

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
Logged by Tania Jordon on November 28, 2007
A verbatim transcript is available
Original format is two cassette tapes
1 hour, 30 minutes, 30 seconds

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Track 01

0:00 What were times like as a child? : He was separated from his immediate family when he was young. It was Christmas Eve 1930. He was adopted by Mr. & Mrs. William B. Thompson and accepted them as his grandparents. He was baptized at St. George's Church. He goes by Edward A. Smith. His baptismal certificate listed him as Edward A. Smith Thompson.

School was rough on blacks during those days. There were no such things as absentee days. You went to school and got excused once you got there. Teachers made sure you learned and were respectful. The classroom was crowded and cold. His favorite elementary school teacher was Miss Mary Kay Mercer. At Cardinal Gibbons High School, his favorite teachers were Mr. John K. Nutter and Mr. Nathan Pitts (History and Math). His favorite subjects were Math and History. His least favorite was English. There was a lack of books so he had to take a lot of dictation from Mrs. Ness who read and spoke to fast.

Track 02

4:43 He dreamed of becoming a musician.

4:55 The family lived off of field and farm crops. Tropical fruits were brought from the store and everything else came from the farm.

5:26 He feels that times have improved in some ways. The equipment is modern "but the dollar does not seem to match up to the improvements of modern equipment."

- 6:00 Earliest memory: Leaving Washington, D.C. with Mr. Brent Thompson. He was riding through Anacostia where he saw chickens walking around in the backyards. On the way, they stopped at Mr. Abraham Butler's farm in Charlotte Hall. He saw a duck walking around the yard. He asked Brent Thompson, "what kind of chicken was that."
- 7:00 He left Washington when he was three years old. He would go back and forth to Washington to visit his biological family during holidays and school vacations.
- 7:46 He attended St. George's Catholic Church as a child. As a teenager, he would attend St. George's and St. Mark's Methodist Church. He would spend the night over his friend's house and would attend St. Mark's on Sunday. The friend would attend St. George's when he spent the night with Edward.

Track 03

- 8:12 Trips: He would go to Washington, D.C. on numerous occasions. They would visit the Smithsonian Institute, Washington Monument, and Air Space Engineering Museum. These trips were school trips. He also went on a trip to the Washington National Press Building with Father McKenna, Randolph Saxon, and John Smith. This was the first time he had ever been in a building that tall. He went to Hampton Institute for class indoctrination. The trip was disturbing because just as he was crossing the Roslyn Bridge in Alexandria, Virginia, the shades were pulled down in the car so that people on the outside could not see the black people inside. When he got to Richmond he did not eat because he had to walk four blocks to eat. There were restaurants at the station that blacks could not eat in. He stayed on campus the whole weekend and stayed on the return train until it arrived in Washington, D.C. He also was able to go to Tuskegee Institute and Xavier but decided not to because of his experience in Virginia. "Because he was hard headed, he missed college until he got out of the service.

Track 04

- 12:46 Health and Illness: Dr. W.H. Bland would come down from Washington, D.C. He would stop at Mr. Ralph Butler's mother's house in Charlotte Hall and Mr. and Mrs. Thompson house in Valley Lee. He had a circumcision operation in the living room of his grandparent's house when he was seven years old.
- 14:10 Chores: Gathering wood, feeding, and watering animals. They would ride the horses to the stream to water them and then play Long Ranger on the way back. He also liked playing baseball.
- 16:05 He also ran track and was not able to compete at Bowie because the Superintendent (Lettie Dent) said the insurance was too high for the students to compete outside the county.

Track 05

- 17:37 Discipline: His grandfather would hit you three times with the strap, and you would remember all three. His grandmother would threaten to tell his grandfather. After he turned 2/3^{rds} man (age 14) he thought he wasn't going to get anymore whippin's. His grandmother gave him a whippin' a few days after his 14th birthday.
- 19:00 His grandparents prepared him well for life. They didn't hold him back from life and insisted that they go to school. "Mama, Papa, Uncle Brent, and Aunt Lizzie were all teachers. Education was foremost.
- 20:15 All the other siblings were at least nine years older than he was. Jeanette was still in high school in Washington and Leroy was going to college at Bowie Normal School.

Track 06

- 20:42 Courting: Grandparents never caught up with him. He went to a recreation at the old St. George's Hall (not affiliated with the Catholic Church) on Flat Iron Road. The recreation center would be open two nights during the week and Saturdays. The recreation centers from the different districts would meet once or twice per year at Cardinal Gibbons, Banneker School, or Dixon Park in the 7th District.

Track 07

- 23:36 Work: "I always like to have my own dollar, because you could spend it as you pleased." His first job away from home was mowing lawns at the Andover Estate Farm in Valley Lee. The owner would fly from Ohio on the weekends. He worked nine hours per day, six days per week at a rate of \$9.00 per day. The only power mower they had was "black power" (i.e. themselves). He started working on the base at age 14. He lied about his age to meet requirement of age 15. He worked for contractors during summer school breaks. He worked in Tall Timber with Mr. Chauncey Briscoe until he went into the service. He was in the service for 1 ½ years. He was surprised when he was stationed in Long Beach and he ran into Mr. Fred Talbert (Jeanette's husband) on the streets of Los Angeles. He went to the Washington Conservatory before he dropped out to start a family. He studied music theory, piano, voice and music history. He worked for Don Gardner Plumbing and Heating. He did an apprenticeship for 4 years as an electrician. Most of the training was on the military base. He installed electronic circuits into equipment on the base. Some of his work occurred in the air. He did that until "they dropped him in Brown's Field and the Bay. They did not have to tell him to abandon ship because he was the first one on the ground." He contributes his health problems to the second drop in the Bay. He started having seizures shortly thereafter. He was no longer able to work as an electrician with

the seizures. He has been retired since 1979. He stopped having seizure about six years ago.

