

Pillar & Post

Les and Carol Smith – Supporting Future Gunsmithing Students

The town of Dalton, New Hampshire was not large. Located in the northern part of the state, it featured one simple ‘Ma & Pa’ grocery store, one filling station and a three-room elementary school.

“It was an old-type country school,” Les Smith explained. “On the cold days, the teachers gave us assignments. We had to shovel coal to keep the furnace going.”



“If you tell people that today, they say, ‘oh, no—no such schools existed,’” he said, chuckling. “Well, I can tell you about the one that I attended.”

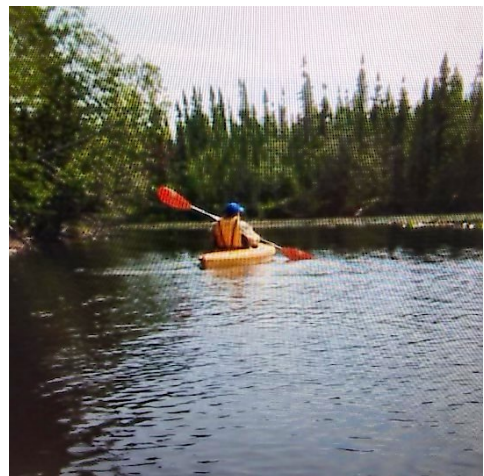
In 1952, the Smith family would move from New Hampshire to Washington. “My dad worked for the Gilman Paper Company. When the paper industry fell through, he was able to get a transfer to Port Townsend, Washington.”

Port Townsend was an agricultural community. As Les grew, the Boy Scouts and 4-H programs would play a big part in his childhood. “Those programs were great,” he said. “I helped start a 4-H horse club with a few friends—we lined up sponsors and built the program. We did backpacking trips in the mountains. We took the horses to state and local fairs, and to local parades. The community loved it.”

Through his participation in the 4-H program, Les was eventually hired as a stable boy at a racetrack in Seattle. “We’d groom the horses and get them ready for their races,” he said. “We got a great big 2% if they won the race,” he added, laughing.



After high school, Les would attend Trinidad State. “I came for the Gunsmithing Program,” he said. “In addition to working for the paper mill, my dad was also a self-trained gunsmith. He did a lot of work—bluing, making stocks. I was around it all the time growing up. It brought me to Trinidad State.”



Les would form good relationships with the Gunsmithing instructors. “Louis Mrace, Bill Prator, James Wilson—they were all top-notch,” he said. “They taught me a lot.”

“I was at Trinidad State to learn my craft,” he added, “but we had a lot of fun, too. I remember how we’d go duck hunting on the weekends. We didn’t have any place to cook them—so we’d end up giving them away. One day the cafeteria manager overheard us and said, ‘I’ll make you a proposition. I like ducks and geese, too—but I can’t cook wild game while the cafeteria is open. But after it closes, I can cook for you.’ It worked out great!”

To make a little extra money, Les and his friends would also capture rattlesnakes to have them milked to make the vaccine. After they were milked, they would return the snakes back to the wild.

“We’d put them in a bag and sell them for their venom,” he explained. “But the person who bought them could only take them at certain times each week, so sometimes we’d have to keep them for a bit.”

“One time a couple guys from Texas thought it would be funny to put the bag of snakes in a dorm footlocker. People would come in and sit on the footlocker—and the snakes would start rattling. They got a bit of a shock! Thankfully, the dorm supervisor never found out.”

“Lots of good memories from Trinidad,” he added. “Meeting different people, being friendly and doing things with the community. Just being involved—that’s what made it so enjoyable.”



After graduating in 1962, Les would join the Army. He completed basic training in California, before heading to Aberdeen Proving Ground in Baltimore to become a specialist in small arms and weapons. From there, Les would join the 11th Air Assault Division at Ft. Benning, Georgia.

