

*To understand Yuma, Jim Smith tells a visitor—all visitors, you suspect—
is to understand the Colorado River.*

And to understand Yuma is to begin to understand Jim Smith.

Though all places have a good amount of history, Yuma may have gotten more than its fair share.

*If you've ever driven through a town that seemed to lack any past worth mentioning—
and you know you have—tell its residents to go get their fill in Yuma.*

And when they get there, the fella they want to speak with is Jimmie Dee Smith.

He knows the city, its people, its past—and he has a hand in its future.

*Almost as an afterthought—Smith would rather you not add—it may be worth mentioning that
he is the newest President of the State Bar of Arizona, its 74th—
and the sixth one from Yuma, he's pleased to say.*

A SENSE OF PLACE

New State Bar President Jimmie D. Smith

About the most un-neighborly thing you can do to a Yuma lawyer is to mention Phoenix, but it bears saying that the two cities are a good three hours apart—a bit less if you have a fluid sense of traffic laws. But those are three hours of highway that Jim Smith has traveled countless times in his work on the Board of Governors.

For the Yuma lawyer interested in State Bar service, Smith says with a smile—and he smiles often—vehicles are a commodity. He ventures that those who previously represented that city on the board probably wore out a car or two. Smith himself is on at least his second truck.

So it's no wonder that Smith is right at home in his red pickup. And it's there that a traveler to those parts is given a tour of Smith's fair city.

In the expansive cab, a gentle background to conversation is the ubiquitous country music—old school maybe, but broadcast via satellite radio, a great benefit to the long-haul president. Smith never thought he would pony up \$16 a month for the service, but now admits he likes it quite a bit.

A small luxury, maybe, but worlds away from Smith's earliest years.

Toltec, Arizona, in the mid-1940s may have been a paradise—if you were an iguana, maybe, or a cotton plant. But for the more upright species, it was a hard and unrelenting place, where dust and poverty were part of the landscape.

"You talk about a depressed agricultural area of Arizona," says Smith, "and I think you're going to select Toltec."

The town—you may not find it on your map—is right next door to Eloy on the way to Casa Grande. Cotton farming was its bread and butter.

Born in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1944, Smith was "too young to remember" when his family moved to Toltec. His dad had been a bomber pilot in the U.S. Army Air Force, and he would have been

content to keep flying for Uncle Sam after World War II. But the government had more pilots than it needed. So the desert beckoned with the promise of a job as a crop-dusting pilot.

The family business would give Smith one of his first jobs, as flagman to indicate exactly where his dad should dust. More than once, the young boy would get dusted himself and "hit the deck" so the plane wouldn't hit him.

Smith's dad would "take those wheels right down to the ground," says Dick Coffinger, a friend and fellow board member. "The farmers wanted it right over the crops, and not 15 feet over the crops."

Out of the fields and inside the classroom, Smith was part of a tiny rural school.

"When I was in the seventh grade, there were three people in my grade," laughs Smith. "It was a very small school."

Was Toltec a good place to grow up? Smith pauses before answering. "I think it was." But then he adds, "I didn't have anything to compare it to."

Like everyone's childhood memories, Smith's are mixed, and after high school "in town"—Casa Grande—he was happy to find the dust of a new place to creak his shoes. Ask what his goals were as he was about to graduate, and Smith's laconic and unhurried speech—a trademark of his—disappears in a big-city minute: "Not live in any more trailer houses, and leave town. And that's what I did."

He did, with a vengeance, and since then two traits have marked his path. First, building structures for friends and family with firm foundations—no trailer wheels for him. And second, cultivating a sense of place—a home—in his life and work.

Both of which ultimately brought him to Yuma—via Flagstaff.

The boy who grew up in the desert had no intention of staying there. He aimed for Flagstaff, maybe to attend Arizona State College (later called Northern Arizona University). More than anything, he wanted a climate change.

BY TIM EIGO
PHOTOS BY JILL JONGEWARD
at Lutes Casino, Yuma

But with no money to speak of, he looked around for a junior college, which was free in the 1960s. With a few friends going to Arizona Western College in Yuma, he decided to head west. He'd never been to Yuma before, and he arrived on a Greyhound bus.

Yuma attorney Steven J. Rouff has known Smith for 33 years, and he recalls Smith's first year there.

"He came here with absolutely nothing. He left high school and put himself through college. When he came to Yuma, he didn't even have a car; he used to hitchhike back and forth to AWC."

