

INTERVIEWER: Good afternoon. Thank you so much for inviting me into your home today for a special interview "*African American Voices Between Two Rivers*". I am at the home of Beatrice R. Smith, 1700 Chestnut Avenue, New Bern, North Carolina. My name, the interviewer, is Shirley Guion. And, again, thanks to Ms. Smith for inviting me into her home. I have a few questions that I want to talk to you about concerning your life, your family life, while you were growing up here in New Bern. And you may answer them as briefly as you want to, but I do feel that your interview is very important for this project. So, thanks again. Please give me your full name, date and place of birth?

MRS. SMITH: Good afternoon, Shirley. I appreciate you including me in this activity. My name is Beatrice Mae Smith and I was born May 2, 1942.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. Would you please give us some basic information about yourself, such as your parents, your children, brothers, and sisters?

MRS. SMITH: Yes, my father's name was Theodore Roosevelt Riggs. My mother's name is Eva Mae Benton Riggs. They are both deceased. There were 9 of us. I have 5 brothers and 3 sisters. I have 2 stepchildren.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. Could you tell me something about yourself, and your family, growing up in this area ... maybe something about your preschool memories, the types of games that you used to play, the kind of toys that you played with, and the kind of clothing that you wore.

MRS. SMITH: Okay, my preschool memories, I lived in Vanceboro, a rural area. We played games for that era, softball, hop scotch, jacks, jump rope, just a myriad of games; dolls, play guns.

INTERVIEWER: Did you make your guns?

MRS. SMITH: No, we were not that creative, we were quite imaginative. If we had one toy, we pretended it was something else; if we had a Sardine can, we would pretend it was a car. In those days, cars were purchased for the boys and dolls for the girls and toys of that nature. My brother might have a toy car or tractor and I would have a matchbox and we would pretend it was a car when we raced.

INTERVIEWER: All right, do you remember anything about your family and their involvement in the community?

MRS. SMITH: Yes, the involvement of my family when I was young was basically centered around church and school activities. We did have softball games and little things that my parents participated in with us. We had church picnics. We went to school and we had May Day at the school and meetings of that sort.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, those activities were centered around school and the church was involved.

MRS. SMITH: The church was basically the center of your life and school was second.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, all right, tell me about the community you lived in. Could you give me a description of it?

MRS. SMITH: Are you referring to the later years or the earlier years?

INTERVIEWER: The early years, what kind of houses did you have, did people live on farms, did they rent, or what have you?

MRS. SMITH: The houses when I was preschool and school age, were modest homes. We were in the earlier years, tenant farmers. That means we were sharecroppers and my father did not own property that he tended. He rented from the owner and shared the profits, which, many times the owner kept the books and our books did not always correspond with the owner's books. My mother kept the books and of course, we had to go by what the owner had.

INTERVIEWER: That means the owner got more of the profits than you did, huh?

MRS. SMITH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: As far as the community that you grew up in, has it changed?

MRS. SMITH: The community, as I said earlier, was basically a farm and of course, it was an integrated community. We had small tenant farmers. We generally had tobacco, we had 10-20 acres of tobacco. We had 20 acres of corn. But now, farmers may have 100 acres of tobacco. Also, in those communities, they have developed now. Tenant areas have developed into homes. I came from a very large farm.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, let's see, what about your education? What schools did you attend in the area and what years did you attend those schools? Where were they located, your grade schools, high school, and even your college?

MRS. SMITH: Well, I began school in the Epworth community. I was 5 years old. I went to school just for a few months and I moved to Spring Garden when I was in the 1st grade. Epworth School was a very small school; had about 4 classrooms. The teachers had more than one class in the school. Then I moved from Epworth School to Spring Garden where I attended Pleasant Hill and the Pleasant Hill school also was small at that time, wooden building; heating in the classroom with a pot-bellied stove. Of course we moved up to 8 rooms, 1 for every grade, and a Principal's office. During the time I was attending Pleasant Hill, we got a new school, a brick building, central heating, not air, and we had a number of classrooms. Some classes had more than one grade level and of course, a Principal. I graduated from Pleasant Hill in 1954-55. From Pleasant Hill, I went to high school in New Bern, J.T. Barber, and graduated in 1959, and from J.T. Barber, I went to Winston-Salem State College (University now) and received a Bachelor's Degree, Bachelor of Science in Education. From there I went to East Carolina University where I got my Masters in Education.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Are there any special things that you remember about the school days, things that sort of stick out in your mind about your school days?

