

Dartmouth College Oral History Project
The War Years at Dartmouth
Interview with Robinson V. Smith '46
By Mary Stelle Donin
September 16, 2008

DONIN: How is it that you decided to come to Dartmouth?

SMITH: This was where my father was a big influence although he went to Bates. He always thought I should go to Dartmouth.

DONIN: Why is that?

SMITH: I don't know. I had a great-uncle—I guess an uncle—who went to Dartmouth, class of about '03 or '04, William Smart, my father admired much. Great-uncle, I guess.

DONIN: You were raised in New Hampshire, right?

SMITH: Yes, born and raised in New Hampshire. I was conceived in Mexico City actually.

DONIN: Well!

SMITH: I say I'm an original wetback. [Laughter]

DONIN: So you were familiar with Dartmouth. You'd been on campus.

SMITH: Oh, many times.

DONIN: Did you go over there to watch the ballgames and that sort of thing?

SMITH: I saw the great Fifth Down Cornell football game.

DONIN: Oh!

SMITH: It surely persuaded me to go to Dartmouth. [Laughs]

DONIN: Yes, yes. That's a pretty famous event. So you matriculated there in 19—

SMITH: 'Forty-two.

DONIN: Yes, 1942. The war was on.

SMITH: Pearl Harbor was in December, of course, the previous December.

DONIN: Yes, yes.

SMITH: So it had been on for six months or so, I mean for us.

DONIN: I think the class of '46 arrived in sort of different stages.

SMITH: There were some that came in in the summer, took a summer term, before I came.

DONIN: Did you wait and come in in the fall?

SMITH: Most of us came in in September, yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh. What'd you do that summer before you went to college? Do you remember?

SMITH: Probably worked around New Hampton.

DONIN: Had a job.

SMITH: Not much of a job. I remembered I had my eyes straightened.

DONIN: And your dad was the headmaster [at New Hampton School].

SMITH: He was the headmaster.

DONIN: Right. So you—

SMITH: He'd come up from Mexico City. That's where I was in my mother's womb. [Laughs] Arrived in 1926.

DONIN: Dartmouth must have been a very different place when you arrived there in that September of '42. A lot of students had already enlisted, I assume.

SMITH: Not too many at that time.

DONIN: No?

SMITH: They left very quickly. I was just going to say, I have no idea what the matriculation and then drafting, enlistee rate was. But I think '42, '43 was when it really happened.

DONIN: When they started signing up and leaving.

SMITH: By the winter of '43 things had changed considerably.

DONIN: Right. So that first term you had there in the fall.

SMITH: Was pretty normal.

DONIN: But war must have been on everybody's mind.

SMITH: It certainly was. One of the amusing things I remember was my cousin, Dan, my cousin and I came over together and met the president of Middle Mass, and he was a Japanese, George Shimizu. I thought, my goodness, here's a Japanese, president of the dorm, Middle Massachusetts, and he's still here.

DONIN: Yes. Was he Japanese-American?

SMITH: Yes, he was born in the United States.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SMITH: Later on I had a lot of talk with him and in fact he ended up being quite a good friend because when I became an historian, I was on some panel, a history panel. I don't remember where it was. And this thing came up on Pearl Harbor and the relocation of the Japanese. So I called up the alumni office at Dartmouth because I remembered George as a wonderful guy. He and his sidekick, Nobu Mitsui. Can you imagine the Mitsui clan?

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: Anyway, I had about a two- or three-hour telephone conversation with George. And he gave me more information. He married a woman who had been in one of these relocation camps.

DONIN: Wow!

SMITH: And then later on I went out to visit my son who lived in Marin, outside of San Francisco where George lived. And I visited him

several times out there. He was always an ardent golfer, and he was with the civil service in San Francisco. And he told me some wonderful stories. I guess he volunteered and became a member of the US Army and became a translator. It's ironic. The thing about him was his parents were in Tokyo all through the war. He told me about corresponding with them through the Red Cross.

DONIN: But he was born in this country.

SMITH: He was born here.

DONIN: How did you all react to these Japanese students that were on campus?