For Smith, Yuma was a place that could get him to Flagstaff. "I certainly didn't set the world on fire, but I learned a little bit about what I might expect college to be."

His plan worked. He eventually went north and took his degree in accounting. But that was not to be his life's work.

"I liked accounting," Smith says. "But I didn't feature myself as somebody that was going to sit behind a desk and work with numbers every day, push a pencil around."

That's when he first considered law. A friend wanted to become a lawyer, they both worked in Flagstaff after college—Smith as a sometime-auto mechanic—and so Jim agreed to go into the venture together.

"I didn't have anything else to do," Smith recalls. "I was single,



and here I had a college degree. I said, 'Let's go. I don't know anything about it, but I'm ready.'"

Years before, high school counselors had encouraged him to train as a mechanic ("They thought that was a pretty good future for me"). Now, even as he worked as a mechanic, he swam away from that forecast—into uncharted waters.

"I was never in a lawyer's office," he says, "ever in my life,

until after I had graduated from law school. I had no idea what lawyers did.”

Smith’s new venture was marked by a brand-new law school. In 1967, he entered the inaugural class of ASU Law School.

He speaks humbly about his admission. Because it was the school’s first year, there were twice as many slots as usual. “That’s the only reason they ever accepted me,” he says.

And that almost wasn’t to be. He initially had been accepted to the UA Law School, but not to ASU. But a week before classes, someone in ASU admissions called to invite him—but only if he said “yes” that very day. Some applicants from Flagstaff had been accepted but had chosen to go elsewhere, and the new school wanted students from Northern Arizona.

When a visitor points out to him that he was a diversity applicant—of the geographic variety—he laughs and says, “I guess I was.”

However his law career began, Jim Smith is a part of that first class—and history.

But the man who never knew any lawyers was on no fast track into firms or courthouses. After passing the bar exam, he continued to work for some months as a mechanic in Cameron, north of Flagstaff, up at the east entrance of the Grand Canyon on the Navajo reservation. At a service station and towing business owned by a friend, he worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day—with a bar card in his pocket.

Smith smiles as he says, “But I got paid good for doing it.”

Smith found few lawyer jobs in Flagstaff, but he heard about a job in Yuma. He drove out and was offered the job—which didn’t last long.

He says he was there three or four months (though a friend recalls Smith lasting a year in the job). Whatever the timing, Smith and Rolle, Jones & Benton parted ways pretty quick.

“I just simply didn’t work into their program,” Smith concludes concisely, “and their program didn’t work into me.”

It could have had something to do with the fact that the young lawyer spent all his time learning about the courthouse up the street and those “trials” they put on, rather than researching tax code provisions for an estate practice. But in any case, he was out.

“I left on Friday, and I was a solo practitioner on Monday.”

And there he’s been ever since, at the corner of Second Avenue and Second Street. In 1975, he built his own office building across the street, so he remains at Second and Second.

“Here’s what a lawyer’s office looks like that has been practicing for a lot of years in exactly the same area,” says Smith.

He’s not kidding. Every level surface is covered with files or rolled-up blueprints. A couch is home to boxes of documents. His desk chair has a cracked arm, though it looks worn and comfortable. But this slump-block building is one he is rightly proud of, for he designed it on a barroom napkin with an architect friend and built it himself.

His interest in construction is clear throughout downtown, where Smith can point out various structures he’s built. The man who fled Toltec trailers plants buildings firmly in the ground.

“If I knew what I know now,” Smith says, “I would have gone to architecture school, because I really enjoy conceptualizing buildings. I’ve never made any money doing that, because when you build your own, it usually takes longer. But that’s not the object of all of this. I never built a building for somebody else.”

Many of his buildings house lawyer friends. And each was built with solo practitioners in mind.

Bob Schmitt knows Yuma and Smith well. Schmitt served on the board and as State Bar President while practicing there.

“Jim Smith owns more office property in Yuma than I think everybody else in town combined. They’re not big, 15-story things; they’re six units

here, five units there, three units here. But he’s been just incredibly successful in all his ventures.”

“He’s about half contractor these days,” says Yuma lawyer and former Bar President Larry Suci. “He’s got building projects going on everywhere around here.”