MRS. SMITH: Well, I do remember some things that stick out in my mind about school days. In my early school days, during segregation, I do recall we had reconditioned used books that we'd get. Our books had children's writing in them, other children's names in them. I remember my first year on the school bus and before that time, we received buses that the white children had used prior to our use. I recall that although I lived in a segregated community and lived fairly close to the school; it was a white school, so rather than go 3 miles to school, we went 5-12 miles to school. We had activities with whites, but not in school and church.

INTERVIEWER: All right, did you have some favorite teachers?

MRS. SMITH: I did have favorite teachers. I don't recall any that I really disliked but I had some that I liked more than others. Mr. Fields, Mrs. Jenkins, Mrs. Pacer, Eva Adams, and of course, I don't think she has ever been aware, the librarian, Ms. Idell Bryant, was a special one of my favorites.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of your experiences of segregation in school or didn't you experience that because you went to a predominately black school?

MRS. SMITH: It wasn't predominately black; it was black when I was attending school. When I was in college, we had a few, very few whites.

INTERVIEWER: In Winston-Salem?

MRS. SMITH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: But it was totally black in school, so you experienced a lot of discrimination then, outside of school?

MRS. SMITH: Yes. Outside of school, when I was young, restaurants would have "white only"; water fountains, they would have two water fountains, one white and one black. The white one would have coolers and the black water fountain would have a spigot. The whites would have clubs "white only". As many in the south, we were eliminated from many activities, simply because we were black.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have different theatres that you could go to, one for blacks and one for whites, or did you go to one ?

MRS. SMITH: Yes. We had separate theatres if we went to New Bern. However, in my community, not in my immediate community, but in my community, we had a little drive-in theatre. One of the farmers built a theatre and my daddy took us to that theatre instead of driving us to New Bern. Once we were there, out of the car, it was sort of mixed. We were all among the people that we knew well. During that day, you knew all of your neighbors. We were fairly friendly.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. Okay, I want to ask you about some of the prominent African-American owned businesses that were here in New Bern. Do you remember any of those?

MRS. SMITH: We had lawyers. I remember lawyer Glye, I believe it was; doctors: Dr Bryan, of course, was a dentist; Dr. Littman and Dr Barnwell.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any when you were young?

MRS. SMITH: I remember them when I was a child. Presently, it would be Harmon, King, and Lamb. And then we have insurance companies, State Farm,

and restaurants. We had funeral homes that own them now. I think that in New Bern, as I recall, we had way more black dentists than we have now because we all frequented black businesses. We have restaurants, Barbara Lee, the Flame. We have a fitness center; we have a photographer. So we have within the community, several, but not as many as I would like to see. We also have a drug store.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Did your family own a home here in New Bern?

MRS. SMITH: No, in Craven County.

INTERVIEWER: What is the name of your family church?

MRS. SMITH: St. John Epworth, in Craven County, Vanceboro area.

INTERVIEWER: Are you affiliated with another church?

MRS. SMITH: Yes, Star of Zion in New Bern. I joined the Star of Zion when I married.

INTERVIEWER: Does anything stand out in your mind about the 30's, 40's, and 50's?

MRS. SMITH: Not a lot because I was born in the 40's. So, in the later 40's I remember my early life was centered around the church and family. On the weekend after church, we would always go to my grandparents house and there would be the other cousins. We would all gather there. On Sundays, it was fun at that time. We were all very close. So that is one of my fond memories.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything about the Civil Rights movement, sit-ins, black revolutions, or black pride?

MRS. SMITH: Yes, I do. I guess you could say I was a child of the 60's. A lot of that was happening during that time: sit-ins, the boycotts, that sort of activities. We challenged a few places just to see if we would be accepted. I participated in a lot in the boycotting of places. We also carried it to the colleges because we recognized our rights and demanded certain things on the school housing and in the cafeteria, getting classes. Classes were filled and we couldn't get courses that you needed. We demanded things that had not been demanded prior to the movement.

INTERVIEWER: In a conversation earlier, you did say that you recalled something that happened during the civil rights era, like the assassination of Dr. King, Robert Kennedy, what do these things mean to you? How did you perceive them?

MRS. SMITH: Both of the Kennedys and Dr. King were very painful memories because I feel they had the interest of black people at heart. They were so much for us. Although they were painful, that gave us the courage to go forward, and to persevere, and make sure we did go the way that they worked so hard for.

