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GROWING UP BLACK IN EAST TEXAS: SOME TWENTIETH-CENTURY EXPERIENCES

by *William H. Wilson*

The experiences of growing up black in East Texas could be as varied as those of Charles E. Smith and Cleophus Gee. Smith's family moved from Waskom, Harrison County, to Dallas when he was a small child to escape possible violence at the hands of whites who had beaten his grandfather. Gee matured in comfortable circumstances on the S.H. Bradley place near Tyler, a large farm owned by prosperous relatives. Yet the two men lived the larger experience of blacks in the second or third generation removed from slavery, those born, mostly, in the 1920s or early 1930s. Gee, too, left his rural setting for Dallas, although his migration occurred later and was voluntary. As Lawrence Levine has noted, post-emancipation blacks moved into direct participation in society, and despite segregation and discrimination, "new channels of mobility and communication were created," bringing "changes and new potentialities."¹

Joining the rural-to-urban migration was not, however, the most significant common denominator among eight East Texas African Americans who, during the 1950s, built homes in the new all-black community of Hamilton Park in Dallas.² The shared foundation of their childhood, youth, and young adulthood consisted of the socialization in the accepted, traditional values: family, work, and education. Given their adult commitment to church activity, religion could be considered central to their lives, but few mentioned it while reminiscing about their earlier years. It is likely that as youngsters they viewed religious activity simply as an extension of family life. All, however, stressed the centrality of family, work, and education.³

Parents set the example in an atmosphere of loving family discipline. Charles Smith's mother stayed home to raise eight children while his father worked, but both parents "always stressed the necessity of work... ." His brother, Willie F. Smith, credited their mother and "some teachers" with inculcating the value of work. Willie B. Johnson remembered that her share-cropper father "was a darned good father. He used to plow... . He didn't like for us girls to do that, and there was only one boy in my family." Sadye Gee, born in Dallas, recalled that she could not go to the nearby Hall-Thomas commercial district because "My daddy was so strict I dared not leave the premises," except to go to the YWCA.⁴

Parents expected their children to follow their example. Charles Smith mowed yards and shined shoes in Dallas to buy clothes for school. If Willie Johnson's father disliked having his daughters plow the land he farmed near Kaufman in the 1930s, he had no such compunction about their picking cotton. He insisted that they work steadily and well. One day he saw Mrs. Johnson's sister "looking at birds just flying around, and he said, 'I didn't bring

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you out here to count them damned birds! Go to work!' She said, 'My back is hurting!' " He said, 'You don't have no damned back! Get to work!' " Curtis J. Smith was expected to stay with his aged grandmother, providing company for her and help as needed in her home near Longview. Later, he earned money during his high school years by tractor disking farmland. Doris Robertson, who grew up in Dallas, worked there to help support her mother, leaving college before taking a degree because of the "need for finances."⁵

Sadye Gee's father, a skilled carpenter, found employment only intermittently during the Great Depression. The family survived by keeping chickens and a garden and by working hard. Whites delivered their dirty laundry by the bundle to the future Mrs. Gee's home on Mondays. The mother and three children washed the clothes in a big black kettle set up under fruit trees in the back yard. Then they starched and ironed, using old-fashioned flatirons heated over a small portable charcoal furnace. On Thursdays the customers picked up their laundry, "washed and ironed and folded, for \$1.50 per week." Le Verne Field's father operated a truck farm near Tyler for several years, often selling the produce in town himself. She and her siblings dug, sorted, and loaded potatoes on truck or wagon for the trip to town.⁶

Vivid memories of schools, schooling, and teachers dominated these recollections of youth. Black East Texans who went to rural schools remembered inadequate materials, indifferent buildings, concerned teachers who labored to overcome those deficiencies, and parental and community support. "Mother was very protective of us girls," Willie Johnson recalled, but nevertheless her parents sent her trudging off to school each day from outside Kaufman to the "Egypt" section of town, where she "would be so *tired*" after her long walk. The school was dilapidated, "but you talk about somebody who thought she was important – when I got to the sixth grade, I went upstairs ... I'd pass those little kids and go up the stairs to that raggedy-looking place where I was going."

