

The Great Depression in Waterloo:  
**The African American Experience**

Interview Summaries

**Marjorie Brown**  
**Valetta Fields**  
**Cliff Smith**

## *Interview Summary of*

### **Mrs. Marjorie Brown**

At the time of this interview Mrs. Brown was living in Waterloo, Iowa. She was born at coal mine No. 10 in the Buxton area in 1904. She lived in Buxton until she was twelve. In 1916, she moved with her grandparents to Cedar Rapids. She first moved to Waterloo in 1922. Later, she lived in Ft. Dodge and again in Cedar Rapids but she has lived in Waterloo now since 1951.

Mrs. Brown's parents died while she was a child. As a result she was raised by her grandparents who were former slaves. Mrs. Brown remembered, "My grandmother became a school teacher after having been born a slave. My grandfather became a barber after having been born a slave. And so I knew my parents such a short while. I am very proud of my father because he dug coal in the mines to become an engineer. My mother graduated from high school here in Leon, Iowa and she was a musician. The only thing I can tell you about my parents and my grandparents is that they were bitterly against ignorance in any of its forms."

Mrs. Brown first attended school in Buxton where a large part of the community was Black. She recalled, "There were three elementary schools. Mrs. Minnie B. London was the principal of one of those schools...I didn't have any idea that negroes were supposed to be second class citizens because the school teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers...I had seen them all Black. So my school experience was a shock when I first went to Cedar Rapids. That as the first time I had ever been looked through as though I weren't existing, rather than be looked at. I did offer to play when we had school singing and whatnot. That was the first time I hadn't been wanted. And had it not been for that little grandmother who was born a slave and worked hard to become a school teacher, I don't know what the school would have done to me. So she was the joy of my life."

Mrs. Brown vividly remembered her work experience during the Depression. She said, "Can you imagine that a time for two full years my husband was out of work? We had his mother living with us and I worked for \$5.00 a week, seven days a week doing housework which meant washing, ironing, cooking, and cleaning and the whole bit! It was very fortunate if you were able to get anything like that during the Depression."

Mrs. Brown didn't feel that the Depression affected Black people more than white people. She hinted that the hardships of the Depression may have been less intense for the Black people than the white people. "We had always been poor. It wasn't a new experience. So many didn't know how to be poor. It wasn't a new experience. So many didn't know how to be poor. We had learned the ins and outs of being poor. When you talk about being down to basics, we were there. We walked where we had to go. We cooked, we raised gardens, we sewed, yes – we were back to basics. But we made it. And most of us are not bitter...most of us are really amazed that we have come this far."

## *Interview Summary of*

### **Mrs. Valetta Fields**

At the time of this interview, Mrs. Fields was living in Waterloo, Iowa.

She was born in 1895, the daughter of Minnie London a black school teacher in Buxton. Mrs. Field's father worked in the mines near Buxton. Mrs. Fields briefly described the community of Buxton as having a strong and active Black population who moved freely within the community. She said, "As I recall it in my own life, there was quite a little social life among the older women. They called themselves the 'elite of society.'...There was a Negro YMCA...with a negro director and then they built a boy's department...So many activities took place in the YMCA where there was an auditorium. They brought in negro

celebrities of the day who spoke and sang...We sort of rubbed elbows, we kids, ...That's why I feel like I kind of know who I am, you know, because we had that kind of contact."

Concerning her school experience in Buxton, Mrs. Fields said, "make me go to school? It was just expected that you go to school. And Mrs. London [her mother] was a teacher. Her children would go to school."

Mrs. Fields finished her elementary school in 1908 and went to high school in Des Moines, graduating in 1912. She attended East High in Des Moines living with an aunt and her brother as Buxton had no high schools.

Concerning her later education Mrs. Fields said, "We went to the University of Iowa. Both of us were in college and there weren't any grants then, you see, and we women, we girls worked, ...lived with a private family and we worked for room and board...I went to live with my reference librarian of the University library...It was no trouble to get a place to stay under those conditions. They didn't pay anything and you really didn't do too much. But that was the way it was done."

Mrs. Fields received a degree in science and her husband a degree in law. They moved to Waterloo during the 1920's and were struggling to set up a law practice while the Depression settled upon Iowa. It was difficult for a Black man to establish a law practice in Waterloo. It was difficult for Blacks of that time to hire lawyers. Mrs. Fields said, "They didn't want lawyers. They didn't hire him. He just sat there. He did have some white clients, of course."

