



Interview with Thomas S. Smith

Under the Auspices of the
Monmouth County Library Headquarters
125 Symmes Drive, Manalapan, N.J.
Flora T. Higgins, Project Coordinator

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Name of Interviewer: June West
Premises of Interview: Mr. Smith's office, Asbury Park, NJ
Birth Date of Subject: December 13, 1917
Deceased: September 26, 2002

Ms. West: Mr. Smith, tell us about yourself. How old are you? When were you born?

Mr. Smith: Well, I just turned eighty-two yesterday.

Ms. West: Happy belated birthday. Where were you born?

Mr. Smith: Lukeville, New Jersey.

Ms. West: When did you move to Monmouth County?

Mr. Smith: I came to Monmouth County when I was two years old, so that's eighty years ago.

Ms. West: You were raised here in Monmouth County then?

Mr. Smith: Yes. I went to elementary and secondary school here.

Ms. West: What schools did you attend?



**Assemblyman
Thomas J. Smith**

Mr. Smith: I attended Howard University for two years.

Ms. West: Into which town did you move when you moved to Monmouth County?

Mr. Smith: I moved to Asbury Park. I went to Banks Avenue South and Asbury Park High School.

Ms. West: You say Banks Avenue South. Were there two schools?

Mr. Smith: Yes, there were two schools. The schools were segregated when I went to school. Banks Avenue South was mainly for Blacks, and Banks Avenue North was for whites.

Ms. West: Were there two separate buildings?

Mr. Smith: No. They were connected to a degree, but the classrooms were separate. They were joined by the auditorium in the middle. That was the spot that really divided the two schools.

Ms. West: Did the Black students and the White students have the same teachers? Did you have the same classrooms?

Mr. Smith: No. We had all Black teachers. Banks Avenue North had all white teachers plus a white principle. Banks Avenue South had a Black principle.

Ms. West: From there you went to high school in Asbury Park?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I did.

Ms. West: In what year did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Smith: 1937.

Ms. West: During your formative years, did you have any hobbies?

Mr. Smith: Well, no. I was an athlete. I played football and track, and didn't develop hobbies until later. I was working most of the time.

Ms. West: Did you play football for Asbury Park High School? Did you play football in grade school as well?

Mr. Smith: In grade school we didn't have a football team, but in high school I played football.

Ms. West: As a youngster, what other games did you all play?

Mr. Smith: As a youngster, we played basketball in the backyards and so on. We had some community teams that we played with or played against, and that was the extent of that.

Ms. West: In the neighborhood, did you have little scruff teams in which kids got together and just played?

Mr. Smith: Oh, yes. We played in the playground. We played touch football and football. Of course, soccer wasn't as prominent then, but some people did play soccer.

Ms. West: You didn't have television back then, but you had the radio. Do you remember what your favorite radio programs were?

Mr. Smith: Well, I hate to say it, but it was *Amos and Andy*.

Ms. West: Why do you hate to say it? They were fun.

Mr. Smith: Yes. That's the reason we listened to them. *The Shadow Knows* was that detective thing on the radio. But we spent most of our time around the kitchen table, because that was the longest place in the house, reading, or playing cards, or discussing daily events.

Ms. West: Do you have any siblings?

Mr. Smith: Oh, yes, I had four sisters and one brother.

Ms. West: You come from a large family, so nobody ever had to want for somebody to play with, right?

Mr. Smith: We always had something going, pinochle or something.

Ms. West: What can you tell us about your family background?

Mr. Smith: Not too much. On my mother's side, the family came from Washington DC, and on my father's side, the family came from Baltimore, MD.

Ms. West: Did your mother ever compare growing up in Washington with her family to growing up in New Jersey?

Mr. Smith: Well, not exactly. My father moved to Norfield to be near New York, because he worked in New York. One of my sisters was sick, and the doctor recommended she live by the shore. So that's why we moved back.

Ms. West: How did you find life in Asbury Park as a Black American at that time?

Mr. Smith: As a Black American in Asbury Park at that time, we all had to live on the West side, close to the tracks and south of Asbury Avenue. There were no Blacks north of Asbury Avenue except three Black families that lived on Second Avenue. But outside of that, there were no Blacks north of Asbury Avenue.

