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Gullah Project
Arnold Smalls
Deborah Oden, Ishmael Lewis
July 11, 2013
Penn Center, St. Helena Island, South Carolina

DO: Hi, I'm Deborah Oden. Ishmael Lewis is with me and we're interviewing Arnold M. Small on July 11th, 2013 at Penn Center. And we're part of the History Connections program. So Mr. Smalls, start telling us a little about yourself.

AS: My name is Arnold Smalls. I was born and raised on St. Helena Island, Beaufort, South Carolina. I'm 45 years of age. I've always lived here, all my life. I've done some traveling, you know, but I've always returned to my home, back here in Beaufort. This is a great place to live. Beaufort is becoming a place where there's a lot of people who's looking for a retirement place to live, settle down. A lot of people consider coming to live here in Beaufort either on one of the islands, Fripp Island, Dataw Island, Harper Island. You know, these islands are great vacation, I mean retirement home living. Anything else?

IL (offscreen): Could you tell us about your grandparents and your mom? What were their names?

AS: My grandparents, Julia Smalls and Anthony Smalls, they're both deceased. They're parents were Eleanor Gutrie. And my grandfather's parents were originated from the island known as Wassaw. We'd get together from time to time at family reunions, just to connect. And show love for the family. I lived with my grandparents the majority of my years coming up. My parents were military. My father, he was... they were always traveling and the last place that I remember that he traveled to was over to Germany. That was during... I was doing my eleventh grade year at Beaufort High School. And my mother wanted me to go but I didn't go because there was some stipulation as to if I went over there to Germany, the schooling over there would have set me back a grade or two. And I was nearing my graduation year so I chose to stay here to finish my high school schooling here. I'm the oldest of four siblings. I have three brothers and one sister. Like I said, I'm the oldest. They all look up to me for leadership, guidance, whatever. We are all a tight-knit family, I mean as do every family have problems? Yes, we do have problems. But when it comes down to family, we are all a tight-knit family.

DO (offscreen): So tell us about growing up here on the island, the food, the customs here, just in your family. You know, growing up being the oldest in the family. (DO and AS laugh).

AS: Being the oldest in the family, in my opinion, I feel that there's a lot of things that if left undone that needs to be done, I'm expected to be the one to see that it gets done. Food, the culture with the food around here... it's about everybody harvest, grow and harvest their own

food. There's a lot of people that garden. We have some farmers around here. During the month of June and July, they harvest tomatoes, cucumber. That's a big, big time during this month of June and July where the migrants from Florida come in and help them harvest their crops. That could last about four weeks and then they'll move on to another state. The fishermen around here make very good use of the fish and the seafood around. If you don't know how to fish, I... That's one thing that you should learn how to do here on this island. Cause just about everybody fish. I, myself, no I don't but there's a lot of, you know, lot of fishing going on over here on the island.

IL (offscreen): When did you learn how to fish and who taught you?

AS: I don't fish. Growing up as a kid, I used to go in the river, throw a castnet, do crabbing. Like I said, do fishing. But I had, I would say a bad experience in the river that just kinda took that taste out of my mouth as far as wanting to go out and do fishing. Um... I went out in the river one day and you know, like they say, you go out in the river on a boat and if there's no fish biting, if you're not catching anything that day, to me, I assume it's time to go home. Well I went out one day with a gentleman and there was nothing biting. We weren't catching anything. I was ready to go home. It was hot and you know, I was ready to go home and he kept me out there beyond what I wanted to be out there. So that, that kinda took the taste out of my mouth for wanting to go out there fishing. I have nothing against it, but you know, that's just my opinion on it.

IL (offscreen): Could you tell us about how race relations here on the island coming up and made change?

AS: Race relations coming up... When I was coming up as a kid, I didn't see that as a problem. And you know, everybody in the community, whether they were Black or White, they helped out for one and other. They watched one and other's houses to see if anybody who wasn't supposed to went around there went around there. Anything in particular in your neighborhood, if it didn't fit in or it didn't look like it was s'posed to be there, whether you were Black or White, they brought it to your attention. So race problem in my neighborhood or coming up in the Beaufort area, when I was comin up as a child, I didn't see that problem.

