

MEMORIES OF NEW BERN

JAMES NEAL SMITH JR

INTERVIEW 909

This is Dorothy Richardson representing the Memories of New Bern Committee. My number is 900. I am interviewing Mr. James Smith, interview number 909. This interview is being conducted on October 12, 1992. We are at 1510 N. Craven Street, New Bern, North Carolina.

Dorothy Richardson: Jimmy, could you tell us about where you were born, your parents, your sibling?

Mr. Smith: Yes I can. I was born at the corner of Metcalf and South Front Street. The house is no longer there. It is part of the Tryon Palace grounds, that is the land is. We didn't go to hospitals then, every whip stitch, like we do now. My mother, she was Mrs. Lillian Hill and daddy was Mr. James Neal Smith, Sr.

DR: What year were you born?

Mr. Smith: June 22, 1919. I picked the longest day in the year just about. That's a nice one to have. Later, my brother was born. I think we were living at what was then Rock Springs. I guess they still call it that. We were living up the Trent River. I only have the one brother. There were no other children in the family

DR: His name?

Mr. Smith: His name is Charles William. Everybody knows him as Billy. He just got married again recently you know, a fine lady from Rocky Mount.

DR: But then you moved back to New Bern.

Mr. Smith: Yes, in the I guess you'd call it the Depression, recession, or something of 1920 they tell me. We moved back to New Bern and started living on Hancock Street. I forget the number, but

it was right across the street from the rear of the O Mark's building.

It was a great big old house that had been there a long time past.

The biggest thing I remember about it, which I am sad to say is gone, is an enormous elm tree in the back yard. That thing was so big it took three of us kids to reach around it with our arms spread out.

It covered the whole backyard, so it made a beautiful place to play.

DR: Jimmy, do you remember any of your playmates down there?

Mr. Smith: Oh yes. There's one, George Bunch used to play there.

Ava Fulcher who later married my brother, and her brother, Murray Fulcher. Everybody called him "Monk." He, of course, is dead now.

He married Jean Fulcher. They used to be down there a lot. The Goldman family lived across the street from us and they all came over. Everybody played in that great big yard, so we had a gorgeous time out there.

DR: Growing up there.

Mr. Smith: Yes. I lived there until I was about nine or ten years old. Then we moved up to what is 726 Pollock Street. It was 142 when we moved and they hadn't renumbered the place. I remember one summer or one spring, my daddy said "come on," and he got a bunch of little sapling elm trees and carried them up there on his shoulder, and I carried one just so I could say I was doing something I guess.

We planted those trees in front of that house right there at the corner of Pollock and Bern.

DR: They were beautiful.

Mr. Smith: They still are. They've been mangled by cutting through wire, but they're still there.

DR: The hurricane took some of them.

Mr. Smith: No.

DR: You didn't put them in the front?

Mr. Smith: Yes we did. We put them in the front and around the side and no hurricane ever bothered them to my knowledge.

DR: Some of the trees on Pollock Street, I remember were torn down.

Mr. Smith: Well, they tore some of them down, but these didn't get hit. You see, we put them there in the late twenties, and the first hurricane that came through was in '33 and so they were still small enough it probably didn't bother them. But we've had them (hurricanes) since then, and they haven't bothered them at all.

DR: Where'd you start school?

Mr. Smith: I went to school at old Central School down there. The primary part has been torn down that was over there. Of course, we all went to school at the Academy building. We didn't know we were in an historic building at the time. I wish somebody had explained that to us. That's something I really wish we would do with all we've got in this town. All of our children. There ought to be a course, maybe not required but at least presented to them, the history of New Bern, it's architecture, it's background, what it did, all this stuff.

When you hear somebody on a TV somewhere, New Bern, North Carolina, what is that named for, and they don't even know. Somebody on the TV yesterday said New Bern was named for capitol of Austria. It wasn't this station, it was another station. Well anyway, they'll get it

straight. I know they got a bunch of reaction from that.

DR: Do you remember your teachers?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I do. In the first grade, everybody wanted Miss Molly Heath. There were too many people for Miss Molly Heath, so my first grade teacher was Miss Gray. She was young and pretty and everybody was happy with her. I remember her boyfriend used to come visit with her. I don't know whether that was legal or not. They'd stand in the door and talk, and to keep us busy, she'd get us chanting our number facts; 1 and 1 are 2, 1 and 2 are 3, and we'd go through that routine and then come back, and it went on and on. I remember that very vividly.

DR: Who were some of your classmates? Do you remember?

Mr. Smith: Most of the people that lived in that area where we did went to school there. I don't remember the first grade people very well.

DR: Who were your teachers then?

Mr. Smith: Well, you had one teacher in the first grade who taught you every thing. Then the second grade was Miss Green. I can't remember her first name now. The third grade, Miss Ruth Berry. And everybody that had her, remembers her. Fourth grade was Miss Bell. The fifth grade, I had Miss Folks and also Mrs. Green. Her husband was a scout master. The seventh grade, we had all those four that were there; Miss Winslow, Miss Anderson, Miss Carter, and Miss Mary Gray Moore. All of us had those.

