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Phil Smith Oral History Interview

Lesley Thomson-Sasso, Interviewer

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Edwardsville, Illinois

Thomson-Sasso (TS): This is Lesley Thomson-Sasso interviewing Mr. Philip Smith, October 19th, 2016. Mr. Smith is a long-time resident of Venice, Illinois. So Mr. Smith, where were you born, and how did your family come to reside in Venice?

Phil Smith (PS): Okay I was born in Granite City, Illinois. We were at that time living in North Venice, Venice being divided into two parts: North and South. North Venice was actually in the Madison School District where I lived. Um, and uh, they—I went to school there, called Blair School and that was first grade through sixth grade and then when we completed sixth grade we moved to Madison, ah, Junior High School, that was for seventh and eighth grade, and ah, my father was a police officer in Venice, but it was a unique situation because North Venice was, as I said in the Madison School District, and we received our mail from Madison, we had a Madison mailing address, but our fire and police protection were Venice. So it was kind of a unique situation there. Ah, as I said we lived there until I was probably—well, I was probably maybe 2 or 3 years old and then we moved to a different address in North Venice, and then we lived there until I was probably 12 or 13, and then we moved to ah South Venice so...

TS: Okay; growing up in the 1950s and 60s was certainly an exciting time, such political figures like Stevenson, Truman, and Kennedy all passed through Venice, ah, at some point in their political career. Can you recall any of these moments when they were in Venice or like a memorable time when they were there?

PS: Oh absolutely. Absolutely, another memorable name was Paul Simon, who I recall coming down ah, but yes, I believe I was a senior or junior actually a junior in high school, and the high school was adjacent to the American Legion Hall. And, ah, President, ah Kennedy—candidate Kennedy came at that time ah, and travelled through the entire area, stopping off in Venice. And we were allowed to leave the school and walk across the lawn to actually see him, and ah, and listen to his speech so it was very exciting at that time, and ah, Venice at that time, being very, very political was more or less the political hub of the county, ah our ah, the Madison County Democratic Chairmen [clears throat] excuse me, was from Venice so he orchestrated lots of events, and ah, and had a lot of influence throughout the state with that.

TS: Um, now you mentioned that your father was a police officer in Venice, so what was growing up, um, you went to school in what would be considered Madison, but can you speak to a little bit about the climate that he dealt with as a police officer in Venice?

PS: Well, when he first started I'm sure a lot of what he dealt with was the uh uh was the gambling

activities in the taverns that were located there on Main Street in Venice. Now Main Street was just as you come across the McKinley Bridge and as I recall, and this was even before my time, that it was a gambling mecca along there with lots of taverns, and people would come from Saint Louis, ah, you know come over to Venice so it was quite popular at that time. Some of the bars don't know if you're interested in the names, The 316 Club was one, ah, Norma's was one, 700 Club was another, so it was—it was quite an active strip down through there at that time.

TS: Do you remember um, when you were growing up in Venice, like did you ever go to that Main Street or was that like, you know, not allowed, like did you parents allow you to go down there or did your dad see kind of like the vice the area and say “this isn't good” or...?

PS: No, yes ah, I do recall going down there. There was a gentleman by the name of ah, Bill Smith and that happened to be my father's name. Ah Bill Smith was associated with ah, ah a gangster named Buster Wortman at that time, and Bill ran this 316 Club. Ah, and I'm sure there was gambling that went on there late at night, but they also would have meals on Sunday afternoon, and as a child I can recall going with our family and having dinner there. Ah, so yes I do remember that, that was ah, that was something and then ah, even as I grew older, it was still—there was still lots of bars along there, and then in addition to that, was the office, for the bridge—the McKinley Bridge office was located there—and ah, so I would go down there, and actually on Saturday mornings, ah, people would congregate there, just as a little meeting place to talk and visit, and there would be a lot of politics discussed at that time as well so.

TS: Um, so you mentioned that this 316 Club—it was interesting because in part of my research I actually found a ah, magazine article that highlighted the gambling in Venice in the 1950s, um, what was your—I guess—it's interesting cause if your father was a police officer, you still had dinner with this you know, prominent family that was associated with ah organized crime, um, what was that dynamic like between your dad and the organized crime that was there?

PS: Well I think they were basically friends. You know, I was young so I didn't know a lot of what the dynamics were other than the fact that they were friends, and uh, I recall as a as a child, this—they called this other Bill Smith “Bad Eye Bill Smith”—is a name they referred to, and I recall as a child that he came ah, to our house in North Venice in in a I believe it was like a 1955 red Cadillac, and I was just astounded because I had probably never seen a Cadillac you know, let alone one that was almost a block long, but ah, I recall it was a beautiful car, and he was a very short man in stature, very little guy, but he was he was very nice, and gentle, but he was ah as far as I know they were just friends with my father.