IL (offscreen): Did you all play sports together or you know, the famous pastimes, football, basketball?

AS: Yeah, we did. Football, basketball, baseball. Like I said, when I was coming up as a kid, in different communities, they would put together a baseball team and you know, on the weekends we would get together and we would play one and other. And that went on for a long time, until the county came along and created what they call the County League. And from there, you know, that progress into the Summer County League, baseball league, the football league. And you

know, the different sports now. And it kinda went from just being a fun thing to do in the summer to a money-involved program.

IL (offscreen): Explain.

AS: It's still goes on today, but you know, it's money involved in it now. You have to pay to register, you have to... you know, the uniforms have to be paid for now and you know, little things like that.

IL (offscreen): Could you tell us about the different teams? Who was the best? Who had the best team? What were the names of the teams and all that?

AS: In my community, there were the Wattest Twins. Scott, the community of Scott, had a baseball team. I think it was... I can't remember what they call themselves, but it was a team from Scott. From the Scott area, Seaside area, the Coffin Point area, you know.

IL (offscreen): Did you all have a mascot or anything like that?

AS: No, there wasn't any mascot.

IL (offscreen): What position did you play?

AS: At that time, when I played, I played uh... I was a pitcher. A left-handed pitcher and I played on the outfield.

IL (offscreen): Did you know if... did your parents play ball as well?

AS: Um... I can't. No, I don't know. I'm not sure about that.

IL (offscreen): Okay. You have any fond stories of your grandparents? Anything like old, old tales that your family would tell.

AS: Uh....

IL (offscreen): Like what types of things did you all do during the holidays? Like when did you all come together?

AS: During the Fourth of July holiday, the Labor Day holiday, Thanksgiving holiday. The Christmas holiday was a time, a great time for people comin together. Cause I can remember when Christmas, the spirit of Christmas was really the spirit of Christmas. And those were usually the winter months, it was cold around that time. So people, your family, when they came

down, everybody, being that it was cold outside, everybody kept to the house. So all the family unit was right there in the house. And we got to spend much more time with each other, during the winter months. Fourth of July, we would have a nice picnic or a cookout in the yard. Invite friends and relatives and neighbors and you know, just a lot of people come over and share...

IL (offscreen): What type of things would you all cook?

AS: Hotdogs, hamburgers, ribs, corn on the cob. There was a...

IL (offscreen): Hold on a second.

[End Clip 1]

[Begin Clip 2]

IL (offscreen): You're talking about the cookout.

AS: Oh, the cookouts. We loved the baked beans. I remember my grandmother always always cooking a pot of lima beans. I grew up on lima beans. I can remember when any day when she decided to cook that for a pot for that day, I can remember her getting up early in the morning and cooking her meat and boiling the beans and putting it all together in a pot. Putting it on the stove and it would take from that time in the morning to cook... She would let it cook that whole day, you know just set in the pot and slow boil. And as a kid, playing with my neighbors in the neighborhood, I could always smell that aroma goin across the neighborhood. And you know, like I said, I could always remember her whenever she would cook that pot, it would take her almost the whole entire day to get that pot like how she really wanted it. Today, now when it's done, it just doesn't have that same aroma and flavor that I remember how grandmother used to do.

IL (offscreen): Do you remember what she put in the pot, I mean, the recipe?

AS: It was neck bones, pigtailed, bacon. She boiled the lima beans down and she put all that in the pot and just let it cook.

IL (offscreen): You have any good hurricane stories?

AS: Hurricane stories? Ah, I don't remember what name, which hurricane it was but I do remember sitting in the doorway of my grandmother's house. The way her house is built, you know, (uses hands to show), the front door and back door was pretty much in line. You could see right through the house with all the rooms off to the side, but if you open the front door and the back door, you could pretty much see right through the house. That's how we used to get a good

breeze going through the house. But I can remember one year, sitting in the doorway, cause it was a big storm going on and she told us we needed to sit down and be quiet. And there was a big sycamore tree out in the front yard, and I can remember sitting in that front door when that wind was blowing and that thunder rolling and the lightning struck. And I actually sat there and watched that big tree fell. Yeah, it fell right over. Yeah.

IL (offscreen): Would you tell us about your grandfather?