“Our division was an experimental fighting group to test new types of weapons, photography, and different approaches to fighting in Vietnam,” Les explained. “I was in charge of small weapons in the company weapons department. I also did maintenance on the Mohawks—they had 50 caliber turret guns mounted on a twin engine turbo jet. That plane had two pilots.”

“We were a unique division. We also had Flying Cranes, Caribous, helicopters—it was a self-contained unit that could head into the jungle and make its own landing field.”

“Our unit also developed recording disks about the size of a silver dollar. We’d drop them on the jungle trails to pick up people talking and record them. We dumped thousands of them. Some of them even picked up sound in their underground tunnels—they were that strong.”

His unit fell under the command of General Harry Kinnard, who notably pioneered the concept of using helicopters to send troops into battle.

“He was another ‘General Patton’ or ‘General Eisenhower’—that type of person,” Les said. “They called him ‘Bulldog’ because he didn’t back down from anything. He had ideas for new types of training and fighting and equipment, and he wasn’t afraid to experiment and design new stuff.”



“I enjoyed that unit—I really did,” Les added. “I worked with advanced weapons that other companies didn’t have access to. I had complete control over small arms. My job was to keep them maintained and working.”



After leaving the Army, Les applied for a couple jobs in the Seattle area. “At that time, Seattle was anti-guns, anti-hunting—they really didn’t want gunsmiths,” he said. “So, I landed a job at a machine shop.”

Les also used his military benefits to return to school and would soon earned his bachelor’s degree at Central Washington University. “In the back of my mind, I thought—if I can’t use my gunsmithing degree, maybe I’ll go into education and teaching.”

“I had all the training to do machine work, plus my army training,” he said. “So, I went in that direction.”

During this time Les would meet his future wife, Carol, while visiting relatives in New Hampshire for Christmas. She was attending school in New York, studying education. Carol would soon transfer to Central Washington University to finish her education degree. They were married in 1967.

“Carol was an English teacher with advanced degrees in counseling,” he said. “She worked with journalism—it was an English-Journalism degree. Carol also did counseling work with junior high and high school students and became a librarian at the elementary level.”

At different points, their careers would take them from Washington to Montana and Alaska. While in Montana, Les and Carol would both earn their master’s degrees at Northern Montana State (now, MSU-Northern).

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“My master’s is a three-fold thing,” Les explained, “Education, Vocational Education, and Outdoor Education and Recreation. It opened up a 37-year teaching career.”

“Carol moved into administration as the person who categorized all the books for the district in Montana. That was before we moved to Alaska,” he added.

While in Anchorage, Les established a VICA club (Vocational Industrial Clubs of America Inc.). VICA was founded by students and teachers who recognized the need for leadership training to complement their chosen vocation.

“The principal at the time was supportive, finding some money—but it was still a challenge,” he said. “Vocational education was slipping at the time, and our equipment was World War II surplus. As machines broke down, we didn’t have the money to repair them. It was a challenge.”

“But Alaska was fun,” he added. “We could hit 100 inches of snowfall in a year, and I got to travel to the arctic circle.”



Although Les has not traveled back to Colorado since the 1970s, he recalled a memorable trip to Trinidad with Carol. “She wanted to see the campus—to know more about the College.”

“Carol saw that Trinidad State offered programs that prepared students for a career,” he said. “She knew that some community colleges in the east weren’t doing that. They weren’t teaching courses that connected students to job opportunities, but Trinidad State had that focus. Carol saw that.”



After Carol passed away in 2021, Les revisited his estate plans to create a legacy gift for Trinidad State. “We had decided to set up an endowed scholarship for the Gunsmithing program. Carol wanted to be a part of this.”

In dialogue with Trinidad State, Les is currently outlining their intentions for the scholarship. This step will ensure that we manage their gift in accordance with their wishes.



Trinidad State is grateful for the generosity of Les and Carol Smith, and we are honored to include them as members of our *Society of 1925*. For more information about creating a legacy gift, please contact Toni DeAngelis at toni.deangelis@trinidadstate.edu or 719-846-5520.



All inquiries will be received with gratitude and respect.