Interview with: Richard Smith	**Landmark West**
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic	**1 audio file**
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Q: Today is June 24th, 2023, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Rick Smith for Landmark West for the San Juan Hill Oral History. Can you start by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Smith: Introduction, okay, Rick Smith, I live in Glen Cove, New York. I used to live in West 66th Street in the olden days before the trivial travertine travesty that was Lincoln Center went up. What else could I tell you?

Q: Yeah, um, can you tell me more about the block, your address, your apartment?

Smith: The block, yes, so I was born at the French hospital on 30th Street, which is now another residence. And then from then to when they tore the neighborhood down, I lived at 215 West 66th Street. We first lived on the first floor, and then we moved to the third floor. And I don't know why we moved up, but it was just as well we moved up because I do remember coming home and having to pass by the door at the end of the hallway where Mrs. Fischer lived, and she was insane, at least I thought so, and other people thought so too. She had these very dark black eyes and she would yell and scream, and carry on, so I had to come down the hall to the stairway and quietly run up the stairs before she opened the door and hear me coming in, or seen me coming in.

But then most of the time I remember living on the third floor, although I had some photographs of me living on the first floor because I lived in the back on the first floor, and we had a backyard. Those buildings were built, they were twenty or twenty-five, I think they were twenty-five-foot-wide buildings, but then they had sixteen, eighteen, twenty-foot-wide buildings and they were usually sixty or eighty feet deep because the block was two hundred feet. So from both 66th to mid-block, and 67th to mid-block, there was a space between the backs of the buildings, which was all backyards, and people would have their clotheslines out there, and we had telephone poles back there with electricity.

And in Jackson Heights they turned those backyards into beautiful gardens, and Jackson Heights was the first, I think the first garden apartments that were in the city, built in the teens. And the building I lived in was also built about that time, I think. It wasn't an old brownstone, there was one right next door to me, which would have been 217, and that had a long, large stoop in front of the building. And I remember, I was sitting at the top of the stoop with some fellow, some little boy that I knew, and he decided for some reason to push me down the stairs, so that's one memory of childhood I have of being pushed down a

long brownstone flight of stairs. And there was a fellow in a trailer truck across the street parked, and he picked me up and brought me in to my mother, and so I survived that episode pretty well.

Q: Can you tell me a little more about the building, and your apartments? When you came in, what did you see?

Smith: Well, when we, the apartment was a lighter colored stone building, probably build in the late teens, sometime in the teens maybe, maybe even the early '20s. So it wasn't an older building when I was living there, it was maybe thirty years old, so it wasn't an old crumbling building, it was just a nice newer building. And you'd walk down the hall, it was a five-story building, you'd walk down the hall and there was a stairway on the left, and you'd go up, turn and you're up to the apartment. So when I grew up we lived on the ground floor, right side I'm sure because Mrs. Fischer lived straight ahead. So there were two apartments on the ground floor in the front, and two in the back, and then five stories.

And we faced, our third floor apartment, faced south, actually probably faced south and north. They were railroad flats, that's what they called them. And the northern view is the backyard, such as it was, and I'll show you some photographs of that, it's quite an interesting backyard. The southern view, I looked out, the apartment that we lived in, we lived in mid-block, we'll talk about the block for a second: 66th Street, and probably most of the buildings in that area, from Amsterdam west, half the block was residences, there was one commercial building, what they did there I don't know. And on the corner, the northwest corner of 66th and Amsterdam there was a little Greek luncheonette where I used to have chocolate ice cream coming home from school occasionally, but half the block was residences, and then the second half of the block from mid-block to West End Avenue were commercial establishments.

There was a building, the first building I believe, the first building west of the building next door to where I grew up was Bournonville Welding, B-O-U-R-N-O-N-V-I-L-L-E, Bournonville Welding, and then did welding, a welding shop. And then the further buildings were taxi garages and repair shops, and mostly automotive stuff, and that was on the north side of the street. The south side of the street, in fact the whole block, the whole block from 65th to 66th were, the Amsterdam Avenue side was a Con Ed plant, and Con Edison made steam or they did something there because there were oil trucks that used to come in, I could see them from my window, the driveway, their driveway, their yard, it was right outside my window, and I would see all these oil trucks coming in constantly, and the name of the company that delivered oil there, I remember, it was Whale Oil, W-H-A-L-E, Whale Oil.

