

Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions
Oral History Documentation Project

CLARENCE C. SMITH

Interviewed by Dorothy Waters

May 31, 2002

At Bethesda United Methodist Church Fellowship Hall

Logged by Tania Jordon on December 7, 2007

A verbatim transcript is available

Original format is two cassette tapes

1 hour, 22 minutes, 48 seconds

Audio CD 1 of 2

Track 01

- 0:00 Tell me about your people and where you were raised? He was born and raised in Drayden, Maryland at his grandfather's house. It was an eight acres place with a three bedroom house. They did a little bit of farming, raised vegetable, and hogs.
- 1:00 What kind of games did you play as a child? They made up there own games. They had no money to buy toys. They rolled up socks to make a baseball.
- 1:25 How did your family live? His family raised a little bit of tobacco but most of there living came from crabbing, fishing and oystering. Most of the income came from the water.
- 2:00 What church did your family attend? St. Mark's Methodist Church in Valley Lee, MD.
- 2:15 Did you take family trips as a child? They didn't take any trips. They went to visit other relatives or friends houses. "Back then, we didn't take any trips.
- 3:00 Did you participate in community activities? The only activity involvement was through the church. After he went to school they participated in a few school plays.
- 3:30 What kind of work did your mother do? She cleaned houses for other people.
- 3:35 Do you think that times were better than or now. "Financial and living conditions are better. Morality and decency is a lot worse now. Back then you respected

you elders, you listened to what you were told. Anybody would correct you if they saw you doing something wrong. Everybody in the community looked out for everyone else.” When you were born poor and lived poor, you didn’t miss what you never had.

Track 02

- 4:58 What were your family’s health concerns? How did they deal with health and illness? They used home remedies. Every now when somebody got really sick they would go see Doctor P.J. Bean. “I can remember when doctor’s visits were \$0.50 to \$1.00. That included three or four boxes or bottles of medicine.” Some of the home remedies were spider webs to stop the bleeding. “If you stuck a nail in your foot, you would put a piece of fatback on your foot to draw the poison out to prevent lock jaw.” There were other remedies that are too nasty to describe but worked.
- 6:25 Were doctors, hospitals and other medical facilities available to you and your family? Hospitals were not available to them but they did go to Dr. Bean in Great Mills, MD. The doctors did make house call if you could get in touch with them.
- 7:15 How were senior citizens care for? Senior citizens looked out for themselves and people in the neighborhood took care of them. Everybody looked out for everybody else. What ever needed to be done, some of the child took care of it.
- 8:20 What did you use for transportation? Feet
- 8:30 What did you do for entertainment? They had a battery radio that wasn’t used a lot because batteries were very expensive.

Track 03

- 9:20 How did black folks get new/information when you were growing up? Most of the news was local news that was word of month. He didn’t remember getting any current news. If he saw a newspaper, it was usually a month or two old. His grandfather would turn the radio on for ½ hour every night to listen to Edward R. Morrow to for the news.

The current news comes from the Enterprise, St. Mary’s Today, local radio, metropolitan news stations, and the Washington Post.

- 11:10 What chores did you have as a child? Cutting and bringing in wood; bring in water, feeding chickens, hogs and mule, working garden and picking vegetable from garden as well as berries in season. He liked to pick black berries and cherries the most because he ate a lot of them.

12:05 How did your family treat you? How did your parents discipline you? How did your parents prepare you for life? “They definitely prepared him for life. Back then people didn’t argue with kids. What they said went.” He played hooky from school one day and his grandfather never mentioned it to him. He “hung him on the cross cut saw” (made him cut wood with a cross cut saw) until lunch time. He took a lunch break and Mr. Smith ate slowly so he could get a longer break, but his grandfather made him get up from the table when his grandfather was finished eating. At that point, he “hung him back up on the saw until dark.” When he let him stop, he still had to do all his chores. “The next morning I was there ½ hour before the bus came. I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss the bus because the saw was still waiting. This is the way they got their point across. They didn’t argue or do a lot of talking, but you knew they knew.” If you didn’t complete your chores, they would get you out of bed in the middle of the night. You learned to do what you were told.

Track 04

14:53 Tell me about your formal Schooling? How did you get to school? What was the classroom like? He went to Drayden School until fourth grade. It was a one room school with a wooden stove and a water bucket. They had one teacher for seven grades. After that he went to #1 School in Valley Lee. “We had stepped up in life.” It was a two room school. His teachers were Miss Carrie Jamison and Miss Mary K. Mercer. Miss Mercer taught 1st through 4th. Miss Jamison taught 5th through 7th. He was taught by Miss Jamison. After he left Valley Lee he went to Old Jarboesville High School until 11th grade. He had three more months until graduation, “but I got stupid and left.”

He walked to Drayden School and caught the bus to Valley Lee and Jarboesville. One bus covered Drayden, Valley Lee, Piney Point, Mulberry Fields, St. Georges Island, Callaway, towards 7th Gables and Route 235. When they caught the bus to Jarboesville, they were on the bus approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours for each trip. Drayden was the first stop in the morning and the last one in the evening. MacDowell Thomas drove the bus.