DR: Who were some of the folks you remember?

Mr. Smith: From that the one I remember most is Doris Harker because I had a crush on Doris. We were good friends and always were right on through high school. We had a lot of fun together. Doris was always fun and still is.

DR: You continued at Central?

Mr. Smith: Central School right on up through high school.

DR: Graduation.

Mr. Smith: Yes. Of course the eighth grade was over in what is now the apartments. We used to call it the old Bell building. It had nothing to do with the name. It's because it had a bell on it. Then we moved into the part that they've since torn down over there to put those houses on.

DR: Do you remember anything from you high school days? Any outstanding teachers?

Mr. Smith: I remember my teachers as very interesting people. The science teacher was a man.

DR: Was it Mr. Raper?

Mr. Smith: That's right. And Mrs. Raper was an English teacher. I met her about ten or fifteen years ago. She was visiting here out at Miss Marjorie Williams house on Trent River. I recognized her right off. She didn't think I would, but I did. And now, of course, having been a teacher myself, we had a lot to talk about, things and what it was like. She was a sweet lady and a very good teacher. Then we had some math teachers like Davis. We didn't realize how good they were until we got out and started to college and start comparing notes

and we realized how fortunate we were. Most of remember the Depression was on.

DR: What do you remember about that?

Mr. Smith: The state only supplied six months of school and the county was supposed to do the rest, but we couldn't do but eight. So, we did all that, nine months we had then, in eight months. I think we learned as much or more doing that.

DR: There were eleven grades too.

Mr. Smith: Eleven grades. We didn't have twelve. So, I graduated when I was sixteen because I turned seventeen that summer. Then I went on to State.

DR: Jimmy, do you remember who were some outstanding students that you went to school with?

Mr. Smith: Your namesake, Dolly Richardson. She was the valedictorian. There was Ruth Chadwick. There was Grayson Waldrop. He was president of the class. Elbert Lipman was in there. And there were about five or six of us who had averages of 94, 95, 96.

DR: You had a good average.

Mr. Smith: Oh, I did, but I wasn't the top average. I have never been so much concerned with grades as learning something.

DR: Well, you were really ready to go on.

Mr. Smith: Oh yes.

DR: Going to college then was really quite expensive.

Mr. Smith: Well, I couldn't have gone if I hadn't had a scholarship. I don't know whether he's Dr. Holliday or Mr. Holliday,

his father was one of the founders of State and there was a Holliday Hall up there. He was putting up this scholarship, \$2,500. Five hundred dollars a year. That sounds like a pittance today, but you could go to school on that then.

DR: Would that be your room and board?

Mr. Smith: It was room, board, tuition, books, every thing just about. There wasn't much in the way of spending money, but \$525 a year would take care of just about everything. I don't know whether you win such a scholarship, but I received one.

DR: Who helped you with that? Who told you about that?

Mr. Smith: I think Dr. Hand did if I remember rightly. He was instrumental in letting me know about it. I had everything worked out to go to Mars Hill College with a job and some scholarship help, and this came through and he had to do all kinds of stuff. But anyway, I received the scholarship. Deservedly or not, I had it. I went to State for four years on that.

DR: May we go back? What kind of things do you remember as a young boy growing up? What did ya'll do for fun?

Mr. Smith: Boats. My brother and I had a little boat. He had one, and then I was jealous enough I had to talk my daddy into getting me a boat. I still have that little boat in my yard. It's not in the best shape but it's still there. It's useable. So, I fussed about it until he found this little old boat down in the dock. It came off one of these big old barges that used to come in from somewhere up in Maryland and he fixed it up. Daddy was a wonderful carpenter at

fixing things. He could take like a wreck and when he got through, it looked like it was a brand new boat. I got him to rig a little sail on it and a keel, just a little board on the bottom. I spent many a happy hour on the river, me and my little old, Josiah Bailey.

DR: Why'd you name him that?

Mr. Smith: My daddy named him for Senator Josiah Bailey. I don't know whether he was trying to insult Senator Bailey or not. What happened, when I was overseas during the war, they had the K-9 Corps.

You could put your dog in the K-9 Corps at such and such a price and the money was used to help train the dogs who were really in the K-9 Corps. So, mother wrote me about it. I was over somewhere in Europe at the time. I don't know remember exactly, North Africa probably.

I said, "Put Joe in there and send them twenty dollars." I sent her money home every month. So, she did. And when it hit the newspapers, that name...(laughter) I wanted to apologize to Senator Bailey, but I never heard anything about it. But because of that name, he became quite a famous dog. I was overseas as a Second Lieutenant in the Army.

It made a good story, so she sent me a copy of it.

DR: Jimmy, when you got to State, did you feel that you were prepared?