Malcolm X, I remember vividly, I was not as taken by him. I appreciate him more today than I did because at that time I saw him as militant. I did not connect with him as much. By the way, I do not believe that Dr. Martin Luther King's dream has been completely fulfilled. I know it was mentioned during the election, but I don't think the complete dream has been fulfilled. I think we are still working on it.

INTERVIEWER: But it's on its way. I know you are very active in the community and I know that there have been quite a few organizations that you have been involved with plus you have been given a lot of awards for things that you have done in the community so I look up to you as being a person in the community that is always reaching out to help others. Now tell me about some of your adult years? I know you are an elected official and you serve one of the most important things in my life which is education and you are working well in that capacity. Would you like to tell me some of the type of work you did?

MRS. SMITH: Well, I was a teacher. I taught for 10 years. I was director of reading for Craven County Schools, and for the last 22 years, I was a Principal. And all of this was in Craven County, by the way. In the county that I grew up in, I began the work in the schools that I attended. I attended Pleasant Hill School and my first teaching was there and it was under my Principal, who was Mr. [] at the time. He recommended me for the job with the Chapter I reading. And yes, I am a member of the Board of Education. I serve it proudly. I hope I am effective in that job because there is a need for someone to be there for the children's interest. I'm not saying that the others do not have the children's interest. But someone needs to be there to speak for us. I try to do that when the opportunity arise. I am a member of course, Alpha Kappa Alpha and I enjoy that and I think that we reach in the community to serve the needs of all the people, not just the black families, but families. We have a special interest in the black families when it comes to education, serving those who are downtrodden. We have a

responsibility to do whatever we can to reach these needed people. So I am willing to serve when I can.

INTERVIEWER: What have you done since retirement? I sort of know what you've done because you're still on the Board of Education. You still are affiliated with these civic organizations. What are some of the other organizations that you are affiliated with besides Alpha Kappa Alpha?

MRS. SMITH: I'll see if I can recall right off hand. Of course, I am a standing member of the Democratic Party. I am a member of the Voters League. I have always been a member of the NAACP, the Commerce Club, the Book Club, Eastern Star. In my community, the Pembroke Community, we have a community organization to listen to the needs of that community, and I am a part of that group. I am a member of the Harems of Jericho. Most of the organizations that I participate in now are service organizations. Of course, I have served on several boards. I am a member of the Deacon Board at my church. I am a missionary. I try to be a service organization because I have been so blessed that I feel like I can bless someone else once in a while.

INTERVIEWER: All right, Mrs. Smith. We're coming to a close. What do you think about Obama as President and Beverly Perdue as Governor?

MRS. SMITH: Well, I can't say that I thought I never would see it because of my faith. With a faith, anything is possible. It was my proudest moment to see a woman leading North Carolina and from our area. I know everybody is not pleased with her, but I am tickled to death. And to have Obama, I'm so proud of him and his abilities, and Michelle Obama. I think that is the greatest moment in history that I can recall. I am elated. I can't tell you how proud I am. And I can't tell you what I did to support that effort.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. All right, my final question to you is what does the New Bern 300 Celebration mean to you?

MRS. SMITH: Well, this is a great time in history. The 300 year celebration is a great celebration. I would like to celebrate. I am happy that we are having the 300 year celebration. Of course, we haven't been free for 300 years. And it would be even greater if we were celebrating 300 years of freedom and 300 years of being treated as equal and having the same opportunities as other citizens. But I think we aren't going to dwell on what we don't have; we're going to respect our country

and flags and send some youth back to Africa. I'm happy that we will be involved to participate so we can share what we have done in 300 years.

INTERVIEWER: All right, thank you so much. I wish I could talk to you much, much longer because I see you have a storehouse of knowledge. You have shared quite a bit with us and I would like to thank you for sharing your recollections and about your life, your home, and the city where you live, your education, and all of those good things. This will empower us in this project. Thank you again, Mrs. Smith.

And, before we leave, could you, briefly, leave us with a word of wisdom?

MRS. SMITH: I don't know how much wisdom is in this word, but I think that, if I were to leave a word of wisdom, I would say what I say to the children: Stop wherever you are and take advantage of every opportunity to be the most that you can be and to be the best that you can be. And remember that you serve yourself by serving others. Do for yourself by doing for others. Thank you.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much.