The second half of the block, from mid-block to West End Avenue were two enormous gas tanks. So that whole block was commercial and it kind of separated the south side of San Juan Hill, where the Amsterdam Housing Project is, from the north side where we lived. And our area, which looked like Hell's

Kitchen, the same type of buildings, 66th, 67th, 68th, and 69th, once you got to 70th Street, the buildings were all much more beautiful and much more expensive, and much larger in height. And then from 70th further north was a whole different, more substantial financially and architecturally neighborhood. And that was even right down to West End Avenue, which was very high-level buildings. I had a dentist, the dentist I used to go to, Dr. Samuel Goodman, was on 263 West End Avenue, which was the northwest corner of West End and 72nd Street.

And we never went, my mother and I never went further south from where we lived, we always would go north, because north was where the more interesting things to do were. The Embassy Movie Theater was on Broadway between 66th and 67th, when you wanted a movie theater. Sometimes you'd go as far north as The Beacon Theater, on 74th and Broadway. On 72nd Street, you had all the good stores. You had the Good Earth Chinese Restaurant, on 72nd, the south side of the street, a little bit west of Broadway, and the Cake Masters was across the street, closer to Central Park, and then you had the Royal Pastry Shop that was on 72nd, mid-block between Amsterdam and West End Avenue, the north side of the street, and, etcetera. And 72nd was where everything was going on. There was a Horn & Hardart on the east side of Broadway, south side of 72nd Street.

Q: What is that?

Smith: Horn & Hardart.

Q: I'm not familiar.

Smith: Horn & Hardart Automat, the automat. Oh, my goodness! The Horn & Hardart Automat, you never saw an automat, huh? You ought to see that movie. Oh, my goodness! It just came out last year or two years ago, called, *Automat.* Mel Brooks is even in it, speaking about how automats—oh, it's a fabulous movie.

Q: Mm-hmm.

Smith: And if you go in there—kids loved the automat, I loved the automat. Because not only could you put in coins into these little windows and they popped up and your sandwich is right there, so you could see what you would gonna get before you got it, but the machine that dispensed the coffee and the hot chocolate was a little fish head, so when you put in the nickel, whatever it was, coffee or hot chocolate came out of the fish's mouth, it was—kids would love that.

Q: They have restaurants like that for sushi now.

Smith: Really?

Q: Yeah, the sushi goes around on this big kind of conveyor belt and you just take what you want off of the belt as it just passes by you.

Smith: They had something like that on 42nd Street. That's the only time we went south, we went very far south, we went to 42nd Street. And you would walk down there, for example, in the summertime when it's ninety-seven degrees, and you didn't have air conditioning in your apartment. The apartments didn't have air conditioning, we were lucky we had hot water. Some of the buildings—some of the buildings at that time were called "cold water flats," "cold water flats," flat being the word for apartment, in England, but they called it that here, being that was a Dutch colony, then an English colony. New York kept an awful lot of the features left over from both of those cultures. Stoop for example is, you know, I mean the whole reason that they had stoops is because people came from Holland where everything was under water half the time, so the first floor, nobody would live in the first floor, you'd walk up the stoop and the main floor was the second floor really.

My doctor was Nemhouzer, he lived on 10th Street, on the north side of Tomkins Square Park, between Avenues A and B, I believe, and he had a long stoop to go up to his office. All those buildings all had stoops. On 66th Street, there was only one building that had a stoop, a long stoop, and that was the one just west of me that I got pushed down. There were a couple of brownstones east of me, and they had just three or four step stoops, brownstones, they were brownstones. So there was the brownstone to the left of me, my buildings, which were white stone, or whiter-colored stone, and they had like one short step. I'll show you a picture of it, one short step going into the hallway. And the other buildings had a few steps, they were older buildings. There was a commercial building then, then the corner building was the luncheonette, and around the corner there was a pharmacy on Amsterdam, and then you could go up to 68th Street. 67th Street, 68th was my school, 68th Street on the west side of the street was PS 94. And that's pictured, when you look at the movie, *West Side Story,* at the beginning of *West Side Story* where the kids are dancing, they're outside my school doing that.

Q: Oh, yeah!

