

## Interview with William and Charlotte Smith

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, April 21, 2010. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. We're in the library right now with Bill and Charlotte Smith. Good morning.

W. Smith: Good morning.

C. Smith: Good morning.

DePue: I'm thrilled to have both of you here, and, Charlotte, we've already had a long conversation with Bill, haven't we?

C. Smith: Yes, you have. (laughs)

DePue: That's because he's got quite a story to tell. But we got to the point in the story where it's not just his story anymore, it's your story as well; it's the story of the two of you together, and so that's why I've asked you to sit in on this one. We don't do it too often where we interview two people at the same time, but I knew the two of you would be excellent candidates to be doing this, so I thank you for taking the long drive from Quincy over here today. We'll try to make it worth your while to do that. Charlotte, I'm going to start with you, and what I'd like to have you do is spend a few minutes talking about your background. Let's start off with when you were born and where you were born.

C. Smith: I was born March the 20th, 1936, in a little coal-mining town in West Virginia, and it's called Bluefield, West Virginia. I was the middle child of three—I have a younger brother and an older brother. I was the only daughter.

Needless to say, I was spoiled rotten, (DePue laughs) because my dad was a very dotting father. I was never called Charlotte; I was always called “darling” by my father.

DePue: Darlin’?

C. Smith: Darling. Daddy was always so good to me, and Bill took up right where my father left off.

DePue: What did he do for a living?

C. Smith: My father was a purchasing agent of a factory that repaired mining motors. He worked at the same job for thirty-five years. When they brought the motors out of the mines to be repaired, my father did all of the purchasing of the materials that went into those mining motors. So he did the same job over and over and over for thirty-five years. The town where we lived was the largest town around for a hundred miles, and it was in the mountains. They brought all the coal from the coal fields through that town. So it was a very good living. It was a really good upbringing.

DePue: Well, you were born in 1936, so I wouldn’t think you remember anything about the Depression, but it sounds like your father kept employment all through those years as well.

C. Smith: Yes, he did, he did. We didn’t have a lot, but we never wanted for anything. My mother was a homemaker; she did not work, but my mother was the kind of a woman who could take nothing and make something. She made my clothes. I had beautiful, designer clothes that we would go to the store, and she would take me in the dressing room and try a dress on me and go home and lay down a piece of newspaper and cut out a pattern, and I had the same dress. So my mother was very ingenious that way. She lived to be ninety-eight years old. I lost her three years ago. At age forty-seven, she went back to school and became a nurse and nursed in the mountains of West Virginia until she was seventy-six. So she was hearty stock person. So I had a very wonderful upbringing.

DePue: What year did she earn her nursing degree?

C. Smith: Oh, I really—she did not go to nursing school—my grandfather was of the old country. She wanted to be a nurse when she was young, and my grandfather said, “You can’t see naked men,” so he wouldn’t let her go to school. So she raised three of us and had grandchildren and then went to school and became a nurse.

DePue: Saw some naked boys in the process.

C. Smith: In the process, yes, (laughter) by raising us. So she had a grandchild—our daughter was already born when she became a nurse.

- DePue: The reason I was asking, I was just curious if that might have happened during the Second World War, but that sounds like long after that.
- C. Smith: No, it was long after that. Lisa was born in 1955?
- W. Smith: Six.
- C. Smith: Six. Shoo! Nineteen fifty-six, and she was four when Mother went back to school. And then she nursed until she was seventy-six years old. My grandfather wouldn't let her go, but it was always her dream in the back of her mind, and she never let go of it.
- DePue: What was your maiden name, then?
- C. Smith: Yost, Y-o-s-t.
- DePue: So Charlotte Yost.
- C. Smith: Right.
- DePue: What's the background of the Yost [family]?
- C. Smith: German. My father was German, and very, very strict. He was loving, but he was very strict. He would raise up off his chair and say, "We won't do it that way," and you didn't. And you didn't.
- DePue: (laughs) Because you knew he was serious, huh?
- C. Smith: Yes, he was.
- DePue: Do you remember anything about growing up during World War II? You were still pretty young for most of that.
- C. Smith: I was very, very young. I remember certain things. My grandfather came to live with us when I was quite young. I don't know, most people don't remember H.V. Kaltenborn in the news, but I remember sitting on my grandfather's lap. You could not speak when H.V. Kaltenborn was on. You could sit on his lap and listen, but when H.V. Kaltenborn came on with the news, you couldn't speak. So I learned a lot when I was quite young by sitting on my grandfather's lap and listening. I remember when Roosevelt died. I was sitting on my grandfather's lap, listening to the news. I remember highlights of those kinds of things, but I don't remember what was really going on in the background, because I was quite young.
- DePue: When you were in high school, did you attend high school in Bluefield as well?
- C. Smith: Yes, I did. I did.

DePue: What did you think you wanted to do with your life when you were in high school?

C. Smith: You know, it's really funny. All I ever, ever wanted out of my life was to be a wife and mother. That's all I ever really wanted to do. I thought, Well, I'll go be an X-ray technician, but then in the back of my mind still it was, I want to be a wife and a mother.

DePue: Did you know your mother had the aspirations to go into nursing?

C. Smith: Oh, yes. Always.

DePue: Were you more encouraged to be a wife and mother or to find a career for yourself?

C. Smith: I was encouraged to do whatever would make me happy. If I wanted to be an X-ray tech, then that was what they wanted me to do. But then in high school I fell when I was getting on a horse at a horse farm that a friend of ours owned and hurt my knee. But then I still thought, Well, I'll go and be an X-ray tech. So then after high school, I went to business college and got an office job where I could sit part of the time, and shortly after I gradu—well, let's go back a little. Then in high school I met a young man, devastatingly handsome young man, I thought.

DePue: Well, I've seen pictures of you in high school. You weren't too bad yourself.

C. Smith: (laughs) Well, thank you very much. I became engaged in high school, as a lot of young women did at that age. It was an off-again, on-again, off-again, on-again, and even bought my wedding dress to marry this young man. He was in the Army—I've always, for some reason, gone with the Army—and his leave was cancelled that weekend. It was going to be a very small wedding, and his leave was cancelled that weekend...by the grace of God. (laughs) So he came in on a Friday night, and we broke up. I was so angry.

Our religion as a German family has always been very strong. Always on Sunday morning you rolled out of bed and you went to church no matter what was going on. And so I did not pray on Friday night and I did not pray on Saturday night. On Sunday night I went to bed and I prayed that God would send me somebody to love and someone who would love me, and on Monday morning, Bill knocked on the front door, lost, looking for his friend.

DePue: We're going to end that part of the story now. You'll have an opportunity to talk about this in much more detail. Were you already graduated by that time?

C. Smith: Yes, I was.

DePue: That would have been 1953, obviously. When you were growing up, who would you say was the strongest influence on your life?

C. Smith: Oh, my mother. My mother was a strong personality. She did not come to the yard and yell. My mother did not raise her voice. She had a tiny cowbell. She walked out on the front porch and she rung the cowbell, and when that cowbell stopped ringing, the Yost kids better be on the way home, no matter what. You better be on the way home.

DePue: Now, how far away from home could you be and still hear that bell?

C. Smith: Not very far. Not very far. But my mother was the kind of a person, if she promised you an ice cream cone, you got it, and if she promised you a whack on the rear end, you got that, too. (laughter) And even at ninety-eight, I still said, "Yes, ma'am." But she was a very strong influence on our lives.

DePue: Okay. Well, this is all fascinating kind of background information to picking up the story now with Bill. We've already spent a long time talking about your experiences. We're going to start with you being in the United States, but you mentioned to me there was one more story that we need to weave into this tapestry about your experiences in Korea, and it dealt with some of your medical treatment over there.

W. Smith: (clears throat) Excuse me. Yes, we had a tall Chinese man, at least seven feet tall, maybe seven-three, seven-four. He was a huge person—the biggest Chinaman that I had ever seen—and he was an acupuncturist. Well, I was having problems because I had to carry water with those chogi sticks and a fifteen-gallon can on each end of that chogi stick, and you run it around your neck for relief over here and then run it back around to the right for relief. I was having a problem, and he sat me down and started putting needles in the back of my neck, in my hands, and in my feet, and he did that for almost a week. Every day he would come around with all of his needles, and believe it or not, it did help. It got rid of the pain. And I heard later that the acupuncture, the needle, actually kills a nerve (laughs) so you don't have any pain. That's what they say—I don't know, really—but that's what happened. We called him Needles because we never knew his name. All the Chinese look alike, you know. The North Koreans have higher cheekbones—the only way you can tell the difference between a North Korean and a Chinese person—but those things kind of grow on you and your instinct tells you whether they're North Korean, South Korean, Chinese, or whatever—whether they belong to Chiang Kai-shek or Mao Zedong.

DePue: But would it be fair to say that that was one Chinese that you didn't mind seeing?

W. Smith: That was one I didn't mind seeing. He was just as gentle as he could be, and his hands were—oh, he could pick up a basketball like we would a baseball. I mean, his hands were huge, but he had those little long needles, and he worked good with them. He worked on a lot of people—some he could help and some he couldn't.

DePue: What timeframe were you going through this procedure?

W. Smith: That had to be in '52, 1952.

DePue: When you talked to us before, you talked about one of the punishments you got was being strung up.

W. Smith: Oh, yeah.

DePue: I would think that's certainly going to be tough on the upper arms. Did it lead to dislocations, anything like that?

W. Smith: Yeah, because your shoulders actually will rotate around, but after so long a time, and when your feet is about six inches off the floor, they seem like they get out of their socket, but you get numb after about an hour or so, like standing on the ice. You just get numb and you get no feeling, or at least I didn't. But those things happen, and it all depended on what the guard thought, how long you stayed there, you know. You could stay there six hours, ten hours, or you could stay there all night. It depended on how he felt. And, of course, he's the man with the gun, so (laughs) you just took your punishment and let it go.

DePue: Well, it's probably good that we kind of went back and reinforced the kind of experiences you had, the kind of treatment you had, the abuses you took while you were in that prison camp, because so much of the rest of what we're going to be talking about today is dealing with that after the fact, and Charlotte, you're the one who has to deal with it as much as Bill does.

C. Smith: Oh, yes.

DePue: Okay. When we met last time, we did get you back to the United States. Very quickly if you can go from place to place, and then we'll get to the point when you're in the Pentagon. So just kind of reiterate the various places you went before you got there.

W. Smith: From the Tokyo General Hospital, we flew into Travis Air Force Base; then we flew into San Antonio, Texas; and from there, I flew to Fort Bragg...no, I caught a train in San Antonio. Shall I tell you why I caught the train instead of flying?

DePue: I think we talked about that before.

W. Smith: We did. (laughs) We got thrown out of the mess hall, that's why.

DePue: Yeah, we did talk about that.

W. Smith: (laughs) Anyway, I got home, and I had only been home about two or three days, from Friday till Sunday. Then something happened, and I got real sick,

and they took me to Fort Bragg, which was only about eighty miles away. I was sedated quite a bit and I stayed there three or four days. Then I got word that I was supposed to go to the Pentagon and help draw maps from where I had been in North Korea.

I was walking down the corridor at the Pentagon, and all of a sudden the floor just flew up and hit me in the face. From there, I woke up at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in the hospital, and I stayed there fourteen or fifteen months. I'm not sure; I'd have to go back and look at the records. But I was a career soldier, and they couldn't get my body up enough to where I could pass a physical for the Army to stay in, so therefore they gave me what they call a medical retirement. I get the same benefits and everything. I was only in eight years, but I get the benefits of being in there twenty-something years, you know. But there was nothing they could do. And when I got out of the hospital, I went to another hospital—I went to a V.A. hospital and stayed there until 1956—yeah, '56.

