JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH Vernon Smith

CONDUCTED BY Roby Kesler

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TRANSCRIBER Hazel Storm

Vernon Smith is a native Cedar Rapidian, having been born (1919) and raised in Cedar Rapids to the family of Elmer T. Smith, Sr. As a chemist for St. Luke's Hospital, he also lectures on topics of urinalysis, clinical chemistry, toxicology and therapeutic drug monitoring. He has been active in various Black organizations and an influencing factor toward Black minority needs. As a Black individual himself, he provides a look at minority life in Cedar Rapids and the Country. He also provides some look into his accomplishments despite the debilitating effects of polio.

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RK: I have the honor of interviewing Vernon Smith, who is making and has made many contributions in this commmunity and has an array of awards. He was born in Cedar Rapids, and we're just going to start right in with his childhood. Vernon, tell me about your parents. Were they from Cedar Rapids? Where did they come from?

Smith: My mother came from--she was born in Pulaski, Illinois--this is in Southern Illinois--and my father was born in Delphos, Ohio. And they were married in Southern Illinois. They lived there for a brief time; and then, later on, because my father's parents at the time had been a part of the Westward movement, they were living in Boise, Idaho. And, so, after my parents were married and the parents of my parents became ill in Boise, Idaho, they took the family, then, and moved out to Boise. Actually, there was no family at that time, but they went out to Boise and they stayed there. And I have two brothers and one sister, and all of them were born in Boise, Idaho. I was born here in Cedar Rapids in 1926.

RK: And where were you born?

Smith: I was born at home. It was a common practice then, of course, to be born at home; so, 416 Ninth Avenue, S.W., was my birth place.

RK: I was born at home, too, but I'm quite a bit older than you are. And tell me about how much younger are you from your next in line?

Smith: All right. My youngest brother is ten years older than I am, so he was born in 1916. The next one--that's Louis Smith--and the next one, Elmer Smith, was born in 1911. And then our only sister was born in 1909; her name is Flavia--now it's Flavia Roy. She presently resides in Washington, D.C. Louis and Elmer both reside here in Cedar Rapids.

RK: So you really are a native. (Laughter)

Smith: Yes, I guess I would have to admit that.

RK: Do you have some outstanding memories, as a child, of the neighborhood, even before you went to school?

Smith: Yes. On the Southwest side it was not uncommon to see, of course, steam engines. We were not far from the Milwaukee Railroad that did switching for Penick & Ford, so we could see steam engines moving about. We were one block from the Avondale Trolley Line on Fourth Street and one block from the Linwood Trolley Line on the other side. These were the Iowa Electric Light & Power Company's two railroad lines. I also had a chance to see an electric car that was owned by the Reeds that lived on Sixth Street, which was adjacent to the old Taylor School on Sixth Street, Southwest.

RK: So you remember the electrics?

Smith: Yes, there were a few around, and electric trucks, also...

RK: Oh, I didn't know they had those.

Smith: ... with hard tires and chain driven.

RK: Uhh, you went to Taylor?

Smith: Yes, Taylor--the old Taylor that was on the corner of Sixth Street and, I believe, Fifth Avenue.

RK: I remember the principal, Miss Strawn. Was she principal then?

Smith: Well, my recollection doesn't serve me that well.

RK: You weren't called into the principal's office.

Smith: Well, I don't know, but I think I spent a little time in the hall, maybe. The kindergarten teacher at that time--I believe her name was Mrs... Miss Miller--and I only went through to the--through the 1st Grade at Taylor before we moved to the Northeast side of Cedar Rapids on Carlyle Street, so this placed me in the Garfield School District. And I started in the 2nd Grade at Garfield.

RK: Were there other Black children, Vernon?

Smith: At Taylor, yes. But when we moved to the Northeast side, I was the only Black student at Garfield. And it kind of remained that way throughout the remainder of my schooling there at Garfield; likewise, in junior high and high school.

RK: Was that difficult?

Smith: Yes and no. It was a common experience for me to be the only Black youngster because my brother Louis, being ten years older than I, we were never in the same school together. He was already in Grant High School when I can remember much about his going to school and my going to school. So we never shared schooling together, and I was the only one. I guess the only problem was the novelty for the other White students that I was the only Black student, and some of the problems that arose from that.

RK: Vernon, let's talk a little about Franklin School. It was both a junior and a senior high school at that time; and the reason was that we were just emerging from the Depression, so we put them together. Have you got some outstanding memories of that?

Smith: Oh, yes, certainly, because there were some fine teachers in the Cedar Rapids School System--I think probably some of the finest were present in this building. I can name a few names of outstanding memories: in mathematics, there was Miss Ella Harding, who took care of 7th and 8th Grade mathematics; and there was Miss Phoebe Bingham in vocal music and the outstanding director of choirs and the musical education. I was a member of the orchestra and the band, and this was Mr. Roland Moehlman.

RK: What did you play?

Smith: I played clarinet; in fact, I started the clarinet in Garfield Elementary and then continued on through to high school there at Franklin. I was involved in almost all of the musical activities that we had at that time.

RK: You were in sports, too, weren't you, Vernon?

Smith: To a limited extent. I was out for track and did a little work in track, but I never played football or basketball.

RK: I'm very interested in your beginnings of chemistry. Vernon is an organic chemist with a master's degree from the University of Iowa, and is a well-known chemist, so it's always interesting to know how this all started. I wonder if it started with these good teachers at Franklin?

Smith: I think it most certainly did. One other teacher that I have not mentioned up to this point was Miss Iola Tillapaugh who

taught biology, and she was certainly very instrumental in planting the seeds of curiosity and striving for excellence in some of the demands that she made of our young people at this time. And, so, although I didn't go on to become involved in biology, I did have the impetus to seek chemistry and eventually ended up in biochemistry and the clinical chemistry setting. But she was a real formulator of minds, and Cedar Rapids is certainly a mark of her excellence in teaching and devotion to those principles.

RK: Vernon, you are and have been a teacher yourself at St. Luke's, and you have been and are a lecturer. You probably learned some of this about good teaching right there at Franklin School with Miss Tillapaugh.

Smith: I'm sure that there was the influence of those early years that set the stage. There's no question about it.

RK: That's right. A good teacher must have empathy and a sense of humor, and you've always been known to have that.

Smith: Well, I think that I was able to acquire it, and they certainly were instrumental in doing so.

RK: In high school--anything more we should talk about in high school? Tell me how Cedar Rapids was then. How did you get to school?

Smith: Well, at this time, there were very few students that had automobiles at the high school level--a few of them--but we rode bicycles. Balloon tires were a popular thing, that was the newest rage, and prior to that I think the tires on bicycles were high pressure and they were kind of hard. So we went from

the narrow tires to the balloon tires, and now here in the eighties it's a popular thing to have the narrow thin-tired racing style bicycle. But the bicycle was the mode of transportation.

RK: When you see that parking lot now at Washington High School, it's quite different, isn't it?

Smith: Yes, it is, because it was a bicycle rack and that was about it. And, of course, buses were still used then for students that lived far enough to be eligible for the bus. I did ride the bus on occasion to junior high, but most of the time it was a bicycle or simply use your two feet.

RK: Yes. We didn't have ten-speeds, either.

Smith: No, we didn't.

RK: That's interesting about the balloon tires. I had forgotten about that.

Smith: Yes, I think my first balloon-tired bicycle, my sister purchased it for me, and I think it came about in about 1937, when I was still going to Garfield Grade School.

RK: Tell me about your decision to go on to college.

Smith: Well, the decision to go on to college followed an experience of being drafted into the military. I was drafted in 1943, and went into the United States Army Quartermaster Corps. And following service of two years, where I served in both the European and the Asian and the Korean theatres of war, came back to Cedar Rapids and enrolled in Coe College in 1946 and graduated from Coe in 1950.

RK: And I believe it was in 1975 that you got the Alumni Award of Merit from Coe.

Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: To go back to the Army, what did you do in the Quartermaster Corps?

Smith: Well, the Quartermaster Corps was involved with supplies, and the United States Army--in fact, all of the armed forces at that time were segregated--so we were in a segregated unit. In Europe we were involved in providing gasoline logistics for the U.S. Seventh Army that went into Germany in the Rhineland and then turned south and went into Bavaria. So my unit went as far as Munich, Germany, before the war ended. We spent some time in Munich and also in a place that later became quite historical during the Olympics that were in Germany at Furstenfeldbruck, and the airfield that was shown on television at the time of the terrorist attacks against the Israeli team, that airfield is the place where we spent a great deal of time when I was in service. So, I could see from the television view, places--buildings on that airfield that I was quite familiar with from our stay there in 1945.

RK: How interesting. So you...

Smith: This was close to the famous Dachau camp where the Jewish people were interred.

RK: Did you know it at the time? Did you know about that concentration camp?

Smith: Yes. In fact, I visited the concentration camp perhaps only one or two days after it was discovered and saw the liberation and the activities involved in that. We were stationed there at Furstenfeldbruck, and that was only about 5 or 10 ks. from the camp.

RK: Did you know it existed before that?

Smith: We had no idea except that we could see the railroad that served the camp. It went right past the airfield, and we saw a number of boxcars and cars that were empty and also cars that had people in them. Some of them were dead and alive. We had investigated this in our activities in this area. But things were in such disarray, it was almost unbelievable, some of the things that you would see in a war-torn country at this particular time.

RK: Yes, right at the end of it. But you were there the second day after they were liberated?

Smith: Yes, I believe it was the second or the third day after the camp had been discovered by the American Forces. I don't remember the units that actually were assigned to that sector that discovered it, but we did see them.

RK: Unbelievable!

Smith: Yes.

RK: Just unbelievable. It's very hard for me to think about it. So then you got out of the war without any difficulty yourself?

Smith: Yes, I did. I was quite fortunate. We were transferred from Europe to the Pacific Theatre because the war with Japan was still in progress, and so we sailed out of Marseilles, France, on a troopship that carried us across the Atlantic through the Panama Canal and into the Pacific Ocean. This was a 48-day trip going to the Philippines.

RK: Forty-eight days?

Smith: Forty-eight days on one ship. So, the war ended in our transit across the Pacific; but there still was a lot of logistical

movement that still had to go on, so we landed in the Philippines in September of 1945.

RK: Where were you when the war ended there?

Smith: Well, we actually were in mid-ocean. Precisely, I think we were probably close to Eniwetok, another famous name, because in the 1950s this became the test site for the "H" bomb in the Pacific Ocean.

RK: What did you do on the ship?

Smith: Well, about all we could do was try to take care of our gear and try to make some decision as to whether we would be allowed to come back home or not. And, of course, we were not because tremendous forces had been assigned for the assault on Japan, and so we were a part of that general support group. And so we continued on to the Philippines and landed in the Philippines in September, remained in the Philippines for six months, and then went on to Korea for another six months. And we were in Korea prior to the Korean War, which was another rather historic thing that we saw before that conflict evolved.

RK: Vernon, I'm curious. You being a scientist, I'd like to know how you feel about this. If it hadn't been for the bomb in Hiroshima, you probably would have been in that assault then on Japan. Is that right?

Smith: I believe so.

RK: How do you feel now in looking back at it? Or, how did you feel at the time, that that was necessary to end the war? What is your feeling about it?

Smith: Well, I think that had I been at the time and could have been a part of the decision-making process, I think I would have

perhaps asked for a demonstration of the power of the bomb rather than to actually use it. But I guess I didn't know the information that the president had at that time and the assault on the Japanese Mainland was considered to be one that would have tremendous loss of life for the U.S. Forces, so perhaps he was trying to minimize that loss in hopes that one strike--and then eventually two strikes--would demonstrate. I think perhaps one strike would have demonstrated; but we didn't get the signals in time from the Japanese to withhold that second strike, and so the second strike came. But in hindsight and all these other things, I wish perhaps we could have given them a demonstration so they could have realized. And perhaps their scientists would have been able to convince the military that it was no hope for them, since we had that power. We could have avoided the loss of life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

RK: That's a good answer. It gives me pause to think about that, because I've always... we all have been concerned about that, whether we should have done it or not. You were gone a whole year then, from home, weren't you? Or, more than that, if you went a whole year and a half, because you were in Europe first.

Smith: Yes, six months in Europe, six months in the Philippines, and six months in Korea.

RK: Then you came back and--could you enter on the G.I. Bill of...

Smith: Yes, that was the mechanism by which I was able to obtain my education, and live at home, save some money in that regard; and the money I saved by living at home made it possible that I could go on to the University to further my education.

RK: What was your father doing at that time?

Smith: My father was a more or less self-educated man. He only completed the 8th Grade of formal education; but he was, I think, a brilliant man considering all of these factors. He was a custodian for Penick & Ford throughout my entire memory. Something that I learned later on in life was a little bit more about my father. In World War I he had been called to service, and he was drafted. But before he was actually inducted as an enlisted man, he was selected to attend Officers Candidate Training for Black officers in World War I. And he came to Iowa, and this is one of the first connections of my parents with Iowa. He came to Fort Des Moines--Fort Des Moines and Camp Dodge, and I really can't differentiate as to which one the Black soldiers were trained at. I think it was Fort Des Moines. But before he completed the training to be given his commission, the war ended in November of 1918. And this program of officer training was stopped immediately, and he never completed the training; so, therefore, he was never commissioned and therefore it was as though he had never been in military service. But I thought this was rather interesting because in World War I, of course, there were black officers that were in charge of all Black units. And I think now, in terms of what qualities did he exhibit with only an 8th Grade education that would make him selected for Officers Training. It amazes me.

RK: He had them. He had some good ones.

Smith: Apparently so.

RK: Hmmm. What an influence he was on you, Vernon.

Smith: Well, he was an influence on all of us.

RK: We can go to Coe, where you entered as a freshman, living at home, and you were required to take certain subjects, which has changed a bit, and we're coming back to that. Tell me about some of the professors that meant a great deal to you.

