

# NASA HEADQUARTERS NACA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

## ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

RUTH HOOVER SMULL  
INTERVIEWED BY SANDRA JOHNSON  
VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA – MAY 1, 2008

JOHNSON: Today is May 1, 2008. This oral history is being conducted with Ruth Hoover Smull as part of the NACA [National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics] Oral History Project sponsored by the NASA Headquarters History Office. This interview is being held in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and the interviewer is Sandra Johnson, assisted by Rebecca Wright. I want to thank you again for letting us come to your home today. I'd like to talk to you first about your first husband, Herbert Henry Hoover, and if you can tell us how you met him and when you first married.

SMULL: Okay. It really was through family, because Herbert lost his mother when he was about nine years old. They lived in Knoxville, Tennessee, but his father was from my hometown, Stanley, North Carolina. He would come and visit his sisters and people in Stanley. He met my aunt and fell in love with her and married her. So Herbert was a little boy at that time, I was just an infant, just a baby, but we had known each other in different ways all along as we grew up. I didn't see him that often, of course, but he used to kid and say that he used to baby-sit for me and my sister.

After he started working in South America, he would come home on vacations. I was a junior in college at the time, and he said to my aunt, "I'm going to marry Ruth." She said, "Well, she's nothing but a kid." But my senior year, and after he worked in South America, he decided to come and apply for a job at Langley Field [NASA Langley Research Center,

Hampton, Virginia] as a pilot there, so he was living in Hampton, Virginia, and was working at Langley Field as a pilot, NACA.

The Christmas of my senior year in college, he wanted to know if he could pick me up and take me to Knoxville for Christmas. So my other aunt joined us, so the three of us spent Christmas in Knoxville. He rented an airplane and took me up for my first airplane ride, and of course I just melted. So that began our romance. Then my senior year, I invited him down to our senior prom. Our relationship began to get closer and closer, and he finally asked me to marry him, gave me my diamond, and we were married that summer after I graduated. I graduated in June, and we were married in August. So that's the story of our lives.

JOHNSON: What year was that?

SMULL: 1942.

JOHNSON: So when you married, you moved here to this area, to Hampton?

SMULL: When we were married, he was working at Langley Field, so we moved to Hampton, Virginia. We had a child, a little girl, I guess the year after we were married. Well, she was born in '43. She had a rough time because she was born with meningitis. She developed meningitis after about three or four days. They don't know where the infection came from, it might have been someone in the hospital, I don't know. I remember Herbert just broke down. He fell across the bed and just broke down and cried. He said, "I already love her."

Anyway, it was a rough time, so I spent about the first year having to take care of her, and he was busy with his work, flying and what have you. Then a couple years later, we decided to have one more child, and so we had a son born in '46. We couldn't make up our minds what to name him for a couple days, and finally, I said, "Well, let's just name him for you," and he grinned from ear to ear. He said all along that name of his, Herbert Hoover, really got jokes all the time about it. My son now is Herbert Henry Hoover, Jr., but Herbert said, "We're going to name him Hank," so we call him Hank.

JOHNSON: Let's talk about relocating. You grew up in North Carolina in a home that your family had lived in for several generations, and then you moved to Hampton. What was it like moving into Hampton, into that area, and with your husband working there?

SMULL: It was a big adjustment. Believe me. I was just so young; I was just 21, and he was 30, so he was much more mature and knew what he wanted with his career and everything. So it was lonely at first, but we met some nice people that worked at Langley, NACA, and I had some good friends there, and joined a church there. Herbert wasn't a church-going person because on weekends he'd play golf, he loved to play golf, and he was a good golfer. I'd take the kids to Sunday School. He was an excellent golfer, but I never saw him play, because the kids were little and I'd take them to Sunday School and he'd go out and play golf on Sundays. So I never got to see him play, but he won a lot of tournaments at Langley. He was an excellent player.

JOHNSON: How did the area around Langley, Hampton and the community, how did they accept or treat the people that worked for NACA?

SMULL: I think they accepted them as nice people, friendly part of the community. I don't think they built them up in any special way, I don't think so.

JOHNSON: We've heard people refer to the community thinking of them as the NACA Nuts and that sort of thing.

SMULL: Yes, they did call them NACA Nuts, I remember that. Yes.

