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Elton Smith oral history interview by Andrew Huse, June 2, 2004

Elton Edward Smith (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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Dr. Smith in the classroom



Dr. Smith meets President Judy Genshaft

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Dr. Smith came to USF in 1961.

Early years at USF

“It’s nice to be in a situation,” Dr. Smith remarks, “where you were there almost at the beginning.” He originally planned to be a minister, and studied the Gospel at NYU, Harvard, and Syracuse University. While he was at Syracuse working at University churches (“To me, New York is Eden – it’s the great place”), he decided that maybe his calling was to be a teacher. After receiving offers from a number of prestigious schools, Dr. Elton decided to come to USF where he was told, “‘You can teach anything you want to.’ Well, that settled it. So, that’s why I came here, and I’ve never regretted it for a moment. It’s been a wonderful place to be.” Dr. Elton jokes that as he has seen the University go through changes over the years, he sometimes wonders if every last patch of grass is going to be paved over for parking lot space. “On the other hand,” he remarks, “How the trees have grown! How the student body has grown!”

While he took the job at USF, he and his wife lived in Lakeland, where she taught at Florida Southern. “For fourteen years I did the commuting – figuring that if I did the commuting, she’d do the laundry and bake the cakes.”

As a professor at USF, Dr. Smith was invited to work for the State Department in the 1960s as a Fulbright lecturer at the Universities of Algeria and Morocco on the African continent, then the University of Paris where he lectured to graduate students (in French) at the Sorbonne, and finally the University of London. “So during my forty-one years here, I’ve been gone four years and never missed a class – to the dismay of my students!”

First impressions of USF

Dr. Smith remembers that since the University was so small at the time, all incoming faculty had the opportunity to meet with President John Allen. “He met me, and we had a delightful visit.” Speaking highly of the president and his wife, Dr. Smith remarks that, “They were indeed our first gentleman and our first lady.” Under President Allen’s administration, “You always had the feeling that everything was organized and worked out very carefully.”

“I think this a very interesting school in many ways. I’m very aware of the fact that my students are working people.”

Religious studies at USF

In those days, Dr. Smith recalls, USF did not have a religious studies department, for fear that it would make the University too much like a seminary. Instead, the different departments all offered a course in religion tailored to their individual areas of study. “Well, the only thing is, it never worked – because the other departments were not anxious to use their hard fought-for salary lines to hire someone who is going to teach a field not their own... So therefore, I found myself as kind of an interim department. For years, I had the only religion classes at the University.” Smith notes that he now teaches his courses in an auditorium at USF that seats nearly 400 students. “I am looking forward to the ... students studying [the] Old Testament in the fall there at Cooper Hall.”

He remembers one instance when Russell Cooper approached him and asked, “Elton, what kind of dean are you going to be?” To which Dr. Smith replied that he did not want to be an administrator, but wanted only to teach. “And I said, ‘I don’t plan to be a dean,’ and indeed, I have escaped that for forty years!”

Courses

In his earliest years at USF, Dr. Smith would teach twice a week in the large auditorium on campus, where all the freshman students would be sitting in assigned seats, with faculty posted at the ends of each row to take attendance. Despite the class sizes, he felt that, “The quality of what we were doing was very high, because ... from the very beginning USF set very high standards for itself. Therefore, the students coming to us were very anxious to meet those standards. So that we had wonderful attendance, wonderful reactions to everything we were doing in class.” An additional strength of the academic program at the time, Dr. Smith recalls, was that departments shared and exchanged faculty with one another. “We were much more open to each other ... the sharing of faculty and knowledge.”

“It was a very exciting place to be, here, at the beginning. Everything is new, everything is fresh, and the sky’s the limit! Now I don’t think we’ve quite hit the limit by any means!”

Publications; Academic focus

Dr. Smith and his wife have published some twenty-one books between the two of them over the course of their careers, and both have contracts for more books in the future. Now, however, he suspects that the emphasis for faculty is “shifting from publications to [grants]” because of the research status of the university.