C. Smith: No.

W. Smith: Yeah, because I'd just got out of the hospital when I met you.

C. Smith: But we met in '55. August.

W. Smith: August '55. Yeah, well, I stayed in the hospital—because I went from one V.A. [Veterans' Administration] hospital to the next V.A. hospital. In one V.A. hospital, I was fixing to go home, and they had a new X-ray technician—I never will forget that—and he found a spot on my lungs. They said automatically, You have tuberculosis. I says, "How could I do that?" Well, I did take care of a lot of guys that did have it and died from it in prison camp.

But I went ahead to another hospital, O.T. [Occupational Therapy] North Carolina, where they treat TB patients. For eight months I took all that medicine that they had, which was so strong, if you spilled it on your locker there, it would eat the paint right off of the locker. That's how strong the PAS and INH was. Anyway, for eight months, and then they did a biopsy and found out I didn't have tuberculosis; I had asbestos, a spot of asbestos on my lungs from working in the shipyards back in the forties. (laughs) So then they let me go. I've been through hell.

DePue: What were some of the other ailments or medical conditions that they diagnosed you as having?

W. Smith: Well I have 310 percent disabilities, and if I can get my card out here... I have—do I have my...?

DePue: Does that mean that you get paid in accordance with the number of disabilities?

- C. Smith: Oh, no.
- DePue: Charlotte says no.
- W. Smith: Well, you just get paid X amount of what... Well, I have—you want me to go over my medicine list, or...
- C. Smith: No.
- W. Smith: What—
- DePue: What would the disabilities be?
- C. Smith: You had frozen feet.
- W. Smith: Well, frozen arms, frozen feet.
- C. Smith: Frozen hands.
- W. Smith: Frozen hands.
- C. Smith: Heart.
- W. Smith: Heart stent.
- C. Smith: Irritable bowel.
- W. Smith: Irritable bowel syndrome.
- C. Smith: PTSD [Post-traumatic Stress Disorder].
- W. Smith: Yeah, and anything else you want to throw in there.
- C. Smith: Well, I'm trying to think. You got a letter just this week.
- W. Smith: Yeah, they come up with something else.
- C. Smith: Ischemic heart—that's one of them. I can't even imagine what the rest of them are.
- DePue: Bill, you're a walking medical textbook, then.
- C. Smith: Absolutely, absolutely.
- W. Smith: I guess. It's unbelievable what I've been through, Mr. DePue.
- C. Smith: He's had kidney failure—
- W. Smith: I've had kidney failure.



C. Smith: —colon surgery, three heart attacks—

W. Smith: Yeah, they took out—

C. Smith: —that we've lived through.

W. Smith: —a third of my colon; they took out two feet of my intestines.

DePue: Okay, during the same timeframe, one of the things that most Americans have totally lost sight of is that some of the people that came back and were in prison camp with you were court-martialed.

W. Smith: We had twenty-one guys, two I knew personally—I met them on the march. When I say “on the march,” I mean from the time we were captured to when we got to the valley. Like I said, twenty-one of them stayed back with the communists, and I never could understand why they would believe all that propaganda that the Chinese were putting out.

One day, I saw my buddy, I says, “What in the world are you doing, Bachelor?” I said, “My goodness, you're walking around with a book of Marx and Engels under your arm and trying to convince these kids that their life is better than ours.” I told him, “If you ever get to the States, if you live to get to the States, somebody is going to crucify you. But they never listened. And then Dickerson was the type of person that was just a dumb hillbilly. He didn't know shit from Shinola. (laughs) He was just awful. I can forgive Dickerson, but Bachelor was an educated kid, and he knew better, and that's what got me. I couldn't understand. But they ate that propaganda up from the Chinese, and I never did go along with it. They would say—I think we talked about this—in one of their many lectures, they would say, well—at that time Taiwan was named Formosa—they would say, Formosa is an integral part of China, and we want it back. And I said, “Well, you have my permission. Go get it. (laughter) I'm not holding you back.” And they didn't like it, but it was the truth.

DePue: I know the two that you mentioned certainly were court-martialed.

W. Smith: They were court-martialed.

DePue: But there were others that did not stay in the north, that came back with the rest of the prisoners, that were also going through the court-martial procedures in varying stages of punishment that they received. What did you think about that? Do you think that was fair?

W. Smith: Well, evidently they had a lot more information on them than I did. One of my buddies visited me in Walter Reed, but he had been over at the Pentagon for just about a week testifying against some of these other guys—my foxhole buddy.

DePue: What was his name again?

W. Smith: Mendell, Ray Mendell. He was my foxhole buddy, and he says, “They should have known better. When we were in the prison camp we tried to talk to these kids and tell them, not to believe all that propoganda that the Chinese were putting out.” Some of them just went along for some reason or another. I don’t know.

DePue: Were you questioned as part of the preparation for these courts-martial?

W. Smith: I was questioned quite a bit, and fact is—I think maybe I told you—that when I was in the hospital in Tokyo, they came around and made me sign those papers not to talk to anybody.

DePue: But at the time, was the questioning of the nature where you thought, well, they’re probably collecting evidence on some of these guys that might be court-martialed?

W. Smith: Well, I thought about that, but I didn’t call any names for the simple reason I didn’t know what they had. You know, the government’s always wanting to know everything, but they don’t want to tell you anything they know. I don’t care who they are, including you. (laughs) That’s just the way they are. That’s the system, I guess. But no, I was never prepared for some of the things that they came for the interviews for, but I did the best I could. I answered all the questions.

DePue: When you were at Walter Reed, then, were you going through some questioning where it was very focused on the people who were going to be going before the court-martial?

W. Smith: Some of them were, because they came over from the Pentagon and moved me from my bed into what we called the St. Peter’s room. When they took a person to die, that’s where they took them, down in the private bedroom.

DePue: At Walter Reed?

W. Smith: At Walter Reed. They would take me down there and spend the day with me interrogating or interviewing about certain people, this, that, and the other, and if I knew anything, I told them, and if I didn’t, I didn’t. No, because a lot of people knew me that I didn’t even know, and I was accused of a lot of things that I didn’t do, but I had to suffer for it because somebody squealed, said I did it.

DePue: Did they record these sessions?

W. Smith: Oh, yes. They got a tape somewhere of them.

DePue: So did you actually appear before any of the court-martial proceedings?

- W. Smith: No, I never did, because I was in the hospital.
- DePue: Do you know if they used any of your recorded testimony?
- W. Smith: I'm not sure if they did, because Mendell, when he came to see me, he had been at the Pentagon testifying for over a week. And the fact is, he had been somewhere in Texas testifying, too, against the guys that were what we called progressives, collaborated with the Chinese. But I never did know for a fact, except the guys that I actually knew what I saw what went on.
- DePue: There \was a debate at the time in the United States among the general public about whether or not it was the right thing to do to be taking these people who had gone through hell and court-martialing them.
- W. Smith: Crucifying them, yeah.
- DePue: So what was your opinion about that? You were—
- W. Smith: I felt the same way: leave them alone. I mean, they've been through enough, even the guys that collaborated a little. They had their own reasons.
- DePue: Even Bachelor?
- W. Smith: Not Bachelor and Dickerson, no. Well, Dickerson was a hopeless case to start with, but Bachelor knew better. I was with him on the march, and he was in good shape. He was a BAR man, just like me, and when his ammo bearer died, he just turned completely opposite of what he was, and that was in the winter of '50-'51.
- DePue: The last thing I want to do here is put words in your mouth. It sounds like you didn't have a problem with the government, with the Army, prosecuting Bachelor.
- W. Smith: Nope, not at all.
- DePue: But you did for the rest of them.
- W. Smith: I did. I thought, well, Mr. DePue, some of them were so young, they didn't know. Some of them had never been away from home in their life; they'd never spent a day away from mama. They were kids, and a lot of them would come to me; they thought that I had all the answers, but I didn't, and (pause, deep breaths)...
- C. Smith: (whispers) Look at me.
- W. Smith: They would come to me for answers, and I didn't have them. I didn't have them. (pause, deep breaths)

DePue: Did the Army look at you differently and the other guys who were labeled as reactionaries, you think?

W. Smith: You know, I don't (laughs) really know what the Army thought, and fact is, I never have known, only I didn't get as rough of treatment as some of them did.

DePue: You mean by the Army after you returned.

W. Smith: By the Army after coming back. But I just—eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve—I just told them exactly what I thought, let the chips fall where they may, and if you like it, okay; it's tough if you don't. That's the way with the CIA, the CID, and all the Army military intelligence people.

DePue: Bill, that was the same way (laughs) for North Koreans and Chinese who were talking to you.

W. Smith: Yeah, it just...

DePue: But if you allow me to make this observation, that's kind of the same reason that you had problems keeping rank, wasn't it?

W. Smith: Yes, sir, it was. I could make the rank, but I couldn't hold it because I wouldn't brownnose anybody for anything. I don't care if you're MacArthur, Ike, or (Charlotte laughs) anybody else.

DePue: Well, let's skip to the point where you are released from the hospital, and I think this is the point in time you pick up your life with Joe Ascue, so remind us why Joe Ascue and you had this agreement.

W. Smith: Well, we were on hard labor at Camp Five at the sick compound, and that's where I first met Joe. We were standing in line one time to get water; Camp Five only had one faucet, and we had to stand in line to get water. I was standing in line with a steel helmet, waiting my turn to get water. This big limey came up and pushed me out of the way, and when he did, Joe was standing right behind me. Joe was a pretty good boxer, so he sailed in on him. They fought for three hours or four hours. They fought from there all the way around one of the big huts and back around here. Finally Joe got the best of him. I thought he was going to kill him. But that's when I met Joe the first time.

Later on, I was put on hard labor, and there was Joe. He was put on hard labor at the same time. The job was to do the cooking for the sick compound and do the cleaning and clean the men up and wash them and everything. I was with him for, oh, several months, and that's when we made up if we ever lived to get out of that place and got back to the States, we would meet up and celebrate. And that's when (laughs)—when I got out of the hospital, I went to see Joe, and we went on a drunk for a week. (laughs)

DePue: Was that the idea you had in mind in the prison camp; that was the nature of celebrating?

W. Smith: Yeah, we was going to celebrate, and so we bought a load of whiskey and went down to the Bluefield City Park—

DePue: So the reason you went to Bluefield was to see Joe?

W. Smith: See Joe. The taxi driver took me over to the address—611 Shenandoah Avenue. I knocked on the door, and the lady said, “Well, he lives in the garage apartment behind us here.” So that’s when I went around and met Joe, and we were there for a couple, three hours, I guess, talking to his wife—he had a seven-month-old child—and then we left.

And I met her out on the—she was on a swing in the backyard near a grapevine. I never will forget that. Good grapes, too. Anyway, (laughs) I met her that morning, and we left. Of course, I didn’t see her anymore until—that was on Monday morning, and I didn’t see her anymore until Saturday morning.

DePue: What was your first impression when you saw her?

W. Smith: Well, when I saw her at first, boy, she was a good-looking little girl. Man-oh-man. And I can’t tell you what run through my mind, but— (laughter)

DePue: You mean you don’t want to. (laughter)

W. Smith: But, boy. And I told Joe when he introduced me to her, I says, “Man, I got to…” I says, “I can’t believe that.” Then after we got over the drunk, Joe couldn’t get up out of bed. (laughs) But I was in the kitchen with my pants leg rolled up, barefooted, and I was mopping the kitchen floor for Emily, trying to get on her good side because, boy, she was mad. God knows, she was mad. And then she came in because she was baby-sitting Joe’s baby. We had planned that night to go to a movie, and I asked her if she would like to go to the movie with us. The movie was *Pete Kelly’s Blues*. Do you remember that?

