

**NORMA JEAN STEELE Interview (Abridged --17 pages)**  
**Interviewed by Richard Norton Smith,**  
**Date: June 13, 2003**

[The complete interview can be viewed at the Dole Institute of Politics Archive]

**MR. SMITH:** Tell me about your folks. Tell me about your Dad and your Mom.

There's a popular notion that your mom was sort of the life force.

**MS. STEELE:** Well, kind of –

**MR. SMITH:** I mean, the really driving –

**MS. STEELE:** Well, Dad was driven in a way, too. He worked with the boys. He taught them how to mow yards and little bit of everything, you know. He thought if they could work they oughta be working. And my mother was the same way, and you didn't lay in bed; when she got ready to wash in the morning if you didn't roll out pretty early she'd pull the sheets out from under you because she had to get her laundry done. I'm that way in some respects. I don't keep everything just exactly like it should be sometimes, but she was very particular.

**MR. SMITH:** Bud Dawson was saying that she waxed the inside of the wastebasket.

**MS. STEELE:** Well yeah. And the porch steps.

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**MR. SMITH:** How tough was life out here?

**MS. STEELE:** We didn't think it was tough. We didn't know what tough was. We had a good life as far as we knew, but if we went to the free matinee movie we had to be ready to go to Sunday School in the morning, so that meant polish your shoes, get your clothes ready to go and be ready to go out the door because you were going; if you didn't go to church you didn't go to matinee.

**MR. SMITH:** Oh really. Okay.

**MS. STEELE:** That was on Saturday, and that happened all the time. Lot of times I babysat, you know, and I was pretty young. We had a neighbor that had a little boy and they liked to have me come over, but it wasn't babysitting. I'd feed him and I'd have to do dishes and get him ready for bed, you know, and all that. It used to be you do the whole thing sometimes I'd get a quarter, you know. I really thought I was rich, you know.

**MR. SMITH:** Was your mother a church-goer?

**MS. STEELE:** Mom went to church but lot of times she was busy getting us ready to go, to get us out the door, you know, dressing us and making sure our hair was right and all that, and sometimes they'd go to church. They didn't go as often as I'd like to have had them go I guess, but that was –

**MR. SMITH:** But they sent you?

**MS. STEELE:** Oh yeah, we went. And we went. And we went, if we went someplace we usually all went together but not always to church.

**MR. SMITH:** Okay.

**MS. STEELE:** And lot of times she'd fix a meal while we were gone, then we'd have our big dinner when we'd get home.

**MR. SMITH:** And your Dad, I'm trying to get the chronology right, he worked at a creamery?

**MS. STEELE:** He had his own creamery, yes, and the farmers would bring their cream in and he'd go out and get that can of cream, bring it in and test it, and it was always fun to watch him with those little tubes. And he'd put it on that little spinner and he'd add something to it, then put it on – and he candled eggs. He'd

have eggs. And of course they bartered a lot then, you know, as far as the chickens and things were concerned.

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**MR. SMITH:** During the Depression your Mom sold sewing machines?

**MS. STEELE:** Oh yes, and I had to go with her. She'd get me something to color and I'd have a piece of paper and I'd have to go with her because I was too young to be in school and I'd sit in that car and I'm thinking is she ever going to come? Is she ever going to come out of that house? And lot of times she, Dad took the back of the old car and they'd tie that sewing machine on and she'd take it out and demonstrate, see, and that's how she'd sell.

**MR. SMITH:** Really. They were pretty heavy things to drag around.

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, yeah. But she was good. I mean, she'd sit right down and sew up something and they'd just be amazed, they'd stand there and think, oh, I gotta have this, gotta have this.

**MR. SMITH:** So she was a good saleswoman.

**MS. STEELE:** Right. And she'd bring home chickens, lot of things; barter again, you know. And then the home office was in Hays and we'd go over there and she'd have to get her reports in and, you know, it was a good job. She was good at it, I will say that, she was real good at it.

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**MR. SMITH:** Was Bob – what kind of kid was he?

