

[Transcript of Al Smith Jr. interview podcast]

My father [Al Smith, Sr.] was born here in Seattle, back in 1916, in April. He was born down on 4th and Pike. He was delivered by a Japanese-American midwife. His parents had emigrated from Jamaica, both his mother and father, right around 1914. And actually, [for] the two of them, it was an arranged marriage, by their respective families. They came via Canada, because in those days, Jamaica was part of the British Commonwealth, so it was easier, especially for countries that had large non-white populations. It was easier to get into the United States through Canada than it was to directly come to the United States, because of the immigration policies of our country at that time.

He was born in downtown Seattle, and his mother and father were Catholics, so his mother and father were married in 1916, in St. James Cathedral, here in Seattle. 1915, I'm sorry. And he also had a younger sister, and he went to Immaculate School here in Seattle and Catholic School and O'Dea High School. He finished in 1935, graduated from O'Dea, [and] coincidentally was the first African-American student to graduate from O'Dea, probably to attend O'Dea, too. He played basketball at O'Dea, was a member of their championship team in 1934-35, and maintained a lifelong connection with O'Dea High School. He was very proud of the Catholic education he received here in Seattle.

He went on, while he was in high school, and just after high school; he had a Brownie camera that he received as a young boy of eleven or twelve years of age, and he just got real interested in taking snapshots, and he started taking snapshots of people, but also of just different Seattle places of interest. He began to get interested in photography, and he met an African-American gentleman here in town, whose name I can probably locate later, who taught him how to develop his own photographs. So when he got married, back in 1941, he settled down and was living two blocks from Jackson Street in Seattle. He was living on Yesler and 23rd. He built a dark room and continued to learn how to process his own photography, and used to go to Tall's Camera Supply here in Seattle to get his photography equipment. He got the full equipment required to run his own dark room, and began to seriously take pictures with a speed-graphic camera. Those are the type that you see in the old movies, with the big arm with the bulb on them. He was able to purchase one of those in Japan.

He had gone to sea right after high school, and he spent several years in the Merchant Marine, going back and forth between Seattle, Japan, the Philippines, China. That would have been in '37, '38, '39, those years, just before World War II, and he has some interesting photographs of Japan, for example, before World War II. He also took photographs, for example, of the ships that were picking up the scrap iron here in Seattle, the Japanese ships, the different maru-named ships, that were here, which is interesting.

And in his travels, he was able to purchase a very good quality newspaper person's type of camera, this speed-graphic. He was interested, in the early 1940s, he and his family; he had his wife and his son, me. I was born in 1942, and during the war, he began to take

photographs at the different clubs, the different after-hours clubs that existed in those days. They were located in the general area, and in some cases, actually on Jackson Street. There were about five or six of these clubs that he would frequent every week, and every Friday and Saturday night, you could depend on him being there. He'd be there with his camera, and he would take photographs of the patrons, the idea being that he'd come back the next week, and he'd have the photographs, and sell the photographs.

While he would be in the clubs doing this; by the way he made pretty good money on the side doing this during the war and after the war. He would take photographs of the different bands that were in the area, so he would go to these clubs before they would close and he would take pictures of the patrons and the bands. He loved music, loved the music of that era, the Big Band era, in particular. That includes Duke Ellington, Count Basie, it includes the Dorsey Brothers, Woody Herman, just to give you a sense as to the quality of musicians that were, in those days, coming through Seattle. This was one of their regular circuits, for road circuits. He was able to actually develop relationships on a personal level with many of these musicians. And later, those musicians included local people, such as Quincy Jones, and Ray Charles was up here in the early 50s, and he was playing in some of these same clubs, and so my dad was very fortunate.

He had the personality that lent itself to socializing easily with people. He could talk to anybody. And because he had this fancy camera, people tended to let him go any place he wanted to go. I don't know if they assumed he was a news photographer or what, but he would go backstage. He never had any problem. He always acted like he belonged wherever he was, and he had no guilt about it. It didn't seem to scare him in any way. So when these bands were playing, he would come on stage and take photographs. I guess people just assumed he worked for the club or he worked for a local newspaper. He was phenomenal in that respect. He had a real easy way of getting permission from anybody to take their picture. I never saw anybody complain that they didn't want their picture taken, and so he got some really great candid photographs of different musicians, the Mills Brothers, as an example, the singing group, the Ink Spots were up here in those days, and many, many others. Many of whom I really don't know their names, but older people of that generation would know who these people are, and he was, in effect, capturing history.