Smith: So that survived until the movie was finished and then they tore that down. On 67th Street, that was on 66th and 67th, there was, right around the corner, there was a bicycle rental shop, and the bicycle shop and you rented bicycles, so you could rent the bicycle and drive around the city. Um, I did that. I don't remember what other stores were on Amsterdam Avenue on that side of the street, but on the east side of the street on Amsterdam Avenue, there was a store where you could buy toys, and little rubber

balls, Spalding's, those little pink balls, and any kind of other things that you wanted to get. And on the corner of 67th and Amsterdam, the north—southeast corner was a green grocer, and they had fruits and vegetables. And his name was Nick Grabarnik, I think was his name. Why I remember these things, I have no idea. I have like a photograph memory, I probably saw his name on the door and I remembered it to this day. Let's see, what else I could tell you.

Q: Well, let me ask about your family. So, can you tell me a little bit about your ancestors, and how your family came to be in New York?

Smith: Well, my mother's family lived in Brooklyn, and some of them lived in Union City, New Jersey. And they were in the milk business, my mother's side of the family. My father died when I was younger so I don't remember much about him, but he started, my father started a business, he was in the jewelry business, he was a jeweler. And he started a business on Maiden Lane, which was the Jewelry District, and this is very common, on 47th Street where the Jewelry District moved, but he started this concept in 1941. He rented a big store, a big space, could have been a supermarket or some sort of food store, or it was something else, and divided it up into tiny little booths because watch makers and diamond setters needed a very small space to do their work, so they wouldn't be able to rent a whole big space. So he called this place The Maiden Lane Jewelers' Exchange. I didn't know about this until recently. This is kind of funny, because when I started my business, The Piano Exchange, quite interesting.

Q: Yeah, which is where we are right now.

Smith: That's where we are right now. So anyway, and my mother lived in Brooklyn, and then she had me, and my father was out of the picture by that time. My parents were older when they had me, so I'm an only child, and it was just me and my mother. And we were growing up on 66th Street, and she had a little job working as a bookkeeper some place in the city, and I spent my time in the apartment because you wouldn't go out in the streets and play. And I wasn't interested in sports or playing stick ball in the street like the other kids, and it was a little dangerous at times, so I stayed in the apartment and read, and listened to old records that I'd been picking up on the sidewalk.

And I had a friend up the street, the one person that I knew that lived on the block that I was friendly with was a little boy by the name of Sam Wood, and I'd love to find him, but he was a little bit younger than I. But we'd play Monopoly or Chess, and that's the only other things that I would do. I didn't have a television, early on we didn't have any money so I didn't have all of those things. But I would watch television anyway because I would go down the hallway, and there was a couple who lived down the hall, and she was American, and he was, I believe, Filipino, so I imagine now, thinking back, she probably met him during the war when she was over there, and then they came back. And they would watch television

and they would let me come and watch television with them. So I ended up watching all the adult programs. I didn't watch the children's programs, I watched what they watched, so mostly musical programs. You know, you had *Ed Sullivan*, and you had all the other. Liberace was on television at that time, and all kinds of other musically oriented shows. Betty White was on television, *Captain Midnight*. I could think of a lot of shows that I used to watch. And when I finally got my own television I was very upset because I couldn't watch all of the shows at the same time because they were all good. And there weren't that many channels. So you had 2, 4, 7, I think 9, and 5, Channel 5 which was a Dumont Channel. Ernie Kovacs, I used to watch Ernie Kovacs. And then 9 and 11 came along, 13 didn't exist at that point, it came much later.

Q: So when you were born was your mother already living at 215 West 66th?

Smith: Good question, I don't know. I know she lived on Montgomery Street in Brooklyn at one time, but maybe not. Let me just see what I can find for you [shuffling sounds while looking for pictures]. I found two pictures. They're all mixed up. There's newer ones and some older ones. These are another because I just found these. Now, so this is 1948, [viewing photos] and my father, while he was still alive, got me this Jeep, and he didn't live with us anyway. And this is right in front of my building, facing east. And you see some of the older buildings next to me. That's 66th Street facing east. That's in front of my building, as is that.

Q: So you look like you might be five years old or so?

Smith: Five. And here I am in the backyard, and earlier.

Q: You're on a rocking horse.

