

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Henrietta Smith

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Smith, Henrietta M.
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Henrietta Smith,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 13, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:26:44).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Library science professor and school media librarian Henrietta Smith (1922 - ) became the first African American faculty member at the University of South Florida's School of Library and Information Science. Smith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 13, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_235
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Library science professor and school media librarian Henrietta Mays Smith was born on May 2, 1922, in Harlem, a neighborhood in New York. Smith is the daughter of Nettie Johnson Mays, a domestic worker, and Henry Lucas Mays, a chef who worked on riverboats on the Hudson. Smith attended Hunter College, studying English and history. She earned her B.A. degree from Hunter College in 1943 and in 1946, she received her B.S.L.S. degree from Columbia University. Smith then moved to Tallahassee, Florida, where she served as a cataloguer at Florida A&M University for the next two years. Dr. Smith received her M.S.L.S.

degree from Columbia University in 1959.

Smith started her career working for Florida A&M University's Library as a cataloger and later returned to New York to complete her M.S.L.S. degree. She also worked at the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library as a children's librarian where she became interested in storytelling and the power of oral traditions. In 1949, she married Isaiah Courtney Smith, a young civil rights lawyer. Returning once again to Florida, Smith worked for Broward County Public Schools, as a school media specialist. In 1975, at the age of fifty three, she received her Ph. D. degree from the University of Miami and joined the faculty of the Florida Atlantic University's School of Education. After ten years at Florida Atlantic, she left the institution and joined the faculty of the University of South Florida's School of Library Science where she was the first and only African American faculty member on campus. She specialized in children's librarianship and the art of storytelling.

Since retiring in 1993, Smith has remained active in the library science field. She has sat on many American Library Association (ALA) selection committees for several literary awards such as the Coretta Scott King Awards, the Caldecott Award, and the Newbery Award. In 1994, she edited the book *The Coretta Scott King Book Awards: From Vision to Reality*. She has been a board member of the Florida Association of Media in Education (FAME) and the Florida Library Association (FLA) and has continued her general membership. She has also been involved with Storytellers Association, an association which teaches and develops multicultural storytelling and the oral tradition. In 2000, she wrote the introduction to *Lift Every Voice and Sing: A Pictorial Tribute to the Negro National Anthem*.

Smith lives in Florida with her husband, I.C. Smith, now a retired judge. She has two adult children, Cynthia Smith Jackson and Robin Smith. In 2008, she was honored by the American Library Association (ALA) as the recipient of the Association for Library Service to Children's (ASCL) Distinguished Service Award for Smith's accomplishments and contributions to children's librarianship.

Henrietta Mays Smith was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 13, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Henrietta Smith was conducted by Adrienne Jones on August 13, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 5

Betacame SP videocassettes. Library science professor and school media librarian Henrietta Smith (1922 - ) became the first African American faculty member at the University of South Florida's School of Library and Information Science.

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## **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®.

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## **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.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

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

### **Persons:**

Smith, Henrietta M.

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghlea, Neculai (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Smith, Henrietta M.--Interviews

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African American librarians-Interviews.

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American librarians--Florida--Interviews.

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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Broward County (Fla.). School Board.

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## **Occupations:**

Library Science Professor

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School Media Librarian

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

EducationMakers

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## **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 Henrietta Smith, August 13, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## **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.

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## **Detailed Description of the Collection**

### **Series I: Original Interview Footage**

Video Oral History Interview with Henrietta Smith, Section  
A2007\_235\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:25 2007/08/13

Henrietta Smith was born on May 2, 1922 in New York City to Nettie Johnson Mays and Henry Mays. Her parents grew up in South Carolina, and moved with Smith's maternal aunts to New York City. There, Smith's father was a cook, and her mother worked as a domestic; and their relatives and neighbors often cared for Smith and her sister, Emily Mays. Smith's family lived beside the East River in the city's Harlem neighborhood, they often saw the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks honor deceased members with parades. Each Sunday, Smith ate

breakfast with her family at a German bakery before attending the Grace Congregational Church of Harlem, where Smith's father was a sexton. Smith also attended Sunday school with her sister, and took lessons in piano, elocution and Latin, which she aspired to teach. She attended P.S. 139 until the third grade, when she graduated to P.S. 81. Upon entering high school, Smith requested to enroll in a different school than her sister, who was two years older than her.