TS: Your dad was never put in a compromising situation where he would ever have to like arrest or ticket any of these um, you know, clubs or anything like that?

PS: Ah, I would assume so, but I really couldn't—couldn't say for sure, I have no evidence of that but I would assume being in the in the position he held, yes, I'm sure there were disturbances there that they would be called to, and they would have to squelch certainly.

TS: Yeah, that's an interesting dynamic, um, and ah, I grew up in ah, in New Jersey so like Atlantic City and you know the same type of you know vice that's down there so it's interesting to see um, on this side. Um, now, you mentioned when you said that there was ah a meeting outside of where the McKinley

Bridge is that Venice becomes this like political hub, um, from your memory what do you call of it being this political hub? Like what do you mean by that?

PS: Well, they had at one time, and this was at—I was a little older, ah, they had an organization called the Venice City organization, and basically what it was was just a group of men, meeting at the bridge office ah playing cards, and ah at that time, ah they would take turns providing a meal. For example, one month, the Venice Fire Department would the firemen would get together and prepare a meal, ah, the next month maybe it would be the police department, the next month it might be the school board members, ah it would be the city workers one month, ah, so with the variety of people you had all the different people providing ah very good food too, I might add, ah, and then as I said we'd eat, play cards, and then ah, just ah, ah, socialize. And ah, they would have politicians come, candidates come and speak to this group, ah as well, so yeah it was fun, as I recall as a younger guy, ah, there was a gentleman named "Buck" Simmons, Walter Simmons, who was our county Democratic chairman, and, ah, I guess as a result of me being associated with this, and this was before I went to college, so, and ah, there were lots of jobs coming out of Venice going to Springfield, and for state jobs, and so I was fortunate to have gotten a job ah, ah, with the help of Buck Simmons, and I went to Springfield and worked for Secretary of State Paul Powell at that time.

TS: Right. About how many people ah, were a part of that, like organization—the organization that you had mentioned?

PS: Ahh

TS: Because it seems like a pretty big number.

PS: Yeah how many workers?

TS: Ah, how many people were a part of that organization where like they would bring them meals? Was that most of the pop—Like, most of the guys in Venice?

PS: Ah yeah, we would have probably have 25-30 guys at each gathering, and it was held on Thursday nights if I remember correctly, but ah, it was kinda big deal, because it gave us you know as I said gave you an opportunity to get together and socialize. Also, as a youngster, not a youngster—but as a young man too, I was involved in the Venice Lions Club. And that was that was prominent and I think from that stemmed some political stuff, because it was the same people Venice being a very small place you had a lot of the same people who were members of both groups, so that was ah that was interesting, and they did a lot of good, as well. Ah, I remember when I was president of it as a young man, we had a Eagle Scout from there, named ah ah Tommy Hooks who had gone to Washington DC on a conference and was diving off of a board at a swimming pool there and paralyzed and became paralyzed as a result; and the Lions Club got together along with the help of the city organization, and we threw a series of barbeques, ah in fact we had 5 of 'em ah throughout Venice, Madison, and Granite City and we raised like \$5,000 dollars to give to the family, so just another thing that just sticks out from you know, from being part—growing up in Venice.

TS: Yeah, wow, and that's a surmountable amount of money for sure at that time.

PS: Yes, it was, yeah, exactly.

TS: Um, so when you were in the Lions Club that was during your high school experience in Venice?

PS: No, I was outta high school at that time. Yeah, that was probably, I would say that was probably around the 1970, maybe 71.

TS: Okay, Um, well, going back a little bit, um, I wanted to talk a little bit about the climate of Venice High School in the 60s. I know that in 1962, they began to re-route the busing, and therefore little by little, schools would become um, integrated. Um, because in 1954, schools across the country were desegregated based on *Brown v. Board*. Do you um, remember how ah, now you said you graduated in 61, but do you remember the climate at this time as schools began to make the shift to integrate in Madison as well as in Venice?

PS: Yeah, I do recall a little bit of that, but I think actually when that integration took place was 1964, or possibly 65, so it was after I had you know, I had ah graduated from—from the high school there in Venice, but, ah, as I recall, Lincoln school was the other high school in Venice, and ah, as I recall that was a newer school and that's where the blacks had gone to school, and ah, that was a newer school, and they had you know, a good basketball team, as I recall back then, and ah, you know as far as I was concerned, as a youngster, I mean it was just the way it was you know, they had their own school which was a lot newer, and better than ours, but everybody seemed to be happy in the early 60s.

TS: Yeah, um, one of the things that I noticed was that Venice had a railroad that came through it, and so, on the other side of the tracks were the Lee Wright Homes, um, would you say that even in the 60s, did you have much integration in Venice, or, was it um, still somewhat segregated?

