**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH**

**DAVID SMITH**

**TWENTY-NINE PALMS, CALIFORNIA APRIL 24, 2020**

INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH HARVEY

AUDIO FILE #BRVB042420 – DAVID SMITH

# EDITORIAL NOTE

This document is a rendering of the oral history interview as transcribed by the interviewer from the audio recording. Although effort was made to provide a verbatim transcription, for easier reading of the transcript, verbal pauses, repetitions of words, and encouraging words from the interviewer were omitted. The resulting oral history interview transcript was provided to the informant for review and, if necessary, correction. Mr. Smith made some modifications to the draft transcript. For the original interview, please refer to the audio file.

# ABSTRACT

Mr. David Smith describes the course of his career with the National Park Service beginning in 1982. He details the circumstances under which he became the Superintendent for Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in 2011. Mr. Smith discusses at length his decision for asking the Brown Foundations to move from the offices provided to them by the National Park Service at Monroe Elementary School and to find accommodations elsewhere in an effort to mitigate what he terms a “toxic environment.” He also describes the events surrounding the OIG investigation of the Brown Foundation and the subsequent termination of the cooperative agreement between the Brown Foundation and the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. Mr. Smith explains his understanding of what the Brown Foundation was supposed to be doing for their Congressionally-funded yearly apportionment and his opinion of what they were actually doing for it. He describes some of the outreach programs he initiated during his tenure and some of the partnerships he developed. Mr. Smith also briefly describes the mentoring situation of Nicodemus National Historic Site by Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site staff. He offers two vignettes of when First Lady Michelle Obama and Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan came to the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site to celebrate Baccalaureate with a select group of graduating Seniors in Topeka and stresses how proud he was to be part of that event.

# PERSONS MENTIONED

Cheryl Brown Henderson, George Turnbull, Sändra Washington, Treva Sykes, Mike [Reynolds], Patty Trapp, [Senator] Bob Dole, Joan [Wilson], Clara Wooden, Angela [Wetz], [Rev.] Martin Luther King, [Jr.], Fred Phelps, Michelle Obama, Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan

David Smith, 2020

# ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH

**DAVID SMITH**

Interviewer: Okay, so now, in theory, I’m recording two versions of this. This oral history interview is for the Administrative History of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas. The interviewer is Deborah Harvey, with Outside The Box, on behalf of the Midwest Regional Office of the National Park Service. Interviewed today is David Smith, former park superintendent at Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site and currently superintendent at Joshua Tree National Park in California. The date is April 24, [2020]. This interview takes place via video media. So, Mr. Smith, may I call you David?

Smith: Yes, that sounds great.

Interviewer: Okay. As I’m sure you know, the purpose of an Administrative History is to document the development of a unit of the National Park System, both physically and administratively. Oral histories are one way to get information that might not otherwise be available from documentary evidence. We try to get as much information as we can from as many different perspectives as possible. This will be used by future park administrators to inform their decisions as they navigate future developments.

However, I should inform you that not all the information we gather will be included in the final Administrative History document. That depends on how the information advances our understanding of park development. But I do want to tell you that we appreciate that you are giving your time to share your experiences of the development of the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site.

So, to start with – this is going to sound a silly – like a silly question, given your name, but I need you to repeat your name and spell your last name.

Smith: Sure. My name is David Andrew Smith. My last name is spelled S-M-I-T-H. Interviewer: Okay. To start with, we’re going to discuss your career with the National Park Service,

and then we’re going to go into the details of Brown v. Board – your Brown v. Board tenure. So, when did you start with the National Park Service?

Smith: I began in 1982 as a seasonal park ranger working at Dinosaur National Monument in Utah. I then went to a Law Enforcement Academy up near San Francisco at Santa Rosa, where I got my credentials to become a law enforcement ranger. And I began working down at Canyonlands National Park in Utah in the Maze District as a back country ranger there for a couple years. After that, I spent about a year working with the Border Patrol in southern Arizona. I primarily did this in order to get my permanent federal status so that I could be a permanent park ranger. After that, I worked in San Diego at a little –

Interviewer: Can I – can I pause for – can I interrupt for just a minute? So, you worked as the Border Patrol in order to get your credentials as a park ranger? I’m – maybe I didn’t understand that.

Smith: Yeah. In order – in order to apply to a permanent position in the federal government, you often have to already be a permanent employee, and sometimes, what you would do is, you would work for an agency that is less desirable. So, at the time, the Bureau of Prisons was hiring, the IRS was hiring, and the Border Patrol was hiring, so I decided that the Border Patrol would be best suited for me.

Interviewer: Okay, I understand. Okay, so, then you went to where? I’m sorry.

Smith: So, I worked there for about a year. Then, I got a job doing law enforcement over in San Diego at a little national park that was down in Point Loma, called Cabrillo. And then, my spouse –

Interviewer: In where? Oh, in Cabrillo? In Cabrillo? Okay.

Smith: My spouse, he got a job – he got a job as a permanent ranger in Joshua Tree, so I began volunteering in Joshua Tree in interpretation, and then, eventually, got a permanent job in interpretation at Joshua Tree.