SMITH: Oh, perfectly friendly. I mean, here he'd been elected the president of the dorm. So I guess he must have been quite popular. He was, I guess, a senior then.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SMITH: He finished up and ended up in the service. That was one of my first experiences at Dartmouth.

DONIN: Yes. Now let's see, you said you had a pretty normal first semester there before the campus started emptying out.

SMITH: The thing I remember particularly was they started to lower the requirements for the fraternities. So I became a Theta Delt that winter.

DONIN: So it was as a freshman you were able to join and pledge.

SMITH: I played freshman hockey and they abolished the team before we had our first game. They sent the best players up to the varsity. They didn't have a freshman team that year. But I did enjoy glee club.

DONIN: So all that kind of stuff was still going on?

SMITH: Oh, yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SMITH: In fact I was in glee club all the time I was there.

- DONIN: Yes. Now you were one of those classes that sort of straddled.
- SMITH: Oh, definitely. We were the most fractured class in Dartmouth history, I think.
- DONIN: Yes. Lots of coming and going.
- SMITH: There certainly were.
- DONIN: So tell us your story. Did you go all the way through without interruption?
- SMITH: No. Now the story is, and of course it was true of Fred, my brother too and my sister. We all were sent to a little kindergarten. A little old unmarried woman and when we were four years old and we went into the public school, we were two years ahead of everybody else. So we were all two years ahead of our classmates. I finished grade school at twelve and went into New Hampton at barely twelve and I entered Dartmouth at 16, barely 16. Dan, my cousin, and I were both 16. My brother, Fred, when he went to Dartmouth, was 16. So for the first two years, we were two years younger than most of our classmates.
- DONIN: And that's a very significant time of life.
- SMITH: I think it was. I was looking back on it and wondering. Socially I think we were must less mature than maybe our.... But I had grown up in a prep school, so I was used to boys older than I in my classes. And it wasn't such a bad transition.
- DONIN: So you weren't intimidated by the older boys.
- SMITH: No.
- DONIN: And life in the fraternity didn't intimidate you, the social life?
- SMITH: No. I enjoyed it.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- SMITH: I roomed in the fraternity my second semester there.
- DONIN: Freshman year?

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: My goodness!

SMITH: First semester I was in South Mass. I had a single room there, and then I moved to the fraternity.

DONIN: So here you were, this 16-year-old kid. You weren't even old enough to drink.

SMITH: We somehow managed. [Laughter]

DONIN: I'm sure you did.

SMITH: We just.... We were quite innocent in those days though.

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: We would drink beer and sing all night. Then I would have a glee club rehearsal the following night, and I'd be hoarse as the devil.

DONIN: Oh, yes. Yes.

SMITH: But that first year was fairly normal at the fraternity.

DONIN: And then at that point they started running classes all through the summer as well.

SMITH: Yes. Now I'm trying to figure out what I did that summer.

DONIN: So you stayed on campus.

SMITH: I must have. I don't remember my summer session there. I don't think I did.

DONIN: They accelerated all the classes and kept going year-round because....

SMITH: Well, the second year there, fall of '43, my cousin and I lived in Richardson. What did they do? Did they close the fraternities?

DONIN: Yes, they did.

- SMITH: I guess that's what happened. So we lived in Richardson. We had this cavernous room on the first floor there.
- DONIN: When did you decide what you were going to major in?
- SMITH: I don't know. I'd always loved history. I was definitely on the verbal side, not the mathematical. I spent my time avoiding math as much as possible. I got through it all right. I think calculus was my limit, though.
- DONIN: Did you have any history teachers there that really...
- SMITH: Yes, John Gazley. John Gazley was a wonderful man. And I think I patterned myself after him.
- DONIN: You got inspired by him.
- SMITH: For some reason.
- DONIN: Uh huh. And you said you did not go straight through. That at one point you left to do your service or—
- SMITH: Yes. I was halfway through my junior year when I was drafted. So I was only two years early. I wouldn't be 18 until my junior year.
- DONIN: So they were waiting for you.
- SMITH: Well, they weren't waiting too hard because I couldn't enlist; my eyes weren't very good.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- SMITH: So I was finally inducted in October '44 in the Navy. I went in as a USNI, US Navy Inductee.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- SMITH: SA, which meant Special Assignment. Which really meant, don't let that man on a ship. He may be dangerous. [Laughter] With my eyesight.
- DONIN: Your eyesight? [Laughter]

SMITH: So I ended up at Seal Beach, California, an ammunition depot in the personnel office.

