when I was writing, she would stop talking, and so we had to get this worked out. I didn't want her to stop her train of thought there while I was writing something down, so I just had to do it by memory, except to write the questions out. This is just an example. You've got to play off these people, and sometimes they don't want to talk about something, okay, fine and dandy. There are two things that people don't like to talk about, and that's the Klan and prostitution. A lot of old men in the 70s, 80s, and 90s had never visited the red light district, which is down where the Plaza Shopping Center is, but yet they must have learned a lot by walking by. Osmosis must have been an amazing things around the red light district, and the other thing is the Klan. No one was ever in the Klan, but we had Klan parades here in Durango, and they burned crosses on Smelter Mountain, but no one was ever in it, a bunch of ghosts in sheets walking down there. If you can get someone to talk about it, and I never did get anyone to admit being in the Klan. I know some people were very suspect, and then when we found the Bayfield Klan records, people were diving for cover because we had the names. Still, there was only one fellow who was on there who was still alive at that time, and, by golly, he was in ill health. I was ready, I had him primed, but he died, but I got his wife. His wife admitted that--she was probably a better interview than he would have been about it anyway because he was in ill health. It had nothing to do with the revelation that he was a Klan member. He suddenly died. He hadn't been in good health for a long time, and that's why I hadn't interviewed him because if they are not in good health sometimes unless they really want to, the interviews can be very taxing on them, not a good situation.

**ELLISON:** We've read, some people think at least when you are talking about some topics, it's better to interview the person of the same sex. What have you found about that, interviewing the woman about prostitution?



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**SMITH:** Nellie was very open to me and just blew a student's project out of the water when this lady came down to interview her. Nellie had a great sense of humor, and I figured this out too, when she winked with her good eye, I knew what was coming because she would pull your leg. I had this lady who was probably 40 years old, and she was doing a history of Durango, women history of Durango, and she was interviewing some people, and she wanted to go visit Nellie, and I said, fine, I said, come along, so I told Nellie she was coming, so we sat down and I started talking to Nellie, and doing my part of the interview, and I had told her just to jump right in, just jump right in wherever you want to. So we were talking about something else, we were talking about Nellie's background at this point, and all of a sudden, I said, do you want to say something, and she wrote out for Nellie, she wrote out, I understand you were a madam in the red light district, which Nellie had openly admitted and was a known fact. Her name she used was Iris, Nellie Spencer was her real name, but Iris was the name she used in the line, and Nellie got her good eye out and squinted and looked at that, and she winked. I thought, oh, gosh, what's going to happen, and she looked at this lady who was in her 40s, and she said, young woman, how dare you suggest that, and it just blew this poor woman. Her interview was ruined. Nellie just did it as a joke. She did go on and talk about it for her, but Nellie just blew her out of the water. I never had any problem. I had never talked to anyone quite like Nellie either. I must admit that Nellie was much better with men than she was with woman, no question at all about it. That's part of the occupation, but out there, in fact, at Eventide they had her at her table. They had tables where the same people had to eat, well all the rebellious men, you know, the geezers who really were sort of half way out of it, they put at Nellie's table and she was a master at hammering them, just a master. I don't usually, oh, I've handled delicate topics for Victorian America, because Victorian America was pretty delicate, but I never felt that a woman has ever, I've had more men actually refuse, or beat around the bush on the red light district and on the Klan when I knew darn well they were in it, then I ever had women. I don't know, I think once they get to know you and they trust you, a rapport is there, I don't think it matters what sex you are. I think you can do it.

**ELLISON:** Where are your tapes of your interview?

**SMITH:** Oh, Nellie's tapes are in my study. I have them transcribed. I have very willingly shared my tapes with everybody. I don't mind. In fact, almost all the Durango ones are transcribed upstairs in the Center. Nellie's tapes are transcribed, but they aren't up there, and there's a real reason for this, not that I'm being selfish, but I'm going to use Nellie as the heart and soul of a study of the

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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 than 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 of maybe five minutes talking and maybe a minute, a minute and a half wait while Nellie is reading, getting for the next one, but actually one of the real difficult things is getting it transcribed. When I did my Durango main interviewing in the 70s and 80s, Nellie wasn't involved in this. I started in the early 70s to the early 90s, and I've gone on with it, but during the summer the secretaries don't have a great deal to do, so said the administration, so why don't you have any secretary on campus, so the word went out that they had to transcribe these tapes, well I tell you, people were diving for cover when they saw me coming. I was like the black death, you know, oh, got to hide, they are typing like mad, lord knows what, they are probably trying out some new method of typing or something, but that is the real difficult part of it. It's transcribing that really takes the time.