Smith: Well, without question, Dr. Ben Petersen, who was the chairman of the chemistry department; he was "Mr. Chemistry" himself, for Coe College and was extremely influential in my whole educational experience. But there were others, and others that kind of pulled me back from a totally oriented technical pursuit of science and mathematics; and the humanities were kind of placed upon my shoulders by Dr. Eric Clitheroe and Reverend Hodson. And these were men of philosophy and steeped in the liberal arts, and I learned a great deal from them as well as Dr. Churchill in the English department. There were others, but certainly these three professors were outstanding in the influence that they had upon me at Coe.

RK: We had been talking before we were taping about Germany and how Germany was so scientifically and way ahead in the world. Tell me what you said on... let's put it on the tape what you said about the value of liberal arts.

Smith: Well, I think the value of liberal arts cannot be measured in its entirety. We know it is extremely valuable, and I think perhaps as we look back on Germany, pre-World War II, I think they lost sight of the humanities and the value of it; and their orientation was toward science and technology to the

exclusion of the humanities and the liberal arts. And perhaps this is what got them into the trouble that they did in terms of things that happened in the concentration camps. My experience at Coe was one in which I thought that all things had to be indoctrinated in science, but, as I mentioned before, these two professors showed me the value of tempering my educational experience with the humanities, the liberal arts, and a well-rounded education.

RK: I like hearing this because I believe in liberal arts so strongly. Were there other Black students when you were there?

Smith: Yes. The first year at Coe in 1946, there were two of us; and the following year, I believe there were five or seven all together. This was the students that returned from World War II. Most of them were males--I think we only had one female on campus during the entire time that I was at Coe.

RK: Now we have a Black house and an organization, and you have taught Black history at Coe.

Smith: Yes, I have been asked to serve as a visiting lecturer in the history department for Black students and the other students that were also interested in Black history at Coe.

RK: It's changed, Vernon, from the number, hasn't it?

Smith: Yes, it has.

RK: Which is good.

Smith: Coe has attracted a number of Black students from throughout the Midwest and as far away, of course, as New York and California. And Coe and Cedar Rapids have been the richer for it because some of these young people that came to Coe and the

Midwest, that had never experienced the Midwest, have stayed on; and now they're setting roots into our community, and we are all benefiting from it.

RK: We have a Nlack admissions person at Coe that works with the students in Chicago, and they have made a big contribution to the campus. Their complaint is that there are not enough of us, they say--there are not enough of us. And we also have had a time getting a regular Black professor. They are in great demand, and you hate to rob the Black colleges. Is there anything about your college days, other than your studies, that you would like to talk about before we go to graduate school?

Smith: Well, I think we've probably covered all of these things; nothing very significant historically that I can think of. This was the post-war years, and student unrest and all hadn't commenced, and so we were--on a scale of 1 to 10, I guess we were fairly quiet in the things that we were doing. We certainly were not very politically active. The young men at this time were veterans from World War II, and their primary concern was to acquire an education and be ready to go out and face the world that we see ahead of us. And these young men were interested in becoming engineers and doctors and teachers and the various professions, and starting to rebuild the country.

RK: They were good students because they were so motivated.

Smith: Yes, we were motivated, and we were perhaps a little older as young men coming into college with previous military experience ranging from one, two to three years.

RK: It was Dr. Petersen, I imagine, that helped you--got you directed toward the University of Iowa for your graduate work.

Smith: Yes, he was very influential in that direction, and we had some other faculty members likewise that were helpful. But Dr. Petersen was a graduate of the University of Iowa, so I followed the course that he more or less mapped out for me and went to the University and started there in 1950.

RK: Vernon, you have been an inspiration to so many people, handicapped and those who haven't been handicapped physically. You probably haven't any idea about this, about just what an inspiration you have been, because look what you have done since you contracted polio. In reading about you, this has been a very--well, it's been a story of courage, of both you and Phoebe, your wife. Tell me about the polio; you got it just six months before the Salk vaccine came in?

Smith: Yes, I think that's just about the right timing.

RK: People listening to this tape, fortunately, will not know much about polio. If this is listened to 20, 30, 50 years from now, they won't know much about it; and I think, if you don't mind, I would like to hear how you think you got it. And I lived through that and the great fear that our mothers had every summer, which mothers today do not have. So, I think historically this would be of value.

Smith: Well, it was customarily thought to be a summer thing, and certainly I acquired it in the summer of 1953, 1952, and it was very devastating across the country. The numbers reported were just phenomenal, and the thing was that medicine didn't have too much of an idea precisely what to do. I think they recognized the fact that it was a virus, but medicine at this

particular stage didn't have any mechanism really to provide any inoculation or any protection against it. So it had to take its toll on those who were susceptible to that exposure. And it struck all ages; in fact, after I acquired it and went to the University Hospitals, in the ward where I spent a great deal of time, I saw infants and I saw a man that was 59 years old with polio. At the time I was, I believe, 27 years old.

RK: People listening to this will know polio mainly through the study of President Roosevelt.

Smith: That's correct.

RK: Because it was about the same time, wasn't it?

Smith: I think he may have acquired it a little bit earlier, in the forties because he became president--in 1933?

RK: Yes.

Smith: Nineteen thirty-three, thirty-four...

RK: Yes, so he got it before that. But those who will look back and will listen to this, they will connect it with President Roosevelt, I think; because they won't know any of their neighbors, fortunately, or their family.

Smith: That's right. One of the things, of course, during this time, you know, if people did have polio, the attitudes of the country were so different. We didn't have the awareness of handicapped individuals that we have now, here in the eighties and so many of these people were kind of kept out of sight by families. It wasn't necessarily shame, but there weren't the conveniences; and the attitudes were vastly different, and the acceptance of someone with a disability has changed. But that

period of time--in the fifties--was the peak of the polio scourge, you might say. And the toll of death and crippling was just unimaginable.

RK: I read somewhere that you thought you might have contracted it through a rabbit?

Smith: Well, I don't know precisely. The only thing I can think of is that while I was there at the University of Iowa as a student, I went swimming just the week before, in Lake MacBride, on a very hot August day. And it may have been in contact with large crowds that were trying to cool off at that time, I might have picked it up through the water or in close proximity to others. I really don't know.

RK: Where did I get the rabbit idea?

Smith: I don't know where the rabbit came in. There's a long affiliation of rabbits in my history because my father raised rabbits, and we provided rabbits for medical purposes to the local hospitals. That kind of brings in...

RK: For pregnancy tests.

Smith: For pregnancy tests.

RK: Which they don't do now.

Smith: They don't do now, that's correct.

RK: And I think maybe I just assumed that you might have contracted it that way, but usually, as I remember, it was always in swimming pools and swimming.

Smith: Right, and I think that's probably where it all came about.

RK: The rabbit doesn't need to come into this. Vernon, how do you account, or what do you give--not credit to--but tell me how

you had so much courage at that time. Was it through your church?

Smith: Well, we had support from members of the church, but I think I would have to give credit to my wife, who was extremely supportive in staying with me. She had just been--we had just been married for one year before this all occurred; and she was a young woman, and this must have been a very devastating thing for her. But we had one child at the time, that was Ruby, and she was four months old. But I must give credit to the strength of my family, and particularly my wife; but my family was very supportive. And so, family and friends gave me the support and the impetus, I'm sure, to not give up.

RK: I think we all know about Phoebe's marvelous support in... when we read about her being named as one of the outstanding women of Iowa in that Award of Merit. And I read about how resourceful she was in supporting you, and her great love and devotion. It's a marvelous story of a wife's love. But I just wondered at the time, because you were so devastated with just this new degree and graduate school and ready to go. It couldn't have been at a worse time, I don't think, when you were all ready to go, and to have this happen. And you were in the hospital a year.

Smith: That's correct. I guess the thing that might have been another factor of strength was, I was in the hospital but I was in the hospital, in a sense, amongst friends and former students. People that I saw while I was a patient at University Hospitals were students and residents in training at the same time I was

there as a student in graduate training in the chemistry department. So it was not a total setting of complete strangers; some of the people I knew.

RK: You mean some of them were doctors then, is that right?

Smith: Right. And the interns and the medical students lived in the housing complex where Phoebe and I lived. So...

RK: That was fortunate.

Smith: It was.

RK: To have them.

Smith: I think so.

RK: And you had to learn to write with your left hand, which I thought was a terrific adjustment. And all of it was a terrific adjustment. You were named the "Outstanding Handicapped Iowan," I think in 1971. Is that right?

Smith: Nineteen seventy-one or nineteen seventy, it kind of escapes me.

RK: Right in there. They took into account all that you had accomplished since then. Tell me about getting a job, because this has been amazing, how you have been such a... risen in your profession despite being in a wheelchair and disabled physically.

Smith: Here again, Phoebe and I had to talk about how we were going to overcome this problem of my getting back into the employment sector. So we--because she had previous experience as a laboratory technician, she said, well, what better place than the hospital would have an understanding and should have an acceptance of the handicapped and the problems that are

involved in my being gainfully employed. So, with that in mind, we decided to see if I could be utilized at St. Luke's Hospital in their laboratory. So we went down to have an interview, and I am thankful that two individuals I'm sure that were most instrumental in having far-reaching attitudes about people and their capabilities and empathy made it possible that I was given a chance. And this was Dr. Francis Tucker, who is the pathologist in charge of the laboratory there at St. Luke's, and then a woman by the name Mrs. Carl Gellner, who was the wife of the professor of biology at Coe College. She was a recent graduate of the School of Medical Technology, but she also had a sister, I believe, that lived in Michigan who had had polio, and she was so convinced because of her sister's abilities in overcoming the handicap that she thought that if I had the right attitude I would certainly have no difficulty in demonstrating that I could deliver a useful service to the laboratory. So through the insightful vision of Mrs. Gellner and Dr. Tucker, they decided to give it a try. And I was ready; and we put this whole thing together, and I started my first trial at being a one-arm chemist, you might say, in March of 1956. They made some adjustments in terms of a work space. Most laboratory work areas are for stand-up purposes, and so we adjusted and found a table that we could sit at. And from that accommodation and others--mainly to change a physical layout of some of the work areas so that you could sit down rather than stand up or sit on high stools--and from that, as long as I didn't pose any hazard to myself or to the other workers, they decided it was a successful trial. And I'm still there.

RK: You're going to have an anniversary, I would think, next year at thirty years.

Smith: Yes, it will be at thirty years.

RK: Vernon, I would like to know just what you do during the day in chemistry. Do you analyze... ? What do you do, really?

Smith: Well, presently my activities are principally involved with therapeutic drug monitoring. This is where we actually determine the blood level of certain critical drugs that have to be monitored for various reasons because of their potential for toxicity or to make sure that there is patient compliance or that the blood levels that are attained are sufficient to provide the kind of pharmacological action that they are designed for. That is one part. And the other part of my responsibilities is in toxicology where we are involved in drug screening, where we take specimens of blood or urine or other body fluids and try to identify any chemical substances that are present that may be responsible for a patient being comatose or being highly agitated or whatever. And sometimes our findings, though they are negative, are very useful because then this means that chemical substances or drugs can be ruled out and perhaps the cause for the patient's condition is some other physiological condition.

RK: You've seen a lot of changes.

Smith: Yes, I have. A lot of changes, and the responsibilities have been kind of on a trouble-shooting or R&D basis, providing new tests for the laboratory so that they can be put into our menu of services.

RK: I'm glad I asked you that, because I have been wanting to know. Vernon, I believe you have lectured at St. Luke's to the nurses. Would you tell us about that.

Smith: Well, I've provided a few lectures to nurses in regards to certain things in laboratory science; but my primary responsibility as a lecturer at St. Luke's is to our School of Medical Technology. And I have been a lecturer there since 1956, lecturing on topics in urinalysis and topics in clinical chemistry, and, more recently, topics in toxicology and therapeutic drug monitoring. And our program there, of course, is a rather extensive program and one that is well known throughout the nation. Our students usually graduate in the top 20 to 15 percent of the classes across the United States, so I feel quite honored that I have a chance to help shape the minds of some of these young people.

END OF SIDE ONE - BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

RK: I want to ask you a question, Vernon, when this started about Negro, Colored and Black and which is preferred. We say "Black" now. Now, how did that all come about, and which is really preferred?

Smith: Well, we are in the 1980's now and the term, or the expression seems to be predominantly amongst this minority group of people to be referred to as Blacks. But I do recall when, back in the thirties and the very early forties, we were still being referred to as "Colored," and then the transition was to be referred to as "Negro," and this was to be capitalized. But

oftentimes in articles that appeared in the newspapers and some periodicals some editors didn't see fit or some typists would fail to capitalize this, so in many respects "Negro" was a designation that didn't serve too well and certainly it has a lot of unpleasant experiences insofar as respect is concerned. The designation of "Black" really didn't commence until the 1960's, mainly around 1967, 1968, when the Black Revolution, you might say, commenced with young college students demonstrating against a number of injustices that they didn't think were being rectified fast enough. So, here, now in the eighties the designation of "Black" is perhaps 95 or 98 percent the accepted designation. There has been some concern that maybe we should have adopted the designation as Afro-Americans because Americans of European descent are oftentimes referred to as German-Americans or Italian-Americans, so it would seem proper probably for Black-Americans to really be referred to as Afro-Americans. But at this time, it seems that the designation is simply to be referred to as Black-Americans because many of us have a long history of our ancestors being here in the United States.

RK: Which do you prefer, Vernon?

Smith: Well, I prefer being referred to as a Black-American. I think that is an acceptable designation.

RK: I wonder if this will change, do you think?

Smith: It's hard to say. There is a possibility, of course, that it may be changed, but I would like to see that we get on to more important things rather than to be really concerned about our labels and become more a part of the fiber and fabric of America in doing the things that we can do, and do them well.