Smith: And this is what the backyard looked like, just a desolate sand pit, nothing growing there. I think I do remember some things growing there. I remember morning glories, morning glories growing on a fence.

Q: Can you tell me what the interior or the—

Smith: Apartment?

Q: Yeah, how did your mom have it set up?

Smith: Okay, if you go to the front, where the window is overlooking 66th Street, that was a bedroom, bedroom/living room. And the kitchen was further toward the back, it may have been the back, I don't remember what the kitchen looked like. But I remember being in the front. I remember sleeping in the front. Of course, back in those days, you know the old story, people used to sleep on the fire escape a lot. There was a fire escape in front of the building. I think it was the front, I'm sure it was the front. Does it show? [referring to photograph]

Q: Just the neighboring building, I think.

Smith: There you can see the fire escapes are all in front of the buildings.

Q: Yes, mm-hmm.

Smith: I have more pictures, let's see what I can find. I found these in this envelope here, I don't know why, maybe I had—

Q: Why don't we kind of just save those questions for when we look at the photos? It's alright if you don't remember it, but, and I'll ask you my questions, and then we can sort through that.

So, you were saying before about, you know, how the neighborhood is often described as being a Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood, but that hadn't been your experience, so what—who lived on your block, and who did you, who lived in your building?

Smith: I think most of the people that I knew of that lived around, that I went to school with—and I forgot to bring the record, I have a record at home. In PS 94, most of the kids were white that I remember, and they were either Germanic or Irish. Sam Wood had blonde hair. They were just Middle European, English, Irish, German, I can't remember any Italian kids. Because I left there when I was about eleven. I went to school for a while, for two years, at the Bernie School, the Bernie School was on 63rd. It was in the YMCA building, a private school. Somehow my mother managed to get me in there, financially, I mean my grades were good, but I don't know how she managed to pay for it. But that was—I finished 4th grade at PS 94, and I skipped the 5th, and I went into the 6th and 7th at Bernie. So it was after the 5th grade, I was probably eleven. I know I was twelve when I was in Jersey already. We had to move to New Jersey because there wasn't enough places in New York for all the people that were displaced by the demolition of the neighborhood. So people scattered, and my uncle had a business in New Jersey, so we went over there, and my mother got a job working for him. So it was Weehawken where I went to high school, Weehawken, New Jersey.

Q: Do you remember how you found out that you were gonna have to move?

Smith: No, I have no idea how we found out. I'm sure it was—you see, the pendulum always swings all the way, like in a clock. The pendulum always swings all the way to that side, and then it come back and swings all the way to that side. Back in those days, society's rights were paramount, and individual's rights were negligible. Now, it's quite the other way around. In 1983, I bought an apartment on 57th Street to get back to my old neighborhood, as close as I could find, because I wouldn't move back to Lincoln Towers, those are disgusting buildings. They're what they built to replace the old, what they—what Robert Moses said were disgusting buildings or a disgusting neighborhood were really better quality buildings than the junk that they replaced it with called Lincoln Towers. Massive, monolithic, incredible long hallway—I've been there to visit my aunt who moved there. My aunt happened to move to 67th or 68th Street, it's one building from 66th to 70th Street, or whatever it is, 69th Street. Terrible buildings, terrible! And that's what they replaced where I lived with.

Q: So your apartment would have been like high ceilings and some sort of detail—I saw the tiles in the entry. I mean, there's effort there.

Smith: New York is the only, it seems to be, New York is the only place, maybe there are other places, but from my experience New York is the only place where they tear down permanent buildings to build temporary ones. And the buildings were very substantially built. They're like pianos, they built things to last forever at one time, until they realized that wasn't a good premise, it's not a good business model. If you make things last too long, they do., and then you can't replace them, or sell them, or build another one, whatever.

Q: Yeah. Were you aware of the Amsterdam Houses being built when they were under construction?

Smith: No, I knew the Amsterdam Houses when they were there as they are today. I just knew there as built buildings, and again, we didn't go down that way much. But there was one place where I remember going to, it was a cabinet shop, a woodworking shop. They built a bookcase for us. And they were probably on Amsterdam, the west side of the street, between 63rd and 4th, or 64th and 5th, right there. And if we ever went further south, we went all the way south to 42nd Street to go to the movies because movie theaters had air conditioning. So in the summertime that's where you went, to the movies. That's why you went to the movies, yeah.