Ms. West: Even though the schools were segregated, did you have any interaction with the whites on the other side of the so-called tracks?

Mr. Smith: There wasn't much interaction. Even the Boy's Club was totally white at that time. It was located on Main Street.

Ms. West: Is there any location in Monmouth County or Asbury Park that has some special significance to you?

Mr. Smith: The beachfront. The beachfront always seemed significant to me, especially during the summer months.

Ms. West: With the area being segregated, how was the beach?

Mr. Smith: The beach was segregated, too. We were down at the lower end of the beach, just before you get to Ocean Grove, and there was a sewer pipe that ran through there, but that was the only beach that we could use. A lot of young people started to go to Belmar. We used to walk to Belmar to swim.

Ms. West: Belmar wasn't segregated?

Mr. Smith: Well, they had a beach down there that wasn't segregated.

Ms. West: What about the concessions on the boardwalk?

Mr. Smith: Concessions on the boardwalk were all white except the one in front of our beach, which was run by Jack Harris. They built the Centario upstairs and had storage downstairs, but the only store that was occupied in Centario was run by Jack Harris. It sold chicken and fish and stuff like that.

Ms. West: Did you do much reading as a youngster?

Mr. Smith: Oh, yes. That's all you did, because there was nothing else to do but read. One thing we did do was make use of the library here, our library at First and Grant. At school, we'd get assignments and we'd go to the library and do our research. It was tough to get our assignments together, but most of the time at night we sat around the kitchen table and read novels and books.

Ms. West: Do you have a favorite book?

Mr. Smith: No. I read westerns most of the time, because my father read westerns and they were ten cents a piece in those days. You would find them in the paper. I read stories by Fred Hart, and all of those authors who wrote westerns.

Ms. West: Who had a profound effect upon your life?

Mr. Smith: George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington. In those days, they were our heroes.

Ms. West: Could you tell us a little something about Dr. Carver, as to why he was one of your heroes?

Mr. Smith: Because of what he accomplished. He invented a lot of things that were useful. Even though he didn't get the credit he should have gotten, many of those things that he discovered are used today and they're very important to our way of living.

Ms. West: And Booker T. Washington?

Mr. Smith: Booker T. Washington was a literary person. His writings were something of an inspiration to me, and they showed what could be done. In those days, most of us who were Black were discouraged with learning, and he indicated to me that you can learn.

Ms. West: What type of music did you listen to as a youngster?

Mr. Smith: Whatever was being played at that time: jazz and Robert Covington, Jimmy Longford, Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, Josephine Baker, even though I didn't have much experience with her because she went to France. Those type of entertainers.

Ms. West: Tell me, what were the medical practices in the area when you were growing up?

Mr. Smith: We had Black doctors; some of us went to Black doctors and some of us went to white doctors. It was according to what your preference was. I remember Asbury Park at one time had three practicing physicians: Dr. Robinson, Dr. Parks, and I forget the other one's name. We had physicians that were younger, like Dr. Harris, in the late 1940s. But prior to that, there were the three doctors. Otherwise, you had to go to a white doctor.

Ms. West: Was there any newspaper headline that stood out in your mind of any event?

Mr. Smith: The attack on Pearl Harbor stood out in my mind quite a bit.

Ms. West: Were you a serviceman?

Mr. Smith: No, I was a policeman at that time, and I remember I was walking down the street on Springwood Avenue and the word came over that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor. Immediately, the mayor came over and took me off my post and sent me down to the waterworks to guard the waterworks.

Ms. West: Let's go back to your college days. You said you went to Howard University.

Mr. Smith: I went there for two years.

Ms. West: What was your major at that time?

Mr. Smith: Education.

Ms. West: And then you left college and came back to Asbury Park?

Mr. Smith: I came back to Asbury Park in 1941, and I became a police officer the same year. I went in the service in 1942.

Ms. West: What branch of the service were you in?

Mr. Smith: In the army, Quarter Master Corps. At that time, Blacks were only in the Quarter Master Corps.

Ms. West: What did you do after World War II?

Mr. Smith: I came back here and became a police officer.

Ms. West: How long were you on the police force?

Mr. Smith: Thirty-eight years. For eleven of the 38 years, I served as the Chief of Police.