RK: You have a wonderful history of contributions of Black-Americans, which I used to hear on the radio at night, when Mr. Powell would tell about one after another--scientifically and culturally and literary--of the big contributions, so this may change. I want to ask you about what prompted you to found the Cedar Rapids Negro Civic Organization back in 1961.

Smith: Well, this organization evolved after several of us, namely, Dr. Percy Harris, myself and a few others, decided that there needed to be some effort on the part of Black men. At that time they were Negroes, as the designation that we just talked about, that we do something for Black students in terms of providing supplementary financial aid so that they could go on an further their education, either in technical schools or liberal arts colleges and/or universities. So with 23 men, all of them subscribing to the concept that the betterment of our position in America would be helped tremendously by education at the level beyond high school, we decided to form our organization with the sole purpose of raising money and serving as a repository of funds and to provide counseling and guidance when needed or when we thought it was going to be helpful toward Black youngsters of that time. This organization has continued up until this day. We are not active except in distributing funds.

RK: Did you have support from the rest of the community?

Smith: We had excellent support from the rest of the community, members of the White community. Various organizations responded to the banquets that we gave in recognition of graduating high school seniors, and it was something that the young people looked forward to as kind of a high point in their secondary educational

careers--at the end of that, to be invited to that banquet, to be recognized, and for many of these students this was the first public recognition of that accomplishment that they had received.

RK: And then did you help with scholarships to college?

Smith: Yes, we provided scholarships. One scholarship in particular was named after Dr. Howard Greenlee, a professor at Coe College, that we wanted to give recognition to because of a rather great sacrifice, we felt, in his leaving Coe and going to a school in the South to teach and to try to strengthen the academic exposure to students of the colleges in the South.

RK: I think he went to Tuskegee.

Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: My grandfather went to teach in Talladega after the Civil War, and then my father grew up--was a little boy--down there with Black friends. He was the only little White boy, and then when he got his Ph.D.--while he was working on his Ph.D.--his whole dissertation was on the Negro in Ohio, which he got at Johns Hopkins and Western Reserve. So, he had an intense interest in the Blacks; I was brought up that way, with my grandfather being a Presbyterian minister and went down there to teach at Talladega. So I was interested about Dr. Greenlee. This is just an aside, but I'm glad you mentioned him, because he did go down there. Now, it's functioning now, you said.

Smith: Well, the membership is getting older and our activities are perhaps not as vigorous as they used to be, but the funds are still being distributed on a yearly basis to those students who apply, who would like assistance, and then we make an award

usually to a student who has demonstrated high academic potential.

RK: What about honoring the seniors in high school? This is done, too?

Smith: This is being done now in conjunction with other Black organizations in the community, but we essentially were the first Black organization to have an individual recognition of Black graduates. But now this is being handled by kind of a combined effort of the Black Federation of Teachers in Cedar Rapids, the NAACP, the Black Women's Civic Organization of Cedar Rapids--all these are combining their efforts in making one single recognition dinner of the Black graduates.

RK: And this--you see, you started something, Vernon, with this. I can just see this has expanded a lot since you graduated from Franklin School, hasn't it?

Smith: Yes, it has.

RK: Um hmm, when you look back on it.

Smith: You never realize those things, though, when you start something.

RK: No, you don't--how the ripples will go on out. And then, tell me about the NAACP.

Smith: Well, the NAACP in Cedar Rapids was formed in 1942, and it was formed in conjunction with a kind of a benchmark in segregation, after the Ellis Park pool had been built. And there was an attempt after it was built to exclude Blacks from using the public pool. And from this event, this attempt to block the use of the pool, the Cedar Rapids chapter was formed.

RK: Tell me, was that really--did that go into effect--that the Blacks could not swim in a public swimming pool?

Smith: Well, there was an attempt to; and I think if the NAACP and those who were involved in forming that first chapter, if they hadn't been persistent and persevered in their efforts to demonstrate that this was a public pool--it had been built with public funds from taxpayers, and certainly Black families in Cedar Rapids were homeowners and therefore taxpayers--they had a part in the stake in this public institution as the rest of the tax-paying Cedar Rapidians.

RK: That's unbelievable, isn't it?

Smith: But that was 1942, and the attitudes that prevailed then and still prevail to a lesser degree perhaps in this time now of the 1980's.

RK: I hope it's to a lesser degree. You really do think so, don't you?

Smith: Well, I think so, but every once in a while it springs up and it has to be confronted, and we try to do the best we can to adjust for what is right because we are Americans, too. We like to be full participants in the institutions that we all contribute to.

RK: You were on the Education Committee of the NAACP?

Smith: Yes, I served on this committee really after I returned from service and upon completion of work at Coe College in 1950. Prior to that, my father was active on the NAACP, and then one year he served as president. I can't recall precisely the year that he served as president of the NAACP, it seems to me it was in the mid-forties, probably 1947, 1948.

RK: Your father's first name, so we'll have it.

Smith: Is Elmer T. Smith, Sr.

RK: Tell me about it now. Are you busy with it now, Vernon?

Smith: Not as busy as I used to be. In the sixties, as a member of the Education Committee, I was instrumental in initiating courses in Black history. Started out with the adult education department of the Cedar Rapids Board of Education, and our first classes were held at Tyler School. And Mrs. Viola Gibson, of course, was the prime mover in initiating this action, and I assisted her and others in trying to give some structure to classes that would allow adults to have a better understanding of what Colored, Negroes, Blacks, Afro-Americans had contributed to the fabric of the American history.

RK: And were. Not did, but were.

Smith: Yes.

RK: Vernon, you mentioned about the Negro Revolution in the late sixties. Would you like to elaborate on that?

Smith: Well, these were certainly troubled times and times of great fear. Cedar Rapids was not without a lot of its rumors and concern on just what was going to take place. But essentially it was a revolution that reflected the impatience of young people, particularly Black young people, of the sixties. But that period also involved White youth with their unhappiness of things that were going on. This is in the midst of the Vietnam War, and all these ingredients were kind of in the cauldron of the pot boiling, and during this time there was considerable unrest in the Black communities, particularly in the larger urban centers--Detroit, Chicago and New York, we could name all

of those. They had some kind of unrest, and so often, as you look at this, the unrest seems to be inflicted upon the institutions that are attempting to serve Blacks. Well, in part, this was true, but many times it was the thought of those who were revolting, they were striking out against those who they felt were oppressing their group. And so businesses that were owned by Whites in Black communities were very adversely affected, and some businesses owned by Blacks suffered as well because these strikes were not surgical strikes as we hear the term now in the eighties, they were just wide sweeping strikes of unrest. But a lot of good came from this. This was the era of Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. Martin Luther King came to Cedar Rapids, spoke here at Coe College, and addressed large audiences. And from this, of course, we made some real significant strides in acceptance in corporate America, as a result of this period of unrest.

RK: And many benefits.

Smith: Yes, many benefits. And, you know, if we look at history, hardly anything is ever accomplished in a smooth fashion. There has to be some disarray and...

RK: Turbulence.

Smith: Turbulence is a good word--before things settled down. And then we look back and we wonder, "Well, why couldn't we have done this before in some other manner?" But I guess it is human nature; we always have to have things kind of shaken before we act because we are kind of creatures of doing things as we have always done them. But the people of the sixties--the

young people were dissatisfied with their elders for not doing things more rapidly. And that was really the essence of it.

RK: How is that feeling now, Vernon?

Smith: Well, it's kind of hard to assess that, except I guess we could look at the college communities across the country, and they are not as politically active now as they were in the sixties. But perhaps the tide is turning and they are going to be a little more politically active if the events that are occurring in Central America continue, and it would appear if the young population is not in agreement with what the ruling political body of the U.S. feels now, maybe there will be some additional unrest. I don't know.

RK: But the Black youth--I don't feel turbulence among the Black youth. Is there some?

Smith: There is turbulence in the sense that right now economic times are very difficult for the rank and file Black without an adequate education. Even some of those with a reasonable education, unemployment is extremely high, and here we are in the summer of 1985, and I would venture to say that unemployment probably runs 35 or 40 percent for Black youth, ages 16 to 22. And this is unhealthy.

RK: Very. (Pause) From what I know, you were president of the Council on Human Relations in Cedar Rapids. Could you tell us how you happen to be a member of that? Or did you help found it?

Smith: I was a member early on in its inception. I didn't help to found the organization, but the Council on Human Relations of the Cedar Rapids and Marion area was an outgrowth of these

troubled times that we talked about. And it was the coming together of a number of concerned citizens that understood human problems and the fact that these problems could only be attacked by honest efforts on the part of people who were willing to volunteer and exchange ideas and search into solutions to avoid misunderstanding that the Council on Human Relations evolved. By 1967 I was asked to serve as president of the organization, and this was an extremely difficult time because this was during the peak of the student unrest and the Council on Human Relations was perhaps a sounding board and a place where people turned to for solutions and in hopes that they could avoid significant unrest. So, it was difficult, and I think back now, I was young and I don't know that I had all the correct answers. But I think we did come out fairly well.

RK: Is it meeting now, Vernon? Is there a need for it now?

Smith: Well, the Council on Human Relations evolved into the organization now that is the Cedar Rapids Civil Rights--Human Rights Commission, and the first executive secretary of this body came from the Council on Human Relations. So that early group evolved into a group now that is a part of Cedar Rapids City Government.

RK: That was very worthwhile, to start that. You were a catalyst.

Smith: Well, I think I was involved with individuals who were catalysts. And I still serve as a member of that commission at this time.

RK: The commission that is a part of the city?

Smith: That's right. And we investigate complaints that are brought to the commission by individuals who feel as though they have

some legitimate complaint concerning employment, housing, sex discrimination. And originally, the organization was established primarily to serve Blacks and minorities, but now the service of the Cedar Rapids Human Rights Commission represents many Whites, male and female, who have various grievances across the board toward employment. Age discrimination now is a big factor of the complaints that this commission investigates.

RK: You are called on to do the actual investigating, Vernon?

Smith: Well, as a commissioner, the commissioner is asked to serve as a quote, unquote hearing officer, and to hear the complaint of the complainant as well as the respondent, and then kind of rule upon the professional staff that makes a decision as to whether there is probable cause or no probable cause for the complaint as it is originally filed.

RK: As you said, the complaints are changing.

Smith: Yes, the complaints originally were primarily employment discrimination on the basis of race. We still have some of those, but the complaints now represent sex discrimination, age discrimination, occasionally maybe religious discrimination, or perceived discrimination based upon these items that I have mentioned.

RK: Speaking of religious discrimination, I haven't asked you about your church here in Cedar Rapids.

Smith: Well, the church that my wife and I belong to is called Bethel A.M.E. Church, and that's Bethel African Methodist-Episcopal Church. It is an old church that was formed early in American history in Philadelphia. The two early founders of this church

were Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who were members of the White Methodist church in Philadelphia; and as a result of misunderstandings based upon race and discrimination and the attitudes that prevailed at that early time back in the 1780's, I believe, they founded their own separate church and became the African Methodist-Episcopal Church.

RK: It came to Cedar Rapids early.

Smith: Yes, and I don't have the exact dates. I remember the present building that was built in about 1931. But prior to that, that building was a wooden building that was situated on Sixth Street Southeast between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

RK: And that land was given by Mrs. Ely, the Mrs. John F. Ely [Mary A.] who gave the land for that church.

Smith: I've read that in some of the historical notes.

RK: Her grandson, John M. Ely, Sr., is very proud that his grandmother did that. (Pause) Vernon, I have read that you were director of the Sickle Cell Screening Committee here in Cedar Rapids. Would you tell us about that.

Smith: Well, this was kind of a combined effort wherein a group of us decided that it was important to offer to the Black community, and the children primarily, a screening program where we could identify those who had the sickle cell trait, or the sickle cell disease, so that they would have as a part of their medical record knowledge about this particular disease entity that can be quite devastating and in some cases can be fatal during certain crises. So with a number of volunteers from the medical community of both St. Luke's and Mercy Hospitals, we

established a screening program. Many of our tests were conducted at the Jane Boyd Community House. And the information was provided for the children that were tested. Results were given to the parents or the guardians, and then a copy of that record was also sent to their private physician. And this screening program was a one-time screening program, but the monies that were raised from various organizations that were solicited in supporting this effort exceeded that which was necessary to conduct the screening program, buy materials, and all the essential components of it. And there are funds that still remain from this particular effort that are being used on an individual basis by those who request their youngsters to be tested for sickle cell anemia or the sickle cell trait. And the testing presently now is being conducted at St. Luke's Methodist Hospital; and for that purpose, those costs are defrayed by the reserve of funds that are left over from that initial program. It was a very successful effort and one that required a lot of publicity and cooperation with the Cedar Rapids Public School System, contacting the parents and all, trying to convince them that this kind of participation was desirable. And we wanted to make sure that there was no stigma attached with it because people are very sensitive about medical information, as they should be.

RK: Did you find many cases in Cedar Rapids?

Smith: Well, our findings when we compiled our results on a statistical basis reflected the same distribution that you would see on a national level for the Black population that was tested in

Cedar Rapids. So we didn't see anything unusual beyond what we expected.

RK: And there is help for that?

Smith: Yes, there is help--there is still research going on. There is no absolute cure yet because it is a genetically transmitted condition. The main thing, of course, is to identify people so that they will know, so that when they become of child-bearing age they can plan their families according to the results--the couple that is contemplating having a family. So it's useful information, essential information to avoid the probabilities that one of the offspring from such a union of two individuals who are known to have the trait, that they could make some alternate plans, because there is some risk involved.

RK: We've covered quite a bit about the Black community and your many contributions. Let's look back at the past. I understand that we had a noted entertainer here in Cedar Rapids.