AS: My grandfather was a... he was a carpenter. He worked for this construction company. All I can remember hearing him say, when he come home. He used to always talk about this man, his name was Mr. Jim Rich. I think the construction company was Beaufort Contractors, but he always talked about Mr. Jim Rich. Him, with a lot of other men that came up in his time, they always... they built, pretty much constructed what's now Fripp Island. A lot of the homes that went up over there on Fripp Island when Fripp Island was first discovered or was being first build, developed, he had a lot to do with some of the construction that was going on over there.

IL (offscreen): Did he teach you carpentry?

AS: I never worked along with him, but a lot of the carpentry that I know, I've picked up on things that he's shown me and that I've seen him do. Yeah.

IL (offscreen): How 'bout your father?

AS: My father, like I say, he's... he was military.

IL (offscreen): What branch?

AS: My father's was in the Army for several years. I don't know exactly how long, but he was in the Army for several years. And he came out of the Army, and he got a job here in Beaufort as a insurance adjustor. He sold insurance, he sold insurance for several years. Then he uh... he got out of that. And he reenlisted in the Marines. And after reenlisting in the Marines, he was in Marines for several more years. I believe the time he spent in the Army and the time he spent in the Marines, they carried over so where he could get his full retirement.

IL (offscreen): How 'bout your mother?

AS: My mother, she worked for many years. I remember she workin on a program that was here in Beaufort called the Cedar Program. That was a program where they provided summer jobs for kids when they got out of school. They provided jobs so that the kids could have something to do and during the summer time. She retired from the Cedar Program and she's pretty much basically now still retired. (Chuckles).

DO (offscreen): You said your family lived all together? So who stayed there? Do all your brothers and your sister all live on the same area or?

AS: My grandparents had, has about three acres of land. Well, three... probably about six acres of land. And it was divided up between one of my uncles and my mother. Which left about three acres of land to her and her husband. When she passed, all that was deeded to me. So on the five acres of land that's there now, is where my mother, myself and my family, a first cousin, an aunt and a uncle lives. Yeah.

IL (offscreen): Do you have any stories on how they got the land?

AS: No, not really.

IL (offscreen): You never remember them talking about it?

AS: I've heard them talk about it. Talk about the land that we're on now and the land next door to a good friend of his, that they grew up with. Somehow when they were coming up and I guess when they were deeding the land, at the courthouse, I think they say they had, had the land switched. Had his name on this guy's land and this guy's name on his land. And being that the houses were already built and the family dwelling was already established, the two agreed to switch the land so that everything could be in order. Yeah.

IL (offscreen): Could you talk about your church affiliation? What church do you attend?

AS: My church affiliation is currently Bethesda Christian Temple Fellowship. It was known as St. Joseph Baptist Church. Currently, I am the Brotherhood leader. That's a ministry that was developed by our pastor. And basically our... the ministry there, the Brotherhood ministry there, our purpose is to teach and to bring up the upbringing of young men in our fellowship, in our community. And we just strive to teach them to be young, Christian men, as the bible teaches us.

IL (offscreen): What does that mean?

AS: That means, to me, you know, my opinion. You go to church, you hear the message, and the message comes from God. And it teaches you to, you know, as a young man, there's a right things and there are wrong things. And I was always taught that if you know better, you'll do better. So that the teaching that we get from church, you know, is based on Christian ministries. Christian religion. And to me, you know, if the teaching that we get, we instruct it to go out there and try to make disciples, try to teach the Word of God, bring... and you know, when you teach them, don't give people your opinion. Stick to what you know, the scriptures in the bible. So like

I said, a lot of times, you know, if a young man out there doing things and if he know it's not the right thing to do, then just don't do it.

IL (offscreen): Did you grow up in that church?

AS: I did.

IL (offscreen): Grandparents went there?

AS: Yes.

IL (offscreen): Can you tell us how it was growing up in the church?