Interviewer: Okay. And, at what point – at what point were you at Brown v. Board of Education? Smith: I was there in 2011, ’12, ’13, and ’14.

Interviewer: Okay. I had you down as 2010, so, did you start work late in 2010 or did you start in 2011?

Smith: I think I started in 2011. There was –

Interviewer: Oh, okay. You followed Cheryl Brown Henderson, correct? Smith: Right.

Interviewer: And she left in December of 2010?

Smith: Right. And then there were some Acting positions between that and when I arrived. And I believe I arrived in May.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Okay. So, you started in May of 2011 at Brown v. Board? Smith: Right.

Interviewer: So, had you ever been there before? Smith: Nope.

Interviewer: What were your first impressions of the site – of the park, when you first got there?

Smith: Maybe I should describe the chronology a little bit of how I got there. That would help with providing a better understanding.

Interviewer: Okay.

Smith: So, I worked up in San Francisco for three years, working for a National Trail, and then I was transferred to Grand Canyon, where I worked as a naturalist there. And then I was transferred to Washington, D.C., where I worked for Congressional Affairs for two years. The Park Service has one ranger that gets assigned to the Senate, and one that gets assigned to the House. And so, I worked for the House for two years. And, while I was there, the Regional Director from the Midwest Region, reached out to me and said, “Hey, we really have a – have a challenging situation at Brown v. Board, and we think you’d be a good person to help us with that.” And that was George Turnbull. He was the Acting Regional Director at the time. And he had reached out and said, “We’ve got a partnership park where we have a relationship with a Foundation. It’s a civil rights park.” And he said, “I know you have a – you have a strong tie to the civil rights-related issues, and this might be a really good match for you. We’re having some problems with the Foundation right now, and it’s a very adversarial relationship in the park, and we think that you have the skills that would be helpful to pull down the walls and to have a better partnership.” So, I had no desire to go to Kansas (laughter). My kids, at that point, had been trucked to three different parks across the United States and were desperate to get back to an ocean. I told them, “I’m sure we can find a park that’s near an ocean.” So, when I was offered to work in Kansas at a park that was, you know, two acres in size. And they’d grown up at the Grand Canyon, and they’d grown up in all these big, Western parks. So, we headed off to Kansas. I went out there for a visit and to meet the Foundation. They were having a meeting there, and I was just blown away by how cool the site was. It was probably the best we could do in interpretation in the National Park Service. So, I was really proud to see the work that Cheryl had done and that Senator Dole had done in securing the money to get the park to where it was, and what the Foundation had done. I had never seen anything quite like it in my history as a – as a Park Service employee. I was very pleased with what I saw when I arrived there in, I think it was, May, for a meeting with the Foundation and with the park staff that was being facilitated and mediated by – I want to say it was Sändra Washington. I think she came down to help with that initial mediation because they recognized that there were some troubles, and I – my job, basically, was to come in there and to help make things more conducive to a healthy environment there.

Interviewer: Okay. So, your first impression was that it was an awesome park. Did that – does that impression extend to how it was – had been administered or what the condition of the administration was at the time?

Smith: I didn’t really know what the administration was. That wasn’t apparent. The Acting Superintendent at the time – and I cannot remember his name. He was the law enforcement specialist up in the Midwestern Office – Regional Office, and then he went on to become the superintendent, I think, at the Ice Age Trail. A very competent guy. He explained that he had concerns about the Foundation – potentially illegal activity by the Foundation. And, the way he described it was a toxic work environment between the staff at the Foundation and the Park Service staff. But, as far as the facility’s condition was concerned – I mean, it was – it was amazing. Treva, you know, takes care of that

building like it’s her own house. She’s taking care of that lawn, taking care of the museum exhibits and everything else. It was really – it’s seldom that you see that in the National Park Service, and so, I was – I was very impressed with the facilities. Didn’t know so much about the administration. I just knew about the partnership – that it was in trouble.

Interviewer: Okay. So, when you agreed to work – to go to that park – to be detailed to that park, or assigned to that park, what were your expectations for your work there at the time?

Smith: Well, my expectations were that I was going to do what I was asked to do. I was going to be able to solve the problems between the Foundation and the Park Service and create an environment that was productive and the definition of a partnership, which means that both parties benefit from that relationship and we have a synergy that comes out of it. I thought that I could – I looked at the visitation, because, at the time, I was alarmed at the lack of people coming to a really significant civil rights site inside of Kansas. So, I wanted to address that. I wanted to increase our park visitation, so it was commensurate with a significant area. And then, the staff there, I wanted to give them the ability to be part of a large organization. You know, I – when you live – when you work in a little National Park in the middle of the Midwest, sometimes you forget that you’re part of an organization of over four hundred different national parks in the United States. And I wanted to empower the staff there to be successful.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay. And did you find that your expectations were pretty accurate, or was the job more, or less, than you were expecting?