Mr. Smith: Compared to the people around me, I knew more than they did. 'Cause I knew what I knew. I wasn't an average student. I'm not trying to brag about it, but that's different.

DR: North Carolina State was known for its agriculture and engineering.

Mr. Smith: I took an engineering's course. I walked around that school about two weeks after I got there and I said, "There's no way I'll learn everything in this school!" Then it suddenly hit me, I wasn't suppose to learn everything in that school! I just learned a certain part of it and learned it well enough that if I needed it, I could go look it up and use it again. State was small. It had just 2,500 students. It was a big school then, but it's 25,000 now, so it's ten times as much. Of course, I was gone from New Bern all those four years. I came back to visit.

DR: What years were they?

Mr. Smith: That was '36-'40. Then I went from there to get a Masters Degree at the University of Alabama for a year.

DR: Why did you select that?

Mr. Smith: It was where you could get it through a program. They had a science thing down there and a certain type of engineering that I wanted to get hold of. So, I went down there and then came back. State hired me to be an instructor for about a year at the ceramic department up there. So, I did that. About March or April I got my notice. I went through ROTC at State so I had a commission. So, they called me to active duty about then.

DR: What year was that?

Mr. Smith; That was the spring of 1942. We were in the war then.

DR: Did you have your Masters then, Jimmy?

Mr. Smith: Yes. I'd finished then. Dr. Greaves Walker, who was head of the department that I was in, got me deferred because I

was teaching then. He got it deferred until the end of the term. But after that, I went home and before my twenty-second birthday, I was on my way with Uncle Sam for three and a half, four years over there in North Africa and Sicily, Italy, Normandy, the whole works.

DR: What outfit were you with?

Mr. Smith: It was called the 531st Engineer Shore Regiment which was part of the First Amphibious Brigade. It was amphibious engineers. We had to go ashore with the D-Day troops and get the beach ready to receive all the incoming personnel and material. It was a very interesting job, but naturally, going to shore early in a fight like that, it was dangerous. But I never got hurt. The worst one I got was I nearly cut my finger off on a c-ration can. That sounds ridiculous, but that's what happened. I just didn't get hit. Maybe the good Lord was saving me for something else.

DR: Jimmy, going back, being raised in New Bern during the Depression, what was your father's job?

Mr. Smith: He was a policeman. While I was in grade school, he was a policeman. They only had eight then, so we knew all of them. There were four on in the day and four on at night.

DR: New Bern was a small community.

Mr. Smith: Twelve thousand or better. It's grown since then. Small is not the way you describe New Bern. It was a very vigorous and able town in spite of it. Always has been. Numbers don't amount to humans. It's not quantity. It's quality that makes New Bern.

DR: The people.

Mr. Smith: The people and the place and everything. And fortunately all these new people that come here, most of them are quality. They entered into the things we do and they help. Measuring ourselves against them, we come out pretty well. The local people are getting older. They have nothing to be ashamed of with anybody. If we want to do something, we get it done and we get it done in style. At least that's my opinion and maybe I'm biased. Well, I am biased.

DR: You came back to the states.

Mr. Smith: After the war, I came here and finally wound up teaching school.

DR: On the way, though, you met your wife.

Mr. Smith: That happened while I was at college. We had to go to the engineering convention. The American Ceramic Society for some reason had this convention in Toronto, Canada that year and we all were supposed to go. There was a young man at State from Toronto who said he'd fix us up with some dates. He called up some girls and they never had met any southerners, so one girl called a whole bunch of friends. We got up there to this banquet and we're suppose to get through with it and go pick them up, but it got later and later and later. Finally, they all got into a taxi and came down to the hotel. Well, that was not done in those days. Somebody volunteered to be chaperon for them and we met them in the lobby of the hotel and had a good time up there. First one thing led to another and I went back after the war to visit.

DR: Jane was one of the girls.

Mr. Smith: She was one of those, yes. Blind dates every one of them. None of us had ever met. They took us all to a skating rink and we nearly broke our necks trying to skate.

DR: Ice skating?

Mr. Smith: Ice skating. Most of them were from well to do families, but of course, we didn't know anything about all that at the time. They weren't wealthy but they had a lot of social background and all. Her daddy was a stock broker. I don't know just what he was doing when I first met her. He was a Major in the Canadian Army in the Reserves and I think he was working at that at the time I was up there. He had two girls, my wife and her sister. He wanted two boys, so he had taught them all the military drills. They were very military. The Canadian drills are quite different from American. He wound up with two sons-in-laws, both of whom were veterans. Jane's sister married an English pilot who was over here becoming an architect. Unfortunately, he died about two years ago of a heart attack. He was playing tennis when he died. I keep in touch with her sister and her people who are up in Canada.

DR: When you came back to the states after the war, then what?