Smith: Well, we've had a number of them, but there is one entertainer in particular that Cedar Rapids figures very significantly in his career and certainly for those of us that still enjoy his music on record and we hear it on radio and television and as background music. It might be well for those who are listening now, that whatever time this might be, to know that Nat King Cole perhaps had his real professional debut in Cedar Rapids. At the time he played in a tavern called the Fox Head Tavern on First Street Southeast, between Second Avenue and I believe Third Avenue; and at that time he was principally a pianist. And he had another man by the name of Oscar Brown, I believe, who played string bass. And I don't know that he had another

member or not--the name isn't available to me at this time. But this was in about the period of 1942 to 1945. But I think it would be interesting for people to know that at this particular time entertainers or other travelers who were Black didn't stay in the customary hotels or motels. We had a few motels then, they were called... (Pause) Can you help me out on that?

RK: On what, the motels?

Smith: The motels. The motel is a later name.

RK: Well, we had tourist homes.

Smith: Tourist homes, right. They didn't stay at those. They stayed usually in the homes of Black families. And Nat Cole stayed in the home of a Black family in Cedar Rapids--the home of Mrs. Nina Miller and her husband. They had extra rooms, and it was quite customary at this particular time, because they couldn't stay in hotels or tourist homes, to live with a Black family for the time that they were in Cedar Rapids. His performances at the Fox Head Tavern were primarily instrumental, and supposedly, the story goes, at the insistence of a customer who must have been quite persistent, probably had quite a bit to drink, kept insisting that this man who played piano certainly must be able to sing, because the attitude with many people was that all Blacks were good singers. Well, some were and some weren't. But, fortunately, Nat Cole was an excellent singer; and so in order to satisfy this customer and to kind of get him away so he could go on and finish his performance, he started to sing. And so I think Nat Cole's real professional

debut as a singer started in Cedar Rapids at a little-known tavern on First Street.

RK: That's interesting.

Smith: But there were other performers, too, that came to Cedar Rapids that played in theatres during this time, and they stayed in the homes. I do recall a rather large group that came to Cedar Rapids in the middle forties, the Wings Over Jordan Choir. They were quite famous on CBS because they had a Sunday morning radio program called Wings Over Jordan.

RK: I remember that.

Smith: And this group, when they performed in Cedar Rapids at the Memorial Coliseum, it was necessary to find homes for them to stay in; and I think our family kept probably five or six of them. We had to double up and really team up. And the... one of the lead singers--I will never forget her name, Ruby Dee--was a member of the Wings Over Jordan Concert Choir.

RK: With a beautiful voice.

Smith: With a beautiful voice. She was one of those that stayed in my parents' home at that time.

RK: That's an interesting commentary on the times, Vernon. Looking back over the past of Cedar Rapids and the future of Cedar Rapids, you mentioned something about visitation that you thought had a great deal of benefit. Phoebe is sitting right here--Vernon's wife, who has had many awards herself and has been an outstanding person in the community--and I think, Phoebe, we'll let you maybe tell about the visitation which proved so beneficial. And I heard you say you would like to have it continue. This was in the late 1960's. So, if you

would come over here, this is Phoebe Smith, who has had a great deal to do with the success of her husband.

P/Smith: Yes, it was in the late sixties that we had the home visitation program, and I believe it came about through the Council on Human Relations--through a Council on Human Relations Committee. And at the time I said I would chair the program, I didn't know that I was going to be out of town. But everybody pitched in and it worked out beautifully. It was a program where White families visited Black families in their homes, and I don't recall the exact number that we had, but as far as the numbers of Black persons and Whites involved, it was very successful.

RK: The Whites visited in the Black homes and then the Blacks visited in the White homes?

P/Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: And was that just for a dinner, or an afternoon?

P/Smith: No, it was just for an afternoon. It was for like a Sunday afternoon, and then everybody served refreshments and just had a chance... it was a very nice afternoon during the summer, and everyone had a chance to visit. And they took their children with them, and it was just like two families. And sometimes in some cases there were more than one or two families of Whites visiting the Black families. Because I think we ran out of Black families before it was over with.

RK: And it had a great deal of benefit for everyone. How many are in the Black community in Cedar Rapids? I would imagine around twenty-five hundred?

Smith: I think that would be a...

RK: Is that about right, Phoebe?

P/Smith: I would say that's about the number we have, maybe a little more, maybe a little less; but roughly twenty-five hundred persons.

RK: I don't think that number has changed a great deal, has it? Has it grown with the city?

Smith: I haven't seen the last census figures, but I think certainly it does not exceed three thousand.

RK: What about the future, Vernon and Phoebe? Do you have--do you want to say what Cedar Rapids really needs now in 1985?

Smith: Well, I guess this is looking into the future and your desires. We would hope that Cedar Rapids would reflect the same kind of growth and the spawning of ideas on the people-to-people basis and the successes that represent a kind of tradition for the Midwest and Eastern Iowa in particular, and I think Cedar Rapids has had a reputation of being an exporter of people and ideas and useful products for the rest of the world; and I would hope that the Black community would still be a part of this amalgamation of the best of human beings. We have an excellent community that can accomplish a great deal, and I would hope that we would still be a significant part of this. It hinges back to a strong and a viable educational system, and it also hinges upon people who reach out and do just a little bit more than what is normally asked of those individuals. It's voluntarism and it's an attitude of understanding.

RK: You mentioned housing, too; you are eager for that--better housing for the middle-income?

Smith: Well, I would say that housing is a factor based upon your economic resources, and I am simply saying that I would like to see minority individuals enjoy a better inclusion in middle-class economics in terms of their owning power and full participation in all that hard and successful work entails. And this is an ideal thing and certainly we would hope for the ideal.

RK: Always. Phoebe, do you have anything to add to that?

P/Smith: No, not--I can't think of anything right now. I think that he has covered it quite well as far as Blacks in Cedar Rapids are concerned.

RK: This has been a most satisfactory interview, I might say. Before we leave, I would like to talk just a little bit about your outstanding children. You have five that have done so well, and we all seem to know about them. You had some valedictorians or salutatorians, and then you also had some from other countries that I would like to just end up this with. I might say that Phoebe, as I think I mentioned before, in 1977 was one of ten Iowa Merit Mothers--outstanding mothers in the state--and received the recognition she so deserved, and the love and support and understanding of her husband and her family and of her own work as a technician. You were a technician at St. Luke's, weren't you, Phoebe?

P/Smith: No, I was a technician in Elgin, Illinois, before Vernon and I were married.

RK: Oh, before you were married?

P/Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: But then you were a paraprofessional at Coe?

P/Smith: Yes, I was.

RK: And I know when Vernon received his Alumni Award of Merit, it was stressed what loyal Coe boosters you are.

P/Smith: Yes.

RK: I want to just... let's just talk about your family before we end. That's a nice place to stop. I've been seeing a very attractive little granddaughter here. There's Ruby, who was born when her father became ill. She was just three or four months old, and she graduated from Coe in 1971. Tell me about Ruby now.

P/Smith: Well, Ruby now lives in Rockford, Illnois. She is married to Wendell Thompson and has two very beautiful children, Rachel and Troy. And Rachel is five years old and Troy is two years old. Ruby works at one of the hospitals in Rockford, Illinois.

RK: And then there comes Vernon, who is in the contracting business right now. Vernon II, and he graduated from Coe in 1975. No?

P/Smith: No, he attended.

RK: He attended Coe.

P/Smith: He and Ruby both attended Coe, and Deborah and Phoebe all attended Coe at one time or another, but... (Pause) Yes, Vernon is a contractor here in Cedar Rapids. Maybe you can enlarge upon that.

Smith: Well, Vernon principally is involved in home construction, but he has done some commercial construction for others. But his present endeavor now is as a builder for himself, and we are very proud of his progress in this direction.

RK: I would think so, proud of all of them. Now, Deborah also

attended Coe, and Deborah is the mother of this little Phoebe, Phoebe Jean?

P/Smith: Yes, we have three Phoebes, so it does get kind of confusing at times. Deborah is with All State and she lives in Chicago, Illinois.

RK: She is with the All State Insurance Company?

P/Smith: Yes, that's correct, uh huh.

RK: And then Phoebe is... that I got to know better. So...

P/Smith: Phoebe Delores, she's with the arsenal in Rock Island, Illinois, and she's the educational coordinator there. And...

RK: She attended Northern Iowa?

P/Smith: Yes, she attended the University of Northern Iowa. And our youngest daughter, Katherine, she's presently a student at the University of Iowa and a former paraprofessional teacher at Roosevelt Junior High School as a physically and mentally handicapped teacher, which she hopes to get her degree in.

RK: With these five children, I think you and Vernon must have done something right along the line.

P/Smith: Yes, I... we've tried, I'll put it that way. (R. Kesler, Laughter) But we have had a number of other children from many countries that we have really enjoyed and have helped our family to grow tremendously over the years.

RK: Vernon, would you like to tell about those--those other children?

Smith: O.K. Well, we probably first started out with one young lady from nearby in the Caribbean. She was a Girl Guide, that's the equivalent of a Girl Scout in this country, from Jamaica. And then after that we formed an association with students from

southern Africa, more particularly from the nation of Botswana. One of their students was a student at Coe College, Geoffrey Garebamono. And through Geoffrey's association with Coe, with St. Luke's, and my affiliation with the Council on Human Relations, Cedar Rapids became the focal point for the meeting of the students from Botswana that were studying in North America. And they focused upon Cedar Rapids as their meeting point. And we, through the Council on Human Relations, provided housing for these students when they came in the summer of 197_--no, 1967. And for two years following that time, they held their student conferences in Cedar Rapids. There were probably 10 or 12 young men and women from this--19, I am corrected by--from this country that were studying in the United States and Canada, and they all focused upon Cedar Rapids; so Cedar Rapids has a real connection with a part of the world now that is certainly in the headlines--Southern Africa, a nearby neighbor of South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

RK: And you hear from them, your extended family.

Smith: Yes, we do. In fact, one of them serves as First Secretary at the United Nations in New York, and he spent a great deal of time in our home because during the summer when he was not in school at Lewis and Clark out in Washington, he stayed with our family here in Cedar Rapids. But he calls us on occasion from New York when time will permit, and we have long and enjoyable conversations. In fact, he has even mentioned that they would like to have some sort of a homecoming if they can line up all of their schedules, because many of them now are serving in

vital capacities for their government as well as some private enterprises. Then a little later on we were host to young...

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2 - BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

RK: We were just talking about the students who had lived in their home from different parts of the world. He was talking about the one from South Africa. Vernon, do you want to go on with that?

Smith: In 1969 we became the parents of--host parents for a young lady from Kenya. Her name was Chelengnat Ngeno [sometimes went by Christian name Alice] and she came to live with us in 1969. She happened to be the first cousin of a young man who was living with the coach at Washington High School, and later on he attended Iowa State College, but there was also another cousin who attended Coe College and graduated from Coe, Kip Kiror. And this young lady stayed with us then for two years, and it was an arrangement without any formal organization such as American Field Service, or what have you. It was an agreement between her family and our family that we established by a telephone conversation; and we accepted this young lady, and she stayed here for two years and went through all the adjustments that you could imagine in coming from living in a boarding school near Lake Victoria in Kenya to Cedar Rapids and all of that that it entailed.

RK: It took some understanding, didn't it? and guidance?

Smith: It did, certainly, require a lot of understanding on the part of Phoebe because here was a young lady that had to be caught

up to 21st century living and even some language adjustments, even though she spoke English.

RK: We're at the end of our interview, Vernon and Phoebe, and I wonder if there is anything more that you would like to say to be put into this oral history.

Smith: Well, subsequent to our experience with the young lady from Kenya, we have also had two students from Japan that have stayed in our homes in conjunction with the program, and I - can you help me out?

RK: Experiment in International Living? or the American Field Service? or Cultural... There is a...

Smith: The Cultural Exchange Program. And these programs were usually one or two weeks in duration, but this allowed us to expose our young people--our family--to young people from all around the world. Some other nations that I could mention were India, China and one from West Africa--Nigeria.

RK: You said that Cedar Rapids was an exporter of products and ideas, and I think you have been a real exporter of good will right here in your home.

I think we'll say goodbye at this point, and I want to thank you, Vernon and Phoebe, and I want to tell you both that you have a great deal of admiration in the community for your big contributions.

END OF INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW TOPICS
CEDAR RAPIDS: THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I. PERSONAL LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

1--When were you born? Where?
1,10--How long have you lived in Cedar Rapids?
28--What are your parents' names?
3-6,12-14-Where did you go to school?
15--Are you married or single?
18,40--Did you raise a family? How big?
4,20-22--What has been your occupation (career) during your adult years?

II. COMMUNITY TOPICS

A. Technology in the Community
1. Transportation
--Railway travel (Union Station, trips to Iowa City on Crandic)
2--Trolleys (the Interurban)
--Horses and First Automobiles
--Mud roads and the seedling mile
--Hunter Airport and the first planes
--Cedar River (ferries, floods, dams)
5--Bicycles
2. Communications
--Newspapers
--Radios
--Advertising
--Telephones

B. People in the Community
1. Amusements/Recreation
--Motion Pictures
--Cedar Rapids Parks
--Dances
--Carnival Week
--Chautauqua
--Community Theater
--Little Gallery
--Symphony Orchestra
--Circus
--Greene's Opera House
--Amusement Parks (Alamo)
--Camps
--Community Centers (YWCA, YMCA)

2. Famous Characters
--Cherry Sisters
--Grant Wood
--Carl Van Vechten (<u>The Tattooed Countess</u>)
--Marvin Cone
35-36--Nat King Cole
29--Dr. Martin Luther King
37--"Wings Over Jordan"

3. Lifestyle
--Life before air conditioning
--Winter Activities
--Holidays (Memorial Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, Christmas)
--Clothing
--Toys
--Saloons/Taverns
--Farm Life

4. Family Life --42-45
--Household Help
--Women's Roles
3-4--Childrens' Activities/Behavior
--Sunday activities (Church life, Sunday Blue Laws)
32--Church

5. * Ethnic/Minority Life --3,22-32
--Immigrants (Czech, Greek, German, etc.)
--Indians
7,11,26.35--Segregation of Blacks and Military Service
--Jobs Available
24-25--Cedar Rapids Negro Civic Organization
25--Black Federation of Teachers in Cedar Rapids, Black Women's Civic Org.

