

High School Senior Returns From China



Connie Smith poses with Chinese boy after completing a 3 mile road race in Canton, China. Connie was part of a U.S. team of 100 high school students selected to take part in the competition.

Photo by Jerry Pierce

By Ted Werth

Thoughts of China bring many preconceived ideas. China is a land that to most of us is a mystery. A land that until recent years has been closed to the outside world. A land that is just now beginning to communicate with the outside world in an attempt to modernize.

Rare are the opportunities to visit this land and yet 17 year old Connie Smith, a tribal member from Scottsburg, had just this opportunity recently.

Connie, who is a senior at Reedsport high school, was invited to join a team of runners invited to compete in a 3 mile road race at Canton, China. Members were chosen according to times submitted from previous competition.

Connie grew up in Scottsburg, a small community 17 miles east of Reedsport on the Oregon Coast with her parents, Lee and Sandra Smith and her older brother Tony. She first got involved in competitive running during her freshman year and has been running cross country and track ever since, although she said that she does take breaks from running during the year. When it comes to track she says that, "I usually run the 880 and on the relay teams."

After receiving notification of the selection Connie had to raise the \$1,600 necessary to pay for her place on the team. A strong community effort helped to overcome any problem of money though. Many in the community helped by making donations and the school also held a Dance and Chili feed to raise money. Then as a final effort Connie and two other runners from Reedsport, also selected, held a jog-a-thon

with sponsors paying for each lap that they could run in one hour. Connie managed to make 30 laps (7 1/2 miles) in the one hour period.

HONG KONG

The group of 100 runners left on December 25th and spent the first three days in Hong Kong. When in Hong Kong "We continued our training for the race." Training aside, "most of what we did is we went to the richest parts, then the poorest parts. There really was no middle class, just rich or poor. The poor were mostly the boat people. The rich mostly drove Mercedes and lived in high rise buildings."

Connie said that it was easier to talk to people in Hong Kong than in China because many of the people spoke English. She remembered one conversation in particular. "We were eating at a McDonald's and we met a couple of girls. They were saying how they were surprised that people would donate money for us to go over there. That really surprised them because they didn't think that anyone donated money I guess. They also told us that they didn't think they would ever be able to leave (Hong Kong)."

The highlight of Hong Kong? "We went shopping at 'Stanley Bay' and other shopping areas. We bought lots of clothes. I bought a dress for one dollar and silk robes for my family."

CANTON, CHINA

Canton is a city of 1.8 million people. It is the regional capital of Kwangtung and the only major city in southeastern China. Founded in 214 B.C., it is 75 miles from Hong Kong and

is located at the mouth of the Hsi Chiang river. Its location makes it one of China's principal ports. It is also considered one of China's most modern cities. Like all of east China it is extremely crowded with 1,000-2,000 people per square mile.

The major means of transportation around China is by train. This is how Connie's group traveled to Canton from Hong Kong.

The group spent three days in Canton. The first night was spent at the NANU Hotel where the race was held on their second day in the country. The 100 American students had to compete against 300 students from China but they still managed to place 9 of the top 10 finishers. Unfortunately officials only kept track of the top ten finishers for boys and girls so Connie isn't sure exactly where she finished. The Americans were at a disadvantage from the start because "they yelled 'go' in Chinese and we just kind of stood there." After the race they traded t-shirts, pins, and small American flags with the Chinese students.

After the race the U.S. group moved to the White Swan Hotel. However, travel in Canton was limited. "We really couldn't go out in Canton because it (the hotel) was all guarded. When we could leave we left on a bus."

The team did get to go to a zoo and also to a porcelain factory (Canton is famous for their porcelain).

In describing the people of Canton, Connie said "we saw mostly men and they all dressed the same, in flat green and brown solid colors", (most of the people have to make their own clothes).

"There were a few vehicles but most of the people rode bicycles. There is very little machinery that they use, they do everything by hand. In the city they would mix up their cement on big long boards by hand. We went through the country and all the people lived in little huts, grass huts. They have big oxen to use for farming. They're very far behind us, it really surprised me."

"The people in Canton weren't as happy as the people in Hong Kong. They didn't smile as much. They looked at us all over because I guess we looked so different to them."

After two more days in Hong Kong the team spent two days in Hawaii before returning home on January 5, 1985.

At the time of this interview Connie said she is just now getting everything unpacked and that she wanted to express her thanks to the council members and others who made donations to her trip. She is now looking forward to starting track in a couple weeks and after graduation a possible career in the fashion merchandising industry.

Is there one thing about her trip that she will remember longer than anything else?

"Their bathrooms, they don't have toilets, like we do, they just have holes in the ground! But besides that, the way the people live. The streets are little and so crowded. Mostly the people farmed and you didn't see much else."