C. Smith: I remember.

W. Smith: And we started dating after that, and four months later, we were married.

DePue: How long was this drunk you and Joe were on?

W. Smith: It lasted about a week.

DePue: A weeklong celebration.

W. Smith: Celebration.

- C. Smith: From Monday morning to Friday afternoon.
- W. Smith: I had three hundred and sixty-something dollars, I think, in my pocket, and the only place we ever went was the ABC store, Annabel Clark's, over there on (laughs) Mercer Street, and we load up with whiskey and ran out of money, and when we ran out of money, we ran out of whiskey.
- DePue: Where were you doing all the drinking, then?
- W. Smith: At the city park. We went down to the city park, and there was a picnic bench down there with a water faucet on the end and we sit right there for a solid week—just about a week—day and night.
- DePue: What were you doing? What were you talking about?
- W. Smith: Drinking and talking and wondering about some of these guys that we were talking about, you know, and some of them, what should have been done to them, and (laughs) everything. We went over quite a few guys.
- DePue: I think I can understand why Joe's wife was a little bit put out with you. (laughs)
- W. Smith: Yeah, she was. You know, until the day he died, every time he got drunk, she'd blame me for it, (DePue laughs) didn't she?
- C. Smith: Yes, she did.
- W. Smith: Yes, she did. I got blamed for him every time he took a drink. I got blamed for it.
- DePue: But he had not been doing a lot of drinking until you showed up?
- C. Smith: Oh, yes.
- W. Smith: Oh, yes, he was—
- C. Smith: Oh, yes. He was the town alcoholic.
- DePue: Well, I think it's a time now to kind of shift gears. Charlotte, let's hear your side of the story.
- C. Smith: Well, when my mother answered the door, I had that Monday off from work.
- DePue: Where were you working at the time?
- C. Smith: I was working at a finance company, and I was working in the office. Mother had been through that two years of me being engaged to this young man, and as I said, I had prayed on Sunday night for somebody, and when he knocked on the door, my mother came racing up the steps, and she said, "Get up. The

best-looking young man you've ever seen just went around the house." So I right quick got dressed and went out and sat down in the swing, and I patiently waited those two or three hours that he was upstairs meeting Emily. They came down the steps, and I thought, Oh, my gosh, **he is** good-looking. So then they left, and they went off, and they did, they got so stinking drunk that week. So Emily would say, "Charlotte, take your car and drive around town"—because she knew I had girlfriends—and we'd drive by the park, and there they'd sit. Two days later they'd still be sitting at the park. And they really did—they did not move off that park bench. So Friday evening, they came dragging in. They looked like—oh, my gosh, they looked horrible. Bill slept on Joe's couch because he didn't have any money. So Saturday morning I went up to get the baby, and they called her Hurricane Emily. I mean, she tore into them something fierce when they got home.

DePue: Were you there when that happened?

C. Smith: I was at my mom's house in the kitchen. You could hear her all over the neighborhood. (laughs) So Saturday morning, she and Bill were having coffee, and I went—and he really was, he was barefoot, mopping her kitchen, trying to get on her good side. He looked up at me with those big old brown eyes and asked me to go to the movies, so I said okay. And we went to the movie.

My ex-boyfriend, my ex-fiancé was, as I said, in the Army. We were walking down the street, Bill was holding my hand, and he stepped out of the drugstore right in our faces. And that was poetic justice. Oh, that was wonderful. He was with a friend of my brother's, and he had just said to the friend of my brother's—which I found out later—"Well, I'm sure Charlotte's sitting home with nothing to do. I think maybe I'll just give her another call. I'm sure she's just pining away. She's not doing anything." And he stepped out right in my face, and Bill was holding my hand, and just laughing. So I just spoke to him. I said, "Hello, Russell," and we just walked on by. So he looked at (laughs)—he looked at his friend, and he said, "What is that SOB doing with my girl?" (laughs) So we went on the movies... But his friend said to him, "Well, she's not your girl anymore; you broke up with her last weekend." He said, but I didn't think it would really be that, because we'd broken up so many times before.

Bill got a job and went to work, because he had to. His parents had been moved from North Carolina to Chicago. He had started to Chicago to see his parents, and he didn't have enough money for a bus ticket to go on to Chicago. (laughs) So he got a job, and some friends of ours had a room, and she rented him a room, and he started working, and we started dating. Four months later we were married—which my father had a fit. "You don't know that young man. You just..." you know.

DePue: That's what I'm wondering here. Now, Bill's circumstances before this time,

there's a lot that comes along with that package. I'm wondering, first of all, how well did you know Joe and what he had gone through?

C. Smith: Well, I knew Joe, but Joe was an entirely different person. Joe, as I said, was the town alcoholic. Joe never got over being a POW. Joe turned to alcohol and drugs, and Joe never, ever got over being a POW. He was an entirely different human being to what Bill is. He was not abusive to Emily in the fact that he hit her, but he was emotionally abusive. They finally ended up divorced. They stood up for us at our wedding, but they finally ended up in divorce after three children.

DePue: How much of that did you understand about Joe, though, at this time in your life?

C. Smith: Not a great deal. But Bill and I had only been dating for about a month or six weeks, and for some reason, I just knew that it was right for us. Bill sent for his medical records and brought them and laid them in my lap, and he said to me, "Read these, and if you feel like that you can go on from here with me after what you read, then we'll go on, and if you don't, then I'll walk away." And I read all of his medical records six weeks into our relationship, so I pretty well thought that I knew. Then after I read them, he said to me, "Have your mom read them because she's older and she has read all the things on nursing, and she knows more. Have your mom read them."

So my mom read them, and we sat down, my mother and I, and talked about it. And she said, "Do you have any idea what you may be getting into?" and I said, "Yeah, I think I do." But I didn't. I didn't. But I took him on faith, and I took him on love, and I loved him just the way he was, and I love him just the way he is.

DePue: What was your thought about what it says about his character, by having him lay those records in your lap?

C. Smith: That told me more than anything else. It told me more than anything else, that he loved me enough to walk away without hurting me and that he would walk away.

I told him, I said, "You have to ask my dad." And my dad said to him, "Now, son, don't ever hurt her. Don't ever lay a hand on her. Just bring her back home to me." And he said, "I will, Pop." So I knew that I was never in any danger as far as being in any danger of what he would do. But with PTSD, it's a whole different lifestyle, an entirely different lifestyle.

DePue: And we knew an awful lot less about it at that time.

C. Smith: Absolutely. Absolutely. What I have learned and what I have been through, you don't get out of books. You don't get out of books. I've offered to go to the nursing classes at home and try to help these students. They have not taken



me up on it, and I wish they would. I wish they would. Because he still has night sweats, he still has nightmares, he still wakes up in the night and has to change his clothes, sometimes twice a night. And you don't touch them when they're asleep; you don't wake them by touching them. You learn a lot over the years.

DePue: Do you remember the moment when he proposed?

C. Smith: Oh, I do. I do. We were window-shopping uptown, because we didn't have any money. We didn't have any money. He would call me up, and he'd say, "We can either go to the movies, or we can go to the"—at that time, the drive-ins were the big thing—"we can go to the drive-in, we can have a hamburger, but we can't do both because we don't have the money." And we were dating in my father's car because we didn't have a car, either.

About ten days before we got married, he got his back pay and we got our car, a little used Chevy. So we would hold hands, we would go to the movie, and then we would window-shop uptown. And we walked by the bridal shop, and he said, "Hey, look at that dress. Isn't that beautiful?" I said yeah, and he said, "I would love you to be wearing that when you marry me." And I was. It was four sizes too big, and I made them cut it down. (laughter) The ladies in the shop would say, "I have something just as pretty in your size," and I'd say, "I want that one." They got so angry with me, but that's the dress I was wearing when I married him.

DePue: Didn't take you long to decide to say yes?

C. Smith: No, it didn't. But I said, "Yes," and then the next morning, I called him at work and I said, "You know, I better think this over," so Mom and I went to Myrtle Beach for two days. (laughter) Then he called me up. At this time, I had changed jobs; I was working at a supply house that ordered the parts that my dad bought for the factory. And he said, "What are you doing for lunch?" and I said, "I brought my lunch today," because we were saving money already together. He was working at service station, five days one week and six days the next. He had every other Saturday off. So he said, "Come down here and bring your lunch." And we were only about, what, three blocks apart?

So I walked down and took my lunch. And he said, "Let's sit in the back of this car"—a car I'd never seen before. So I got in the backseat of the car. Now, a lot of things happen in the backseat of a car. (laughter) So I'm sitting in the backseat of this car, and he puts a tray of diamonds on my lap, and he said, "Choose whatever you want." A tray of diamonds. His boss was a friend with a diamond salesman, and that's how we chose my diamond, sitting in the backseat of a car. So that's how I chose my diamond.

DePue: That's pretty romantic.

C. Smith: Yeah, romantic. So I chose my diamond sitting in the back—then we had to take it to a jeweler in town and have it cut down, and then I couldn't tell anyone all day that I'd picked my diamond out that day.

DePue: Okay, Charlotte, did you pick the biggest diamond, the prettiest diamond?

C. Smith: We picked the prettiest but not the largest. And he said afterwards, "Why didn't you pick a bigger one?" and I said, "No, I didn't. That's the one I wanted."

DePue: At what point in this did he present these medical records to you? Was that before the proposal or afterwards?

C. Smith: Before. Well, he had told me that he loved me, and he said, "Someday I'd like to spend my life with you, but I think you should read these first."

DePue: Well, that sounds like a proposal to me right there.

C. Smith: It was. It was. But then afterwards, then he picked the dress.

DePue: Well, Bill, are you able to talk about this one?

W. Smith: Well, there's one thing that she left out, really, that is about Bullock.

C. Smith: Oh, yeah.

W. Smith: I had this black guy that I did hard labor with, his name was Bullock.

DePue: You remember his first name?

W. Smith: No, I don't, just Bullock is all I... It was two of them, and one of them was Bullock, and the other one was named Moore, M-double-o-r-e. I never knew what happened to them after my hard labor was over with. I told her, "Well, if Bullock ever comes to my door, he's got a place to stay, he's going to sleep in our bed, he's going to eat our food." Back then, prejudice was really strong, you know.

C. Smith: Oh, it was bad.

W. Smith: I says, (pause, deep breaths) "If you can live with that, we'll go on, and if you can't, I'll just walk away." (pause, deep breaths) And that was about it. That's the only thing I think you left out. Because back then—Bullock and I met at Fort Bragg, and we went down to a place to get some barbecue. He said, "The best barbecue you ever tasted." Well, back then, a black person could not be seen with a white person walking down the street. And here we were, close to the sidewalk there, and this deputy sheriff came up to me, and he says, "Come over here," and he took me over by his car. He said, "Now, let me tell you one thing, soldier." He said, "You get your"—he decorated it up a little bit—"back

to Fort Bragg, and don't you ever come back down here with that black so-and-so again." He says, "We just don't tolerate it here in Fayetteville." Under my breath I says—(laughs) I can't say what I thought at that particular time. But that really floored me. It dawned on me at that time that that was not kosher; you couldn't do that. And it hurt my feelings because I loved Bullock like a brother, you know?

C. Smith: And I told him that whoever he was over there with, it didn't matter what color he was or what he had done.

DePue: How far into this relationship, Bill, did you figure that Charlotte was the girl for you?

W. Smith: Well, you know, when I first saw her, something in the back of my mind, I just wanted her so much, I wanted her so badly. But I couldn't get her off my mind. I'd go to bed at night, I couldn't. In the morning, I couldn't. And the fact is, I used to call her every morning before she (laughs) went to work, and I know they got aggravated with me at her house, but that's the way it was. I couldn't get along without at least hearing her voice.