Smith: Well, regarding the first issue, after about two months, I realized that the situation was untenable, that the – when I arrived at work the very first day, the Office of the Inspector General had issued a report for their investigation on the Brown Foundation, where they had two significant allegations regarding impropriety in the workplace and Cheryl Brown Henderson’s failure to recuse herself from business matters. They also made allegations that there was – that money had been poorly or illegally spent. So, I knew that there were going to be some issues. And, after interviewing the staff, after working with Cheryl and the Foundation staff – it was truly toxic. You know, people were frightened that the Brown Foundation members were going to get into their office and, you know, try to get them fired or – it was – it was a very weird work environment. And I think it was based on years of mistrust on all parties. And I made the decision, after about two months, that this was not working. Given the OIG report, I was concerned about further illegal activities, and I made the decision that we would ask the Brown Foundation to find office space in Kansas, in Topeka, somewhere outside of the National Park unit itself. So, it’s one – have you been to Brown v. Board?

Interviewer: Yes. Yes, I have. So, they had an office at the – in the building, and you found that one of the problems was that they had an office in the building? Is that correct?

Smith: I – yeah, very much so. You know, the staff – I – you know, my philosophy in the Park Service was that a park is a – is a family. We work closely together. We support each other. If someone asks you to do something, you do it, and vice versa, and that was not

happening at all. And a lot of it was because of mistrust, and, also, I got the feeling like the Park Service staff were second- or third-class citizens that – you know, that the Foundation deigned to have to interact with. And so, I thought it was a – I thought it would be healthy for everyone if they had their own office space in town and they could conduct business, and the Park Service staff could conduct business as well. So, I was asking them – actually, telling them – that, “You’re going to be moving out of this building.” You know, “Go find some property. You’ve got a six hundred thousand,” – I’m sorry, “a three hundred thousand dollar a year grant from the National Park Service to operate the Foundation. You know, you can use some of that money to rent an office space in town,” and, you know, “This is Topeka, you know, during a pretty tough financial time. You can get some pretty good office space for five hundred dollars a month.” So, it was not a hard stretch.

Interviewer: Okay. So, was that, like, the first step to distancing the park from the Brown Foundation, would you say?

Smith: Well, it was – it was giving the Brown Foundation something that they could manage that was separate from the park itself because, when Cheryl would get herself into the operations of the park – and I think that was part of it. You know, since she was not part of chain of command – she was a separate entity – the fact that she could dictate to staff what was going to be done, I think, did not sit well with the staff. So, that was the other thing: I didn’t want to remove the Foundation from being a partner. I mean, my gosh, that – she is – she is the link to the Brown v. Board decision. You know she is the living connection to what happened. So, she’s an important link. She’s a civil rights icon, you know, to people all across the United States. And, you know, it’s nice to have a Foundation when you run a park. It’s a nice tool that you can use for, you know, purchasing things, for doing fundraising and things like that, that, the Foundation could do. So, the last thing I really want to do is to not have a Foundation. Just, they couldn’t be housed in the same building.

Interviewer: Okay, so, even after she stopped being the superintendent, she was still involving herself in the day-to-day management of the park, is that what you’re telling me?

Smith: Yeah, but I also think, even more important than that, she had left a – her tenure as superintendent had really affected a lot of the staff. One thing that was quoted to me a lot is she told the entire staff that, “You know, if you don’t like it here, there are other parks you can go to, and you are welcome to leave right now.” And it just was – it was a very disheartening statement for the staff to hear that. So, every one of them mentioned that to me during the first two months, that one quote, because it just really scarred them, long-term. So, even though she hadn’t been superintendent for six months when I arrived, there was that legacy and also her repeated interaction in day- to-day activities.

Interviewer: Okay. And when – as you went to the park, and during your tenure there, what kind of directions did you see – receive from the Midwest Regional Office, mainly from the Regional Director and the Deputy Regional Director, regarding management of the park and your relationship with Brown Foundation?

Smith: Well, at the time, Mike was the Regional Director and Patty Trapp was the Deputy Director. They were both incredibly supportive of whatever well-thought-out actions I was going to take. You know, they were very cautious about the political sensitivity of a – of a civil rights park like Brown v. Board. This park had been created under the – under the direction of, you know, Bob Dole, you know, one of the icons of Kansas. And it was a well-loved location, and the governor had ties to it. He thought it was an important part of Kansas’s history, so they were very cautious in how we moved forward with this. But, also, I think that, when the OIG investigation came out, and then, when we did an audit of where the money went, and it was clear that it had been spent in ways that were not consistent with policy, they were alarmed by what that could do to the National Park Service. Kansas is a – is a relatively conservative state. You know, generally, it’s known for its fiscal responsibility, and, if you have a partner organization that receives an annual grant of three hundred thousand dollars a year, and, over the course of three years, they have misappropriated six hundred thousand dollars, it goes really, really poorly for the National Park Service and for the people of Kansas. And so, I think, once that audit came out, they were, like, “Wow! We really have to prove that, you know, we are – we are being responsible stewards of the people’s money.”

Interviewer: Okay. So, why, do you think, she felt it was okay to spend that money that way? Had – do you know if she had been given directions as to what she could not spend money on? Or –?