C. Organizations and Institutions in the Community

1. Education
3-5--Cedar Rapids Schools and number of Blacks
6,12-14,41--Coe College and Black Students
--Mount Mercy College
--Cornell College
4,15--University of Iowa University of Northern Iowa--42

2. Government
--City Services
--Streets/Roads
--Relationship with Marion (Courthouse Dispute)
31,38--Council on Human Relations--part of City Government

3. Medical
20,33,34--Hospitals
--Patient-Doctor Relationship
--Broken Bones
15-18--Polio, TB, Debilitating Diseases
--House Calls
--Home Delivery of Babies
33-35--Sickle Cell
18-20--His Own Polio and Handicapped Status

* 25,27--NAACP
30,31,38,43--Council on Human Relations, Human Rights Commission
38--Home Visitation
45--Cultural Exhange Program

4. Business and Economy
   --Local Factories (Douglas Starch Works, Quaker Oats, etc.)
   --Local Brewing Companies
   --Retail Businesses /Department Stores
   --Professions
   --Banking and Finance
   --Restaurants (Greek Restaurants in 30's)
   --Businesses that no longer exist (old groceries, drygoods, icehouses)
   --Farmers Market
   --Mills on Cedar River
   --Buildings Erected
   --Manual Labor/Types of Jobs
   --Companies (Labor Unions, Strikes, Pay)

5. Attitudes/Values
   --Children/Discipline
   --Sex/Petting
   --Charity
   --Divorce
   --Work
   --Working women, Voting Rights for Women
   --Patriotism (World War I)

D. Historic Events in and Outside the Community
1. Catastrophic Events
   --Clifton Hotel Fire (1903)
   --Douglas Starch Works Explosion(1919)
   --Bank Closings (1933)
   --Lyman-Stark Building Collapse(1913)
   --Public Library Murder(1921)

2. National Historic Events
   --Womens' Suffrage
   11--World War I
   --Roaring 20's
   --Prohibition
   4--Great Depression
   6-10--WWII, Quartermaster Corps
   7-8--Concentration Camps
   6,9,10--Korean Conflict
   28--Negro Revolution in 1960s

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF CEDAR RAPIDS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH Vernon Smith

CONDUCTED BY Roby Kesler

DATE July 13, 1985

TRANSCRIBER Hazel Storm

Vernon Smith is a native Cedar Rapidian, having been born (1919) and raised in Cedar Rapids to the family of Elmer T. Smith, Sr. As a chemist for St. Luke's Hospital, he also lectures on topics of urinalysis, clinical chemistry, toxicology and therapeutic drug monitoring. He has been active in various Black organizations and an influencing factor toward Black minority needs. As a Black individual himself, he provides a look at minority life in Cedar Rapids and the Country. He also provides some look into his accomplishments despite the debilitating effects of polio.

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Interview with Vernon Smith
Date of Interview: July 13, 1985
Interviewer: Roby Kesler
Transcriber: Hazel Storm

RK: I have the honor of interviewing Vernon Smith, who is making and has made many contributions in this commmunity and has an array of awards. He was born in Cedar Rapids, and we're just going to start right in with his childhood. Vernon, tell me about your parents. Were they from Cedar Rapids? Where did they come from?

Smith: My mother came from--she was born in Pulaski, Illinois--this is in Southern Illinois--and my father was born in Delphos, Ohio. And they were married in Southern Illinois. They lived there for a brief time; and then, later on, because my father's parents at the time had been a part of the Westward movement, they were living in Boise, Idaho. And, so, after my parents were married and the parents of my parents became ill in Boise, Idaho, they took the family, then, and moved out to Boise. Actually, there was no family at that time, but they went out to Boise and they stayed there. And I have two brothers and one sister, and all of them were born in Boise, Idaho. I was born here in Cedar Rapids in 1926.

RK: And where were you born?

Smith: I was born at home. It was a common practice then, of course, to be born at home; so, 416 Ninth Avenue, S.W., was my birth place.

RK: I was born at home, too, but I'm quite a bit older than you are. And tell me about how much younger are you from your next in line?

Smith: All right. My youngest brother is ten years older than I am, so he was born in 1916. The next one--that's Louis Smith--and the next one, Elmer Smith, was born in 1911. And then our only sister was born in 1909; her name is Flavia--now it's Flavia Roy. She presently resides in Washington, D.C. Louis and Elmer both reside here in Cedar Rapids.

RK: So you really are a native. (Laughter)

Smith: Yes, I guess I would have to admit that.

RK: Do you have some outstanding memories, as a child, of the neighborhood, even before you went to school?

Smith: Yes. On the Southwest side it was not uncommon to see, of course, steam engines. We were not far from the Milwaukee Railroad that did switching for Penick & Ford, so we could see steam engines moving about. We were one block from the Avondale Trolley Line on Fourth Street and one block from the Linwood Trolley Line on the other side. These were the Iowa Electric Light & Power Company's two railroad lines. I also had a chance to see an electric car that was owned by the Reeds that lived on Sixth Street, which was adjacent to the old Taylor School on Sixth Street, Southwest.

RK: So you remember the electrics?

Smith: Yes, there were a few around, and electric trucks, also...

RK: Oh, I didn't know they had those.

Smith: ... with hard tires and chain driven.

RK: Uhh, you went to Taylor?

Smith: Yes, Taylor--the old Taylor that was on the corner of Sixth Street and, I believe, Fifth Avenue.

RK: I remember the principal, Miss Strawn. Was she principal then?

Smith: Well, my recollection doesn't serve me that well.

RK: You weren't called into the principal's office.

Smith: Well, I don't know, but I think I spent a little time in the hall, maybe. The kindergarten teacher at that time--I believe her name was Mrs... Miss Miller--and I only went through to the--through the 1st Grade at Taylor before we moved to the Northeast side of Cedar Rapids on Carlyle Street, so this placed me in the Garfield School District. And I started in the 2nd Grade at Garfield.

RK: Were there other Black children, Vernon?

Smith: At Taylor, yes. But when we moved to the Northeast side, I was the only Black student at Garfield. And it kind of remained that way throughout the remainder of my schooling there at Garfield; likewise, in junior high and high school.

RK: Was that difficult?

Smith: Yes and no. It was a common experience for me to be the only Black youngster because my brother Louis, being ten years older than I, we were never in the same school together. He was already in Grant High School when I can remember much about his going to school and my going to school. So we never shared schooling together, and I was the only one. I guess the only problem was the novelty for the other White students that I was the only Black student, and some of the problems that arose from that.

RK: Vernon, let's talk a little about Franklin School. It was both a junior and a senior high school at that time; and the reason was that we were just emerging from the Depression, so we put them together. Have you got some outstanding memories of that?

Smith: Oh, yes, certainly, because there were some fine teachers in the Cedar Rapids School System--I think probably some of the finest were present in this building. I can name a few names of outstanding memories: in mathematics, there was Miss Ella Harding, who took care of 7th and 8th Grade mathematics; and there was Miss Phoebe Bingham in vocal music and the outstanding director of choirs and the musical education. I was a member of the orchestra and the band, and this was Mr. Roland Moehlman.

RK: What did you play?

Smith: I played clarinet; in fact, I started the clarinet in Garfield Elementary and then continued on through to high school there at Franklin. I was involved in almost all of the musical activities that we had at that time.

RK: You were in sports, too, weren't you, Vernon?

Smith: To a limited extent. I was out for track and did a little work in track, but I never played football or basketball.

RK: I'm very interested in your beginnings of chemistry. Vernon is an organic chemist with a master's degree from the University of Iowa, and is a well-known chemist, so it's always interesting to know how this all started. I wonder if it started with these good teachers at Franklin?

Smith: I think it most certainly did. One other teacher that I have not mentioned up to this point was Miss Iola Tillapaugh who

taught biology, and she was certainly very instrumental in planting the seeds of curiosity and striving for excellence in some of the demands that she made of our young people at this time. And, so, although I didn't go on to become involved in biology, I did have the impetus to seek chemistry and eventually ended up in biochemistry and the clinical chemistry setting. But she was a real formulator of minds, and Cedar Rapids is certainly a mark of her excellence in teaching and devotion to those principles.

RK: Vernon, you are and have been a teacher yourself at St. Luke's, and you have been and are a lecturer. You probably learned some of this about good teaching right there at Franklin School with Miss Tillapaugh.

Smith: I'm sure that there was the influence of those early years that set the stage. There's no question about it.

RK: That's right. A good teacher must have empathy and a sense of humor, and you've always been known to have that.

Smith: Well, I think that I was able to acquire it, and they certainly were instrumental in doing so.

RK: In high school--anything more we should talk about in high school? Tell me how Cedar Rapids was then. How did you get to school?

Smith: Well, at this time, there were very few students that had automobiles at the high school level--a few of them--but we rode bicycles. Balloon tires were a popular thing, that was the newest rage, and prior to that I think the tires on bicycles were high pressure and they were kind of hard. So we went from

the narrow tires to the balloon tires, and now here in the eighties it's a popular thing to have the narrow thin-tired racing style bicycle. But the bicycle was the mode of transportation.

RK: When you see that parking lot now at Washington High School, it's quite different, isn't it?

Smith: Yes, it is, because it was a bicycle rack and that was about it. And, of course, buses were still used then for students that lived far enough to be eligible for the bus. I did ride the bus on occasion to junior high, but most of the time it was a bicycle or simply use your two feet.

RK: Yes. We didn't have ten-speeds, either.

Smith: No, we didn't.

RK: That's interesting about the balloon tires. I had forgotten about that.

Smith: Yes, I think my first balloon-tired bicycle, my sister purchased it for me, and I think it came about in about 1937, when I was still going to Garfield Grade School.

RK: Tell me about your decision to go on to college.

Smith: Well, the decision to go on to college followed an experience of being drafted into the military. I was drafted in 1943, and went into the United States Army Quartermaster Corps. And following service of two years, where I served in both the European and the Asian and the Korean theatres of war, came back to Cedar Rapids and enrolled in Coe College in 1946 and graduated from Coe in 1950.

RK: And I believe it was in 1975 that you got the Alumni Award of Merit from Coe.

Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: To go back to the Army, what did you do in the Quartermaster Corps?

Smith: Well, the Quartermaster Corps was involved with supplies, and the United States Army--in fact, all of the armed forces at that time were segregated--so we were in a segregated unit. In Europe we were involved in providing gasoline logistics for the U.S. Seventh Army that went into Germany in the Rhineland and then turned south and went into Bavaria. So my unit went as far as Munich, Germany, before the war ended. We spent some time in Munich and also in a place that later became quite historical during the Olympics that were in Germany at Furstenfeldbruck, and the airfield that was shown on television at the time of the terrorist attacks against the Israeli team, that airfield is the place where we spent a great deal of time when I was in service. So, I could see from the television view, places--buildings on that airfield that I was quite familiar with from our stay there in 1945.

RK: How interesting. So you...

Smith: This was close to the famous Dachau camp where the Jewish people were interred.

RK: Did you know it at the time? Did you know about that concentration camp?

Smith: Yes. In fact, I visited the concentration camp perhaps only one or two days after it was discovered and saw the liberation and the activities involved in that. We were stationed there at Furstenfeldbruck, and that was only about 5 or 10 ks. from the camp.

RK: Did you know it existed before that?

Smith: We had no idea except that we could see the railroad that served the camp. It went right past the airfield, and we saw a number of boxcars and cars that were empty and also cars that had people in them. Some of them were dead and alive. We had investigated this in our activities in this area. But things were in such disarray, it was almost unbelievable, some of the things that you would see in a war-torn country at this particular time.

RK: Yes, right at the end of it. But you were there the second day after they were liberated?

Smith: Yes, I believe it was the second or the third day after the camp had been discovered by the American Forces. I don't remember the units that actually were assigned to that sector that discovered it, but we did see them.

RK: Unbelievable!

Smith: Yes.

RK: Just unbelievable. It's very hard for me to think about it. So then you got out of the war without any difficulty yourself?

Smith: Yes, I did. I was quite fortunate. We were transferred from Europe to the Pacific Theatre because the war with Japan was still in progress, and so we sailed out of Marseilles, France, on a troopship that carried us across the Atlantic through the Panama Canal and into the Pacific Ocean. This was a 48-day trip going to the Philippines.

RK: Forty-eight days?

Smith: Forty-eight days on one ship. So, the war ended in our transit across the Pacific; but there still was a lot of logistical

movement that still had to go on, so we landed in the Philippines in September of 1945.

RK: Where were you when the war ended there?

Smith: Well, we actually were in mid-ocean. Precisely, I think we were probably close to Eniwetok, another famous name, because in the 1950s this became the test site for the "H" bomb in the Pacific Ocean.

RK: What did you do on the ship?

Smith: Well, about all we could do was try to take care of our gear and try to make some decision as to whether we would be allowed to come back home or not. And, of course, we were not because tremendous forces had been assigned for the assault on Japan, and so we were a part of that general support group. And so we continued on to the Philippines and landed in the Philippines in September, remained in the Philippines for six months, and then went on to Korea for another six months. And we were in Korea prior to the Korean War, which was another rather historic thing that we saw before that conflict evolved.

RK: Vernon, I'm curious. You being a scientist, I'd like to know how you feel about this. If it hadn't been for the bomb in Hiroshima, you probably would have been in that assault then on Japan. Is that right?

Smith: I believe so.

RK: How do you feel now in looking back at it? Or, how did you feel at the time, that that was necessary to end the war? What is your feeling about it?