DONIN: How long were you in?

SMITH: Just—well, two years from fall '44 to the summer of '46.

DONIN: Oh, so you came back in the summer of '46.

SMITH: Yes. They kept us—I reached the heady height of yeoman third class.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SMITH: They kept us yeomen in. We were the secretaries of the Navy.

DONIN: I see.

SMITH: To discharge everybody else. Which sort of annoyed me because all these—a lot of them I know had gotten their education through V-12, and they kept us on later.

DONIN: So you must have been glad to get back to campus.

SMITH: I was glad to get out of the Navy, yes. I had a very easy war, though. As my son said, “Gee, Daddy, it’s lucky you could type so well.” [Laughter] My Navy was just living at the beach and living in LA.

DONIN: Right. Well, you were one of the lucky ones.

SMITH: Yes I was.

DONIN: So when you came back, you still had what, three terms to do? Probably.

SMITH: I got back in the fall of '46.

DONIN: And all your classmates were here.

SMITH: They gave me—They gave certain hours for the service.

DONIN: Right. They gave you points, I think.

- SMITH: Yes, six or something.
- DONIN: Anyway, I finished the summer. I went through the summer of '47, and graduated that fall. Never went to commencement because I was at Columbia in graduate school then.
- SMITH: So did they hold a commencement ceremony?
- DONIN: Oh, yes.
- SMITH: No, I guess they didn't for the fall graduates.
- DONIN: Right, right.
- SMITH: If you wanted to come back in the spring maybe, you could
- DONIN: Did you ever get a diploma?
- SMITH: Oh, yes.
- DONIN: Ah-huh. They mailed it to you.
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: Now were you able to connect back with any of your friends from freshman year when you got back there? Were there any left?
- SMITH: Well, my cousin. We moved... We lived in Richardson one semester. And then with some friends on our floor there we moved to a private home on 8 School Street. I remember Tommy Dent, the soccer coach lived next door.
- DONIN: Where did you get your meals? At the dining hall?
- SMITH: I guess we did. I don't remember. I think we ate at Ernie's or something.
- DONIN: Not on campus.
- SMITH: No, in town. At least I had breakfast there. Then beginning in the spring of '43, my second semester at Dartmouth, a bunch of us civilians, they needed workers. So they persuaded us some of us to work in the DDA.

- DONIN: The dining system.
- SMITH: The Dartmouth Dining Association. So I think I worked for at least two or three semesters with them.
- DONIN: You probably got your food for free.
- SMITH: Probably did. Yes, I remember we did. I worked both at the Hanover Inn as a busboy.
- DONIN: Oh, yes.
- SMITH: And as a dishwasher. I think I was demoted. I successfully.... When I first worked at the DDA, I was a busboy at the Hanover Inn. I managed to pour ice water down the neck of one of the wives of the OCS students that was there then. That was before V-12 started.
- DONIN: Right. Uh-oh!
- SMITH: He happened to be a famous movie actor, the husband, Shepperd Strudwick.
- DONIN: Oh, I don't know that name. Shepperd Strudwick.
- SMITH: He started out as John Shepperd in the movies. And he played the brother of Jesse James, I remember, and a few other things. That was when they had the Officers Candidate School before the V-12.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- SMITH: And then they went to V-12. And I think I dropped a tray of dishes on the table of Ford Sayre, the manager's wife. Anyway, I ended up a dishwasher at some time or other.
- DONIN: No wonder you got demoted. [Laughter] Were most of your friends working at part-time jobs?
- SMITH: Some did. My cousin Dan didn't. But I did, and a lot of them worked at things like that.
- DONIN: Yes. Right.
- SMITH: I made some good friends there.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

SMITH: One of my classmates was Tom Burnap, who became quite a famous doctor. We worked in Thayer dishing out to the V-12ers.