JOHNSON: You said you met several people and became good friends. Were there any organized social activities that you took part in as far as the NACA group?

SMULL: I don't recall being in an organization. They had NACA parties of course that type of thing. I don't recall their having an organized group to get together. I don't recall that.

JOHNSON: What area did you live in?

SMULL: Well, at first we lived in Phoebus [Virginia] when we were first married. Phoebus is the little town right after you cross the bridge, coming over here. In fact, when we lived there, they didn't have a bridge. We had to take a boat to get over to Virginia Beach, they didn't have a bridge then. We lived in Phoebus, and then we moved to Hampton, and after both the children were born, we moved to Newport News [Virginia] on James River Drive, which was a beautiful area where a lot of the NACA people lived. Like [John A.] Harper was the fellow that was with

Herbert when he had his accident. Jack [John P.] Reeder was one of the pilots. Don Bales was an engineer. The [Jerome B.] Hammack's lived next door. So there were a lot of NACA people in that community.

JOHNSON: So as you said, you made a lot of good friends. Did you belong to any kind of organizations or did you, were you working at that time?

SMULL: I didn't go to work until after I lost Herbert. I taught school for a couple years. I didn't have a chance to do anything but just staying at home with the kids. I joined a group called PEO, have you ever heard of it? It's the Philanthropic Educational Organization. It's a wonderful group of women and we support colleges and give money for people that can't afford to go to college. It's a college-oriented thing. Philanthropic. I still belong to it.

JOHNSON: You joined it back then, during that time period?

SMULL: Yes. Let me see what else I belonged to. Of course, I was always active in our church there, the Presbyterian Church. I think I joined a Garden Club, Home Demonstration Club. That's about all.

JOHNSON: When you married him, you knew that he was a test pilot. How much did he share with you, what he did or the dangers of his job?

SMULL: He was so happy in his job and loved his work, and he always said he felt safer in an airplane than he did in an automobile. So we never really considered it too much, it was his livelihood, but he loved it. He just liked his work, and didn't consider it. We made the mistake of not discussing if something happened to him, what I should do. The only thing he ever said, "If something happens to me, be sure you pay the mortgage on the house." And we didn't discuss anything else, which was a mistake. It definitely was a mistake. We should have discussed more.

JOHNSON: Did you ever know about any of the missions that he was flying when he was doing them, if they were going to be especially dangerous?

SMULL: Of course flying the X-1, he definitely wanted to do that. He said, "We both will benefit from it." I don't know exactly what he meant by that, but he said, "We both will benefit from it," and of course he got a lot of recognition from that. But he just didn't discuss the danger of it, and I wasn't smart enough to ask him about it.

JOHNSON: You were young, too. As you said, you were very young.

SMULL: Exactly. Right.

JOHNSON: Did he fly back and forth to California to go to [NACA] Muroc [Flight Test Unit, now NASA Dryden Flight Research Center, Edwards, California]?

SMULL: He was in California a lot of times. It was really hard with the kids not having their dad around. But that was his life, that's what he wanted to do. Like my son said, "Mother, he was doing what he wanted to do." So I just have to accept it that way.

JOHNSON: What did you do, personally, to handle the stress?

SMULL: I just wasn't aware of it.

JOHNSON: So you never felt the stress. Or did you feel like you had to relieve his stress by taking care of things?

SMULL: I was young, I just didn't think a thing about it.

JOHNSON: Didn't think about it?

SMULL: Nowadays, I certainly would, now that I'm an old woman I would certainly do it. Back then, I was just so young and immature.

JOHNSON: Did he have any way of, when he came home, any hobbies or anything that you remember that he may have used to cope with some of the stress that he had at work?

SMULL: Well, he was good at making furniture. Hand work. We had, in the garage, all kinds of tools that he would make, he would build tables and chairs, and he was really talented in that way. Of course, he loved his golf; he was really playing a lot of golf.

JOHNSON: I've heard some people describe golf as stressful.

SMULL: It is, it is. I play golf now, I've been playing for years and I love it, but it is stressful.

JOHNSON: I know that test pilots, most of them have a certain type of personality. Very cool, very calm under stress. Was he also that way, and did he handle other situations in his life the same way?