DePue: Well, considering some of the other things you could have been dreaming about at night, (laughter) I think this is a good alternative.

W. Smith: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: So in other words, it didn't take very long for you.

W. Smith: No, not at all, not at all. I had dated seven Charlottes before I got to this one. (laughs) I don't know. Every girl I met was named Charlotte for some reason or other. I do not know. But that's the way it happened. But this one was the one, so here we are, fifty-four years later.

DePue: Why did you decide to present her with your medical records?

W. Smith: Because I knew I had problems after being at Walter Reed for so long, and I knew that I was subject to kind of go off of the deep end occasionally. But that's why I decided, well, if she's going to live with me, she's got to know a little bit more about my background than just everyday meeting, and so that's why I took her what records I had, what records I could get. I wanted her to read them and understand them if she could before we went any further, because she was the one I wanted to marry; but then again, on the other hand, I didn't want to deceive her in any way. I wanted her to have a whole picture of everything.

DePue: Did you have any doubts in your mind that maybe she would see this and decide not to get married?

W. Smith: Well, I did. I did. And, of course, that was her prerogative. After she read

them, if she wanted to call it quits, fine, I'd just walk away. I wouldn't pursue her. But very fortunate, it didn't seem to faze her one way or the other. It just didn't make any difference, did it?

C. Smith: No, no.

W. Smith: And, of course, here we are.

DePue: How many years later?

W. Smith: Fifty-four years, going on fifty-five years.

C. Smith: If I let him live till Christmas. (laughter)

W. Smith: She always says that. Yep.

DePue: Tell us about the marriage, Charlotte.

C. Smith: Well, we had a small wedding. Like I said, my mother could take nothing and make something, so we decided that if we got married on Christmas Eve, we could run it into our weeks and we could have a honeymoon. So my mom decorated the house. We had a reception at home. She went outside and got twigs and rolled them in glue and put glitter on them and put white carnations with them and the boughs off of the Christmas tree and tied white bows and decorated the whole house that way. It was perfectly beautiful. It was perfectly beautiful. We had a very small wedding. Emily and Joe stood up with us. And we had a honeymoon in Florida.

They told us that probably, probably, due to the malnutrition and the effects of Bill's captivity that there would probably be no children, and so we didn't try. So ten months and four days later, our daughter was born. (laughter) But I fell. I was six weeks pregnant, and somebody dropped a cigarette with a filter tip, and I rolled my knee on it, and I fell when I was six weeks pregnant. I fell five times during the pregnancy—had a very, very difficult pregnancy—and he just took care of me wonderfully. We have one daughter, and after she was born, I couldn't even carry her.

DePue: What's her name?

C. Smith: Lisa. And he bought me a basket with wheels on it so that I would give her a bath and lay her in that basket and drag her from room to room. My mother again stepped to the plate, and when we would go wherever we had to go, Mother carried the baby, and I carried the diaper bag. And Mother was more mother to her. I was on crutches nine months when she was three years old because I had the knee fixed again. So it was a really hard time there for a while. I've had a great deal of medical problems myself, and this one has always stepped to the plate and taken care of me as I've taken care of him over the years, so it's just been a hard life in some ways but a wonderful one.

God only lets one of us be down at a time, and we've just had a good life.

DePue: Bill, let's go back to your situation, then, and I want to talk about school and see if you took advantage of the G.I. Bill benefits.

W. Smith: I did. (clears throat) Excuse me. Yes, I went to business school and worked three jobs, because at that time, with my disabilities, you couldn't work and draw the disability pay, so I went to the Army and told them—I says, "You can mark me off of the disability pay. Just leave me alone, and I'll make my own way." So I signed a waiver to give up the disability pay because you couldn't live on your retirement pay and disability pay.

DePue: Was your pay based on your rank when you...?

W. Smith: Yes.

DePue: And your rank was...?

W. Smith: My rank was corporal when I got out. It took an Act of Congress (laughter) to make me a corporal at that time. The pay was not much. It was 216 a month, I believe.

C. Smith: Yeah.

W. Smith: And I couldn't live on that.

DePue: How challenging was it for you to, one, find work, and then two, to keep work?

W. Smith: It was very difficult. Like I said, I worked three different jobs. I went to school for an accounting degree. Well, I got that, and then I couldn't make enough money even with that. So a friend of mine owned a drive-in restaurant, so I managed that at night. Remember that?

C. Smith: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

W. Smith: And I kept books on the side for a few people, and what else did I do?

C. Smith: Anything that we could for you to make some money...legally.

W. Smith: Well, I did pretty good. Then the man came along, and he says, "I got your reference from school, and Mrs. McClaine" which was the head of the school, "she says that you were a pretty good man and that I might could use you." I said, "Well, I'm working for a job, because I need to make more money." It was a job traveling, setting up dealers for Kelvinator appliances and Sylvania televisions at that time. I traveled five states. I'd leave sometimes on Sunday evening and not get back till Saturday morning or leave on Monday and come back Friday.

DePue: What timeframe was this? Was this the late fifties?

W. Smith: Yes. Well, it was middle fifties, wasn't it?

C. Smith: Yeah. Lisa was in first, second—

W. Smith: Second grade.

C. Smith: —third grade.

W. Smith: Somewhere along there. And with me traveling, the good part about it—the man says, “Well, now, I don't pay you any salary; you've got to sell and set up dealers and, of course, service them, but I will give you 30 percent of the profit.” So I furnished my own car, paid my own expenses, and then at the end of the month I got 30 percent of what we had sold, which was really good, you know. I worked that for years.

I bought a motel and a restaurant, and that was my downfall. At forty-three, I had my first heart attack. I was in the hospital—you didn't live over three days at that time—in the intensive care rooms. Five days was the maximum. Well, I'd been there twelve days. Tell him what happened when I was in the hospital.

C. Smith: The doctor came in, and he looked at me, and he said, “He can stop work, and he probably will live. He can keep on working, and he's going to die.” So while he was semi-conscious, I took a crew and went in and inventoried that motel and restaurant and sold it. And while he was just coming in and out of whatever, I would say, “Sign this,” and he'd just write his name. How he came to trust me, I don't know, because with Bill and all these POWs, trust is a very, very great issue. How a wife gets beyond that wall that they built around themselves is a miracle. They're either married for a very long time, or they're married five times, (laughs) but you don't get around the wall. So I got around the wall. But anyway, he trusted me so that whenever I say sign his name, he just signs it. So every time he would wake up, I'd say, “Sign these papers,” and he'd sign them. So when he came out of the hospital, he didn't own anything but me. I sold everything we had—everything. And, you see, I still have him.

W. Smith: But, Mr. DePue, I had just bought a new lawnmower, electric, (DePue laughs) 180 feet of cord and everything. I used it one time across the yard this way and back. She sold it to a preacher for fifteen dollars. Now, I had about 180 dollars in that thing.

C. Smith: Now you notice that he doesn't fuss about the motel and restaurant, but he's always (laughter) this lawnmower.

W. Smith: That lawnmower was new!

DePue: Did you then have to back away from the work after that?

W. Smith: I couldn't work. Fact is, I couldn't do anything. And when you're told you can't do a thing and your body won't stand up to it, I'll tell you, you're talking about—I've never thought about committing suicide, but I can understand why a person would do it. I really do.

DePue: What year was that heart attack?

C. Smith: Well, he was forty-three—

W. Smith: I was forty-three.

C. Smith: And that was—I don't even remember. But anyway—

DePue: When were you born again, Bill?

W. Smith: I was born in '29.

DePue: So that would have been '72, '73.

W. Smith: It was '73.

C. Smith: It was just before Lisa graduated high school in '74, so it was probably '72, '73. And the first winter—we had a ten-room house—he wore out three pairs of bedroom slippers. If he wasn't asleep, he was walking the floor. What am I going to do? How are we going to survive? We have a sixteen-year-old. What's going to become of us? So he went back on disability, and we've been fine. But that's the year I learned to love football. Now I watch football and he cooks dinner on Sundays, (laughter) because he doesn't like football. But we survived, and it was fine.

DePue: What I want to do now is turn it over to you, Charlotte, and tell us about what it's like to live with a prisoner of war, especially somebody that went through the horrendous experiences that Bill did.

C. Smith: Well, first, you have to earn their trust. You have to let them know that you're there, that no matter what they do or how bad it gets, they come first. They have to come first, before children, before family, before anything. You have to earn that trust.

DePue: Did you get any training, or did anybody in the military come and explain any of this stuff to you beforehand?

C. Smith: No, no, and I thought I was the only wife that this was ever happening to until we married, and I didn't meet another POW wife except Emily and one other wife in our area until 1975. Then I went to a convention, and they had a V.A. representative there. Then I thought, Oh, my gosh, I'm not by myself. And

then you get a little bit of help.

DePue: When you realized that, was that a relief to you?

C. Smith: Yes, it was. It was. Because the other two wives in our area never talked about it. But I can remember one incident. We had a four-poster bed that had a bar across the bottom. We had moved back from Cincinnati and were waiting on our apartment to be ready to move into, and we were living with my parents for about three weeks. I was pregnant with Lisa, and Bill scooted down in his sleep, got his feet under that bar, and he was screaming so loud because he was dreaming of being tied down. And my father hit the floor, my younger brother hit the floor, and the people in the house next door were out on the porch, he was screaming so loud. And I couldn't touch him to wake him up, because I knew better than to touch him when he was asleep. I'm trying to say, "Honey, wake up; honey, wake up; honey, wake up" without touching, because I knew if I touched him, he would hit me, and I'm about five, six, eight months pregnant.

So everybody thought... Our bedroom door was shut. Everybody thought he was beating me because he was screaming so loud and I'm yelling, "Honey, wake up; honey, wake up." It was horrible. It was horrible. I couldn't get him awake. So you have to learn how to handle those situations. So he finally got awake, and then when he does get awake, he's so embarrassed about what has gone on with him, so you have to let them know that they come first. You have to learn to fight his battles for him when he can't fight.

DePue: Can I ask how you learned that you couldn't touch him when he was sleeping?

C. Smith: Because I know the startled reaction that I'm going to get. When he starts coming up this way—when he starts coming up in a fighting position, then you know to get out of the way. The first time I touched him when he was asleep and he started coming up in a boxing stance, then I thought, oh, I don't want to do that again! You know that the startle reaction that you get, that you don't want to do that. And I know when a balloon bursts behind him, it's a horrible, horrible reaction for him.

DePue: Bill, when you were in prison camp, there were plenty of times you had to be very, very close to starvation. Was it hard to learn how to eat again?

W. Smith: Yes. You had to learn to not eat too much, because I had learned that our stomach had shrank so that you couldn't hold too much. You would eat a little bit, and then you'd get full, but you'd still be hungry. When I was at Walter Reed, they fed us about six or eight times a day, and then they followed us around anywhere we went on the ward with a juice cart, and they had all kinds of juice and everything on it. They encouraged you to drink or to eat something all the time, all the time, until I got back—I got back up to—when we got married, I weighed 130 pounds, 135 pounds, I believe.



C. Smith: Um-hmm, about 135.

W. Smith: And I can eat everything, you know what I mean? I would eat everything, and I couldn't gain any weight.

DePue: What were you, again? Your weight when you were captured.

W. Smith: When I was captured, I weighed 193 pounds, and when I came back I weighed eighty-two or eighty-three pounds. I tried to eat; I was fed good, I had plenty of food, but you couldn't eat it all. You'd eat two or three bites, and then you couldn't eat anymore. And when we got married, the first time she went to the V.A. with me, (laughs) the dietician called us in there, and they said, "Now, Mrs. Smith, you have to do this, this, and this. Cook this." Well, I was drinking three milkshakes with two eggs in it, beat up, every day. I was drinking six glasses of Mogen David wine and eating everything that I could, wasn't I?

