

KENNETH ROGER SMITH TRANSCRIPT

Date not mentioned

Damian Macey Interviewer

Transcribed by Donna Duzan, January 2017

Damian: This is Damian Macey, with the Friends of the Library Oral History Project, and I am in the home of Ken Smith and he will be telling us about his experiences this past Fall.

Ken: Okay, this is Kenneth Roger Smith, and I was born in Anderson Township, born at home, the fifth of six children. I was born at home, in the country, and the reason my middle name is Roger is because there was a Doctor Rogers from Martinsville who delivered me. So they name me after him. We lived in the country, my dad was a farmer, and it was in the old farm style. I can remember we farmed with horses. There were a few tractors around but my dad farmed with horses. We lived there until I was five years old and then we moved to the Clarksville area and I started school there. I didn't go to kindergarten because when you lived in the country, you didn't go till first grade. If you lived in town and could get to the school, you went to kindergarten, but I didn't.

We moved into Marshall then later in the first grade and I went to the North Side School for three years and then my dad bought our first home, we had always rented before, on South Second Street. So then I transferred to the South School for the remained of elementary school and then went to the Junior High School. Then on to high school and graduated in 1962. In high school I was active in athletics and I was the class president my junior year, president my senior year and was rated 16 out of 105 in class ranking. But my father had passed away so I couldn't go on to college. Student loans was not explained to me so I had to go to work.

D: At that time, there probably were not many college loans available.

K: No, I had good enough grades and the desire, but it just didn't work for me to go. Backing up a little bit. I got a paper route when I was in the 6th grade and did that for about three years, made some pretty good money doing that. I bought my own bicycle and got good tips from customers. And I thought I did a pretty good job of taking care of the newspapers and being on time. Then I got so that I wanted a little better job so I gave that paper route to my brother. So in the summers, then, I worked for a farmer, Harry Murphy, in the Clarksville area and he did custom bailing of hay and straw and I worked nearly every week day if it didn't rain, another kid, Butch Baker and I. We would ride the wagon and stack the hay ...that is a tough job. I did that about three summers. And that was before I had a car so I had to ride my bicycle out to wherever we were bailing that day. But it was a good job and Harry was good to work for. It was a good experience....I was wanting to build up muscle so I could play football.

And then after that there was a girl in our class named Pam Abel and her dad and uncle had a large farm and raised hogs and between my junior and senior years, she asked me what I was going to do that summer and I told her I didn't know and that I was still looking for a job and she said I should talk to her

dad. I told her I had never driven a tractor or anything but she said I needed to talk to her dad. So, I did, and he said they would train me and teach me so I started out at \$35 a week and worked from 7AM to 6PM and half a day on Saturday. And they furnished me gasoline for my car. The gasoline pump there was marked .26 per gallon. So that was a good job for a kid and I worked two summer and then two and a half years after I got out of high school for them.... until I could determine what I was going to do. I saved up some money and decided to go to barber college.

So then I went to barber college in Decatur, IL. Came back here and worked for Barney Millhouse for four years. Then I quit and went to Terre Haute at the Pillsbury Plant and worked for a year. But I didn't really like the confinement of that job so I quit there and went back to the barber business for three more years. And about that time long hair came into style and I realized that I wasn't making the kind of money I wanted to and needed to find something else. So, I talked to my little league coach, John Shonk, and he was a production manager at Velsicol. So I filled out an application and went to work at Velsicol. That was in 1972. I worked there for about six and a half years. In the process, I had worked about three weeks and we had an explosion and I was burned and spent nine days in the hospital. Anyway, I survived that and had worked there six and a half years. Then we had a strike. We went out on strike in December and by March was still going on so I needed some income and needed something more secure than that because the plant had some environmental issues and I didn't think that job was going to last much longer.

So, I happened to belong to the Masonic Lodge and one night after the meeting, I was talking to a friend of mine, Charlie Vanoven and he asked what I was doing and I told him I was just getting by and was looking for another job. I told him I thought I would go over to Eli Lilly and put in an application. And he said he was a supervisor at Eli Lilly. And I said that I didn't know that. He said he didn't try to help many people get jobs there because if they don't work out, then it reflects badly on him. And I said I understood that. So over the next few weeks, I applied, was interviewed and got on at Eli Lilly. And worked there for 27 and a half years and retired in 2005. That was one of the best things that could have happened to me, it was a good job and challenging ...having to learn computers and how to operate equipment, you had to learn to think like a computer, anyway it worked out to be a very good job and there was a profit-sharing program and just a very good job.

Going backward a few years, when I was working at Velsicol, I decided I wanted to run for the city council. I didn't really know the man I was running against, had I known him, I would not have run. I ran against Kenneth Low and he beat me 3 votes. It was the old fashioned ballot counting, and we both stood there and watched them count and he asked me if I wanted a recount, and I said no, I saw it all and the best man won.

D: Do you know what year that was?

