

## Vincent O. Smith Distinguished Alumni

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Alumnews Editor

Vincent O. Smith (BSCE Civil Engineering '50) says his life has included so many highlights he can't remember them all. That comes as no surprise considering a more than 50-year engineering career that includes construction of bridges, airports, dams, canals, tunnels and roads, leadership positions in professional organizations, and recognition by his peers.

"UW got me started down the right road. Since age 8, I'd always wanted to be an engineer and build things. There's nothing more important and necessary in life than getting a good education in order to follow your dreams."

Smith came to Laramie from Sheridan in 1940 to attend UW and completed several quarters with the help of a scholarship, but still struggled financially. Meanwhile, he and a friend kept hearing there was money to be made at aircraft factories in California. They decided to leave school and follow those leads to see what they could find there. It turns out that Smith couldn't get a job at the factory because he couldn't run a milling machine. However, he was able to use his early UW engineering training to obtain employment as a land surveyor with a contractor who was building an expansion to the San Diego Naval Training Station.

With the onset of WWII Smith was drafted. The draft board assigned him to the engineering branch of the service. They recommended he be sent to Officer Training School, in part due to the training he received from ROTC at UW. He completed Engineer Officer Training school, graduating as a second lieutenant. He served in the military for four years, becoming operations officer for a construction battalion in the Pacific theater. He was discharged after the war ended. The GI Bill allowed him to re-enroll at UW, and he was graduated in 1950 with Honors. It had been 10 years from the time he initially enrolled at UW to the time he graduated.

By the time Smith finished college he was married and the first of his five children had been born. He took a few graduate courses at UW but didn't complete his master's degree. As a



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married student, determined to finish his education, there was little time remaining for extra curricular activities. However to this day, Smith remains a loyal Cowboy fan.

Following graduation, Smith got his wish to return to sunny California, obtaining a job with the California Division of Highways. Smith worked there for 10 years, starting as design engineer and rising to the position of district construction engineer. His projects included the Candlestick Cove Open Water Fill, Highway 80 from Carquines Bridge to Oakland, and the McArthur Freeway Highway through Oakland.

In spite of being fairly young, Smith had the opportunity to work on engineering projects that other engineers shied away from. "The older guys didn't want to fail on an experimental and controversial project like building an open water fill over an arm of the San Francisco Bay."

In 1960, he joined Gordon H. Ball, Inc., as general manager, advancing to vice president and finally president of the company. During the 16 years he spent at Ball, Smith was involved in projects such as the Bay Area Rapid Transport System, the Washington D.C. Metro, Vandenberg AFB's Shuttle Launch Facility, excavation for Grand Coulee Third Power Plant, Tehachapi Tunnels, 75 miles of canal for the San Luis Water Project; and many other projects of national significance.

Smith stepped down as president and chairman of the firm following a serious car accident, which required a three-year recovery period. After that time he started his own business, Mark-O Engineering and Construction, dealing primarily with

bond claims and completion of construction contracts that were in default. In that capacity, he was able to combine his engineering skills with a talent for arbitration and mediation.

Smith has been involved with numerous professional organizations, including membership in the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Beavers. He was also a member and past director of Associated General Contractors and past president of Engineering and Grading Contractors Association.

As Smith grew professionally he started to involve himself in philanthropic activities. He established the V.O. Smith Family Foundation, which provides educational support to disadvantaged students. "I started the Family Foundation to help needy people with their education, knowing how hard it was for me financially, I wanted to provide what assistance I could. There are so many young people who are capable of succeeding but just lack the money to go to college."

Smith has helped people through his involvement with educational and social institutions in California and elsewhere. UW has benefited from Smith's generosity, as well. He has established several scholarships for

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students in the College of Engineering, including the Vincent O. and Ann Barker Smith Civil Engineering Scholarship, to assist promising undergraduate and graduate students. Graduate students can apply for teaching or research fellowships to help finance their advanced degree, and undergraduates can apply for scholarship funds as well. In addition, he has made several major gifts to university funding campaigns outside of the College of Engineering. He has also served on the Foundation Board, the College of Engineering National Advisory Board and the Alumni Association 50 Year Reunion Committee.

Smith chuckles when reminded that his name is above a particular room in the Engineering Building. He is amused that a computer lab has been named for him, since most of his professional work was done without computers. He is in awe of their capabilities, wishing he had the ability to use them to their full extent. Smith is proud, though, of his skill at sending and receiving e-mail messages, but calls on the help of his grandchildren when technical tasks get too complicated.

He's impressed with the UW engineering graduates he has seen, and has hired a number of them over the years. "I have hired lots of engineers from Cal, Stanford, Santa Clara, and Oregon State. Those from UW were as good as or better than those from the other bigger schools." He believes that engineers with bachelor's degrees assimilate better in the construction industry than those with master's degrees. The undergraduate education is not so specialized. What does he think engineering students should focus on? "Engineers need to learn more about writing and speaking. They can plan, design and build great things, but they also need the ability to communicate to those who don't understand engineering to further their goals." One other thing: "If they could teach common sense that'd be the most wonderful training for engineers, probably everybody else, too."

Apparently it is Smith's combination of engineering skill and common sense that has helped him succeed. In fact, this is not the first time UW has acknowledged Smith's professional and personal accomplishments. In 2000 he was named to the College of Engineering Hall of Fame. "I was proud to be named to the Hall of Fame in Engineering. It was an honor to be recognized in my field of expertise. The nomination of Distinguished Alumni is overwhelming. I don't even know who would nominate me, but I am truly humbled and honored."

Smith looks forward to his visit to Laramie, in spite of the altitude and the sometimes the "not-quite-California" fall weather. He still comes to Wyoming for a yearly visit with his brother in Sheridan, and enjoys international travel now that he is mostly retired. He's been to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan on business, and has visited several areas in Europe and the Pacific Rim for pleasure. Retirement has allowed him time for his woodworking hobby and for his family. However, he has one complaint about his hobby of golf: "The courses keep getting longer!"