SMULL: Yes. He was just a smart, capable individual. Very calm, and he never seemed to get uptight about much of anything. But, the morning that he had his accident, after breakfast—he had a nice singing voice, and he left singing, "Oh, what a beautiful morning! Everything's going my way." And then about midmorning, a chaplain came to my house. But anyway, he was happy that morning. He was singing, "Everything's going my way."

JOHNSON: I'm sure that's a comfort to you, to know that he was happy. As your son said, he was happy doing what he wanted to do.

SMULL: He was doing what he wanted. But my son hadn't even started first grade. It just, it was—well, it still haunts me, because Herbert was so strong and capable, and he wanted me to



be that way, too. I was young and didn't know exactly how to handle things. After his death, we had these friends, couples that worked for NACA. They would invite me and ask me to come and have dinner with them and whatnot. I'd miss him so, being with our friends and he wasn't there, and I'd come home and cry to myself all night.

One day, I had to go to the dentist and I had to take the kids with me, and the dentist had to give me a shot of Novocain and I passed out. So the dentist took us home. The next day I went to the bank and I collapsed, I fell and I collapsed in the bank, fell on the floor. Then I go to the doctor, and he said, "Ruth, you've been through too much. It's been too much of a shock. You're just going to have to learn to accept and start all over."

Well, my family was such a wonderful support that the kids and I went back home to live with my parents for the rest of the year. I had a real good friend whose husband was a doctor in Chester, South Carolina, and she said, "Come on down and have him give you a physical, and let's just see if we can find out what's wrong." After the physical, he said, "Ruth, we don't have a pink pill that will bring your husband back. There is no such thing as that pink pill. You're just going to have to start all over and accept it." So that was—that first year was plain hell. I don't know what I'd have done without my family. They were the ones who took over.

I had a degree in education to teach but never got around to it, and I had this wonderful aunt that volunteered—she taught school at home, I was in her class in first grade—to come and live with the kids and me, and we both taught school there in Newport News. So she was a real savior for me, she really was. So I taught school for two years.

Then, I don't know whether this has been mentioned or not, but I had this PEO friend, she worked for NACA, she worked for Thomas [L.] Smull, my last husband. She and her husband kept saying, "We've got to find Ruth another husband!"

I thought, "Gee, that's what I need." Well, they introduced me to the nicest—he was a pilot, but he was in the Air Force. He fit into our family so well. The kids loved him and he loved them, and they were so excited that we decided to get married. He was a very delightful guy. He lived two years. He walked in the house one night and he said, "I've got a splitting headache." He was gone the next morning. We flew him over to the Naval Hospital here, and the doctor came up to me and he said, "He's not going to make it." He was 41 years old. Herbert was 40. So that was another tragedy.

Then the same gal that introduced Kurt and me, my second husband, said, "You've got to come to Washington [D.C.] and meet Tom, my boss." She worked for Tom Smull, who was in the Office of Grants and Research. He was at Langley for about four years and then sent to Washington. I said, "I'm not ready to go out." They called me one morning—I was working in a church office at that time—and Lee's husband called and said, "Come on up and attend the Christmas party that my group is having." I said, "I'm not ready to go out." I said, "I'll call you tonight when I get back."

So I called him that night and I said, "I'm not ready to go out." He said, "Well, you get off your high horse and get up here," he said, "just consider it an evening out." Well, I made reservations on a flight to fly to Washington, and I got up that morning and there was snow on the ground, and I thought, "Oh, good, I don't have to do." I called the airport, "Yeah, planes are flying."

So I go, and I meet Tom. We just considered it an evening out, that's all it was, but he knew Herbert. They had worked together and they were friends. A couple weeks later, I got a letter from him, and his handwriting was terrible. I couldn't decipher what it was for my life. It took me about two days to read it. Finally, he says, "I'm coming to Langley for a meeting.

Would you go have dinner with me?" So I did. He had a sailboat up near Annapolis [Maryland] with West River Sailing Club, and he'd invite me up to go sailing with him, and it just kind of developed. We had so many mutual friends, he knew the Reeders and the Bales, and it was just all ones that Herbert and I knew. So he asked me to marry him, so I did. We were married 35 and a half years.

JOHNSON: Were you hesitant the third time, considering what had happened to your first two husbands?

SMULL: I was just, I don't know, young and stupid. I didn't know what I was doing. My son said, "Mother, you should write a book. Call it *Three Strikes and You're Out*." (laughter) So that's what I should do, I've got to do that.