Curtis Smith walked three miles to elementary school, but when he began high school, he rode the bus. "The bus would come by and pick us up about 7:00 in the morning, and I imagine we had somewhere around a thirty-five or forty-mile route to get to school," arriving just in time for the beginning of class at 8:45. The segregated high school was operated under the "separate but equal" doctrine, but with no pretense of equality. "I think we had some pretty good teachers, and they taught the best they could with what they had to teach with. Most of the books were passed down, of course." That is, when the white high school acquired new editions, the outdated, worn books were "passed down" to the black schools. Similarly, "all of our football equipment was used equipment. I played football for about three years in high school, and all of our equipment was handed-down equipment."⁸

Le Verne Fields began her education at the one-room Lindale elementary school in Smith County. Teachers solved the problem of mutual distraction by moving classes to separate sections of the big room. "You walked into individual corners. Sometimes the teacher would even take you,

depending on the weather, outside for classes. Then, the other kids would really be upset because everybody wanted to go outside and have their class... . If the weather was really nice, we always had several classes outside. We'd sit around on the ground, and the teacher would teach us there." When the weather confined the children indoors, "we didn't know if we were disturbing each other, because we never knew any other way." On cold days members of the community made certain that "there was always someone coming by" to put firewood in the wood-burning heater. "We never had no problem. There was always somebody that came by to bring some wood to make sure the kids was warm at all times."⁹

When the future Mrs. Fields moved to Tyler with her family she continued to attend elementary school, but not the black school nearest her, for it was overcrowded, and certainly not the white school. Her school received "handed-down" books, yet the students were expected to do their best despite the adverse circumstances. "We would cry sometimes because a page would be missing out of the book, and the pages would not be missing out of the teacher's book. The teacher would have the best book." Teachers and parents were suspicious of excuses for a lack of preparation. "Back then," students without completed lessons "would get a whipping from the teacher and from your parents, too,..." Woe to the pupil whom the teacher suspected of tearing out a page to avoid a lesson, because of the emphasis on student honesty.¹⁰

When the Bethlehem, Upshur County, school would not or could not pay for basketball uniforms, Streetman Watson remembered that new uniforms arrived anyway, because "somebody in the community raised money. The school never had that much money. Somebody in the community raised money to buy uniforms and whatever equipment we had." Members of the community sponsored box suppers and other fund-raising projects, which were so well supported that it "wasn't very hard" to have uniforms and equipment.¹¹

East Texans who migrated to Dallas or were born there attended Lincoln or Booker T. Washington high schools, but the atmosphere of discipline and high expectations was no less than in the rural or small city settings. Students were expected to behave and to learn. Sadye Gee, who attended Booker T. Washington in the late 1930s, never forgot Jerry Towns, an instructor with a unique method of punishing infractions. Towns sent students after school to the detention room, where they would copy the United States Constitution, crossing "t's" with red ink, and dotting "i's" with blue. The number of copies depended upon the seriousness of the offense. "Then when you would have done that, he would tear it up before your very eyes, ... so we avoided going to the detention room." Mrs. Gee remembered her task, three copies of the Constitution for an unexcused tardy. She was careful not to be tardy again.¹²

Willie Smith, a graduate of Lincoln High School, valued the education

he received. "In the years that I went to school, ... and before all of the sophistication and all of the hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars of sophisticated equipment, before all of the modernization came along, no one graduated from school who couldn't read. We didn't have kids graduating from high school and they couldn't read. I mean, we could work math problems in our heads. Now, kids graduating from high school, if they don't have a calculator, they can't even divide. I think it's a sad commentary."¹³