Smith: Well, I think that had I been at the time and could have been a part of the decision-making process, I think I would have

perhaps asked for a demonstration of the power of the bomb rather than to actually use it. But I guess I didn't know the information that the president had at that time and the assault on the Japanese Mainland was considered to be one that would have tremendous loss of life for the U.S. Forces, so perhaps he was trying to minimize that loss in hopes that one strike--and then eventually two strikes--would demonstrate. I think perhaps one strike would have demonstrated; but we didn't get the signals in time from the Japanese to withhold that second strike, and so the second strike came. But in hindsight and all these other things, I wish perhaps we could have given them a demonstration so they could have realized. And perhaps their scientists would have been able to convince the military that it was no hope for them, since we had that power. We could have avoided the loss of life in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

RK: That's a good answer. It gives me pause to think about that, because I've always... we all have been concerned about that, whether we should have done it or not. You were gone a whole year then, from home, weren't you? Or, more than that, if you went a whole year and a half, because you were in Europe first.

Smith: Yes, six months in Europe, six months in the Philippines, and six months in Korea.

RK: Then you came back and--could you enter on the G.I. Bill of...

Smith: Yes, that was the mechanism by which I was able to obtain my education, and live at home, save some money in that regard; and the money I saved by living at home made it possible that I could go on to the University to further my education.

RK: What was your father doing at that time?

Smith: My father was a more or less self-educated man. He only completed the 8th Grade of formal education; but he was, I think, a brilliant man considering all of these factors. He was a custodian for Penick & Ford throughout my entire memory. Something that I learned later on in life was a little bit more about my father. In World War I he had been called to service, and he was drafted. But before he was actually inducted as an enlisted man, he was selected to attend Officers Candidate Training for Black officers in World War I. And he came to Iowa, and this is one of the first connections of my parents with Iowa. He came to Fort Des Moines--Fort Des Moines and Camp Dodge, and I really can't differentiate as to which one the Black soldiers were trained at. I think it was Fort Des Moines. But before he completed the training to be given his commission, the war ended in November of 1918. And this program of officer training was stopped immediately, and he never completed the training; so, therefore, he was never commissioned and therefore it was as though he had never been in military service. But I thought this was rather interesting because in World War I, of course, there were black officers that were in charge of all Black units. And I think now, in terms of what qualities did he exhibit with only an 8th Grade education that would make him selected for Officers Training. It amazes me.

RK: He had them. He had some good ones.

Smith: Apparently so.

RK: Hmmm. What an influence he was on you, Vernon.

Smith: Well, he was an influence on all of us.

RK: We can go to Coe, where you entered as a freshman, living at home, and you were required to take certain subjects, which has changed a bit, and we're coming back to that. Tell me about some of the professors that meant a great deal to you.

Smith: Well, without question, Dr. Ben Petersen, who was the chairman of the chemistry department; he was "Mr. Chemistry" himself, for Coe College and was extremely influential in my whole educational experience. But there were others, and others that kind of pulled me back from a totally oriented technical pursuit of science and mathematics; and the humanities were kind of placed upon my shoulders by Dr. Eric Clitheroe and Reverend Hodson. And these were men of philosophy and steeped in the liberal arts, and I learned a great deal from them as well as Dr. Churchill in the English department. There were others, but certainly these three professors were outstanding in the influence that they had upon me at Coe.

RK: We had been talking before we were taping about Germany and how Germany was so scientifically and way ahead in the world. Tell me what you said on... let's put it on the tape what you said about the value of liberal arts.

Smith: Well, I think the value of liberal arts cannot be measured in its entirety. We know it is extremely valuable, and I think perhaps as we look back on Germany, pre-World War II, I think they lost sight of the humanities and the value of it; and their orientation was toward science and technology to the

exclusion of the humanities and the liberal arts. And perhaps this is what got them into the trouble that they did in terms of things that happened in the concentration camps. My experience at Coe was one in which I thought that all things had to be indoctrinated in science, but, as I mentioned before, these two professors showed me the value of tempering my educational experience with the humanities, the liberal arts, and a well-rounded education.

RK: I like hearing this because I believe in liberal arts so strongly. Were there other Black students when you were there?

Smith: Yes. The first year at Coe in 1946, there were two of us; and the following year, I believe there were five or seven all together. This was the students that returned from World War II. Most of them were males--I think we only had one female on campus during the entire time that I was at Coe.

RK: Now we have a Black house and an organization, and you have taught Black history at Coe.

Smith: Yes, I have been asked to serve as a visiting lecturer in the history department for Black students and the other students that were also interested in Black history at Coe.

RK: It's changed, Vernon, from the number, hasn't it?

Smith: Yes, it has.

RK: Which is good.

Smith: Coe has attracted a number of Black students from throughout the Midwest and as far away, of course, as New York and California. And Coe and Cedar Rapids have been the richer for it because some of these young people that came to Coe and the

Midwest, that had never experienced the Midwest, have stayed on; and now they're setting roots into our community, and we are all benefiting from it.

RK: We have a Black admissions person at Coe that works with the students in Chicago, and they have made a big contribution to the campus. Their complaint is that there are not enough of us, they say--there are not enough of us. And we also have had a time getting a regular Black professor. They are in great demand, and you hate to rob the Black colleges. Is there anything about your college days, other than your studies, that you would like to talk about before we go to graduate school?

Smith: Well, I think we've probably covered all of these things; nothing very significant historically that I can think of. This was the post-war years, and student unrest and all hadn't commenced, and so we were--on a scale of I to 10, I guess we were fairly quiet in the things that we were doing. We certainly were not very politically active. The young men at this time were veterans from World War II, and their primary concern was to acquire an education and be ready to go out and face the world that we see ahead of us. And these young men were interested in becoming engineers and doctors and teachers and the various professions, and starting to rebuild the country.

RK: They were good students because they were so motivated.

Smith: Yes, we were motivated, and we were perhaps a little older as young men coming into college with previous military experience ranging from one, two to three years.

RK: It was Dr. Petersen, I imagine, that helped you--got you directed toward the University of Iowa for your graduate work.

Smith: Yes, he was very influential in that direction, and we had some other faculty members likewise that were helpful. But Dr. Petersen was a graduate of the University of Iowa, so I followed the course that he more or less mapped out for me and went to the University and started there in 1950.

RK: Vernon, you have been an inspiration to so many people, handicapped and those who haven't been handicapped physically. You probably haven't any idea about this, about just what an inspiration you have been, because look what you have done since you contracted polio. In reading about you, this has been a very--well, it's been a story of courage, of both you and Phoebe, your wife. Tell me about the polio; you got it just six months before the Salk vaccine came in?

Smith: Yes, I think that's just about the right timing.

RK: People listening to this tape, fortunately, will not know much about polio. If this is listened to 20, 30, 50 years from now, they won't know much about it; and I think, if you don't mind, I would like to hear how you think you got it. And I lived through that and the great fear that our mothers had every summer, which mothers today do not have. So, I think historically this would be of value.

Smith: Well, it was customarily thought to be a summer thing, and certainly I acquired it in the summer of 1953, 1952, and it was very devastating across the country. The numbers reported were just phenomenal, and the thing was that medicine didn't have too much of an idea precisely what to do. I think they recognized the fact that it was a virus, but medicine at this

particular stage didn't have any mechanism really to provide any inoculation or any protection against it. So it had to take its toll on those who were susceptible to that exposure. And it struck all ages; in fact, after I acquired it and went to the University Hospitals, in the ward where I spent a great deal of time, I saw infants and I saw a man that was 59 years old with polio. At the time I was, I believe, 27 years old.

RK: People listening to this will know polio mainly through the study of President Roosevelt.

Smith: That's correct.

RK: Because it was about the same time, wasn't it?

Smith: I think he may have acquired it a little bit earlier, in the forties because he became president--in 1933?

RK: Yes.

Smith: Nineteen thirty-three, thirty-four...

RK: Yes, so he got it before that. But those who will look back and will listen to this, they will connect it with President Roosevelt, I think; because they won't know any of their neighbors, fortunately, or their family.

Smith: That's right. One of the things, of course, during this time, you know, if people did have polio, the attitudes of the country were so different. We didn't have the awareness of handicapped individuals that we have now, here in the eighties and so many of these people were kind of kept out of sight by families. It wasn't necessarily shame, but there weren't the conveniences; and the attitudes were vastly different, and the acceptance of someone with a disability has changed. But that

period of time--in the fifties--was the peak of the polio scourge, you might say. And the toll of death and crippling was just unimaginable.

RK: I read somewhere that you thought you might have contracted it through a rabbit?

Smith: Well, I don't know precisely. The only thing I can think of is that while I was there at the University of Iowa as a student, I went swimming just the week before, in Lake MacBride, on a very hot August day. And it may have been in contact with large crowds that were trying to cool off at that time, I might have picked it up through the water or in close proximity to others. I really don't know.

RK: Where did I get the rabbit idea?

Smith: I don't know where the rabbit came in. There's a long affiliation of rabbits in my history because my father raised rabbits, and we provided rabbits for medical purposes to the local hospitals. That kind of brings in...

RK: For pregnancy tests.

Smith: For pregnancy tests.

RK: Which they don't do now.

Smith: They don't do now, that's correct.

RK: And I think maybe I just assumed that you might have contracted it that way, but usually, as I remember, it was always in swimming pools and swimming.

Smith: Right, and I think that's probably where it all came about.

RK: The rabbit doesn't need to come into this. Vernon, how do you account, or what do you give--not credit to--but tell me how

you had so much courage at that time. Was it through your church?

Smith: Well, we had support from members of the church, but I think I would have to give credit to my wife, who was extremely supportive in staying with me. She had just been--we had just been married for one year before this all occurred; and she was a young woman, and this must have been a very devastating thing for her. But we had one child at the time, that was Ruby, and she was four months old. But I must give credit to the strength of my family, and particularly my wife; but my family was very supportive. And so, family and friends gave me the support and the impetus, I'm sure, to not give up.

RK: I think we all know about Phoebe's marvelous support in... when we read about her being named as one of the outstanding women of Iowa in that Award of Merit. And I read about how resourceful she was in supporting you, and her great love and devotion. It's a marvelous story of a wife's love. But I just wondered at the time, because you were so devastated with just this new degree and graduate school and ready to go. It couldn't have been at a worse time, I don't think, when you were all ready to go, and to have this happen. And you were in the hospital a year.

Smith: That's correct. I guess the thing that might have been another factor of strength was, I was in the hospital but I was in the hospital, in a sense, amongst friends and former students. People that I saw while I was a patient at University Hospitals were students and residents in training at the same time I was

there as a student in graduate training in the chemistry department. So it was not a total setting of complete strangers; some of the people I knew.

RK: You mean some of them were doctors then, is that right?

Smith: Right. And the interns and the medical students lived in the housing complex where Phoebe and I lived. So...

RK: That was fortunate.

Smith: It was.

RK: To have them.

Smith: I think so.

RK: And you had to learn to write with your left hand, which I thought was a terrific adjustment. And all of it was a terrific adjustment. You were named the "Outstanding Handicapped Iowan," I think in 1971. Is that right?

Smith: Nineteen seventy-one or nineteen seventy, it kind of escapes me.

RK: Right in there. They took into account all that you had accomplished since then. Tell me about getting a job, because this has been amazing, how you have been such a... risen in your profession despite being in a wheelchair and disabled physically.

Smith: Here again, Phoebe and I had to talk about how we were going to overcome this problem of my getting back into the employment sector. So we--because she had previous experience as a laboratory technician, she said, well, what better place than the hospital would have an understanding and should have an acceptance of the handicapped and the problems that are

involved in my being gainfully employed. So, with that in mind, we decided to see if I could be utilized at St. Luke's Hospital in their laboratory. So we went down to have an interview, and I am thankful that two individuals I'm sure that were most instrumental in having far-reaching attitudes about people and their capabilities and empathy made it possible that I was given a chance. And this was Dr. Francis Tucker, who is the pathologist in charge of the laboratory there at St. Luke's, and then a woman by the name Mrs. Carl Gellner, who was the wife of the professor of biology at Coe College. She was a recent graduate of the School of Medical Technology, but she also had a sister, I believe, that lived in Michigan who had had polio, and she was so convinced because of her sister's abilities in overcoming the handicap that she thought that if I had the right attitude I would certainly have no difficulty in demonstrating that I could deliver a useful service to the laboratory. So through the insightful vision of Mrs. Gellner and Dr. Tucker, they decided to give it a try. And I was ready; and we put this whole thing together, and I started my first trial at being a one-arm chemist, you might say, in March of 1956. They made some adjustments in terms of a work space. Most laboratory work areas are for stand-up purposes, and so we adjusted and found a table that we could sit at. And from that accommodation and others--mainly to change a physical layout of some of the work areas so that you could sit down rather than stand up or sit on high stools--and from that, as long as I didn't pose any hazard to myself or to the other workers, they decided it was a successful trial. And I'm still there.

RK: You're going to have an anniversary, I would think, next year at thirty years.

Smith: Yes, it will be at thirty years.

RK: Vernon, I would like to know just what you do during the day in chemistry. Do you analyze... ? What do you do, really?

Smith: Well, presently my activities are principally involved with therapeutic drug monitoring. This is where we actually determine the blood level of certain critical drugs that have to be monitored for various reasons because of their potential for toxicity or to make sure that there is patient compliance or that the blood levels that are attained are sufficient to provide the kind of pharmacological action that they are designed for. That is one part. And the other part of my responsibilities is in toxicology where we are involved in drug screening, where we take specimens of blood or urine or other body fluids and try to identify any chemical substances that are present that may be responsible for a patient being comatose or being highly agitated or whatever. And sometimes our findings, though they are negative, are very useful because then this means that chemical substances or drugs can be ruled out and perhaps the cause for the patient's condition is some other physiological condition.

RK: You've seen a lot of changes.