Smith: You know, I can’t speak for, you know, what transpired because that was three years before I came, and I, honestly, don’t know whether it was hubris, whether she was in ignorance of the – ignorance of the rules and regulations at the time. I don’t know.

Interviewer: Okay, that was – that was kind of what I wondered about: whether or not she was just not familiar with how she was allowed to spend that three hundred thousand dollars.

(Interview interrupted by someone coming to Smith’s office to ask a question. Interview paused.)

Smith: The park is officially closed right now, you know, during the pandemic, but we’re beginning to ramp up operations again in the idea that we might be re-opening in about a week or two.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. Yeah, that’ll take a while. So, you asked the Brown Foundation – suggested to the Brown Foundation that they find other accommodations?

Smith: Yeah, it wasn’t “suggest.” It was, like – I think it was along the lines on, “December 1 – or, December 15 and February 1, you know, you will be out of this building, and we will provide you with – you know, you can use that money appropriately to fund your new accommodations.”

Interviewer: Okay. What other changes between the – in the relationship between the park and the Brown Foundation, then, occurred after that, during your tenure?

Smith: Well, at about that time, we began work on doing an audit for the Foundation. So, I met with the Foundation Board and said that, based on the OIG investigation, the Park

Service is concerned about malfeasance regarding the use of federal dollars and that we would be commissioning an audit. So, getting a contractor - it took a few months for that to happen – but, you know, when you bring an auditor in, it definitely changes the relationship between the parties. I think this occurred while they were still in the building waiting to leave. So, this was – it was going on simultaneously while the audit was taking place. I even met with Cheryl, because we had weekly, scheduled meetings, where we would sit down to discuss park matters, but it was – it was a very formal relationship. It was not the kind of relationship I’m typically familiar with in working with a partner organization. It was – it was very formulaic.

Interviewer: Okay, was the – was the cooperative agreement with the Brown Foundation renegotiated during that time?

Smith: So, I think, when I had gotten – when I attended the May meeting, I – if I remember correctly, I think the cooperative agreement was renewed, and there was a new general agreement that was good to go. It allowed for the transfer – it allowed for the transference of the annual grant to the Foundation.

Interviewer: Okay. So, during your tenure, the cooperative agreement was still in force with the Brown Foundation, correct?

Smith: Right, but, as soon as the audits were released to the agency, and it was clear that the money had been spent improperly, I contacted the Regional Office and said I would recommend terminating the cooperative agreement immediately and, you know, looking for another – we have to re-think – we have to re-think our relationship with the Brown Foundation. If a third – if two-thirds of the funds potentially were spent in ways that were – that were not legal or not part of policy or there was malfeasance, then we need to terminate this agreement.

Interviewer: Okay. Was that done during your – during your tenure, or was that later?

Smith: Yeah, that was done during my tenure, and I want to say it might have been around January of – January of 2012. I’m sure that –

Interviewer: 2012? Okay.

Smith: I got there in May of ‘11, and, I think, around September – let’s see, I’m looking for my notes right now. So, in August, it was, you know, pretty much business as normal. On – at the end of August, I reached out to the Regional Director to tell him that I was recommending that the Brown Foundation be housed outside of the park. One of my concerns was – at the time, was that the Foundation was spending twenty-five percent of its annual appropriation on the Chief Financial Officer’s pay. He was the boyfriend of Cheryl Brown Henderson, at the time, and it just – it looked, to me, really bad to have such a large amount of money going to the CFO for an organization that was not bringing in any donations, really, and was getting a grant – it was getting a grant from the federal government, but he was getting a paycheck for seventy-five thousand dollars a year.

Interviewer: Okay, and what – let me ask you this, then: what did you understand the function of the Brown Foundation to be for that three hundred thousand dollars?

Smith: It was – the function for the Foundation was to support the park, so Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. It was to tell the stories that were the basis of the park’s existence –

Interviewer: How were they going to do that?

Smith: How were they going to do that? Well, some of the things they have done was, like, have a newsletter. You know, that’s one of the tools that they used. Before then, they helped create curriculum that they would share with schoolteachers. They would sponsor speakers that would come – at the park to speak about some subject matter. And a lot of [unintelligible], that, you know, they would take trips to Florida to go ahead and meet with small school groups – you know, in Key West and locations like that. And it would be usually tied to a vacation, as well. But, the audit revealed some concerns about, like, how that money was being spent, but, ideally, it was going towards connecting children with the park, supporting the park by doing interpretive outreach or educational outreach, things of that nature.

Interviewer: Okay, and this was intended to be nationwide, or just in Kansas, or just in Topeka? This outreach –?

Smith: Well, it was nationwide, but –

Interviewer: Yeah, this outreach that they were supposed to be doing?

Smith: So, when I came on board, this had been an existing Foundation for a decade, and they had been receiving appropriations through grants from the National Park Service to allow them to do outreach, whatever that was. So, when I took the job, I saw what they were doing, which was, kind of, a description of what I just gave. I envisioned that, probably in the next six months, when we did their Annual Work Plan, we would identify things that were much more concrete and much more specific to the local school districts in Kansas, just so things are more fiscally responsible. You know, giving a program to twenty children in Key West and then bringing the whole staff down there and then staying on vacation, did not seem like the best use of money.