PS: Uh, North Venice was integrated before South Venice and that's where I had lived. Actually it's a unique situation you had Madison on one side of the tracks, then you had North Venice, and that's where I grew up and that's that was white to a certain point I think the street was ah well I don't remember.... Weaver.... Weaver Street at one time and everything on the other side of Weaver Street was West Madison, so—it was kinda unique the way it was all cut up, but West Madison was all black, and North Venice was white, but then in the—probably late 50s ah, North Venice then became integrated, and then later on in the 70s, then South Venice became integrated.

TS: Um, so as far as like growing up for you, you didn't feel any racial tension in Venice at all whatsoever? Like one of the things that surprised me was when I was researching, Madison schools in 62 or 63, um, had a Klan presence and they had burned crosses on the front lawn of the school because they were protesting integration of schooling, and so I had wondered, you know you had mentioned your dad was a police officer, um, if he was still working at the time, or you know, looking back and reading newspapers like were you shocked that this was happening in like such close proximity to where you grew up?

PS: At one time I do, I don't remember any specifics about it, but I think that it was probably in the I was married in 1967, so I think it was between 1967 and 1970, there was one time that yeah, that there seemed to be a little uprising between the blacks and the whites there but I don't remember the specifics on it, I just recall I lived on the street there, that that kinda connected North Venice and South Venice so much of

the traffic would pass by our house, and I do recall a little bit of some uprising but not specifics, ah, however I do recall, as I said because I grew up in North Venice, I had an older brother, 4 years older than me, so he went through high schools in Madison, and in the 50s is when they really had serious problems, at Madison, and that's when that was integrated, probably '54, '55. Ah, but Venice wasn't integrated then like I said until like 65 til about 10 years later.

TS: After graduating high school where did you attend college?

PS: I went to SIUE, in Edwardsville, actually I recall, ah, when they built the campus, and ah when I started I actually attended classes in East Saint Louis, that's where SIU classes were being held in, so my first year I went there, and then ah, I went one year, and then ah, didn't go back, didn't finish, didn't stay in college and started working, and worked for a while and then once I got married then I went back and attended SIUE in Edwardsville.

TS: Um, what was campus like in East Saint Louis? Because coming from Venice it seems that everybody that I've talked to that lives there um, you know, says it's a very tight knit nice community the park, you know was a beautiful place to go and everybody seemed to know their neighbors, and so, coming out of Venice and going to East Saint Louis, and college can you talk a little bit about what the climate was like there?

PS: Yeah, basically it was just—I went there, attended classes, and came home. I didn't spend any time on campus down there, ah, I even recall back then, believe it or not I had one class that that was on TV, so I would go like once, ah maybe once a week or every two weeks and then you'd watch the rest of your classes on TV which was you know, for going back that far, was rather unique, but, ah, ah, other than that I don't remember a whole lot about the campus down there. It was called, they called it 10th Street Tech and it was right the Old Rock Junior High School in East Saint Louis is where the classes were held, ah, but yes, you're right about Venice being close knit—we did we had beautiful park and it was called Lee Park and it was named after Dr. Lee, who was the Mayor at one time, and then his son became mayor later Dr. John E. Lee Junior, but yeah, it was a beautiful park, the land was donated by the Lee family, the Lee family lived there ah, for a long time, you know, until ah, they they've actually died off.

TS: So after you left college what did you do for work?

PS: I immediately as I said earlier to you, I graduated like in June or May and started teaching immediately summer school in Venice at the Venice Grade School I think I had 8th grade students and they were—I believe they were all black at that time, it was a small class, and it was good, there was a gentleman named Mr. Vickers who was Superintendent who was a very nice man, ah, he was very good, he did a good job down there, in Venice. And I started teaching there and I taught a summer school there, and was fortunate enough to ah get a full time teaching position in Granite City, as an elementary school teacher.

TS: Um, now you mentioned that you also worked for the Secretary of State, Paul Powell, so, that happened after the first year you completed ah campus at East Saint Louis, you said you went out to work, so is that who you were working for at that time?

PS: I believe it was yeah, I'm thinking that was probably—I went to SIU, ah, well in the summer, I

graduated in '61 worked at Laclede Steel in the summer, then went to SIU in East Saint Louis, and finished that first year, and then went back to Laclede Steel worked there for a while, ah, then I'd left there, and I think I worked at Tri-City Grocery Company that was a grocery company in the Tri-City area in fact they were all over the area. I worked there for a while, and then left there and I guess that would have been about '63 or 4 that I left there and went to Springfield and worked for Secretary Powell.

TS: What was your job for Secretary Powell?

PS: I worked in the driver's license division at that time to renew your driver's license you would just fill out an application mail it with a check, ah, and then I was in the office where we received those checks, I had ah 9 people work for me, who basically just opened the mail, and ah, sorted it, and ah, ah, I just supervised that department. But one thing unique about that is that when we would get applications in from people in the state of Illinois, and it would be a celebrity, for example Cassius Clay, Muhammad Ali, we would see something like that, or Otto Kerner who was governor at that time would send his in, of course everybody would pass it around and that was kind of a neat thing to do at that time, you know.