JOHNSON: One of these days, huh?

SMULL: One of these days, write a book, *Three Strikes and You're Out*. But they all were great guys, they really were. Tom was divorced from his first wife, and he had that one daughter who is the artist. She lives in San Diego [California]. So we're close friends. I got an email from her the other day and she said, "Well, what Herbert and Tom did for NACA is they really contributed, they both did," and she said, "and thank goodness you were part of their lives."

JOHNSON: That's so sweet. That's very sweet.

SMULL: So that's my story.

JOHNSON: During that time period, organizations of people that had dangerous jobs and those sort of things, they didn't always know how to handle those situations. I was wondering if, when your first husband died, and since it was doing testing, was there any kind of organized group or any kind of effort to help you get over this or to help you in any way?

SMULL: No. Did you ever hear the name, Mel [Melvin N.] Gough? He was one of the pilots when the accident happened, and he came out to see me, he said, "We have lost our key man. We've lost our key man." Dr. [Hugh L.] Dryden came to see me too. But no, there was no particular group that the got around to give you comfort. No. I look back on it, and the kids and I, we all should have had some support and help. We should have. We needed help to accept what had happened because it was hard on them, too. It really was.

JOHNSON: Yes, I can't imagine being there with those two young children and what you must have been feeling.

SMULL: Yes, it was tough. And then the minister that performed Herbert's funeral came to see me, the kids and me, one cold winter night. I was busy working supper for us, and I said, "Oh, Mr. Thompson, I miss him so much." He said, "Ruth, there are more things important than the flesh." That was the help I had from the minister. "More important things than the flesh." Than human beings. More spiritual. He didn't give me any help whatsoever.

JOHNSON: Because unfortunately, you were still in the flesh, weren't you?

SMULL: Yes. He reminded me of [Barack] Obama's minister. (laughter) Oh dear! They aren't always right, either.

JOHNSON: No, not always. They're still human no matter what, aren't they? Well, as you mentioned, he was an important pilot, and he was the second person to break the sound barrier, and the first civilian for NACA. I've read some about him, and they said that he would deliberately fly through bad weather to conduct the flying research.

SMULL: Oh yes. He chose to drive through thunderstorms.

JOHNSON: Quite an amazing pilot.

SMULL: Yes, he was. I don't know what he was made of.

JOHNSON: Well, having him and then your second husband, he was also a pilot for the Air Force?

SMULL: Yes, but he wasn't a test pilot. He was just Air Force.

JOHNSON: Then your third husband, I know he worked for NACA, too.

SMULL: He was in charge of grants and research.

JOHNSON: Was that when he was with NACA?

SMULL: Yes, he worked for NACA at Langley. This just tells you about what Tom did, that's his record [referring to document].

JOHNSON: Did you relocate to Washington D.C. area? You said you lived in Alexandria [Virginia] for a while after you married him?

SMULL: After I married him, I sold my home in Newport News and we moved to Alexandria. So that's where I lived for 35 and a half years when I was with him. Although we moved to Palmdale, California. We lived in Palmdale five and a half years, because Tom had job there at Edwards Air Force Base as some kind of a—I don't know exactly what he was doing there.

JOHNSON: What years were those?

SMULL: Let's see. Early 70s, '72. About '70. We lived there five years.

JOHNSON: How was that, living in California after being out here?

SMULL: Well, it was a big adjustment. It really was. I thought, "I cannot take this desert climate." The wind blew and the sun was just hot, hot, hot, hot, hot. Every morning, Tom would

get up and pull the drapes and he'd say, "Oh, another beautiful day in Antelope Valley," and I thought, "If I hear that any more, I'm going to croak. I want to see rain." We didn't know what rain was in the desert.

Of course, we played a lot of golf there, we lived right near the golf course. You'd go out there and the wind would just be blowing everywhere and the hot sun. One day—I used to walk and pull my clubs—and when we came in from playing 18 holes, I thought, "Gosh, I don't feel good." It turned out it was 112 [degrees] that day. I played 18 holes of golf in a temperature of 112.

JOHNSON: Oh my goodness! I guess you didn't feel very good, did you? You were probably dehydrated.

SMULL: I was, that's what I was.

JOHNSON: You said you were young and you didn't really have a grasp of what your husband was doing at that time. Did you know the wives of some of the other test pilots? You weren't friends with any of them?