Children

When Dr. Smith’s daughter was younger, he and his wife sat her down and asked, “Where would you like to go to school? Would you like to go to ... USF where daddy is a professor, or Florida Southern where mother is a professor? And she said, ‘Thank you very much mother and daddy, I would like to go to school at the University of Florida where neither father nor mother is a professor!’ And so, she went there and had a perfectly wonderful experience doing that.” His son, the twin brother to his daughter, wanted to be an artist, which concerned Dr. Smith and his wife a bit. “That blew our minds, for,” he jokingly wonders, “could we afford having an artist in the family?” On one particular occasion, Dr. Smith used his son’s artwork for the cover of his book.

St. Petersburg Times article

Dr. Smith recalls “sometimes [getting] some odd things in the professorship.” For instance, when he began teaching the Bible as Literature to larger classes at USF, the *Floridian* (published by the *St. Petersburg Times*) sent over an editor to spend the day with Dr. Smith at the University. The editor published a story on his experiences with Smith at USF that day (see left photo above, May 10, 2000). The story read, in part, “Dr. Elton Smith’s commanding knowledge of the Bible plus his impish and entertaining delivery make the Bible come to life for USF students.”

Baptist Collegiate Ministry

Since moving to the Bay area, Dr. Smith believes that he has served more than fifty churches in and around Tampa either as interim pastor or as a director of bible study courses. “In the ministry ... one of the great joys for me has been working with the Baptist Collegiate Ministry.” He recalls the laying of the cornerstone for the BCM building in March of 1963. He jokes that initially they were called the BSU (Baptist Student Union) until realizing that there was another group on campus that went by the very same acronym (Black Student Union). From thence onward, the organization was known as the BCM. Since the time of its inception, Dr. Smith has served as faculty advisor to the group. “And that has been very exciting.”

Student organizations and school spirit

From the beginning, Smith recalls, students at USF had little school spirit because they had many obligations and responsibilities that took them off campus immediately after classes. In fact, when he asked his own students to write down the names of fellow classmates, most could not name a single one. “And so, it tended to be an absentee

campus in that regard ... I think that USF has had a great need for [activities and organizations] which will put them in small groups ... I think these all have a wonderful function ... I'm so glad that we have them."

Students and staff of the BCM

Back in 1995, he remembers, a student named Nicole Johnson who not only served as President of the BCM, but also later became Miss America (1999). "So here's this girl, with [serious] physical problems, that managed, through the grace of God and through her own marvelous energy, to project herself right up there with the most beautiful girls in the land. I thought that was a remarkable thing."

He thought also of Andrew Bancroft, the current BCM President, who is now in the hospital as the result of a very serious operation. "His wonderful spirit, his energy, leaping like a goat up onto the platform at the BCM meeting and all sorts of activities – I was so impressed with the wonderful things there."

"And then I think of the pleasure it's been working with the various staff members there [at BCM]." One director, Dr. Smith remembers, left him instantly with the feeling that he had known him forever. "I thought, what a gift if you're going to be working with students, to be able to have everybody feel that surely we have met before. That was wonderful." Another, he recalls, made the worst spaghetti he had ever tasted. Still another served as BCM director for nine years before going to Poland as a missionary. "When he left, I was strongly tempted to give him a large sausage, considering that's what he would be eating a great deal [of] while he was in Poland!"

"I think there's a very special need at USF for activities of that sort from which [students] will have continuing relationships in the years ahead."

The Bible as Literature

Typically, a class such as "the Bible as Literature" is run by the English department rather than the department of Religious Studies, "and at that time we had no religion department, so that was fine." Having both a religious and literary background, Dr. Smith was well suited for the position. The course was his idea, and was, in fact, the very first "religious class" on the USF campus. During this same year, the first for Dr. Smith at USF, a religious council was formed at the University, of which he was asked to be a part. Dr. Smith served as the president of the council until asked to become faculty advisor for the newly formed Baptist Collegiate Ministry. "And that has been very exciting and heartwarming and wonderful. As a result, I know students who are serving in all kinds of capacities ... This is a very happy experience for me!"