To help with the situation Mrs. Fields worked. She described two jobs she had in Waterloo:

" I worked on an elevator, but not electric elevators. I feel jittery when I get on one of those. I feel like somebody ought to be there to handle that thing. It was down on 4<sup>th</sup> and Walker. That building is not there now."

"Somebody told me about a job at the telephone company, the restroom for the girls. It was linoleum floor and I had to mop it...It was one of my jobs to mop that and keep the toilet tissue and the paper towels in the toilet and wash

the lavatories. That is the kind of sculldugery I did. That was what you got to do. You did it...if you could find it.”

Neither Mr. or Mrs. Field were able to get work for which they were qualified and educated. When the Fields arrived in Waterloo during the 1920's segregation was evident. Of this she said, “Negros had to be seated in a special place in theatres when we came. Restaurants had signs, ‘Negro patrons not solicited.’ A lot of our generation had not experienced that. My husband being red hot and fresh out of law school, knew the code of Iowa and he and the county attorney got together and said this thing is against the code of Iowa. And they got those signs removed.”

Because of the hardships already endured by the Black population, Mrs. Fields hinted that possibly the Depression didn't worsen their lives much. “I think many of [the Blacks] are used to a lot of sacrifices and it probably didn't affect them too much...So much of our experience here was depressing...We just lived through it. It was just something that you lived through. Our life had not been so rosy anyway. It had been sort of full of sacrifices and you just dug in and went.”

## *Interview Summary of*

### **Mr. Cliff Smith**

At the time of this interview Cliff Smith was living in Waterloo, Iowa. He was born in Carbon, Kentucky January 6, 1902. He moved with his family to Waterloo in 1911. His father was a carpenter by trade but he came to Waterloo to work on the railroad. Educational opportunity was one of the chief reasons the Smith family moved north to Iowa.

The prejudice in the South at that time was intense. Black children were not generally allowed to go to school with white children. In this regard Mr. Smith said, "I lived across the street from the only white school in that town and when the teacher was sick, my mother would go over there and substitute for the

teacher, but we couldn't go to school. So my oldest sister went twenty-five miles to the county seat to school everyday."

Following grade school and high school, Mr. Smith attended Howard University for three years before attending Morningside College in Sioux City. As a young man, Mr. Smith was a concert organist. He said, "I did nothing but concert work and I played at theaters. I am the first person that ever played the Paramount Theater organ. I played at the old Plaza Theater once here in Waterloo. Then as a youngster I traveled. I played at Louisville, Dayton, Washington, D.C. and Columbus, Ohio."

Mr. Smith said he was always able to get work during the Depression. He managed the Elks Club 290 and Sunnyside Country Club. Of his experience during the Depression he said, " In those days it was very rough for people...I was very fortunate...my father always had a job. But people suffered a lot. Malnutrition, doctors would come to your house and say 'Well the child needs food.' But you know, I never run into anything so terrible in the Depression personally...We were always able to have a job. So we got along all right."

Mr. Smith didn't feel that the Depression affected black people any differently than white people. He said, "Everybody was having a hard time. Black people were not hurt any worse than anyone else. Everybody was suffering from it. Lack of food, lack of clothing, lack of homes, run-down property,...everybody suffered from it. Today when I look at the houses on this street, and the houses on Sumner Street where I live, the property today is better than it was fifty years ago, when it was owned by white people. Because the people now, black people, are making a little money. They keep their homes up and in those days it was not possible for anyone hardly to keep their homes up." Regarding segregation in Waterloo, Mr Smith said,"...It wasn't so bad. You know everybody has the opinion that it was terrible here for black people. [We] went to all the clothing stores, [we] didn't dine out. That was the only thing that [we] might have been segregated about. [We] didn't go downtown and go in Bishops and and restaurants and dine...but black people didn't need to go to their restaurants...We had everything of our own."

Mr. Smith started his own restaurant as a result of the segregation in Waterloo's restaurants. He said, "...There was one restaurant downtown. All the [Black] kids that worked downtown went to this segregated place. They had to go in the back door and go in the basement. I went down there one day and I saw all of those people down there and I said, 'What are all of you guys doing down here?' I said, 'If I was in Mississippi I wouldn't mind going in the back door, but that's policy. But in Iowa, never!' So I came over there and bought that deli over there and started me a restaurant."

Mr. Smith felt there were some good effects which came from the Depression. He concluded, "Well it taught people how to live when they didn't have. I am telling you that. Depression wouldn't worry me anymore, but I feel sorry for other people...That was one of the fortunate things about colored people. We have learned to stand hard times, so we have been very fortunate."