SMULL: No. Later on, I met Bill Gray's wife. And of course Bill Harper and Peggy, I met them. Of course I knew Jack Reeder and Francis. But I didn't know all of them, but I did know the Reeders and the Harpers, and of course Howard Lilly wasn't married. I remember when he was killed.

JOHNSON: Did you ever go back to teaching? You said you taught those two years.

SMULL: I taught two years, and then I married. My career was marriage. Marriage and widowhood.

JOHNSON: Well, you've married some high achieving men, so I imagine that's a career in itself.

SMULL: They all were. They all were such nice guys, they really were. I came across a lot of old letters from them. Been lucky in a lot of ways, but none of them hung in there. Someone said, "Ruth, you're hard on them." But Herbert was 40 when he was killed, that's awful young. Then Kurt at 41. That was hard on my kids too, because they were so crazy about Kurt. I have the cutest picture of Kurt and Hank with their arms around each other. That was really hard on them. They didn't know Tom that well when we got married, but my son Hank and Tom became very good friends.

JOHNSON: That's good. It takes a special person, too, to do that. To develop that friendship and that love with another child. Is there anything you want to talk about?

WRIGHT: I do. You mentioned that your husband was the second to break the sound barrier. Did he come home and tell you that day? Tell us about that day that he did that.

SMULL: I don't think he called to tell me. I don't think he called to tell me.



WRIGHT: He just went to work and did something historic and came home?

SMULL: No, I don't think he did.

JOHNSON: When did you find out?

SMULL: I don't even remember. Maybe someone at Langley told me, but I don't recall when he told me that, if he told me.

WRIGHT: Did Tom talk much about his work?

SMULL: Tom? Oh yes. Tom talked a lot about his work. He worked with the universities in promoting the projects with NASA. He did a lot of traveling. He accomplished quite a bit.

JOHNSON: That fits in well with what you were doing, with PEO. Working with education.

SMULL: Yes.

WRIGHT: Tom being in the position that he was in, did you attend a lot of activities, entertaining?

SMULL: With Tom? Yes, I traveled a good deal with Tom.

WRIGHT: Any special memories with some of those travels?

SMULL: Not particularly. I can't recall any.

JOHNSON: Did you visit some of the other Centers other than Dryden, obviously, you were living in that area?

SMULL: Yes. I'm trying to think, what were some of them? I know we did, but I can't recall them now. I know we did.

WRIGHT: One of the other questions I was going to ask you. I know that Herbert was a pilot when he came back to Stanley, and you had mentioned to us before that he was down in South America working for Standard Oil [Company]. How did he apply for that, how did know about that job? Do you remember how he found out?

SMULL: How did he get that job? [Referring to document] That tells all about him.

WRIGHT: How'd he become a pilot during that time frame?

SMULL: Well, after he graduated from college, he said he was just walking down the street one day and he saw this sign, "We need you," Uncle Sam said, "Come on and join the Army Air Corps." Back then it was called the Army Air Corps. So he just decided to join the Army Air Corps. This tells about when he joined the Army Air Corps.

WRIGHT: Okay.

JOHNSON: It was 99<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron.

SMULL: Then he was to be fitted for airline pilots.

JOHNSON: I think I read that, that he was going to go—was it American Airlines?

SMULL: I think so. This is when he received the Octave Chanute Award or the Air Medal. A friend of his told him that there was this job available for Standard Oil Company. He would fly for different reasons there, and Herbert said it was more like a taxi cab driver except they were driving a plane. He got tired of that, and that's why he wanted to come back to the [United] States. As I recall, he told the people—I don't know who it was—the NACA people, that he would be willing to work for them for a year without pay just to get into the organization because it was such a wonderful organization. Tom felt the same way, he said it was a fabulous organization to be working for, and he felt so lucky to be a part of the NACA clientele.

JOHNSON: Did he train some of the other pilots coming up?

SMULL: I think he trained, I think he helped with Bob Champine.

JOHNSON: Yes, I think that's what I read, that he did train him. Or he was one of the ones that was instrumental in hiring him.

SMULL: Yes.

WRIGHT: Another thing you were telling us, about when he would come to Stanley before you two were married, he would fly a plane around there.

SMULL: Yes, he would just rent a plane and just come and thought he'd fly around the old home place and see how things were going. He'd drop a note in my aunt's yard that said, "Meet me at the airport at such-and-such time."

