

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Vernon Smith

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Smith, Vern E.
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith,
Dates:	August 2, 2005 and August 26, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	11 Betacame SP videocassettes (5:20:12).
Abstract:	Author and magazine reporter Vernon Smith (1946 -) is an award-winning journalist who has written for Newsweek and the New York Times, among many other publications. Smith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 2, 2005 and August 26, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_182
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

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.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Vernon Smith was conducted by Larry Crowe and Paul Brock on August 2, 2005 and August 26, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 11 Betacame SP videocassettes. Author and magazine reporter Vernon Smith (1946 -) is an award-winning journalist who has written for Newsweek and the New York Times, among many other publications.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Smith, Vern E.

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Smith, Vern E.--Interviews

African American journalists--Interviews

African American authors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Newsweek, inc.

Occupations:

Magazine Reporter

Author

HistoryMakers® Category:

MediaMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, August 2, 2005 and August 26, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_001_001, TRT: 0:29:01 ?

Vernon Smith was born on February 13th, 1946 in Natchez, Mississippi. His mother, Rosetta Valentine Smith, was born in Natchez to John Valentine and Dora Stewart Valentine. Her parents met in Washington, Mississippi. Smith describes his mother's childhood in Natchez during the Great Depression. His grandfather, John Valentine, died when his mother was very young. She was forced to quit school and work as a domestic alongside her mother, making less than \$10 a week. Smith describes his mother's gift for writing; she wrote him detailed letters when he was a college student, which influenced his interest in writing. He also talks about his maternal grandmother who he spent time with as a child and talks about his maternal aunts. Smith's mother married his father, Eddie Smith, an auto mechanic, in 1928, and the couple settled in the Purnell Hill neighborhood of Natchez.

African American journalists--Interviews.

African American authors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_001_002, TRT: 0:29:45 ?

Vernon Smith's paternal great-grandfather Adam Smith was born in 1881 in Adams County, Mississippi. He worked as a farmer and storeowner. Smith describes his paternal grandparents, Mary Haywood Smith and Peter "Pop Pete" Smith, who sold coal and ice, had a store, and farmed. Smith describes his paternal grandfather's personality. Two of Smith's paternal aunts were teachers. Smith was raised in the neighborhood of College Heights, a black subdivision in Natchez, Mississippi. The Smith family settled in College Heights in the 1950s where Smith attended a private grammar school at Natchez Junior College. Smith describes College Heights as an upwardly mobile black middle-class community, and talks about the socioeconomic and racial demographic in the surrounding areas. His father, Eddie Smith, worked for the Jordan Auto Chevrolet Dealership. Smith recalls his earliest childhood memories of his first home in Natchez, and of running from neighboring wild horses with his brother and sister.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Vernon Smith explains the history of Natchez, Mississippi settlers and describes the city's ethnic demographics and class distinctions. Smith talks about his memories of growing up in Natchez during the era of segregation. He remembers the lynching of three of the city's black residents and that some people left town after their names were published on a petition organized by the NAACP supporting integrated schools. He also remembers that the police called the black residents "horse," and that his father and other residents were armed to defend themselves against racial violence. He shares a story about his grandfather settling an altercation involving a white Mississippian and his uncle. He talks about the black professionals in Natchez and his positive relationship

with a white man, who is the former president of the Britton and Koontz Bank in Natchez. He also talks about an incident that disqualified, for him, the myth of white superiority and talks about ethnically blended families in Natchez.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Vernon Smith knew he wanted to be a writer at an early age. When he was thirteen years old, he made his father buy him a typewriter. Smith attended Prince Street Elementary School and Sadie V. Thompson High School in Natchez, Mississippi. He describes his experience as a student at Sadie V. Thompson and the culture of education in the 1950s. Smith did not trust the government in Mississippi. He talks about the contradictions of white racism, and the racial violence and police surveillance in Mississippi, including the 1959 murder of Sam O'Quinn in Centreville, Wilkinson County and an assassination attempt made on Natchez NAACP president George Metcalfe in 1965. Smith participated in a protest after the firebombing of a local grocery store and discovered a white neighborhood peddler was a member of the Klu Klux Klan. Smith graduated from high school in 1964. He relocated to San Francisco, California and was admitted to San Francisco State University.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_001_005, TRT: 0:29:37 ?

Vernon Smith talks about his uncle Otis Smith, who once played saxophone with former President Bill Clinton. Smith attended San Francisco State University in San Francisco, California; there he majored in journalism and radio/TV production. Leo Young and Lynn Ludlow, who were reporters at the San Francisco Chronicle, mentored Smith as a college student. In college, Smith worked as a copy boy for the San Francisco Chronicle and wrote some pieces for Newsweek's San Francisco bureau, but turned down an offer for an internship. In 1969, he got married and attended the Summer Program for Minority Journalists at Columbia University. Journalist Joseph Strickland was his advisor during the program. Smith's first full-time job was at the Long Beach Press-Telegram. There, he covered journalist Ruben Salazar's death and got the attention of John Dotson, Newsweek's first black bureau chief. In 1971, he was offered a job in Newsweek's Detroit bureau.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_001_006, TRT: 0:29:35 ?

