

# EARLY BIRD WEEKLY



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**Last week was another StoryCorps episode.** This one led by Mark Moisan and featured Art Smith.

**StoryCorps** began with a StoryBooth in NYC's Grand Central Terminal in 2003. Since then over a half million Americans have recorded their stories which have been uploaded to the Library of Congress in the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered.

All the questions were scripted and Art had seen them all in advance. This is not, after all, a game show or contest. If the interviewee is prepared, the resulting story will be more succinct, have better flow, and greater impact.

Mark introduced himself for the record then introduced Harold Arthur Smith, known to us as Art.

**Art, can you tell us a little about where you grew up and what it was like?**

Art grew up in Delphi, IN, a town of about 3,000 people. It's located on the Wabash River about sixty miles north of Indianapolis.

One of the town's main features is the Wabash & Erie Canal where he spent a lot of time splashing in its swampy waters.

"Because we felt we lived in such a secure environment, I think I was sixteen years old before I learned we even had a key for our front door. Nobody locked their cars. In fact many people just left their keys in the car."

"To get an idea what our town was like, if you've ever seen the movie, Hoosiers, the town of Hickory is kind of a carbon copy of the town I grew up in."

"High school basketball dominated the culture. I desperately wanted to be a good basketball player. That wasn't to be."

It was a great place to grow up but it's not where Art wanted his whole life to be.

**Do you know the story of how your family came to this country?**

The Smith side is Irish. He believes his great great grandfather was a potato farmer and blacksmith. The story goes that the rebels said they were going to burn the farm, whether he was on it or not but gave him time to leave. So he gathered what he could and put his family on a small ship for America.

His grandmother was a Watts which would have made Isaac Watts (over 600 hymns bear

his name) his great great great grandfather. "But then I learned he was a bachelor," so he changed his story to say he was a distant relative.

His mother was a Baldwin. They lived somewhere in England with three brothers. One built the piano, one built locomotives, and the other (Art's lineage) was a farmer and gardener.

When they came to the US, Art's grandfather settled in Michigan where, for years, was the chief gardener for the MacArthur Estate. The MacArthur's asked him to follow them to their new home in New York to establish the garden there. He declined, staying in the upper peninsula of Michigan, where Art's mother was born, until they retired to Florida.

**Can you tell us one of your happiest memories?**

Art has been blessed with two marriage ceremonies as well as the births of kids and grandkids.

"If I were going to pick one occasion, it would be in the Air Force while stationed in Guam. When I was promoted to Major, of all my promotions, that was the hardest to get."

"The entire base came out to celebrate like they enjoyed the fact I got promoted as much as I did." Even his off-base friends put together a big fiesta. "My parents were able to fly in from Indiana. We had a pig roast and it was just a great, happy occasion."

Channeling his inner Frank, Mark quipped, "so you would say it was a major celebration?"



"It was a major celebration, indeed."

**If you're comfortable with it, tell us one of your most difficult memories.**

Sadly, that was an easy answer to identify

for Art. In 2005 they learned that his wife had leukemia. She lost that fight in June of 2006. That year, and the grief that followed, was by far the most difficult of his life.

She was a wonderful wife and fantastic mother to all three girls and the boy.

**How old were your children when your wife died?**

They were all young adults, away from home establishing their own lives so it was a difficult time for the whole family.

**Can you tell me about someone you will always remember?**

Another easy one for Art. "The fella's name is [Jim Shaffer](#). He was the owner of one of the gas stations in town." It was a favorite hangout and it was where Art picked up the papers for his paper route.

[For those of you in diapers with our club was founded, blogs used to be editorials, and they were printed on flimsy paper with ink that rubbed off on the fingers of pre-teen boys delivering them to porches via bicycles in the rain. -editorial snark]

"When I was ten or eleven he asked if, when I was old enough, would I like to work for him. He would hire high school kids to work after school and during the summer."

"When I was fifteen he asked if I was ready to go to work. I said, "yes I am.""

"Because I had observed everything he and his workers did, I kind of hit the ground running."

Jim was a very kind, hardworking man of tremendous character. "Of all my bosses, Jim was by far my best boss and kind of a surrogate dad to me at a stage when I really needed that. I think he was the first person outside of my family that really affirmed me and believed in me."

Art maintained that friendship through the years extending it to his wife and children on their visits back to Delphi.

Are there events or stories about your relationship with Jim that stood out for you?

Art found it interesting that, "during the summer, Jim would disappear for an hour. He never said where he was going or what he was doing until one day he invited me to come along with him."

