

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

Edward Allen Smith

Interviewed by Delores Cooper
December 14 & 18, 1996

At St. Mary's College of Maryland

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[Begin Side 1, Tape 1 of 2]

Delores Cooper: Delores Cooper. I am interviewing Edward Smith. We are at St. Mary's College, Saturday, November 16, 1996. The project is Unified Committee for African American Contributions Oral History Project.

Edward, what were the times like when you were a child?

Edward Smith: Well, the first thing I can sort of remember—I was separated from my family, my immediate family and brought from Washington, D.C. to St. Mary's County, Christmas Eve of 1930. And, I was adopted by Mr. and Mrs. William B. Thompson and accepted in by my grandparents.

As far as a baptism: I was baptized in St. George's Church and I noticed on my birth certificate not long ago—baptism certificate not long ago that Edward A. Smith Thompson and they left that Thompson hanging in the air, and I never did accept the name as—Thompson as a name.

Schooling at that time was pretty rough on blacks, in particular, because—oh—I never rode a bus to school until I was in high school. And, there were some very cold

days to be going to school. And, we never were—There never was such a thing as weather absentee days. You reported to school and then get excused after you went to school.

That's was for the deep snows, etc. Had some very good teachers and were interested at that time. And, they would make sure that you learned, and they also made sure that you maintained sort of respect and things of that nature in school.

DC: What was your classroom like?

ES: Crowded and cold.

DC: Who was your favorite teacher?

ES: Well—

DC: In elementary and in high school.

ES: Well, in elementary school, it would be Mary Kay Mercer. Mary Carrie Mercer Briscoe as she was before she died. And in high school, I—it's kind of hard to pick out a special one because Mr.—Mr. Netta—Mr. John E. Netta taught at Cardinal Gibbons School_____. He was very—I was very interested in him. Also, Mr. Layton Pitts who taught History and Math at Cardinal Gibbons. He was very—He was very hard for me to listen.

DC: Why would you consider Mr. Mercer a favorite teacher?

ES: Well, she was my first teacher, I guess, but she was sweeter then.

DC: What was your favorite subject? And/or least favorite subject?

ES: Well, I guess Math and History are good. My least favorite was English, particularly after I got to high school because the first year I was in high school, I had a fair—fairly good pan whipping when I started. But by lack of books, we had to take dictation in class, taking our homework home. And by listening to Mrs. Mayers, who could read and talk so fast—By good, by the time you wrote that stuff down, it'd be cold by the time I got

home.

DC: What were your dreams as a young adult? What did you dream of doing when you grew up?

ES: Being a musician.

DC: How did your family live? What did they eat when you were a child?

ES: Oh, field crops and farm, farm crops, and they were such thing as, as a–tropical fruits were bought from the stores, and other stuff was belonged to–raised on the farm.

DC: Do you feel times are better or worse now than then?

ES: Well, they have improved in some ways. They have improved by having modern equipment that you have today. But, there's some other things to live up to–these modern equipments. The dollars don't seem to match the improvements of modern equipment.

DC: What is your earliest memory?

ES: Earliest memory was: Leaving Washington, DC, I rode down with Mr. Brett Thompson. We had–As we were going through Anacostia, we saw some chickens out there. People used to raise chickens in the backyard back there in Washington, DC at the time. And, so I asked what were they, and he said, "Chickens." When we got down to Charlotte Hall, we stopped and there was a farm at Mr. Butler's–Mr. Abraham Butler's. We stopped there, and they had a old duck walking around the tree, walking around the yard. He was walking and quaking, and I couldn't understand that duck language. I asked him about that. [chuckle] I asked Mr. Brenner. "Now what kind of–Just what kind of chicken is that?" That was one was my first experiences! [laughter]

DC: Funny! So, at what age were you brought from Washington?

ES: Three.

DC: You were three years old? Okay. Do you have any memories of relationships with your sisters and brothers before that time?

ES: Very vaguely until after I was about seven or eight years old, start going back and forth to Washington on Christmas holidays and—Probably holidays, in general. Anytime school was out.

DC: What church did you go to as a child?

ES: St. George's Catholic Church. And when I was teenager, I went to both 'cause I had a friend who was a, belonged to—He belonged to St. Mark's, you know, a Methodist church. And if we stayed overnight at his place, we still had to go to church. Now, I'd have to go to his church if I was staying at his house that weekend or he'd have to our church if I wasn't at his house.

DC: What trips did you take as a child?

ES: Quite a few trips, but the miles were short. We'd go to Washington, DC to see the Smithsonian Institute, the Washington Monument, and the Aerospace Engineering.

DC: Who took you on these trips?

ES: Most of them were school trips. I also had a trip to the Washington _____ Center. We went there I think—I think it was about third year of high school. That's when we went there for a whole day with Father McKenna and John Smith and all that. I think—I think that was—Yeah. John Smith ran _____ and John Smith—yeah. Yeah, we went there to the Washington National Church which was 14 stories high. That was the first time I'd been that high off the ground. I mean, except for going up in that monument. I went up the monument by elevator, but I'm talking about going up the steps

and looking out the 4th window. Oh gee. Most of the trips—

Then, I went down to Hampton. Went down there for college indoctrination course or class—whatever you might want to call it—for a weekend down there. And, that was—That was very upsetting and I started—When we left Washington, DC on a plane going south—When we got to the Roslyn Bridge—This was outside of northwest Washington, we pulled down every shade around the, around the cars we were riding in because it wasn't quite—It was just about time for him to turn the lights on. So when they turn the lights on in this black car, the outside lights would be—You didn't anything in the dark anymore. Nobody saw who was riding in the car. So that, that was tough—kind of pipe. So, on the way down there—We got down, down, down in Richmond the next morning and asked him, “You all gonna eat?”

I looked outdoors and, “That's fine restaurant there for the some people, but I didn't see any that was marked where I was supposed to be going. So, I didn't bother getting out of there because he said it was a 29-minute layover later and the place that I had to go was four blocks down the street. So, I missed breakfast til we got to Norfolk. Got to Norfolk. I wasn't too satisfied out town then, so the bus from the school came over and picked us up to carry us on, carry us...Stayed on campus the whole weekend I was down there. When I came back to Washington, I stayed on that train until I got back in Washington, too.