Track 05

18:00 Who were your favorite and least Teachers? What were your favorite and least favorite subjects in school? His least favorite subject was English because he hated William Shakespeare. He hated Shakespeare with a passion; this is what made him quit school. His least favorite teacher was Miss Myers who taught English. His favorite teacher was Mr. Myers the Principal at Jarboesville. He was strict but fare.

Jarboesville was on Route 235 before you get to Carver Heights on the property now owned by the Naval Base. There was no inside plumbing. They had to use outside bathrooms and use an outside pump to put water in the water cooler.

There were about six or seven classrooms. Then had the standard classes plus home economics and shop.

The students came from all over St. Mary's County because that was the only black high school in the county at the time. Jarboesville covered from Point Lookout to Seventh Gable Road.

Track 06

21:52 What did you dream of becoming as an adult? "I always planned that I would work on the water. I did this but after a while it was too much hard work and not enough money so I had to find something else."

22:20 Where did your parents approve of you going as a teenager? Did you court and where would you go? He basically wasn't allowed to go anywhere. He could go to the movies at Happyland Club with Ralph Waters if he could find a ride. Ralph Waters was the black superintendent who owned the projector. They would show movies on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. The movies were \$0.25. They were serial movies that would make you come back the next week to see the conclusion. The project would breakdown a lot.

23:45 What was it like when you first moved out on your own. He got married when he moved out. It was alright. They had to struggle because they didn't have a lot of money. "If you were willing to work you could survive."

24:35 What kind of work have you done to support yourself? He dug ditches, crabbed, oystermen, carpenters helper, ran heavy equipment, drove trucks, worked on a farm, installed storm windows, ceramic and floor tiles. Over thirty years ago, he went in business for himself until he retired.

Track 07

25:12 Describe a typical day on one or more of these jobs? When you went out to oyster, you went out as early as you could because you didn't know what the weather was going to do while you were trying to get the oysters in the boat. "It was good money, but it was cold and nasty work." Driving the truck wasn't bad but you didn't make much money. You would get ½ day off every other Saturday. He only made \$50.00 per week.

Running heavy equipment was hot and dirty work. A lot of heat would come back on you while you would work. This would cause some skin to come off of his feet when he took his socks off. You didn't want to go back, but you did what you had to do to keep a roof over your head and food on the table.

He worked for Tom McGhee who had a tire shop. He and his wife bought the business. After four or five years they started working on lawn mowers. They

phased out the tire shop and did strictly lawn and garden repair until December of 2000. At that point he turned it over to his son.

He has also contracted driving school buses for 35 years.

Track 08

29:23 Describe some of the funny or unusual experiences you had on the bus? There was parent on Norris Road that would get on the buses and chew the bus drivers out. "I told her, lady I can handle this. When the kids hit the blacktop, they're yours, when they hit the step of the bus their mine." "I told her that anybody that gets on the bus goes to school." She got on the bus in the middle of the kids and he shut the door when the last kid got on the bus. When he got to school he told her that everybody gets off the bus. She wasn't happy when he put her off in the Esperanza Middle School parking lot with her bathrobe, rollers and slippers on. She never did do that again.

The only thing unusual in the lawn repair business is finding a dead snake under a lawn mower top.

Track 09

31:42 How did you meet you spouse? When he was 17, his friend Mattie Watts got her to pick her up for a birthday party. I think it was a set-up. They got married at St. Mark's Church by Rev. Lewis Mayhew. The only witness was the Pastor and his wife. He paid the Pastor with \$5 he borrowed from his father, "because he was broke." They have been married 51 years as of October of 2002.

33:16 What has your family life been like? "As far as I know everything is fine. The grandchildren are nice but weird. I've had 51 happy years."

34:05 What part has religion played in your life? He has been attending Bethesda United Methodist Church for the past 15 years. He is the head of Finance and Trustee Board. As far as I'm concerned we are doing remarkable works at Bethesda." We have a supportive Pastor and members that is willing to work. For a small church, I just don't see how things could be any better then they are. For the past ten years we have added to the church twice. We have put bathrooms in the church and added on to the hall with a kitchen, bathrooms, and air conditioning." They have two ministries for a food pantry and clothes closet.

He and his wife support all churches regardless of denomination.

Religion plays a role way above anything else. It has shown him a lot and he has learned a lot. The more you give the more you get back. You put in your labor and you are dog tired, but when you look at the job you've done, you're not that tired anymore. Bethesda is more like a family then a congregation.

Track 10

38:13 What community activities do you participate in? He worked with the boy scouts and cub scouts for over 20 years. He is a member of the Minority Business Alliance as well as his church participation. He doesn't see the need in joining organizations if you don't have time to participate in them.

40:25 How do you feel in general about life in St. Mary's County? "Life in St. Mary's in general has improved. It still has a long way to go. We still have prejudice." It is a three tier system. When he ran heavy equipment the white operators made \$12 per hour when he made \$10 for the same work. Some of the same things are going on now, but it's not as obvious. The financial institutions still see you as black being a risk regardless of you credit rating. If you are not careful you will be paying 2% more on a loan then white customers. They say it's not true, but it is true."