Discipline and hard work should not suggest that growing up was devoid of fun. Streetman Watson and Curtis Smith played in organized sports. Sadye Gee recalled coming from Dallas on the interurban rail car for Sunday and holiday family excursions. With her parents and siblings she left the car at the Vickery community, then far north of Dallas in what was known as the White Rock area. "Then we were met by our cousins who owned a T-Model Ford... . It was a thrill to ride in an automobile." Sometimes her family would visit relatives in the Upper White Rock section, where Hamilton Park was later established. "We would play and go up and down the cotton fields and just explore the rural area... . We lived in the city, and everything was so fascinating to us." Doris Robertson remembered her high school senior year hayride to the black-owned Anderson farm in the same general vicinity.¹⁴

The family influences on these East Texans were not transitory or confined to youth, but continued through life. Backgrounds of land ownership and home ownership were reflected in their desire for owned homes in Dallas, even though Dallas blacks in the late 1940s and early 1950s faced significant barriers to home ownership. The barriers included white violence against blacks moving into houses previously owned by whites, and generally successful white opposition to new black subdivisions in outlying areas. When a coalition of black and white leaders was able to establish, in 1953, a suburban-style black subdivision in what was, at the time, far North Dallas, the East Texans gravitated to the new Hamilton Park. Asked if she and her husband could have rented instead of buying in Hamilton Park, Sadye Gee replied: "No way! Daddy wouldn't have that."¹⁵

Curtis Smith was dubious about pouring his savings into a house that he might not be able to pay for, but family influences inclined him toward home ownership. His father instilled the idea of thrift. When Smith was young, he was provided with some necessities, but everyday clothing and extras were to come from his earnings if he worked, and he was expected to work. Smith began saving early. His father's requirements "taught me to be dependent on myself, ..." The older man later squelched the idea that homeownership would compromise financial independence. While Smith and his family were living in an apartment in Dallas, his father came to visit. Smith recalled that he "talked to me and said, 'Every time you pay rent on this place, you don't own any more of it than you did before you paid the rent. If you made a payment on a home, that means you're closer to owning it.' I said, 'Dad, I'm not making enough money.' He said, 'Well, you're making enough money to pay

your rent and live here, and you could live in your own place.'"¹⁶

Their parental commitment to education was so powerful that all but one of the eight East Texans considered here did at least some post-secondary work. All of them formed stable nuclear families, and expected their children, in turn, to obtain good educations. Their children graduated from high school and most pursued college or university studies. The children were also expected to make their way in the world, as their parents and grandparents had done.¹⁷

The intergenerational commitment of black East Texans to family, work, and education refute white racists' assumptions of black indolence or shiftlessness. Such black identification with traditional American values shames those white Texans who refused to recognize the full humanity and citizenship of blacks. Whites' arbitrary distinctions of segregation and discrimination burned into the consciousness of Charles Smith when as a child of eight he left Waskom by train to join his family in Dallas. More than fifty years later he recalled the Jim Crow section "up front," near the locomotive. "When we got off the train and got on the streetcars to go home, you got in the back. There were signs designated for 'colored' and 'white.' Right then I realized that there is a difference."¹⁸

At the same time the barriers of segregation were not so impermeable as to prevent friendly interracial cooperation. A white friend of Willie Johnson and her husband intervened with the Hamilton Park sales office to secure an application blank for the couple after an initial refusal. "They wouldn't let us fill it out because they said my husband was too old at that time, and he wouldn't have been able to finish paying for [a house]." Doris and Lincoln Robertson bought a home in Hamilton Park because Mr. Robertson's white employer, "furious" over the rejection of their application for a Veterans Administration loan, appealed to the local VA office to reconsider. Even before the relatively racially enlightened era of the 1950s, a sympathetic white loaned Sadye Gee's father the money to retire the mortgage on his house and stave off foreclosure.¹⁹

The experiences of these twentieth-century black East Texans suggest that American values know no racial boundaries; that a commitment to family, work, and education transcends racism, discrimination, and segregation. Their experiences also suggest that the values are durable, surviving geographical migration and generational change. The tall sycamore trees in Sadye and Clephus Gee's front yard in Hamilton Park symbolize that durability. When the Gees moved to Hamilton Park they bought with them "switches" from the Gee home place in Smith County. The sycamores grew from those cuttings.²⁰

NOTES

¹For Smith, see Charles E. Smith, interview by William H. Wilson, Aug. 24, Oct. 24, 1989, interview OH 793, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas, pp. 1-4, hereinafter cited as Charles Smith Interview.