Ms. West: Did you just work on the Black side of town?

Mr. Smith: Originally. Before the war, we worked the Black side of town. We called it Post Five, and a couple years after the war ended, we still were restricted to that. We couldn't ride cars, so we had to walk. A lot of patrolmen were riding cars then, but we had to walk.

Ms. West: When did that change in the police department?

Mr. Smith: Well, it changed right after the war. There was a human cry for some Black promotions in Asbury Park. As a result of the human cry, a group of young men got together and pressured the counsel. I became a detective, but I was restricted to the night shift from twelve at night until eight in the morning.

Ms. West: What year was that?

Mr. Smith: I don't recall, but that was a breakthrough for us as Blacks in the Police Department. A couple of years later I became a Sergeant. I didn't spend much time in uniform, though. I was in plain clothes most of the time in the Detective Bureau. Then, I became Captain of the Detectives and I was in charge of the Detective Bureau, and then I became the Chief.

Ms. West: When was it that people of color could work the day shift?

Mr. Smith: As a patrolman, you're rotated three shifts: eight to four; four to twelve; twelve to eight. Every week you would change, but in the Detective Bureau I was assigned to work at night, sometimes eight at night until four in the morning, and sometimes twelve at night until eight in the morning.

Ms. West: Is there any one person, other than a Black person, who helped you in your career or influenced you?

Mr. Smith: I had a partner by the name of Pat Moiner. He stood by me and supported me and advised me about the mechanics of getting ahead in the police department.

Ms. West: Would you want to elaborate upon that?

Mr. Smith: Well, he always encouraged me. Sometimes you get frustrated in police work, but he always told me that that was part of the job and you just have to forget that and go on with your work everyday and do what you can do to solve crimes.

Ms. West: As you began to establish a position in the community, how did this affect the other Blacks in the community?

Mr. Smith: Oh, it brought them up, too. It made them feel better, and I think they appreciated it, as I did too. It also gave them a thought that we weren't throwaways anymore. We could get in a position to move.

Ms. West: After you left the police department, what turn did your life take?

Mr. Smith: Well, I retired from the police department in 1979. Then, I sort of got interested in politics. I ran for City Council, was elected, and served four years as Councilman.

Ms. West: What year was that?

Mr. Smith: It was in the late 1980s. I ran for councilman, I was elected, and then I ran for council again. I was re-elected and made mayor.

Ms. West: Of Asbury Park?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

Ms. West: And how long were you mayor of Asbury Park?

Mr. Smith: Four years. I served on the council for eight years in all: four as councilman, another four as mayor.

Ms. West: With what party affiliation?

Mr. Smith: Well, at that time we were bi-partisan here on a local level. But I was a Republican, actually. I still am.

Ms. West: As an African American and as a Republican, how were you received in the Republican Party?

Mr. Smith: The Republican Party asked me to run for something. I actually didn't solicit it, they came to me. I was in Florida at the time and I got a telephone call. The person on the other end of the line said to me, "Would you run for assembly?" I said, "All right, let me give you my answer when I get back. I will be back in two days." That gave me time to talk to my family. That was a monumental move and the family needed to be involved in it. They encouraged me, so when I came back, I gave them the answer: "Yes. I would run."

Ms. West: Did you ask why you were running?

Mr. Smith: No, I didn't ask why. It was a chance for a Black breakthrough, especially with respect to the Assembly, because we never had a Black person from Monmouth County or this district in the Assembly. And the Republicans had often made a position for African Americans to run with their backing, which is very important. So I said, "Let me take advantage of this and run."

Ms. West: What was the advantage?