I was invited to go down to Tuskegee to take a course. In fact, I was planning on going until they, until that trip—that college indoctrination came up. And I got back and I told Grandma and them, “Now, I'm not going to go down Alabama to go to school.”
[chuckle] That was about it. As far as McKenna, you ought to know why. I told him. I

said, "Ain't no way—the type of person I am with some of the thoughts I got, those people down there kill me before I got down to school!" I wasn't going down there.

So, a little after that, Father McKenna pulled some more strings and tried to get me in Xavier University. Went down to Louisiana. I said, "Hold it. Hold it right there. Louisiana is further down than Alabama and it's no sense in me digging that type of hole down there." So, I—by being hard-headed, I missed college until after I got out of the Service.

DC: How did your parents—in this case, your adoptive parents—deal with health and illness? Do you remember any special cures? And, did your family have a medical doctor?

ES: We had a doctor who used to come down from Washington, DC. Dr. W.H. Bland. He used to come down. He had a stop in Charlotte Hall at, I think, it was Mr. Ralph Butler's mother's house, and he used to have a stop at our house in Valley Lee _____.

And at that time, I had to go—I had a circumcision operation. I had to take it—seven years old, and he gave me that operation right in the house down, down in Valley Lee. And after that, I don't think I had to go to the doctor too many times until, until I, after I got going, after I went to school, the Service, and whatever.

DC: What kinds of things did you do as a child? What did you like to do most, and did you have any chores?

ES: Well, we had chores. Quite a few of them. Most of them were farm type of, house type of chores. We did everything outdoors—getting wood together, and that was a year-round thing because you didn't have gas stoves, didn't have electrical stoves at that time. And, had your regular farm chores—feeding the animals and watering them per day. We used to have fun watering the horses 'cause I'd always ride them to the stream. They get the

water and them ride them back, playing the Lone Ranger. That was pretty old deal.

DC: Anything else you liked to do besides ride the horses for fun?

ES: For fun? Playing baseball and the only kind of a game that was a competitive-type game was make money and _____. At that time, we didn't have football down here. And when I started going to Jarboesville High School, I started playing basketball. Basketball, softball, track. That was another thing: I got penalized in the track business. In fact, I didn't get penalized in track, not by home. At that time, I had a idol that used to live close to us, and his name was Roy Cutchember. And, he was a—He was track & field where he would have to go to Bowie every year to compete against the other counties. So, that was my ambition was to go to Bowie. So, Momma and then told me, said, "Okay. Tell you what." Said, "You be a good fella and all this and we're going to pay your way so you can ride to Bowie." And, best _____, every time when the time comes to go to Bowie, I would commit some kind of lewd crime or on the phone, such as climb a tree or something like that. "Uh unh. You're hard-headed. Not going," and I didn't go.

So, the following year—the first year I was in high school, I thought I'd take the baseball out of the trash. Now, I ran track and got 12th place in the dash and 2nd place in the relay, and both of them entitled me to go to Bowie to compete that year. And of all things, Lady Bedette, who was the Superintendent of the schools in St. Mary's County, said that the insurance was going to be too high for any of the blacks to go out of St. Mary's." Now, I don't know whether it was the blacks or not. But anyway, the insurance was going to be too high for the students to go outside of the County to compete, and that made me have a very hard feeling with Mrs. Bedette for a long time.

That's the—I guess wind up with most of my athletics as a child.

DC: How did your parents treat you? What did they did that you remember most? How did they discipline you? You just spoke about not being able to go to the track & field games, but just in general.

ES: Well, they had a old _____ (stress test?). Pop wouldn't hit you but three times. I don't care what you did. If you murdered a horse, you didn't get but three cracks and you would remember all three of them from that belt. Momma: She had a way of—Now, I can tell...that skate right there. So, that was the only [chuckle]...and I—I member once. I was 13 years old and—No, 14 and--just turned 14, and—So, one Friday—I turned 13 at Friday. So I said, “Passed on 2/3 man. Gonna get more whippings now!” So that Sunday, I went upstairs after church, stayed up reading funny paper instead of coming down to do my Sunday morning chores. Momma called upstairs and I didn't come down. After all, when I did come down, she sent in the kitchen: slap, slap, slap, slap. No more whippings have to get 2/3s man. A pretty good one, too!

DC: Do you feel that they prepared you well for life?

ES: Good. Nothing—There's nothing that they held back that I should have known, and they didn't hold me back from going to school to learn what I should have learned in school.

And, they very much insisted that school be—

One thing: In that family, everybody—they were teachers. My uncle was a teacher; Papa was a teacher; Uncle Brent was a teacher; Godmother was a teacher.

DC: Who was Godmother?

ES: Lilly. So that made—There were—Education, mind and people and stuff. There was nothing held back. Anything I failed to get in school was my own fault.

DC: How did you fit in as far as age with the other Thompson siblings?

ES: Everybody there was nine years older than me or more. Everybody there was out of high school when I first came to the house. And 'course, when I came there, Jenna was still in school in Washington and Leroy was still in to Bowie. And, I think Leroy got out—Leroy finished there at Bowie when I first came down there, somewhere in that neighborhood.

DC: As a teenager, did your parents allow you to court?

ES: Well, they didn't catch up with me! [laughter] Well, they—There would be this little joke for this, that and the other. But most of the time, boys played boys, boys games most of the time. And by transportation problems and things in those days, I couldn't borrow the family car until I was old enough to get my own license. And, I didn't—So, that, that out ruled that.

DC: So when you were able to go, where would you go? What would you do?

ES: Oh, we had recreation centers at the time. We had—We had a recreation center over in Valley Lee at the St. Francis Hall—Not St. Francis. Old St. George's Hall which was—It wasn't a Catholic hall. They call it St. George's because of the area, not because of the church affiliate. It was—It was on Prataline Road down there. And, we—Everybody that was in the 2nd District went to that, that particular, that particular recreation center. And, we used to have two nights and they just had two nights through the week and Saturdays that we had recreation.