AS: (Chuckles). Growing up in the church, I guess like every young man or young woman, it first started out as you know, your parents are going to church so it's something that you have to get up and do. Every Sunday morning. You know, when you starting out young, you really don't know a lot, a whole lot so you do what you see your parents do. And that's basically what I did. I did what I saw my parents do. I would always have my grandmother, and I like to talk about my grandmother cause I grew up with, around my grandmother. Sunday morning, she would always take her radio and turn it on the gospel station. Put it out in her bedroom window and just let the gospel music play across the neighborhood. And that grew up in me. And like I said, she always, every morning, I didn't go to church every morning, but on the mornings that I went with her, I saw how, you know, the people in the church, how they praised. They gave thanks for being there, for the Lord waking them up that morning, giving them health and strength. And like I said, as a child, you see those things going on but you really don't... it don't really focus on you as to what they're doing. But I stayed in the church. I got baptized. And when you get baptized young, you really still don't know what you getting into but you see all the people do it so you do it as well. And I continue to grow in the church and as I got to know the pastor, and got to become affiliated with programs and ministries that was happening in the church, my involvement just got me more closer to understanding and knowing what church and reading your bible, and understanding Christian and loving people is all about.

IL (offscreen): You said that you love talking about your grandmother.

AS: Yes. (Nods).

IL (offscreen): Tell me some fond memories of your grandma. Best things she cooked, how she would get on you when you didn't do right. Give me some of those stories.

AS: Like I told you bout the pot of lima beans, that's basically one of the things I fondly can remember cause I love the lima beans. She did things like, she jarred pears. She jarred tomatoes.

We had a pear tree in the backyard and that tree, every August and September, we would go out there cause August and September, was the time to harvest the pear off the tree. We would go out there and my grandmother, little short lady 'bout 4 and a half maybe 5 feet. And I could see her out there, just shaking the tree or she grab her rake and put it up and shake the limb so the pear could fall on the ground. And I would go out there and pick it up. Pick it up with five gallon buckets and stuff like that. And we would bring it in the house and boil the pears until the skin was nice and soft and peel 'em, cut 'em up and put 'em in jars. And put 'em on the porch on the shelf and let 'em preserve until the next year. And you know, she did things like that. Tomatoes, okra. We'd go out in the garden, pick sweet potatoes, corn, you know, stuff like that.

IL (offscreen): Did she have a big farm or did she have a small garden?

AS: No, it wasn't a big farm. We had a garden, a field, bout the size of a football. The size and length of a football field is what we harvest.

IL (offscreen): How bout... did she get on you when you didn't do what you're supposed to be doing?

AS: She did. (Chuckles).

IL (offscreen): I was getting ready to say... can you tell us some stories about that?

AS: Well, let me tell you this one. My aunt, there was an incident in the neighborhood over to one of the neighbors house and we were, me and the kids, the neighbors, we were out there playing. And this house was being under-construction. And I was coming through the neighborhood, walking past the house and there was a pole leaning up beside the house. And I had missed and bumped the pole and the pole slid and broke one of the windows. Well, it was common mistake. But you know, the neighbors, the kids that I was playing with, they saw it happen and they went and told the aunt. And you know, they kinda twisted the story. And my aunt really, instead of letting me tell my side, she just gave me a good whoopin that day. You know, for doing something like that.

IL (offscreen): You all have a talk about family church. Do you have a family cemetery as well?

AS: Uh, no we don't have a family cemetery. It was just a cemetery in the community, in the Wallace community, but no it's not a family cemetery.

DO (offscreen): So can you tell us how you're bringing up helped you raise your children? Do you see some of the things that your grandmother did with you that you did with raising your own children?

AS: Yes, I have. My grandmother, she wasn't really really you know, she wasn't really hard on me. She wasn't really hard on her kids. It's kinda like, she would give us the freedom to go out and do the things that we want to do or need to do. And along with that freedom, it's like you are, you're tied to a rope and that rope can only go so far. And when you start to go beyond where that rope is, you have to pull that rope and stretch that rope to get to where you need to go. And to get to where you need to go, if you have to pull that rope, it's not... it's beyond what you should or need to do. And you know, there were times when we were told not to do things and we went, didn't listen and went and do it. And we had to suffer the consequences. Sometime the consequences, it wasn't that she punish you right then and right there, she would let you see and realize what it was you have done. And realize your mistake. And you know, maybe that first time wasn't one of those times where you really really got a punishment. But if you went and did that same thing again or something similar to that, you know, then you would have to suffer the consequences. So in me, personally as a father, bringing up my kids, I don't chastise my kids for when they do wrong. I sit them down and talk with them and explain them the right from wrong. But for me, to really punish my kids or really anyone, it would have to go on continuously or be something really, really, really bad.