Q: And what about the sounds of the neighborhood that you remember?

Smith: I loved the sounds of the neighborhood. Well, first of all, unlike today—today there's noise, but it's not the same kind of noise because when I had my apartment on 57th Street, from '83 to '99, the kind of sound—the sound of the city, to me, is a prenatal sound. I grew up listening to that even before I was born, I'm sure, somehow I knew it was there. And you'd hear the traffic, the sounds of the traffic, the sounds of the cars, the sounds of the trucks, and the sounds of the horns. There were more horns being blown then than there are today. Today they have tried to restrict horn blowing, they're making it illegal to blow a horn unless there's danger or good reason. But the horns were not prohibited at that time, so, and I loved the sound, it was just, it was a vibrant sound of activity, and people, and commerce, and life. And, you know, you live in the suburbs, you really miss that.

Q: And what about the steam plant that you mentioned?

Smith: I believe it was a steam plant, I don't know, unless they made electricity.

Q: Or the gas—

Smith: Well, the gas tanks were next door. And the Con Ed building, which was a dark brick building, it took the whole block on Amsterdam Avenue, and halfway down the block. I don't know what they did in that thing. They either generated electricity or steam, or whatever Con Ed does. I don't remember, I don't know what the stacks looked like, I don't remember the upper part of the buildings because I just remember the lower part. And there was a place across the street from my house that was like a platform with a big garage door, and I used to sit at that platform sometimes. And the sidewalks, it wasn't a complete sidewalk like it was—on my side of the street, the sidewalks went from building to curb. And on the other side of the street, in front of the gas tanks, the sidewalk was the same width, but it was in three sections. There was a grass piece against the building, there was a walkway in the middle, which was cement, and there was another piece of grass between the cement and the curb. And people would walk their dogs. So being much shorter than I am today, I was closer to the sidewalk, and closer to the dog waste, and it was very—I remember the smell, very, very smelly because that's where they took their dogs.

I also remember living on the street when—they turned the street around, actually. The direction of the traffic flowed in a different direction on 66th Street. It used to go east. Now it's west. The street cleaners, they had—things that I remember about living there—the street cleaner was a man who had a pushcart with a barrel on it. He had a white uniform and he had a shovel and a broom standing up with a garbage can, and he'd pull it along the street and he'd sweep the streets, and pick it up, and put it in the garbage. You had that. Then you had the trucks that came by, they were full of water, and they had on both sides—although they only did one side—they had a big pipe with a valve and like a fan-shaped end to it,

and they would turn that on and it would put a blast of water that would come out and wash the streets in the gutter, and they would clean the streets that way. It was different, it's quite interesting.

Q: Wow, I'd never heard how they used to clean the streets.

Smith: Oh, yeah, they'd wash the streets.

Q: Was there any kind of flooding in the streets like there is sometimes today?

Smith: No, no water that I remember. But when I went up to Broadway, where we used to go quite a bit—either we went north or we went east. When we went east, Broadway was there, and there was a Walgreens or a Weylin's, one or the other, and I remember having chocolate malteds in that store. It was great. They had these little metal containers, conical shape, there was a little conical shaped paper cup in there, and they'd give you the whole container, and you'd put some of it in it, and you'd drink that, you put more in, you drink that, they'd give you the whole container of the malted on the counter. And the movie theater was a couple of doors next to that, Embassy Movie Theater. And you went a little further and you were in Central Park, and you're on Central Park West, and rich people, it was—the neighborhood changed dramatically. Forget block by block, building by building. You know, because we were all poor people living on the west side of Amsterdam Avenue, but as soon as you crossed Amsterdam and you started going toward Columbus and Central Park, it changed dramatically.

We used to—I might have a picture of that too someplace—on 66th, where Columbus crossed Broadway, began to cross Broadway, there was a little building on the north side of the street—oh, there you go [looking at a map of the area]. On the north side of the street, it was on the triangle, and it was called Mike's Ship A Hoy Restaurant. I found, on eBay, one of the menus, I have one someplace here. Mike's Ship A Hoy Restaurant. And what was interesting about that was the windows outside were round, round glass windows, like portholes all around, and when you went in, they had real boats, all different sizes of boats, with a little notch cut out of the middle of the boat, with a little walkway and you walk up and you go inside, you sit down at a table inside the boat.