Smith: Yes, I have. A lot of changes, and the responsibilities have been kind of on a trouble-shooting or R&D basis, providing new tests for the laboratory so that they can be put into our menu of services.

RK: I'm glad I asked you that, because I have been wanting to know. Vernon, I believe you have lectured at St. Luke's to the nurses. Would you tell us about that.

Smith: Well, I've provided a few lectures to nurses in regards to certain things in laboratory science; but my primary responsibility as a lecturer at St. Luke's is to our School of Medical Technology. And I have been a lecturer there since 1956, lecturing on topics in urinalysis and topics in clinical chemistry, and, more recently, topics in toxicology and therapeutic drug monitoring. And our program there, of course, is a rather extensive program and one that is well known throughout the nation. Our students usually graduate in the top 20 to 15 percent of the classes across the United States, so I feel quite honored that I have a chance to help shape the minds of some of these young people.

END OF SIDE ONE - BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

RK: I want to ask you a question, Vernon, when this started about Negro, Colored and Black and which is preferred. We say "Black" now. Now, how did that all come about, and which is really preferred?

Smith: Well, we are in the 1980's now and the term, or the expression seems to be predominantly amongst this minority group of people to be referred to as Blacks. But I do recall when, back in the thirties and the very early forties, we were still being referred to as "Colored," and then the transition was to be referred to as "Negro," and this was to be capitalized. But

oftentimes in articles that appeared in the newspapers and some periodicals some editors didn't see fit or some typists would fail to capitalize this, so in many respects "Negro" was a designation that didn't serve too well and certainly it has a lot of unpleasant experiences insofar as respect is concerned. The designation of "Black" really didn't commence until the 1960's, mainly around 1967, 1968, when the Black Revolution, you might say, commenced with young college students demonstrating against a number of injustices that they didn't think were being rectified fast enough. So, here, now in the eighties the designation of "Black" is perhaps 95 or 98 percent the accepted designation. There has been some concern that maybe we should have adopted the designation as Afro-Americans because Americans of European descent are oftentimes referred to as German-Americans or Italian-Americans, so it would seem proper probably for Black-Americans to really be referred to as Afro-Americans. But at this time, it seems that the designation is simply to be referred to as Black-Americans because many of us have a long history of our ancestors being here in the United States.

RK: Which do you prefer, Vernon?

Smith: Well, I prefer being referred to as a Black-American. I think that is an acceptable designation.

RK: I wonder if this will change, do you think?

Smith: It's hard to say. There is a possibility, of course, that it may be changed, but I would like to see that we get on to more important things rather than to be really concerned about our labels and become more a part of the fiber and fabric of America in doing the things that we can do, and do them well.

RK: You have a wonderful history of contributions of Black-Americans, which I used to hear on the radio at night, when Mr. Powell would tell about one after another--scientifically and culturally and literary--of the big contributions, so this may change. I want to ask you about what prompted you to found the Cedar Rapids Negro Civic Organization back in 1961.

Smith: Well, this organization evolved after several of us, namely, Dr. Percy Harris, myself and a few others, decided that there needed to be some effort on the part of Black men. At that time they were Negroes, as the designation that we just talked about, that we do something for Black students in terms of providing supplementary financial aid so that they could go on an further their education, either in technical schools or liberal arts colleges and/or universities. So with 23 men, all of them subscribing to the concept that the betterment of our position in America would be helped tremendously by education at the level beyond high school, we decided to form our organization with the sole purpose of raising money and serving as a repository of funds and to provide counseling and guidance when needed or when we thought it was going to be helpful toward Black youngsters of that time. This organization has continued up until this day. We are not active except in distributing funds.

RK: Did you have support from the rest of the community?

Smith: We had excellent support from the rest of the community, members of the White community. Various organizations responded to the banquets that we gave in recognition of graduating high school seniors, and it was something that the young people looked forward to as kind of a high point in their secondary educational

careers--at the end of that, to be invited to that banquet, to be recognized, and for many of these students this was the first public recognition of that accomplishment that they had received.

RK: And then did you help with scholarships to college?

Smith: Yes, we provided scholarships. One scholarship in particular was named after Dr. Howard Greenlee, a professor at Coe College, that we wanted to give recognition to because of a rather great sacrifice, we felt, in his leaving Coe and going to a school in the South to teach and to try to strengthen the academic exposure to students of the colleges in the South.

RK: I think he went to Tuskegee.

Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: My grandfather went to teach in Talladega after the Civil War, and then my father grew up--was a little boy--down there with Black friends. He was the only little White boy, and then when he got his Ph.D.--while he was working on his Ph.D.--his whole dissertation was on the Negro in Ohio, which he got at Johns Hopkins and Western Reserve. So, he had an intense interest in the Blacks; I was brought up that way, with my grandfather being a Presbyterian minister and went down there to teach at Talladega. So I was interested about Dr. Greenlee. This is just an aside, but I'm glad you mentioned him, because he did go down there. Now, it's functioning now, you said.

Smith: Well, the membership is getting older and our activities are perhaps not as vigorous as they used to be, but the funds are still being distributed on a yearly basis to those students who apply, who would like assistance, and then we make an award

usually to a student who has demonstrated high academic potential.

RK: What about honoring the seniors in high school? This is done, too?

Smith: This is being done now in conjunction with other Black organizations in the community, but we essentially were the first Black organization to have an individual recognition of Black graduates. But now this is being handled by kind of a combined effort of the Black Federation of Teachers in Cedar Rapids, the NAACP, the Black Women's Civic Organization of Cedar Rapids--all these are combining their efforts in making one single recognition dinner of the Black graduates.

RK: And this--you see, you started something, Vernon, with this. I can just see this has expanded a lot since you graduated from Franklin School, hasn't it?

Smith: Yes, it has.

RK: Um hmm, when you look back on it.

Smith: You never realize those things, though, when you start something.

RK: No, you don't--how the ripples will go on out. And then, tell me about the NAACP.

Smith: Well, the NAACP in Cedar Rapids was formed in 1942, and it was formed in conjunction with a kind of a benchmark in segregation, after the Ellis Park pool had been built. And there was an attempt after it was built to exclude Blacks from using the public pool. And from this event, this attempt to block the use of the pool, the Cedar Rapids chapter was formed.

RK: Tell me, was that really--did that go into effect--that the Blacks could not swim in a public swimming pool?

Smith: Well, there was an attempt to; and I think if the NAACP and those who were involved in forming that first chapter, if they hadn't been persistent and persevered in their efforts to demonstrate that this was a public pool--it had been built with public funds from taxpayers, and certainly Black families in Cedar Rapids were homeowners and therefore taxpayers--they had a part in the stake in this public institution as the rest of the tax-paying Cedar Rapidians.

RK: That's unbelievable, isn't it?

Smith: But that was 1942, and the attitudes that prevailed then and still prevail to a lesser degree perhaps in this time now of the 1980's.

RK: I hope it's to a lesser degree. You really do think so, don't you?

Smith: Well, I think so, but every once in a while it springs up and it has to be confronted, and we try to do the best we can to adjust for what is right because we are Americans, too. We like to be full participants in the institutions that we all contribute to.

RK: You were on the Education Committee of the NAACP?

Smith: Yes, I served on this committee really after I returned from service and upon completion of work at Coe College in 1950. Prior to that, my father was active on the NAACP, and then one year he served as president. I can't recall precisely the year that he served as president of the NAACP, it seems to me it was in the mid-forties, probably 1947, 1948.

RK: Your father's first name, so we'll have it.

Smith: Is Elmer T. Smith, Sr.

RK: Tell me about it now. Are you busy with it now, Vernon?

Smith: Not as busy as I used to be. In the sixties, as a member of the Education Committee, I was instrumental in initiating courses in Black history. Started out with the adult education department of the Cedar Rapids Board of Education, and our first classes were held at Tyler School. And Mrs. Viola Gibson, of course, was the prime mover in initiating this action, and I assisted her and others in trying to give some structure to classes that would allow adults to have a better understanding of what Colored, Negroes, Blacks, Afro-Americans had contributed to the fabric of the American history.

RK: And were. Not did, but were.

Smith: Yes.

RK: Vernon, you mentioned about the Negro Revolution in the late sixties. Would you like to elaborate on that?

Smith: Well, these were certainly troubled times and times of great fear. Cedar Rapids was not without a lot of its rumors and concern on just what was going to take place. But essentially it was a revolution that reflected the impatience of young people, particularly Black young people, of the sixties. But that period also involved White youth with their unhappiness of things that were going on. This is in the midst of the Vietnam War, and all these ingredients were kind of in the cauldron of the pot boiling, and during this time there was considerable unrest in the Black communities, particularly in the larger urban centers--Detroit, Chicago and New York, we could name all

of those. They had some kind of unrest, and so often, as you look at this, the unrest seems to be inflicted upon the institutions that are attempting to serve Blacks. Well, in part, this was true, but many times it was the thought of those who were revolting, they were striking out against those who they felt were oppressing their group. And so businesses that were owned by Whites in Black communities were very adversely affected, and some businesses owned by Blacks suffered as well because these strikes were not surgical strikes as we hear the term now in the eighties, they were just wide sweeping strikes of unrest. But a lot of good came from this. This was the era of Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. Martin Luther King came to Cedar Rapids, spoke here at Coe College, and addressed large audiences. And from this, of course, we made some real significant strides in acceptance in corporate America, as a result of this period of unrest.

RK: And many benefits.

Smith: Yes, many benefits. And, you know, if we look at history, hardly anything is ever accomplished in a smooth fashion. There has to be some disarray and...

RK: Turbulence.

Smith: Turbulence is a good word--before things settled down. And then we look back and we wonder, "Well, why couldn't we have done this before in some other manner?" But I guess it is human nature; we always have to have things kind of shaken before we act because we are kind of creatures of doing things as we have always done them. But the people of the sixties--the

young people were dissatisfied with their elders for not doing things more rapidly. And that was really the essence of it.

RK: How is that feeling now, Vernon?

Smith: Well, it's kind of hard to assess that, except I guess we could look at the college communities across the country, and they are not as politically active now as they were in the sixties. But perhaps the tide is turning and they are going to be a little more politically active if the events that are occurring in Central America continue, and it would appear if the young population is not in agreement with what the ruling political body of the U.S. feels now, maybe there will be some additional unrest. I don't know.

RK: But the Black youth--I don't feel turbulence among the Black youth. Is there some?

Smith: There is turbulence in the sense that right now economic times are very difficult for the rank and file Black without an adequate education. Even some of those with a reasonable education, unemployment is extremely high, and here we are in the summer of 1985, and I would venture to say that unemployment probably runs 35 or 40 percent for Black youth, ages 16 to 22. And this is unhealthy.

RK: Very. (Pause) From what I know, you were president of the Council on Human Relations in Cedar Rapids. Could you tell us how you happen to be a member of that? Or did you help found it?

Smith: I was a member early on in its inception. I didn't help to found the organization, but the Council on Human Relations of the Cedar Rapids and Marion area was an outgrowth of these

troubled times that we talked about. And it was the coming together of a number of concerned citizens that understood human problems and the fact that these problems could only be attacked by honest efforts on the part of people who were willing to volunteer and exchange ideas and search into solutions to avoid misunderstanding that the Council on Human Relations evolved. By 1967 I was asked to serve as president of the organization, and this was an extremely difficult time because this was during the peak of the student unrest and the Council on Human Relations was perhaps a sounding board and a place where people turned to for solutions and in hopes that they could avoid significant unrest. So, it was difficult, and I think back now, I was young and I don't know that I had all the correct answers. But I think we did come out fairly well.

RK: Is it meeting now, Vernon? Is there a need for it now?

Smith: Well, the Council on Human Relations evolved into the organization now that is the Cedar Rapids Civil Rights--Human Rights Commission, and the first executive secretary of this body came from the Council on Human Relations. So that early group evolved into a group now that is a part of Cedar Rapids City Government.

RK: That was very worthwhile, to start that. You were a catalyst.

Smith: Well, I think I was involved with individuals who were catalysts. And I still serve as a member of that commission at this time.

RK: The commission that is a part of the city?

Smith: That's right. And we investigate complaints that are brought to the commission by individuals who feel as though they have

some legitimate complaint concerning employment, housing, sex discrimination. And originally, the organization was established primarily to serve Blacks and minorities, but now the service of the Cedar Rapids Human Rights Commission represents many Whites, male and female, who have various grievances across the board toward employment. Age discrimination now is a big factor of the complaints that this commission investigates.

RK: You are called on to do the actual investigating, Vernon?

Smith: Well, as a commissioner, the commissioner is asked to serve as a quote, unquote hearing officer, and to hear the complaint of the complainant as well as the respondent, and then kind of rule upon the professional staff that makes a decision as to whether there is probable cause or no probable cause for the complaint as it is originally filed.

RK: As you said, the complaints are changing.

Smith: Yes, the complaints originally were primarily employment discrimination on the basis of race. We still have some of those, but the complaints now represent sex discrimination, age discrimination, occasionally maybe religious discrimination, or perceived discrimination based upon these items that I have mentioned.

RK: Speaking of religious discrimination, I haven't asked you about your church here in Cedar Rapids.

Smith: Well, the church that my wife and I belong to is called Bethel A.M.E. Church, and that's Bethel African Methodist-Episcopal Church. It is an old church that was formed early in American history in Philadelphia. The two early founders of this church

were Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who were members of the White Methodist church in Philadelphia; and as a result of misunderstandings based upon race and discrimination and the attitudes that prevailed at that early time back in the 1780's, I believe, they founded their own separate church and became the African Methodist-Episcopal Church.

RK: It came to Cedar Rapids early.

Smith: Yes, and I don't have the exact dates. I remember the present building that was built in about 1931. But prior to that, that building was a wooden building that was situated on Sixth Street Southeast between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

RK: And that land was given by Mrs. Ely, the Mrs. John F. Ely [Mary A.] who gave the land for that church.