Mr. Smith: The advantage that I had their backing. It's very hard to win an election without the backing of a party. If you understand what I'm saying, in politics, the party backing is very important. Very few independents win. You have to realize that I lived here all my life. I went to school here. I played sports here. I was an All State Mention in football and people knew me. All the families in my neighborhood knew me and if I did something wrong, they would tell my

parents. You know, like you say, it takes a village to raise a child, and I assure you it takes a whole neighborhood, in fact this town, to raise a child. This village doesn't exist anymore. You have to realize one thing: I was popular way back then. I hate to say it that way, but everybody knew me. I became a police officer, I became more popular. The word spread who I was. I was always fair out there and if I thought a guy didn't do something that he was charged with, I would try very hard to investigate it and find out if he did or if he didn't. And if he didn't do it, I tried very hard to bring it to the authorities and tell them that this didn't happen. I had two instances of my life when that happened and one was with a juvenile who was charged with rape. An investigation came out that he couldn't possibly have committed the rape, but he was charged with it. Eventually I got him released. Another situation was on a narcotic raid when a certain person planted narcotics in the car. Chief of County Detectives and myself had searched the car and we didn't find anything. Another person went out there and he found narcotics. He planted him, actually. They charged the owner of the car with the offense, but with two investigations and a talk with the prosecutor, it was agreed there was no way possible that it could happen. We got the charge withdrawn.

Ms. West: Now as an Assemblyman, what changes have you been able to make here in the county?

Mr. Smith: Well, I deal mostly with quality life issues and also urban problems. Education is very important to me, and I've managed to get Neptune back in the Special Needs District, which was needed. In regards to Asbury Park, I got them in the Urban Enterprise Zone to try to lift the city up. And in Long Branch I have helped with recreation. I've gotten money for soccer fields and I've gotten money for restoration to historic sites especially in Long Branch where they managed to get forty thousand dollars to put a roof on an historic building.

Ms. West: Historic sites such as?

Mr. Smith: The one in Long Branch, the old school, I forget the name of the school. They took over the school, but the roof was leaking.

Ms. West: How has the county changed over the years?

Mr. Smith: Well, the county has changed because the increase of population. We're getting more Democrats in from North Jersey which creates a problem with us Republicans. This used to be a totally Republican county.

Ms. West: If you could describe your life as a road map, how would you describe it, things ran smooth, up and down, rocky, diverse?

Mr. Smith: Things never ran smoothly. But it actually hasn't been that difficult because you could overcome all the obstacles that were facing your path, and being a Black person, many obstacles were placed in my path. I remember when

I took the exam for Chief of Police. The first time I took it I placed first, but they chose the second man. The second time I was chosen, I think, because Martin Luther King raised the social consciousness and that of this nation that had a lot to do with my becoming Chief of Police.

Ms. West: What year was that then?

Mr. Smith: I was Chief of Police since 1968.

Ms. West: If you could choose a symbol for your life that would represent your life what would it be?

Mr. Smith: I've always prided myself on being fair. I prided myself on wanting to do something for people. I prided myself for wanting to do something for my community. When I say my community we can't just say Asbury, because communities are so intertwined that it goes as far as Freehold of being part of the community, even though it is not part of my district. I have accomplished some things that affect the lives of people, especially the young people, and also me as an individual.

Ms. West: What so-called words of wisdom would you give the youth today?

Mr. Smith: Well, our youth today need a lot of shoring up. Our youth have lost hope. They've lost hope and that's the reason why we have so many problems with our youth. The loss of hope is mainly because of us. We have not given them that emphasis to continue on, the idea that regardless of what obstacles are in your way, you can side step them and go around them and get the thing done. The one thing we have to instill in our youth today is hope.

Ms. West: What would you consider your greatest achievement?

Mr. Smith: There are many things that I could name that I can consider achievements, but not my greatest achievement. The greatest achievement I think is that I was able to raise my son and educate him, and he's now sitting judge. He sits in Superior Court in another county.

Ms. West: Do you have just the one child?

Mr. Smith: Just the one child. We have three grand children, three girls. One has two masters degrees, and the other one is working on her masters, and the third one is a junior in college.

Ms. West: That's wonderful.

Mr. Smith: We believe in education.

Ms. West: What's the most unusual thing about you?

Mr. Smith: I'm just a plain guy. I have a good family life. I've been married to the same women for fifty-seven years. We can look back when we had nothing, but we were talking the other day about how lucky we have been.

Ms. West: In what way is your life different today than what you thought it might have been when you were a youngster?