Interviewer: Yeah, I see what you’re saying. I can tell what you’re saying. And so, did they do – as I understand it, the Foundation was pretty small, so they didn’t do any volunteering or anything at the park. Did you have other – did you have a Friends Group or other volunteers?

Smith: No, the Foundation functioned as our Friends group. They had the authority to do fundraising. Our cooperating association was Western National Parks Association. They were the – they provided some staffing – or, money for staffing to operate the bookstore. The Brown Foundation – it was – I’d have to say that the – and this is my perception – before I got there, it was more the tail wagging the dog than the dog wagging the tail. The Brown Foundation was not collaboratively working on an Annual

Work Program with the National Park Service. They were saying, “These are the things we are going to do, and we are going to do them.” And so, their annual gala dinner and things like that, or any, kind of, celebrations they wanted to hold – sometimes they would complement the Park Service’s mission and the park’s mission, but, sometimes, they were, “These are the missions of the Foundation.” So, the partnership was not a true partnership, but – not how we define them in the Park Service, which is a shared goal.

Interviewer: Right, with defined responsibilities that are measurable? Smith: Right. And I – and that’s –

Interviewer: And measurable results?

Smith: That was probably a lot of the problems, you know, for the ten years leading up to the audit – was that they did not really define the roles as well as they should have done.

Interviewer: Okay. So, let’s go to talking about how did you address the difficulties with the staff that you found when you – when you came to the park? Did they all stay after you got here – got there?

Smith: Everyone that – yes, for the most part they stayed. I think some of them are still there, at this point. They –

Interviewer: Treva’s still there.

Smith: Treva’s there. I think Joan might have retired. Joan – I think Joan’s still there. She was an interpreter. The Chief of Interpretation, he moved down to Texas, to LBJ. And he was a – he’s amazing. He was a very, very good worker, and amazing guy to work with. His wife works for the Association, so she was – they were a great team to work with. But they wanted to get back to Texas, where they are from, and he has since retired. So, they left. One of the very first things I did is, I taught the Operational Leadership course for staff. That’s a two-day, sixteen-hour course that emphasizes personal responsibility for providing leadership when it comes to safety and the work environment. And I saw that was missing at Brown v. Board. I wanted – I wanted staff to know that, when you’re in a situation where the environment is unacceptable, you know, you have a – you have a responsibility to change that. Now, sometimes, for safety reasons, but, in this case, it was for health reasons because they were so mentally stressed. I spent a lot of time counseling staff. I – you know, like, for hours for some of them, they would be up in my office just sharing some of their, you know, challenges they had working for – working for Cheryl Brown Henderson when she was there. And she was only there as superintendent for six months, but it – she was a – it was a toxic environment. I, personally, would work closely with our EEO counselor up in the Midwest Office, Clara Wooden, and with Sandra Washington. She was the Associate Director, and she’d been, kind of, tasked with helping me with the Brown Foundation. So, I got some really smart, powerful women that were working with me weekly to discuss how do we – how do we work with Cheryl Brown Henderson, how do we – how do we support our staff. So, those are – those are some of the things I did with staff. And then, I always think that

work is a – is an amazing medicine. And, since we were serving, at that point, I think, twelve thousand visitors a year, which was just a horrifyingly small number to me, I said, “We’re going to do a lot of outreach.” So, we hired a new educational ranger who took her job as to help guide us to do more classroom programs. We created a partnership with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Topeka and Lawrence, and we started – we created a summer camp. So, during the course of three weeks, we would get these kids from Missouri and from Kansas, and we would take them to go visit all these different historic sites and natural sites in eastern Kansas and western Missouri. And we created a bus program so we could bring entire classrooms into the park. So, in the course of, like, two years, we doubled the visitation to about twenty-five thousand a year. And I think the staff really being involved in working helped them a lot. So, they felt that they were actually being productive rangers – more so than they were before.

Interviewer: Great! Okay. So, did you – what other kind if administrative changes do you recall making? Did you change hours, or – you changed – you improved the outreach. Did you have more –?

Smith: We entered into a lot of partnerships. We partnered with a National Heritage Area, Freedom’s Frontier, and that was a really good partnership. We started using – getting art exhibits back and forth with them. With the local, like, university in Topeka – and I forget the name of it – Washburn – with Washburn University, we worked with their Art Department – their Arts Department there. There was a project called “Rockets for Peace,” or something, where children would make all this artwork, and we would decorate the walls of Brown v. Board with this art that the kids were doing so that she could – I think the artist – she was wrapping a missile with artwork from kids from the campus. A pretty cool idea. We – there were other – we started working with Constitution Hall, which was a historic site in the middle of Topeka and worked on the