**MS. STEELE:** Bob was a lot of fun but you didn't do a lot of hanky-panky stuff, you know. Kenny would have his rubber guns out there and be shooting at everybody.

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**MR. SMITH:** Okay. Bob as a kid – was he a workaholic?

**MS. STEELE:** Absolutely. He got that job at Dawson's, and gosh, you'd think he was making a million dollars. He didn't care, he just loved it. Kids from high school would start coming because they heard he was, especially the girls.

**MR. SMITH:** He was popular with the girls?

**MS. STEELE:** Very. And with the guys. I mean, he had a lot of friends and when they'd play ball, I mean, the whole bunch would come over and they'd be over there, you know, it was just fun having him –

**MR. SMITH:** Yeah.

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**MR. SMITH:** Your Dad, I take it, was not a guy who distributed a lot of compliments.

**MS. STEELE:** Well, if you did good he was gonna tell you about it –

**MR. SMITH:** Okay. And it meant all the more.

**MS. STEELE:** And I loved that. Oh yes, I loved that. But he had to do a little discipline, too, and he didn't like that part. I mean, he could thump me on the head and I knew I'd been thumped and I didn't know what that was even, but, you know, if he felt like I was out of line or maybe had done something he didn't think I should have done I knew I wasn't gonna do that again.

**MR. SMITH:** Was he the disciplinarian in the family?

**MS. STEELE:** Pretty much. Mom would ground the kids and say, well, you do this or else, you know. But the boys were real good. They'd get out and do yards and they sold cold green salve. Kenny said to me, "I'll let you ride the

bicycle if I ever get one,” and I said, “Okay,” and I’d run across the street and hit those same people been hit about every day of the week.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah.

**MR. SMITH:** What did you do for the Fourth of July?

**MS. STEELE:** Oh, that was always a big day. We didn’t shoot fireworks till we went out together. We’d go out to the lake a lot of times, or out in the country and some of my friends, some of their friends would be with us and they would put the pinwheels up. Dad wouldn’t let us touch those things because he was afraid we’d get hurt, and we had a pretty display over the water, you know, and we’d get pop and watermelon on the Fourth of July, that was our big deal, pop and watermelon. You’d take a big ol’ tub and chip ice in there, you’d get a block of ice like they used to buy and you’d chip ice, and boy, that watermelon would just be so good, you know. You remember a lot of those things.

**MR. SMITH:** Sure, sure. And what was Christmas like?

**MS. STEELE:** It was super duper. We didn’t always have a lot but they would work so hard and he just...talk about perfection, he wanted every icicle hung just as straight, they used to use those icicles and he would hang that limb, he’d take a whole handful and put over his arm and kind of straighten them as he’d put them on. He’d hang up one and then he’d come back – lot of times they’d wait till Christmas Eve and put up that tree and we didn’t get to see it till Christmas morning.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** Uh-huh. That was kind of their surprise for us, and we didn't have a huge big Christmas as a rule. Mom sewed for us, she made clothes for boys and girls, all of us. She made the boys little suits, even made caps, and bonnets for us, and lots of our clothes. I didn't do it for my kids. I did some sewing but – and I did cooking. I learned how to do a lot of things, but never as good as she, I'd never say that I could do anything as good as my mother.

**MR. SMITH:** Tell me about school. Were there special teachers?

**MS. STEELE:** Oh sure. I know the one, now let me – what was her name? Something Thorpe. Anyway, that was one of Bob's favorites. Then he and Bud Smith knew they were going to be, they were out doing reports on – this was in English, I believe, and they were out getting a report on someone and they were doing a little, little extra time and they knew they were going to be late getting back so they went to Dawson's and got ice cream cones and took it back to the class and everybody had ice cream cones.

**MR. SMITH:** Really. Bud Smith was his best friend, wasn't he?

**MS. STEELE:** Oh, he really was.

**MR. SMITH:** What was he like?

**MS. STEELE:** Bud was a wonderful kid. They just got together, they'd play ball together and they were always in the teams at school and basketball, football, whatever. They went to school together, left for college. Course I was a good friend of Stewart's, that was Bud's younger brother.

