

Excerpts from  
*The Smith Ranch 'After School'*

*by Bob Steele*

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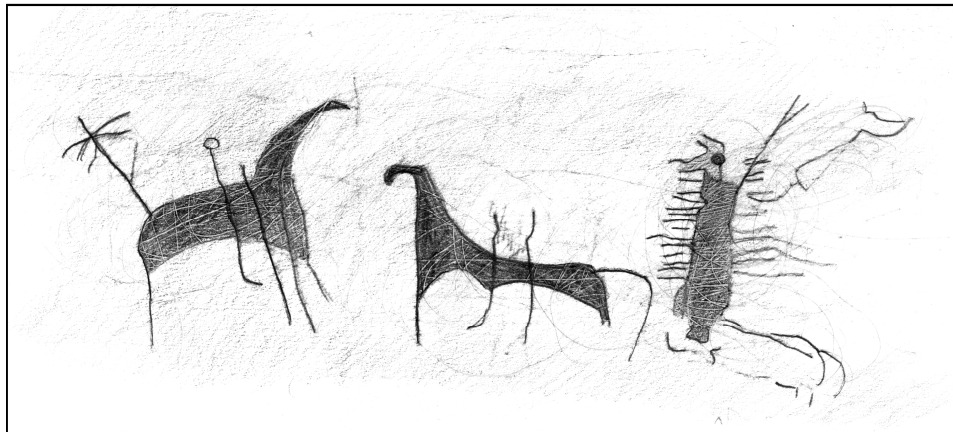
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*The Smith Ranch  
'After School'*



*Bob Steele*

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## Preface

*The Smith Ranch 'After School'* is a collection of fictional stories dedicated to bringing the arts into the core of the curriculum. While this central position has traditionally been given to math, science, social studies and literacy, the arts - dance, drama, music, literature, and the visual arts - should be given a central role because they are *language* media and are unique sources of aesthetic energy, information, knowledge, and wisdom. In an ideal schooling, the arts would join the traditional subjects at the centre of an integrated curriculum.

Schooling has made significant improvements since I attended a village school in the 1930's when my fellow scholars and I suffered, for example, daily 'freight train' reading. We were required to take turns reading aloud and when not reading, were expected to follow the halting progress of our less gifted colleagues. As one of the good readers, I was monumentally bored, but then we all were for different reasons, good and bad readers alike. We all looked forward to recess and 'after school' so we could leave boredom behind.

While learning is always a challenge, it is not naturally boring for children, nor is there any excuse for it being so. However, I am not resurrecting the 'do your own thing' philosophy of the 1960's. Children are capable of productive learning on their own and, if motivated, will work hard at it. Motivation is the responsibility of enthusiastic adults, parents and teachers, who are there to guide and encourage and informally evaluate. This book aims to encourage lifetime involvement in an open-ended, broadly-based curriculum. Children are born with curiosity but we send them to school where they often lose it. At school, the natural curiosity of children should be fostered.

Even enthusiastic children who show no signs of boredom in the present model will thrive on an open curriculum, one that integrates the arts with the traditional core subjects.

One measure of a successful schooling would be a population where most adults engage in activities such as reading, attending concerts of classical music, going to plays and taking part in drama clubs, visiting museums and art galleries, participating in games and outdoor activities, taking part in the political life of the community and so on. An adult population in which everyone not only *appreciates* but *participates* would tell us that schooling is on the right track.

‘Freight train’ reading is a thing of the past but schooling still generally is still constricted by the requirements of a narrowly prescribed curriculum, the unimaginative way it is often presented to learners, a growing burden of bureaucratic requirements, and the influence of a powerful lobby that would rather produce consumers of packaged information and packaged merchandise than lifelong explorers of knowledge and wisdom.

With the guidance of wise parents and teachers, the child whose curiosity and imagination is set free has the ability to school himself or herself. The model of schooling described in these pages would lead to a seamless environment of learning, to positive attitudes towards schooling and to mental health and intellectual development. It would be a certain cure for boredom and a guarantee of increased involvement throughout the child’s waking hours as information is gathered and processed and knowledge and wisdom are achieved. Trust the child; trust the motivating parent and teacher. Let learning be a lifelong adventure!