U.S. – started to try to preserve the U.S. Postal Office in downtown Topeka. It used to be the courthouse where the Brown case initially went to. So, there was a lot of civil rights groups we were working with – and history groups – around the areas that we entered into partnerships with. There was a lot more working outside the park than working in the park. So, kind of a work change that the - that staff were regularly – like, for the summer program, you know, for a month or so, we had staff that were getting on school buses each day and going off to where John Brown had his first battle just before the war or going to the state historical museums, to go walk through Tallgrass Prairie, or things like that. So, that was good. We brought on some interns – some – I think they were SCA interns for another agency, and they started working with us in the summertime, specifically on youth programs. That was kind of a new thing: to have young folks from diverse backgrounds. So, it was targeting kids from historically Black colleges to get them into the National Park Service, and so we had them come and work during the summertime at the parks. About the same time, there was a change in administration over at Nicodemus, which is a little National Historic Site that’s about three hours to the west. And that, then, became the responsibility of the superintendent to help manage that and to hire the person who would become the superintendent out there. So, that was kind of more –

Interviewer: You mean –? Smith: Pardon?

Interviewer: You mean the superintendent at Brown v. Board was in charge of Nicodemus? Smith: Correct. So, I hired –

Interviewer: So, that was you?

Smith: I hired the superintendent that was out there, Angela. And she was – she was very, very capable, very good. I – you know, park staff would occasionally go out to work at Nicodemus and help out. So, that was a nice collaboration. I would even send Treva down to help out at Tallgrass Prairie a bit. So, we had a network of parks in Kansas, and I think, for the first time, you know, our rangers began working more with them on other projects as well. So, there was – you got – you’re more – you’re part of a larger family of Park Service employees than just, you know, being in Topeka.

Interviewer: Right. And it gave you more to do than just deal with twelve thousand visitors a year?

So, less time to think about stuff, more – because you had more work to do?

Smith: Yeah. And it will probably be the only time in my Park Service career, but the budget for Brown v. Board was incredibly large compared to the needs of that park. So, there was a certain responsibility for sharing that wealth with parks that needed it. If there were purchases that needed to be made at, you know, Fort Scott or some other place, you know, I would offer up some money from our budget to be able to get things like that. And staff as well.

Interviewer: Well, this is unique. I’ve almost never done oral histories for National Parks that we didn’t have to discuss budget issues, and budget problems, and the impacts of budget. So, you’re saying that your budget was sufficient and more than sufficient?

Smith: It was more than sufficient. It was – it definitely covered all of our needs and then some.

And so, to be able to really – so, extending our visitation, you know, we didn’t need to use grants to pay for school buses. You know, let schools do – give them money to pay for their buses so that they can bring their kids to the park. And Kansas, while we were there, the education budget was slashed considerably, and so they really were in dire need of bus money. To provide – so, to provide that and then to give a curriculum-based education program that complemented the schools’ was really meaningful for the teachers in Shawnee County and, you know, in Topeka.

Interviewer: During your time there, the Brown Foundation – did they hold any of the symposia that they had – that they held previously?

Smith: I don’t think they did. I really think that stopped. I started in May, and by – and by Christmastime, you know, they were looking for new office space. The audit results came out, I think, first of the year, and it was definitely a change in business for them.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So, what about – was the Parks as Classrooms program – was that part of the, like, summer school camps?

Smith: I think Parks as Classrooms was going on before, and then it continued to go on during the summer, and so the camps were part of that. So, it was kind of a mix. That was a National Parks Foundation grant?

Interviewer: Right.

Smith: Yeah, so the National Parks Foundation grant was – I think, was covering bus costs as well. We were supplementing them with Park Service funds.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you still do Martin Luther King Day On – Not Day Off? That was a – that was a work day at the park, so I wasn’t sure if it continued after – I know it was going on before the park opened, but I wasn’t sure if it –?

Smith: Yeah, I think at – the only – so, most parks don’t close at all. But I think at Brown v.

Board, we were closed on Christmas.

Interviewer: No, I mean, before it opened as – before the Dedication. Before the park was opened to the public.

Smith: Okay, well, I will tell you that MLK was a big day at the park, so we had programs all day long. We would bring in additional speakers, and it was a place where parents could take their kids so they could learn more about civil rights on – which was an official holiday for the state.

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah. The state and the whole rest of the country! Okay, so, let’s go to: were there any major physical improvements projects at the park during your tenure? I mean, I – they – you know, it was six years after the completion of the – of the rehabilitation, so, were there any things that you needed to do after that, either in the – to the building or to the – were there any changes to the interpretive materials?

Smith: Yeah. We took a – the meeting room and repurposed it as a model 1956 classroom that would have been seen at Monroe Elementary. So, it was made to look just the way any other classroom would have looked like at that time, which was really fun! And one of the cool things with that was the sand table that would have been typical in Kansas at that time to actually allow kids to manipulate sand. And so, we bought a whole bunch of that really expensive sand that you see at museums, you know, all over the place, so – and adults really enjoyed that because that was so different. We also completed a Wayside Plan. The waysides were not installed until after I left, but a number of waysides out in – temporary exhibits in the schoolyard in front of the historic site. I think one of the trees that were growing inside – in front of the Visitor Center – we think it was a maple, but I might be mistaken – we had to replace that because it died, and so, we replaced it with another one while I was there.