WRIGHT: Pretty confident that you'd be there.

SMULL: Oh yes.

JOHNSON: It said in here that he had flown over 100 different types of planes. And he was there the whole time during World War II, he was at Langley doing test flights?

SMULL: Yes.

WRIGHT: Did you two have a concern that he would go to be as part of World War II action as a pilot?

SMULL: I think he had to take a physical, but they decided that he would be more important working for—his work was more important. The same thing happened to Tom. In fact, Tom was drafted in World War II and he thought he was going to be sent somewhere else, but they sent him back to Langley and he was put in a barracks right across from his office at NACA. He was there for three months and they decided his work was more important than being in the service, so he moved back to his office. Tom said if he lived long enough, he would write about his career in the army—it was three months. (laughter)

WRIGHT: Was he doing the grants then, or what was he doing during that time period?

SMULL: I don't know. It tells in his biography, I think. Grants and research. I don't know.

WRIGHT: Tom was in NACA and NASA at a very interesting time, since he was there during the transition.

SMULL: Oh yes. He said it was wonderful. You see, he was happy in his career, he really was. He said he was lucky to be working for such a wonderful organization. But I don't know, I was just being young and immature and everything, I just didn't realize how serious his job was.

JOHNSON: Well during that time period, a lot of times wives didn't always know what their husbands were doing or how dangerous those jobs were, because I think a lot of the men felt that they had to take care of this and they didn't bother them with it.

SMULL: Yes. That's our daughter [referring to photograph].

WRIGHT: Beautiful. And what's her name?

SMULL: Susan.

WRIGHT: Susan. That's nice she's only an hour away from you, now.

SMULL: Yeah, she's the one who lives in Yorktown now.

JOHNSON: That's wonderful. The book is nice to have all of this all in one place like that.

SMULL: Just little mementos.

JOHNSON: Yes, this is nice.

SMULL: That's my aunt that Herbert's father married. She was celebrating her 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday, and in the article in there, she said, "It's no fun growing old." It sure isn't.

WRIGHT: Interesting name. Wixie [phonetic].

SMULL: Wixie. I don't know where she got that name.

That's my daughter and her two little children. That's her grandson. Of course, they've grown up and married.

JOHNSON: Time flies, doesn't it?

SMULL: Oh dear, don't tell me. This is when he got the Air Medal—President [Harry S.] Truman.

WRIGHT: That's right, you mentioned that to me on the phone.

SMULL: President Truman signed it. I gave it to my son, he has a trophy and all that, he has it framed.

WRIGHT: You were there for the presentation?

SMULL: Yes.

WRIGHT: Tell us about that day. What was it like to meet the President?

SMULL: Oh, it was exciting. Of course, the President wasn't there, no. He just signed [the award].

WRIGHT: Was this at Langley, the presentation?

SMULL: Langley, yes.

WRIGHT: Was he the only one getting a medal that day?

SMULL: I think, yes.

WRIGHT: That was nice, a ceremony just for him.

JOHNSON: Yes, that is nice. What year was that?

SMULL: Let's see, '40 -- I don't know. I think it tells it somewhere.

JOHNSON: Okay, we'll find it. I'm sure it's in there.

WRIGHT: '49 was the Air Medal.

SMULL: What year was that?

WRIGHT: 1949 he was awarded the Air Medal for the flight that he did in 1948 when he broke the sound barrier.

SMULL: Then the Octave Chanute Award, I don't know.



WRIGHT: That was also 1948.

JOHNSON: These are wonderful pictures. Was this when he graduated from the Advanced Flying School? Oh, that's so nice. Kelly Field, Texas.

SMULL: Yes, he was at Kelly Field. Then he was at San Antonio [Texas], too.

WRIGHT: He must have been at Randolph [Air Force Base].

JOHNSON: Are there any other stories that you can think of, or anything about that time period? Maybe about your neighborhood or some of the people you knew, that you'd like to share? Maybe talk about the way things looked, or some of the activities that you did together?

SMULL: I can't think of any. We were only married ten years. Just so much. He was so busy flying and with his work and everything.

Oh, we had planned to go to Nag's Head [North Carolina] the weekend that the accident happened. We had already made reservations. I said, "We don't ever do anything as a family. We've got to get together as a family." So we decided to make a trip, take the kids and go. And then, of course, we weren't able to go. But we weren't too family-oriented because he was so busy with his job.