## Chapter One

### The Smith Ranch 'After School' - An Introduction

The stories take place in the 1930's on a ranch in Southern Alberta owned by the Smiths - Smith and Eleanor, as our parents preferred to be called, and their eldest daughter Madge. They believed that *children are not truly educated unless the arts are at the core of their curriculum - not to replace traditional subjects, but to strengthen them*. Their rationale was simple and logical: the arts are *language* media and language is the basic instrument of learning.

The boys and girls at the Smith Ranch - myself (Will Smith, the narrator in this book), my brothers and sisters, our friends from the nearby farms and ranches and the Indian children from the neighboring Blackfoot Reservation - were all part of a community of young people. Our Indian friends were only home during the summer months when the residential school was closed. We were saddened and frustrated by their condition of 'enslavement' - Henry Coyote Singer's word for it - and we looked forward to summer when they would join us at the After School.

The Smiths wanted this model of schooling for their children, and they were quick to embrace *all* children, as they were strong believers in community. We would be free to pursue our own academic interests, guided by one or more adults. This book is a collection of stories about this kind of schooling.

The Smiths had purchased a ranch in a remote part of Alberta with the intention of raising a large family and using the open environment of the relatively unspoiled prairies and the advantages of ranch life (animals, gardens, a large ranch house with a library, a varied social structure) to put into practice their educational theories. These can be

reduced to four principles: 1) freeing children from a rigidly prescribed curriculum 2) trusting their natural curiosity to define their own educational path with the help of caring adults, 3) involving adult mentors as senior scholars ready to give advice and guidance and to participate in learning activities 4) conceptualizing the arts as language media without detracting from their intrinsic value as agents of psychological growth.

The Smiths decided to leave the basics in the hands of the traditional school - arithmetic, basic literacy, and so on - and they started the 'After School', a year-round program of the arts for anyone in the community who wished to attend, child, youth, or adult. It might surprise you to discover how the arts as language media enriched the standard subjects of the curriculum, especially literacy in all its branches, but also aspects of science and social studies education.

Special emphasis was given to literacy as an art form. (Smith was an academic writer, Eleanor a poet who also wrote short stories. Madge, their eldest, loved to converse, argue, and debate.) Drawing was considered an aid to literacy as well as a language in its own right. The other visual arts and crafts, music, drama and dance were all part of the daily activities at the After School. Arts activities took place after school every day, on weekends, and during long summer breaks.

These stories are meant to illustrate a schooling where children and young people are free to create their own fields of study, achieve their own modest expertise, share what they learn with others, practice democratic governance, and evolve a schooling designed for the future. While this went far beyond the arts, the arts were an important part of it. The arts were at the core.

What was life like at the Smith Ranch in those days? Was it all play - and play was honoured at the After School - with work left to the hired help? Not at all. It was assumed that chores in the kitchen and household generally, growing and harvesting a garden, caring for animals and so on were all vital parts of schooling. The Smith children were expected to contribute to the working life of the ranch. The non-ranch kids either pitched in and helped or went home to perform similar tasks for their own families.

The Smiths knew that the After School would easily win a popularity contest if pitted against the official schooling that took place at Meadowlark where the curriculum was boring and only distantly related to real life. The Native kids at the residential schools suffered more. They were forced to study a rigidly defined curriculum which included a terrifying religious dogma, were required to abandon their Native religion, their own language, and the joys and consolations of family life. They were forced to live in a virtual prison camp for most of the year. Part of what Smith called "the social agenda" at the After School was an active campaign to destroy the Indian Act, the reservation system and the residential schools. This involved much letter writing, the making of posters, and confrontations with local politicians.

