HOBART MUIR SMITH

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HOBART M. Smith is one of the most distinguished herpetologists of all time, and he is one of the world’s leading experts on Mexican herpetofauna. As a field biologist, taxonomist, and teacher, he has made a lasting impact on the field. His career has become a paragon of wisdom, inspiration, and collegiality. He continues to serve as mentor to students as well as professionals who have been lucky enough to learn the way to his office. Hobart (HMS) was born 26 September 1912, in Stanwood, Iowa. His birth name was Frederick William Stouffer. His biological parents were Harry M. and Blanche Stouffer, farmers, and the family included five children older than HMS. He can remember two of the boys, Chester and Jimmy. He can also remember that he had a sister, but he can’t recall her given name. Shortly after HMS’s birth, the family moved to Norwalk, Ohio, again to pursue farming. However, Harry was killed in World War I, after which the children were orphaned when HMS was three years old. Soon thereafter, he was adopted by Charles Henry and Frances Muir Smith. After leaving the orphanage with the Smiths, HMS never saw his siblings again, although he had some correspondence with Chester who became a farmer in his adulthood (Norwalk, Ohio). From Chester he learned that Jimmy went to Seattle and that his sister was adopted by a Florida family who eventually moved to Hawaii. Frances M. Smith was a teacher and her husband was a postal worker. Hobart was their only child. The family lived in Oklahoma, first in Shawnee and later in Okmulgie. These were the towns in which HMS received his grade school education, supplemented with home schooling by Frances. The family moved again to Bentonville, Arkansas, where HMS went to high school. These various moves were occasioned by Frances’ health, as she had tuberculosis and each of the moves was designed to provide her with better treatment opportunities and a more salubrious environment. Nevertheless, both Frances and Charles died before HMS finished college, but they left sufficient funds to pay for his undergraduate education at Kansas State University (KSU).

During high school, HMS was a perpetual runner. He was small, so it was often for self-preservation. He would rather run than walk. In his senior year of high school, however, a mysterious disease struck, producing severe tachycardia upon the slightest stress or exercise. This put an end to HMS’s running habits. Hobart also had an allergy to caffeine, which exacerbated the tachycardia. One consequence of the combined effects of the disease and the allergy was a period of adolescent reflection that resulted in a resolution: “If I’m gonna do anything worthwhile, I had better get to it, because I am not gonna live very long.” Hobart speculated that his mystery disease might have been rheumatic fever, but several doctors in later years absolutely insisted that he never had rheumatic fever. Whatever his teenage disease was, HMS thought the event was of great importance in getting him settled down and in bringing about the beginnings of maturity and the work ethic, traits that were soon to facilitate his progress in college.

Before getting into the Kansas State years, we have a charming anecdote from HMS’s early days in high school. During the summer between his freshman and sophomore years, he was sent to Boonville, Missouri, to work on a farm owned by relatives. Though the work was arduous, he came to love it. He tended chickens and gathered eggs, picked fruit, and dried extensive quantities of fruit by cutting and arranging the thin pieces on the metal roof of a storage building. That summer, he read by lantern light a serialized novel published in the weekend newspaper, a feat judged to involve high merit by the others on the farm, none of whom had learned to read. So thoroughly did HMS enjoy his work and high status on the farm, that he missed it terribly when the time came to return to Bentonville. In fact, he decided that farm life was much superior to his lot in Bentonville and that he ought to skedaddle from the city in order to make his way back to Boon-