**ELLISON:** Have you done transcribing?

**SMITH:** I have done, I actually did some of mine.

**ELLISON:** What have you learned personally from doing that?

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**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 important, I feel, to watch, in fact, I had one of these that failed me last March when I went down to do my thing at spring training. I cover spring training for the Durango Herald, it gives me a pass to do all these neat things, but anyway it failed me and I lost half of a good interview because of it, and to this day I don't know what the problem was, but anyway, always have confidence in your machine, work with your machine beforehand, test it out. I will even at times, like just before I start, I will try testing one, two, three and back up to see if it is working because there is nothing that's more heartbreaking than to find that there's nothing on the tape, sort of like when you do your VCR right. I'm a master at somehow failing that technique, but this is key to what you do. You've got to know this machine, whatever machine you've got.

**ELLISON:** What have you found to be the best for you in terms of microphones?

**SMITH:** Well, actually what I've used, this portable type mike as opposed to, for example, this [audio recording machine] will pick people up without a mike. You've got to put it pretty close to them. I always like to have a mike; as for types, you know, it's really just whatever they have. If I have a mike, I will always test it out before I go, so I know what its limitations, what I can find, are because you just don't want to mechanically blow an interview. You might blow one, at least it better be your mistake, not the machine, you don't have to drop kick this across the room, which you are sometimes tempted to do.

**ELLISON:** What other things can you remember that have gone wrong in an interview?

**SMITH:** Not much, I've been pretty lucky. I only lost that one interview in 34 years. That was kind of crushing, oh was it a great interview, I was talking to Larry Himes, the manager of the Cubs, and we were just having a great discussion about baseball, and it didn't come out. Really, in all the years that I've done it, there have only been two people that have turned me down. Most people are very willing to talk once they know what you are doing, and not only that, but the

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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

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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 least you've got them on tape, or if you don't have them on tape, at least you have what they said transcribed. I did not save all of the tapes simply because some of them I gave to the families. In fact, some people found out it was the only physical thing they might have had. They didn't bother interviewing grandmother and grandmother died, and I knew the families, so I gave them back. Also, when I want to read an interview, just because it's so much faster to read it transcribed than it is to listen to it. Sure you can get nuances and things like that, but I have saved some of the better tapes, interviews, but a lot of them I didn't simply because no one is ever going to probably spend the time to listen to them if I've transcribed them, so I just simply didn't bother, which probably Todd's over here cringing a little bit.

**ELLISON:** I'm wondering what you will do with them eventually?

**SMITH:** Oh, I'll give them to the Southwest Center, yeah, no problem. Nellie's tapes and all the ones I have, yeah.

**ELLISON:** Well, Duane, you've probably written more on Colorado's history than anybody, and you've used oral history, and I think it would be useful to us if you would tell us something about how you've used the oral history material in writing history.

**SMITH:** Okay, how I use oral history, as I said, when I started out talking about.... I don't expect them now, and I realize they can't, unless it was something really important in their lives. For example, if they went through the San Francisco earthquake or the recent Los Angeles earthquake, some of these things are going to stand out, a lot of things are going to blur together, and you have to realize well maybe this didn't happen on June 3, 1930, it happened sometime in their life to them. I figure that a person, looking at my own life, I think a person probably 7, 8, 9 is probably first hand memory down to that period of time, earlier than that in their life, it's probably something that someone told them, unless a little kid, maybe a house burned down or something, they would

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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 remember Pearl Harbor. Lordy, I can tell you what I was doing on Pearl Harbor day, but that's the exception to the rule. If you asked me, for example, if you wanted to interview me about World War II, I could tell you what I did in World War II. You know, I was over there, as a little kid I was in the scrap drive. I was in the first, second and third grade, but I can tell you what I did. I can't give you a date to it, and that's what I look for, and this history is going to be lost because it's a personal history. I can get dates. I can look at documents. I can read newspaper accounts. I can get that, but the flavor, the personal feelings.