**MR. SMITH:** Okay.

**MS. STEELE:** And he lives in, he's still living in Oklahoma, or Texas, I mean, now Texas. But, yeah, Bud was a good kid. Mom just thought he was about it, too.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** Took a shine to a lot of our friends like that.

**MR. SMITH:** And he was killed in the war?

**MS. STEELE:** Uh-huh. Yeah, and see, when we went – I was in Western Union school whenever they took Bob and I went to be with him that weekend. I just had to go just to see Bob. And we had to hide the newspapers so Bob wouldn't see that about Bud.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** Mom was there with him and we helped him go to the bathroom and everything, just – they were short-handed. They had male nurses some but, you know, they had a big bunch of people there and he, I don't know, he just looked so pitiful. That was tough.

**MR. SMITH:** Well, of course. He wanted to be a doctor. Was that something he always wanted to do?

**MS. STEELE:** He talked about it a lot and we really thought that's where he was headed, and course he just couldn't stand the thought that if there was a war he needed to be in there doing something, so –

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** That's exactly the way he felt.

**MR. SMITH:** What led him to KU?

**MS. STEELE:** I think friends. Because there's several people that he knew from there and they just kept, you know, come on, we want you to come to KU and we'll get you on, I'm sure you'll make the team, and he did play there, but not like he did in Russell. I mean, it was a smaller town and –

**MR. SMITH:** Oh, sure.

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**MR. SMITH:** So when Pearl Harbor comes along, some time went by between the actual attack and his enlistment, but there was never any doubt that he was going to go into the Army?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, he just kept talking more and more like it. He hated to give up his school but he knew that he needed to be there.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** That's the way that went. Mom and Dad both kind of hated it but they knew Bob.

**MR. SMITH:** What do you think made him feel that way? A sense of obligation?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, I think, that and the responsibility. He just decided that he had to be one of them, you know, who protect the country. That's the way a lot of them felt, I think.

**MR. SMITH:** And he discussed it with your folks?

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, phone calls, and he'd come home on weekends and stuff like that and we'd cook up a storm, fix all Bob's favorites.

**MR. SMITH:** What were his favorites?

**MS. STEELE:** Fried chicken.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** Fried chicken, homemade ice cream, chocolate syrup. Yeah, we still kind of like to fix his favorite meal when he comes.

**MR. SMITH:** When he went off to the war, did he keep in touch?

**MS. STEELE:** I have a lot of V mails – I debated about making copies and sending them and I might still but I don't want to part with those myself, but I've got V mails and things like that.

**MR. SMITH:** You really should copy them because they're a historical record.

**MS. STEELE:** You know, it's funny. He wanted me to go to college so bad and he was afraid since I was the last one that maybe the folks couldn't afford to send me, and my grades probably wouldn't be that good, he didn't know, but he sent me an allotment check.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** Uh-huh.

**MR. SMITH:** This was when he was in the Army?

**MS. STEELE:** Yes. And I saved that money. I put it in the bank. I bought bonds with it.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** And that helped me go to K-State.

**MR. SMITH:** That's great.

**MS. STEELE:** And he was pleased, too, because he just wants everybody to get some school.

**MR. SMITH:** Do you remember how you learned of his injury?

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, they called me at the Western Union where I was going to school, had a message and she said you need to contact your mother and gave

me that, and I said, “This isn’t my mom’s number.” She said, “Well, that’s where she called from.” I thought, well, maybe she was in Topeka, you know, and so I called and the lady was there at the house and course she was staying, they had her come in and stay there, she was real close to where he was, and so she told me what had happened. Then I got a call from my Dad and he said, “We’re coming for you and we’ll bring you back to the hospital so you can be with Mom.” So Dad and I – and then of course I finished school. It didn’t – we was just at the tail end of it, you know, with the tests and so forth, so when I got through, course I went, came back and forth, and Dad and I made many, many, many trips on that train.

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**MR. SMITH:** Okay. You remember the first time you saw him?

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, that was at the hospital.

