As far as we know, the subject of this perspective and its author are not related, although the parallels in our lives are remarkable. We grew up in neighboring communities in western New York State, and our mothers were both schoolteachers. We attended the same university, and were drawn into the study of fishes by the same major professor. We even ended up doing research on the same tiny Caribbean island. The subject does, however, retain exclusive rights to the nickname “Smitty,” by which he is universally known, and which the author concedes on the basis of priority. As a final coincidence, the author’s brother and family live outside Denver, Colorado. That is how we found ourselves at Smitty’s house in nearby Colorado Springs, enjoying the hospitality offered by him and his wife, Marj.

The Smiths live in a spacious, split-level house on a quiet, tree-lined side street, close enough to the main highway to be convenient, but far enough off to be away from the noise and commotion. On a clear day, which is most of the time in Colorado Springs, Pike’s Peak dominates the western horizon, as it did for the explorers and settlers who passed through the area in the 19th century. On the August day that we visited, the air was clear, dry, and comfortably warm, altogether a perfect place to spend a summer day and listen to the story of a life in ichthyology.

Clarence Lavett Smith was born on 19 December 1927 in Hamburg, New York, a small town about ten miles south of Buffalo, the only child of Clarence Lavett Smith, Sr. (ca. 1895–1961) and Mildred Gaeckle Smith (ca. 1895–1971). His father worked for many years at the Bethlehem Steel plant in nearby Lackawanna but took early retirement and thereafter operated a small farm in Orchard Park. Living in the country and working around the farm gave Smitty an introduction to nature. In high school, he had a particularly influential biology teacher who helped him develop his interest in science. Although Smitty was not much of a joiner during his school days, he was active in the Boy Scouts, reaching the rank of Eagle Scout. This was during World War II, and when his scoutmaster went into the Army, Smitty became the acting scoutmaster by default. What he remembers most about this experience is that it convinced him that he never wanted to be an administrator when he grew up.

After graduating from high school, Smitty enrolled in the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. At the time, he thought he might become a veterinarian, and Cornell was well known for its college of veterinary medicine. It was also, as Smitty admits, one of the few colleges he knew anything about. Although his mother had graduated from the state teacher’s college in Buffalo, no one else from his family had ever attended a college or university, so he had no direct experience with any of them. As a resident of New York State, Smitty would be eligible for the low in-state tuition rate, another important factor. It proved to be an excellent decision.

Cornell at that time had a particularly strong program in zoology, or, as it would be called today, “organismal biology.” Among the prominent faculty members were the herpetologist Albert Hazen Wright (1879–1970), ornithologists Arthur A. Allen (1885–1964) and Peter Paul Kellogg (1899–1975), the mammalogist William J. Hamilton, Jr. (1902–1990), the comparative anatomist Perry W. Gilbert (1912–2000), and the ichthyologist Edward C. Raney (1919–1984). Although he arrived with vague intentions of studying veterinary medicine, his first zoology course convinced Smitty that his true interest lay there, and he never applied to vet school.

The most influential figure in his undergraduate career was undoubtedly Raney. Zoology at Cornell was then undergoing a kind of generational transition. The best-known faculty members at the time were probably Wright and Allen. Wright had authored, along with his wife, Anna, authoritative books on snakes and anurans of North America. Arthur Allen had made Cornell into one of the leading centers of ornithological research in the country. Both, however, were aging, and their best work was behind them. Raney, on the other hand, was a rising star who was gathering an outstanding group of graduate students around him. More than one student who had come to Cornell because of its reputation in ornithology was converted to ichthyology by Raney’s dynamism. Raney had an ability to recognize talent in students, and he gave them the opportunity to pursue their interests. Indeed, the “Cornell School” of ichthyology was rivaled only by Stanford.