Segregation--New York (State)--New York.

African Americans--New York (State)--New York.

African Americans--Education--New York (State)--New York.

African American children--New York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Henrietta Smith, Section  
A2007\_235\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:13 2007/08/13

Henrietta Smith attended the majority-Jewish Morris High School in the Bronx, New York. During her senior year, school officials pushed her to transfer to the majority-black Wadleigh High School for Girls, but Smith's mother enlisted the help of the NAACP to keep her enrolled. Smith graduated in 1940, and matriculated at New York City's Hunter College, where her peers included actress Ruby Dee. She aspired to become a Latin teacher, but was disappointed by the education courses; and instead studied English, history and physical education. After graduating, Smith volunteered at the 135th Street Library, which she had frequented as a child. In 1943, she enrolled in the library science program at Columbia University. She went on to work as a cataloguer at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University; and, after two years, returned to the New York Public Library system. There, she was mentored by librarian Augusta Braxton Baker, who wrote about African American children's literature.

African Americans--Segregation--Florida.

Library education--New York (State)--New York.

African American librarians--United States--History.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University--  
Employees.

African American students--Education (Secondary)--New  
York (State)--New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Henrietta Smith, Section  
A2007\_235\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:08 2007/08/13

Henrietta Smith met her husband, Isiah C. Smith, while teaching at the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes. They married in 1949, and moved to New York City, where he attended the Brooklyn Law School, and Smith worked in the public library system. She learned storytelling from librarian Augusta Braxton Baker, and participated in the annual Hans Christian Andersen storytelling hour. Upon earning a law degree, Smith's husband moved to Delray Beach, Florida to open a practice with William Holland; and Smith joined him there after completing her library science degree at Columbia University. In the segregated South, Smith was denied a position in the public library system, and instead became a librarian and media consultant for the Broward County school district. She went on to earn a Ph.D. degree from the University of Miami; and taught children's literature and language arts at Florida Atlantic University from 1975 until 1985, when she was hired at the University of South Florida.

Public libraries--Florida

United States--Race Relations.

African Americans--Civil rights--20th century.

African American librarians.

Library education--Florida.

African Americans--Marriage.

University of South Florida. School of Library and  
Information Science--Faculty.

Video Oral History Interview with Henrietta Smith, Section  
A2007\_235\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:25 2007/08/13

Henrietta Smith was the first African American faculty member of the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. There, she was mentored by Alice Smith, an expert in the field of children's literature. Smith commuted

to the campus from her home in Delray Beach, Florida; and was welcomed by her coworkers, whom she knew from her membership in the Florida Association for Media in Education, Florida Library Association and American Library Association. Smith also joined the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee, which formed in 1969. She produced the annual Coretta Scott King Awards Book, and advised a group of Hispanic librarians who founded the Pura Belpre Award. During her career, Smith worked with librarians like Sam Morrison, Doris Hargett Clack, Charlemae Rollins, Virginia Lacy Jones and Effie Lee Morris, as well as Native American storyteller Blue Water. She was also an active member of Storytellers International for thirteen years.

African Americans and libraries.

African Americans--American Library Association.

African Americans--Reading comprehension--Study and teaching.

African American librarians.

University of South Florida. School of Library and Information Science--Faculty.

American Library Association. Coretta Scott King Task Force.

Storytellers International.

Video Oral History Interview with Henrietta Smith, Section A2007\_235\_001\_005, TRT: 0:27:33 2007/08/13

Henrietta Smith shares her philosophy of storytelling, and her concerns for the future of public libraries and children's literature. She also reflects upon her legacy, and the improvements in access to African American children's literature. Smith concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

African Americans--Education.

African Americans--Social conditions.

African American librarians.

African American vocational guidance.