

# BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

## HISTORIAN SHERRY L. SMITH

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Raised in northwest Indiana, Sherry Smith always enjoyed reading and listening to stories about the past. But one particular childhood friend sparked her passion for Western history.

A summer cottage neighbor named Roy Hawkinson hailed from South Dakota. The son of Swedish homesteaders, Roy befriended many Native American neighbors and became fascinated with their Dakota culture. When Sherry was only five years old, he regaled her and her siblings with stories, songs, and dances he had learned from these people. He dressed in regalia, gave the children "Indian names," and shared his love and respect for native cultures.

"He was like a surrogate grandfather and set me on my course for a long-term interest in the American West and Native American history," said Smith who also credits her mother and the prevalent Western movie culture of her childhood with further inspiring her.

Sherry's interest ran deep. After graduating from Purdue University, she moved to Seattle to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Washington. In school, her natural inclination towards the past was, "fed by reading and discovering you really couldn't understand the world unless you had a sense of history."

Now, Sherry is a University Distinguished Professor Emerita with Southern Methodist University specializing in the American West and Native American history, as well as the author of seven books and even more publications. Her award-winning titles include *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power* and *Reimagining Indians: Native Americans Through Anglo Eyes, 1880-1940*. Sherry's most recent book is *Bohemians West: Free Love, Family and Radicals in the Twentieth Century*. She has also been honored with fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Fulbright Foundation, and Yale University.

Sherry's path led her to Wyoming after graduate school, when the Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office hired her to find and document the Bozeman Trail, a well-known native travel corridor used later by prospective gold miners and others to journey from the Oregon Trail through Wyoming to Montana.



Photo by Bonnie Sanders

Not only did Sherry write and present a nomination for the Bozeman Trail to be successfully placed on the National Register of Historic Places, she also discovered her ancestor Private William Earl Smith was among the U.S. 4th Cavalry who followed the trail in late 1876 to avenge Custer's defeat at the Little Big Horn. In fact, Sherry tracked down her great-grandfather's diary which was an account of the expedition. Her book *Sagebrush Soldier* shares his first-hand story and the historical context around the 1876 Sioux War.

Sherry's work extended into teaching at the University of Wyoming, where she taught alongside her future husband and fellow historian Robert (Bob) Righter. In 1986, the couple honeymooned at the AMK Ranch in Grand Teton National Park, eventually building a cabin in the valley.

Locally, Sherry considers her work with Carole Hofley and others to help establish the Teton County Historic Preservation Board in the mid-1990s as a crucial step in conserving the valley's cultural resources, especially in Grand Teton National Park. Both Sherry and her husband Bob have done much to support the Jackson Hole Historical Society & Museum, including Sherry's current role as a second-term JHHS Board Member.

As Sherry looks ahead to a new History Museum campus on the historic Van Vleck Block, she's excited for the opportunity to tell more complicated and diverse stories to even larger audiences. Of course, Sherry also has a history project in the works. She's researching the friendship between a group of literary women in the early 20th century American west. We can't wait to read more of Sherry's work in the future!