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Smith, who insisted that he had no other name, and Eleanor Crawford met as students when they were attending McGill University in Montreal. They kept running into each other at campus events and in the city at concerts, museums, art galleries and political rallies. They discovered common interests in the arts and their friendship deepened. When they began talking about marriage and family, they discovered another common interest - how children should be educated.

Eventually Smith completed his university studies with an undergraduate degree in educational psychology and a masters degree from Teachers College, Columbia, New York, which was then a center of 'Progressive Education' under the influence of John Dewey, Hughes Mearns and others. Eleanor had a graduate degree in English Literature and was active in the Montreal poetry and drama scenes.

On their honeymoon, the Smiths visited the foothill country of Southern Alberta. They were astonished at the openness and beauty of the landscape and decided to move heaven and earth to live there permanently. They talked about owning a ranch where they would raise a large family and put into practice their ideas about schooling and the role the arts might play in it. As a wedding gift, their families got together and placed a down payment on a working ranch which became the Smith Ranch.

The ranch happened to be across the municipal road from a Blackfoot reservation and within walking distance of a community of Native families, which the Smiths considered a happy coincidence. They had views about the advantages of raising children where friendships with children of other cultures would be natural. In the summer months, the Indian kids and the Smiths moved back and forth freely.

The ranch and the reservation provided endless places to explore and natural phenomena to be observed - animals, domestic and wild, birds and insects in great numbers and varieties, constantly changing weather and climate conditions to be observed, studied and recorded. Ranch life brought close contact with the cowboys who were part of the larger family and who contributed in many ways to

the After School programs, as did the hired help in Eleanor's kitchen. Whatever meager science was taught at Meadowlark - and it was indeed meager - the program was greatly enhanced at the After School by the natural phenomena found on the open prairies and described in the Smith library. And then there was the Blackfoot culture, with its songs, dances, and decorative and expressive arts, which became a natural field of study for white kids and Native kids alike.

The urban life style that the Smiths had brought with them from Montreal; the Blackfoot reservation with its ancient culture; the neighboring farms and ranches, each the focus of a different tradition from 'back east', the United States or Europe; the nearby towns and villages with opportunities for participating in community affairs, all were important areas of study at the After School.

Writing-on-Stone deserves special mention. Located on the southern edge of the ranch, it was a huge display of prehistoric Native art, a mere thirty miles or so south of the ranch. It could be thought of as a vast gallery of Native art incised into canyon walls, a perfect location for After School summer camps and an intriguing environment for considering the origins and vital importance to human culture of the visual arts.

The arts held an important place in Ranch life even before the After School was established. There was a piano in the Ranch Library and Eleanor gave us music lessons, which had been important in her schooling. There was plenty of campfire singing in the summer and there were frequent concerts in the library in winter. There were sessions of art-making almost every day. Reading and talking about books was well established and at least two of the young Smiths considered themselves budding

writers, including Will Smith, the book's narrator. Henry Coyote Singer was certain that he would go to art school and I had similar ambitions, though teaching art to children was closer to my interests. The three of us, Henry and I and Madge, who had spent three years at art school, formed a nucleus of drawing-as-language advocacy.

It all came together one day in the library when a few of the young adults from the ranch were having a discussion about schooling and how far it was from being a satisfactory way to spend one's time. Madge was there, now nearly twenty, the oldest of the Smith children. She had just finished a diploma course at an art school in Montreal. She was home for the summer months and would probably remain home to help with the ranch and pursue her career as an artist. Two or three of the older Native kids were around the table, including, Henry Coyote Singer.

On this occasion, the Smiths told us about their dream of an arts-centered school, not only for children, but for young people and even adults in the community. It sounded to Madge as if her parents wanted to take total responsibility for home schooling the provincial curriculum along with their plans for the arts. She pointed out that this was expecting too much of themselves. Did they really want to be responsible for the entire curriculum for every grade which they would have to provide if the Smith kids were to get high school graduation? There were lots of non-arts sorts of things that Meadowlark did reasonably well and besides, the community life of a rural school was a lesson in civics which the Smith kids shouldn't miss. Meadowlark was not ideal, but it was not Dotheboys Hall either.