Mr. Smith: Well, see, in those days we didn't have the luxury to dream; we didn't dream. We just took every day like it was. I remember that when I was in Asbury Park, before I went to Washington to go to school, I took any job I could get. I remember working twelve hours a day for seven days a week on the Boardwalk, on the beachfront rather. I remember digging ditches in Spring Lake for one dollar an hour. All those things come back to me, and when I tell my son, he doesn't believe it. Because I came through the Depression I know what the Depression did and what it was. I was the only one working in my family at that time -- and a family of six and eight. I used to set up pins in the bowling alley and make seventy-five cents a night. My mother was a terrific cook. I'd give her the seventy-five cents; she'd fix a meal. We'd have a good meal. It taught me that life isn't as easy as you think it is and often it is difficult because you have a lot of hurdles to jump, but if you stay in there, and you just say, "I'm not going to let this deter me," you can get it done.

Ms. West: Is there anything else that you would like to accomplish in life that you think you haven't?

Mr. Smith: The whole thing that I would like to accomplish in life or see it accomplished is that Asbury Park comes back. The Asbury Park situation worries me and I'd like to see it come back. It can come back and I think it will come back, but the ultimate question is how and when it's going to come back; that's the big question.

Ms. West: Being an assemblyman from the county, is there anything that you could do personally towards this endeavor?

Mr. Smith: Well, we're trying everything we can to do it, but you have to realize that this is a local matter involving the City Council and other powers. We've offered our help and the State has offered its help.

Ms. West: What are your deepest values?

Mr. Smith: Truth and honesty. You have to be honest with yourself and you have to be truthful with your people and yourself. Our marriage has survived fifty-seven years because we are truthful with each other and honest.

Ms. West: What concerns you most about the State of New Jersey?

Mr. Smith: What concerns me most about the State of New Jersey is that there have been centers within the State of New Jersey which need a great deal of help, especially with education. I'm watching the Abbot decision about how much money they're going to put into school construction, because a great number of our urban schools are in very bad need of repairs or new school construction. In fact, Asbury Park wants to build a new school, and some money would probably come out of the Abbot decision, but we don't know how far that's going to go. And this is the point: we don't know what the legislature is going to do. Are the monies going to be given out? There's one group that wants to give ninety percent funding and there's another group that wants one hundred percent. So politics is the outer compromise that gets things done. I would say that right now we may get ninety-five percent, but still there are urban centers that can't afford the five percent they're going to have to put up because taxes are already high, because of the the low tax collection rate they're in. If they get below eighty per cent, they're in trouble, and Asbury Park is very near that.

Ms. West: What major changes have you seen in this country in your lifetime?

Mr. Smith: One of the major changes since I was kid is that most of us Blacks had menial jobs back then. Today, we have Blacks in every area in employment and we have good doctors. We have some very successful lawyers. All these things have changed during my lifetime.

Ms. West: Are there any stories or anecdotes or anything of this nature that you would pass down to the younger generation?

Mr. Smith: The younger generation has to know history. They have to know what happened prior to them becoming adults. If we don't know where we were, then we don't know where we're going. Our youths don't know what happened back in 1900 that changed where we were at now. That knowledge gives them direction on where they want to go.

Ms. West: What do you consider your personal strength?

Mr. Smith: I think it is the conviction that I have to make the quality of life better for my people: to make it easier for them to live, because a great number are suffering right now. They're in this office everyday. I want to make sure that we get our piece of the pie.

Ms. West: Well, now there's just a few days left in the century, a few days left until a new millennium. What are your feelings overall about things as we approach the new millennium? What insights would you like to share?

Mr. Smith: The new millennium is going to create some problems for us, but I think of what we've been doing the past twenty years as a race. We don't like to say that everything we wanted has been done, but in the next millennium, if we play our cards right, we can achieve the goals we really want. We have to set our goals, and if we set our goals, I think we can attain them in the next millennium.

Ms. West: Is there anything you want to add?

Mr. Smith: I would say this that the world has been good to me. I came out of the service without getting killed and came back to work. I've never known what it is to be out of a job: since I was eleven years old I've been in the work force during the summers and after school. My wife and I were talking the other night, and she said, "Do you realize that since we've been married, you've never been out of a job?" And I never realized it until I sat down and we had dinner and she said, "You had never been out of a job," and I look back and it's true.

Ms. West: Thank you very much for this interview, Assemblyman Smith

Mr. Smith: Thank you.