TS: Who was, ah, the most famous driver's license that you had to?

PS: Probably one of those two... yeah yes, absolutely. I mean we would see other people who are local people, but ah, any time the big names would come through like that, ah, that was interesting—you know—we'd alwa—everybody pass them around look at their check, look at their signature on the check and uh yeah, kinda neat.

TS: Sounds like it. Um. Paul Powell had a huge influence on the State of Illinois, um, he was even dubbed the "Democrat even Republicans voted for..." um because he had this larger-than-life presence, so ah, working the licensing division how much interaction did you have with him? And can you speak a little bit about his character, um, the time that he was alive? and you know, being in the state, you know his influence?

PS: I—I actually the position I held was ah a small position compared to him. I don't know that I ever actually saw him, other than when—I think I got the job when I went up there, but, I ah never really saw him, the only thing I do recall at Christmastime they would come around and take a nice collection from everybody for a Christmas gift for him, and so I'm sure with that department being as large as it was, that was a very nice Christmas gift that he received, ah, also, I think you alluded to a little story about the shoebox, ah, I guess I can talk about that as well.

TS: Sure

PS: And ah, John Rendleman who was chancellor at SIU, as I understand it, was his executor, and had received a call, ah, from Springfield, stating that Mr. Powell had passed away at the St. Nicholas Hotel, and uh, uh, the story goes that Mr. Rendleman then immediately drove up there, parked in a no parking zone in front of the hotel, and went upstairs to I assume retrieve some shoeboxes that were stored in a closet as the story goes, and uh, started taking those down to his car, and putting them in the trunk, and then, ah, on one of the following trips down the car was gone. Ah, and the city of Springfield, I guess police department somebody had had it towed, so that was I recall that story vividly, and how quickly they tried to—he made some calls and got the car back, and I assume only assume that all the money was

in it, I don't know.

TS: Yes

PS: That would make interesting you know, story.

TS: Um, yeah you're right, that is you know, part of the story was that you know Powell had over \$800,000 dollars that he had received you know um, which you wonder now [laughs] like if your collection at Christmastime was a part of that, um, but you know, when he died in 1970, um, Rendleman's ah accounts of the money, and where it potentially could have come from, it didn't come out until about the following year. Um, at this time were you ah, still working in '71, for the licensing department or were you, back teach—were you teaching?

PS: No, yeah, I—fact I—I started my teaching career in 1971, so I was no, I was long gone from Springfield at that time.

TS: Yeah, so could you speak to the climate of, um, when these reports came out, and you worked for the State Department, and even though you never really interacted with him, did it, like what was your opinion? Was everybody in Illinois shocked? Were you know ... cause he seemed like such a beloved political figure...

PS: Yes, I think probably a lot of 'em were, but maybe the insiders knew more, and they may have known sources that money may have come from I don't know other than you know, other than as I said, we they collected from us for Christmas gifts, and I guess birthday as I recall whatever it was, so it could have been some of that, but I don't know—ah I would say yeah, the people you know in the outside little people, like myself, we were shocked at it, but ah, I don't know about others.

TS: Um, so after working for Powell you returned to teach in Venice. Um, what was the school district like at the time you returned in the 70s?

PS: Well, it was a very good school district actually, as I recall, ah, Venice was one of the higher-paid districts because we had ah union electric plant there we had railroads there, so they had a lot of revenue, ah, as opposed to some of the other districts, so it was was one of the higher paid districts at that time, and like I said I only taught there ah during the summer session but ah you know, living there, after I got married I lived there for seven years, my wife and I did. My father owned some rental property, and it kinda we moved into one of those houses and kinda got our start, so we lived there seven years, but it was a very good school district, and there were noted had a good basketball team—as well having gone to states and won state, so yeah, it was a good school district it the-the teachers had done a good job, some of them, were still there ah the ones that I had had were still teaching at that time so...

TS: What, um, eventually motivated you to move out of Venice?

PS: Well my wife was from Collinsville, and uh, it was it took an arm and a leg to get her to move there, and one of the reasons was there was no stores, no shopping area, because if you lived in Venice, if you did any shopping at all, you'd go to Granite City, or even back then you'd go to East Saint Louis, because East Saint Louis was very vibrant at that time, and there were lots of stores there. But, ah, we lived

there for seven years, kinda got our feet on the ground, and gave us a start, but she wanted to be back closer to her mother and her family, so we moved to Collinsville in 1974, so...

TS: When you left Venice, were a lot of other families um, leaving as well and moving out too? Because the dynamic shifted quite a bit in the population. Um, now it's I think 80 I'm sorry 98 percent African-American, um, so did you see some of that change over time that you were there?