**MR. SMITH:** Topeka?

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, it really –

**MR. SMITH:** Were you surprised?

**MS. STEELE:** Oh, I was shocked. I wasn’t sure it was even him, you know, he was so thin and looked so bad and flat on that bed. He was still in a cast clear up to here.

**MR. SMITH:** Really?

**MS. STEELE:** Uh-huh.

**MR. SMITH:** Could he speak?

**MS. STEELE:** Yes. And I’d hold the paper for him, try to let him read. Nothing from Russell, we couldn’t – Russell papers had to stop because it had too much

in there about Bud. We'd go through and read and make sure there wasn't anything about Bud Smith.

**MR. SMITH:** Who had just been killed?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, he was missing in action.

**MR. SMITH:** Oh, he was missing. So how did your folks deal with it?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, it was tough. My mother was strong, and it's a good thing she is, and they say I'm just like her, but I don't know, I think they test you sometimes. You know, give you so much that you can't really handle, but somehow you do; you just have to.

**MR. SMITH:** And of course just to get there to visit him, that was a major production?

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, it was.

**MR. SMITH:** The hospital in Topeka.

**MS. STEELE:** Finally when he did get to come, as I remember, they brought him in the ambulance because he went directly into – we made Mom and Dad's room into his room and it had the French doors that go out into the living room from the bedroom and we used those to keep people out, because everybody wanted to be there to see him and we just couldn't let people in. He just wasn't able to take that much, but little by little, you know, one at a time.

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**MR. SMITH:** What was his days like when he first came back to the house?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, we had to keep him busy. He read some but he was in bed a lot and when he could get up, boy, I mean he'd get up and he'd get out, you'd help him out the door a little. And he really didn't want people helping him. He

wanted to do it himself. He wanted to get on his own two feet and he worked on that thing, that's still hanging out there, I don't know whether he wants that – lot of people just kind of stop to see that, see where he worked out. And it's just the simplest thing on a little pulley but he spent hours and Mom would send me out to get him to bring him in to eat and he'd say, "Ask her if I can have just another five minutes." You know, he just was bound and determined he was going to get that muscle back in those arms.

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**MS. STEELE:** Kelikian told him, he said, "You have to work with what's left, not what you've lost." And that, I mean, that was just like a map and he knew that that was what he had to do.

**MR. SMITH:** Very special relationship?

**MS. STEELE:** It really was. He thought the world of him, he really did.

**MR. SMITH:** You know how Kelikian came into the picture?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, you know, I think it was through his injuries. Now no, it had to be – now wait a minute.

**MR. SMITH:** Because my understanding was the Army basically would do so much, then they weren't going to do more.

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**MR. SMITH:** ...Did you think that was going to lead to a political career?

**MS. STEELE:** No, I really didn't. He talked to the folks about it, though, quite a bit, because he was kind of in a quandary as to what to do. He loved Russell and he knew it was a big move for his family and he knew he'd be moving away

from here. And of course he didn't get home as often, it didn't seem like, then, and I know Mom missed him a lot, and I know Dad did, too.

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**MR. SMITH:** Was he a natural campaigner?

**MS. STEELE:** Bob? Oh my yes. And he liked, he liked homemade signs; that was one thing he was very firm about. Course the others were very expensive, but he liked the homemade signs that somebody had taken time to sit down and, you know, "I'm for Dole" or whatever. You can see that in all his campaign pictures, there's always a lot of those. I remember in Topeka there were so many of them you couldn't hardly see Bob but they just had so many signs and he loved that, he always did.

**MR. SMITH:** And Huck Boyd was very important –

**MS. STEELE:** Oh, he was a neat man. So was Marie. Marie was at this thing, no, not on his birthday but when he was at the high school building, Marie came that day and she wasn't too well then but she was getting around a little bit. And she was always so proud of him. She carried on where Huck left off to the point she could, you know. But Huck was always behind Bob Dole.

**MR. SMITH:** How did that relationship begin?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, I think when they started talking about him for Congress, I think that's when he jumped in and he supported him through the newspaper, and he made a lot of trips to see Bob.

**MR. SMITH:** He told me that Huck told him at one point to watch his sense of humor. He said we don't need another Jack Benny in Washington.