C. Smith: Yes.

W. Smith: I gained four pounds, and she gained forty.

DePue: (laughs) It's just not fair, is it, Charlotte?

C. Smith: I did get some help that way from the V.A. They did try to tell me, You have to cook this and this.

DePue: Well, how did his POW experiences manifest itself as far as eating?

C. Smith: Well, the only thing he said to me when we did get married, he said, "Now woman, don't you ever not put enough on my table to eat." He said, "I'll be cold, and I'll be everything again, but I will never be hungry. But (laughs) don't put cauliflower on my table, (laughter) because I hate cauliflower." The first time I raked out food, he just went ballistic. He just went crazy the first time I raked out his leftover.

DePue: Raked out? You mean threw away?

C. Smith: Yeah, threw away. The first time I got up from our dinner table and threw something away, he just went crazy. "You can't do that. Don't throw that away. That'll be good. We'll have that again." It was only just a tiny little bit of it, but he didn't want that. So I learned very, very quickly, just put in a container, put it in the refrigerator; when he's gone, then clean out the fridge. I started to put away laundry one day, and his sock drawer was full of candy. I mean, it was just full of candy. And so he came in from work, and I said, "Bill, why is your sock drawer full of candy?" "Well, I just thought I might need it. I thought I might need it." He hid food everywhere in the house. It was in the sock drawer, it was in his underwear drawer—it was everywhere. So I learned just to leave it alone—don't move it, leave it alone.

So one Sunday afternoon—the big thing when our Lisa was little and we didn't have a lot of money—we would always take a drive on Sunday afternoon, and he would always take food in his pockets when we went for a drive. So one Sunday afternoon he got a banana out of his pocket to eat, and Lisa said, "Dad, where's my banana?" And he said, "If you don't provide for yourself, you have to learn to provide for yourself." Now, she was about two and a half, wasn't she, Bill, about that age?

W. Smith: About two or three. I don't remember.

C. Smith: And she said, "But Dad, I didn't think to bring mine." He said, "But you've got to learn to think to bring your own." Then he got one out of his other pocket and gave it to her. The next Sunday we went for a ride, she had her own banana with her. So he taught her at a very early age that you have to learn to provide for yourself too in this world. And I said to him, "You don't have to hide it," but it took a very long time for him to learn that he didn't have to. Even when our granddaughters were little, they knew that Bop had a candy drawer in the extra room. It took me I guess thirty years to break him of that candy drawer; I've got it in the kitchen now. (DePue laughs) At least I got it back in the kitchen, but he still has a candy drawer.

DePue: Did Lisa understand that her dad was different in some respects? Did she comprehend that?

C. Smith: She did. She did. It didn't take very long for her to understand because I sat her down and explained to her that—my dad lived very close, and everybody called him Dad. We called him Bop. When she'd say "Daddy," everybody would turn around and look at my daddy. So she always called him "Daddy Bill" until she was a lot older, and she'd say "My Daddy Bill." So she understood—and that's the reason we wrote the book, actually, for the granddaughters, because they understood as little girls, as babies, that their Bop was different. They understood as babies that they had to open the door if he was taking a nap and say, "Hey, Bop, it's me," and then go and get on him. They knew they couldn't just run and hop on Bop, because he would hit them too. And Bill doesn't open a door and just go out; he opens the door and looks right and left and then goes out. He still does that. We would go to a restaurant, and he likes his back to the wall even in a restaurant today. We call ourselves his harem because my son-in-law travels a great deal, and he would have me, my mom, our daughter Lisa, and two granddaughters. So he'd travel with a harem of five women, and Papa Bear. We'd go, and they'd say, "Smith, your table is ready," and he'd say, "No, I'd rather wait for a minute." Sometimes he'd make those girls wait for a different table so his back would be to the wall. Well, as little girls, they didn't understand that, and now at twenty-one and twenty-three, they understand.

DePue: I was just going to say, that's an awful lot for a little kid to understand.

C. Smith: It is. It is. And now they subconsciously take care of him. Easter, we went to Easter lunch. There were two children—children just drive Bill up a wall—there were two children in the group that went with us Easter Sunday. You didn't even see this happen. Allison came to her mother, and she said, "Mom, those two kids are rowdy as heck today," because they were all hopped up on Easter candy, and she said, "I've got the seating done. Tutu and Bop are at one end of the table. See that they get down there." Did you see them put us at that end of the table?

W. Smith: Yeah, I was wondering about that.

C. Smith: See, they subconsciously put him at the end of the table with our backs to the wall and put the two little kids at the other end of the table.

DePue: Bill, how much of this kind of behavior did you understand was a result of what you'd gone through and wasn't necessarily normal kind of behavior?

W. Smith: You know, I never did understand, and fact is, even today I don't understand a lot. I go through a day, and something invariably will remind me of being in the prison camp, and I have to be on guard not to go into that situation if I possibly can help it. But I still fight it. Mr. DePue, you don't know how much I fight it. But I tell my wife, I'm not in jail, and I haven't killed anybody, (laughter) so I'm in pretty good shape. But still, you have a time.

C. Smith: But you asked about my life as being his wife. Now, several months ago I put him in the hospital—maybe a year or two ago—and I asked for a private room, and they said, There are no private rooms. And I said, "Okay, that's fine." So we go up to the room, and they start to put us in the room with somebody, and that's fine. The man's room was full of balloons. We got to the door, and I said, "He's not going in there," because I knew if that balloon burst behind him what kind of a reaction he was going to have. So they put him out in the hall, and they think I'm the biggest horrible person in the world, but I'm going to fight these battles for him as long as I can fight. So I said, "He's not going in that room. Take him back downstairs to the emergency room, and we'll wait for another room." So they go and they get the head nurse on the hall that night, and she said, "That's the only room I have." I said, "It's full of balloons. He's not going in that room." So miraculously they found me a private room. (laughs) See? So that's what being the wife of a POW is. When he's unable to fight his battles, you have to fight them, and I will.

W. Smith: And she can get mean as hell, too. (laughter)

C. Smith: I can. I can, because I have to.

DePue: I wanted to change gears here a little bit. In many of our conversations that we weren't actually being recorded, Bill, you've told me about these FBI visits, year after year of FBI visits.

W. Smith: Year after year.

DePue: I want you to go into that experience.

W. Smith: Well, they would come to my house—

DePue: And you were living where at this time?

W. Smith: I was living in West Virginia the last time.

C. Smith: Every time.

W. Smith: Every time except when I was in North Carolina at the hospital. They would come in, after I was married, and they would go to the living room, they'd set down their typewriters—and a lot of times they would have a stenographer with them, and they would do the shorthand. And sometimes it would be three days; they'd stay three days. Well, after three days of interrogations, or they called them interviews, it would take me a long time to get back to normal. You know, after answering all of their questions, it would take me several days to get back to where I was, I would say, halfway normal again, and then by the time I got over it, you'd get a phone call: "Well, we'll be at your house tomorrow morning at eight o'clock." That's the way they would do.

DePue: Did you have a job at the time?

W. Smith: Sometimes yeah, when I was working.

DePue: But they didn't care?

W. Smith: They didn't care. And I've told my boss a couple of, three times, I said—fact is, they came and got me out of work one time down at Bluefield pharmacy, remember?

C. Smith: Yeah.

W. Smith: They came in there, two of them, like I had been a criminal. And the other employees were looking at me when they took me outside. They thought I had committed a damn crime or something, you know. These guys come along in black suits—you've heard of the men in black—come in and take your ass outside.

DePue: Show the badge?

C. Smith: Yeah.

W. Smith: Yeah, and—

C. Smith: "We're from the FBI."

W. Smith: It was awful. It was awful.

DePue: What kind of questioning did you go through, then?

W. Smith: Well, first they would start off if I knew of anybody that collaborated with the Chinese. Then, how did they treat you? What did you eat? How many times did you get sick? Did you see sick people? How many times did you take... When a person died we took them across the ice, but we would keep their body three days so we could get that extra bowl of cracked corn, but after three days, the body smelled so bad you had to get rid of it. Things like that, I would tell them, and of course they looked at me like, where is this guy coming from? Believe it or not—I don't care whether you believe it or not—it's facts. They put the pressure on you, and they would try to lead you with their questions, and I would just tell them what I thought, and that would be it. But God, they asked so many—I had a stack of questions this thick, full pages that big, both sides, of what they—

DePue: A stack of eight-and-a-half-by-eleven paper an inch thick or more.

W. Smith: Yeah, and they would go over that thing. And the thing of it is, they turned me over to some people from MIT that was doing theses. See, if you don't cooperate with them, they can cut your pension, and if you do cooperate with them, then you're stuck for several days and sometimes weeks trying to get your mind back straight. It's a bitch.

DePue: I know you've had lots of opportunity to meet and talk to prisoners of war here in the last twenty-some years. Did everybody go through those kinds of experiences?

W. Smith: I'm thinking that most of them did.

C. Smith: Several did.

W. Smith: Several of them that did.

DePue: But why you in particular? Because they came back, you said, year after year.

W. Smith: Sixteen solid years they were on me three, four, and sometimes five times a year. Every time I'd get over it, somebody else would call at eight o'clock at night and said, "I'll be there at eight o'clock in the morning." That's the way they operated, wouldn't they? And then they would run my wife and baby off from home, said, you can't stay here. That's the truth.

C. Smith: You know, we never figured out why—there were only 115 in that last camp, and they did a lot of those guys, but never as many times as Bill. And when we got the records, they said he was in contact with about fifteen hundred men and that he had a phenomenal memory for where he was and all this, but we never figured out why they came so many times. We never did, and they never

would tell us.

DePue: Well, I wonder if that has a lot to do with the memory that you have and the ability that you can retain this information.

C. Smith: That's what we think. That's what we've been thinking. I don't know.

DePue: Do you think they ever had an appreciation of the burden this put on you?

C. Smith: Unh-uh.

W. Smith: I don't think it ever fazed them.

C. Smith: I don't either.

W. Smith: I was just another one to be interrogated, you know.

C. Smith: The last time that—

W. Smith: Get what they can out of you, and...

C. Smith: The last time that Phillip O'Brien, whom we really liked, from the Pentagon. He's Department of Defense and he comes to every convention, still does. And the last time he sat down with Bill—and Bill missed two meetings—they talked for two hours. They go back into North Korea, and now North Korea's allowing them in. Bill was in the Battle of Unsan—now, I talk like I'm doing it, but I've done all that research. They went back in, and they got twenty-eight bodies out of that battle. Bill does have a phenomenal memory about where he was and now, he can't remember what he had for breakfast, but he knows that. They brought out twenty-eight bodies from that one battle, so it's no wonder they picked his brain all the time. They used to bring six and eight and ten men that would bring all these maps and spread them out on the tables and ask, "Do you remember going here; do you remember going there; do you remember being here?" And if they're going back into North Korea now, they need all the information they can get, because if they can pinpoint where they're going, it helps them.

DePue: But has this happened recently where you've been interviewed?

W. Smith: The last convention last year.

C. Smith: The convention last year Philip was there, and they were getting ready to go back in. They go back in just about every two years or so.

DePue: What brought an end to the times, though, where they'd come and find you.

C. Smith: Me.

W. Smith: Yeah, she—

DePue: Well, Charlotte, why don't you tell that story, then.

W. Smith: Oh, boy.

DePue: (laughs) You seem rather emphatic about that.

C. Smith: Oh, I was. I was so angry.

DePue: Do you know when this was, roughly?

