

James T. Smith Autobiography

August, 2024

James Thomas Smith (Jim) was born on 8 November 1939 in Springfield, Ohio, to Earl Gearhart and Betty McCartney Smith. Jim graduated from Springfield High School in 1957. His parents then moved to California to continue careers as clerks with the Post Office and Air Force. Jim was the first in his family to attend university. Supported by a National Merit scholarship, he earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Harvard in 1961. During those years he was heavily engaged as a reed player with bands and dance and theater orchestras. He soon stopped that but retained a vital interest in music for the rest of his life.

Jim crossed the country again to begin graduate study at San Francisco State (SFSU) and then Stanford alongside employment as a mathematician for the US Navy. In 1963 he married Helen Marie Patteson, a fellow student born in 1940 in Petersburg, Virginia. She taught social science and biology in secondary schools in San Francisco and in Regina, Saskatchewan, while Jim completed his studies. Their son Jedediah was born in Regina in 1968. Jim earned the PhD degree from the University of Regina in 1970 with a dissertation on the logical foundations of geometry supervised by Prof. H. N. Gupta.

Jim and Helen returned to San Francisco in 1969 to pursue teaching careers in the public schools and at SFSU. Both also served in administration. Jim continued research in geometry and was a founder of the SFSU computer-science program. For short periods he also worked as a software engineer and taught that at Mills College, University of Alaska, CSU Hayward, and SUNY at Subang Jaya, Malaysia. Jim published an advanced geometry textbook and eight books on software engineering. A few years before his 2009 retirement, he changed emphasis to history of mathematics and coauthored three books on the lives and work of the Italian and Polish mathematicians Mario Pieri (1860–1913) and Alfred Tarski (1901–1983).

The Smiths became adept at outdoorsmanship with long backpacking trips in high mountains each summer for about thirty years. During 1997–2021 they spent about half of each year at a second home in rural California overlooking the Klamath River. They continued to greatly enjoy classical music and musical theater. They generously supported those activities, higher education, and other humanitarian organizations. Jim devoted much of his energy to learning about logical and spatial relationships. From Helen he learned much about people and how our history unfolds. He was equally devoted to helping others with similar quests.