

A road to freedom for Smith

When people first meet Superior native Harry Smith, they make assumptions about his injury. When they discover that Smith spent years toting dangerous explosives from the rail station to the mine, they are more certain than ever that his hand was mangled in a terrible accident.

Which makes their surprise all the more amusing to Smith when he tells them he lost his hand in a car crash when still a toddler, and in his 28 years working for the mines in Superior, he never once had an accident.

Smith's dad did location and assessment work for the mines when he first came to Superior in the early 1900s. "My dad wasn't an educated man, but he could look at a rock and tell you what was there. He always had an instinct of where a vein would run," Smith says.

His father spent many years at the Belmont mine, pulling out mostly silver and a little copper and gold. The mine was located about two miles southeast of Superior. Smith recalls sitting in his dad's office at the Belmont mine as a teenager with two of his five brothers, listening in amazement as the news came over the radio that the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor.

In 1925, the Smith family settled on a homestead of 100 acres about six miles outside of town. The ranch is what got the Smith family through the depression in the early 1930s. Smith's father held a 25-head permit for cattle, including milk cows; Smith's mom churned her own butter to help save money.

The ranch also sported chickens and a vegetable garden whose riches were canned by Smith's mother. "We didn't have a lot of money, but we got by," recalls Smith, who was one of seven children that had to be fed each day. "Mom made fig jam from our fig tree. We never had lunch; we always had a big breakfast and a big supper. Sometimes we could have a tortilla with beans or with fig jam and butter in the afternoon."

Smith grew up on a ranch and had a father who spent many years in the mining industry. But Smith, who describes himself as "more mechanical in nature," decided to take a different path for himself and, after marrying in 1946, moved to Eugene, Ore., with his new bride to work in a machine shop.

Smith spent nearly 10 years in the machine shop, where engines ranging from one cylinder to big diesels were constructed and re-constructed. He eventually became shop foreman. They might have stayed forever, if not for his wife's Vitamin D deficiency. On the coast of Oregon, hours of sunshine are a welcome but rare occurrence. So they chose to come back to sunny Superior.

Smith went to work for Magma Copper Mine in 1955, spending his first six months in the lumberyard, bringing up timber from San Manuel. He ran the first front-end loader that Magma ever had.

Smith drove every kind of truck the company owned, from Model As to a 1937 Ford pickup to a Ford half-ton. He spent a lot of time running "errands," whether it was picking up parts in Tucson or shuttling the general manager's wife back and forth to Phoenix. But his most dangerous assignment was the years he spent bringing explosives down from the San Pedro & Southwestern Railroad

(SPSR) rail station at Paul Spur, located 10 miles west of Douglas, to the storage house at the mine.

From 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., six days a week, Smith would get the explosives order from the mine office, get the keys to the storage house, load the powder on a truck, and bring it up to the shaft openings so the crew bosses could load it in before the rest of crew went underground.

The 50-pound boxes were a mix of special gelatin powder, and somewhat unstable, Smith says. A railcar full of 1,200 boxes of powder would take all day to unload, since the 12-foot truck bed could only carry 300 boxes at a time. And driving fast on the rutted dirt roads clearly was not an option.

While a small crew of men loaded the powder from the railcar into the truck bed, another crew was back at the storage house moving the older powder forward, so the newest shipment could be placed in the back. The storage could hold 1,500 boxes of powder, stacked to the rafters.

Later, the mine switched from its special gelatin to carbonate powder, which proved to be not only more stable, but more economical as well. One hundred pounds of carbonate pellets would cost the same as a 50-pound box of stick gelatin powder.

The carbonate came in 50-pound bags, which was pumped into a drill hole with a pressurized hose. The previous gelatin powder had to be put into a stick and then inserted into a drill hole before a blasting cap could be tamped down onto it. Sometimes the cap would be tapped a little too hard, causing it to explode prematurely and injuring or killing several miners.

The carbonate powder was far more stable and didn't need to be tamped, Smith explained. At its peak, the mine was using 44,000 pounds of carbonate a week, versus the 55,000 pounds of gelatin powder used previously.

Many of Smith's bosses thought of him as a "company" man, meaning a manager or a boss, but he never was, and he turned down manager positions that came his way. He liked the fact that each day brought a different assignment. When he wasn't transporting blasting powder, he was driving all over the state on one errand or another for the company.

"I got to be moving all the time. I got to drive all over and stay busy. I'm the kind of person who can't sit still and do only one job," Smith explains.

Even after retiring from the mine when it closed down in 1982, Smith still found ways to stay busy. At one point, he served as a member of the town's Planning and Zoning Commission. Smith is concerned about future development in town and wants to make sure it "goes in the right place for the right reason." After all, his only child—a daughter—lives in Superior with her own two children.

"It's a nice town, but it could be a lot better," Smith asserts. "It's quiet and it's got great scenery. I'd like to see the population back up, get some more houses in here. Still, I wouldn't live anyplace else."