²About thirty closed or unprocessed interviews in the Oral History Collection support the conclusions presented here, which are based on the available interviews. For aspects of Hamilton Park, see William H. Wilson, "Private Planning for Black Housing in Dallas, Texas, 1945-1955," in Laurence C. Gerckens, comp. and ed., *Proceedings of the Second National Conference on American Planning History* (Columbus, 1988), pp. 67-84; and "Desegregation of the Hamilton Park School, 1955-1975," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, p. 95 (July, 1991), pp. 43-63.

³The rural-to-urban migration during the lifetimes of the interviewees may be traced in the following Bureau of the Census publications: *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*., Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1932), p. 1081; *Census of Population, 1950*, Vol. 2, pt. 43 (Washington, D.C., 1952) pp. 43-11, 43-12, 43-14, and 43-31; and *Census of Population, 1960*, Vol. 1, pt. 45 (Washington, D.C., 1963), pp. 45-27, 45-37, 45-38, 45-40, 45-41, 45-462, 45-469, 45-477, 45-480, 45-481, 45-490, 45-492. See also Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1965-1980*, (Lexington, 1984), pp. 113, 156, 161, 169, 170-171. For a socio-historical survey of black religion, see C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, 1990).

⁴Charles Smith interview, p. 6. Willie F. Smith, interview by William H. Wilson, May 31, June 14, 1990, OH 829, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas, p. 3, hereinafter cited as Willie Smith interview. Willie B. Johnson, interview by William H. Wilson, Feb. 9, 22, 1990, OH 819, pp. 129-129, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas, hereinafter cited as Johnson interview. Gee interview, p. 89. Curtis J. Smith, interview by William H. Wilson, Feb. 2, 23, March 30, 1990, OH 826, pp. 7-8, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas, hereinafter cited as Curtis Smith interview.

⁵Charles Smith interview, p. 6. Johnson interview, p. 38. Doris Robertson and Lincoln Robertson, interview by William H. Wilson, Jan. 7, 21, 1990, OH 817, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas, p. 8, hereinafter cited as Robertson interview.

⁶Gee interview, pp. 4-6; quotation, p. 4. Le Verne Fields, interview by William H. Wilson, July 9, 16, 1990, OH 835, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas, pp. 2-4, hereinafter cited as Fields interview.

⁷Johnson interview, pp. 2, 3.

⁸Curtis Smith interview, pp. 9-10.

⁹Fields interview, pp. 4, 5-6.

¹⁰Fields interview, p. 8.

¹¹Ruby Watson and Streetman Watson, interview by William H. Wilson, March 14, 16, 1990, OH 825, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas, pp. 4 (quotation), 5.

¹²Gee interview, pp. 110 (quotation), 111.

¹³Willie Smith interview, p. 50.

¹⁴Gee interview, p. 33. Robertson interview, p. 13.

¹⁵Gee interview, p. 21. For a discussion of black property ownership in the twentieth century, see Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, 1990), especially pp. 207-216, 226-232.

¹⁶Curtis Smith interview, p. 20 ("taught me" quotation), pp. 38-39 ("talked to me" quotation).

¹⁷Citations to individual interviews in support of the statements would be tedious and cumbersome. The conclusions emerge from a complete reading of each of them.

¹⁸For white depreciation of blacks, see Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, pp. 268-269; James A. Burran, "Violence in an 'Arsenal of Democracy': The Beaumont Race Riot, 1943," *East Texas Historical Journal* 14 (Spring 1976), pp. 39-51; and Bruce A. Glasrud, "Child or Beast?: White Texas' View of Blacks, 1900-1910." *East Texas Historical Journal* 15 (1977), pp. 38-44. Charles Smith interview, p. 5.

¹⁹Johnson interview, p. 69; Robertson interview, p. 21; and Gee interview, pp. 39-40.

²⁰Gee interview, p. 27.