And, then the recreation centers would meet twice a year—I think it was. They meet in different districts; like, we would go down to Cardinal Gibbons School which was a big open place or we'd go, in the 7th District, over to they used to call it Dixon Park. They used to call it over it in the 7th District. They had this big old—family Dixon.

And once a year...sometime all the different areas would meet together at Banneker School for a big get together.

DC: Did you have to pay to go to these rec centers?

ES: No. The recreation centers: They were sponsored by the county or something like. I don't know if it was the County or State, but people there to man the stores were just like Boys Club meetings, something similar to them.

DC: What kind of work have you done to support yourself? How did you get to your work and why did you choose this work? Was it difficult? What did it mean to you?

ES: Well, I was one of these folks—I always like my own dollar because I thought if you get your own dollar, you can spend it the way you please and you don't have to answer to anybody. That was my first drive to get a dollar or go to work. First job I had away from home was mowing lawns down at Andover Estates over in Valley Lee, Maryland—a great big, old farm over there was owned by some way-upstairs folks. And, Ed Johnson—He was a lawyer in Ohio and he come home on weekends from Ohio. He would fly back from Ohio back to Washington, DC. John Smith would drive up there to pick him up. And, I started out at that job—\$9 a week, nine hours a day, six days a week, and the only power mower we had was this one! [laughter] In other words, I named that real quick—black power. Yes!

From that—When the Base started down here, I slipped my age into 15 'cause I was—'cause I was so scared. I slipped my name and my age up a little bit and went on over there and got the job with some of those contractors over there during the summer. I still went to school afterwards, soon as the Fall came out.

And, I started to work at Tall Timbers with Mr. Jonathan Briscoe down there at

for awhile until I went to the Service. When I was in the Service, I only stayed there a year and a half. That was beautiful. I got one of the biggest prizes in my life being out in this. I was in—I was in Long Beach at the shipyard there, aboard a ship, and Mom wrote me a letter and told that Fred Tiger was going to California looking for a job! I thought he was going...up there in Lexington Park, Maryland looking for a job over at the Base. So one night, I was walking down the street, voice called: “Ed!” and it sounded very familiar to me. I turned around and looked and what did I see but Fred Tolbert walking down the street in Los Angeles! [laughter] That’s what it is! That was a nice one!

DC: Who was Fred Tolbert?

ES: Fred Tolbert...(inaudible)

DC: I know!

ES: And after—Let’s see. After I got out of the Service, I went to school in Washington to the Washington Conservatory and I stayed there a little while until I got overanxious, and that’s when I needed a family. And so, that’s when I dropped out of school.

DC: So what did you study at the Conservatory?

ES: Music Theory, Piano, Voice, Musical History. It was only four courses. You were only demanded to take four courses to get a BS degree in it at the time. I don’t know. Got out of that...work for...Started to work for Jonathan Briscoe for awhile...Don Gonner come in the evenings. While I was at Don Gonner’s, I happened to be working there the same year that they were upgrading this cottage where I am here today. They were upgrading this to start men going to school here ‘cause it was St. Mary’s Seminary style, and they were gonna—They were upgrading it, changing all the buildings and whatever. I happen to be working here and up comes—We were in the center rush working and we were

downstairs looking. Nobody even looked outdoors. So I looked—So about a quarter to 4, I had to go upstairs to pick up a piece of cooking...get back downstairs. I told the boys, “Come on. Let’s go.” The big, old 40 gallon water tank was over there. It was swaying as much as 6'. And of all things, that was Hurricane Hazel. Yes.

Shortly after that, let’s see. Shortly after that, I started to work with—I went to school on apprenticeship course thing that started me in this electronics, and I took 4 years on-the-job training plus schooling there. In fact, most of the schooling was right there on the Base and then they had traveling teachers. Sometimes we would do some traveling courses. Like in Washington, DC, we used to go to—Trying to think of the name of the school. Anyway, we used to go there about once every 6 months. We went there for about 4 months, but most of the courses there were general high school. I mean, not general high school: Math, History, Naval History, Science, and we had Basic Electronics up until the end of the year. Come up to advanced, deeper and deeper into Electronics Theory.

And, I worked there until—And, my job called for installing these basic electronic—I mean, these electronic circuits in aircraft, then we would fly with this equipment and make sure that it works. Or if we had two or three different units we want to change anything airborne, we could do that. And, I flew with that one for awhile. Some of that flying, I think it got a little to me after a couple drops! [chuckle] Which—They weren’t as much fun as I thought they were. The first time me, they dropped me down at the Brown Field down here where the Brown Police Camp, Boys Camp is down there? That was bad. Next time, they make mistake and dropped me over there in Bayleville. [chuckle] Dropping that—bang—picked that plane back up there and brought it back to

the—Marine, probably, picked it back up there to the Base. Put me out. They didn't have to tell me abandon ship when they got back to the Patuxent 'cause I was the first one on the ground—

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 2]

[Begin Side 2, Tape 1 of 2]

ES: —off of that second. It was all of that dropping in that Bay the second time, I put my health problems because we went—So after that accident, I went on home First Base, two or three days. It happened on a Friday. I went back to work on Monday. I went back Wednesday? Monday or Tuesday? Back started hurting, so I went down to the hospital to check myself out, get checked out on the Base Hospital. My blood pressure went up so high, it took them 18 days to get the thing back into regular motion. Not long after that, I started having seizures. So, electronics and seizures together: They don't too work well together, so told them, I said, "I'm getting out of here."