Track 08

34:45 Marriage: “He had the most beautiful wedding of anybody he knew.” His wife, best man, brides maid and mother in-law were at the church. He got married at St. George’s Catholic Church. He got married on the Saturday before Labor Day 1960. The wedding reception was at his mother-in-laws house under a big oak tree. He met his wife Thelma by jumping the fence (she was his next door neighbor). He got married because of love and demand. “They were in the process of starting to raise a family, so they might as well raise them together.” He had good times and rough times, but the good times outweighed the bad. He had a good time raising his children until his oldest son went into the service. He was injured in Vietnam. He lived ten years after his injury. These were his worst ten years. He had seizures for his injuries. He was shot while carrying his commanding officer to the helicopter.

Track 09

40:05 Religion: He currently goes to church at Bethesda United Methodist Church. Religion has taught him how to love thy neighbor as yourself, but this doesn’t mean you have to like him.

Track 10

44:00 Community Activities: 4-H Club Leader, Little League Coach, and Pony League Coach. He helped start teams for blacks in different parts of the county. They had nine teams; Valley Lee (coaches -Edward Smith and Chester Clay), Ridge (coaches -Mr. Barnes and Mr. Elwood Smith), Lexington Park (coaches - Ralph Thomas and Kelly Cutchember), Carver Heights (coach -William Murray), Charlotte Hall (coach - Rev. Hall), 7th District, Mr. James Forest and Oakville. The head of St. Mary’s County Park’s and Recreation was able to get the teams and coaches insurance at that time. They only played the white little league team one time. He’s been a member of the Elks since 1959.

Track 11

51:18 Life in General: He does not feel that life in general is better now and it started with the congress when they “took out the three R’s.” The three R’s are respect for your country, respect for the Lord and respect for your teacher. “They don’t have to salute the flag if they don’t want to; they don’t have to say prayers if they don’t want to; and if the teacher tries to correct them, she will wind up in

Leonardtown for child abuse.” You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. Life is going down hill. Children today are not taught at home to be respectful to their elders. People today rely on modern technology. They would be lost without it. He gives an example of how you can be out in the ocean without a radio and still be able to calculate how far you are from land using the shadow of a pencil and basic geometry to get back to land.

Track 12

56:25 Are people different then they use to be? : Teenagers don’t have to go to church anymore and they can hang out in the parking lots of the bars.

58:00 Race Relation: “The races get along because there is a written documents that governs them now. When they are out of the other races sight, they go back to their old ways.” “ They will know you as long as they have to know you.”

Track 13

59:58 Segregation: You could see and feel the hatred. The white kids could walk through his yard to catch the bus and he had to walk to school. He was not afraid of a group, but was afraid of what he might intimidate the group to do. “I was never much about lying down’

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Track 01

0:00 Life in the County versus the city: Life currently in the county is better because of the crime rate in the city. There is only a slight difference between county people and outsiders.

1:59 Travel: He traveled when he was in the U. S. Navy and traveled to different military bases when he was a civil servant.

2:35 Direction of the County: The youth are not going for what they need. Nobody wants to help them and they don’t want to listen.

Track 02

4:46 Citizenship: He started working with youth through 4-H Club, Future Farmers of America, Little League, Pony League and various charitable organizations.

Track 03

8:33 The most valuable thing that ever happened to him was in August of 1963. He held hands with Burt Lancaster and a black actor while walking down 7th and Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C. for the original March on Washington with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Everybody woke up and shook hands that day. This was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me.”

9:50 Wanted more education – feels that it held him back. Visited Tuskegee but decided not to go.

Track 04

12:53 If he could change his life, he wanted to get more education. Discusses his potential.

14:07 Biggest change in the county – the Base, the Piney Point facility, and the St. Inigoes facility. Educated people came to town and the place grew. Schools got better.

16:00 Adoptive parents were school teachers and farmers. Way of life back then compared to today.

Track 05

19:07 Got their news from the Washington Post Times Herald, The Enterprise, Beacon, Writ (sp?), and the Afro-American. Sold papers when he grew up. Deliver papers by bicycle. Gasoline was ten to twelve cents a gallon.

21:36 Today the news comes in on radio and television. People went to the general store to listen to the Joe Lewis fights on the radio, in the 1930s.

Track 06

22:55 Served in the U. S. Navy; all three sons served in the U. S. Army. Youngest sons died from injuries suffered 17 years after the Vietnam War. He was shot while recuing his wounded commanding officer.

26:23 Concluding comments by interviewer.

Editors Note 11/28/2007: 1:12:16 Per conversation with Edward Smith, black actor was Harry Belafonte