PS: Uh, yes it was, it was the beginning of it actually about the time we moved was the beginning of the of the change, ah, they were you know, kind of moving into the area, so uh, I recall ah guys that I graduated with a lot of 'em left they didn't stay, ah I guess we mainly I stayed because ah, my father had the rental property and it was you know, we would pay rent when we could, and when we couldn't he wouldn't throw us out or evict us, so ah that's why we stayed, but yeah I—a lot of the young people as they graduated, they ah they would leave, ah some of 'em would go off to college and not come back, but ah, there were a few my age that stayed, as I recall.

TS: So, when you left in um '74, you said, um, what—your father stayed in Venice or... did he eventually move out too?

PS: Well my father—my actually yeah, he was—yes—my parents my father actually passed away that year, but yeah, they were still there, they remained there and then my mother remained there for a few years after that, and then, she and my sister moved out of there, ah, I would say probably, you know '70, 1970 around that time, so...

TS: So, working for um, the school system, what changes have you seen over your career in education as far as Madison County's school system is concerned?

PS: Oh, gosh, um, I mean technology of course is one of the big things that I've noticed, ah—the schools—Venice of course if we're going back to Venice, if that's what we are talking about—got—you know got much smaller, ah, and then eventually ah the high school closed, as you probably know, ah, and ironically me working here at the ROE [Regional Office of Education], I was instrumental in doing that—and it was it was kinda personal that I had to go down and actually go through the building—you know, a high school that I had attended, and ah, you know, be a part of the demolition, but ah, ah, that as I said Venice was always good in sports, ah, and ah, as far as the education of Madison County in the schools, I guess technology being the biggest change we've had.

TS: Venice's High School closed in 2004, I believe

PS: I don't remember the exact date, but that sounds right

TS: Um, and so, what was it like um, what was the process that closed the high school exactly?

Because now from an administrative angle um, what is it that exactly closed the school?

PS: Well, I don't I don't really know, other than the fact that the enrollment was down, you know, but ah, I don't know specifically what the reason was they did they did that I just knew at that time I didn't have anything to do with it as far as being part of this office, but ah, I know that it was they were in financial

trouble and they just didn't have the students or the revenue anymore to operate the high school so... And merging just wasn't ya know worth it—with Madison it was very difficult to try to get that done, anytime that you want to merge school districts I mean you got school board members that would have to give up their seats, and they're not willing to do that. So...

TS: What um, what was it like going back through the high school knowing that it was closing and you graduated there, those years back, what was the condition, had it—had some things stayed the same, had some things changed? Um...

PS: Yeah, there were—it was basically an old building, and a lot of it, was pretty much the same as when I had attended there, it was especially interesting even going back into the office I recall climbing up in one of the closets way in the back there were boxes of what I mentioned we still have some of that, but, I actually came across old ah grade cards, from my class that had my name on it, and we dug some of that stuff out—but I was surprised that the school district you know, they didn't retain any of that ah, and I guess by the law they don't have to I don't know after so long a time, but ah, what I could retrieve and save I did, and then brought here, and now we retain it here in the regional office. But yeah, it was it was interesting just to go back as I'd walk through the halls and have the memories that I had and ah, and see the things. There were two buildings and they were connected by a corridor, the one building being the grade school, which was newer than the high school but ah, even in when I was in high school we would have a class or two we would have to go over to the grade school building ah, I think I did for math and speech you know, but it was kinda interesting just to to walk through there, and just see what it was like, and ah, ah, yeah it just brought back a lot of memories.

TS: Um, when Venice merged with Madison, um, what were the biggest challenges to the community?

PS: Ah, the school district you referring to?

TS: Yeah

PS: They didn't really merge with Madison ah, I mean Venice still has their own separate school district

TS: Okay

PS: And Madison has theirs so the- they're not really a together they did not merge

TS: Um, when Venice High School closed then, those students now go to...

PS: Well, I'm not certain, where they you know, they some of 'em may have gone to Madison, but ah, I don't know that legally they could have a Venice address and attend unless they pay, I'm not exactly sure how that works, but some of 'em may have gone to East Saint Louis, or Lovejoy, but I don't really know the specifics on that.

TS: Mmm. So, after the high school closed, um, did you ever like you went back to have to go through the building, you found some of the records and the old history um, and then did you notice at all, when you were back there how the climate of Venice had changed from what you remembered when you left in the 70s?

PS: Well, the time ... I mean it was it was already ah, integrated almost fully integrated at the time the high school closed, so yeah after the high school closed, no it pretty much I think has remained the same ah, they still have the grade school there, I think grade K through 8, ah, which is I think they're doing quite well, you know, ah, Dr. Cullen who used to be our assistant regional superintendent here is now superintendent there, and ah, I think they're doing a very good job in the school down there, ah, I've been down there several times, ah, as part of my duties here I go out and inspect buildings and ah, so I go through and inspect the school and ah, everything seems to be running well down there. In fact, ah, several years ago, ah, I even went down there and substituted as a principal a few times when they were in need, so ah, and I found that very interesting, you know, but it was it was pretty much the same as, I had subbed as a principal in the Granite City schools as well, so it was basically the problems were the same, you know, it was just smaller down there than Granite City.