Mr. Smith: I fooled around a while and messed with some stuff. I was just kind of looking. But about a year after I was here, I accepted a job at New Bern High School. I figured if I'm gonna stay in this, I might as well get out of it all I could. I had to go get certified. So, I went over to East Carolina and spent a year over there doing all the stuff you get a certificate for. Then I got a

job down at New Hanover High School. I went down there a year and then I got a chance to come back here and I've been here ever since 1951 in school out there teaching all those years.

DR: What did you teach?

Mr. Smith: Math and science. Any math they had, any science they had. Mostly I taught people.

DR: What was school like in 1950?

Mr. Smith: Well, it was that old high school. The one big advantage that school had was the halls were wide as can be and when you had a rainy day and didn't want to go outside, everybody could go out in the hall. We had about 450, 460 students. At the time, it was the largest high school in the northeastern conference; Kinston and Greenville and New Bern. Jacksonville wasn't around in those days.

DR: Did you have large classes?

Mr. Smith: Yes, they were. Sometimes they'd be up as many as 30, 35, which was too big but you can teach it if you make up your mind to do it. Of course, there's always some that aren't going to learn no matter how much you do, but then most of them learn something anyway. I enjoy teaching. It's one of the biggest thrills in the world when you see their eyes sparkle, when they get something. You can see an idea penetrate almost and you know you've done some good that day. But there are plenty of days, when you say to yourself, "What am I doing here?" Other days, it's that rare instance when everything and everybody is hanging on your words, and you suddenly realize they are. Boy, it's quite an experience!

DR: Preparing them.

Mr. Smith: Yes, you get them ready. Then when they get out and go other places, they realize what you've done for them. I hear from a lot of them though. They appreciate it. They didn't realize it at the time though, which makes you feel good of course.

DR: Do you remember some of the teachers you taught with?

Mr. Smith: Oh yes. Most of them are gone. One of them that was up there was Albert Willis. He's retired too now. I guess somebody's going to interview him before it's over with. There were others who came and went. Most of them are gone now. The principal in high school now is one of my former students, Billy Dill. That's a magnificent place out there.

DR: How long were you at the old New Bern High School?

Mr. Smith: We were downtown across from the Masonic Theater somewhere around the spring of '54 about three or four years before they built (Grover C. Fields Middle School}. When we moved out there, we thought we had the world with a fence around it, but we soon found out those halls were way too narrow. They weren't even half as wide as the ones in the old school. We had to go in there and live in it and teach in it while they were still building around us and it was a rather aggravating time, but we were so happy to be there, we didn't let it bother us.

DR: Were your labs adequate?

Mr. Smith: Oh yes. Compared to those old things that we had at that old school, that dungeon down there underneath the building.

Do you remember that?

DR: Of Moses Griffin? Yes.

Mr. Smith: At Moses Griffin. That old basement that every time it rained in the summer we got about three or four inches of water down there. Everything would get rusty and wet and mildewed during the summer. We had beautiful labs at the new school; physics lab, chemistry lab, biology labs.

DR: Good equipment?

Mr. Smith: Yes. It was such a change that we could hardly stand the prosperity to tell you the truth.

DR: Jimmy, what about salaries for teachers?

Mr. Smith: Salaries for teachers have never been what they ought to be of course. They are better now. Actually a starting teacher now makes more than I made after thirty years experience with a graduate certificate. It's just that that's how things have gone. But I don't envy them anything. Whatever they can get, they deserve if they do the job out there. That's the way things go. But that's personal memories. We had some happy times at that school. My mother told me when I was growing up, Jimmy, your high school days are the happiest days you'll ever live. Well, when we were growing up, we didn't question what grown-ups said. I took it and put it in the back hip pocket of my mind. Well, I got out there and looked at what those kids were doing and teenagers were conscious of being teenagers about that time.

We never thought of ourselves as teenagers. They were trying to do things in the dances and all that, so I said, "Well, my mother was

right. I'm going to do every thing I can to help these kids have a happy memory of school," so I did. Of course, I wound of being stuck with the Junior/Senior Prom for thirty years. We didn't just go out there and string a little crepe paper. We remodeled the gym every single time. They had more fun doing that than they did going to the dance, a lot of them.

DR: Jimmy, do you remember the years you taught, did discipline become more difficult?

Mr. Smith: Yes. When I first started teaching out there, all I had to do was catch a student's eye with my eye and whatever they were about to do or into, that was the end of it. The last few years it took you about ten minutes to get them calmed down. (They were talking about what they did the night before) to get their attention on what we we're suppose to do. But mostly, my memories of them are very happy memories. We've had some happy years in that school.

DR: How were discipline problems handled and truancy handled?

Mr. Smith: Most of it went to the Principal.

DR: Who were your principals?

Mr. Smith: When we first moved out there, we had Mr. Brinkley. He stayed there about two years. Then Dr. Spear came. He was quite an educator. He used to run a class in hypnotism and all the kids wanted to get in that class. Well naturally, he did all kinds of things with them when he taught that. I'm sure all those that were involved remember a certain boy. They came out and they had some kind meeting at my house one night and he was there. He wanted to smoke cigars

and they were the most awful smelling things you've ever smelled. So, they had a plot. Now, he wanted to be hypnotized by all of this.

