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Robert Smith interview for the 1913 Dayton Flood Survivors Oral Histories Collection

Robert Smith

Jeff Moyer

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
1913 Dayton Flood Oral Survivors Histories (MS-296)

Interview Date: July 19, 1996

Interviewer: Jeff Moyer

Interviewee: Robert Smith

[The video does not come in until 00:00:28]

Jeff Moyer: And um just look at me while we're doing this...sorry about taking so long.

Robert Smith: That's alright.

JM: We just got uh a couple of technical difficulties to take of here and we'll be ready to get through this.

RS: Okay....Just start talking....

JM: ...can I get you a glass of water?

RS: No. No.

JM: Okay.

RS: But when you haven't talked for a while, sometimes you voice don't come out right. Okay. I think it's okay now.

JM: To be hones a lot of this-what we talk about today will not be- wind up on the program. A lot of it will be cut out. So...

RS: Okay.

JM: So Mr. Smith just um tell me a little bit about yourself. Were you born in Dayton?

RS: I was born in Miami Valley Hospital...

JM: Mm-hmm.

RS: ...on February the 3rd, 1909. In fact uh Miami Valley Hospital had a party here about four or five years ago for those that was born between uh 1900 and 1920; there was six of showed up.

JM: Is that right?

RS: Yeah.

Background voice: So um turn down a little bit John, there you go.

JM: You guys okay?

Background voice: Yup.

JM: Alright. Um...so I...let's start off with um you know what do you remember about your neighborhood before the flood? I know that might be a little...difficult question.

RS: Yes. I remember pretty well. Um cause my, my father lived on the same area, maybe not the same house but the same area for years afterwards. But um Montgomery Street was a street that ran from Fifth over to McClain and Eagle, McClain, and Montgomery came to a point all there at one time. We lived about uh half a block north of McClain on Montgomery. And I could remember that the house uh was up about four steps on a porch before you could get in to it. And that particular day I was out in front of the house playing. The reason these memories are so clear is because really these are first memories I have about anything. And um I was playing out there and the Haymarket was west of us and I was looking toward McClain and I saw water coming up Montgomery from McClain. So I called my father who was in the house and he came out and he said "what's the matter Bob?" and I said there was water coming up the street and he took one look and he grabbed the uh my mother and said "come on ma let's get out of here." So uh she grabbed my daughter or my sister and my dad grabbed me and she grabbed her pocketbook that was about all; bout time he got to McClain and get up out of the water, the water up...was around his waist, it was coming that high. Luckily my grandmother lived up on Fifth just east of LaBelle. So we was able to go over there and have a place to go but uh the thing I remember mostly is that we went back to Bomberger Park and at that time Eagle came right on past Bomberger Park past the west entrance of Stivers High School, that has now all been taken over by Bomberger Park, so Eagle is no more. But we can sit there on the bank and watch water going down on Eagle Street uh and barn doors with chickens on and just about everything you could think of ducks and everything, horses swimming in the water and everything and we stay there for quite some time before we went back. My grandmother at the time was down there in what they called the Ware Block at the corner of Fifth and Jackson and she was at a Temperance meeting on the second floor. So uh she got caught in the flood there for two days before she could get out. My uncle Clarence...

JM: So um how did your grandmother survive while she was down there in the...?

RS: Well it was a Temperance meeting but the...some of the fellas took a fire axe and broke a hole in the floor and was able to reach down and find bottles of whiskey and stuff like that. And that's really all they had to subsist on for a couple of days till they could get out. Eventually they was taken out by boat and taken back to where land was dry which was only about four, five blocks really. But uh my uncle Clarence tried to go down and get her and he borrowed a horse and wagon and I guess he got down to about Montgomery Street and then he had to give that up cause the water was too deep. So as far as I know that was as far as he got. But it was an exciting time.

JM: Mm-hmm. So you were four years old at the time.

RS: Yeah.

JM: Do you remember what you thought as a child when you saw that water coming down your street?

RS: Well I think I was just surprised more than anything else cause it was something not expected at all. I wasn't never scared that I remember. In fact it was kind of an event. But uh it was a big time. Everybody talked about it of course.