**[end of side A;  
start side B]**

**SMITH:** You ask them, for example, how did the 1930s depression affect you? Terribly. They look at you, you know, whoops, then what are you going to do, well, how was the Dust Bowl era or something. That type of interview, some people are that way, just cryptic.

**Craig McMaster** [student in class]: How do you convince them to open up?

**SMITH:** I lead them along. That's where you've got to know the territory. They'll say, they lived down here. I would come right back and talk about, well, how were the Dust Bowl days, I mean, the dust was even down here in Durango. You know, we think of it out in Oklahoma, in eastern Colorado. In fact, they closed the highway right out here, it got so deep, drifted in. What do you remember about the Hooverville? There was a Hooverville in between Durango and Animas City. Animas City is the northern part of Durango, it's where the north City Market is. I might, depending on who it was, I might talk about the baseball team, a very good baseball team. There was a CCC camp right up here, and they might have been involved in that. I try to understand them

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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.

**SMITH:** Uh huh, yeah, not that you want to feed them, you don't want to lead them, but, oh sure, because let's face it, if it happened 50 or 60 years ago, unless it was a great drama, dramatic thing for them, they are going to remember aspects of it, and that's why it's so good. You can talk about, well, what about Emory Smiley, who was the long time superintendent of schools here, and Smiley Junior High is named after him. Maybe they are talking about their memory of Emory Smiley, and I might say, do you remember when he was principal of the high school and the big flap about the women's basketball team, something like that. That's how you use that particular approach. They had a real big fight to get the women's high school basketball team here, for example. He was dead set, dead in the middle of it, he was in favor of it, but he was right in the middle of it. You might say, remember Smiley's comments or his attitude about the Klan here in Durango. He was four square against it, so that's the type of thing. If you do know the person a little bit, this is hard when you start at your age because you don't have it, but all these sort of things are just sort of built up with me. Now I couldn't go to some other towns and do this because I don't know the people that well. I mean, I know the history of Durango, San Juans and mining and baseball, things like that I can pretty well sit down and talk to them just one on one without any trouble at all.

**ELLISON:** Last year when you spoke to our class, you told us about your interviews with another colorful woman, the woman at the mine.

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**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 10:00 or 11:00 at night, go out to the ranch, geez. She would come into town here, Smith, you had to feel sorry for him. She just bossed that, I mean she ran the operation, but Smith would come into town and get drunk, sometimes, and Violet would come in and clean out the whole tavern, boy when she came in, it was sort of like Wyatt Earp, everyone dives for cover, but she was just a great interview. Next time you drive out to Hesperus, you know where Hesperus is on 160, you notice that sort of ruin over to your right there, that building, well that was going to be a mall, her son, who didn't get her intelligence whatsoever, she was a very intelligent woman, put that in there for some reason and never finished it. Anyway, she stood up to the federal government, became really a hero, and I showed up out there one day to interview her, more than once, but the first time I took along a person who knew her, used him for a shield. I sat down after I showed up, and she said, young man, you're too skinny, so she fixed me dinner in the middle of the afternoon, and all the time she was talking away. Boy it was a meal and a half, like I grew up with in Illinois. Then Violet--Smith



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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 Caribou, which is my first love because I did my master's thesis and later a book on it. Everyone

