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NERDC's Bob Smith Retires After 38 Years

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# Table of Contents

NERDC's Bob Smith Retires After 38 Years ..............................................................3
Changing Times .......................................................................................................3
NERDC Times ........................................................................................................3
Special Times ........................................................................................................4
New Times ..............................................................................................................4
NERDC's Bob Smith Retires After 38 Years

Except for a two-year stint in the Army, Bob Smith has been at the University of Florida since 1953 when he enrolled here as a freshman. On February 28, 2001, after nearly 40 years of working with UF's mainframe computer systems, he retired.

Changing Times

Over those years, Smith has seen NERDC change from a mainframe research computing center to the hub of a great network. He has seen computing change from a tool used by very few, to an everyday part of life for nearly everyone.

Smith completed his bachelor's degree in French in 1958, but had already begun working on a second degree in Engineering when he received a form letter from the U.S. government which began "Greetings:". Instead of heading to classes that fall, he found himself heading to Fort Benning, Georgia, for basic training. He spent a very cold winter at Fort Leonard Woods in Missouri before being sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, where he completed his military duty as a personnel clerk.

Smith returned to Gainesville and resumed work on his engineering degree in 1960, but by 1962 money had started to run low. He had just completed a course in computers in which he had to write a program in assembler language. (The program, which Smith still has, allowed the machine to translate a single document from Russian to English.) He decided that he liked programming, so he started looking for work on campus as a programmer. He found what he was looking for in the Physics Department.
At that time, there was no NERDC, but there was the UF Computing Center, which had grown out of the UF Statistical Laboratory. The UF Computing Center was located on Lake Alice near Hull Road, out in the country as far as the rest of the campus was concerned. Though Smith worked for the Physics Department, he spent most of his days in a carrel at the Computing Center—the user had to come to the computer then, not the other way around. The computer was an IBM 709, a room-filling behemoth made up of vacuum tubes.

In 1966, Smith inquired about positions in the Computing Center itself, and was offered a job with the applications group. Smith accepted the applications spot, though he admits he wanted to work with the systems group: "The applications people worked with the users; the systems people worked with the machines."

The UF Computing Center came to its present home, the Space Sciences Research Building, in 1968, bringing Smith with it. In 1972, it became the Northeast Regional Data Center, and in 1975 CIRCA was spun off to address the specific needs of campus users. Because of his background with applications, Smith worked with the CIRCA staff for a time, but always maintained an office at the SSRB, until he finally returned full time to NERDC.

Special Times

Ask around among Smith's colleagues, and lots of special memories pop up. Smith and his wife Alberta, who were involved with a square dance group for many years, held a square dance in the machine room in 1974 to celebrate the imminent arrival of a new machine. On Halloween, Smith was known to show up for work dressed as Wonder Warthog, a cartoon character from an underground comic book. Perhaps most telling, however, is the fact that many of the people Smith assisted over the years always came back to him for help, no matter what their questions.

Smith's contributions haven't been limited to work. In addition to square dancing, spelunking, and hiking, Smith has been heavily involved in many community projects. His wife started working with Habitat for Humanity (she worked on its first project in Gainesville), and he joined her in that activity in 1990. In 1992, they traveled to Nicaragua to work on a Habitat project there.

Another of Smith's projects is the Alachua Press, which was the Alachua County Historical Society for many years. He's been a member since its inception in the mid-1960s and treasurer for nearly 20 years. He speaks enthusiastically about the Alachua Press's publications, which are books by local authors about local history. The Florida Trail Association, which is working to set up a hiking trail through Florida similar to the Appalachian Trail, is another group that has benefited from Smith's volunteer spirit.

New Times

How will he occupy his time now? This question brought a quizzical look and a smile. "That's TBA, I guess," he said, and then offered that he and his wife will probably travel more. When asked what he will miss most about working, Smith replied promptly, "The people I work with."

They'll miss him, too.
Your Comments are Welcome

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