Dr. Spear hypnotized him and told him, "Now, when you wake up, you'll feel fine, but if you take one of those cigars to smoke, it will taste horrible to you." So, we were all waiting to see what would happen.

He lit up his cigar in his mouth, took a puff on it and you've never seen such a face. He took that thing and threw it in the fireplace.

I had a big fireplace with a fire going. We said, "What's the matter?"

He said, "I don't know what's wrong with that thing, but it tastes horrible." He finally guessed what had happened.

DR: Was he really hypnotized?

Mr. Smith: Oh yes. This was after he woke up. If he hadn't been, that wouldn't have happened. 'Cause nobody said anything about it.

DR: Who was the other principal after Dr. Spear?

Mr. Smith: After Dr. Spear left, I think Mr. Allen was next. The two years he was there, that was one of the happiest schools. The kids called him the "Wabash Cannonball." He got around everywhere and saw everything going on. He used to come in early. Some of his older teachers would be a little grouchy and they'd be cross when they get there, so he'd get around to them earlier and talk to them and get them all buttered up in a happy mood when the kids came in. He was a psychologist from the word go. But then he had to leave and go get a superintendent's degree and Mr. Flowers came in. He stayed a while.

DR: Bill Flowers.

Mr. Smith: Then Mr. Hunnicutt came. Then here comes integration and all that. Then Mr. Fields came and he stayed on till about a year after I left. Then Mr. Phelps came. Now, he gave it up because of heart problems I think and the present principal took over and they moved out to the new school.

DR: Jimmy, getting back to the problems in your classroom. You say they were handled internally.

Mr. Smith: Well, sometimes you had to sit on the kids real hard and make them do. Of course the personality controlled most of it, but there were some no matter what you did were going to get out of line and eventually you just had to send them to the office and the Principal would have to handle it over there. We had detention halls.

DR: What were some of the kind of problems?

Mr. Smith: When I first started, it was just mischief, but then again, none of it was very malicious mischief that I recall. But as it got along later and drugs entered the schools, we had problems with that and you sometimes had to take care of that in the school. The biggest problem was motivating them to do what they ought to do. Sometimes you could succeed and sometimes you didn't.

DR: Were funds available? Did ya'll have good materials to work with?

Mr. Smith: Funds were always short. I just never worried about money. I just went ahead and did something. If I didn't have it, we made a project out of their making it for themselves, especially,

in the science classes. That was fun and they got a big kick out of it and they learned something too.

DR: You felt like you had the support of the community.

Mr. Smith: I did. I don't know how the rest of them felt. I had an unwritten law; don't go to a student's parents unless it's an absolutely desperate situation. They caught on to that and they appreciated it. It was sort of unwritten; don't snitch on me. That works some but you had to deal with some of them all the way. I enjoyed teaching and had a good time with most of it. You went to school in the mornings and hey, we're going to have a happy day to day. There were times later that was not the case. "Oh God, if we can just get over today!" But it's not that bad, I'm exaggerating. I quit when I was sixty-two because I said well, I can get eighty percent of my social security now, why not? I've already had thirty years of teaching and so I got a fairly decent retirement from that.

DR: Jimmy, what year did integration come in?

Mr. Smith: We had some integration I reckon about '65, '66. About eight percent of the school was black. They were fine kids and they were mixing in and were accepted as people and forgot about their being black until '70 when they jammed the whole two schools together and of course it blew up in their face.

DR: How did it blow up?

Mr. Smith: I don't really know exactly what happened.

DR: Were you there?

Mr. Smith: Oh yes I was there. We had some belligerence on

both sides of the fence and every time something would happen they'd take all the black students out of class and talk to them or do something. The white students felt they were being discriminated against because they didn't get out of class. I mean, that's childish, but that's the feeling I got from what they were saying.

DR: Was there any specific instance that it really got bad?

Mr. Smith: Yes. There was a morning that was a Martin Luther King holiday or something and they were going to celebrate. So, they wouldn't come back into the class and the thing got out of hand and they had to send them all home. The black kids went home first and the white kids were fussing. I wish I had known about it earlier, but I didn't. They were going to have a meeting and do something, the white were going to have a demonstration about their rights. It was such a confused mess. Soon they took them all over to the auditorium. The whites went over there. Well, as soon as they did, some of the black kids who should have been back in their classes but they weren't they went over there. Something happened in the meeting and they got into a fight. I remember looking out my window to see them spilling out the auditorium. Somebody was coming around the corner with a wheelbarrow full of pop bottles that had been picked up in there.

Some of them grabbed those things and broke them off and started trying to use them as weapons. That's why we never have anything but canned drinks on the campus. Well, the whole thing blew and we had to get the police out there. It was about ten days before we could get the school people all settled down and get back to school. The newspapers

came out and a whole bunch of mess about a fight between kids on Martin Luther King's birthday and Robert E. Lee's birthday. I said that has not got a thing to do with it at all! That's something the paper dreamed up. I said, "Well, if that's what they want to think, let it go as far as I'm concerned."