The last class that he taught had an enrollment of 250 students, though next fall the registration for his Old Testament class is expected to be nearly 400. "This has been a wonderful experience."

He recalls one time when several students approached him and asked that since they were Jewish students, if they would be allowed to take the New Testament course. Dr. Smith

then asked them a question of his own: “What was Jesus?” At which time they enthusiastically replied, “Oh – he was Jewish! Ah, it’s alright!”

Term papers

Dr. Smith says of the nearly 250 term papers that he single-handedly grades each semester, “I love the opportunity for them to tell me what they were thinking ... and often I would get very different points of view ... It’s on their term paper that I get what they’re thinking and who they are, and I encourage them in that.” He is warmed particularly by the memory of those students who, having never read either Testament of the Bible, told him that after taking his class they could never get enough of it. “So, that was a very moving experience for me in that regard.”

Success of the course

He thinks part of the success of the course is that the Bible can be taught as literature, rather than, “How you become a Catholic [or] how you become a Baptist ... I’m not talking about Christianity in relationship to Islam, to Buddhism, to Hinduism ... All I’m doing is – exactly as you would do in an English class – you pay your attention to the text ... I think ... I continue to have very large, growing groups for that reason.” It is even more remarkable, Smith reflects, because there is no particular push for the course. “I mean, I’m not sending out for-hires, or giving ice-cream cones to the kiddies who come! ... It seems to be because it has met a need that [the students] had felt.” Dr. Smith concludes, “I presume this would be one of the great experiences for me here [at USF] ... this relationship with both the BCM and the ... Bible as Literature [class].”

Department of Religious Studies

“Finally we got a department of religion, and we have a fine, strong department of religion at the present time.” On one occasion, the department head told him, “Elton, you’re going to kill yourself trying to teach the Old and New Testaments in one semester!” He suggested, and Dr. Smith agreed, that the course be taught in two semesters from that point onward, Old Testament first, New Testament second.

As a result of his role in the classrooms of USF, a pastor of Christ the King Catholic Church asked Dr. Smith to lead a bible study at the church. “I said ‘I would be not only willing, I would be honored to do so.’ But I said, ‘Something you need to know, do you realize that besides being a university professor, I happen to be a Baptist minister!’” The Catholic priest gladly accepted Dr. Smith into his church. “But they listened, and responses were just wonderful afterwards ... I am so grateful for that experience.”

“Our school here is a wonderful one and a strange one in many ways ... I think the growth of the administrative sector has been out of step with the growth of the teaching staff.” Dr. Smith asserts that it is much more important that faculty members be concerned primarily with teaching a subject that they love rather than pleasing their deans or other administrators.

University milestones and turning points

“I think that we have been from the very beginning very anxious to practice diversity ... When we came in, we had a great many students who came from the Arab world, and then we had a number of students from Japan, ... [and] they tell me now it’s Hindu, people from India are our largest group – and that’s very exciting! Think of all the money Americans spend visiting other parts of the world. Come on, we don’t have to visit other parts of the world – they’re moving in with us! So, in that regard, I think USF has always had its eye on the right goal, to see to it that we are open to people of all races and genders and backgrounds.”

Closing remarks

“I wanted to say ... one of the exciting things for Esther and for me has been [that] we were in religious work for thirty years, and working always on the edges of college campuses ... and, in that time, people came up to us afterwards and they would say wonderful things ... wonderful compliments and all the rest ... so you went home glowing ... As we watched this, we realized that we ought to be writing, and so within my first year here at USF, I had contracts from five publishers ... and so, from there on, both of us got started.”

“It was a pleasure, thank you.”

End of Interview