Interviewer: So, how was the water – was the water mitigation – did it work? Apparently, you had wetness in the basement.

Smith: (Long pause) I’m trying to remember. Oh, there was – there was a problem with radon down in the – in Treva’s office. The radon levels were too high, so we had to do a radon test, and then mitigate that by putting in some additional vents that would remove the

radon from the air. That happened. I don’t remember dampness as being an issue when I was there. Another major change we were working on were new exhibits – new exhibits for the main exhibit room downstairs. We were working with Harpers Ferry to put in some new exhibits and to change them, so they were a little bit more dynamic.

So, that was [unintelligible].

Interviewer: Okay. So, those were – were they intended to be less static and more interactive or were they – were you adding different information?

Smith: There was – you know, it was different information, but it was done in a way – you know, it was – it was – we were updating the - every exhibit space information. It was putting in some exhibits that were more interactive. You know, a continuation of the – there’s a hall where there are really powerful, emotive images from the civil rights era. That was extended – made longer to provide more of a tunnel kind of experience as you’re going into it. It was more immersive. But I have not seen those exhibits yet. I have not gone back since I was superintendent at Joshua Tree.

Interviewer: Okay. So, while you were there, they were just in planning?

Smith: They were in planning, but I – you know, I think they rolled out in 2015.

Interviewer: Okay. (Pause) And so, you had some partners, but the only Friends group you actually had was the Brown Foundation, or they were supposed to function –?

Smith: Correct.

Interviewer: So, you didn’t have any other, kind of, volunteer groups that helped with the park, correct?

Smith: No. I will say that the VIP program was significant. I think there were one or two people that served as volunteers – the front desk, and, when we would have large events, you know, we might be able to find a couple, as well. But, in general, it was – there was no group raising funds for the park. Western National Parks would give us a small amount of money each year, but that was as part of their agreement as a cooperating association. We entered into a cooperative agreement with Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area, and that was so we could apply for additional grants and to allow for transfer of money so they could do, you know, good work for the park. I don’t remember it came in the other direction.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Okay. You know, I want to go back to Nicodemus for a minute. How did it happen – they were originally mentored by Fort Larned. How did it happen to be transferred to the care of Brown v. Board? Do you know?

Smith: Some challenges with the superintendent at Fort Larned. I think he was removed from the position, so it might have been that relationship. But, even more importantly, Nicodemus is a – is a civil rights kind of a – so, from a mission standpoint, Brown was more of a – of an appropriate connection. Or even Homestead would have been a more appropriate kind of a link between – Homestead’s up in Nebraska. And because of

Nicodemus was a homestead park, that was – that made more of a connection – more than with Brown, because it’s a civil rights park.

Interviewer: Were you part of that decision to change that?

Smith: I – you know, you’d have to talk to Patty and Mike about that, but I think it was just, kind of, a practical approach. I was close. I was willing. You know, Brown v. Board was not a super-difficult park to manage. I had the energy to do it. I was happy to provide some help up there. And I really cared about it. And it – and I thought Nicodemus was a really special place that deserved some attention.

Interviewer: Yeah, I’ve been there. I really enjoyed it. In a mentoring situation, what does that entail?

Smith: Well, the superintendent was rated lower than I was, so my job was to help her navigate some of the challenges of managing a spot like that. So, mentoring is –

Interviewer: Okay, so it – so, it’s basically – it was basically the superintendent – mentoring the superintendent?

Smith: Correct. And then helping her deal with some personnel challenges. You know, Nicodemus is literally in the middle of nowhere. There are no large cities nearby. The Park Service owns virtually no part of that park. So, it was a really tough assignment, and it helped to have someone to talk to.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay, let me move on here. I’ve only got two questions left. These are questions that I normally ask people at the end of the oral histories. Of your work at Brown v.

Board, what do you – what are you most proud of doing, or what do you think is – was the most effective thing you did?

Smith: (Long pause) I think the youth – the youth program is what I’m most happy with from Brown v. Board. It was – it was, you know, really unheard of to do that kind of outreach. We targeted kids that didn’t have any other resources. And we worked with, you know, three day-care organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs in the downtown sections of town. And gave these kids an experience that – they had no idea. Kansas has less than one percent public land. You know what I’m – like, California has – half the land is public land. And you can camp wherever you want, for the most part. You can hike wherever you want. In Kansas, everything is owned. And to be able to take them to little places where they can actually get out and feel like they’re on public land, and also to see that there is a history – the, you know, native American history and Black history in Kansas, and, you know, talk about all these different people that have come here, that – I hope that, for these fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, you know, those made lifelong connections with Kansas that they otherwise would not have. So, I think that would be my proudest, kind of, accomplishment there.

Interviewer: Okay. So, lastly, is there anything that you – that I have not asked you about, that you did want to say? Was there something you hoped I would ask you about that you would like to talk about? (Long pause) Not that – not that you can think of?