Vernon Smith describes his experience as a junior correspondent in Newsweek magazine's Detroit bureau. Smith arrived at Newsweek in March of 1971 as Detroit was experiencing a heroin epidemic. He describes writing, 'Detroit's Heroin Subculture,' about the city's heroin suppliers. The article ran in Newsweek's national affairs section, and Smith was contacted by Regnery Publishing to do a book adaptation. Smith's first novel, 'The Jones Men' was published in 1972. He talks about the positive recognition the work received including an excellent review from Richard Condon, author of 'The Manchurian Candidate.' Smith relocated to the Newsweek bureau in Atlanta, Georgia in 1973 where he covered Hank Aaron's pursuit of Babe Ruth's home run record in 1973; Aaron broke the record April 18, 1974. Smith lists black journalists that influenced him, including HistoryMakers Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Paul Delaney.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_002_007, TRT: 0:28:02 ?

Vernon Smith attended San Francisco State University in San Francisco, California. He talks about the reorganization of the Negro Student Association into the first black student union in the country. Smith talks about the emergence of the Black Power Movement and the 1966 March Against Fear, where activist James Meredith was shot in the back by a white gunman. Smith played basketball for two years at San Francisco State and organized the athletes'

participation in a student strike. He describes his experience in the Summer Program for Minority Journalists at Columbia University, and starting his first full-time job as a general reporter at Long Beach Press-Telegram. Smith transferred to Newsweek's bureau in Atlanta, Georgia in 1973 and talks about the migration of African Americans back to the South. He describes contemporary race relations in Georgia and talks about the relatively close proximity between blacks and whites in the South.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_002_008, TRT: 0:27:51 ?

Vernon Smith speculates on why Atlanta, Georgia is seen as the "Black Mecca." One of the first stories he reported on when he arrived to Newsweek's Atlanta bureau in 1973, was Maynard Jackson's mayoral campaign. Jackson was elected Atlanta's first African American mayor in 1973, and served three terms from 1974 to 1982, and 1990 to 1994. Smith remembers interviewing HistoryMaker John Lewis who was head of the Voter Education Project at the time. His second big assignment in Atlanta was covering Hank Aaron's pursuit of Babe Ruth's home run record in 1973. He describes the racial politics surrounding the event, Hank Aaron's history in the Negro Leagues and the speculation around Babe Ruth's racial identity. In 1977, Smith reported on Alabama attorney general William Joseph "Bill" Baxley's reopening of the investigation on the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church, and covered the Atlanta child murders of 1979 to 1981, a two-year period of serial murders of African American children and adolescents in Atlanta.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_002_009, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

Vernon Smith talks about HistoryMaker Lee P. Brown's involvement in the Atlanta child murder investigations. Brown served as public safety commissioner of Atlanta, Georgia, from 1978 to 1982. The Atlanta child murders were a two-year period of unexplained killing of black children and young adults in Atlanta, from 1979 to 1981. Smith talks about conspiracy theories surrounding the murders, patterns in connection with the murders, and collaboration between Atlanta's black and white communities in an effort to catch the killer. He talks about the discovery of Wayne Williams, the lead suspect in the murder investigation, and Williams' murder trial in 1982. He was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of twenty-one year-old Nathaniel Cater and twenty-seven year-old Jimmy Ray Payne. Smith also talks about the reopening of Williams' case in 2005 by Louis Graham, former Fulton County and DeKalb county police chief.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_002_010, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Vernon Smith became Newsweek's Atlanta bureau chief in 1979 and talks about the formation of Newsweek's special projects unit. Smith worked on a number of reports for the special projects unit including, 'Charlie Company: What Vietnam Did to Us,' 'Brothers,' and 'The Making of the President.' 'Brothers' chronicled the lives of black men that grew up in the Robert Taylor Homes public housing project in Chicago, Illinois, one of whom was Newsweek reporter HistoryMaker Sylvester Monroe. In 1988, Monroe adapted 'Brothers' into a best-selling book. Smith talks about his coverage of HistoryMaker Jesse L. Jackson's second presidential campaign in 1988, and Jackson's controversial anti-Semitic remarks. He talks about Newsweek's cover story on Afro-centric curriculums, his coverage of Spike Lee's rise in filmmaking, and his coverage and involvement in the Mariel boatlift, a mass emigration of Cubans from Cuba's Mariel Harbor to the United States between April and October of 1980.

Video Oral History Interview with Vernon Smith, Section A2005_182_002_011, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Vernon Smith covered the assassination of Alberta King, Martin Luther King,

Jr.'s mother, in 1974. Smith describes covering James Earl Ray's escape from Brushy Mountain Prison in 1977, and talks about the King family's attitude towards Ray and two murders in Natchez, Mississippi: Ben Chester White in 1966, and Wharlest Jackson in 1967. Smith also talks about HistoryMaker Andrew Young's appointment as United States Ambassador to the United Nations in 1977. He remembers Young's meeting with the Palestine Liberation Organization, and resignation as UN ambassador in 1979. Smith reflects upon Jimmy Carter's presidency, including Carter's Playboy interview and relationship with Martin Luther "Daddy King," Sr. Smith covered Atlanta's bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics and describes the urban development in preparation for the games, including the controversy around the expansion of MARTA public transit into the suburbs. Smith covered the bombing of Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park during the Olympic Games.