



Conrad I Smith

September 5, 1932 - November 28, 2025

Conrad Irwin Smith (Con), a long-time Kearney resident, passed away on November 28th at age 93 after a brief illness. A Celebration of Life Open House Luncheon to honor Con will be held at The American Automobile Experience Car Collection Museum in Kearney, Nebraska 11 AM – 3 PM on December 27th, 2025.

Conrad was born to Bennett and Marie Smith on September 5, 1932, in Valentine, NE. Con lived in and around several towns in south-central South Dakota, such as Hidden Timber, Witten, and Winner, in his early years before the family moved to Anoka, Nebraska where the family settled and Con started high school in nearby Butte, NE.

Con's high school days in Anoka and Butte were filled with adventure. Regular transportation from Anoka to Butte High for students was via the back of the mailman's truck to school in the morning, then back with the mailman as he delivered the mail to the train in the afternoon. The family soon moved to a farm closer to Butte and Con had to find his own transportation to and from school each day. Con's creativity emerged when he built a motorized bicycle using a washing machine engine, though a snowy ride ended in a crash and a broken arm.

Con's dad worked briefly near an airfield, and Con and his brother would tag

along and wash planes for the aviators returning from the war who were flying their private planes around town. In exchange, they would sometimes get invited for a quick flight. This fueled the brothers' love for flying, and Con eventually earned his private pilot license and logged over 200 flight hours, even purchasing his own plane.

Con took a break from high school after his sophomore year and started operating heavy equipment for his dad's company building dams and roads. Two years later the school superintendent convinced Con to come back and finish; Con made up for lost time and completed both his junior and senior classes in one year to earn his diploma.

After going back to work after graduation, Con was drafted into the Army during the Korean War. The war ended as Con was completing Basic Training, and his job in the Army was Fire Direction for a new artillery weapon that could fire atomic projectiles. Con's unit was deployed overseas to Germany for training; Con's enlistment was up after 10 months, and he returned to civilian life in Nebraska.

Con's streak of self-employment started when he returned from his time in the service. He purchased a used crawler, scraper, and truck and went into business for himself. One of his most memorable projects involved convincing the Boyd County Board to take a chance on a young contractor to move an existing bridge, replacing one that had been washed out in a flood. Instead of dismantling the bridge, Con enlisted the help of a house mover in transporting the bridge in one piece. This would be one of Con's many success stories throughout his lifetime.

Con and Sharon Peterson were married in 1956. Con and Sharon dated in high school and Sharon had written Con letters all during his time in the military. After getting discharged from the military, Con and Sharon moved to

O'Neill, then eventually in 1965 they moved to Kearney, NE. During this time Con was a sales representative for Modern Woodman Insurance and had his designated CLU license. He decided to start selling real estate as well and sold his airplane to his brother Fred, using the funds to buy a house and remodel his first apartment complex. Soon this became Con's primary focus, and he became a full-time landlord and construction remodeler.

Con and Sharon welcomed their daughter, Kristi Lynn, a few years after they relocated to Kearney. In 1978 Con started Lawn Builders, a local lawn care and sprinkler business that still exists today. That business took off, but Con was doing other things as well ... for example he and another local developer decided over a cup of coffee to develop some land, later known as Sobotka and Smith – First, Second, Third, and Fourth sub-divisions in the City of Kearney.

Sharon was diagnosed with lymphoma in 1983. Unfortunately, Sharon passed away after a brief three-year remission.

Con and Kristi managed to keep the dishes washed and the house clean (mostly) until Con and Joan Tarrell were married in Blair, NE in 1990. Kristi gained three brothers (Alvin, Ev, and David) in the deal, plus an additional dog. Joan was a Counselor at Kearney High School in those years, and Con started the slow transition away from running Lawn Builders and his remodeling and apartment business. As Con gradually stepped away from those endeavors, he began acquiring agricultural land, first doing custom farming but later transitioning to share cropping his farms with several tenant farmers. Con found a new passion in this work, tracking the commodities markets daily (if not several times per day) and learning much about how grain marketing works.

Con also found enjoyment in restoring antique cars, usually cars that were less well-known and not actively collected. His pride and joy was a Hudson Terraplane “Big Boy” pickup that he rebuilt and then used extensively in marketing for his Lawn Builders business. He also devoted himself to Kaiser and Frazer automobiles, an automobile manufacturer that most people do not know existed. He was an active member of the Kaiser Frazer Owner Club International (KFOCI), even enticing the group to hold their annual gathering in Kearney one year. On any given day any number of guys would gather at “Con’s Shop” to swap stories, trade ideas, and admire each other’s restorations.

Con was also an active “Coffee Clubber”, going almost every morning to one spot or another to catch up with the various coffee clubs to which he belonged. He often commented that he didn’t say much while he was there, but that he really enjoyed hearing comments from others from all walks of life about how they viewed the news of the day or the question at hand for the group. Those coffee outings provided lots of energy for Con and really kept him going through his later years.

In recent years when Con was asked what he did before retirement, he loved to respond with answers like “What makes you think I’m retired?” and “I never really had a job ...” In truth Con did many things ... he was a husband, father, and grandfather. He was a builder and entrepreneur who found great success in his multiple endeavors. He was a largely self-taught engineer and developer who could always be counted on to know “how things work” and how to make them work again, maybe even better, when they were having problems. Con was engrossed in his work literally up almost to the moment he passed, making sure bills were paid and negotiating commodity contracts from his hospital bed. Conrad will be dearly missed, he made a lasting impression on everyone who knew him.

Con is survived by his wife Joan of Kearney, NE, his daughter Kristi and her family of Omaha, NE (Todd, Tea, Taegren), stepson Alvin Tarrell of Elkhorn, NE and his family (Kena, Alejandra, Andrea, Ariel, Amanda), stepson Ev Tarrell and his family of Sidney, NE (Jana, Reid, Trever), stepson Dave Tarrell of Lincoln, NE and his family (Kennedy, Kelsey), brother Fred Smith of Lincoln, NE, sister Marilyn Lenz of Hurst, TX, and multiple great-grandchildren, in-laws, and innumerable lifelong friends.

In lieu of flowers, memorials are suggested to some of Con's favorite causes:

- The American Automobile Experience Car Collection Museum
- Nebraska Future Farmers Association – Ogallala Chapter
- Or to the family for distribution to those and other causes

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

DEC 27. 11:00 AM - 3:00 PM (CT)

The American Automobile Experience Car Collection Museum
3600 US Highway 30 B
Kearney, NE 68847

Tribute Wall

NH

“ *Kristi*

My sympathy and a hug. You were a wonderful caregiver for your Dad.

Nancy Harrington



Nancy Harrington - December 27, 2025 at 10:22 AM

SK

“ *It was a pleasure to get to know Con and work along side him during the 2013 Lincoln Highway Centennial Celebration preparations. I also had the pleasure of working with him when Kearney bid and hosted the Hudson-Essex-Terraplane car club conference. He always had a smile and was pleasant to visit with.*

Sarah Focke, Visit Kearney - December 26, 2025 at 10:43 PM