

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Vernon Smith

PERSON

Smith, Vern E.

Alternative Names: Vernon Smith; Vernon Emile Smith ; ; Vernon E. Smith

Life Dates: February 13, 1946-

Place of Birth: Natchez, Mississippi, USA

Residence: East Point, GA

Occupations: Magazine Reporter; Author

Biographical Note

Journalist and author Vern E. Smith was born Vernon Emile Smith on February 13, 1946, in Natchez, Mississippi, where he spent the majority of his youth. Smith attended San Francisco State University, where he was a member of the school's Black Student Union and served as sports editor and columnist for the campus daily newspaper. Smith met his wife in 1967, graduated from San Francisco State University in 1969, and, soon after, attended the Summer Program for Minority Journalists at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

In the summer of 1969, Smith joined the staff of the Independent, Press-Telegram in Long Beach, California. Smith joined Newsweek as a correspondent in 1971 after being recruited by John L. Dotson Jr., the magazine's then Los Angeles bureau chief, the first African American to hold that title. Smith was assigned to the Detroit bureau where he learned from veteran writers Jim Jones and Jon Lowell. Smith won the Detroit Press Club Foundation's annual magazine writing award for a Newsweek article entitled "Detroit's Heroin Subculture," which informed his 1974 novel *The Jones Men*, recommended by the *The New York Times* and re-published by W.W. Norton in 1998.

In 1973, Smith was transferred to Atlanta, where he covered Maynard Jackson's campaign to become Atlanta's first African American mayor and Hank Aaron's ordeal as he broke Babe Ruth's Major League Baseball home run record. While in the South, Smith wrote articles about several unsolved civil rights murders and covered the trials of the Klansmen convicted in the 1963 church bombings in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four little girls. In 1979, Smith became Newsweek's Atlanta Bureau chief. In 1980, Smith covered the Atlanta Child Murders. As a reporter for Newsweek's Special Projects Unit, Smith contributed to four cover stories that were later published as books, including "Brothers," the true story of fellow black journalist Sylvester Monroe's roots

in Chicago's housing projects, and "Charlie Company," which was awarded the 1981 National Magazine Award. Smith also wrote about George Corley Wallace, the family of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, Strom Thurmond, and the Little Rock Nine. After covering the 1996 Summer Olympic games in Atlanta, Smith was named a Newsweek National Correspondent in 1997.

Smith wrote numerous articles for several publications including Ebony, Crisis, GEO, The Sunday Times of London, and TV Guide. Smith also contributed to My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience, published in May of 2004 as part of the Voices of Civil Rights Project.

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