

Interview with Mr. Reginald Smith

Date: June 1, 2001

Interviewed by Dr. David A. Williams

DW: We're here with Mr. Reginald Smith, who is a prime resident of the East Austin community and has lived in this area all his life. We're going to talk to him this afternoon about the educational situation in East Austin and his experience in the school as being a student and a parent.

Mr. Smith, I understand that you attended both elementary, middle school, and high school in East Austin.

RS: Good afternoon. Yes, I have. I have been very fortunate in living in East Austin all my life and, of course, attending schools starting at the elementary level at Rosewood [Elementary School], then Kealing Junior High [School], and I graduated from [L.C.] Anderson High [School], class of 1955.

DW: Tell us something about your experiences as a student from the lower grade school, high school. What was it like?

RS: Well, I think one of the things that's somewhat forgotten, even when I was in elementary school, we also had the support of two fine colleges, both Samuel Huston and Tillotson, and I guess because the high school was somewhat the nucleus of the community, the educational environment seemed really exceptional when we look back, and those were days of segregation. I think that just the excitement on Saturdays with the football games at the colleges, Friday nights over at the stadium, whether it was the newer stadium on Thompson or the old stadium there on East Twelfth Street, seemed to be a real uniting factor within the community.

DW: So you were saying till 1971, when the schools desegregated, that the focal point of the community seemed to have been with the high school and the colleges located in East Austin.

RS: Yes. Well, I think there were two things there. Number one, the majority of the teachers from elementary through high school lived in the community, in East Austin. It was not unlikely that your teacher knew your parents very well, either through church or PTA or other type functions or get-togethers. As a result, I think this enhanced their efforts in the classroom as far as discipline, and as a result, the parents were certainly always notified when you weren't doing what you should be doing. I believe that they could correct a lot of the problems, both educationally and discipline, at an early age to get you straightened out. There was nothing like my teachers dropping by and sitting on the porch talking to my mother about how either good or bad I was doing.

DW: So it made a difference for the teachers in the schools to also be a part of the community.

RS: Exactly, because I believe that they were more sensitive to some of the problems in the community. As a result, it gave them—in many cases I'm sure that they worked much more than what they were paid for to see that every child obtained a level which I don't see today. I think that in many cases, because of the distance between parents, teachers, it appears that that interest is no longer there.

DW: Why do you think this is so? Why did it change?

RS: Well, I think East Austin was affected a little differently from maybe even other sections of town, and I think principally a lot is a carryover from the days of segregation. I think that most of the schools on the east side have not been funded as well. That certainly may have an effect on the type of teachers that locate in the East Austin sector or East Austin schools. I would just feel that some sincere effort should be made, incentives that might bring people back to the neighborhoods.

DW: Did you think when Anderson closed that it made a difference in this community overall?

RS: Can we cut? [Tape recorder turned off.]

DW: Mr. Smith, you have indicated from what you've said so far that the school, the church, and the community, there seemed to have been a cooperative effort between those institutions to make the community a more viable community, a community that was more livable and a community where people sort of helped one another. In 1971, when desegregation finally came, do you think the community changed with the moving of the school, especially Anderson High School, from East Austin?

RS: Yes. Personally, even though I was away working in another city, through my mother and family I came home often, and I felt it was a very bad decision, and I believe that when you have a community, back in that day, when the masses or the majority of the population, a lot of them, never even made it through high school, because familiarization with the teachers and with the school itself, I think the PTA meetings and other organizational meetings within the school were attended more. Because you have to realize that a lot of times people are made to feel very uncomfortable in situations where they go to another area where the income is higher and certainly with people of other ethnic backgrounds.

So what I felt was lost, and in talking to some of my relatives who were in high school at the time and then later on my sons, who had to go well out of the district to attend high school, even though they were attending [L.C.] Anderson [High School], they were attending it in another part of town that was unfriendly, uncomfortable. [L.C. Anderson High School located on Mesa Drive in Northwest Austin.] I never will forget, my elder son, when we moved from Michigan, even though he had been in a very integrated atmosphere, it was his concern that at Anderson most of the kids from the east side rode the bus. The majority of the kids at Anderson were from the neighborhood in that northwest section, and, of course, they drove their own cars. They felt very comfortable in their surroundings. But each day it seemed to be somewhat of a task for him to go to the school, and yet it was the school legally that he had to attend.

He indicated that at lunchtime it was separated by races, the Hispanics, the blacks, and the whites. They all went in their little separate areas of the school. Well, I could not understand why it was so difficult, as well as he and his other two brothers did very well grade-wise, but they never participated in any organizational activities. I can't ever remember them even going back after school to functions that were there, even basketball games and things like that, and they were very athletic, which really bothered me, because my education in a segregated high school in the fifties was so well-rounded compared to theirs.

So I didn't see the progress that this was supposed to have brought. I felt that the necessary money should have been put into Anderson, the old Anderson at Thompson, to make it equal to those other schools with that money, with that kind of funding, and with the dedicated teachers that we had there, that I understand a lot of them lost their jobs completely, and these were very good teachers. I don't know whether or not that was the turning point but, from what I can understand,

politically and otherwise, outsiders began to take the lead in the community, and by the late seventies, when I did return, East Austin was no more of what it was.