TS: What um, so even as a former educator, what type and I'm just curious what type of problems would you say um, are prevalent in, like you mentioned Granite City and Venice, Venice just has its smaller...

PS: Ah truancy was one, you know, a big one, um, cooperation from the parents as far—helping the children ah you know, and ah, ah, that type of thing were the big things you know, discipline as much as anywhere I guess, and then, when you'd have discipline problems getting hold of the parents many times you couldn't you know, ah, I mean I've had instances as a substitute principal that - where ah, a student ah, would be left there not picked up after school, so I'd have to stay ah I've stayed as late as like 6:30 before waiting for parents to show up to pick up their kids, so ah, pretty much common problems like that.

TS: So school um, maybe has changed a lot since you went to Venice High School like being on the other side, you know as a teacher, and even as an administrator um, but, you're involved in um, the Venice Historical Society, and part of um, from what I understand, their initiative is to kind of preserve this history of Venice, as well as the experiences of high school, that um, everybody had, um, so what types of things are you hoping that are preserved from your memories or the collective memory of Venice?

PS: Well one thing I mean the people, and the the closeness of the people, and that was the big thing in Venice, ah, growing up there, everybody knew everybody, you know, and ah, it it just and again it was as far as politics it was predominantly Democratic there, I mean, very it was always a joke that there was one person voting Republican and they spent lot of time trying to figure out who it was, but ah, it was predominantly, Democratic, ah but ah, the closeness is the big thing with Venice and I hope they can let let that continue—I mean those memories continue on, ah, I do know that we had a church there Saint Mark's church, and I just received word yesterday that they're going to have their last mass at that church. I attended about a month ago, what I thought was the last mass, but, now I understand officially it wasn't - and now they've got it scheduled for the, 20th of October maybe something like that - and uh, no it wouldn't be the 20th, be the, I don't know in a week or so, it's gonna be the last mass, officially and then that church will close so, ah, a lot of things like I said, you know, the closeness of the people, and the church and the school and that I hope that we can retain those memories a lot.

TS: How large was your classes in the high school, like when you talk about the closeness of the community, um, like how many students do you remember in your classes, or how large was your graduating class of the high school?

PS: Okay, as I recall, when I attended high school there, but the entire population of four year high school was about 125 students. I graduated with 25 students and I think the class the year after me there were like 20 or 21 so it was even smaller so, yeah it was very small, the classes were all small, and uh, that probably part of the - is why people became close, and you know you knew everybody, but ah, yeah, I'd say that I'd probably knew everyone in the high school there may have been 1 or 2 students that maybe were new or something, but everybody kinda knew everybody in the whole high school at that time. Ah, so, but it was ah neat; neat place to grow up.

TS: It sounds like um, such an interesting experience, because everybody that I've talked to has always said that it was kind of like a "Happy Days" scenario [laughs] and that everybody really just, you know, ah, got along, and you know, um, really enjoyed their high school experiences, um, when you attended, um, do you - like what were some of the, were you involved in any sports or clubs, or things that Venice offered and then, coming back to it in the 70s did you think that anything had changed because now, I don't know if there is still that same community feeling that there is.

PS: Going back and looking it's something you said there that made me think, when I was in high school, it was like I said the town was so small and unique, we had a grocery store called Kavner's Grocery Store which was a block from the school. I would actually leave my study hall, and go to Kavner's and they would have bags of groceries with people's name written on them, and I would take and pick those up, and take their car, and drive round Venice and deliver those groceries, and you would just walk into the house, you'd maybe knock on the door, the understanding was you just walk in and set it on their table, and I recall doing that for a long time, but I was actually doing it during my study hall, ah, as far as activities in school, I was not involved in sports but I was a part uh I was president of the student council, and played a part of the student council for two or three years when I was in high school, and ah, remember one year actually, getting to go to Chicago on the train for the student council convention was a big thing for a little boy from Venice you know, but ah, yeah, it was all those things played a part and it made it a lot closer, you know.

TS: When do you think the dynamic of Venice changed?

PS: Wow, I would say, um, when the - probably - when the integration took place at the high school because as I understand, and I was gone then, that it became overcrowded at that time. And uh, I think that's when a lot of it - a lot of change - the classes were much larger, and uh, I think that's when it was, and that probably would have been oh, I guess that would have been in the you know, well, '65, was the first year it integrated and then any time between '65 and '75 probably was when the major changes took place.

TS: Um, what type of ah, now what type of changes? Is it just the integration of new people, was there any industry that was closing? Or jobs that ah, were beginning to move out of Venice and into other areas, um, you know, was the bars on that main street were they still open? Um, were there more problems that were maybe coming out of those areas?