IL (offscreen): Could you tell me, what does Gullah mean to you? Would you please define it before you tell me what it means?

AS: I've heard that term. I've grown up here on this island. I've heard that term a lot. In my opinion, Gullah is straight-forward, broken English spoken without the "and's," the "the's," the "a's," the "the's." Just straight-forward, spoken broke English.

IL (offscreen): Did you hear it all the time growing up?

AS: All the time.

IL (offscreen): Are you able to speak it?

AS: Not like I've heard some people speak it. You know, to me, just the way I'm talking now, is what I thought was Gullah-Geeche language. But I've heard people spoke it and to me it's somewhat different from my everyday speaking.

IL (offscreen): Could you tell us anything else about growing up on the island that may be different from other places that you've been? Like the name of the streets?

AS: Well yeah, I mean, being out in the country, at one time there were... the streets didn't have name. That was just something that came up with bout several years ago. Some of the roads that, the dirt roads that you see that's paved now, they were paved dirt roads. Those were things that not too long came about. The ability to go out in the river and harvest seafood, you know, back

then, a man could go out in the river and get a meal and come home. Cook his meal. Now, you have to have a fisher's license. There are limits to how many you can bring out the river now, you know. Things like that. That in some other states is probably not as bad.

IL (offscreen): So you grew up eating seafood?

AS: I grew up eating seafood. I grew up eating food that we harvest. Tomatoes, cucumber, watermelon, you know, corn, stuff like that.

IL (offscreen): Would you tell us, how has things changed since when you were little as opposed to now? Have you seen any changes on the island?

AS: I've seen a lot of changes on the island. The island has developed a lot and it's still developing. There are business that have come to the island and some of them are probably still trying to come on to the island. I've seen the roads have changed. The traffic, you know, with the increase of people coming to live in the area has also caused the change in the traffic. As far as the road, the road has been widened to accommodate the traffic that's coming on the island now. Security, you know, law enforcement has got more security riding around the island, to patrol the island during the day, you know, things like that.

IL (offscreen): When you were younger, did you all go to Lady's Island in Beaufort at all?

AS: Excuse me?

IL (offscreen): Did you stay primarily on St. Helena or did you go to Lady's Island? Did you go to Beaufort a lot at a young age?

AS: Well, we would always have to go into Beaufort, what we call town, for groceries, before there was convenient stores nearby or on the island. The closest convenient store I could remember was just before you entered into the city of Beaufort. That was probably the closest supermarket that I can remember.

IL (offscreen): Are there any old home remedies that you can remember as a kid when you got sick, your grandmother would give you? Trying to get you...

AS: Yes. There's this thing called, and this is how she called, "night of alastis." And it was basically a bush, a green, a fern bush that grew out in the wild and she would go out or send me out to break off some and bring it back. And she would boil 'em. She would cut 'em up, put 'em in the pot and boil 'em. It looked like tea. It had a, to me, an awful smell. But you know, she used to use that for colds, fevers. And as a child, it seemed to work. But it was something that had a smell that I could just never get over but you know, it worked.

IL (offscreen): How bout any old fables or old stories they used to say? Beware, don't do that cause...

AS: (Chuckles). Beware, don't do that.

IL (offscreen): Any local legends? Local myths?

AS: Local legends? A local myth was there was... they said down in Land's End, this place called Land's End, that people used to say there was a headless horseman. Well, come to find out, there was privacy light that you know, was in someone's, somebody's yard but it was near the road where if you traveled three miles down. Land's End Road is a very straight road. But if you traveled at least three miles down that road, you could still see that light. And there was a tree limb that hung over in front of that light. So the more you traveled, you zig-zag on the road, the tree limb, tryna look at the light and the tree limb at the same time. (Uses hands to describe). It appeared that the light was moving. And they just made that up. Myth that there was a headless horseman down there. (IL and DO laugh). Yeah.

IL (offscreen): Is there anything else you would like to tell the youth that will watch this interview of you?