WRIGHT: I'm sure he was up early and gone in the morning.

SMULL: Yes. He was away lots.

JOHNSON: It's quite a demanding job. It took a lot out of a lot of people, I'm sure.

WRIGHT: Well, it's nice that your family's coming in to go to the [NACA] reunion this weekend.

SMULL: My son and daughter are coming because I wanted them to join me. But we're just going to be there for the little banquet. It's at the Reed Center. Do you know where the Reed Center is?

JOHNSON: On site?

SMULL: It's on the field, it's at Langley, but where is it located? I'm sure they'll tell us as we drive up to the gate.

JOHNSON: You stay on that entrance road as you go in, and just keep on the same road, and it's on the right-hand side.

SMULL: Really? The Reed Center?

JOHNSON: It's not hard to find.

SMULL: We were just wondering. Hank called me last night and wanted to know if I had the directions on how to get there. I said, "No, they'll tell us at the gate as we drive in."

WRIGHT: Don't need to know right now. That's the other thing we learn as we go through life. Some things you just don't need to know right now.

JOHNSON: Yes, until it's time.

WRIGHT: Well, I'm sure you'll have a good time visiting with lots of folks. Did he ever take you back up in the airplane? You said he took you for that first ride.

SMULL: One time, on one of his trips out to California, Edwards and Muroc, the kids and I flew out to Knoxville to be with his dad and my aunt, and on the way home, Herbert picked us up so we flew with him then. That's the only time, but he kept saying "Later on, we'll buy our own plane and we'll have family trips."

WRIGHT: How old were the children that time when he flew you all home?

SMULL: Well, Hank hadn't even started first grade when he was killed. I think Susan was only eight or nine, she was in about third grade.

WRIGHT: That must have been pretty exciting for them, to come home in a plane.

SMULL: Yes.

JOHNSON: These are some of the planes he flew.

SMULL: We have the Naval Air Station here, and that's Oceana. So we had planes flying around here all the time.

JOHNSON: You get just used to the noise, don't you?

SMULL: Used to it, I guess.

WRIGHT: Did you enjoy living up in Alexandria?

SMULL: I loved Alexandria. It's a pretty, pretty town. So much history there. It's a beautiful, beautiful place, it really is. Yes, I liked Alexandria.

WRIGHT: I noticed you had a home on Admiral Drive?

SMULL: Admiral Drive. It was right on the Mount Vernon Parkway down towards Mount Vernon.

WRIGHT: Did you get a chance to explore the area?

SMULL: Oh yes, we used to ride our bicycles down on the bike trail to Mount Vernon.

WRIGHT: That is very pretty, especially when all those cherry trees start to bloom.

SMULL: Oh yes, beautiful, beautiful.

JOHNSON: Did he fly helicopters?

SMULL: I don't think he flew helicopters. Jack Reeder took us on a flight in a helicopter one time, but I don't think Herbert flew the helicopters, I don't think. Did you all know Jack Reeder?

WRIGHT: No.

SMULL: Francis died just about two—I guess she's been gone a couple years now. Did you all ever meet Chuck [Charles E.] Yeager?

WRIGHT: No. I take it you have.

SMULL: He didn't speak very nicely of the NACA pilots. He was a guy who did it all, not the rest of them. He said later on in his book that he's written, "Later on, two of them were killed," like they didn't know what they were doing. You know, Howard Lilly and Herbert Hoover. But he came through it all, he knew what he was doing, but he didn't speak highly of them.

JOHNSON: That's such a shame, when they were all trying to achieve the same thing.

SMULL: Yes. I think Gloria Champine feels the same way. There was an article that Chuck Yeager wrote that was not all true, and Gloria corrected it. She wrote him.

WRIGHT: Good for her.

JOHNSON: She seems to be recording a lot of information.

SMULL: Oh yes, yes. Have you seen this? [*Flight Research at Nasa Langley Research Center*, by Mark A. Chambers]

JOHNSON: No. I've heard about it, and I wanted to get a copy of it, but we haven't seen it yet.

SMULL: I sent Steve [Stefan A. Cavallo] a book. "A very nostalgic picture of Herb and all the others, long ago." He said, "There aren't many of us left standing." "Look forward to seeing you."