C. Smith: Oh, yes, I know exactly when it was. It was 1974. Lisa's group from high school was getting ready to go to Myrtle Beach, and they were collecting money, and they were doing it in the kitchen. And that particular day for some reason they didn't run us off. They were sitting in the living room talking to Bill. We lived in a ten-room house at the time, and the girls were going in and out of the kitchen collecting money. And so I walked through the living room, and the man said, "Is your house always this busy?" and I said, "Yes, it is." So he kept on and on and on with Bill. There were three of them that day. I finally walked into the living room and I said, "Gentlemen, I think enough is enough. I think it's just about time for you all to leave. The girls are all here, and the house is in chaos." And so they left, gathered up their little typewriters and things, and they left.

In about thirty minutes they called back from the motel, and I answered the phone; he said, "Mrs. Smith, we'll be back in the morning." I was so angry, and I said, "If you come in the morning, you bring three things. You bring credentials, your lunch, and three big men, because it's going to take you all day to get back in my house." They didn't come, and they've never been back, and I don't know why. But I was so angry, because they had just put him through so much.

DePue: Were you thinking at the time, (laughs) I should have done this a few years before? (laughter)

C. Smith: When they didn't come back the next morning, Bill said, "Why in the world didn't you do that years ago?" But I was so angry that day. I had had it that day, and so I just turned on them, so they didn't come back.

W. Smith: But even in North Carolina when I was home on leave from the hospital, the CID would come down to my parents' home and they would spend the day. I think every time they got a new man in to train, they brought him over to my house and interrogated me all day with the new person, because the same man would come, Mr. White, CID, and he'd always bring a young man with him. Then I told my dad one time, "I think that"—I decorated it up a little bit—"he's just using me to train other employees."

DePue: I got to believe they're covering the same territory time after time.

- W. Smith: Time after time. It's the same old stuff all the time. A different person with the same list of questions.
- DePue: And yet back in Tokyo they had you sign this release form that says you won't talk to anybody about this.
- W. Smith: Won't talk to anybody.
- DePue: Did that ever come to an end where they allowed you to start talking about it?
- C. Smith: Yeah.
- W. Smith: They never have, have they?
- C. Smith: Well, when you got the release to speak in Bluefield with the list of things...
- W. Smith: I was going to speak to the Kiwanis Club in Bluefield, West Virginia. It's the first time.
- DePue: When was this?
- W. Smith: What is it 1957, no, '58?
- C. Smith: Lisa was in the high school, so it had to be
- DePue: Well, then it's much—
- C. Smith: —the seventies.
- W. Smith: Sixties, seventies.
- C. Smith: It's got to be seventies.
- W. Smith: Seventies, somewhere along in there. Anyway, I had to get permission from the Pentagon. Well, I wrote for permission, and they sent me back a stack of regulations about this high of what you could and couldn't say. And I says, "Well, there's no use in me talking, then." And she says, "Well, go on up. You're already committed. You go ahead." And so that was the first time I had talked to anybody.
- DePue: Do you remember roughly the kind of things they thought you should not be talking about?
- W. Smith: Not call any names, not talking about where anybody's buried, and not talking about anything that the men talked about of their families.
- C. Smith: Treatments, wasn't that one of the things?
- W. Smith: And the treatments was one of the things. And what else was it?



- C. Smith: I believe that was it.
- W. Smith: That pretty well covered just about everything. In other words, just keep your mouth shut. That's about what it was.
- C. Smith: But then some of the guys started coming out with books about it, so Bill said, "I'm just going to start talking. Let them come after me."
- DePue: Now, Bill, the things you went through are things that most of us can't even begin to comprehend. Why did you decide that you wanted to start telling your story?
- W. Smith: Because nobody else believed anything. When those twenty-one men stayed and went into China, everybody that came back was tainted by their actions, and I started letting people know that everybody didn't have the same thoughts that those men had, and nobody would listen to me. But when people started listening to me, I started telling them everything. I even told them what the government did and how they restricted us to not talk to anybody. What are you doing to do now? I don't really...
- DePue: Well, now it's incredibly important that this kind of story gets out so that it's not lost to future generations, and that's obviously why I'm sitting here.
- W. Smith: Well, I'll tell you, the government can put the screws to you, they really can, and they can make you so—I was so afraid in Tokyo General Hospital when they wouldn't let me get on the plane until I sign those papers. You can't realize how afraid I was. I was afraid to say hi to anybody, and that's the truth.
- DePue: Well, until you met Charlotte, perhaps. (laughs)
- W. Smith: Yeah.
- C. Smith: Oh, yeah.
- W. Smith: She broke the silent treatment. (laughter)
- C. Smith: I did. I did.
- W. Smith: But, I mean, they did; they scared me to death. I'll tell you.
- DePue: When you did start talking to groups, were there certain kind of groups that you preferred to talk to and certain groups that you just didn't want to deal with?
- W. Smith: No, no, I didn't cull anybody from them. If they were willing to listen, I was willing to tell them some things. And fact is, I'm speaking Memorial Day in Palmyra, and—

- C. Smith: Yeah, and the fourth of May you've got another—you've got two pending.
- DePue: How about the kids?
- C. Smith: Oh, yeah.
- W. Smith: Yeah, the children at school. I usually talk to the history classes.
- DePue: High school history classes?
- W. Smith: High school and then some colleges I've talked to, but the first thing I tell them, and I think I told you, "Some of the things I'm going to tell you, if you were telling me, I wouldn't believe you either." (laughs) I just tell them right off the bat, because it is unbelievable. Man's inhumanity to man is just unbelievable. When you see a man's eyes go back about an inch and a half or two inches back in his head and you don't see nothing but a beard, and it looks like two piss pots in the snow, it's awful, but everybody looks the same way. It's hard for you to visualize or understand when the human goes back into the animal stage, and that's what you are at that point in time: you're an animal. You're not a human anymore, you're an animal trying to survive. I'm sorry.
- DePue: Are there any of the questions—I'm thinking especially maybe some of the younger kids can have the questions that catch you by surprise, that disarm you. Remember any of those?
- W. Smith: Well, the first thing is: Did you ever kill anybody? I tell them only the ones that were trying to kill me. That's about all you can tell anybody. What'd you use for toilet paper? I says, "If you don't eat, you don't go." (laughter)
- C. Smith: The little ones, the littler ones—I mean, he's spoken to them from the fourth grade on, and he brings it down to them. One of the things he really does that he brings it home to whatever group he's talking to—he's made a mock-up of the camp where he was. He takes that with him. He takes a bowl the size that they ate out of, and he takes cracked corn and millet in that bowl for the children to touch and see. They ask him what a bayonet is. They don't even know what a bayonet is.
- W. Smith: They don't know anything, really.
- C. Smith: They don't know anything. We went to one school—they were the fourth and fifth grades—and they were absolutely mesmerized. We went back the last day of school and took treats for the whole class. He had to sign autographs. They just think he's the best thing since sliced bread. You know: Was your wife in the military? Do you still have friends in the military? And when they asked him if he had killed anybody, he said, "I did so that you could be free to sit here in this classroom today. That's what they train you to do when you're in the Army." He tried to bring it down to their level. He spoke when

Allison's group and Sullivan's group was going to see the Holocaust museum.

DePue: Is this your grandchildren?

C. Smith: Grandchildren.

DePue: What's their name again?

C. Smith: Allison is the oldest one, and Sullivan is our second granddaughter.

DePue: What's their last name?

C. Smith: Oakley.

DePue: O-a...?

C. Smith: O-a-k-l-e-y. And they were getting ready to go see the Holocaust museum, and so that's why they asked him to come to talk to them about having buried the men naked because they needed their clothes. And that's when one of the little kids asked him about the toilet paper. I mean, that's the things that are in their minds at sixth and seventh grades.

W. Smith: I went down to the Mark Twain School at Center in Missouri to speak to the history class, and I had to talk to five classes—I had five classes before I left that day. I spent the whole day down there.

C. Smith: Yeah, you started a nine o'clock class in the morning—

W. Smith: Ended at 3:30.

C. Smith: —and each class heard about it, and they just kept bringing them in all day.

W. Smith: But the kids seem to pay attention to what you're saying, and when I talked over at Virginia a couple of weeks ago—

C. Smith: Pleasant Hill.

W. Smith: Pleasant Hill. The principal came up, and he said, (pause, deep breaths) "Four or five kids had never been still, had never been quiet..." (pause)

C. Smith: They were troublemakers, and he said, "I expected them to disrupt"—there were like two hundred in that gym— "I expected trouble," and they never moved. They never moved. He said, "Even my troublemakers were still." And he talked for forty-five minutes. The kids never moved a muscle. But he can get to them by saying, "Whatever day school started, I didn't have a shower until school was out. Now, think about it. I went that whole eight months without a shower. How would you like to sit next to your buddy all this time without a shower?" And sometimes he'll get fifteen or twenty of them and mark off the dimensions of the room he slept in and make them stand in that

room or get them to sit in that room. He brings it down to where they are, and he visualizes things with the kids. He's a very good speaker. He's a very, very good speaker. He brings it to them. With the high school kids, he's very good, and then with the older men, you know, they are BAR men, there's a lot of veterans in the group. So he's a very good speaker.

W. Smith: But you only tell them the truth, and that's why it's hard for some of them to believe when you tell them the truth. That's why I always say, "If you were telling me, I wouldn't believe you either."

DePue: When the FBI was coming and making all of these visits over and over and over again, you've already expressed that there was a price you had to pay after they left.

W. Smith: After they left.

DePue: How about these experiences when you're talking to various groups? Is there a price to be paid for doing that as well?

W. Smith: But it's easier now. It's much easier now. I don't dream as much, I don't think. I still wake up with night sweats—I change clothes twice a night sometimes—but I don't know why I do that, and the doctor doesn't know. I just don't know. I don't know what causes it.

DePue: I want you to talk about—and we'll start with you first, Bill—about going to the POW conventions and about the decision the first time that you were looking to go. What went through your mind of whether or not you wanted to go?

W. Smith: It took us a long time to make up our mind, didn't we?

C. Smith: Um-hmm.

W. Smith: We had almost a year's notice when they was having the first convention.

DePue: Was it just for Korean War veterans?

W. Smith: Yes, sir, just the Korean War veterans. We debated on it a long time, didn't we? Louisville, Kentucky. And we decided to go. I told her... I Should we tell him about the medicine? I was taking six ten milligrams of Valium a day. It worked. And I said, "I'll just take some extra." (laughter) "Take some extra Valium with me, you know?"

When I got there, I ran into a couple of, three guys that I knew, and I ran into one guy that they said, "Come out in the hall, and Vince Simonetti is out there, Smitty and he wants to see you. He says, "No, W.W. died a long time ago." And I told the other guy, I said, "Vince died a long time ago." Each one of us had thought the other one had already died. And when I finally went out in the hall, I

couldn't believe it was him. There he was. And I had to ask him a couple of questions before I believed it was him. (laughter) Remember that?

C. Smith: I do.

W. Smith: Oh, man, I'm telling you. But I was so shocked to see him, because the last time I saw him he was sitting on a rock, and they was marching me out with two guards, and I told him, "Don't let them son of bitches get the best of you, Vince, no matter what you do. Die first, but don't let them get you." That was the last time I saw him. It was in 1952, and they moved me to another camp; I didn't see Vince until, what, seventy-something when we went to Louisville.

C. Smith: Seventy-five.

W. Smith: Was it seventy-five?

C. Smith: Um-hmm.

W. Smith: And that's when she found out that she wasn't the only one going through that stuff.

DePue: Charlotte, why don't you tell us a little bit about that, then? What were you expecting, first of all, when you went to this?