When he practices, Smith is primarily a bankruptcy lawyer, but now he’s mainly a bankruptcy trustee and he represents himself and other trustees (“He’s sort of the guru of bankruptcy around here,” says Suci). And Smith enjoys the solo life.

“You’re your own boss. You don’t really answer to anybody but the court. You make your own absolute decisions as to how much work you want to do, what cases you do.

“Nobody has any strings on me.”

What will the Yuma goodwill ambassador bring to the office of president?

Steve Rouff says Smith will do well because “he has the uncanny ability to not lose sight of the forest for the trees. He’s a very smart guy.”

Rouff and others cite Smith’s independence and straightforward nature.

Former Bar President Chas Wirken says, “Jim is a plain-spoken, no-nonsense, down-to-earth, unpretentious pragmatist. His style is to roll up his sleeves and get the job done without fuss or fanfare.”

Waldo Israel served on the board for five years, and he’s also known Smith since his earliest Yuma days. They were both asso-

**SMITH ENJOYS THE
LIFE OF A SOLO.
“YOU’RE YOUR OWN
BOSS. YOU DON’T
REALLY ANSWER TO
ANYBODY BUT THE
COURT. NOBODY HAS
ANY STRINGS ON ME.”**



ciates in the Rolle firm (“He got fired ... and then I got fired about two years after that,” recalls Israel), and Smith helped set him up in solo practice. He thinks Smith’s manner will impress members.

“He’s an engaging guy that’s easy to talk to. I think he’ll listen to the members. He’s a hard worker and a smart guy and a good lawyer. He’s going to take the time to be a good Bar President.”

Bob Schmitt agrees.

“Jimmie’s a doer; he’s not a B.S.er. You meet him and you immediately like him. He’s just a good guy, and you know he’s a good guy within 60 seconds. ... He is a straight-up person. I’ve never heard anybody say a bad word about him.

“He’s not gonna see his job as being a king over a kingdom. He’s as regular a guy as you’ll find. What you see is what you get.

“I think the Board members are really going to enjoy his year.”

But what about that routine—you may have seen it—“Aw shucks, I’m just a lawyer from Yuma”?

Schmitt laughs. “You have to be around him awhile to appreciate just how smart he is. He is a brilliant guy. But when he rolls in in his Levis and a T-shirt, it takes awhile to figure out that this boy is smart.”

Dick Coffinger roomed with Smith in law school, and saw that firsthand.

“He has a style of getting you to think that he is a simple fellow. A lot of his opposing counsel have found out the hard way, thinking this is a simple fellow and then at the end of the case wondering ‘How did this happen?’”

Yuma’s got a lot “Aw, shucks” on the surface, too. You could visit without a tour by Jim Smith, but you’ll miss the real deal, as he might call it.

Cross the Colorado River on Penitentiary Road to where it turns into Quechan Drive, and Smith will point out that the yellow centerline is a border; swerve a foot and you’re in California.

Pull into a turnoff and view the expanse of the Colorado River valley, dividing the two states. Well, not really, he says, for the border was set and then the river moved, so some of California is east of the river.

Wait to cross that one-lane bridge, clearly an insignificant structure. But then he nods to the small sign “Ocean-to-Ocean Bridge”—the first vehicle bridge to cross the Colorado, allowing travel on one road coast-to-coast in 1918.

And Smith may take you to Lutes Casino—not a casino at all, but a dining favorite for generations of Yuma residents. Its *Especial* Burger doesn’t even come with fries. Disappointed? Take a bite and meet its life-changing qualities.

He may hesitate before taking you to Jimmie Dee’s Bar, on Second Street just west of Main. After all, should Bar Presidents have, well, *bars* named after them? He bought and refurbished the building years ago, and now the bar is owned by a friend of his, who named it in his honor. It may look like many other dark-wood, alcohol-soaked bars in the world—even with a band area and pool table—but some claim this is one of the “in” places in Yuma.

The number-one thing Smith enjoys is meeting people, and that’s what he looks forward to this year.

“I’m not somebody that wants to be hanging around an office all day long, and I don’t care about wearing a fancy suit and all that stuff. I envision myself as a guy that can wear jeans every day and be a common man, a country-lawyer type of person.”

Chas Wirken says of Smith “Common sense is his compass.” Of course, common sense and the common man are rarer than rainfall in June. But until Smith gets around to writing his long-promised history of Yuma, he’s happy to put his common skills to work, meeting Arizona lawyers along the way. 