They transferred me to electronic workshop. And in that workshop, I said, "Uh uh." I had a couple warnings. These seizures—seemed like these seizures were gonna come on or something. I'd sit down and override them or something to that effect. And, that's when I, I decided maybe get out of electronics. I mean, I'd get out of that particular job. So, they were getting ready to give me another job, but they'd changed my rate two times. The rate came down, and I said, "Oh no! That ain't my pay...Fall down some more." I said, "I'm going out of here." They didn't want it. They didn't want to turn me loose there for awhile until I showed them waiting was the best thing to

do was to discharge me 'cause if I fall on a piece of that equipment, and one of them old dumb sailors comes over there and tries to grab me and take me off that piece of equipment, it's going to kill three or four people instead of one. And, that's how I got out of the Service. And, I've been retired since '89.

So far as seizures concerned, I had them up until about six years ago. I haven't had any now in about six years, but I...It was a long time after I stopped drinking that they stopped. I stopped drinking 15 years ago and the seizures only stopped about six years ago. I stopped drinking, stopped smoking...I stopped smoking for one reason and I stopped drinking for another. I stopped smoking because I thought it was a health problem. I stopped drinking because it was dangerous to my pocketbook!

DC: [chuckle] Okay. What do you remember about your wedding?

ES: Beautiful! I had the most beautiful wedding anybody I know. It was simple in church. It was just my wife and I, the best man, his wife—I mean, best man and the bridesmaid, and my mother in-law. That's all that was at church for the wedding, except the priest. And after—

DC: Where was it?

ES: At St. George's Church. Got married there one Saturday morning before Labor Day in 1960, and it took me—I think—about 12 or 13 years to find out exactly what date it was. I knew it was Saturday before Labor Day, but I could never keep the date straight. So a lot of times, I done—time come for the anniversary, I done—[chuckle]—I be: “Almost missed it!”

But the wedding reception itself was the most beautiful thing I ever saw. My mother in-law's house: They had a great, big oak tree. It would cover—It would cover of a hundred people I knew. I mean, the shade, and that's where the wedding reception was.

The tables were around under that big oak tree, and you just brought the food and whatever out of the house. It was very nice.

DC: How did you meet Donna?

ES: Well, I met her through jumping the fence. Well, in other words, what I mean by “jumping the fence” is all I had to do was look across the fence. That’s where she lived.

DC: [chuckle] Okay! Might be a hard question. Why did you decide to get married?

ES: Well, two reasons: Well, one of them’s love. The second one was demand. I mean, nobody demanded that I do anything, but we were in the process of getting ready to start raisin’ a family, so the best thing to do was raise them together.

DC: Okay. What’s your family life been like?

ES: Busy. Sometimes up, sometimes down. I’ve really had some good times and some rough ones, really, but the good ones outweigh the roughs.

DC: How ‘bout with your children and grandchildren?

ES: Whew! Now, the children: Now, my life was really great raisin’ my children till my older son went in the Service. He got hurt. That took a lot out of me for about a year or two. I mean, he actually got hurt. In Vietnam, he lived 10 years after that, and those 10 years were the worst 10 years I’ve ever lived in. He would come home and he would have these—You never know when he was gonna have one of those seizures ‘cause he’d been shot up and everything else.

I went to the hospital to visit him when I had the opportunity in Washington—Walt Reed—and he took a real bad, had a bad—something fell on his bed that day. And I said to him, “Junior.” I said, “What’s the matter? You feeling rough or what is gonna on?”

And he told me, he said, “Come back tomorrow and I’m gonna tell you about

this.” Come to find out they had moved him to about three beds from the man he used to be his commanding officer, and he originally got shot by carrying his commanding officer to a, to a helicopter. And, the fella—He said when he got into the bed, the fella couldn’t recognize him. He said it hurt him to his heart. So after he got up...things started looking a whole lot better.

Now grandchildren: I mean I’ve had some good times and some rough ones. Most of them pretty. The—I been there for them if they ever needed me. And as they’ve been growing, plenty things I’ve done. They always got done. They come by, see how Grandpop and Grandmama’s doing or whatever. “Can I help you do things?” “Can I help you do that?” and so on. ...Beautiful.

DC: What part has religion played in your life?

ES: Oh, it’s pretty good. I’ve had some goods and bads in that, too. [chuckle] I remember once we—We [pause]—Now, when I was going to Catholic schools—I’m Catechism over at St. George’s, we had a area there. Now, there was the people from Piney Point. There were people from Piney Point, regardless where you’re black, white, _____ race. People from Valley Lee. There were people from Valley Lee—whatever. I mean, like, you know, had boys headed to the gangs and whatever, and the people from Valley Lee, Grey (?) and Piney Point. All three of us go to Catechism over there at St. George’s Hall. And, some of us got to be some really tight going out. Irv and I were just about as good as I don’t know what. He was from Gray (?) and I was from Valley Lee. And Junior Baylor out of Tall Timbers, he and I got to be very, very good friends. Then, Junior Baylor and I—We worked together after we were men. I mean, in the same field until just before I retired. So, we had some nice times.

I remember when they revamped the new church down at St. George's. And it wasn't long after we had just built that church and all that work we'd done, we went out there and we found all these shrubberies. So, I'm clearing, come down there and pull little shrubs up, instead of tying the shrubs home somewhere...send them to somebody, throw them all up and down St. George's Road. And, the Rev., the Priest got word of it. He got word of it, and he said, "He thinks he know he did it," but he never mentioned anything about it. I don't think anybody ever caught...because those shrubs got replaced, but they got replaced by new ones and different ones. I don't know, somehow that didn't him me too good—after all that work!

DC: So—

ES: I mean, that wasn't the reason. Right now, I go to church down the street because I stole...(inaudible) So, I started going to church down in Bethesda. I've been enjoying myself pretty good. Yeah, I guess the religion part of it is letting His, His—learning how to get along with people...whatever, but that's only half of religion 'cause being able to speak with your Builder. Because, this one—One thing in religion that I always agree with and it's: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." That's fine, but it don't say you have to like them. See what I mean. I mean, if you see a person out here. If there's anything you can do to help them, you'll help them and whatever, but you ain't gonna—Don't tell me if that fella comes over and picks your grass out your house, you ain't gonna get mad him! Your brother—You get mad at him about things like that!

DC: Tell me about your community activities. I know you're quite active.