"We had a retired English teacher in our town, Tom McCormick, who was a bachelor and had significant issues."

Jim would go to Tom's house every day, make his lunch for him, then take him for a ride through the country. "He just showed extreme kindness, even up to the time of Tom's death" in 1988.

Jim and his wife worked a lot with silver and various stones. Art still wears a ring that they made for him.

How about a person that has been the kindest to you in your life?

"Hands down, I would have to say my mother was the kindest person to me and to just about everybody I knew. She certainly face plenty obstacles in her own life."

"I think one of the things that is an indication of her kindness is that our house was not too far from a railroad." Art grew up post-WWII and there were a lot of hobos that rode the rails and would camp not far from where the Smiths lived.

Word got out that if the hobos wanted a meal they could come up to the house. "Much to my dad's chagrin, my mother would offer food to the hobos."

"I actually think it was our insurance policy because word got out in the community of hobos," don't mess with the Smiths and ruin it for the rest of us.

His mom, in her later years, also worked in a nursing home and was relied on by the residents with issues because she was such a kind person.

### **What person had an influence on your life and what lessons did you learn from that person?**

The other person, besides Jim, had to be the pastor that Art had for the longest time. Reverend Arthur would haul Art around in his Nash Rambler to other youth events because their own church was so small.

The reverend had kind of adopted Art as his own son and the two were affectionately referred to as Arthur and Reverend Arthur.

What do you feel most grateful for in your life?

"I think, at this stage of my life, I'm really grateful for each day as I survey the things that have happened to me in my life. I have tempted fate," and had plenty



of adrenaline rushes including being caught on a trestle with an oncoming train, starting an old tractor and almost getting run over by it, being in an aircraft accident, combat flying over Hanoi three

times ("I survived that but many of my friends did not"), and the most recent, a heart attack while visiting Ireland.

### **How is your life different from what you had imagined?**

"I wouldn't say I was a bad student but I had no business trying to go to college. I didn't have the resources to do it but decided to try it anyway."

Art then joined the Air Force which took him to various corners of the world including Guam, Thailand, Japan, and Korea. In civilian life he served as director of a transportation organization in Sacramento, finishing a career there as a planner and analyst in air quality management.

In all of this, Art still had a self image of a small town kid with no future ahead of him.

### **Art, how would you like to be remembered?**

"I have a joke that the epitaph on my gravestone would read, "Here Lies Art Smith. He Was A Nice Guy.""

What he would really like, though, is one who loved and is loved by his family and his friends, and is kind, thoughtful and generous.

### **So, do you have any regrets?**

"I think we all have regrets. And if we say we don't, we're lying."



If one sticks out for Art, "I grew up in a big family. I was a better brother to my four sisters than I was to my brother. He was so different from what I was and I kept trying to mold him into what I thought he should be. And he was having none of it. There were many times I was unkind to him and even bullied him because he seemed to be an easy person to pick on."

Art realized as a young adult what he's been doing and apologized to his brother for being so lousy in the growing up years. Art continued to apologize on home trips from the Air Force.

At one point, Don told Art that he had forgiven him the first time he asked. "I got the point."

### **Is there any wisdom you would like to pass on to future generations?**

Because he came from such a strong culture of my parents and community, "I have always had a strong belief in God," that having a commitment to Him, to ask Christ on a regular basis how He wants me to live, and to be aware to the promptings that come.

The life verses on his wall are the same as were on his parents' wall. Proverbs 3:5-6

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight

"I can't count the ways that has worked in my favor through difficult times. I would appeal to others to try it and see it would be true for them also."

### **What would you regret not having done, and why haven't you done it?**

(Art perceived this question as regrets unresolved) There was one, late in his Air Force career, when he decided on a remote assignment so he could get the final assignment he needed before retirement. That turned out to be a huge mistake that caused a lot of family stress for the year he was away.

As far as travel, his wife got to visit him while he was active duty.

With Mary Gail they have been to New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, Alaska, the Baltics but the heart attack and pandemic have shortened the list. But Mary Gail has been able to visit Greece and Turkey, and Art would like to for their biblical significance.

### **Tell us how you met your wife.**

He met his first wife in high school. He was state president of his church youth organization. Ralee was the secretary treasurer. We lived 70 miles apart.

They met again at Purdue, courted then married and she followed him through his Air Force career.

His sisters introduced him to Mary Gail, they bantered a little but didn't connect until an Oregon visit in '07.

For his take on children and family traditions, [Art's story can be found at StoryCorps!](#)