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## Smith, Helen - Oral History Interview

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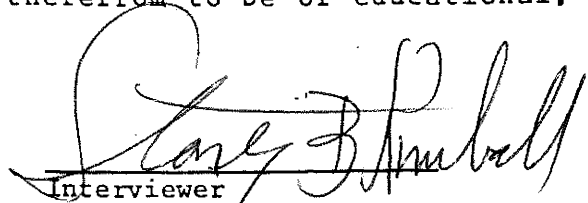
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ORAL HISTORY

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Date:

Date of Accession:

SIUE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Summers 1990-92

Helen Smith Interview, May 29, 1992

Interviewed by Stanley B. Kimball

Filename: SMITH. 529

Q: On this May 29, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Helen and Jewell. I am delighted you have dropped by my office and are willing to share your opinions and views of the early days of this University. Helen, if you do not mind, we will start with you.

I notice you came in January of 1959, why did you come here Helen?

H: I was working at the YWCA in charge of food service. Mrs. Mildred Trabue was in charge of the cafeteria in Alton. She asked if I would come to work as her assistant. Of course I was just listed as second cook, but I was still her assistant. Lula Belle Perry and Marion Arstead were the other cooks.

We were in that building on the North side of the college. The big building at that time was the Student Center. The cafeteria was in the basement.

Q: And you were here just about at the beginning, you started in January, we started classes here in 1957 at Shurtleff and prior to that time you were with the Alton YWCA, in food services I presume? How did they learn of you, they came to you?

H: Yes, years ago I had worked with Mrs. Trabue, she had done catering work and that is why she called me.

Q: I haven't heard that name in ages.

H: It was just for catering, and I did the catering at the YW.

Q: You stayed here until 1973, that's 14 years.

H: I went to East St. Louis from Alton. I was supervisor when I went to East St. Louis.

Q: So you were promoted and went down there.

H: Yes, Mr. Carr and Mr. Turner called me and told me to bring my husband with me, I guess they knew we would have to discuss it together. I took the position in East St. Louis as a supervisor.

Q: I remember in the 1961 News, our yearbook, there is a photograph of you, somewhere in the Old Rock High School down there. Why did you stay so long?

H: I enjoyed the work and I liked it. I liked the people and everything. I really liked East St. Louis because everyone was there in the same building. You knew the instructors and you knew everyone.

Q: Did you retire at East St. Louis?

H: No, I came to Edwardsville in 1967, and then once a week I would check on East St. Louis, or if something came up I would go and check to see that everything was right.

Q: Many people have mentioned the fact that in the so called good old days, in East St. Louis and also in Alton, there was much more collegiality, we were much closer together. Then we came out here and we have gotten big and scattered, and we have lost that.

What do you consider your greatest contribution to this place was?

H: I guess my enthusiasm, I liked my work. I liked the people and the students and I really enjoyed it.\*\*\*\*\*INSERT B\*\*\*\*\* I took early retirement because I'd never had the chance to just really live on my own. When the children were there I could not work and then when I started to work I could not do anything. I was interested in doing volunteer work in the community. So, I took early retirement.

Q: Your greatest satisfactions?

H: You actually began to feel like you were a part of the University. Mr. Crabb came along, he was the manager of food service. He was good to work with, and all the staff and students were good to work with. We got along very well.

Q: Your greatest frustrations?

H: Well, I don't remember that many in Alton. In East St. Louis, some morning you'd get there and the doughnuts would be gone. Someone had stolen the doughnuts. At that time deliveries were left on the doorstep. It was not very bad, but every once in a while they would be gone. So finally, Mr. Crabb built a chute so they would go down inside. Two or three times we had a bomb warning in the school. Of course everyone would have to leave and go outside. Finally they discovered that every time they had a bomb warning there was an exam going on. The last time we had one they just ignored it, we did not leave the building or anything and we did not have any more as far as I know.

Q: Well, that was perhaps a risky thing to do, but if it solved it, I guess it was worth it.

H: Well, someday or another they discovered that every time they had one there was an exam scheduled for that hour.

Q: Any other comments along the frustration line?

H: One morning I went to work and Semmi, the lady who opened up all the time, was there ahead of me to get things started, noticed the place had been robbed. Someone who knew where the money was.

I guess that was the second time. The first time, we used to keep the change in the drawer. Well, that was taken, the change you use to open up with. After that we decided, well we will just leave the cash register open at night.. The security guard always went in with the girl who checked the money. It had to have been someone who

knew where the money was because the change drawer was in the bottom of the file cabinet and the money for the business office was in an envelope in the top file drawer between papers. They knew exactly where to look. They took everything but the pennies. They took the folder with the money in it and the cash drawer, except the pennies, some were scattered on the floor.

Q: About how much money was involved?

H: I don't know exactly. We usually had a couple hundred to turn in and we always kept about \$35.00 in the cash box. When Semmi saw what had happened she left the building and went to the police station. They came back with her to check things out, I don't know what ever happened to it, but Mr. Crabb and Mr. Handy brought me change from the office to open up that day.

Q: Did they even find who did it?

H: They didn't have any idea who could have done it. But we always feared someone who worked there knew, because they forced the drawer open.

Q: Some of your best memories of your 14 years here?



H: Well, There in East, I keep talking about East St. Louis I guess, but right after Mr. Crabb came, he decided to have a couple of days all-you- can-eat specials. I think the second time was when he decided not to do it anymore because this one fellow just piled his plate completely full of chicken.

I had a beautiful fruit arrangement as the center piece, and I was so disappointed because the first group that came through ate all the fruit.

Q: Worst memories?