PS: Ah yeah, I think, ah yeah the Union Electric was a big factor I think when it when it first closed down and the railroads ah there was a place, Dow Chemical Company was actually in North Venice, or in the city of Madison, which you know, also, I think there were lots of jobs there Laclede Steel was a big

employer at that time in Madison, ah, probably, I'm trying to think I left Laclede Steel I worked there after - I worked the summer I graduated from high school, went to college, came back worked again, left, and then came back ah, and worked at Laclede in the accounting department until probably 1969 when I went back to college but ah, yeah, I think that's when a lot of things changed when the jobs left.

TS: What did you do for Laclede Steel the summer after you graduated?

PS: Okay I worked just as a laborer, in the plant, real eye opener, you know - coming from high school into a steel mill and working, you know, ah, some of the rough jobs, but I enjoyed it, it was paid well, it helped pay for my college, and ah, then, as I said I went to college one year, came back, and worked again as a laborer but then left there and then went to I think I worked at Tri-City Grocery Company as I said, um, but ah, then when I came back later, I came back and worked in the accounting department and figured bonus on jobs and did a lot of that at that time, so...

TS: Do you remember what um, what year that was that you came back to work in accounting was that the late 60s or...?

PS: Well, let's see... ah, I started college I think in '69 so, I worked there - so I'd say about '65, or '66, is when I came back and worked at Laclede Steel.

TS: And you worked there until you started SIU again

PS: Right, until like '69 and then I just quit and went back to school full time.

TS: One of the things that I had found in a lot of newspaper reports at this time was that between '67, '68, and '69, um, groups like CORE and the NAACP were coming into Madison and Venice, and in particular they were interested in um, knowing how many like black workers were able to acquire jobs in Venice and obviously in Madison, so I was wondering if, you know, on the accounting side of it, um, if you saw, like any of that disparity or could speak to any of the claims as to why they might have been there?

PS: No I don't even recall an NAACP group down there, ah, in Venice by the time that I lived there, I do know that there were they were always been black police officers on the police department and fire department working for the city, I can always recall that, um, as far as the teachers in the school, I don't recall- I know I didn't have any ah, even even when I went to school in North Venice in the Madison school district there were no black teachers but I think when the school integrated there were a few black teachers that came from Lincoln and they worked there - ah, there, there as far as I know there were blacks always employed there, and at Laclede Steel as well when I worked there.

TS: Um, do you remember, because that was the claim, was that they weren't getting I guess like maybe equal opportunity for jobs, but at Laclede, um, do you remember at all, like was it, ah, like ah you know you had like 50-50 population wise or you just knew that jobs were available to black workers that wanted them.

PS: Right, yeah yeah, I don't recall that ever having been a problem down there or an issue, ah like I said I don't remember the NAACP or black groups in that area, it could have been after I left, then maybe they became a part of it, ya know.

TS: Yeah, um, it was interesting because you know, when you mentioned um, earlier that scuffle that - racial scuffle that you weren't really sure, it actually involved in 1969 a black police officer that was accused of like I guess harassing um, the black communities of the project homes Lee Wright and in um, Venice Homes, and I didn't know if you remembered, so apparently that night, 30 black youths came into Venice and like firebombed part of the town um, from where I understanding geographically cause like zoning has changed and things like that it was in the park that was by where Mayor Lee used to live um, so I didn't know how close in proximity you were to that, or if you remember any of that happening or maybe that was the scuffle you had thought.

PS: Now what year would that have been?

TS: It was '69

PS: '69 no...

TS: And there was one flash in a newspaper...

PS: Yeah, see, I just I lived, ah, actually I lived there at the entrance to the park which is just down the street from Dr. Lee, and uh, I remember a small skirmish but I don't remember anything that would probably made the news, and as you're describing it, I don't remember that being a big issue and ah, ah I would have because I lived there; that was my back yard was actually you know, part of the park, so yeah, I was right there in the midst of it, but I don't remember it being ah, a huge issue you know, as you're describing it was in the papers.

TS: It's interesting cause it was one article, um, and it was in the ah Edwardsville paper, and they arrested 30 ah black youth, and then they were let go the next day, but from what I can kind of discern was that um, the park was then closed and they began like limiting like who could go into the park, at what hours at what time, and then the park I guess used to have like a recreational area with like um, rides, and like a carnival and stuff like that and eventually that all was closed, um, but maybe you know press brought something...