Here's what I remember Madge saying: "Why don't we start an after school arts program? We could all contribute.

Eleanor, you would do the music, of course, and also the drama, with your experience in amateur theater back in Montreal. I could supervise a visual arts program with Will and Henry's help. Smith would be our psychologist/philosopher and also our manager. If we pooled our interests and talents, we could have an arts school that would offer a sort of 'after school' during the week, on weekends and summer holidays. Our goal would be to get the kids and their parents involved in the arts and in an open-ended curriculum."

That's how it started, the 'After School', as it came to be called. Through it, we discovered that the arts are the perfect integrating focus for a variety of learning activities and we found ourselves involved in a curriculum of our own making that included aspects of science, social studies, language arts, visual arts, music, dance and drama. They all provided subject matter for artistic expression!

Like all children, we loved physical activity and games. We walked the prairies and often ran across open stretches, especially down hills. We played every athletic game you could think of. Smith even found a psychological connection between physical education and the arts. Let me paraphrase him on this point: "You can't have the arts without involving yourself in deep levels of preconscious thinking and feeling. (*Remember, Smith's advanced degree was in psychology!*) The preconscious is that part of the mind where form and content, intellect and feeling come together as an integrated whole. The same can be said of games. Empathy is as natural to games as it is to the arts. Of course you get empathy in other subjects too - e.g. solving math problems." Smith didn't argue that the arts have an exclusive claim to empathy. As he explained, "The arts bring empathy into play in the intimate and very personal business of growing up as

unique human beings. It just happens to be particularly strong in games and the arts.”

In the chapters that follow I won’t attempt to describe all the activities that captured our imaginations, just the ones that stand out in memory. Our Indian friends took to the After School with enthusiasm and joined us whenever they were home. Our Meadowlark friends took to it with the same enthusiasm, and in the summer months the population at the Ranch grew to include visiting cousins. (Eleanor noted that whereas our cousins in far-away cities had always visited the Ranch for a week or two, they now stayed for the entire two months!) There was no prescribed course of studies, no provincially approved curriculum. There were no stated goals or learning outcomes, no final exams or grade expectations, no nervous teachers evaluating our work in fear of school principals and inspectors hanging about. This part of our schooling was blessedly free of such restrictions; we were free to learn. We saw ourselves as artists, musicians, dancers, writers, players, and, above all, scholars. The arts involved us in serious disciplines and serious challenges, but oh, what fun we had!

## Chapter Two: The Museum of Ten Thousand Things

It was Elizabeth who suggested we turn the old log cabin into a museum. She saw a museum as a way of providing a focus for our scattered rural community.

(Smith conceptualized community in the abstract as a series of concentric circles of cooperative interaction fueled by affection and mutual interest. To his way of thinking, it began with the home and expanded to include the ranch and Blackfoot Reserve, the farms, ranches, villages within our immediate reach and the large town that was not far off. He went further and included the province, the Western region, Canada as a nation and the global community. “If you think of community in this way, as a nesting of neighborhoods, why would there be wars, poverty, famine, ecological depredation?” he argued. “You would naturally look after your neighbors wouldn’t you?”)

Elizabeth was challenged at that library meeting by her older brother, Alex. “This sounds very idealistic but is it an arts project? I thought the After School was for the arts.”

Elizabeth replied, rather primly, “The After School is for a kind of learning we’re not getting at Meadowlark and there’s been no mention of local history at the school that I can remember. You could say that the Junior Red Cross would fit into Smith’s concept of community, but we never do anything at JRC meetings except get pins to wear, and a lecture on hygiene. Just wait, Alex, you’ll see how the museum idea fits into the After School!”