C. Smith: Well, when we first started, I figured it was either going to be a good thing or it would throw him into drinking, like some of the guys were doing, or it would be a very bad thing. So you go with a lot of trepidation to the first one, and you think, oh, is this the right decision or a wrong one? It turned out to be a very right one. We go every year or try to. Since '75 I think we've missed maybe five. And now we go on Wednesday, I kiss him at the front door of the hotel and just say, "Come in quietly." (laughter) "Just don't wake me when you come to the room," and then I pick him up on Sunday morning. Because they can get together, and they talk about—and you would think after all these years, they wouldn't—but they talk about all the things that they've done and all the things that they saw, but they can talk to each other when they can't even talk to us. And then over the years, the wives have come together, and it's just wonderful.

DePue: How important was it to encounter those other women who were going through the same things as you?

C. Smith: Oh, unbelievably, unbelievably important, because I know, one of my dearest friends, her husband is now passed away, the first date she ever had with him, they were walking down the street, a car backfired, he threw her on the ground and fell on top of her. Very first date. She said she looked up at him and said, "Will, what the hell are you doing? (DePue laughs) Get off of me." They married and had five children. And she had no idea what she was getting into either. But it's just something that you learn. Some of the guys have

absolutely... They can't even sleep in the same bed with their husbands even after all these years—they still can't. You learn that your situation is not nearly as bad as some of the women go through. Her husband slept with a loaded pistol under his pillow. They couldn't sleep in the same room. So you learn a lot. And we talk. We know what we're facing. It's just unbelievable.

DePue: When you get together with these women, would you share a lot of laughs and a few tears along the process?

C. Smith: Oh, absolutely, absolutely, about whether we're going to kill them or love them (laughter) or what we're going to do with them tomorrow. And then, like I say, you know you're not the only one. One of the girls said her husband choked her, left marks on her. The next day, he said, "What happened to you?" He didn't even remember that he did it. And then there's the remorse, and how do you deal with that? Every year somewhere along the line there's a new one comes that's never been there before, so we're there for her, and we're there for the girls that are the widows, that have to get their pensions, that have to get their benefits. Bill and I have become National Service Officers to try to help those ladies. We just have to lean on each other. That's all we can do.

DePue: Are there children that come to these as well?

C. Smith: Absolutely, absolutely, and we encourage the children to come because they need help too, and the grandchildren are even there.

DePue: This might be an unusual question. Are the children proud about their dads?

C. Smith: Absolutely, absolutely. But I'll tell you a for-instance: when we first got married, I was nineteen, and I was like my mom, I'd never seen a naked man. So Bill had on his hipbones two marks on each hipbone about the color of a mahogany table, and I thought, what—yeah, and about—

DePue: Big?

C. Smith: —about the size of a saucer on each hip. And I thought, what in the world are these two dark spots just on the hip bones? So I didn't say anything, and so finally I got my courage and I said, "Why are these two marks on your hipbones?" It turns out that they were stains from the mud hut, of having slept on the mud hut. The mud had stained through his clothing and stained his skin. And they stayed there for about eight or ten years. So there are just things that... It turns out that some of the other guys had them. The wives were the same that I was, you just didn't know. You just don't know. So we commiserate. We cry. We've lost some of our women. My best friend now in Mesa, Arizona is dying with cancer. They just lost their daughter three weeks ago. The first thing he did was pick up the phone and call us. We are closer than any sister I could have had. So, I mean, it's just a family. We're a family.

DePue: Bill, I wonder if you can recall a couple times, a couple incidents at these POW conventions, and tie it together with some of the guys you knew back in Korea. I've got a couple of names here, but I'll turn it over to you first of all. (pause) How about Bob Erickson. Remember meeting him at a POW convention?

W. Smith: Yeah. No, I met Bob Erickson at a KWVA chapter that they have in Quincy, which is a Korean War Veterans Association. He was never a prisoner or anything. But we got to talking, and I was telling them about they're always questioning me about this, that, or the other. And the morning that I was repatriated, I was on the litter—I'd been on the litter for about a week—and the doctors kept coming in and giving me shots of adrenaline. Well, when the ambulance pulled up, they took me off of the litter and pushed me in the back of the ambulance. Well, when the ambulance got down to Freedom Village, opened the door, well, I was the first one that popped out and hit the ground. This young Marine and two soldiers picked me up. And we got to talking, and he says, "Well, I remember. You're the only one that fell out of the ambulance." I said, "Yep. Boy, I hit the ground hard, too." And he says, "I remember, because I picked you up with one hand, straightened you up," and then the two soldiers and Bob took me in there. I couldn't believe it. We went back over the same stuff, and come to find out, he was the bugler for the signing of the armistice that they had for the South Koreans. He was their bugler at Panmunjom. The fact is, he's in the veterans' home pretty sick over there now. And who was the other one?

DePue: Did you run into Bullock at any of these conventions?

W. Smith: Bullock, I never have, and I've asked people about him, and we never have found him.

C. Smith: Never found him.

W. Smith: We never have found him. I'd like to know whatever happened to him.

DePue: Well, here's a name that I think you did encounter there, and I'm going to mispronounce it, so you're going to correct me. Jerry Françoise?

W. Smith: Franso and François. C. Smith: No, François.

W. Smith: Now, there was a similar name too.

C. Smith: But he doesn't come very much. François is the one that comes most of the time.

W. Smith: François is in bad shape because he has a place in California. He was raising horses, and he got sick one day, and she took him to the hospital, and they put him on a gurney, and while he was on the gurney, he had a stroke, and he can't speak—just mumbles, you know what I mean. And we have a (pause,

deep breaths)—God, I'm going back a long ways—we had a code that we used to pass to each other when we were in danger of being overcome by the Chinese in the prison camp, and when one of them was approaching where we were, we would say, "Sky blue pink, here is a Chink." Things like that. We would talk, and we would give certain knocks. We were at a convention in Colorado.

C. Smith: Denver.

W. Smith: Denver, Colorado. Me and François, me and Jerry, we were sitting there talking back and forth like, and this guy came in the door, Cletus...

C. Smith: Norton.

W. Smith: Norton, who had caused Jerry to go in the hole at one time, and he went wild when that guy came in the door. And then he told me what happened, and so I went over and told Cletus, I said, "Somebody's fixing to kill you. You better leave right now," and buddy, he got out of there, because he knew what I was talking about. Those guys would have killed him. These guys will break your neck in no time, just not even thinking about it, like stepping on an ant. And boy, he never did come back, did he?

C. Smith: Unh-uh.

W. Smith: But it's those things like that, when you're talking with somebody, you can communicate with them, you don't have to say much; you know exactly what each other's thinking.

C. Smith: Jerry, that morning when he was so upset, he got a hold of Bill, and in two seconds on Bill's hand, he told him exactly what he wanted him to do.

DePue: Just by using the code?

C. Smith: Yeah.

W. Smith: Yep.

C. Smith: Dawn, his wife, and I were sitting there, and Jerry had a hold of Bill's hand, and he was just doing this.

DePue: Just tapping the hand.

C. Smith: Just tapping his hand. Dawn looked at me, and I looked at her. Jerry was so agitated, and Dawn was afraid he was getting sick. Bill jumped up from the table and left, and Dawn got a hold of Jerry. Bill came back, and as soon as Bill came back, Jerry just calmed right down because Cletus left the room. Then Jerry got a hold of himself and Bill explained what happened. I mean, just in that split second, those two knew exactly what was happening.



- W. Smith: But you have a flashback so quick, you know. I mean, just instantly (snaps) it comes back to you.
- C. Smith: But boy, Jerry just went ballistic.
- W. Smith: I may have told you—and of course you’ll never hear this, either—we had a convention in St. Louis, Missouri at the Marriott, and somebody was pushed down the elevator shaft. You never heard anything about that.
- DePue: One of the convention members?
- W. Smith: Yeah.
- DePue: Did the police determine it was an accident?
- C. Smith: We never heard anything about where he went.
- W. Smith: We never heard anything about it. I asked Brooks—and of course Brooks is dead now—I asked Brooks—he was from Missouri, from—where is that place in Missouri?
- C. Smith: Farmington.
- W. Smith: Farmington. And I asked him, “Whatever happened in the...?” He said, “You know, Smitty, we never did know what happened, and nobody’s ever said anything. Nobody’s ever questioned. We just don’t know. The guy just disappeared, it seemed like.” That’s why I know that they have ways of getting rid of you if they don’t like you.
- C. Smith: That’s the other thing about this convention. When we go to this convention, one of these guys—we always had one guy, his name was K Y—that’s all I ever knew him by. He always called—
- DePue: The initials K.Y.?
- C. Smith: K Y. I never knew him by anything else.
- W. Smith: Because he was from Kentucky; that’s why they call him K Y. (laughter)
- C. Smith: That’s right, he was.
- W. Smith: That’s the truth. We had weird things. (laughter)
- C. Smith: When this convention first started, there were so few of us that would go that everybody rented their own room. We had a room that they rented as a hospitality room, and they kept our beer and stuff in the bathtub. Now, that’s how small it was. It was only like, what, about twelve or fourteen couples.
- W. Smith: Something like that.

C. Smith: And K Y would always get drunk. I mean, he would always get drunk. That's the only way I remember him. The last time I ever saw him, he was standing on the table taking off his shirt, doing this number. And two a guy and gal put him to bed, and that's the last time I ever saw K Y. They take him, they put him to bed, they talk to him, and that's it. And they respect their wives. They don't allow them to get falling-down drunk in front of their wives or their children. They don't.

W. Smith: Well, we police our own.

C. Smith: That's right. That's right. Except that one time we went to Dayton. (Bill laughs) We had the whole, entire hotel. Two o'clock in the morning, they set off the fire alarm and went up and down the halls singing the Korean national anthem. Now, that day, I could have killed them. (laughter) But anyway. Then we were getting ready to go to the banquet, and they set off the fire alarm again, and everybody was running out of their rooms half-dressed. I told Bill, "I'm busy getting ready to go. You go out and see if the place is on fire, and then I leave. If it's not, then I'm going to finish getting ready." (laughter) It was not on fire. But, I mean, they just have good, clean fun. They don't do anything to hurt anybody at these conventions.

DePue: You talked earlier in this conversation how hard it is for the POWs to trust. Bill, do you trust your fellow POWs?

W. Smith: Some of them, I do, but the majority of them, I don't. They don't trust me either, so... But, you know, out of all the FBI interrogations—and I got a copy of them—there was only two men that said anything bad about me. One of them is dead, and the other one, I cornered at the convention. It's a wonder I hadn't killed him, because I didn't even know him, and he thought he knew me. But there was only two in that whole series of interrogations that said anything at all bad about me. Nobody had ever said anything.

DePue: Well, and it says something that you allowed me to look at all those comments that these people made, because you've got those comments later on.

W. Smith: Right. Well, I don't know if you read them or not, but I laid them out there. Yeah, and it's been a long time. There was one thing that really struck me, and then for the life of me now, I can't remember exactly what they said that was negative in nature, but you can read between the lines and say, you know, this is really a compliment. It had something to do with why I was taken to the reactionary camp.

C. Smith: Well, I think—

W. Smith: But they took us up there and locked us in a jail within a jail. They took us up there and put us in the woods, and we stayed there a couple of weeks, I guess it was, before they ever moved us out to Camp Two, Company Three, beyond the officers' camp. For some reason or other, we made a deal with them

then—I think I told you about it—If you stop the lectures, we'll do your work and won't cause you any problems. They stopped the lectures, and we went ahead and did what they wanted us to do.

DePue: Charlotte, what were you going to say?

W. Smith: I'm sorry.

C. Smith: I think the way Bill was raised had a lot to do with the fact that he ended up in that reactionary camp. Bill and his father had such an adversarial relationship that he just never knew when to quit. He never knows when to quit.

DePue: Bill?