PS: I believe that was the case, you know, it just probably made for a story to sell papers, because I really don't remember that being a huge issue, I do, vaguely, as I'm thinking back maybe I do recall having seen ah, police vehicles from other municipalities like Madison, maybe the Madison County Sheriff's department, ah, they may have been patrolling the area but ah just thinking back you know other than that it just - may have been a one-time thing, ah, a one night thing and they arrested people and then let 'em go and that was it probably but yeah and it could have been the beginning of some of the changing at that time, yeah the park had rides they weren't ah actually like carnival rides - they were just a merry-go-rounds and swings things like that that ah I don't I don't know if they're still there or not actually you know but ah but there also used to be ball diamonds there, and ah, there were buildings that had little restrooms in them, I recall that, actually my father did part time work as a handyman type thing and I recall helping him ah as a young boy build some of those back then, so yeah.

TS: Um, so, with your work on the Venice Historical Society and kind of speaking to those greater themes, besides from this sense of community are there any projects that the historical commission is working on um, in the preservation of Venice history?

PS: The one thing that I do recall they had something to do with a cemetery that's located in Granite City and it had - it was maybe the St. Mark's Cemetery? I don't know the specifics on it, but that was the big thing they worked on, ah, I do remember also that they brought the bells from maybe the old church and ah erected those right here in Edwardsville at Sunset Hills Cemetery. I think they're up there - ah, but ah other than that I don't attend the meetings so I'm really not up on what they're actually doing, but ah those two things I do know, you know, along that line, ah, as a young man, I was invited, I used to be invited with Dr. Lee ah, and Buck Simmons and various other people from the community and ah, that last Saturday before Christmas of every year, ah, they would go to Saint Louis, and we'd dress up and we'd all go to a hotel for lunch, and then we'd all do a little bit of shopping and then ah, eat lunch, and then just socialize. And ah, I actually had been a part of that for probably 50 some odd years, and maybe only missed like 2 years out of 50 some odd years and I now probably am the oldest member of the group, but we still have and we still do it, and we still have like third generation of kids that come and the story was back then that you'd bring your son, I mean providing he was old enough and ah, let 'em get a feel of what it was like, and help to keep that thing going, and so we've been doing that, and I'm confident that once I'm gone that these young guys are still will continue to do this and so we don't ah dress up and go to lunch anymore like we used to but we still get together and ah, we do we do have a little food and just socialize.

TS: Does the current mayor of Venice take part in this as well?

PS: No, ah, no actually I don't recall we have had any black members, well it's not actually members, they're just people that show up, but it's just mostly it goes back to the time before the city was integrated you know

TS: Okay, ah that's interesting um, so, what's the so ah, the lunch that you go to these are members of like families that were all a part of Venice

PS: Exactly

TS: That were prominent and now you said the Lee's there aren't any more is that correct? No?

PS: There's one. Dr. Lee's son, Jack Lee is still living ah yeah and he still comes, and he has in the past brought his son, ah, and then we had the there was a Hartman family, in fact one of the Hartman's had been mayor prior to Dr. Lee, ah, and we still have some of Hartman's kids - grand kids; great grandkids that are still involved. Tolliver was a very big family down there we have ah still have the Tolliver's come ah so yeah it's just a, I'm confident it'll go on and on and on and on I don't know that ah, even though the kids now, and I lot of 'em come in now, I guess their kids were not raised in Venice but they still feel a connection because their fathers were and their grandfathers were and this is something that they had done and they want to be a part of it so, ah, I'm confident it'll keep going, you know, long time after I'm gone I hope -

TS: yeah, that's a great that's a great tradition. Did Mayor Lee - did Dr. Lee start that?

PS: Yes, I believe he probably was one of the original ones that started it yeah, he and ah, I think a guy named Roy Edwards and Buck Simmons, they were probably were down the major players and I do recall one year there were three of us; Jack Tolliver, Charlie Simmons and myself and we were at the top of the

Statler Hotel and we're having lunch and there's three of us, and we thought are we gonna let this thing die? You know last year we had you know a lot more, and now this year we're down to three? you know and we decided we were all going to bring somebody else next year and we would build it up and it just started getting bigger and bigger and bigger we probably will have - we probably had as many as 50 guys and ah, we can still easily get 25 to 30 even now, so it's just kinda neat, neat to do

TS: Yeah. One last question, so how many people from Venice like from your generation still stay in touch with each other? That sense of community that was fostered there like you said you have this luncheon so that's a nice way to you know, bridge the generation gap, and have people become involved in wanting to know more about the history of Venice because it is interesting and unique, but how many people do you know of whether it was from your graduating class or others that still do have this sense of community and keep in touch?

PS: Yeah, probably from my actual class there's only a couple that were my age, but a lot of these guys now are younger than me, but ah, I'd say yeah we'd probably have 20 of 'em that we do it just I may not see 'em but once or twice a three times a year, but ah there's we just have that connect that you just you always come back you know, and at Christmas time we're always think of this and get calls from younger guys now they always wondering if we're going to do it again you know, and that's sure we'll get it together and they kinda now are taking over, so, ah, that's good to see.

TS: Nice, well thank you so much for your time I really appreciate it

PS: Oh you're welcome