DR: In your classroom, did the students get along together that you could see?

Mr. Smith: I made them tolerate each other. I treated them all equally and they found that out. The first few days or weeks when we first had everybody in the school, it was my custom to stand in the hall and say good morning to all as they went to class. They couldn't understand that at first. What's his game, I guess. These are the black kids. Finally, they found out that all I was doing was saying good morning and accepted it. That year when they first put the two schools together, the previous spring I went over to their prom to see what they did so that we could incorporate some of their ideas into ours. It was everybody's then. So, we went to work and we had some times planning it and there were some difficult moments, but we all managed to get it done. We had a few of the black kids come out to help. Most of them, though, came to the door and kind of made fun of those who were helping. But they found out they were welcome, "Come on in. It's our Junior/Senior. You are students here." By the third year, they were out there. I had more black kids helping and working and it was a nice situation. We made it that way. Of course, there were always a few that wouldn't do it on either side. Wouldn't have

anything to do with each other. But actually, in my way, it was never integration, it was amalgamation. They just put them under the same roof and they'd have a respectful tolerance of each other and that's about as far as it went. At least, as far as I could see.

DR: Did you notice that the black students that came from the black high school, were they ill prepared?

Mr. Smith: You're touching on dynamite lady. That's all there is to it. Some of them were well prepared, but on the average, they were not as well prepared. I guess it's safe to say all of this now publicly, but our policy was that the lowest grade we could give on anything was a 60. We were used to giving zeroes if they made zeroes.

So, for about three or four years there, the lowest we could give anybody was a 60. It didn't take the white kids long to find out that if you do that, it doesn't take much to add to a 60 to make a 70 to pass. So, what's the use in working harder if we can get a grade without doing anything. They gradually came up and it's back the way it ought to be. They get the grade they deserve or they earn. But there was a policy to help them get adjusted to what were obviously higher standards than they had been accustomed to.

DR: Through no fault of their own.

Mr. Smith: No. Whatever the reason was, they were pushed into a situation where more was demanded of them than they had been prepared for. So, we made adjustments and that's what went on, and gradually we started raising the standards to where they began to get the grades they made.

DR: Jimmy, do you remember through your career any outstanding students that went on to bigger things?

Mr. Smith: Yep. Robert Kennel was one. That boy was brilliant. You know, his daddy was Lefty Kennel.

DR: Baseball player.

Mr. Smith: That and also a mail carrier. They live down at Kennel's Beach now. He worked and he studied hard. He was the only kid I ever gave a 100 on a report card cause he deserved it.

DR: Math and science too.

Mr. Smith: I did everything I could that was fair in we taught to challenge him and he got it right, so I gave him a 100. I never did that before or after cause nobody ever got that close. He went on to State and then they didn't have this 4 point standard. I think he made one B the whole time he was there. All the rest were A's. He was taking Nuclear Engineering. He played freshman basketball. That's when they had freshman basketball and he was helping to tutor the freshman team. He got through there and he had a chance to go with the Baltimore Orioles as one of these bonus things. He didn't want to take it. He got a Rhodes Scholarship, but he wanted to get married, so he turned that down. Then he got a Kiwanis Scholarship to Australia. He got over there and he won what they call two blues which is like being all American in two sports. Of course, there weren't more than about thirteen colleges there; but nevertheless, that's what he achieved. He came back and then he had a job with either Atomic Energy Commission or NASA. I think at one time he was a liaison officer

between the two of them. The boy's just brilliant. He's a man now and he's with some big company doing something. I see him up at State when I go up to reunions every now and then. He attends them.

DR: Any other students that you remember?

Mr. Smith: I remember hundreds of students. Not necessarily because they were brilliant but just because they were wonderful people to know. I couldn't begin to name all of those people.

DR: Any black students that impressed you?

Mr. Smith: Sure, there were lots of them. Warren Keyes, his mother was a teacher. His daddy was too I think. He was smart. But there were a lot of kids in there whether they were smart or not that impressed me. I remember one little girl who came in this general science class. We gave them because they hadn't finished it before and most of them were lesser students. I would have them write and she wrote something down that was beautifully done. She knew how to write. That was something that I wasn't expecting from these kids cause most of them didn't. But she did and naturally that impressed me. She was smart. One of the smartest students I ever had in chemistry was a girl. She didn't make the highest grades cause she just didn't want to be bothered, but she knew what she was doing. When she went in that lab and she mixed this, that, and the other, she knew what was suppose to come out. Most of them are, "Well, let's see what happens if we put this in", and fortunately most of it wasn't going to blow up. But I can remember her vividly.

DR: What was her name?

