

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

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Smith, Maxine Atkins
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Smith,
Dates:	July 30, 2010
Bulk Dates:	2010
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:21:25).
Abstract:	Executive secretary, foreign languages professor, civil rights activist, and state government employee Maxine Smith (1929 - 2013) was a leader of the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, where she served on the school board for twenty-four years. Smith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 30, 2010, in Memphis, Tennessee. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2010_094
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Civil rights activist, executive secretary, and state government employee Maxine Smith was born on October 31, 1929, in Memphis, Tennessee. She graduated from Booker T. Washington High School and went on to receive her B.A. degree in biology from Spelman College and her M.S. degree in French from Middlebury College. In 1957, Smith applied to the University of Memphis and was rejected because of her race. This brought her to the attention of the local NAACP chapter, which she joined and became executive secretary of in 1962.

Having helped to organize the desegregation of Memphis public schools in 1960, Smith also escorted the first thirteen Memphis children to benefit from the Memphis school desegregation. Smith continued to fight for civil rights and school integration throughout her career, organizing lawsuits, sit-ins, and marches, including the “Black Monday” student boycotts that lasted from 1969 to 1972. Smith served on the coordinating committee for the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers’ strike that Martin Luther King Jr. travelled to Memphis to support before his assassination.

In 1971, Smith won election to the Memphis Board of Education, a position which she held until her retirement in 1995. In 1978, Smith was instrumental in ensuring W.W. Herenton’s election as the first African American school superintendant in Memphis, kicking off his political career. Smith was elected president of the Memphis Board of Education in 1991, the same year that her protégée Herenton became the first elected African American Mayor of Memphis.

Smith received more than 160 awards for her efforts on behalf of educational equality and civil rights, including the National NAACP Leadership Award, the Bill of Rights Award from the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Whitney H. Young Jr. Award from the National Education Association. She was a member of the board of directors for many charitable and civic organizations, including The National Civil Rights Museum, the NAACP, the Women’s Foundation for Greater Memphis, and the National Kidney Foundation. Smith has also been featured in several documentaries about the Civil Rights Movement, including Oscar-nominated *Witness From the Balcony of Room 306* and *Memphis: The Promised Land* . She passed away on April 26, 2013.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Maxine Smith was conducted by Larry Crowe on July 30, 2010, in Memphis, Tennessee, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Executive secretary, foreign languages professor, civil rights activist, and state government employee Maxine Smith (1929 - 2013) was a leader of the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, where she served on the school board for twenty-four years.

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, Maxine Atkins

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Smith, Maxine Atkins--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

LeMoyne-Owen College

Occupations:

Executive Secretary

Foreign Languages Professor

Civil Rights Activist

State Government Employee

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|EducationMakers

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 Maxine Smith, July 30, 2010. 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).

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 Maxine Smith, Section
A2010_094_001_001, TRT: 0:30:09 2010/07/30

Maxine Smith was born on October 31, 1929 in Memphis, Tennessee to Georgia Rounds Atkins and Joseph Atkins, Sr. Her father was born in 1895 on President's Island, a peninsula on the Mississippi River in southwest Memphis. He graduated from Kortrecht High School, and went on to work as a postman in Memphis. Smith's mother was born on a farm near Grenada, Mississippi in 1899. Upon obtaining a teaching certificate from Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi, she moved to Memphis, where she met Smith's father at a tennis match. They married and moved to an integrated, middle class community on South Parkway East in Memphis, where they raised Smith and her older siblings, Clementine Atkins Ramsey and Joseph Atkins, Jr. When Smith was nine years old, her father was hospitalized at the Memphis Veterans Hospital, where she remembers confronting a racist clerk. Her father passed away in 1939, and her mother then began working as a secretary at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Memphis.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Smith, Section
A2010_094_001_002, TRT: 0:31:17 2010/07/30