DONIN: So when you arrived there, the president you matriculated under was Ernest Martin Hopkins.

SMITH: Sure. Met him.

DONIN: Did you?

SMITH: He shook hands with everybody.

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: When we came in. Quite an impressive man. Didn't know him too well. Of course I just noticed our yearbook here. This is the 25th anniversary reunion yearbook.

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: It was dedicated to Bob Strong.

DONIN: Oh, yes, the dean.

SMITH: A wonderful dean. He knew my father intimately. So I got reports from him to my father.

DONIN: Uh-oh.

SMITH: Reports on me.

DONIN: Now when you returned in 1946, you had a new president, John Sloan Dickey.

SMITH: Yes, let's see. He came in when I was—did he come in the fall of '46?

DONIN: Fall of '45, I think.

SMITH: Oh, did he that late—that early?

- DONIN: Yes, yes. So that transition must have happened while you were away.
- SMITH: It seems to me I was there when he first came in. But I didn't know him very well. I remember he started the great books program.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm. Great Issues course.
- SMITH: Great Issues. Which for some reason I wasn't required to take.
- DONIN: Well, I think it may not have really gotten off the ground until that year or the year after.
- SMITH: They started it. It was quite controversial at the time.
- DONIN: A whole different way of teaching.
- SMITH: Which I liked.
- DONIN: Yes. Especially for someone who's interested in history.
- SMITH: Of course I was only there three semesters.
- DONIN: Were you a different kind of student when you came back? Do you think you were a better student?
- SMITH: Oh, I was always honors all the time I was back. Maybe low honors before then.
- DONIN: Uh-huh.
- SMITH: Did much better when I came back.
- DONIN: Why do you think that was?
- SMITH: I don't know. Well, I think probably I focused more. But I don't think I went through the transitions some of my classmates who were real wild guys when they first started and came back married and sober. [Laughter] Straight arrows.
- DONIN: They got straightened out by growing up.
- SMITH: I guess so.

- DONIN: And getting married.
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: So where did you live when you came back? Were you back in the dorms?
- SMITH: My cousin Dan and I and a very close friend, he became one of the closest, Larry Denton who was class of '47, lived in Lord Hall. I think that semester over that winter, that fall of '46 and '47, spring of '47. And then I finished up in the summer. I didn't see them. I lived alone in Smith I think over in... and finished that year.
- DONIN: Must have been sort of odd the way you were all coming and going at different times.
- SMITH: It was. I didn't sense any great... Of course we didn't have much class cohesion at the time. Most of my friends that I became friends with at reunions and so on, I had known before.
- DONIN: Were you ever tempted to change your class affiliation and join the class that you were actually graduating with?
- SMITH: Not really. I had lots of friends that came in with me.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm.
- SMITH: That I did know. We had quite a large contingent from New Hampton where I went to prep school.
- DONIN: So you wanted to stick with them.
- SMITH: Stick with that group.
- DONIN: Has the class managed to find its sense of togetherness and sense of identity since?
- SMITH: I think some of us did. I recall that I made a lot of friends with the classes of '47, '48, and '49.
- DONIN: Did you? Uh-huh.
- SMITH: People who were there much later.

DONIN: Because you were all on campus at the same time.

SMITH: Yes. But, see, when I came back, they already had class of '47, '48.

DONIN: Sure. Yes. They were there.

SMITH: And '49. And I guess maybe '50, too.

DONIN: So did you overlap with your brother? You must have.

SMITH: Yes, my last year there.

DONIN: That must have been funny.

SMITH: Well, I don't know. We always got along. We didn't see too much of each other actually.

DONIN: Now have you gone back to your reunions?

SMITH: Oh, religiously.

DONIN: Oh do you. That's nice.

SMITH: As a matter of fact, a close friend, one of my classmates, Jim Von Rohr, just came down the day before yesterday, and we spent the day together.

