

HERSCHEL C. SMITH: 1907–1966

E. L. DAVIS

IN SEPTEMBER, 1966, Herschel Smith died suddenly at the age of 59, and Early Man research lost one of its staunchest supporters. Geologist, pilot, miner, racing swimmer, and construction engineer, Hersh was also a devotee of Pleistocene archaeology. He was extremely well read in this field and kept abreast of its smallest details.

Born near Salt Lake City, Utah, he received a B.A. in Civil Engineering at the University of Utah, wrote his M.A. thesis at the Montana School of Mining, flew as relief pilot on National Parks Airlines (now Western Airlines), and surveyed the Green River Gap for the United States Geological Survey under the direction of Dr. Earl Douglas. It was this work which aroused his interest in archaeology and Pleistocene geology, an enthusiasm which was later to take him to Israel to work with Stekelis and to Africa to work with Leakey, and which made him an indefatigable fund raiser for such projects.

As his own construction projects grew into a huge business, he also enlarged his involvement with archaeology, drawing many other influential people to its support. Hersh was a catalyst, a dynamo. He was a most magnetic man. When

he sat in a restaurant, people came and went toward his table like streams of ants; yet many of them were individuals on whom Hersh was putting “the touch” for large contributions to some aspect of an archaeological project. Their awareness of this in no wise diminished the loyalty he had engendered in them.

Hersh was scientifically trained, but he never let unnecessarily lugubrious views of science spoil his fun in the archaeology game. You never knew when your field camp would tremble and shake as a Piper Aztec roared over at tent level with Hersh at the controls and Willard Libby, Carl Hubbs, and Jay Gould aboard — to land neatly on the playa. He relished sitting under a canvas fly in the desert and eating improvised sandwiches with archaeologists.

The Tule Springs Project of 1962–1963, designed to test coexistence of prehistoric men and extinct animals near Las Vegas, Nevada, is an example of Hersh’s effectiveness. Research was directed by Richard Shutler, Jr., and the Nevada State Museum. Work was funded through a grant from the National Science Foundation, but to a great extent it was made possible by Hersh’s gift for mobilizing individuals, labor unions, and private industry. He brought the wallop of business enterprise into the fuddy-duddy preserve of archaeology — big machines, big money, team work by a battery of specialists. In connection with this project, Shutler writes: “He was one of those rare individuals whose great interest in a subject inspired others to greater efforts; yet he did not intrude in areas for which he was not trained, relying on specialists in these fields to carry out their work.”

Willard Libby says of this project “of one half million dollars of effort, only ten per cent was cold cash and the rest was services donated. The labor unions gave labor. All we had to pay was insurance premiums and the chow line and small stipends for the indigents — the graduate students in archaeology.”

After Tule Springs Hersh’s favorite of several projects was Pintwater Cave, located within the Indian Springs Gunnery and Bombing Range in Nevada. Hersh, as Associate Archaeologist with Nevada State Museum, financed and directed a preliminary excavation for the Museum with Dr. Charles Rozaire as chief field archaeologist.



Herschel C. Smith shown second from left at Tule Springs. Reading from left to right: Willard F. Libby, Herschel C. Smith, Jay Gould, and Harned Hoose, all directors of The Isotopes Foundation.

Entry to the area was on weekends only when the range was dormant, and this restriction along with others imposed by the Air Force made for slow going. Even so Hersh charmed the Air Force into granting far more privileges than they had ever intended. Hersh did not live to see the results of this project in print, but he was delighted with its yield, which, in brief, provided radiocarbon dating of occupations for at least 9,000 years along with Amargosa, Pinto, and Gypsum Cave artifacts.

L. S. B. Leakey writes "the help that he gave many in connection with our research and his unflinching hard work in support of projects . . . is something we shall remember."

Not only did many of us work with him, admire him, and receive his help, but we were very, very fond of the crazy guy. The sentiment of his many friends for Hersh was expressed by Libby in a quotation from Dylan Thomas, closing the funeral address:

"Oh I was young and easy in the mercy of
his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea."

SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF MAN
San Diego, California
February, 1967