WRIGHT: Good. Tell him hello for us.

SMULL: But that, you can get that at any of the bookstores.

JOHNSON: We're going to have to look for that while we're here. I knew that they had done one, we've talked to the publishing company and I knew they had done one, so we'll have to see if we can find one.

WRIGHT: I would imagine too, that the NACA pilots that were at Langley tended not to get the recognition that the pilots did over at Muroc or Dryden, because they were here.

SMULL: Right, yes. It's always the one that does it the first time gets the most recognition. That's why Chuck Yeager has gotten such recognition.

JOHNSON: Then there was a competition between the Air Force and then the civilian pilots, too.

SMULL: Yes. Have you ever read the book by Chuck Yeager?

WRIGHT: No.

SMULL: Well don't. (laughter)

WRIGHT: All right.

JOHNSON: We'll take your word for it.

SMULL: Here's his book. But he's the one. He's the one that knew what he was doing. He didn't get killed. You know the book, *The Right Stuff* [by Tom Wolfe]? Herbert was mentioned in that, in the book *The Right Stuff*. I don't think he was mentioned in the movie. Have you ever visited Muroc or Edwards Air Force base?

WRIGHT: We have been out there, yes. So we knew what you were talking about with the Antelope Valley environment. It is a little warm. It's just dry.

SMULL: Yes. Have you ever heard about Walt Williams?

WRIGHT: Yes.

SMULL: He was an outstanding engineer.

[interruption]

SMULL: This is what he says. "I never could figure out why the most arrogant bunch at Edwards were the NACA pilots."

JOHNSON: This is Yeager writing [in *Yeager, an Autobiography*].

SMULL: Yes. "The National Advisory Committee of Aeronautics had got into the flight test business while I was still flying the X-1. They bought a second X-1 and hired civilian test pilots



to fly it. I flew it first, checked it out, then turned it over to them. Their two pilots took turns cracking the gear on landing. The X-1 demanded an experienced fighter pilot at the grounds, and those two just weren't qualified to fly it. Both of them were later killed." I mean, isn't that arrogant, to say that? "Both of them were later killed. They didn't know what they were doing," he said. I can't stand that guy.

JOHNSON: You just keep the book around so you can push it away? (laughter)

SMULL: To think that's what he would he would say. Well, he was just—I don't mean this in a bad way either—but he was not educated like in engineering and doing the research work. He was just a real gutsy guy that could get up there and fly.

JOHNSON: He was a pilot.

SMULL: He was a daring devil. I don't take that away from him, but why should he criticize the ones that were trained? I think Herbert did most of the research on that X-1.

JOHNSON: Well, it sells books.

SMULL: (laughter)

WRIGHT: Did you ever see the X-1 plane? Did you see the planes?

SMULL: I saw it at the museum in Washington. The one called the [Glamorous] Glennis. Yeager named it for his wife.

WRIGHT: Did you ever see any of the planes that Herbert flew?

SMULL: I think I saw the P-1. That was his favorite plane. He flew some out at Langley when they had air shows, and I was out there when he had some shows.

JOHNSON: So you went out to watch the air shows and he was flying some of the planes?

SMULL: Yes, I went out when he was flying. There was an air show that he participated in.

JOHNSON: Were there a lot of people?

SMULL: Yes, a lot of people were there that day. A long time ago.

WRIGHT: There's still lots of people at air shows.

SMULL: Herbert's been gone almost 60 years. You know, he was killed in '52. And this is 2008. It's been a long time.

JOHNSON: Anybody else in the family fly?

SMULL: No.

JOHNSON: No other pilots?

SMULL: No, my son was never interested, it never appealed to him. I don't know what got Herbert so interested in it, but just he joined the Army Air Corps and was trained and liked it. That's what he said. He was thrilled to work at NACA. I remember his saying that, after he gave up his job in South America, he offered to come and work for them without payment for a while just to just to get the job with NACA.

JOHNSON: We appreciate you giving us the time today to talk to us and to look through all your albums and everything.

SMULL: Well thank you for coming down. I don't think you learned anything about what went on.

JOHNSON: Yes, we did. We like to get everyone's perspective, and you definitely had a different perspective being the wife of a test pilot, or actually two pilots before it was over with, and the dangers that go along with it.

[End of interview]