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HOW I MET C. EARLE SMITH

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In 1941, when I had received my PhD from Harvard University, I had the opportunity to go to the Colombian Amazon on a National Research Council grant to begin ethnobotanical work, especially on the components of curare or arrow poisons.

The Indians of the northwestern part of the Amazon had the reputation of preparing unusually potent curares and many different types of curare according to the kinds of animals that the hunters wanted to kill. Furthermore, there were suggestions that the natives of this region employed plants unknown elsewhere as curare components.

Immediately before I was to leave, I had a call from the late Professor Elmer D. Merrill, director of the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University. He said, "I have $500 left from a grant. I also have a very promising undergraduate whose one ambition is to prepare himself to be an ethnobotanist in the tropics. I am deeply impressed with this young man whose name is C. Earle Smith. Would you be willing to interview him and possibly take him on your expedition to Colombia as a helper? I am sure that he can learn much more with you in the field than he can from any lectures or books."

That afternoon, "Smitty," as he was known amongst his fellow students, phoned me and told me that Dr. Merrill had suggested that he request an interview with me. We arranged the interview. I had already half decided in my own mind that it might be advantageous to the student and to me, since I knew that Professor Merrill had a well known and uncanny ability to "size up" students. It was this aspect of his perspicacity that influenced my pre-interview thinking.

Smitty appeared, and we had a most cordial interview. I immediately realized that here was a young many fully determined to dedicate his life's work to tropical ethnobotany. I told him then and there to prepare for the trip and to follow me as soon as he could leave. He left overjoyed.

There was one point in the interview that impressed me more than anything else. Even in 1941, $500 would not go far in travel and living. I pointed this out to Smitty. Dr. Merrill had told me that Smitty was working his way through Harvard. Smitty informed me that he had saved up $350 that year and that, since he was going to take half a year off, he would put this towards the $500 that Dr. Merrill had offered. I knew that once we got out of cities and into Indian country our expenses would not be high, and I decided then to help this young protegé from my own grant should he turn out to be as promising as we suspected he might be.

I had my reservations to Colombia, and they could not be changed without an extra charge. But Smitty was so anxious to go that within ten or twelve days he followed. In the meantime, I had found in Bogotá a lovely but inexpensive

British boarding house run by an elderly and motherly English lady who had spent years in Colombia. We spent several weeks, Smitty and I, in Bogotá getting used to the high altitude, collecting plants in the high moors or *páramos* on the moutains surrounding Bogotá, working in the National Herbarium and becoming acquainted with the very friendly and helpful staff of the Institute of Natural Sciences. Soon we had preparations made for our trip south and into Indian country.

We went by bus, the least expensive way—a five-day trip to the small city of Pasto near the Ecuadorean border. From Pasto, we went east to the high mountain-girt Valley of Sibundoy, inhabited by several thousand Kamsá and Inga Indians. The Capuchín missionaries, interested in native anthropology and ethnobotany themselves, welcomed us with open arms and set us up in an extra room in their large school. We collected in this beautiful valley, where the Indians still had impressive knowledge of medicinal plants, for several weeks, assisted by the missionaries and the native medicine men.

One young Kamsa boy, especially knowledgeable about the plants and their local uses and names, showed extreme interest in our work. When it was time to leave Sibundoy, he asked if he could accompany us to learn more and to see the forests of the lower warm country to which we were headed. His father agreed that he go with us but that he return immediately, because he did not want the boy to be exposed in the hot country to malaria. It turned out to be a great boon for both of us, especially for Smitty who, for the first time, could experience working with a native Indian and appreciate their profound knowledge of the properties of the plants of the ambient vegetation.

Again we were welcomed by the Catholic missionaries in the town of Mocoa. Through their good will and help, we were introduced to a German who had spent many years in the Colombian Putumayo, the State of which Mocoa is the capital. The Putumayo has a very heavy Indian population, with a number of different tribes represented: Inganos, Sionas, Kofáns and other smaller groups. A number of Indians of various tribes worked for the priests and for the German who had extensive agricultural holdings. We were able to make extensive ethnobotanical collections. Smitty was such a dedicated helper and was learning so much about the many tropical families and genera and becoming so adept in gathering ethnobotanical data from the natives that I resolved to have him accompany me as I penetrated deeper into the northwest Amazon where Indians were less acculturated.

Unfortunately, news of Pearl Harbor came over the radio in the priests' residence after a month's work that we were able to accomplish in the Mocoa region. Smitty decided to return to Bogotá and then back to Boston. He signed up with the navy, I understand. I was assigned to return to the Amazon to help on the programme of procurement of rubber from wild trees for the war effort, as the Japanese had by that time taken over all of the British and Dutch colonies and their rubber plantations. I remained for the following twelve years in the Amazon and did not see Smitty until the 1960s, when he had earned his doctorate and was well on the way to becoming one of the outstanding ethnobotanists of this century. His greatest contribution probably was his extensive research in archaeoethnobotany, but as a professor in the University of Alabama he trained

a number of ethnobotanists and returned to the Colombian Amazon to initiate ethnobotanical studies among the Tikuna Indians in the region of Leticia. He turned this study over to one of his excellent students who eventually published a summary of the plant uses of this famous tribe. With all his teaching and research, he found time to serve on committees and to attend meetings in which he read papers on his research in ethnobotany and economic botany.

When the International Botanical Congress met in Seattle in 1969, I was asked to chair the section on Ethnobotany. Following the Congress, the papers read in this Section were published in book form. Who did the editing and preparation of the manuscripts but my helper of many years before in the Putumayo—Smitty!

Smitty's death in an automobile accident represents a tragic loss for the fast-developing field of ethnobotany. Had he lived, there is no doubt that ethnobotanical progress would have profitted greatly not only from his own insatiable spirit of research but also for his training of students in this field that so desperately need specialists in view of the ever more rapid loss of ethnobotanical knowledge in primitive societies as a result of acculturation and westernization in many parts of the world.

I have often thought how fortunate I was in heeding Professor Merrill's suggestion and how happy I was in my short collaborative field work with Smitty. Although I was in a way his teacher, he certainly taught me much in that brief period of joint research among the Indians of Colombia's Putumayo.