C. Smith: Bill does. He just doesn't know when to quit. That old saying, "only the good die young." (laughter) He just won't give up, and that has always stood him in good stead.

DePue: Okay, we're getting to the point where we can wrap this up, I think, but I've got some other things I want to get your reaction to. You grew up during World War II; you had this horrendous experience during the Korean War. You're still pretty young during the Vietnam War. What'd you think of that war and what happened?

W. Smith: I didn't think we should be there to start with. Of course, that was just my opinion. I think I told you, my kid brother died of Agent Orange<sup>1</sup> about five years ago, and his legs turned purple. He pulled four hitches in Vietnam. Like I said, I didn't think we should be there to start with, but maybe they had information that I didn't have.

DePue: What'd you think about all the student protests and the rioting and all the stuff that was going on back in the States?

W. Smith: I think it's a crock. I mean, these kids don't know...from Shinola. They don't know what they're doing. I went on weekend pass one time at Walter Reed with my buddy—I don't know if I told you or not. He had a hand off, and he had a hook. We were downtown in Washington, and they were protesting. We got on the wrong side of the street and got in some fights, and while we was fighting, he got his hook caught in a parking meter, and God, they like to killed him (laughs) till we could get him out of there. I mean, those things happened, but I still don't think... Of course, this was during the Rosenberg<sup>2</sup> trial, I think it was, as well as I can remember. I mean, those things happen. But like I said, you just try to take care of each other. And even some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Agent orange was a chemical defoliant used to make it difficult for the enemy to hide in the jungles of Viet Nam. Unfortunately, some soldiers were affected by it.

<sup>2</sup> He is probably referring to the Pentagon Papers trial of Daniel Ellsberg. The post-WWII trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg occurred at an earlier time.

guys... Well, a lot of the guys won't come to the conventions because of the way they acted in prison camp. I guess they don't want to face men. But I'm not ashamed of anything I did when I was there.

DePue: What do you think about the reasons you were in the Korean War after all of these years? Was that a war worth fighting?

W. Smith: Well, I was over there during peacetime, during the occupation of Korea, in '48 before we moved over to Japan; they hated us as much as they hate us now, and it was all political, I think. I don't really know. Of course, being in service, you know, yours is not to reason why. I didn't question it, but I guess I should have. But what good would it have done?

DePue: Well, you've sacrificed more than almost anybody I've ever interviewed. Do you have any regrets, looking back on all of that now?

W. Smith: No. I could have got out of a lot of things, but I think I told you, when the Chinese said that we didn't get mail because—I think I told you about that, the little dogs. I said, "Well, the dog was probably pulling a 105 howitzer," and the guy behind me was educated at Harvard, so he knew what I was talking about. He took me up to the guy that was giving the lecture, and the guy giving the lecture says, "I should have you shot. W.W. Smith, I should have you shot. I will have you shot for this." And he says, "Get down on your knees and pray to me that I don't have you shot." I just stood up and backed up and said, "Shoot me. I pray to no man." And I stand by that right today. I just won't do it. Shoot me, I don't give a shit. (laughter) I mean...

DePue: That's okay, Bill. That's okay.

W. Smith: It just doesn't matter. I'm not going to pray to any man because I don't believe in it.

DePue: Well, Charlotte, you especially have talked about the phenomenal memory that Bill has, and that's been very obvious going through these interviews. Bill, is that memory of yours a blessing or a curse?

W. Smith: A little bit of both, I think, because sometimes you can't shake it. I try. That's another habit I picked up. If something comes in my mind, I can do this, and sometimes I can shake it out of my mind, but most of the times, you can't. I don't know. In some ways, I guess it's pretty good for the benefit—if it would benefit someone else, I'm all for it, but if it has no benefit for anyone else, why should I put up with it? You tell me. I don't know.

DePue: I'm going to put you in a point where you really have to speculate How much different would your life have been had you not met Charlotte that day?

W. Smith: Oh, I'd have been dead or in prison. (laughter) I probably would have, because when Joe and I was on a spree—Joe was the kind of person, without a

fight, he wasn't living. We went into a place called the Stream Line Grill there in Bluefield. We went in, and there was twenty or thirty people in there, everybody drinking beer, the jukebox was going, and I turned around, and nobody left but me and Joe and the barkeep. (laughs) He started to fight, and Joe, he'd get in a fight no matter where he went or what he did. He was just that type of person. He'd just walk up and start fighting people. I beat the hell out of him one night down at the parade ground down at the city park. He said something about me and his wife, and boy, I jerked his ass out of that car and beat the shit out of him. I said, "Don't you ever tell me anything about me and Emily." I said, "She's a good woman, and you don't even deserve her." Of course, I probably couldn't have beat him if he hadn't have been drunk, but I did. I laid it on him, and he never did mention it again. The whole time we were friends, he never mentioned it anymore.

DePue: Well, Charlotte, from your perspective, maybe your life could have been a little bit easier had you not encountered Bill that day. Any regrets?

C. Smith: No. Never.

DePue: This is the one that was meant to be?

C. Smith: Absolutely, absolutely, from day one. From day one. It might have been different, but you look back and you think, had he not gone through that, had he not met Joe, then we never would have met. I'm sorry that it had to be that way, but God was preparing him through the whole thing by letting him meet Joe, because Joe was from my hometown. So that's the only way I look at it. No, it was meant for us to be.

W. Smith: Did I ever tell you—I think I might have told you—about these conventions, how much money we're saving the government from psychiatric fees?  
(laughter)

C. Smith: Absolutely.

DePue: Best therapy going.

C. Smith: Best therapy going.

W. Smith: Best therapy, boy, I'll tell you. Yeah.

C. Smith: Joe would not go. Joe only went, to my knowledge, once—

W. Smith: He went to two...

C. Smith: Once—

W. Smith: Once or twice.

- C. Smith: Once or twice. He wouldn't go.
- W. Smith: He couldn't stay out of trouble.
- C. Smith: No, he couldn't. He couldn't.
- DePue: Well, the last ten years have been another period of war for the United States, and treatment of prisoners has factored very large into this whole discussion ever since the invasion of Iraq. So first of all, Bill, let me ask you this: What's your opinion about the current war that we're in or wars that we're in?
- W. Smith: I don't know. Like I said, war is hell, and I don't think we should have been there to start with, but on the other hand, they say, well, we haven't been attacked by anybody else. We can be attacked any day. Anybody that wants to attack the United States and the American people's frame of mind, they can get by with anything. I can go out here and buy all the explosives I want and go most anywhere I want and blow it up. It's a free country; you can do what you like. No, I don't think we should have been over there. This is a political war; it was fought for oil which we don't need—we got plenty of it, just politicians won't dig it out of the ground. I don't know. (laughs)
- DePue: Abu Ghraib—I guess that was 2004 that that story broke.
- W. Smith: Yeah, their treatment of their prisoners down there.
- DePue: What was your reaction when you heard about that, especially the nature of the treatment that was being given?
- W. Smith: Well, I didn't think that was right. They didn't have to do that. They were satisfying their own ego. They had no business doing what they did.
- DePue: "They" being the prison guards.
- W. Smith: The prison guards. They had no business doing what they did. According to the Geneva Convention, they didn't have to get out there and strip those guys off naked. Of course, they did that to some of our guys when we were there. They marched them up and down the street naked. But no, that was uncalled for. They were not trying to interrogate them or get anything out of them, they were just having fun. That's the way I looked at it. That's the way the pictures showed. Somebody was just getting off on seeing them together or something like—I don't know what was behind it. I mean, what did they get out of it? What did they gain?
- DePue: But there was a certain group of people in the United States and still today that would say what you went through versus what they went through, there's no comparison, so what's the big deal? Now, what's your reaction to that?
- W. Smith: Run that by me again real slow now.

DePue: Part of the discussion is that American prisoners who were captured by the Chinese or the North Koreans or the Vietnamese or Al Qaeda or the Taliban go through such an incredibly worse experience than what these people experienced at Abu Ghraib, so what's the big deal. Why are we making a big fuss about what happened at Abu Ghraib?

W. Smith: I don't know. I just don't know.

DePue: Your reaction to that argument, though?

W. Smith: Well, I don't think the guards should have treated them like they should have been treated. Now, they're the enemy, I understand that, but they didn't have to take them out and strip them off, you know. That's why I think the guards that did it were just as bad as the men that they were doing it to, in my opinion—and I'd tell them so. (laughter) They had no call to do that. I mean, what good was it? They were only interrogating them, but they didn't get anything out of them. We didn't gain a thing by it except bad publicity is the only thing that they accomplished. Of course, that's just my opinion.

DePue: How about this: do you think we were justified in water-boarding some of the prisoners that we had in Guantanamo?

W. Smith: Well, if it would help, I'm all for it. If it will get information from them. They didn't kill them. (laughs)

DePue: We're getting towards the end here, Bill, so—

W. Smith: That's a bad experience, I'm sure it is, but funny things happen in war, and they're the enemy. They'd do the same thing to you.

DePue: So what you're explaining to me here, what happened in Abu Ghraib, where there didn't seem to be any real purpose behind it, makes no sense to you.

W. Smith: Makes no sense at all, no sense at all.

DePue: But the water-boarding is a different story?

W. Smith: What were they trying to get out of them? Were they holding back information, or what was the purpose in doing it? You'd have to explain to me why you did it or what was the reason behind doing it. Did you gain anything from it? Did you get anything out of it?

DePue: Here's one that's right out of the front pages of today. Does it make any sense to you to bring these prisoners of war—whatever you want to call them down at Guantanamo—and give them a civilian trial?

W. Smith: Nope, nope. They should be tried by the military. They were in the military, they were fighting the military, they were captured by the military. Let the

military handle them. These politicians don't know shit from Shin...  
(laughter)

DePue: Bill, that's okay.

W. Smith: You know? You show me a politician that won't tell you a lie, and I'll show you a corpse. I don't think the way these people think.

DePue: Well, let's go back to your own experiences and wrap this up. And I want both of you to answer from here on out, I guess. What do you think people should know and understand, Bill, about what you've gone through and your experiences?

W. Smith: (pause) Now run that by me again real slow.

DePue: What would you most want people to know and understand, to learn about what you have gone through?

W. Smith: That war is a terrible thing, and man's inhumanity is unbelievable, and to understand that the men coming back from service—particularly the ones that's been in combat—don't expect them to be the same person as they were when they left, because they're not. No matter what they say, they are changed people, just from their experience. They cannot explain it to the civilian population because they don't have words for it. That's the way I feel.

DePue: Charlotte?

C. Smith: Well, I just want to say that, first off, when this war first started in Iraq and they took the prisoners, we had to put him in the hospital with his heart four times. His heart just went wild. It went out of sync, because he knew what they were going to do to them, especially the women, when they took those women prisoners in the first part of the war. His doctor said, "Bill, just turn the television off. Quit watching it. Don't try." So he has an empathy for people that few people have. The quote in the book said that freedom has a taste for some people that other people will never feel if you don't come this close to losing it, or something to that effect.

DePue: "Freedom has a taste to those who fought and almost died that the protected will never know."

C. Smith: Right. So if you don't come close to losing it, you never know what you have. These POWs know what they've got and what they almost lost. The rest of us owe them such a debt of gratitude that we can never, never repay it. As Bill said, they're so changed. They're so changed. So we just have to love them the way they are, love them for what they've done, and always, always be there for them.

DePue: I think that's a pretty fitting way to end this. Any final comments from either



one of you?

C. Smith: No.

DePue: It's been a real privilege for me to get to know the two of you. I appreciate, Bill especially, your willingness to put up with me and all my persistent prying questions as we go through this, but I think it's so important that we record this story and preserve it. So thank you.

C. Smith: Thank you.

W. Smith: Thank you. Thank you.

(end of interview)