H: Oh, sometimes the steam down there. Something would happen and the place would steam up or the dishwasher would, something would happen. Every once in a while we'd have a leak up over head. See we were in the basement. It was considered first floor because you could enter from the street. But it was still the ground floor and the pipes that ran through we would have a leak a lot of times and we would have someone from the physical plant come in right away and check it out and work to fix it. I guess that is about the worst thing.

Q: Let me ask you a tough question, were you ever subject to any discrimination on this campus?

H: No. When I first came, Mr. Hubert, was in charge of the campus in East St. Louis and he told me to begin with , Mr. Smith we have never had a black supervisor before but anybody who doesn't want to work for you they can just and we'll just hire someone else.

But I never, I had only one student and he never said anything, but that first day I was there I went around and introduced myself, asked everybody their name and so later in the day I said to this student, you didn't tell me your name. He said, oh it don't make any difference this is my last day to work anyway. So that's the only incident.

There was another young man who was the president of student council. He came in welcomed me and told me he wanted to help me, whatever they could do, if they could help in anyway. They were very nice to me.

One day an elderly man man walked in, see we were right off the street, I went over and told him, you'll have to leave and he looked up and said, opps up jumped the devil. That was the only time I have ever had anything said. The instructors, everybody was very congenial, very nice. Over here is the same way, when I came to Edwardsville, I still had the same, there was was never any difference that I noticed.

There was one other little thing, well, some of he student workers were kind of disturbed when I first did it. In Alton everybody paid for their food, even the workers paid for their food. Well in East St. Louis I discovered that they didn't. And of course when I made that ruling I ran into a little problem.

Q: Any humorous stories you'd care to pass on Helen?

H: Oh I don't know. A lot of times you had girls who came in that had never worked before. Not even at home. So Clara said to me, they are terrible they don't even know how to take pie out of the pan

after it's been cut. She asked her, don't you help cook at home and she said, mother says my days coming later. She said, well honey your day is here now. So.

Some of the boys didn't know how to work and Mr. Cole was supervisor of the physical plant, anyway he was in charge of the students. There was another fellow was in charge of the physical plant at that time. But he had charge of the students ,so he came in one day and says Mrs. Smith. Do you have anything this young man can do that he won't break up something? I said well the walls need washing. He said good I'll let him do that.

Q: Well did he handle that all right?

H: Yes. You just had to have patience with them and most of them were anxious to work. And it wasn't hard to find students when we were in East St. Louis to work because so many of them wanted jobs.

Q: Were your experiences overall generally pretty good with the student workers?

H: Oh yes. I used to work too and I realize how people felt with someone over them. I always tryed to be reasonable. But Mr. Crab use to tell me sometimes I was to gentle with the help. But anything I wanted done usually got done. I asked one of the fellows to do something and when I left I heard him say to the other fellow, I'll do anything for Mrs. Smith, but I don't care much for the rest of them.

And when I came in in the morning I would go around to each department and speak to everybody and see how things were going. And I just thought that was part of the what you should do. It wasn't that I was trying to buy brownie points or anything it's just the way, I remember how I had been treated at certain jobs. I have ridden on both ends of the wagon and it's kind of bumpy back there on the back and since I've been in the drivers seat I wanted to be nice to the one's riding on the bumper.

Q: Obviously you had black and white student workers mixed and presumably that never caused any problems.

H: I never had any problems, but when I went to East St. Louis I discovered that all the black students were bus people who did the dishes and the waiters out front were caucasian. But I mixed it both ways, I had cashiers, some were the white girls, some were the black girls, it didn't matter. The help didn't seem to mind a bit. I tried to treat everyone the same.

I tried not to make a difference, cause one girl spoke to me one day and she said, Mrs. Smith they used to and I said, well we don't do that we treat everybody alike.

I had been through all that and knew how they felt. I felt I should treat the other group the same way I wanted to be treated because I knew how it was to be made a difference.

Q: That's a great contribution you made from a racial or a anti-discriminatory policy on this campus.

What contributions do you feel the University as a whole has made to the area?

H: I attended Shurtleff a short time and someone asked me if I was sorry when they closed Shurtleff down and I said no. She never could understand why I didn't object to the closing. Well I knew the state college was coming in and there was a bigger chance for more students to attend school.

Q: So you're saying that we made a great contribution academically.

H: I think so and then I think with the different things they had - the programs and everything, even the community is better too.

Q: Cultural enrichment, perhaps we could call it.

H: Yes.

Q: Did I hear you say you attended Shurtleff?

H: Um-hmm.

Q: That's interesting. When?

H: Oh it must have been what '36 or '37 I guess.

Q: You had long since left by the time SIUE came along.

H: Yes. I just couldn't afford to go any longer. And so I had to get a job to work and I would like to have gone at night, but I was still working and it was hard. I think I went one semester at night.

Q: I have interviewed some people who taught at Shurtleff before we took it over and then stayed on. YOU are the first person I think that I have talked with who has ever been a student there. So that's an interesting dimension. Quite interesting that you would be there in the 30's then go elsewhere and then come back and for a while work there before you went to East St. Louis.

If you had it to do all over, would you do it again?

H: Well, if I was the same age I would.

Q: You have no serious regrets. Now is there anything you would care, Helen, to add to any of the questions we have talked about. Any other addition information or address any topic that I haven't addressed.

H: I'm glad of the experience and I'm glad I worked here because I had other experiences I probably wouldn't have had. No matter what I enjoyed and I think it helped me. I really enjoyed doing it. I think I benefited from it too.

Q: Well good on that happy note maybe we will end this part of the interview.

H: Well, O.K. fine and I enjoyed doing it.

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