ES: Well, I've been quite active in community activities a little while back. I used to be Boys Club Leader. I was a Little League coach, Pony League coach, and few other little odds

and ends. Greatest of all of my things I enjoy: I was asked to be—Wait a minute. First of all, I wasn't asked to be 4H Club leader but a helper because the 4H Club leader at that time was very busy and they couldn't do but so much work at a time. That was Leroy Thompson, Sr. And, he asked me to give him a little assistance which was a voluntary thing, and I really enjoyed it. And, that started me in doing community, community work of different types.

So after that, Mr. Fred Tolbert. I'm planning on writing a little story about him or else he's getting somebody else to write it, and he chose me to get a Little League started for blacks. Because at that time, there was only one black boy in St. Mary's County that was playing in Little League Baseball and that was Vincent Briscoe, Jr. down at Tall Timbers. So, he told me—He challenged me to do it. I said, "Man, you ain't done nothing." I went all out.

So, Cheps, Cleeny and I went out together and solicited our boys together over at Valley Lee, and we started getting together with men from different districts of Maryland, now—I mean, St. Mary's. Now, down—We went down in Ridge and we got Mr. Barnes, Mr. Elwood Smith, and somebody else down there I can't think about. Up in Lexington Park, we got Mr. Ralph Thomas and Mr. Kelly Cutchember together. They got—They got a team together there, and Mr. William Mary and we got a team in Carver Heights. When we finished, we had nine teams in that 'cause we went up to Charlotte Hall, and we got Reverend Hope. We got him. He said he couldn't work with it too much himself, but he'd get somebody to be his deputy. And, a team out of 7th District and had a team over there at Mr. James Horton and one in Oakville. And, we really had fun. That was some fun.

And, I forget who the gentleman was here. I'll think of his first name now. He was the—He was the head of the St. Mary's County Reparations Department at the time. And after he heard about we had went on and did what we're gonna do, now he gonna ride around...Stick his chest out one day and...

[End of Side 1, Tape 1 of 1]

...chest out one day and—fella from up in Pennsylvania was down here, from up there at Little League headquarters—[chuckle] and he was riding around. He was riding around and watching, you know, showing him where some of these black teams were. And, we happened to be playing ball...that day. He came out there. And when he introduced who he was, I said, "Well now! You the man I might be willing to see!"

[laughter]

So, the fella asked us, "What can you do for us?"

I said, "Well." I said, "You do me one favor, it'd be the best thing ever happened."

He said, "What's that?"

I said, "Can you get these boys insured?"

He said, "What? You mean to tell me you got the boys playing ball and they're not insured?"

I said, "You got that right."

He said, "I'll be back down here within a week. I'm gonna have something for ya." He said, "Can you get all your managers together?"

I said, "I can do that. I can do that in two days if you let me know what you want done."

Well anyhow, he came down with insurance. He brought some Blanket's insurance for all of the teams, plus their coaches, all in one package. If a child get hurt out there, all they had to do was file a claim or whatever. And, that was very, very interesting. And, we went a long way with it, and we only challenged—We only had one challenge, as I know of, with Little League—Black Little League fame—White Little League team: We played them one day. We lost to them 2 to 1, but I enjoyed myself, and I enjoyed myself 'cause I lost the game! [laughter] Yeah, I was manager of the team that lost the game.

Oh, let me see if there's anything else...Well, I worked in a lot of different things like that. Something comes up that we know or something that can help somebody, we reach out and touch them. Always try to be up on whatever it is out there helping somebody. Help them out in some kind of way.

DC: Do you have a leadership role in Elk Lodge?

ES: Me?

DC: Um hm.

ES: I have been from the bottom all the way to the top, and now I'm the Chairman of the—Man, there's a thought for everything! Shucks...My words get tied up, memory gets short-changed and I can't remember what I want to say. Anyhow, I've done it. It'll come to me.

DC: So, how long have you been a member of the Elks?

ES: 1969 till now. I'm the—There's only one brother in my lodge who's been there longer than me and that's Arvin Thomas. He's been there 50 years. He was there 52 years. This will be a little while ago. The only two brothers in the lodge that's older man than I.

That's Thomas and Brother James Brown.

DC: So Edward, how do you feel about life in general?

ES: Life in general?

DC: Um hm. In what ways is it different from the way it used to be? Do you think the quality of life is better now?

ES: Well, no. When it started--If it meant me, I would say it started in Congress. When they messed up there and took three R's out of school, they did the worst thing that could ever happen. When I say the three R's, I'm not talking about Reading, Writing and 'Rithmetic. I'm speaking of Respect for your country, Respect for the Lord, and Respect for the teacher. They don't have to salute the flag if they don't want. They don't have to say prayers up there if they don't want to. And then, if the teacher gets in correcting them, she's gonna wind up in Londontown for child abuse. Now, there it is. It's just as plain and simple as I don't know what.

And, that's what I look at young leadership. You can't--You can't very well lead a horse to water--I mean, you can lead to horse to water, but you can't make it drink. But, if you can't give the child a little bit of sting there to let him know that you mean what you mean. There is no such thing as coming up and getting etiquette and all these other good things. That's why I say--like, as I look at it going downhill. The children don't have to learn to be respectable to old man, John sitting over there. They don't what, who he is. All men deserve a little bit of respect. That's the way I look at it, and the young folks today are not really taught. People say they're taught by the--They're not taught at home. Now, I don't know all what everybody teaches at home. But just like a child playing ball. I mean, or a person that gets whatever he wants.

Now just like if you're gonna train somebody to do something, there are stages in training. Now, you start training them at home, then they get their professional training. Except the professional can't train him—The train will stop right there. I mean, that's the way I look at it. And, the change was very recent because this training now is for a younger group which actually, they've been training to feel like this dial 911 for the last 20 years. And I mean, you can't—You can't very well guide the country if you don't have any leaders. So, that's the part I look down on.