K: Oh, that was probably 1972. Then two years later I ran again and I won that term. And I served that term. Then my wife and I built a house which was not in the city limits. So I didn't run again until, I don't know for sure, Dale McConchie was the alderman in our ward. And we annexed into the city, Les Litteral was my neighbor, and we did some calculations and thought we would have better road

maintenance and cheaper utilities if we annexed into the city, so we polled our subdivision and all but two agreed to annex into the city, so we did annex in. And then when Dale was a good alderman, he decided not to run and my brother, George the superintendent of utilities, came to me and said "why don't you run". So I thought about it and I did run. And I won. I think Dale's intention was to not run for alderman and then run for mayor in the next mayoral election. But then he passed away.

D: Was that the subdivision out by the Lincoln Motel where Judy lives now?

K: Yes and this subdivision here. This is the one we brought in. Because the city had a disposal plant right behind my property and it was in the city, so we could annex in because we were contiguous. And so we did. I served two terms then as alderman for Ward 2 and then lost an election and I just thought, I had served twelve years and that is enough, I will be done with city politics and the next election was one where there would be a complete city turn-around. But then after a couple years I got to following the city politics a little more and the administration that was in ...I looked at their audits and the city had lost money and I had some renewed energy and some people talked to me and said "why don't you run for mayor" and decided that I would. So I ran against the sitting mayor and the mayor that was previous to him.. a three candidate election. And I won that election pretty handily.

So I had some people that were close to me and we had a plan for what we wanted to do if we did get elected and so we worked pretty hard at it and achieved most of our plans and so in four years I ran again against Camie Sanders and that election was really close but I did win it. There was a lot of controversy over Harlan Hall and my brother still working for the city and the change of the Chief of Police. There was some "baggage" I guess you might say. So went along again for four years.

D: So, Ken, was that your third term?

K: No, second term as mayor.

D: But you did serve three terms as mayor?

K: No, just two. My wife and my family and me had determined that if I won the second term, that that would be my last term. I had a few second thoughts on that decision. In my mind, I thought I did a good job as mayor, I put in a lot of time, much more than any mayor before me, and we achieved several things. So that ended up my political career. And when I stepped down as mayor, I pretty much decided to stay out of any limelight and let the new administration have the chance of succeeding without me looking over their shoulder. I have been contacted by them a few times, for advice, but are some issues that I would have done differently, but ...

D: So now, Ken, as you are free, you have some hobbies, I think... what are those?

K: Well, all my life I've been a hunter. And that has been my real hobby. I like to train my own dogs. I have raised several litters of pups and trained dogs and bought dogs and I have really enjoyed that. The thing is that there are getting to be fewer and fewer quail, and that is what I like to hunt. But as long as I can walk and go I'll do that. But that is primarily a fall and winter activity so several years ago, my son and I, he was into demolition derbies and that's a pretty rough life, so I decided we needed

to get him into something besides demolition derbies and I had a cousin that was into antique tractor pulling and so we went over to Casey. They had a place there where they pull, and we went over there and watched that and got interested in that. We purchased a tractor and got into the antique tractor pulling business and now about sixteen or seventeen years later we are still doing it and have more tractors. I think we have a total of five tractors now. And it's even down to my grandkids now, they are into it with us and driving and learning.

D: Where do you keep the tractors?

K: We have then in rented space right now...out at Tom Stone's right now. We have space... tires and parts out there. And then at my son's house, he has a 30 x 40 where we have tools and equipment in. So in the summer when we are activity in pulling, we move the tractors out to his house.

D: You mentioned your dogs and training them, have those been more than a hobby than pets?

K: Yes, they are not inside dogs, they are outside. I have never brought them in in cold weather, I fill a box with straw. They are English setters breed. They have fairly long hair and I've never had a problem with leaving them out, I have got heated water so they always have water. They are a hobby but they do get treated pretty well, though. They don't miss any meals, but they are not house dogs.

D: So when you are gone, does your son take care of them?

K: Yes, In fact, the last two winters that we have gone to Florida, I have had my grand-daughter take care of them. And I pay her so it's a way that she can earn a little money and actually, she did a better job than my son did. And I told him so too !! I guess I haven't mentioned by family. I heard you interview my wife and you got it all in there but you may want it in my interview also.

D: Yeah, why don't you tell us about your family.

K: Well, my dad was born C. Smith and my mother was Cecil Mae Sanders. And there was five boys and one girl in our family. If you start from the oldest, there would be Harold, the oldest, Jerald next, my sister Lura, Wiley, then me and then the youngest, George. My oldest brother is 84 years old but we have in the last two years lost two, Jerald and Lura have passed away. So there are four of us left and we get together a few times a year. And communicate by phone and e-mail. And then we have a son and a daughter. Curtis Neal who is 44 years old and he is the Director of Recreation at the Robinson Correctional Facility. And my daughter is Chaundra who is 42 years old and she is the Director of Operations for the Water Department in Decatur, IL

D: When you said the age of Curtis, I was treasurer of the 281 Boy Scout committee and I was helping him with his Eagle Badge.