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remembers what their first love was, the mining camp is my first love, which says something about my warped youth, but anyway just because they were so friendly and they gave me recipes and saffron, which you go in the store and it's locked up, you know, it's worth more than silver, per ounce, and because really they pushed it back. That's as far back as I've ever been able to go, and obviously now we can't go back that far, that was the 1870s, lord, that's only a few years after the Civil War, so I mean, that's 120 some years ago, but they were just great interviews because they were just darn nice people. They were very kind and nice to me because I was not an experienced interviewer and they just sort of, we all flowed along together. We learned together and they were really nice. I can't think of any really memorable ones, one lady wanted to share her book of poetry with me one time, and I didn't want, she wrote poetry about like I write poetry which isn't really very well, and she wanted to read it into my tape recorder, so I pushed the [pause] button and she never did really know. She gave me a book of poetry, so it wasn't lost to eternity. I donated the book over to the library. Right off the top of my head, there's too many, I've got them all, all the way back, I've got transcriptions of all of them. Geez, I'm sorry, Todd, just off the top of my head, some of those, my memorable ones. Some of the best ones, sometimes you just pick up one or two little things from an interview. Sometimes interviews go along very dull, I mean, you never know what you are going to get. That's what makes it exciting. It's like something new every time, but you will be going along, oh, my goodness, you can't show them that you are bored, but you think, I was hoping to get more, all of a sudden something, they will just come up with something. Like one lady ran a hair dressing business downtown, she had her salon right down next to the Chamber of Commerce during prohibition days, and she said one day, they had transoms on the top of doors in those days, glass doors, she looked through the transom, she was working late at night. She just finished doing some lady's hair and she heard all this laughing next door at the Chamber of Commerce, and the Chamber of Commerce and some of the movers and shakers in Durango and the local police, this was in the 1920s were drinking up the evidence from a prohibition trial. Out of the clear blue sky, she just came up with that story. This is the type of thing you will get, I don't know what happened in the 20s, but.... Oh, another one, was Jackson Clark Sr., Jackson Clark, Jr. runs Toh Atin downtown, and Jackson Clark Sr., mother was one of my really memorable interviews. She was Harry Jackson's daughter. Harry Jackson had come here in the 1880s and she was talking about prohibition again, and she apparently had been kind of a wild daring woman, nothing wild about this, but she talked about going downtown, and they had a lot of malted milk parlors, she said, you went to the back and peer through and you would have to tell everybody what this was, and you would go in and get your bathtub gin, but she said, there were other ways, she said the milkmen painted bottles white, and they would bring by, with your order of milk, you know, in that day and

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time the milkman came by and he would leave your milk out in front. None of you remember that, but they did, and you would get these little white bottles, bottles painted white, and you couldn't tell the difference between milk or whatever they were, not from the street anyway, but it was bathtub gin or whatever booze you were ordering. Another way to do it, the coal man would bring it by. It was a little more chancy there, along with your ton of coal, almost everyone in town would have coal, they would wrap the booze up in the burlap sack, and they would put it down, not under your ton of coal, you wouldn't have anything, but somewhere near the top, you have to be very careful, you'd feel around and get probably filthy, but there would be your booze. One lady was talking, too, about, speaking of that, this is how you learn things, and this was a great area for stills, Silverton was, and Durango was, and she said, her brother was an alcoholic, and this was a real problem in the middle of prohibition, but she said, she and her husband had just spent all morning painting the floor, now, some of you have heard, kitchen floor, some of you have heard about bathtub gin and all these things, I mean, people went crazy drinking it, they went blind, it killed people, it was deadly. Anyway, her brother knew where to get this, and he had a hip flask and he didn't want to drink in front of his nieces and nephews, her children, so he came over, just after they finished painting the kitchen, they were all sitting in the living room, and he went out to the kitchen, the floor was dry, but he went out to the kitchen to have a little guzzle, and then he left and went off, and she and her husband went out into the kitchen and he'd spilled some of it, and it had eaten right through the paint, their brand new paint, this booze had eaten right through it. I mean, this is what you pick, you are not going to pick this up anywhere else except in oral history.

**ELLISON:** Well, you've interviewed old people; what are the youngest people that you've interviewed?

**SMITH:** Youngest people, oh, they were young.... I've interviewed people, oh, golly, I've interviewed people in their teens. When I was doing Durango history, I just didn't interview old timers. I interviewed tourists, I interviewed younger people, to get their attitudes about Durango--it all depends on what I'm trying to approach. If I'm doing work on Caribou, then I automatically just lock in on older people, and you are typically locked into old people because that's what you are doing. No, I've interviewed people in their teens.