Now, all the good sides and all that other stuff, it's nice. It's very nice because—But, it's another thing. It's nice that children learn these modern technologies of the computers and all this stuff. But if a child's out on a boat and he was 5 miles out in the middle of the sea, and he look up in the air—His motor cut off. He look up in the air and he can't see shore from either side. But if he stands up there and, and, and, and, have a compass, he can tell which way he's supposed to be going in order to go home. And, but, how many of them—How many of them—But if you don't carry your compass out there, you, you hurting. Then if you go out there—Say for instance, you got all this—You got a radio onboard the boat, and the radio falls overboard and he stops running. Now, how can you call anybody? But if you got a pencil, you could stand up and look at the shadow—Look at your shadow on that boat, you can tell how far you are from shore. All you go to do is general geometric numbers and tell you just how far away. But...keep on believing...a lot of people hasn't pulled you under.

DC: Do you think people are different than they used to be?

ES: Yeah.

DC: How are teenagers in St. Mary's County today different from when you were a teen.

ES: Teenagers in the County today are different because of two things: One of them is don't have good _____. Second one: They go ahead and get out there. And if they don't go in the bar, they can go there and get in that bar yard and say they just along to please, along to—And while they're there, that's when the different habits start. Just because one fella has a habit and he gets out in a bust of about 18—And before long, he's going to have half of that 18 going his way because youth will follow excitement. Regardless of how it is...saying, "Well, I'm not going do this and I'm not gonna do that." But if you got—Nine times out of 10, you go out in a bar yard. Ten there or 18 guys, as I was saying a while ago. Now, it's not gonna be nine of these and nine of these. There's no way. Now if you got two leaders out there, maybe one of the leaders can lead some of them away, but they ain't gonna big guys. So.

DC: Do you think race relations are different today in the County?

ES: Ah, yes. The race relations, as I look at it is this: They—They get along with each other because there's a written document that they're supposed to. But so far as they get out of that written document, they go right back to that same old junk. You take a lot of people. They come up to you. They say, "Hello! Hello! Minnie, how you doing? Dee, how you doing?"...get 'round the corner. You don't I have to be—And see his buddy. His buddy look at him: "What—What you doing around in here?"

"Oh, man. I had to get out there. I had to do this, that and the other." Yeah. Had to do that just because—just because that was written...get 'round the corner, they don't see that doctor no more.

Now...I know a case of that one time. Young girl over—She grew up in the Valley Lee area. She was white girl, and we all went to church together; and, I hadn't seen her

in about 10 years. So happen one evening, I met her and my supervisor walking right down the street together, and she saw me and **he** didn't! And, she ran out... "Edward! I haven't seen you in...? How you doing?" This, that and the other.

And he looks up, "Surely I didn't see you!" [laughter]

I said, "No? Okay. Beautiful." But, that just shows you—Now, they'll know you as long as they don't have to—I mean, as long as they have to know you're moving. They don't have to! They don't care anything about you! And, that—Just like—At that time, things had started to change in this—in different, large, large, large places of employment...I don't know 'bout the standard places, but the government services: Most time, the government services—You're supposed to be able to run up and down, go anywhere you got to. You crazy enough to stay at the same level for them, that's your problem. But in general services,...they don't have to give you a raise unless the top man feel like he want to give you one.

DC: What was segregation like when you were growing up? I heard you mention, in an earlier story, about a child who would come through your yard to get on a bus—in front of your yard?

ES: Jump through it!

DC: But yet, you had to walk miles to go to school.

ES: That's right! Yeah. See, the two things about segregation I didn't like: One of them was you could see that hatred. You could feel it, and that was one of them. And, the—Now getting with that going to school: I, I, I, I hated that right off the get-go. These people lived in a—back in the woods. 'Course they had another road. The old road came 'round the other way and bus didn't drive on that because it was a dirt road at the time. Do you

want to know what road it was? Tromp right by your house! [chuckle] That's the deal. So instead of them going out the road that they--that was their front road, they didn't go out there. They came right through our yard and go right there on that blacktop to catch the bus before school, and I had to walk to school...cold as it was.

And so, I asked Pop. I said, "What's going on? Why is it that they riding, they got the privilege walk through here [chuckle] and catch the bus? I have to cut this grass here. They don't never have to cut no grass...nothing else." I said, "Why is it they can walk through here?"

And he said, "Ah, we'll discuss it later."

DC: [chuckle] Were you ever afraid of a group or a person who practiced hate?

ES: I don't have time for none. Yes, I was afraid of--I wasn't afraid of the group itself. I was afraid of what I might intentionally, intend to do. See, I never was too much into this laying down thing. [Tape cuts off.]

[End of Side 2, Tape 1 of 2]

[Begin Side 1, Tape 2 of 2]

DC: This is December 14, 1996. A continuation of an interview with Edward Allen Smith by Dolores Cooper. Edward, how do you feel about living in the County? If you lived in a city, which did you like best?

ES: I lived in the county until now. This time in life, it's better in the country than it is in the city. Let me see. The crime rate and, I guess, the roughness and then complaining that seniors wouldn't be able to run on their feet too fast, so they wouldn't be able to...to fast

because...most of the youth...particular time.

DC: Do you feel there's a difference between County people and outsiders?

ES: All people have different backgrounds, some types. I mean, they'll pick up some habits in different places, so I would say there's a slight difference, but people are people regardless of county.

DC: So how do you interact with outsiders living in the County?

ES: I treat them as good as I can anybody else. I work with different—I have worked with different people and I'm used to working with them whether they—from out of state or rural or hillbillies or whoever.

DC: Have you traveled or lived outside of the County?

ES: Yes. I lived outside the County because I was in the Service, in the Navy, U.S. Navy. Carried just about anywhere. And, I worked in different...When I was working, my work sometimes you had to have a certain amount of travel...and we'd go to different bases and be there a week sometimes. Getting reservations on aircraft.

DC: What do you think of the direction that the County is going in today?

ES: Well [chuckle], it's taking a funny—It's taking a wild, wild moves. One thing...they don't have...same thing that they really need which is interest in some of the different principles. Lately, you take a kid. He gets...He gets 175 pounds at 16 years old, he thinks he's just as much as whatever he wants to be. And he wants to drop out of school, bingo! There he goes. Nobody helps him. Not that much help out there. I don't know why, but there's just not that much out there because some youth, they—They haven't seen the hurt...They can't hear. Or if they can hear, they don't take time to listen.