This discussion was part of our weekly Action Assembly which we older kids, the so-called senior Scholars, held in

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Chapter Four: Sammy Discovers a Stone Circle

Our visitors laughed and said they had never heard anything like it! We took their double meaning with grace and laughed with them. We didn't mind; we were having too much fun! The program lasted over an hour with solos, duets and other combinations. We performed the two symphonies, and one movement from the unfinished clarinet concerto. By this time shouting out numbers was no longer necessary and conducting was mostly by holding up cards with numbers painted in black which we had learned to read. (Eleanor said this is how avant garde music was played in Montreal.) You had to watch for your number. When the program was finished our audience gave us a standing ovation. Then Eleanor and her helpers provided tea and cookies.

Everyone was reluctant to go home. Smith took visitors down to see his horses. Others went up to the museum. Many visitors wanted to try out the Sound Sculpture, so I stayed behind to regulate traffic.

I have two special memories from these final moments. One was a duet by Sammy Coyote Singer and his grandfather, Old Silus, who danced together, both singing in Blackfoot while quietly moving through the Sound Sculpture, all the while touching individual pieces lightly. At the very end when everyone had wandered off, seven-year-old Abraham Beaver came up to Madge, who had stayed with me at the feedlot. He carried two percussion hammers and, with a shy grin, offered one to Madge. He said, "Come into the Sound Sculpture, Madge, and we will dance together. Okay?"

## Chapter Four: Sammy Discovers a Stone Circle

Even Smith didn't know that a sacred stone circle existed on the Ranch, but Old Silus Wolfskin knew. He had known all his life, but Blackfoot Elders don't give secrets away easily. Maybe he wanted one of the Indian kids to find it or maybe it would be okay if it turned out to be a Smith kid or one from another ranch or farm. There was no hurry; it wasn't going anywhere.

I remember him saying to Henry and me - we were visiting Old Silus to make portrait drawings - that it would be nice to have a community picnic at a place he knew on the Smith Ranch that was rarely visited because it was too far from the home spread. It was a place of great beauty and very near Writing-on-Stone, where many prehistoric drawings were carved into the sandstone walls of the Milk River canyon. There was a grassy slope, a small spring-fed slough surrounded by willows, a good view from a nearby hill looking west to the Rockies, east to the Cyprus Hills, and south to the Sweet Grass Hills of Montana. We told the Smiths about Silus's suggestion. The Smiths acted on it and it was decided to make a day of it. Eleanor and the young women who worked in the kitchen would pack a lunch and Smith would take the half-ton so the elders and the younger children would be able to ride the ten miles to the site. The rest of us, the senior Scholars, would get up early and walk there, with Madge setting the pace. The truck would arrive about noon and we would be there to greet them.

We were exhausted when we arrived and sank into the long grass just happy to be resting in the sun, happy to be listening to the near-silence of grasshoppers clicking and willow leaves rustling. Sammy Coyote Singer was the

exception; he wasn't a boy who took much to resting. Indeed, Sammy couldn't keep still for more than five minutes. He was like a dog on a country walk, nose to the ground, determined to find whatever there was to find. The rest of us weren't paying much attention until we heard his shouts and knew that he had indeed found something and from his voice you could tell it was something special. He was on the far side of the slough on his hands and knees clearing away turf from something, but what? Had he found an arrowhead? Maybe a meadowlark nest with eggs, or even chicks? No, his movements suggested it wasn't a single object. He was leaping about crab-like to new locations where he repeated his efforts to expose whatever it was he had found in the grass.

As we gathered round, we could see that Sammy was uncovering partially buried field stones and we knew then why he was so excited: *he had discovered the sacred stone circle!* Too large for the kind used to anchor tipis, this one was rare, *sacred!* Sammy, now on his feet, pointed to a defining detail, the entrance to the circle also shaped by field stones. We knew, as Sammy knew, that this was the kind of circle Smith had once told us was essential to Indian religious practice.

We could imagine a 'congregation' sitting on the surrounding hillside. We could imagine the dome of the sky as a cathedral vault and in our imaginations we heard the falsetto singing of the performers of long ago, the drummers who were also singing, and the dancers adding to the pounding rhythm with the shaking of bells stitched to their costumes. No stained glass windows here with sunlight streaming into a dark interior, but a view of the Great Spirit's creation as far as the eye could see in all directions.