Mr. Smith: That was in 1952 or '53. I don't remember. After all, after thirty some years, you've got 45,000 kids to sort out. So, it was interesting. I see some of them all the time. They've grown up so and they've changed so. One thing I was talking to Mr. Latham about before he left was the 1922 fire. I was three years old when that happened. I remember mother taking me up to the corner there at George and Queen Street. There wasn't any ball park there. I could see all those flames but it didn't mean anything to me. Of course that burned down area where Kafer Park is now was all a fire. Then they started dynamiting houses to make a fire break and boy that scared me. I wanted to go home.

DR: You could hear it?

Mr. Smith: Oh yes! It was right close, all that loud noise. I started yelling, "Mama, let's go home", so she took me home. That's all I know about that fire. I wanted to get away from it. Of course I remember what people have said about it since but that was my experience with it. I didn't know why we were going up there. She wanted to see it and she took me with her. I remember that vividly.

DR: Jimmy, I was a graduate and product of New Bern schools. I have always felt that we were blessed with the quality of teachers that we had.

Mr. Smith: Lady, you have said several mouthfuls. We didn't realize it as kids but when we got away where we could start comparing it... I had a math class up at State and the teacher gave us a whole bunch of homework and I was the only one that came back with it the

next day. The rest of them, "You did all that?". I said, "Of course, the teacher said it was to be done." It wasn't that hard. I mean, that was just one comparison.

DR: These were students not just from North Carolina.

Mr. Smith: But everywhere. Most of them were North Carolinians. I remember Mr. H. B. Smith said once about the New Bern schools, "Only three percent of all our people that went on to colleges failed where the average for the state was eleven percent." That's what he told me one day. I don't know what his source was but I never have forgotten that. It may have been right at that time. I don't think the statistics are that now, but anyway, they are good. What we've got in these schools is good and the kids that go out there and get it, it's there for them. If they don't get it it's because they don't really try to get it.

DR: Back then, of course, the women teachers that we had, there were so few fields open for women then, so we got really good minds going into teaching.

Mr. Smith: A man teacher was a rarity back in those days. It was still rare when I started teaching. But now, it's a lot less rare.

The thing was, the money just wasn't there. For a long time it was very difficult for a man. He could not support his family on what he made as a teacher unless the wife worked too. I had to start teaching.

I taught night classes for East Carolina down at the base, and eventually for Craven Community College and right now teaching part time at Craven Community College but I like it. The extra money helps.

DR: Jimmy, it seems to me there has always been so much required

of them; recertification that you had to go back and pay for yourself.

Mr. Smith: Right. In the days when we were growing up, New Bern was blessed with a core of very able people in this town who were teachers. They were well above average training and everything else in their ability. So, we had a very fine school without realizing how much better it was than the average. Of course, that's my opinion, and not just because I was a teacher out there. I could look around and see what we were doing and I could see the change in that over the years as the school got bigger and we got teachers. Teaching became just a job and not a dedicated profession.

DR: Jimmy, in your career after you came back to New Bern in the fifties, did you always feel that you had the support of parents and of the community and of the powers that be, the county administration?

Mr. Smith: I never had reason to believe otherwise. They helped with what they could, but I didn't worry about it. I just went ahead and did my thing and taught my kids. If I needed something I asked for it. If I didn't get it, I made a way of doing without or making do with. I just didn't worry about it. I just went ahead and did things.

DR: You apparently had to.

Mr. Smith: Yes. Funds were not there but the will to help was there. If I called on a parent or somebody to do something, they really came out. I didn't call on them much, but when I did, they came to help me.

DR: Do you think that has lessened, parents are not as involved in their children?

Mr. Smith: I can't really answer that, but I get the impression that too many parents send their children to school for just a place to park them for the day and the kids whether they realize it or not, that's the result. The last three or four years I was there it was a baby sitting operation. I hate to say that, but that's what it was as far as I was concerned.

DR: Did you feel that the children, the young people then, were as interested in learning or in just getting out?

Mr. Smith: Not as much as twenty-five years before, but that was classic all over the whole system. Parents have to get into this thing with their kids. If they don't, their kids don't see the reason for it. I know a lot of parents that really go after their children and see to it that they learn and see to it that they get their lessons and read to them when they are little. I have got a grandson who is a prime example of that. He was able to read and write some by the time he was four years old because of the teaching he got. He has to be first in everything in school and he has up to now. And that's unusual for a boy.

DR: In your last years, Jimmy, were the academic demands lessened?

Mr. Smith: No. The demands were there and the improvements were there. They had expanded. But what the kids that are expected to learn today is way more than when we were growing up because there's more to learn. I used to kid mine in general science, "You better

learn it now buddy cause if you stay here, we're going to have to learn the geography of the moon, the geography of Mars and all these other places." They laughed, but they got the point. We had some good courses. When they combined the two systems, New Bern High School had more courses offered in all areas than the other two high schools put together. I don't know whether that's still true or not, but it was certainly true then. The quality of those courses was well up there. Of course, you can't have perfection in everything. It was some time ago, but we used to take these achievement test and the school would average out to 92, 93 and that's remarkable. The lowest they got was 75 on Language Arts. The average is about 50 when you get on a curve like that. When they'd put it all together and average math, science, and language arts and everything, we'd get about a 90 or 92 which is well up there. Now whether it's that still, I could not say. I'm not sure if these figures I'm quoting are before or after integration, but I think it doesn't really matter. It was a good school and it got better.