AS: I would just like to say that to you, the youth, that are growing up, you know, there's a lot of possibilities to life out there. I know, coming up as a youth, speaking toward young men, that young men has a tendency to like to draw towards sports as their way as to be successful. But coming up in life, always have a backup place cause sports, being a professional football player or basketball player or whatever, that is not for everybody. And you know, coming up in life, you start to plan what you want to be in life, always have a backup plan. I started out, I went to a technical college and my interest was to be a auto mechanic. And it so happened that when I went to the school after I had sent in my registration that... on the registration they had me in a auto body shop rather than a auto mechanic shop. So we had bout two weeks to correct that problem if we really wanted to. But I decided that I was gonna try to... I was gonna go to the auto body shop and see what it was all about. Because although I always watched my uncle repair his cars in the backyard coming up as a kid, I always wanted to be a mechanic. But I didn't always want the dirt under my fingernails. So I decided I was gonna go and see what the body shop offered cause comparing the two different types of work and like I say, in a mechanic shop you would get the dirt under your fingernail but in the body shop, you could take a air hose and blow the dust off you and you'd be basically good to go. So I went in the auto body shop for I think a week and saw what went on in there and how things were done in there and I took an interest in the auto body shop. And I just never went back and had my schedule change and from that day on, from that time on, I stayed in the auto body shop. You know, went to class. Did what was asked of me and that became something I was... I took a lot of interest in and doing. And

that became my profession. That wasn't my backup plan but I would like to say to the youth out there that things like that don't always happen to everybody. So, in planning your future, just always have a backup plan.

IL (offscreen): Real quick, after you got out of mechanic school or auto body school, did you start your own business or what?

AS: I didn't start my own business right then. I went over on Hilton Head, I was hired at a body shop over on Hilton Head. It was a very prestige, nice, clean facility. I worked there for about eight years. And from there, I moved... I left that shop and moved closer to a shop here back in Beaufort closer to home and you know, I've worked. All my life I've just basically done auto body repair.

IL (offscreen): Are you still at the same shop or?

AS: No, I'm not at the same shop now. In... Since college, I would say that I've worked for one, two, three, four different body shops. And in the twenty-five years that I've been in this business, I've always worked for myself at home.

IL (offscreen): What convinced you to do that? Start your own?

AS: Basically, it started out as a hobby. I built a shop. It started off as a hobby and as I grew, as I learned more, you know, I got more experience in it. People started bringing me more work. It got to a place where there was more work at home then wherever I was employed. And I just decided to open up a business cause I see that it could be a and was becoming a successful business.

IL (offscreen): Could you give us the name of your business?

AS: Ultimate Gloss Paint and Body.

IL (offscreen): And what are some of the trials and tribulations as an independent business owner?

AS: Trials and tribulations?

IL (offscreen): And benefits as well.

AS: (Chuckles). Trials and tribulations, just learning how to deal with customers in general. You know, sometimes you put your best work out there and people still aren't satisfied. And then when you go beyond what's necessary to make them satisfied, you know, they're still not. But

I've learned from being in business and working with other people that you know, you're gonna have those things. Everyday is not gonna be a good day. I've learned from previous employers, you know, that you need to take the good with the bad. Cause sometimes it's the bad that makes the good what it is. The benefits from it is that having a home-based business, you know, it's nothing like walking out of your back door right into your place of employment. You can pretty much determine how much work you wanna do that day. How long you wanna work. You know, things like that.

IL (offscreen): You plan on passing that down to your children?

AS: I do. I have two boys and they... from time to time, they'll come out in the shop and ask questions and see what's going on. But at the age right now, one of 'em is twelve and the other one is seventeen, and you know, they really don't have a whole lot of interest in that line of work now. And basically, because I believe that they are still young boys, young men, growing up and they really don't have a idea of what they really would like to be doing in life right now. But it's there for them and that is something that I would like to pass on to my two young men. Yeah.

IL (offscreen): Now once again, this is Arnold M. Smalls?

AS: Yes.

IL (offscreen): From...

AS: Beaufort, South Carolina.

IL (offscreen): Beaufort, South Carolina, interviewed by Deb Oden and Ishmael Lewis on July 11th, 2013. We would like to thank you for this interview.

AS: Thank you.

[End]