Q: Wow!

Smith: A seafood restaurant. And there were all kinds of interesting things in the neighborhood that they tore down.

Q: What about music in the neighborhood, either hearing music or people singing?

Smith: That, I don't remember any of that. I don't remember any music. The only time I remember anything happening in the street, I remember ice trucks coming, when they used to bring ice because people still had ice boxes then, some of them. And the ice truck would come with a gigantic block of ice in the truck, and he'd take his ice pick, and [makes chipping sounds] break a section off and carry it into the house, put it in your icebox. I remember coal being delivered, guys would back up the truck with a basket on their back, fill it with coal, and they'd go to the opening in the window at the base of the sidewalk where the building was, and he'd dump it in there, and it went down a chute into the basement. Of course, the buildings were heated individually with coal, sometimes oil, but I never remembered an oil truck, I just remember coal.

And the only other music I would remember was when, on 67th Street, periodically they'd have the Italian Feast, where they'd come and close off the street, and they'd have all these games. You could play the games. There was a ping pong ball and try to get it in the glass jar with a goldfish in it, and they had all kinds of games where you throw pennies and try to get them to win money. And they had music there, but I don't remember any music. There'd be no reason to have music in the streets. Other than that, I don't remember music there. Just the records I was picking up on the street, bringing them home.

Q: Yeah, can you talk about your, I guess, early interest in records and music?

Smith: Well, you know, people are throwing out things constantly, and I'm five or six or seven or eight or nine years old, I'm closer to the sidewalk than I am now, so I would see all these things being put out on the sidewalk, and it would inspire my curiosity, so I would bring a record home, and then—I didn't have a record player at first, but I figured out that there's music in there because there was a label and it said what it said. And then eventually I had a turntable and I could spin it around and put a pin in it, and I could hear sound coming out from the pin, and then I taped a piece of paper to the pin like a little flag and it got louder. And then I got a phonograph, they were throwing things out, so I'd pick them up, phonographs too. And then I had a record player and then I started collecting records. That's how I started collecting records and getting into music. I had a lot of records. By the time I moved to New Jersey, I had a lot of records.

Q: And did your mom like music as well?

Smith: I don't remember her being interested in music in any way, shape, or form. All I wanted was, whenever we went to visit, and as I said, if there were no kids there to play with there was always a piano, so I found myself, when she went visiting picking out tunes on—the dressmaker was on 74th Street, and we'd go visit her, and she had a piano, and I'd be picking out tunes on the piano. I was very musical. And I heard a lot of music on the radio. I heard a lot of music—there was music in the city, you would hear it

different places. And I remember it all, so I don't know how but I remember, to this day, thousands of songs, words and music, both. And I was picking out tunes on the piano, so all I wanted was a piano. And we were on the third floor walk-up, we had no money, we had no space, I had no piano. So I've solved that problem now. I've got maybe 750, and close to eight hundred pianos, I'm sure. So the lesson there is, "never deprive a child of something they want because one day they might over-compensate for it." [Laughter]

Q: Um, what kind of things were, I guess, what kind of things were your responsibility around the house? Is there anything that you were responsible for besides school?

Smith: No, I don't think. I didn't wash dishes. I didn't clean up anything. Some things, it's very interesting––all the things that I do remember in vivid detail, some things I don't remember at all, at all! For example, I tell people today, as much as I love to eat, I don't ever remember, except one occasion, one occasion I remember eating. All the meals I ever had, and all the food—I think she tried liver on me once, that I remember, I remember that, it didn't fly. But at six o'clock at night, and I'd have to look it up to be sure, I think it was a Sunday night at six o'clock, I would have dinner, and there'd be one of those floor model radios, those old fashioned radios. This one had, somebody had decoupaged the outside with all kinds of pictures of movie stars, and I would listen to the *FBI in Peace and War* and *Inner Sanctum* on the radio. And I'd be having dinner and I had Mueller's, why I know the brand name, I don't know, but it was Mueller's elbow macaroni, with Chef Boyardee tomato sauce, or Sauce Arturo, Sauce Arturo. Sauce Arturo, it came in little cans. That's what I remember eating.