DC: Have you contributed to the County through your work? Your citizenship? I know

we've touched on this before.

ES: Well, some of my work...We improved some of the distant areas in St. Mary's by upgrading the houses and what have you. And, there's a whole lot of people that I knew years ago, they didn't know what plumbing was. And if you ask--If you sit around and you talk about things, why don't you...So., they found themselves...interested in listening to that and some of them, they lose.

And now, so far as working with youth: I've been working with youth ever since I was a youth myself. I started with working with youth when I was a teenager. In my early--in my top grade of high school, I was working with Boys Clubs and different areas of that. As soon as I got back out of the Service, I started working with...4H Clubs, Future _____ Of America. Then, we went into Little League and Pony League baseball because there wasn't a such thing as Little League baseball for blacks here in St. Mary's County. One black playing Little League ball. We started Little League teams in St. Mary's County. Fred Tolbert: I give him credit today. He started Little League baseball for blacks here in this county. He challenged me to see if I could get the Little League started, and I told him certainly I would do it because I knew just about all the grownups in every district 'cause I played baseball in practically every district. So, and we went out and talked with different ballplayers and started--We thought they would be interested in helping the young. And, we went along before we did get g going. We got a Little League team in every district in the County.

And, something else that interested me: These fellas that was head of the...Department here in the County. After he found out about we having this little Black Little League...they drove up. Happened to come back to look at

a game one day. So—Well, he brought a fella down from Little League Headquarters up there in Pennsylvania...Anyhow, the Little League...probably 18...He was interested in what we were doing. So then, my...in St. Mary's County..."Anything we can do?"

I said, "Yeah. You go out there and give us some insurance so we can, so these little fellas, if they get hurt—That ball hard...—Any of them get hurt now, help them out a little bit."

And, it wasn't long that the fellas from park—from Pennsylvania, he asked me, he said, "Can you get those managers together so I can talk to them all at one time?"

"Yeah."

"When can you do it and can you call me?"

I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll give you—" I said, "We can have that ready by next day's night. You can head down here."

He said, "I'll be here." So he came down, got us a good program of insurance, insured the managers, players of all teams, regardless of where they—regardless of what team they were playing. All the children were insured from the time they left home till they got back home. That was one of the greatest things in Little League that we worked on.

Now, so far as anything else I think would be beneficial. Well, worked with different donations. I've donated to different causes...bring through here. I worked with organizations. I worked with personal charities and things of that nature.

DC: What do you consider to be the most valuable thing you ever had, something you could have done without in your lifetime? Thing.

ES: One thing that I, that most valuable to me? Okay. Most valuable thing that ever

happened to me was in August of 1963, I held hands with Bert Lancaster and one other black actor—Hm.—and we walked from 7th and Constitution Avenue all the way down to Lincoln Memorial for Martin Luther King’s speech. That very day he gave us this—

DC: “I have a dream.”

ES: Yeah. And, everybody walked up and everybody shook hands that day...that ever happened to me.

DC: Okay. Have you done everything in your life that you wanted or planned to?

ES: Have I did, done everything I wanted?

DC: Um hm.

ES: No. I didn’t because I didn’t get the proper education. That was the thing I should have done. I had the chances. But when I was challenged to go to college, I started out leaving from Washington, DC one day to go down to Hampton, Virginia for college indoctrination. And just as soon as we got as far as that train and they got everybody dark to pull down the shades. And we headed to ...Virginia, I turned around and look at this. Because I was hesitant to go down to school in Tuskegee, Alabama, but we were going down there—We were going down to Hampton just to get a little tiny see how college life was. And...I said, “Now, this just don’t seem to be too good.” The next morning, we got down in Richmond or Hampton, close to Hampton, just about breakfast time. Look right out the window, you could see where the one race of people could go right there and eat, and they said where I had to eat was five blocks down the street, and we had a 29 minutes overlay—layover. Now, to walk down that five blocks and back would took half of that time. And I said, “Uh unh.” So, didn’t eat. So, that gave me the thing I told Momma and everyone when I got back to St. Mary’s County. I told them,

“I’m not going down to Tuskegee.” I said, “Between here and Alabama, something happened that might be detrimental to all of us.”

So, I got back and I think I wasn’t going ‘cause of that racial thing. So, Father McKenna: He tried to set something up. He said, “Now, okay. I can take you—Go down to New Orleans, down to Xavier University. That’s a Catholic College.” He said, “Now, you...I don’t think.”

I told him straight out, I said, “Down to, down to New Orleans is further down there yet,” and I said, “There still more chance I can get myself killed going down there ‘cause I don’t trust none of these folks.” And so, that’s why I didn’t go to college until I got back here and I started—All the college work I did, I did on part-time this and part-time that...I didn’t get any degree, so that’s what I—one of the things I worried about.

DC: You’ve probably answered this question, maybe, in another statement. If you could go back and live your life over again, what would you change?

ES: First thing I would do, I would—When I finished high school, I’d a kept right on into college then. I wouldn’t wait until I got 30 years old because it takes three months to get back into the rhythm of studying as you get away from it. And by the time I got back up in one year, I was still failing. But, I enjoyed the class I did take. I took a paid course which I thought about—one black in three people. And at the end of the course, I was second in the class...and all of my competition were high school graduates, just got out of school. So, I guess schooling would have been one of the best things I would try, try to catch up on real fast.

DC: What do you think has been the biggest change in the County in your lifetime?

ES: Biggest change in the County in my lifetime--When they broke ground for three different

Naval installations here in the County: one at Piney Point, one at, down at St. Ines Jones, and then the big Navy Air Test Center which is the second largest Naval air station in the world. And when they broke ground for all three of those, they opened up—They opened up a whole lot of cans of worms, as they call it. There's more people here that were used to a whole lot of different kind of living and some that were—lived almost like slaves 'fore they got here. Then, they brought people here that were degrees and what have you and people of other races that were brought, with decency at that time. But before then, St. Mary's County was peaceful.