DONIN: So did you find life at Dartmouth a little bit more constraining when you came back because you'd been out in the big bad world and grown up a little bit? And you know had life in the Army.

SMITH: Well, actually, I was just the right age when I came back. I gained the two years; I'd lost the two years I'd gained when I first came there.

DONIN: So you were right on target.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: You didn't feel too old for the place.

SMITH: Not at all.

DONIN: Because at that point you had on campus, you know, guys from the classes of the early forties.

SMITH: Yes, right. They were old men, some of them. [Laughter]

DONIN: Some of them were old men. Married, with babies, living in Sachem Village or Wigwam.

SMITH: When I came back to write and research in Baker when I was married and had a child, we lived in Wigwam for one winter.

DONIN: Did you? This was after you finished at Columbia?

SMITH: Yes, I was working on my doctoral dissertation, and I was working on New Hampshire history.

DONIN: Ah-hah.

SMITH: So here we were. Living in that place where if you dropped a wet rag on the floor, the rag froze.

DONIN: [Laughs] Yes, I've heard it was not the greatest accommodations.

SMITH: No, I was penniless graduate student.

DONIN: Sure. And your poor wife was there all day with a brand-new baby?

SMITH: She was a wonder.

DONIN: In that freezing cold Wigwam.

SMITH: She loved it. She loved everywhere.

DONIN: Did she?

SMITH: She was never unhappy. At least she didn't admit it. And we had good friends there, too, we met. The Osgoods, Sawyers.

DONIN: They were all back going to graduate school?

SMITH: Going to school.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SMITH: Most of them were.

DONIN: As undergrads.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Ah-hah.

SMITH: Well, no actually, Bill was a reference librarian in Baker. Interesting guy. As a matter of fact, he wasn't even a Dartmouth man. He went to UNH.

DONIN: Now did you think that the quality of the teaching changed at all from when you were there in the early forties, you know, '42?

SMITH: Well, I had some of the same professors.

DONIN: When you got back?

SMITH: When I came back. I had Professor John Gazley again.

DONIN: Did you sing again in the glee club?

SMITH: I sang for four years, all four years I was there.

DONIN: Oh. It was run by—

SMITH: Cobleigh, Don Cobleigh.

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: I never did have the [inaudible]; he came in after I left.

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: But it was a lot of fun. Of course during the war we didn't get to travel much.

DONIN: No.

SMITH: White River Junction. [Laughter]

DONIN: That was as far as you got to go.

- SMITH: After the war we did take one extensive trip.
- DONIN: Did you?
- SMITH: Washington, Detroit, and so on.
- DONIN: Now in terms of girls on campus, when you were young, when you were there at age 16, could you get any girls to go out on dates with you because you were so young?
- SMITH: Any girl would love to go to Dartmouth to those Green Key and Carnival and so on.
- DONIN: Did you date girls from the high school?
- SMITH: No, I dated girls from home. Oh, no, I didn't. My sister was in Mount Holyoke, and she supplied me with girls, come to think of it.
- DONIN: They didn't mind that you were a couple of years younger.
- SMITH: No. That's right. They were usually a year or two older.
- DONIN: Yes. But you were a Dartmouth man, after all.
- SMITH: That's right. No, I had two girlfriends there.
- DONIN: Ah-hah!
- SMITH: I had met through—We had joint glee club concerts with Mount Holyoke, and I went around with her for a while. And a classmate of my sister's for quite a while. That's where they came from, come to think of it.
- DONIN: How did you travel back and forth to see the girls? Did you hitchhike, or did you get rides with other students?
- SMITH: It was very infrequent.
- DONIN: But you did manage to have a social life.
- SMITH: Of sorts.

DONIN: Yes. What did you do? Well, of course you joined a fraternity. Did you do anything with the Outing Club much? Were you an outdoorsy kind of person?

SMITH: I played hockey. That was the only thing—

DONIN: Freshman hockey, that's right. Yes.

SMITH: And then glee club.

DONIN: Between that and your job, you were a busy guy.