**ELLISON:** How is that different, getting an interview?

**SMITH:** You are looking for only one or two specific things because they don't have that

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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

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way. I've always loved history. When I was a little kid, my dad was in the Navy, and one of the greatest things I ever did as far as a book, my dad was a Japanese prisoner in the second World War, and in 1991 we published his memoirs, Prisoner of the Emperor. I was the editor. He lives here in town and it came out just in time for Pearl Harbor, not the Pearl Harbor, but the fiftieth anniversary of the Pearl Harbor. It was one of the more fun things that I ever did because I went down memory lane because I was living in a little Illinois farming town. That didn't answer your question, but what I was driving at was this. After the war my dad was in the Navy, and we went back to Virginia. It was his first duty, and we were at, he was a Naval dentist, Bethesda Naval Hospital which if the President gets an upset tummy, they go to Bethesda. Anyway, we toured Civil War battlefields, and I talked to people whose parents or grandparents had been involved in the Civil War. They were old folks, they instilled something. I toured Bull Run battlefield, for example, with Wade Hampton Morgan who was the grandson of Wade Hampton who had fought as general at Bull Run. Here we are standing there talking about General Beef you know, Stonewall Jackson and they were all there, and he was talking about it like you and I would sit down and talk about Jose Cansecos. I mean, these were live people, my grandfather told my father, might have even told him for all I know. Wade Hampton Morgan was in the prisoner of war camp with my dad, and, I mean, I always loved history. It's one of the subjects I did better, I did well in it, in fact. It's one of the subjects if you look through my whole career, I did well in it, and I guess I just had an interest toward history. I love history. I love to make history come alive, any type of history. I started out in Indian and military history but very quickly got into mining history, and I went to social history. I've done medical history and political history, and you name it, I've touched on just a variety of things. I have yet, sort of like Will Rogers, who never met Richard Nixon, but he said, he never met a person he didn't like, but I've never really met a topic in history I don't like, maybe the Venerable Bede and Tom Eckenrode<sup>1</sup>, but that would be about the only thing.

**ELLISON:** How has your love of history and your expertise in history affected the way you do oral history interviews?

**SMITH:** I think it's given me a depth that I wouldn't have otherwise. You've got to know the territory, you've got to know Durango, but yet you've got to know what's going on outside of

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas R. Eckenrode has been Dr. Smith's colleague in the Fort Lewis College Department of History since 1969. The two have long engaged in a series of pleasant verbal skirmishes, and yet are known to have great respect for one another. Eckenrode was one of three FLC colleagues to whom Smith expressed "special appreciation for support over the years" in the preface to Sacred Trust, his history of Fort Lewis College (p. xiv).

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Durango, the New Deal legislation. You've got to know what that is and how it impacts other places. [coughing] Excuse me, when you are not really into lecturing or talking, it's funny like any other skill, I usually can talk three or four hours in a row, but now I start to cough a bit. I think it's made it for me a lot deeper, a lot richer, especially as I've gotten into so many different things. I never thought I would sit around, especially with a young lady present, and talk about syphilis and gonorrhea--doesn't ever phase me today--and prostitution, I can remember in high school. I lived in this little Illinois town, which I am by the way studying now, one of those projects I'm doing. I love the 1890s, that's a great year for the Cubs. The 1890s is a good era, and I'm doing a study, a contrast and comparison study of a farming town, the town I grew up in, Sandwich, Illinois, which has a lot of my relatives in it, and the one here, Durango. I can remember in the 1950s a teacher told me not, I was giving an oral book report that was on Cripple Creek, I'd read a book on Cripple Creek which is typical Civil War or the West what I usually read, and I started talking about prostitution, it was Cripple Creek days which is Mable Barbie Lee, she talked about this madam, so I started to talk about this madam, and I got the attention of the whole class until I was told to find some other topic to discuss in the book. We didn't have to discuss that one, and so I changed topics. I didn't change the book, I just changed topics, but times have changed. I really got off your question here, but I think it's one of those things, I think sometimes you have a bent toward this. I mean, why am I a Cub fan. That's in my genes. My father was a Cub fan before me, and I think a love of history. I've just always had it. Some people don't like history. Some people unfortunately have a bad teacher. I had bad teachers but I overcame it.

**ELLISON:** One last question is, how do you think your style of doing oral history interview has changed over these....