Smith, in a lecture he had given in the Ranch Library to the senior Scholars, had pointed out that the circle is a symbolic womb, a place of spiritual rebirth. The fieldstone entrance was a birth canal leading the performers into the sacred space, and, later, taking them out again into the world, cleansed and reborn. It was this type of circle that Old Silus Wolfskin and a few elders had known existed on the Smith Ranch. Sammy had fulfilled his grandfather's dream by making an archeological find!

How did they get there, these stones? According to Smith, when prehistoric visitors arrived, they had found them left behind by the melting ice, scattered about randomly. Over time, they had become partially buried, each a rough circle itself fixed permanently in the earth forming the larger circle. The upper surfaces of the stones had been exposed to wind and prairie weather for aeons. Each had become a miniature granite garden interlaced with patterns of orange lichen and green moss. They were so beautiful you wanted to draw or paint them or write a poem about them. Some of us had brought sketchbooks, colored pencils and water colors so we set to work.

And so there we were, absorbed in drawing and making field notes, all except Sammy who was now at the top of the hill waving his arms about, getting ready to fly down from his perch. He would be the first to see and hear the approach of Smith's truck carrying the Blackfoot elders, the Smith elders, and the small children, closely followed by our friends from nearby ranches, the cowboys who worked for Smith, the kitchen help who worked for Eleanor, and Smith and Eleanor themselves. They were all making their way to the far side of the slough to join us.

Sammy launched himself down the hill, running slalom-fashion to keep from tumbling head-over-heels. We knew

he would want to be the one to point out his discovery. It was his day. Breathless and grinning, he confronted his audience and, pointing to his find, he managed to gather the words: "It's a stone circle. I found it when I was looking for arrow heads. I think it's the 'mystical' kind, the kind Smith told us about, not the kind to anchor tipis. This was a good place for an Indian camp with the water here and the view and the shade. What do you think. Grandfather?" This last meant for Old Silus.

Silus grinned and nodded his head but found that he, unlike his grandson, could find no words. He walked slowly towards Sammy who was standing at the entrance of the stone circle and he put his arms around the boy and hugged him. He took him by the hand and they entered the stone circle together. They didn't exactly dance... but they sort of danced. Old Silus lifted his head and spread his arms wide and Blackfoot words came tumbling out of his wobbly old throat, a song of praise and thanksgiving in Blackfoot. When he was finished, it was our turn to be speechless so we just clapped and shouted for Sammy Coyote Singer and we clapped for Old Silus Wolfskin - Sammy, our After School archeologist! Old Silus, our ancient grandfather!

## Chapter Five: Dancing on Air at the Smith Ranch

Is dancing the oldest art form of all? Smith thought so and said it was likely born with the beating of the first drum in some remote African forest. In the early days of the After School, Smith called a meeting of the senior Scholars:

“We brought you here to discuss a problem. In setting up the After School we planned to include all the major art forms. Eleanor and I feel we now have a program which includes literacy, the visual arts, music, and drama but not creative dance. It is something we need to think about, talk about and do something about.

“We elders have a background in a number of art forms and we try to keep up with the latest theories and developments. We admit to being amateurs, but those of you who know French will recognize that the root of the word, amateur, is ‘love’. In that sense we are all amateurs.

“We make a good team: Eleanor is strong in creative literacy - fiction, non-fiction, poetry and drama. She is also able to teach music. I’m the resident educator/psychologist, and I am able to contribute to our music program. And then there is Madge: when she went to Montreal to study drawing and painting she came back here every summer with her ideas about children and what she called their incredible drawings. It was Madge who put us on to the notion that drawing is a language medium. That led us to the realization that all the arts are language media, each different, each contributing in a special way.

“Perhaps our neglect of dance is understandable. No one here has had any experience with it. We have no dancers in the family and no one able to teach it. Eleanor and I attended dance recitals in Montreal, but this hardly qualifies us to set up a dance program. How then can we