

ALUMNI INTERVIEW

BESSIE WEINBERG SMITH

In-person interview on October 25, 1983.

Mrs. Smith recalled that she was about two years when she entered the JCH. Actually, since she was born on June 14, 1914, and entered on February 14, 1919, she was almost five years old at the time. She was the youngest of four children, all of whom were placed in the Home by their father after the death of their mother. Her brother has since died, one sister is at Willowood, and the other lives "somewhere in Gentilly." Later in the interview Mrs. Smith mentioned that since her siblings are older than she, she had little to do with them during her years at the Home, being friends with other girls her own age instead.

Mrs. Smith left the home when she was "17 or 18", though the record states her date of discharge in 1933, when she would have been 19. ~~It is likely that she is correct, since her recollections were that she was looking in vain for work right before she left.~~ She finally got a Mrs. Weil, one of the Big Sisters, to go with her, and she was hired at Maison Blanche as a salesperson, and she stayed there for forty years until the store closed. She recalled that she did not want to leave and was scared to do so. Her father had remarried by that time, and she really did not care for her step-mother and did not want to live with them.

Mr. Weinberg met her step-mother when he was visiting the Home, as she also had two children in the Home, Sarah and Henrietta Meyers. Mrs. Smith never became friends with those two girls, even though Sarah was her age and Henrietta only a year older. Subsequently her father had another child by his second marriage.

Mrs. Smith described the life in the Home as "wonderful and rewarding." She recalled going occasionally to have dinner with her Big Sister, Mrs. Bonart, in her large house on Napoleon Ave., where they were served by maids and butlers, and later going for a ride with them in their big car. Mrs. Bonart's niece, Blanche Bondheim (?) also was in the home, and she was always there when the four Weinberg children were entertained by the Big Sister. She recalled that sometimes someone would donate tickets to the Symphony, and the older children would attend. The owner of the Orpheum theater gave passes to the Home, and the children went downtown to the movies at the Orpheum every Saturday afternoon. They also got passes to the pool in Audubon Park and could go swimming there every week-day afternoon. On Sunday the four of them would go to visit their father and step-mother. These visits were after Mr. Lashman became superintendent, since in Dr. Vollmer's regime, parents could visit children at the Home on Sunday, but children were never permitted to go out of the facility.

In discussing the superintendents she had known, Mrs. Smith characterized Dr. Vollmer as being "very stern" and known to spank children, especially the boys. She recalled that some of the children would say that they ought to complain to the Board. Mr. Lashman was "an angel" and Mr. Ginsberg was "wonderful." She recalled that she was a little frightened of Mrs. Lashman, but that she also was very fond of her and kept in touch with her after the Home closed. She also recalled Jean Avegno very fondly.

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Mrs. Smith recalled going to camp, first for two weeks, with the boys going for the next two weeks, and later when cabins for the boys were built, having all of them go for six weeks at a time. She also went for two weeks to Girl Scout camp, as she was a member of a Girl Scout troop that was composed of children who did not live in the Home as well as some of the residents.

Mrs. Smith did not recall much of the daily routines that the children followed. She did recall helping to dry dishes and setting the tables in the dining room. The maids washed the dishes. Then she added wryly, "We were orphans, but we had maids." The maids did the laundry, and the girls went down to the laundry to get their own clothes. She does not believe they washed anything except perhaps their stockings. When a child needed a new dress, Eola, the seamstress, would make it for them. She recalled being told to go down to have a new dress made. Mrs. Smith did not recall that she had any complaints about the clothing Eola made. They got a good price at Krausses, so they went there for hats. When they needed shoes they went down to a room in the basement, where shoes, which she assumes were donated, were stored and selected a pair. She does not recall going to a store for regular purchases of clothes.

Some of the children, the "brilliant ones" studied in the evenings, but she herself recalls spending her after school time either playing ball in the court or in the evening going down to the social room on the first floor to listen to the radio or to play records. Several times Mrs. Smith referred to herself as "dumb" in school. She used to get a couple of girl friends, Esther Turansky and Naomi Cantor, to help her with homework, and often they would wind up doing it for her.

Although Mrs. Smith did not recall any times when she was punished specifically, she does recall that when punished she would just say, "I don't care." After Mr. Lashman came and during Mr. Ginsberg's regime punishments consisted mainly of being deprived of a privilege, as attending movies or going swimming. One alumna she knows, Sarah Karp, says that Mr. Ginsberg slapped children, but she does not recall this and does not believe it.

After Mr. Ginsberg came older girls were permitted to have dates, provided that the boy had come to the Home before, had met Mr. Ginsberg and he had satisfied himself that the boy was Jewish. Inter-faith dating was not permitted. She recalls that she and a couple of other girls had crushes on the boys, non-Jewish, who were life guards at Audubon. Sometimes they would go for a ride with these boys, but they had to be let out a block away, so that no staff would know they had been out with non-Jewish boys, but they never saw these boys in the evenings.

Mrs. Smith attended Touro Synagogue after they stopped having their own services at the Home. She recalled they had "hymn practice" on Thursdays. She preferred the services that Dr. Vollmer conducted to those conducted by Rabbi Leipzeiger at Touro, and she found Rabbi Leipzeiger to be cold and not interested in the Home children. She recalled that Rabbi Vollmer would conduct the Seder and that alumni were invited to attend. She also recalled that they each got a small present for Chanukah, and she remembered the Succah in the yard. She also remembered the Alumni dances which took place each year on the anniversary of the Home; they were held in the dining room with a band, ice cream and cookies provided by the alumni.

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Mrs. Smith recalled that they got all the inoculations and that they had annual physical examinations by either Dr. Newman or Dr. Isidore Cohen. Twice a year they had their teeth examined. There was a small room on the first floor of the building where there was a dentist's chair, and the dentist came there to care for the children.

Mrs. Smith's special friends in the Home were Ida Beerman, Fay Steiner, Rosalie Gordon, and she still corresponds with them.

Mrs. Smith said that one of the things she liked was that one was never lonely, as there were always other children to play with. It was as if they were all sisters and brothers.

(Mrs. Smith has some pictures she will be glad to send when we want them.
She can be reached at 522-6170)

ALUMNI PROJECT
JEWISH CHILDREN'S REGIONAL SERVICE
JEWISH CHILDREN'S HOME

 I shall be glad to participate in the project to gather the recollections of alumni of the Jewish Children's Home.

 I am willing to be interviewed.

 I am willing to interview other alumni.

 I plan to write to you about my recollections.

 I have old photographs and/or memorabilia that I will lend to be copied and returned.

 I prefer not to have my name used in any publication of the memoirs.

 I do not wish to participate in the project.

COMMENT: _____

1919-33

Bessie Weinberg Smith
(Name)

1040 St. Charles Ave. apt. 617
(Address)

522 6170
(Telephone)