He and his wife could not borrow \$500 to complete construction on a house they were building on two acres of land. The house was completely finished outside, with chimneys and partitioned. He felt they couldn't borrow it because they were black. He still remembers this when he goes to the bank today.

Track 11

44:07 Do you know of instances where bank loans have been denied to people within the past five years? Yes, they got a run around from a bank for several weeks when they wanted to borrow money to purchase a rental property. This is a bank that he gave financial statements for his business every January 1st. His wife went to another bank in Leonardtown and got the loan within one hour.

46:55 Do you notice this in the housing in the county. "It is in every part of society. As long as you are black, you have an image problem." " Their image of black folks is that if you are black, you are a thief." As a black person, he has never wanted any extra help just treat him equal.

If you look at highway construction, look at who is on the equipment and who is on the shovel. 80 to 90 percentage of the equipment is run by whites and 90 percent of the blacks are on the shovel. If a black person starts a job he has to be an expert from the beginning. If you are white, they will help you along.

Track 12

51:40 Are people different in St. Mary's County? Yes because there are a lot of people in St. Mary's today from other places. Some areas have changed for the better but other areas he is not so sure about. He can't stand people who will smile in your face and stab you in your back.

Fifty years ago you knew everybody who lived in your area. Now you don't know who lives next door.

54:30 How are teenagers different now? Some have no respect or pride in their parents or themselves. A lot of the teenagers have no home training. He is hauling the grandchildren of some of the first children he drove. Now some of the children are loud, abusive and they have nasty mouths. The parents say they are not like that at home. "Kids are not going to be an angel at home and a devil when they step out the door." The teenage of today have no resembles of the teenagers 35 years ago.

Track 13

56:20 What was segregation like? You didn't realize how bad it was because you always lived in it. When you traveled the white could go in the restaurants and blacks had to be served through a window. Blacks and whites did not sit together in the movies. Black's schools were pitiful. We got all the cast offs and junk. The broken down desk, books with pages torn out. No sports equipment and black boards that were wore out. You did not get any new equipment in black schools. The only thing new was pencils and paper that the student brought to school. Most of the cast offs should have been thrown in the dump. But it was better then what we had.

"It was bad, but I don't guess it was as bad here as it was in other places." A lot of white establishments didn't even want you to pull up in their yards. It wasn't totally one sided. His attitude was live and let live. You don't bother me and I won't bother you.

1:01:00 How do you feel about living in the county? He lived in the county all his life. County people looked after each other. In the city, everybody basically live their own life. County living until later years, you didn't have to lock your door or your car.

Audio CD 2 of 2

Track 01

- 0:00 “In the country even if you didn’t have a farm, you weren’t living wall to wall with people. You have fresh vegetable and fresh seafood. I have no desired to live in the city.”
- 1:10 He does travel to other sections of the county for church and social functions. People are different in different sections of the county. There seems to be a slight difference in lifestyle in different parts of the county.
- 2:50 What do you feel has the biggest changes in this county in your lifetime?
Patuxent Naval Air Station being built and giving locals other job opportunities. Other people coming from other place and growth in the county is unbelievable. Fifty years ago you would not have dreamed of all the new house and business being built in the county.

Track 02

- 4:37 Were county people hostile towards the government for taking their land to build the base? In general no. By today’s standards they gave it away. A lot of them got more then they thought it was worth. One of his uncles was still working on a farm when the government took the land. He moved back a year later and got a civil service job that he retired from.
- 6:24 What are your feels about the new growth because of the base? “I think the base is great, I think what it’s doing for the county is great. I have nightmares about what would ever happen if the based closed.” Almost everything is related to the based (retail, housing, etc.). If it ever closes he sees bad things for St. Mary’s County.

Track 03

- 7:45 What do you think of the direction that the county is going in today? There s not enough planning being done. A lot of tax payer’s money has been spent on things that were not done right. There needs to be a better accountability of county government and the board of education.
- 10:33 Do you think St. Mary’s will become an urban county or stay rural? It is heading away from rural. There is a large population and the county is growing and he doesn’t think that the political leaders are keeping up with the grown. “Band-aids and quick fixes don’t work.” The county government needs to manage their money better.

Track 04

12:55 How have you contributed to the county? He and his wife have always tried to help the sick and elderly. They contribute to the worthy causes. He believes in direct contribution rather than big organizations.

14:51 What awards and certificates have you received? He's received awards and plaques from the Lion Club, Optimist Club, Boy Scouts, Bethesda Church, and Minority Business Alliance. He appreciates the award and certificates but he works for his own self satisfaction.

Track 05

16:25 What do you consider the most valuable thing you've ever had? Religion because it has taught him how to live with life problems and not get upset when things go wrong. How to work with and appreciate other people. Not to see fault in other people. "Religion has done more for me other than my health in my lifetime."

18:27 Have you done everything in life that you wanted or planned to do? Yes and done more and accomplished more than he thought was humanly possible. He has a loving wife and he's proud of his children and grandchildren. "Life is great."