Smith: No, it – honestly, no. I mean, we talked about, kind of, the significant historical things that transpired, which were the change in relationship with the Brown Foundation, the decisions to do an audit, and the findings of an audit and how that kind of changed the relationship with them. I am very financially conservative, and I got there, and I’d just worked for Congress, and, you know, I just valued safeguarding public funds. And so, I was going to try, as much as possible, to connect with as many people as possible, while we were there, so it was a meaningful park. So, working with kids was a very cheap thing to do. For sixty bucks, we got a school bus with fifty kids who were going to come there, and we could spend six hours with them and give them something that would last a lifetime. And I prefer as many things like that as possible. We did a – we did a 5K run at the park, and I don’t think they have – probably have never done a 5K since then, but that was a way to reach out to the community around Brown v. Board. When I got there and realized that there weren’t people that were coming to the park, I went and – I went door-to-door around that neighborhood, and I asked people, you know, what the – what the park meant for them. And they said it was a place where they could safely recreate. And they liked seeing uniformed – they liked seeing uniformed Park Service rangers there because they knew it was safe for their kids to go out and play there. They didn’t understand the civil rights mission at all. So, I thought, if we could provide a safe place for kids to be at, and they would see the civil rights from there. You know, when I was there, I think we had, like, two or three murders within a few blocks of the park. A half a mile away, Fred Phelps – he’s a famous minister. He’s the one who usually shows up at military funerals and has a big protest signs that say, you know, “God Hates Fags,” and things like that. He’s just this vile man, and he – his office was – and his home was less than a mile from the park, and he would picket the park every now and then. So, we had this environment which was really poor. You had a lot of people that were scared to go out of their houses because of violence. You had this violent, nasty, bigot who would protest everything, and then you had, in the middle of it, this beautiful, beautiful thing, Brown v. Board of Education. And I wanted that to – I wanted that to spread like wildfire to help change that neighborhood. You know, what I think we forgot was when Michelle Obama came to visit.

Interviewer: Oh! Well, let’s talk –

Smith: That was magic. That was a magical, magical time. Interviewer: Tell me.

Smith: She was to speak at the graduation at Topeka High School. And she came, and they were really excited about it, and then they realized that there was not going to be enough room at the graduation for everyone to bring as many family members as they wanted. It got the graduates so upset, it was about to turn into a disaster. And she said, “Oh, no, well, then, I’ll do the,” – what is the term? It’s that – it’s the religious ceremony that you have before the graduation – like, the Benediction or –

Interviewer: Invocation?

Smith: It was, Baccalaureate. So, she had, kind of, a rally for the students ahead of time. And so, she went and did a great job, and the kids got really excited. But the really cool thing is, she reached out to the park and said, “I’d like to come there and see the site. You know, it’s the sixtieth anniversary of the Brown v. Board decision, and I’d like to have a group of kids there as well, and could you find kids that are – that would really benefit from my visit?” So, we worked with the local school district, and they had a program for kids that were from families that, typically, would not go to college. So, these were from poor, White families; from farming families; diverse kids from inner-city families. And so, these kids didn’t know why they were coming to Brown v. Board of Education that day, but they were told to “dress up.” So, they show up at Brown v. Board, and they come in, and there are metal detectors, and there’s Secret Service people, and then they see Michelle Obama, and they screamed, they were so excited. And she was going to spend fifteen minutes with them and then let them go. She spent an hour and twenty minutes with them. These tense, young people, dressed up in prom gowns and really fancy overalls, you know, they came out, weeping, and doing selfies with her and the joy that came out of them from that hour and fifteen minutes that she spent with them was overwhelming. And I was – I was so proud, that day, you know, to be part of a – of a country where our First Lady, of all things, would come and reach out to young people in a blue - it was such the right thing to do. But it was such a wonderful experience. I was really proud to be part of that.

Interviewer: That sounds wonderful. I didn’t – what year was that?

Smith: That would have been, I think, in 2014. And then, a little bit before that, the Secretary of Education, Arnie Duncan, came out, and he had all these educators there, and he spoke to them and took really – it was really motivational, you know, talking about the role of education. And, when he was there, the church associated with Fred Phelps, that bigot that I was talking about – they showed up to protest. And they had, you know, just terrible, terrible signs about (pause) everything. And they were out there –

Interviewer: They were protesting education?

Smith: Well, they were protesting the Obama administration because they thought he was – they thought that he was – I don’t know what they thought. He was un-Christian, and God was going to punish the nation because he allowed women to vote and gays to be alive, and things like that. So, they were – they were protesting there, and, as soon as they started yelling and doing their thing – the Topeka band drumline was there as well to celebrate Arnie Duncan being there, the Secretary of Education. So, the band director at the time, he sent all the drumlines to go around Fred Phelps, and they just pounded their drums in a circle around him, and you couldn’t hear him at all. And Fred Phelps and his family disappeared after that. So, that was another proud moment in Topeka.

Interviewer: (Laughs) Well, that’s a – that is a – quite an inspirational story to end on, so, I’m going to (laughs) – I always like those little stories. I’m going to turn off the recording device, and I want to thank you for spending an hour talking to me about your tenure at Brown v.

Board. END OF INTERVIEW