DR: Jimmy, is there anything else you want to talk about?

Mr. Smith: I could talk to you all day, Dorothy, about the fun and joy I had. Remember when we graduated from high school? We had permission to stay up all night.

DR: Yeah.

Mr. Smith: So, we went down to Union Point and watched the sun come up. Bessie Joyce Lewis was somebody I remember in that crowd. I think Helen Louise Williams was there too. Of course there was

always a crowd in a car because we didn't have very many cars. But we sat there. We went to a dance and did a lot of things. But we went down there to watch the sun come up.

DR: It was beautiful.

Mr. Smith: I hope they don't spoil it with a bridge across there, but I reckon they will.

DR: It seems to me now, Jimmy, we're not seeing the river. The sight from the river is being closed off.

Mr. Smith: I know to some extent. But I'm not going to grieve over that. I'm gonna enjoy it while it's still there and let it go.

DR: What are you doing now in teaching.

Mr. Smith: Teaching math at the college.

DR: At the community college?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

DR: I was disappointed that the bond issue didn't pass.

Mr. Smith: Well, they should have supported it. I better not comment on that. It's too bad because that school is a catalyst to everything else. There was a piece in the Sun Journal a couple of nights ago. I think Tom Thompson wrote it. It was about how we are progressing and getting larger and having a fairly good economy. All around us, all these counties are having a rough time of it in eastern Carolina. One of the things he cited was the community college. This was before the election that the article was written. If you got that paper, you ought to get it out and read it.

DR: I read it.

Mr. Smith: You saw what he said about the statistics and everything.

DR: Yes. Jimmy, it's an avenue for many young people who cannot go away.

Mr. Smith: Yeah. Well, you don't have to have a high school degree to start out there. They've got the means to help you get the GED, general education development. But you can start college. So many kids don't do things for themselves in high school, but then they get a little older and they get mature and they see the need of it and then that's their chance to go back and do some more.

DR: Then they really apply themselves. They know where they want to go.

Mr. Smith: That's right. They motivate themselves then. You don't have any discipline problems in college. That's all there is to it. I don't think I ever had but one. This guy insisted on wearing his hat in class.

DR: How'd you handle that?

Mr. Smith: I just asked him to please take it off that this was my class and I just couldn't tolerate that. So, he did. He didn't like it, but he did. They rest of the class didn't say anything but you could feel that they were on my side. We didn't have any argument.

I just made it clear that's what he'd have to do if he wanted to stay in the class.

DR: Jimmy, are you teaching at Cherry Point too?

Mr. Smith: I was but I'm not now. That's a long drive down there

and back.

DR: At night.

Mr. Smith: Yes. But three or four years ago, I did that about twice a week, and sometimes four times a week if I had two classes.

I enjoyed teaching down there. The Marines you'd get then would be a quality person because they're out to do something for themselves.

You don't get the knuckle head that you find in any military thing.

Any time you're going to get some, but the quality of the young people in the services has gone up tremendously because it's a volunteer service. I have great respect for the Marines and what they do as people.

DR: Jimmy, in looking back over your life, you have really contributed; the war, your teaching.

Mr. Smith: It's been fun. One of things I did that I was very pleased with and I wish I could still do something was the Christmas parade. I made that a Christmas parade, not a parade at Christmas.

Look whose birthday is celebrated. Not GM or somebody with all the cars and trucks. I don't want to criticize that though. The Jaycees work at it and do things with it, but it's not a Christmas parade.

There's very little in that to do with Christmas. Santa Clause shouldn't be riding on a fire truck. He should be in a sleigh. So, I went to all the trouble to build a nice sleigh and I let them have it. But the last I heard of it, it had been given away to some outfit in Havelock as a means of where people put Christmas gifts for the poor. Well, that's fine. Just doing a good job. But if I ever get

back into it, I got a plan right now that I'd like to build three floats, but I won't have time to do it this fall. They would involve three covenants that would be the Ten Commandments, Noah's Ark, and the birth of Jesus Christ. That would make three beautiful floats.

DR: Jimmy, it sounds like you're staying busy and productive in your time.

Mr. Smith: I can't imagine people who just sit down and dry up in a rocking chair. That's just not me. As long as I'm healthy and I can go to the doctor to get a check up and he says, "Get out of here. There's nothing wrong with you." I pay him forty dollars for that and leave.

DR: Jimmy, we do appreciate your sharing with us your memories.

Mr. Smith: Thank you. I'm glad I could help.

END OF INTERVIEW