**SMITH:** Oh, I think it's gotten much better. It's just like writing, you know. I would hate to go back, I never read anything after it comes out, never do, for a very good reason. After you've spent all that time researching it, and writing it, and your wife edits, and you get, believe it or not, I think it's as near as a male can come to having a baby. You just get so tired and then you read the galley proofs, and you don't want to read it again, but if I did go back, I know that I could, I hope I could, I don't know. I hope I would write it better today. I hope I'm writing better today in many, many ways, and I would think my oral histories would be much better. I'm much more at ease. The first time, you talk about being nervous, I was nervous. You don't have to feel bad about that. I don't think, I'm not nervous today. There's nothing they can talk to me about that's going to throw me for a loop, nothing. I think there's a depth in my interviews, and a confidence in what I'm trying

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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 about their life today than I knew in 1960-61. I was just learning, but today I have a darn good idea what their life--I've got to tell you quick story, can I tell you one more story? These two girls, they lived in this nice little frame house in Caribou, which was still standing when I first went there. Caribou is up above Boulder, Nederland was the mill town for Caribou and that's where my mine is.<sup>2</sup> I actually own the mine, which is being operated today. You are looking at Horace Tabor, Jr., but anyway the Todd, this was so great because I had two of them, well one of them would get the other one going. You remember, oh I remember. I didn't even have to interview them. I would just do the question. Here's the flip of a coin, heads/ tails, go, and off they'd go, but they got to talking and one day there were two things they could not do. They were not supposed to play with the kerosene lamps because fire was a real factor, and they weren't supposed to go into the basement. This house actually had a basement. It was sort of a root cellar. One day their mother, they lived sort of on one side of the saddle of Caribou and their mother had to go over to this little saddle and drop down into town, so they were playing house, and they had to have some cans. They had canned goods in those days, and so they went down in the basement and they got some cans to play with. They weren't going to open them, they were just going to play with them, and they were going to put them back before mommy got back. Well they got so carried away playing house and all these things, that suddenly they heard mommy coming up the sidewalk or the path into the house, and so they had to do something. Well, they decided we've got to hide this before mommy sees us and we'll be punished, and in the living room they had a big pot bellied stove and their dad was a teamster, that is he freighted goods in Caribou, and he always, in the mornings because Caribou is 10,000 feet. It snowed up there one time on July 4. It was 85 degrees in Boulder, 20 miles down the canyon and snowing at Caribou. We went up there for a picnic, and we ate the watermelon down at Boulder, our teeth were chattering up there. But anyway they decided, quick, they opened up the top of the pot bellied stove and put the cans in it. Well, then they went, mom came home and they got to talking about what had done, and they forgot completely that had put the cans in the stove. Well, that night, what they typically would do as a family was sit around like this. They had board games to play, but this night they were reading. They liked to read, one of them would read, one of the daughters would read or the father or mother, and it was a little bit chilly, so father went over and lit the pot bellied stove, fire in the pot bellied, and they were reading away, and all of a sudden these cans exploded. They lifted

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<sup>2</sup>See Dr. Smith's book, Silver Saga: The story of Caribou, Colorado. (Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Pub. Co., [1974].

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off the top of the pot bellied stove, knocked down the pipe, all the soot and ashes went all over the living room and it was also the dining room, and fortunately it didn't catch anything on fire, and mother and father couldn't imagine what happened. It was at that point that the daughters remembered where they put the cans, and the cans had exploded, and so that was one of their more embarrassing experiences in life.

**ELLISON:** Duane, you've done us a real favor by talking to us.

**SMITH:** Oh, I don't know about that, but thank you very much. I had fun.

**ELLISON:** Thank you very much, oh, Craig has a question.

**McMaster:** A quick question for you out of curiosity, as a mutual Cubs fan and anybody can beat the White Sox. Have you got the chance to interview Harry Carey.

**SMITH:** Oh, yeah, I've interviewed Harry. Harry is a good interview. The only problem with Harry Carey is you've got to catch him.....

**[end of tape; end of interview]**



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**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.

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**[end of interview]**

*[Note: This audiotaped interview was transcribed by Catherine Conrad, Administrative Assistant for the Center of Southwest Studies, and was formatted and edited by Center Archivist Todd Ellison on February 24, 1994, and converted to PDF file format for online access on the Center of Southwest Studies website on February 7, 2008.]*

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