JM: Do you um...while you were um, um, um so I guess you and your brother just sat there having a grand ole time watching the events go by...

RS: It was my sister. I was...it was just the two of us. Myself and my sister.

JM: Uh-huh.

RS: Yeah.

JM: Did you see any of the fires?

RS: Yes. I...mostly I saw smoke though uh back in the distance cause I never got any closer to, Downtown than uh Bomberger Park. But uh it came...I remember it came up to Stivers uh second stairs, the one in the middle, that's where the water came up to and the one on the west end had several feet in there. I do remember that part. And I can remember after the water went down there was a church across from the corner of Jackson and Fifth and there was a dead horse laying in the entrance to the basement. I remember seeing that.

JM: Um, um I want to ask this delicately but I don't, I don't really know how to other than to say, do you know anybody who, who passed away during the flood?

RS: No not really. No. I don't remember anything like that uh my mother and dad lost everything they had though and after the flood was over they left me at my grandmother's and my sister went with them and I stayed with my grandmother clear through the fourth grade of school. So I was there quite a while.

JM: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Did um, um do you remember seeing your house uh after the water resided?

RS: No. I don't. I don't remember ever going back there to look at it.

JM: Right.

RS: But my dad told me that everything was just washed away...

JM: Mm-hmm. So how did the flood change your life?

RS: Well the biggest way it changed me was that my mother and father didn't have anyth...any assets so they had to kind of aband me. In fact the last words my dad said before he died "do you ever forgive me for abandoning you," and uh I told him I had course I don't know whether I had or not. I told him I had and that was um well he died he was eighty-eight when he died and he's been dead about twenty-five years so that was then I was at his...when he died I was with him. Um but I never did go back home until I got into high school. I stayed with my grandmother and then I had an aunt, she had a sister who um husband divorced her and she was kind of lonely so she sent me over to live with her as company and she lived in Columbus in west Jefferson, Ohio. So I stayed there until I was fifteen and um my aunt had remarried and I got tired of all the stuff that went on so I just finally came home, I was about fifteen. And then I went to high school in Dayton and lived at home during that time.

JM: Um let's change the subject a little bit. Did you uh see any uh the NCR rescue boats?

RS: Yeah I saw a couple of them.

JM: Mm-hmm.

RS: They were down there uh below the Fairgrounds in downtown area. And uh I went down with my father and saw some of that stuff when they was rescuing people out of the second floor of their houses and stuff. Yeah I did see some of that. But not a lot just a little.

JM: Did you ever see John Patterson down that area?

RS: Not in that time no.

JM: Mm-hmm.

RS: I saw John Patterson later when he was giving lectures and stuff. So I always thought he was a great man. I think he was uh very much misunderstood really cause I think he was much greater man...nobody ever got credit for.

JM: Misunderstood how?

RS: We he practically invented the art of selling. He knew how to do it. He understood people and how to get to people. And most of his lectures was on that teaching people how to sell stuff. And uh I used to go to some of his lectures; I enjoyed them very much. But uh he didn't get the credit for what he did course he also give Kettering and Deeds their start in life. He...Kettering was just a farm boy when he came to Dayton went to work for John H. Patterson so; I think he was a great man really.

JM: Mm-hmm. Do you know uh anything about the stories about uh um him being under indictment for...?

RS: Oh only what I heard in the way of gossip.

JM: Mm-hmm.

RS: Um I do know that he was having trouble and I don't know exactly what although I have a book on his life that I think tells a little bit about it. But the uh they forgave it all after the flood that he went to great efforts to build boats and save people and he did a lot of things, the NCR was really a rallying point for all the members that was trying to do some good during the flood.

JM: Is there anything else you remember that that you'd like to share with me?

RS: Well not a lot. I know that uh course Deeds built the dams because of that flood and John H. Patterson had a lot to do with, with that but uh no I can't personally say too much more about it.

JM: Okay.

RS: Mm-hmm.

JM: Well I appreciate you taking the time.

RS: Well that's alright.

JM: I think that'll do it.

[Video goes out at 00:10:56]

JM: ...famous I hope.

RS: ...famous. Did it sound all right?

JM: Oh yeah. It sound....

[Video ends at 00:11:02]