**MS. STEELE:** Well, see, that's the thing that bothers me now, to hear all these people saying, well, if he just would have shown he's human.

**MR. SMITH:** I know.

**MS. STEELE:** He's always been that way but he was trying to hold it down to show that he is serious about his office, he was running for that office.

**MR. SMITH:** I know exactly what you mean. As long as I've known him people would say the same thing –

**MS. STEELE:** I know it, and it bothers me a little because he does have a good sense of humor but it's not always time to laugh, you know. There are serious things that you need to attend to and that's what you need to do.

**MR. SMITH:** One thing I've always wondered because it seemed to me there's a little bit of a Kansas Populist in him. I mean by that, not the economics necessarily, but a lot of his humor is directed against stuffed shirts, against pomposity, you know.

**MS. STEELE:** Well, I think that he likes the little hometown, I know that, because there's nothing he'd rather do than to come back to Russell and he just wants to get around, see the guys.

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**MR. SMITH:** Do you remember the first time you talked to the Senator after September 11<sup>th</sup>?

**MS. STEELE:** Oh, he couldn't even talk about it, he was just very upset, and I don't know how many times we called the office.

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**MR. SMITH:** Tell me about '76 and that day when they all came back to the courthouse lawn. The whole town must have pitched in.

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, they did.

**MR. SMITH:** How did you find out that he was on the ticket?

**MS. STEELE:** I was there.

**MR. SMITH:** You were at the convention?

**MS. STEELE:** Darn right. We were having breakfast and he came in and said, \*\*\* "I've got some news for you." And he told Mom, and, oh, I tell you what. And then Dad, and –

**MR. SMITH:** How did they react?

**MS. STEELE:** Well, all Mom could think of, we'd better get home, get the house cleaned. She was so excited that she said, "Oh my gosh." And, you know, for awhile up in that motel, everybody was with their cameras and I said, "We better get out of here, you can't go to the bathroom." So we had a lot of fun over that. So thrilled and so excited and the whole town just opened up.

**MR. SMITH:** For a lot of people that's the first time, you know, he broke down. I've always thought that his emotions are very strong and I think they're closer to the surface than most people think so he makes all the more effort to conceal them.

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**MR. SMITH:** That whole relationship with Nixon is fascinating, because Nixon didn't treat him very well in some ways.

**MS. STEELE:** Well, you know, I saw them together in – I lived in Derby then and they had that big breakfast. I don't know, were you there?

**MR. SMITH:** No, I wasn't.

**MS. STEELE:** I guess it was more of a luncheon and he wanted me there to be on the door to greet all those people that I knew, because I was always, I ran his office when he ran for Senate, and, you know, I knew so many people, too, and I am outgoing, I guess.

But anyway, they had Nixon's book under your chair and I never did get mine signed, I hated it because I wanted mine autographed and it didn't get autographed, but I've got the book and I know the kids will love that. But he was so nice and so friendly and Bob just thought a lot of him. He said, you know, it's just like taking a man and everybody's down on him and one person that isn't and that seemed to be Bob, kind of the way he was. I wouldn't say he's going for the underdog, he knew he'd done some things wrong after all, but he still couldn't run out on him. I really feel like that's the way he felt about Nixon, because he couldn't get through that service, you know.

**MR. SMITH:** I wrote that speech.

**MS. STEELE:** Did you?

**MR. SMITH:** I did. But see, here's the thing. Here's the difference. Nixon never did a spontaneous thing in his life. I don't mean that critically, --

**MS. STEELE:** Yeah, I know what you mean.

**MR. SMITH:** -- I think that Nixon planned his funeral and I am utterly convinced he wanted the Senator to speak because he knew he wouldn't be able to get through the eulogy and he also knew that probably the best thing that could happen, for people to see that side of Bob Dole. He was Nixon's candidate for

President in '96. I was there at the funeral, and I knew when I saw the look on Elizabeth's face as she came out of the building just how tough this was.

**MS. STEELE:** I didn't know how he could do it because I knew how much he thought about Nixon.

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