DW: So from what you're saying, you feel that the school, again, played a very viable role in the life of the people of East Austin. You made an interesting point about your son's experience at the new school and your experience at old Anderson. Tell us something about your activities at old Anderson. What all did you participate in?

RS: Well, personally, I wasn't able to participate in some of the sports because I worked, which a lot of kids had to work to help make things go at home. But I was a member of the band, which at that time was probably more prestigious than some of the sports because it was under the directorship of Mr. B.L. Joyce, who for many years certainly gained fame with the type of discipline and the type of music that he demanded.

But I did participate in the Student Council. I was vice president in my senior year, and I was a class leader through my entire high school career. I was a member of the state Hi-Y Club, which I think now today is more like distributive education or business.

These were things that prepared me for — I moved from, let's say, washing dishes when I was nine or ten years old, to actually helping manage a small grocery store. By the time I was out of high school, I had really learned something from this experience.

What I felt was that it was convenient. At night, even after I worked from 4:00 to 8:00 o'clock or whenever, many activities I went over and attended even after I came home. I think certainly that's where the community began to split.

DW: What were your teachers like?

RS: The teachers, of course, I thought at that time were certainly qualified. They may not have had the advanced education degrees in some cases, but I don't think that was really the defining point at that time in getting a well-rounded high school education. I think discipline, which most of them demanded and received, and I think dedication to those problems which they would see every day and communicating those problems to your parents and working together with them to solve them.

I think we certainly had problems that you would find in today's society, dropouts and that type of thing, but they were a much smaller rate of people that would leave school, simply because there was so much there for them. I think most students, whether they were making As or barely passing, seemed to have a desire to go to school.

DW: What about the equipment, books and things like that?

RS: Well, we were certainly aware that we were not getting the best in equipment and other learning materials. I was very fortunate, when I was in eleventh grade, I was selected to attend the state Hi-Y conference. I believe it was held in Texarkana [Texas]. This was one of the first times, I believe—it would have been about the year of 1953—that black and white students were brought together in the same forum.

While attending that meeting, I met the president and vice president of the Student Council of Austin High [School], and at that time there was only one white school and one black school. We talked and received an invitation to come over and spend a day and look at their curriculum and

what they were doing, because we had found a number of common points of interest in discussing what maybe we didn't have, and they were surprised.

So it was little unfortunate, because I think it brought a lot of pressure on the administration there at Anderson because Principal [William B.] Campbell was not too happy when we met and told him that we would like to accept the invitation. I think he was a little nervous about it. But we finally somehow were able to go, and we were just really shocked and amazed at the vocational courses and the type of facilities that they had.

DW: So you're saying that they had much better facilities compared to what you had and they were supposed to be making them equal.

RS: Exactly. And then, of course, certainly the academics, even though we could not maybe gauge those as well, because in the vocational facilities you saw the equipment, the auto mechanics shop, etc., etc., but we certainly could almost assume that academically they probably had teachers with more advanced degrees and other tools to work with. But what I think was most important that we realized is that whereas it seemed like the main focus at Anderson then was as if every student was going to continue on to college and be academic.

DW: And this was the new Anderson.

RS: That's right [speaking about the school on Thompson Street]. And what we felt was that a lot of those kids that were our classmates, we knew they were not going to college, and, unfortunately, if they had had the same opportunity with the advanced equipment such as the auto mechanics shop, bricklaying, and other things that they had that we did not have, that a lot of those that were not going on to college academically would have been more prepared to take a job. That was one of the shortfalls that I personally experienced in comparing the two.

DW: But you said where you had a full social life at old Anderson and could participate in anything, that your sons, either because of alienation or lack of opportunity, did not have the same experience that you had.

RS: Exactly. Every night of the week at the old Anderson on Thompson and the older Anderson at Pennsylvania, because I had a chance to attend both of those schools, there was some activity, something, the CAPEZIO Club [Lucille Crawford was the director], which was very popular, a dance club. They had debating and other type groups that would attract us over at night, other than just athletics. These were things that many of the scholars that came out of those classes, which we have many—as I understand, someone has done research on the number of doctorates that have been obtained by members of the old Anderson High School. I think, as it was stated in one meeting, and I don't have the facts, but it was unusually high for a school in that era.

DW: Old Anderson was highly rated. But the thing that I'm curious about, what do you know about the situation of the trophies? I understand that through the years that Anderson, both through literary and through athletics and other endeavors, accumulated numerous trophies, just a large amount of trophies in all fields. What happened to those trophies?

RS: Well, I've heard, which I believe is firsthand, and that's in talking with Miss Delores Gregg, and I can't call her married name [Mrs. Algerene D. Craig], but Delores and I were, of course, one grade apart at Anderson. She finished a year before I did. In talking with her over the years, she has told me the story of how she received a call from a young black guy who was working, I guess, for the district maintenance, and he was along with a bunch of other guys that had no ties

to the old school. Anyway, this young man called her and told her that they had been ordered to dump all of the trophies, that they had been sitting there for a year or so, and she said she immediately took off and went over and obtained some from the dumpster that had already been put and asked them not to destroy the rest.