Smith: I've read that in some of the historical notes.

RK: Her grandson, John M. Ely, Sr., is very proud that his grandmother did that. (Pause) Vernon, I have read that you were director of the Sickle Cell Screening Committee here in Cedar Rapids. Would you tell us about that.

Smith: Well, this was kind of a combined effort wherein a group of us decided that it was important to offer to the Black community, and the children primarily, a screening program where we could identify those who had the sickle cell trait, or the sickle cell disease, so that they would have as a part of their medical record knowledge about this particular disease entity that can be quite devastating and in some cases can be fatal during certain crises. So with a number of volunteers from the medical community of both St. Luke's and Mercy Hospitals, we

established a screening program. Many of our tests were conducted at the Jane Boyd Community House. And the information was provided for the children that were tested. Results were given to the parents or the guardians, and then a copy of that record was also sent to their private physician. And this screening program was a one-time screening program, but the monies that were raised from various organizations that were solicited in supporting this effort exceeded that which was necessary to conduct the screening program, buy materials, and all the essential components of it. And there are funds that still remain from this particular effort that are being used on an individual basis by those who request their youngsters to be tested for sickle cell anemia or the sickle cell trait. And the testing presently now is being conducted at St. Luke's Methodist Hospital; and for that purpose, those costs are defrayed by the reserve of funds that are left over from that initial program. It was a very successful effort and one that required a lot of publicity and cooperation with the Cedar Rapids Public School System, contacting the parents and all, trying to convince them that this kind of participation was desirable. And we wanted to make sure that there was no stigma attached with it because people are very sensitive about medical information, as they should be.

RK: Did you find many cases in Cedar Rapids?

Smith: Well, our findings when we compiled our results on a statistical basis reflected the same distribution that you would see on a national level for the Black population that was tested in

Cedar Rapids. So we didn't see anything unusual beyond what we expected.

RK: And there is help for that?

Smith: Yes, there is help--there is still research going on. There is no absolute cure yet because it is a genetically transmitted condition. The main thing, of course, is to identify people so that they will know, so that when they become of child-bearing age they can plan their families according to the results--the couple that is contemplating having a family. So it's useful information, essential information to avoid the probabilities that one of the offspring from such a union of two individuals who are known to have the trait, that they could make some alternate plans, because there is some risk involved.

RK: We've covered quite a bit about the Black community and your many contributions. Let's look back at the past. I understand that we had a noted entertainer here in Cedar Rapids.

Smith: Well, we've had a number of them, but there is one entertainer in particular that Cedar Rapids figures very significantly in his career and certainly for those of us that still enjoy his music on record and we hear it on radio and television and as background music. It might be well for those who are listening now, that whatever time this might be, to know that Nat King Cole perhaps had his real professional debut in Cedar Rapids. At the time he played in a tavern called the Fox Head Tavern on First Street Southeast, between Second Avenue and I believe Third Avenue; and at that time he was principally a pianist. And he had another man by the name of Oscar Brown, I believe, who played string bass. And I don't know that he had another

member or not--the name isn't available to me at this time. But this was in about the period of 1942 to 1945. But I think it would be interesting for people to know that at this particular time entertainers or other travelers who were Black didn't stay in the customary hotels or motels. We had a few motels then, they were called... (Pause) Can you help me out on that?

RK: On what, the motels?

Smith: The motels. The motel is a later name.

RK: Well, we had tourist homes.

Smith: Tourist homes, right. They didn't stay at those. They stayed usually in the homes of Black families. And Nat Cole stayed in the home of a Black family in Cedar Rapids--the home of Mrs. Nina Miller and her husband. They had extra rooms, and it was quite customary at this particular time, because they couldn't stay in hotels or tourist homes, to live with a Black family for the time that they were in Cedar Rapids. His performances at the Fox Head Tavern were primarily instrumental, and supposedly, the story goes, at the insistence of a customer who must have been quite persistent, probably had quite a bit to drink, kept insisting that this man who played piano certainly must be able to sing, because the attitude with many people was that all Blacks were good singers. Well, some were and some weren't. But, fortunately, Nat Cole was an excellent singer; and so in order to satisfy this customer and to kind of get him away so he could go on and finish his performance, he started to sing. And so I think Nat Cole's real professional

debut as a singer started in Cedar Rapids at a little-known tavern on First Street.

RK: That's interesting.

Smith: But there were other performers, too, that came to Cedar Rapids that played in theatres during this time, and they stayed in the homes. I do recall a rather large group that came to Cedar Rapids in the middle forties, the Wings Over Jordan Choir. They were quite famous on CBS because they had a Sunday morning radio program called Wings Over Jordan.

RK: I remember that.

Smith: And this group, when they performed in Cedar Rapids at the Memorial Coliseum, it was necessary to find homes for them to stay in; and I think our family kept probably five or six of them. We had to double up and really team up. And the... one of the lead singers--I will never forget her name, Ruby Dee--was a member of the Wings Over Jordan Concert Choir.

RK: With a beautiful voice.

Smith: With a beautiful voice. She was one of those that stayed in my parents' home at that time.

RK: That's an interesting commentary on the times, Vernon. Looking back over the past of Cedar Rapids and the future of Cedar Rapids, you mentioned something about visitation that you thought had a great deal of benefit. Phoebe is sitting right here--Vernon's wife, who has had many awards herself and has been an outstanding person in the community--and I think, Phoebe, we'll let you maybe tell about the visitation which proved so beneficial. And I heard you say you would like to have it continue. This was in the late 1960's. So, if you

would come over here, this is Phoebe Smith, who has had a great deal to do with the success of her husband.

P/Smith: Yes, it was in the late sixties that we had the home visitation program, and I believe it came about through the Council on Human Relations--through a Council on Human Relations Committee. And at the time I said I would chair the program, I didn't know that I was going to be out of town. But everybody pitched in and it worked out beautifully. It was a program where White families visited Black families in their homes, and I don't recall the exact number that we had, but as far as the numbers of Black persons and Whites involved, it was very successful.

RK: The Whites visited in the Black homes and then the Blacks visited in the White homes?

P/Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: And was that just for a dinner, or an afternoon?

P/Smith: No, it was just for an afternoon. It was for like a Sunday afternoon, and then everybody served refreshments and just had a chance... it was a very nice afternoon during the summer, and everyone had a chance to visit. And they took their children with them, and it was just like two families. And sometimes in some cases there were more than one or two families of Whites visiting the Black families. Because I think we ran out of Black families before it was over with.

RK: And it had a great deal of benefit for everyone. How many are in the Black community in Cedar Rapids? I would imagine around twenty-five hundred?

Smith: I think that would be a...

RK: Is that about right, Phoebe?

P/Smith: I would say that's about the number we have, maybe a little more, maybe a little less; but roughly twenty-five hundred persons.

RK: I don't think that number has changed a great deal, has it? Has it grown with the city?

Smith: I haven't seen the last census figures, but I think certainly it does not exceed three thousand.

RK: What about the future, Vernon and Phoebe? Do you have--do you want to say what Cedar Rapids really needs now in 1985?

Smith: Well, I guess this is looking into the future and your desires. We would hope that Cedar Rapids would reflect the same kind of growth and the spawning of ideas on the people-to-people basis and the successes that represent a kind of tradition for the Midwest and Eastern Iowa in particular, and I think Cedar Rapids has had a reputation of being an exporter of people and ideas and useful products for the rest of the world; and I would hope that the Black community would still be a part of this amalgamation of the best of human beings. We have an excellent community that can accomplish a great deal, and I would hope that we would still be a significant part of this. It hinges back to a strong and a viable educational system, and it also hinges upon people who reach out and do just a little bit more than what is normally asked of those individuals. It's voluntarism and it's an attitude of understanding.

RK: You mentioned housing, too; you are eager for that--better housing for the middle-income?

Smith: Well, I would say that housing is a factor based upon your economic resources, and I am simply saying that I would like to see minority individuals enjoy a better inclusion in middle-class economics in terms of their owning power and full participation in all that hard and successful work entails. And this is an ideal thing and certainly we would hope for the ideal.

RK: Always. Phoebe, do you have anything to add to that?

P/Smith: No, not--I can't think of anything right now. I think that he has covered it quite well as far as Blacks in Cedar Rapids are concerned.

RK: This has been a most satisfactory interview, I might say. Before we leave, I would like to talk just a little bit about your outstanding children. You have five that have done so well, and we all seem to know about them. You had some valedictorians or salutatorians, and then you also had some from other countries that I would like to just end up this with. I might say that Phoebe, as I think I mentioned before, in 1977 was one of ten Iowa Merit Mothers--outstanding mothers in the state--and received the recognition she so deserved, and the love and support and understanding of her husband and her family and of her own work as a technician. You were a technician at St. Luke's, weren't you, Phoebe?

P/Smith: No, I was a technician in Elgin, Illinois, before Vernon and I were married.

RK: Oh, before you were married?

P/Smith: Yes, that's correct.

RK: But then you were a paraprofessional at Coe?

P/Smith: Yes, I was.

RK: And I know when Vernon received his Alumni Award of Merit, it was stressed what loyal Coe boosters you are.

P/Smith: Yes.

RK: I want to just... let's just talk about your family before we end. That's a nice place to stop. I've been seeing a very attractive little granddaughter here. There's Ruby, who was born when her father became ill. She was just three or four months old, and she graduated from Coe in 1971. Tell me about Ruby now.

P/Smith: Well, Ruby now lives in Rockford, Illnois. She is married to Wendell Thompson and has two very beautiful children, Rachel and Troy. And Rachel is five years old and Troy is two years old. Ruby works at one of the hospitals in Rockford, Illinois.

RK: And then there comes Vernon, who is in the contracting business right now. Vernon II, and he graduated from Coe in 1975. No?

P/Smith: No, he attended.

RK: He attended Coe.

P/Smith: He and Ruby both attended Coe, and Deborah and Phoebe all attended Coe at one time or another, but... (Pause) Yes, Vernon is a contractor here in Cedar Rapids. Maybe you can enlarge upon that.

Smith: Well, Vernon principally is involved in home construction, but he has done some commercial construction for others. But his present endeavor now is as a builder for himself, and we are very proud of his progress in this direction.

RK: I would think so, proud of all of them. Now, Deborah also

attended Coe, and Deborah is the mother of this little Phoebe, Phoebe Jean?

P/Smith: Yes, we have three Phoebes, so it does get kind of confusing at times. Deborah is with All State and she lives in Chicago, Illinois.

RK: She is with the All State Insurance Company?

P/Smith: Yes, that's correct, uh huh.

RK: And then Phoebe is... that I got to know better. So...

P/Smith: Phoebe Delores, she's with the arsenal in Rock Island, Illinois, and she's the educational coordinator there. And...

RK: She attended Northern Iowa?

P/Smith: Yes, she attended the University of Northern Iowa. And our youngest daughter, Katherine, she's presently a student at the University of Iowa and a former paraprofessional teacher at Roosevelt Junior High School as a physically and mentally handicapped teacher, which she hopes to get her degree in.

RK: With these five children, I think you and Vernon must have done something right along the line.

P/Smith: Yes, I... we've tried, I'll put it that way. (R. Kesler, Laughter) But we have had a number of other children from many countries that we have really enjoyed and have helped our family to grow tremendously over the years.

RK: Vernon, would you like to tell about those--those other children?

Smith: O.K. Well, we probably first started out with one young lady from nearby in the Caribbean. She was a Girl Guide, that's the equivalent of a Girl Scout in this country, from Jamaica. And then after that we formed an association with students from

southern Africa, more particularly from the nation of Botswana. One of their students was a student at Coe College, Geoffrey Garebamono. And through Geoffrey's association with Coe, with St. Luke's, and my affiliation with the Council on Human Relations, Cedar Rapids became the focal point for the meeting of the students from Botswana that were studying in North America. And they focused upon Cedar Rapids as their meeting point. And we, through the Council on Human Relations, provided housing for these students when they came in the summer of 197_--no, 1967. And for two years following that time, they held their student conferences in Cedar Rapids. There were probably 10 or 12 young men and women from this--19, I am corrected by--from this country that were studying in the United States and Canada, and they all focused upon Cedar Rapids; so Cedar Rapids has a real connection with a part of the world now that is certainly in the headlines--Southern Africa, a nearby neighbor of South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

RK: And you hear from them, your extended family.

Smith: Yes, we do. In fact, one of them serves as First Secretary at the United Nations in New York, and he spent a great deal of time in our home because during the summer when he was not in school at Lewis and Clark out in Washington, he stayed with our family here in Cedar Rapids. But he calls us on occasion from New York when time will permit, and we have long and enjoyable conversations. In fact, he has even mentioned that they would like to have some sort of a homecoming if they can line up all of their schedules, because many of them now are serving in

vital capacities for their government as well as some private enterprises. Then a little later on we were host to young...

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2 - BEGINNING OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

RK: We were just talking about the students who had lived in their home from different parts of the world. He was talking about the one from South Africa. Vernon, do you want to go on with that?

Smith: In 1969 we became the parents of--host parents for a young lady from Kenya. Her name was Chelengnat Ngeno [sometimes went by Christian name Alice] and she came to live with us in 1969. She happened to be the first cousin of a young man who was living with the coach at Washington High School, and later on he attended Iowa State College, but there was also another cousin who attended Coe College and graduated from Coe, Kip Kiror. And this young lady stayed with us then for two years, and it was an arrangement without any formal organization such as American Field Service, or what have you. It was an agreement between her family and our family that we established by a telephone conversation; and we accepted this young lady, and she stayed here for two years and went through all the adjustments that you could imagine in coming from living in a boarding school near Lake Victoria in Kenya to Cedar Rapids and all of that that it entailed.

RK: It took some understanding, didn't it? and guidance?

Smith: It did, certainly, require a lot of understanding on the part of Phoebe because here was a young lady that had to be caught