K: Yeah, you helped him with badges. I think I might have missed his age, I think in March he turned 45. Doesn't seem possible. And then he had two children, Vanessa 17, and Nathan who is 14. My grandson is involved in all sports, I enjoy that. He has a talent for kicking the football. At his age he can kick field goals. So we follow his sporting events.

D: Well, you a fortunate them are here in town where you can take part in that. In your education or political environment, or whatever, is there an individual who really influenced you or steered you into a positive direction?

K: Well, I was not very fond of the first couple of mayors I served under but when I served under Dick Smitley I thought he did the job of Mayor of Marshall in a very good way. Another person, and I'm not going to an older person here, is my brother George who worked for the city for many years. And probably did more for Marshall than all the mayors added together. And he gave me several ideas that he thought would be good for the town but he couldn't get involved in politics to do it. He was, you know he was about three years younger than me, but he kinds misses me a little bit.

Going way back in time, when I was a child, there was a man named Paul Walker. He ran the Western Auto store and he went to our church. And we were raised, maybe not at poverty level, but very poor. And he helped by dad at Christmas, he sold him some toys that had been returned to the store, if it hadn't been for that we might not have had Christmas presents. And as I got a little older, and I'm sorry that he passed away, he was a good man, he was a deacon in our church, and he lived what he preached. He was a very good man and I respected him. And then another man was Roy Crocker. Roy went to our church, the Baptist church, and he belonged to the Masonic Lodge, in fact so did Paul Walker. And I thought they were a good example of good men and I joined the Masonic Lodge because of them. I was active in the Masonic Lodge, I was a master twice. My dad did not like the masons, he didn't like them because of the Shriners, back in those days, the Shriners were known to come to town drink it up and he thought that was....he didn't think much of them. But anyway, those are two men in life that I thought a lot of.

D: Seems like just about everyone has one or two people who helped steer them in the right direction.

K: Yeah, I thought if I could be as good a man as they were I'd be okay.

D: Ken, is there any historical event that has taken place in your life that really changed your outlook on life or changed you in any way?

K: Do you mean something personal that happened or...

D: Historically.... anywhere in the world...something that happened.

K: I don't know....I'm a little bit of a "history buff". But just recently I have gotten involved in reading books about World War II. I was only born in 1944 so I didn't live through WWII but as I read some of the things that happened then, I just can't believe it. And when you read about our own country, and the Civil War and how foolish that was, a waste of 700,000 people. It just makes you think. As far as personally, an event, well the one that affected me. The best thing that happened to me was getting the job at Eli Lilly. That changed my life, and we were able to be successful enough, between my wife and I, to be able to go and do things now that we never dreamed of. As far as in Marshall, I really think a couple events that I was involved in as mayor, not just because I was mayor but because the city decided to do it, was when we had the Great Race come through here. When they decide to come back

to your community, you have done something to impress them. I think the town came together for that and all the old historic cars that came through, I think that was one of the greatest things I was involved in.

D: Ken, is there an invention or machine that has really made a difference in the way you live?

K: Yeah, I think the invention of electricity just surpasses everything. I have been through Edison's museum down in Florida three or four times, and what that man came up with and his ideas... you just think, what would we do without electricity? We could live without it...the Amish do.

D: I think the significance of electricity hits us when we just have a thirty or forty minutes of outage... and everything seems to come to a screeching halt. And even if you go into a grocery store ...

K: Well, yeah, because they can't even check you out !! Yeah, electricity just controls everything.

D: Well, Ken, it really been a pleasure talking to you. I will ask you one more question if you were trying to tell someone about Marshall, where and how you live, and why your life here...what would you say?

K: I would tell them that Marshall is a small, rural town in east central Illinois, in a country setting and it is a very well-managed town, they have their own utilities and control their own rates, its clean, people are helpful, whenever there is a fire, etc., the citizens come together to take care of that family, its right on the National Road, built to help open up the west. When I got my job at Eli Lilly, I had a 35 mile drive, one way, and so the wife and I drove over to Clinton, Indiana and a couple other towns, which would have been much shorter drives and looked other towns over and we just decided that I would rather drive the 35 miles. We have a good school system, no place is perfect, but Marshall is just a good clean quiet town. Very little crime, good place to live and retire.

D: That's a good summary, and the time that you were mayor you made some significant contributions and helped to raise our standard of living. And it was our intention today to put some historical things down for future generations.

K: And I might add too that aside from economical things of mayor, one of my greatest achievements was the city owned Harlan Hall. It took longer than expected to complete the renovations, and many many volunteers like yourself to get it done. I didn't do so much physical labor there but I sure did help raise money and get grants and I think Harlan Hall is one of the big assets of our town.

D: And it is something that has been there for many many years and it's in better shape now and should be able to continue to be useful for many years.

K: Well, you know, they are coming up with this mural program too, and I am helping on that. And I am dedicated enough to Harlan Hall that I have paid for the mural that will be painted of Harlan Hall. I want to see that done properly.

D: Do you know where and when that will be?

K: No, that hasn't been decided yet.

D: Well, again, Ken thank you so much for your input today . We certainly appreciate your participating in our oral history project.