SMITH: During the civilian years, very busy. Oh, speaking of instruction, one of the things that was kind of odd was going to classrooms when the V-12 were there. We'd all have to stand up when the professor came in. I don't know whether you had to salute or not, but the V-12ers had to salute.

DONIN: They had to salute.

SMITH: I believe they did.

DONIN: Yes. Did they mix up the civilians with the V-12s?

SMITH: Oh, yes.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SMITH: Oh, definitely.

DONIN: Did you socialize with them much?

SMITH: Not at all.

DONIN: Probably because you were too young.

SMITH: I don't think we had much social life together.

DONIN: But you went to class together.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Were you in the dining hall with them?

SMITH: Well, I worked in the dining hall. And I either ate at the Inn or at Thayer.

DONIN: Did you go to the sporting events? Did everybody turn out and go to the football games and the hockey games?

SMITH: Oh, yes. That was one of the things that—they, of course, had good teams all the time because they even got better athletes from other colleges who were doing the V-12 program.

DONIN: Sure. Sure. And they were older, too.

SMITH: Of course hockey was my love. And we had tremendous hockey teams under Jeremiah.

DONIN: Yes. They won the national championship in 1942, I think it was.

SMITH: Yes, I think they did. They were undefeated for what? Two or three years.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

SMITH: Just incredible. So you couldn't make the varsity if you weren't outstanding.

DONIN: But you had fun on the freshman team.

SMITH: Yes, for a short time, until they disbanded it. That was the only athletic team I made at all.

DONIN: So the frat life was sort of shut down after a while, wasn't it?

SMITH: That's right.

DONIN: But when you got back, it was reopened again? Theta Delt?

SMITH: Went to a lot of movies. [Laughs]

DONIN: Oh, yes.

SMITH: The old Nugget.

DONIN: At the Nugget before it burned down.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: And then I think they had to put the movies in Webster Hall.

SMITH: That's right.

DONIN: That was a pretty popular place then, Webster Hall.

SMITH: I'm just trying to think of the social life. We had to pretty much do it by ourselves. I think we didn't anything much, particularly exciting because we were restricted on travel.

DONIN: Most kids didn't have cars.

SMITH: That's right.

DONIN: And there was gas rationing for a while.

SMITH: I never had a car there.

DONIN: But you feel like you got a good education despite the fact that it was all sort of chopped up.

SMITH: I think so. I enjoyed the history department very much. I took Spanish and French. I had some outstanding—I had Professor Denoeu who was really quite a fabulous guy, in French. Tom Adams—or John Adams, I guess his name was.

DONIN: Oh, yes, John Adams.

SMITH: He was quite a lecturer. Lew Stilwell was a friend of mine. Saw him afterwards.

DONIN: Was he a history professor?

SMITH: Yes, he was American history.

DONIN: Uh huh.

SMITH: Al Foley, of course, was another course.

DONIN: Is he the one who taught Cowboys and Indians?

SMITH: Yes. He was the one. He wrote *Vermont Humor*.

- DONIN: He was a popular guy I gather.
- SMITH: Oh, very popular.
- DONIN: Here's a question for you: Where did the term GOBS come from?
- SMITH: That's what sailors are called.
- DONIN: Oh, the sailors. Never heard that. Nope.
- SMITH: Where did that come in?
- DONIN: You wrote that in your 50th reunion essay.
- SMITH: I'll be darned!
- DONIN: You said, "The campus was a sea of GOBS except for us few civilians who were either too young or too halt to be acceptable. But halfway through my junior year the Navy even wanted me."
- SMITH: Yes. [...]
- DONIN: Now did Theta Delt have a reputation for being any particular kind of—
- SMITH: We didn't have the reputation they have now. [Laughter]
- DONIN: That's what I meant.
- SMITH: A lot of us got very disillusioned with the way we thought it went downhill. No, ours was very—we were swimmers and hockey players. Not so much... Phi Gam was the big hockey fraternity. Quite a — I'd say well-behaved bunch, not the *Animal House* it became. [...]

[End of Interview]