Maxine Smith grew up on South Parkway East in Memphis, Tennessee. After her father, Joseph Atkins, Sr., passed away in 1939, her mother became the family's sole provider, and saved enough money to pay off their mortgage. During her childhood, Smith was outgoing and adventurous. She remembers attending Memphis' segregated movie theater and the annual Tri-State Fair, which was the all-black counterpart to the all-white Mid-South Fair. Her family subscribed to magazines like Pageant and Reader's Digest, as well as African American-owned publications like the Chicago Defender. In Memphis, Smith began her schooling at the privately run Potts kindergarten, and went on to attend Lincoln Elementary School and Porter Elementary School. She enrolled in the ninth grade at Booker T. Washington High School, where she excelled in her Latin classes. Smith went on to matriculate at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. She reflects upon her upbringing, including her experiences as the youngest of her siblings.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Smith, Section
A2010_094_001_003, TRT: 0:31:18 2010/07/30

Maxine Smith matriculated in 1945 at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. There, she majored in biology, and took courses in the foreign language and philosophy departments. She also met Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a student at the nearby Morehouse College. Smith went on to complete a master's degree in French at Middlebury College in Vermont. Around this time, she met her husband, Vasco Smith, Jr., who grew up in the Binghampton section of Memphis, graduated from Memphis' LeMoyne College and then studied dentistry at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee through the Army Specialized Training Program. Before marrying her husband, Smith taught at the Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in Tallahassee, Florida. After their wedding, the couple settled in Memphis, where they joined the NAACP Memphis Branch alongside Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Russell B. Sugarmon, Jesse H. Turner, Sr.

and A.W. Willis, Jr.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Smith, Section
A2010_094_001_004, TRT: 0:33:07 2010/07/30

Maxine Smith and her husband, Vasco Smith, Jr., returned in the mid-1950s to their hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, and joined the NAACP Memphis Branch. In conjunction with the Shelby County Democratic Club, Smith led voter registration drives to mobilize the area's African American citizens. At this point in the interview, Smith talks about the Civil Rights Movement; Memphis Mayor E.H. Crump's political machine; Booker T. Washington High School Principal Blair T. Hunt, Jr.; and the changes to voting procedures that disenfranchised illiterate citizens in Shelby County, Tennessee. She remembers attending the March on Washington in 1963 with her husband and son, Vasco Smith III, and witnessing Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s historic I Have a Dream speech. She also recalls the elections of 1964, when Russell B. Sugarmon and A.W. Willis, Jr. were elected to the Tennessee General Assembly. Smith concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon Dr. King's assassination.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Smith, Section
A2010_094_001_005, TRT: 0:29:51 2010/07/30

Maxine Smith was active in the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, where she served as the spokesperson and executive secretary of the NAACP Memphis Branch. In this role, Smith led voter registration drives and supported the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike, which was officially organized by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1733 union in 1968. In response to the exclusion of African Americans from the Board of Education of Memphis City Schools, Smith partnered with education activist Miriam DeCosta-Willis to orchestrate the city-wide Black Monday school boycotts, during which 69,000 black students from the Memphis City Schools refused to attend class on Monday for two years. In 1971, Smith was elected to the school board with overwhelming support from her community. She served on the board for twenty-four years; and, during her tenure, was instrumental in the

election of W.W. Herenton as superintendent of the Memphis City Schools.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Smith, Section
A2010_094_001_006, TRT: 0:29:22 2010/07/30

Maxine Smith was elected to the Board of Education of Memphis City Schools in 1971, and served for twenty-four years. During this time, she campaigned for the election of W.W. Herenton as superintendent of the Memphis City Schools. Herenton was successfully elected to the position, and went on to serve as the first African American mayor of Memphis, Tennessee. Smith talks about her recent support for politician Steve Cohen, who served on the Shelby County Board of Commissioners with Smith's husband, Vasco Smith, Jr. At the time of the interview, Cohen was running against Herenton for the Democratic nomination to the U.S. House of Representatives. Smith talks about the divisions in the black political community in Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee, and concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon her life and legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Maxine Smith, Section
A2010_094_001_007, TRT: 0:16:21 2010/07/30

Maxine Smith was a founding board member of the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, which was inaugurated in 1991. Located in the historic Lorraine Motel, the museum served as a bastion of civil rights history. At this point in the interview, Smith talks about the museum's individual, organizational and corporate support; its commitment to education; and its leadership, including board president Jesse H. Turner, Jr., who was also the president of Tri-State Bank, the first black-owned bank in Memphis. She also reflects upon the legacy of her husband, Vasco Smith, Jr., who integrated the Shelby County Board of Commissioners in 1973. Smith concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.