But she said she also noticed that quite a few trophies had been either taken from whatever, from vandalism—possibly, you know, the school had not been secured like it should have. But this, I think, I go down to Doris Miller Auditorium and look at the trophies that we have left, and I think it's deplorable that the school board would have made such an order, irregardless of whose responsibilities that fell on, to destroy something that was so valuable to the history of a people. Today we'll never be able to recapture those lost items.

DW: That's an interesting thing. After the trophies were salvaged and they were put at—Doris Miller, you said?

RS: Yes, Doris Miller Auditorium.

DW: Was there any sense of loss for the general community? Were they aware of what had happened?

RS: Being that I was not here at the time, I don't think that there was a general awareness, and maybe because in the seventies, this probably happened two or three years after the school had been closed. So I think a lot of interest was not there simply because communication was not there. I know she said she had a heck of a time just rallying people to demand that they finally build a place to house them.

What to me was a slap in the face, and of course, she said that many people felt that way, was the fact that they would build a school in Northwest Austin, name it after this school that had been in the community for fifty or sixty years, and yet destroy—it looked like it was intentional when they changed the name. Of course, the Anderson High Yellowjackets was really our fighting esprit de corps, and to change the name, it appeared that they wanted to destroy the history.

DW: Do you remember anything about the yearbooks and the school newspaper?

RS: Yes, I was quite active in both, in helping put it together. I was one of the reporters, writers, in the newspaper during my years there, and I also participated, I believe, with Mrs. Frasier, who was generally in charge of putting the yearbook together. Those things were so valuable. I mean, the newspapers, I have one or two copies, I believe, that I was able to salvage and hold onto. But it was certainly a chance to, again, get information out into the community. I think parents were better informed of some of the things that were going on among students from a student's point of view, and I think that's important, that students also participate, because some of the issues that we had with teachers or the principal and other things were brought out in that paper. The editorials were generally about problems or conditions that existed, and it certainly opened up for discussion and, in many cases, resolution.

DW: It sounds like you put a lot of pride in your work in the newspaper and with the yearbook. Did the same feeling pervade your sons about the yearbook and the newspaper at the new school that they attended?

RS: Well, sadly, and certainly I'm not sure of what the reason was, they did not have a yearbook. Certainly it wasn't because they couldn't afford to purchase it. I'm not really sure of the

newspaper, because I never saw a copy, which I would have felt that it would have made me a little bit better informed. But to be very honest with you, I was probably one of the few that would attend PTA meetings, because my mother was so instrumental in attending mine when I was in school. At that point, when I'd look around and see—I believe the numbers were something like 200 to 300 black students at Anderson in a school of about 2,000, and I never saw more than two or three parents there.

We were not generally welcomed, you know, the way that you would feel. It always seems that we were bystanders. Of course, whether you know it or not, it was just about that time that I believe a new court order was given to bus some of those students to Johnson High [School], and they had a real rally around the campus there by the neighborhood, which scared the dickens out of my son because it was anti—you know, I guess the order that had been made to bus some of those students to Johnson. Well, they couldn't understand that, because they had been bused their whole high school career from East Austin. So I think that left a very bitter feeling in even going every day into that community as if they weren't safe. As far as I know, I never heard the school board either make an apology or take any action on some of the conditions that existed there.

DW: It seems that a lot was lost when Anderson was closed and moved out of East Austin and the junior high school, Kealing School, was made a magnet school and sort of took the power away from the people in East Austin. How did you feel about the closing of the school, and what could we do to bring back the cohesiveness of the community like it used to be in the schools today? Is there anything we can do?

RS: Yes, I think there are a number of things we can do. I disagreed in a meeting that I was at, when several people that even live in the community felt that we can't go back and reclaim what was. But if you look at the picture of East Austin today, we're not necessarily talking about resegregating. I think as long as people want to get along, if they respect each other, we could care less who moves back into the community. But if you look at the redevelopment along the Eleventh and Twelfth Street corridors, if you look at many of the utilities and other road work that's being done, then you can see that East Austin is being prepared for a renaissance.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

RS: ...and I'm hoping that many of the people that live there now and their descendants who may inherit the property will not leave. I think one of the greatest things that I've experienced in the twenty-three years since I've been back is the void of leadership, the void of ownership in the community, speaking up and demanding certain things that property owners can demand. We're taxpayers. But unfortunately, a lot of the people who live there, when I was growing up, their sons and daughters moved out, and of course, the properties became rental properties, and, of course, that generally means that the values go down and sets it up for other developers to come in and take properties for little or nothing.

Now, what's going to happen, of course, is that unless there are some kind of controls put in place, we may find that most of the people that deserve to be there from this ancestral being may have to move or relocate, and what could be will never be.

DW: Well, let's hope for the best, and let's hope for some of those days when Anderson brought us to glory and when we worked together, that something will happen that we can do that again.

Mr. Smith, I want to thank you for coming. You've enlightened us. You've added to our project here in a very significant way, and we appreciate it. Thank you.

RS: Thank you, Dr. Williams, for inviting me.

[End of interview]