Now you look at St. Mary's County, the schooling system picked right up because, because of the fact there were a whole lot of different, different ideas came into the County at the same time. Then, everybody had to learn in order to compete with what, who was coming here. 'cause if they didn't, they wouldn't make anybody from St. Mary's County going, going, going to have a job after awhile.

DC: Can you share some old stories about what was life, what life was like in the County for your adoptive parents?

ES: Yeah! [chuckle]

DC: I say that because your parents were not from the county.

ES: My adoptive parents were here in the County, and they were—They lived a whole lot better than a whole lot of other people, I would think, because they were retired school teachers and they were—And they—Living at that time from the farm. They had a farm of fairly good size. Such as with the things that they planted and whatever, it supplied everybody everything in the household. And then, you had your wood right there that you would—that could supply all the heat and for cooking oil and heating, and you had

water right on the premises where you didn't have buy, didn't have to buy, didn't have to go out and haul water for miles and miles. And, you didn't have to rent it from any city system or anything like that either. So far as that was concerned, we were better living than a whole lot of people that I knew right in the area where I lived. White or black.

And, I think they were some of the first that got electricity here when, when Selec—when Southern Maryland Electric Company was organized...some persons in this area that got electricity here.

And of course another thing I knew at that time: Telephones.

Telephones...There's a whole lot of white people didn't have telephones. Most times, you found somebody that had a telephone, like somebody at a store, and they would— They could call—Telephones were really scarce here until the '40's. And then after World War II, people started getting phones, but a whole lot of people didn't get. A whole of lot people didn't have electricity until after World War II.. I think so far as home living, where I lived, it was, I would say, in top shape for the era which I came through. Of course, after, after, after the '40's, I was out of the home. I was out on...

DC: How did black folks get news in the County when you were growing up?

ES: Whee!

DC: What did they read?

ES: Well, they read the *Washington Post Times Herald* was the main daily paper down here and very few people—A few of them bought that and they passed the word to others. And then, you had the weekly paper, the weekly County papers: *The Enterprise* and *The Beacon*. And then, they had the outside weekly papers here that were *The Grit* and the Negro paper which was *The Afro American*, the Baltimore edition of *The Afro American*

which I sold both of those: *The Grit* and *The Afro American*. At that time, you could buy *The Grit* for 5¢ and *Afro American* for 10¢, so you see how much the salesman made.

[chuckle] And *Afro American*, at that time, I was—I drive all the way to Drayton to sell three *Afro* papers a day and Piney Point to sell three in Piney Point, and the rest of the papers I sold up here in the Valley Lee area, Valley Lee and Great Mills areas, but that was a whole lot of miles for a little bit of money!

DC: [chuckle] How much was gas at the time?

ES: Gas—

DC: Were you making any money?

ES: Well, I wasn't selling—I wasn't—I was riding a bicycle.

DC: Oh, you were riding a bicycle. Oh okay!

ES: But gasoline, at that time, was 10, 11¢ a gallon. But see right there at World War II, gasoline got rationed and you couldn't buy, couldn't get gasoline. Ride all over the place and you get these license stamps about gasoline. And, what a lot of folks would do: They'd hold the stamps and put them together, then fill up a tank of gas. Or if they had a buddy that had a car, we'd get gas. We'd fill up one car here and one car there, and then we could carry 12 people at the same time!

DC: [chuckle] So how do people in the County get their news today?

ES: Now, they—You got—You got radio and television and see, down in the local—They even have them stations here. You have the—Now they have the Channel 10 which passes out a little bit of news in St. Mary's County and I betcha—I betcha a third of the people in St. Mary's County even watch Channel 10. So, I don't watch it too well myself! [chuckle]

Now, I remember—Just about—Speaking about news: Now back before, in the

'30's, when Joe Lewis was fighting, people used to go down to the General Store on the nights that Joe Lewis fights and go down there and listen to it on battery radio. Today, I...they go to watch it on super screens tv's. And, I was planning on mentioning that 'cause it bothered me.

DC: Okay. Is there anything that you'd like to add that I haven't asked you? About anything that we might now have covered?

ES: Let's see. I don't--Well, now another thing--basketball, I think, you asked. Donating to the County. Me, family-wise, I donated to the County, the state and the country by I served in the United States Navy myself, all three of my sons served in the United States Army. And as a result of my oldest serving in the United States Army, he actually got injured in Vietnam. He suffered 10 years until he finally died from injuries served, you know, in, pain, in the Vietnam area. And one day, we were at Walter Reed Hospital, and I walked in that day. I was told Junior was in a, one of these weird moods. I couldn't get myself together. I wanted to ask him, I said, "Junior." I said, "What's the problem?"

He told me, he said, "Just go ahead and I'll explain to you next time you come here. I really don't feel like talking about it right now."

So, I went back upstairs two days later. I asked him--I didn't ask him about it. He said, "Dad, I know you want to know what was the problem." He said, "You saw that fella was two, two beds down from me, that white fella two beds down from me?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "That's the reason I was in here." He said, "He was my commanding officer and I'm carrying that guy to a helicopter when I got shot at. And the fella, he was in such bad shape, he was one of these fellas didn't want me. He didn't recognize me."

And, that's why Junior broke down. He had just gotten moved into that area.

I don't know if there's much other that I can cover unless there's some extra questions that you might ask.

DC: Well, thank you very much, and it's been—It's been a great interview.

ES: Only too glad to do it.

DC: Certainly appreciate it.

ES: And if you ever come to anything that needs to be done—Later, I'll sit down and get myself together and there might be some more persons that you might have that you want to ask some definite points on. Maybe I can answer them, too.

DC: Okay. Thank you.

ES: Very welcome. [Tape cuts off then turns back on]

DC: This has been an oral history with Edward Allen Smith, 22025 Baha Lane, Great Mills, Maryland 20634. (301) 737-1745

[End of Side 1, Tape 2 of 2]