Q: That was the brand, Chef Arturo?

Smith: Sauce Arturo. Sauce Arturo. There was also Chef Boyardee, we'd have that occasionally too, but that was the spaghetti and the sauce together. Sauce Arturo is just the sauce, and she'd make the Mueller's elbow macaroni, and I would listen to the radio. I remember that. Anything else, I don't remember. I don't remember eating in school, I don't remember what I had in school, what I had lunch in school, where I had lunch in school.

Q: Just ice cream, and—

Smith: That I remember. Coming home, and the Greek Diner, it was a little luncheonette. I remember the counter and the seats right there as soon as you come in. It was a corner building, on the corner, the northwest corner of 66th and Amsterdam.

Q: And do you remember what you called the neighborhood?

Smith: I didn't know it was called San Juan Hill until a few years ago. I don't know if it was ever called that when I was living there. I think that name might have come later on. I don't know what it was called.

Q: Yeah, Lincoln Square is another—

Smith: Yeah, Lincoln Square was—and I remember sitting in the park, the block between 65th and 66th, where Broadway and Columbus cross, I remember the hexangular asphalt paving tiles that were on the sidewalk. And I also remember at that time they still had large granite, this deep, these deep troughs, large granite troughs because there was still people that had horses and wagons, and the horses would come by and they would drink the water. And they still had those.

Q: Wow. So let's talk about having to move. So what do you remember of that process?

Smith: Having to move, I don't remember, and I was eleven years old, eleven or twelve. My twelfth birthday was in Weehawken so I had to be eleven when we moved, which would be 1955, right, that's when they tore down everything, I guess, '55?

Q: I think that's when they announced that Moses's plan was approved, and then they tore things down a few years later.

Smith: Years later, yeah, it took time to get everybody out and move them out. As I was saying about the pendulum swinging all the way, so back then they would chase you out, they'd condemn the buildings, they'd pay the landlord something, and they'd probably pay them very little—and went to court with them too—I'm sure all the time, and then the people that were forced to move, the vacancy rate was very low in New York, always was, so a lot of people like me moved out of town. [00:41:54] And they didn't give you a dime, nothing, just goodbye.

Now, when I had my apartment on 57th Street, there was a building on the corner of 57th and 9th Avenue, the southwest corner, that was empty for twenty years; there's one light on in one window, there's some little old lady living in that place, paying no rent, I mean, very little rent, rent controlled, they can't get them out, and whatever they try, they get gangsters to move in, they do anything they can to chase these people out and they won't go. I just read in the paper a couple of years ago they just paid three people twenty-five million dollars to move out of a building on 38th Street and 10 Avenue. So now individuals' rights are paramount and society's rights are negligible, interesting how that's happened.

But I don't remember moving. I don't remember moving to New Jersey, I don't remember the process. I remember being in New Jersey. I remember vividly being in New Jersey and what I did when I was there. But the transition, moving, how we moved, when we moved—I would think I'd remember a moving truck or moving van and taking furniture—not a thing! It's amazing how selective memory can be because I don't remember anything about—I remember being in Manhattan, and I remember being in New Jersey. I even remember being in Manhattan on day when there was a big truck, and it was loaded with lumber, I mean, way overloaded with lumber, and it was driving up 66th Street, and we happened to be at the corner of 66th and Amsterdam, and the truck turned the corner and fell over on its side. A massive truck full of lumber, and that I remember, but I don't remember much about moving, not at all.

Q: Did you have a sense of how your, I guess, what your mother's response was to having to move?

Smith: No, no, you know, all I know is you go with the flow, you know? [Laughs] You go with the flow, and I think people at a young age are much more resilient to what's happening because they're guided, you know, you don't have your own mind and you don't have your own thoughts necessarily. So we're going here today, okay. We're going to the park today, okay. We're going to the museum today, okay. We're going to the zoo today, okay. We're going to Weehawken today, okay. [Laughter] I remember taking the ferry back and forth. I remember taking the 42nd Street ferry to New York City from Weehawken, when we were first in Weehawken because they had the ferry right there, right at the bottom of the street where I lived. There was the ferry terminal, and it brought you to 42nd Street in New York City. And that was a very common thing, the ferry back and forth in those days.

Q: Do you know if your mom kept her bookkeeping job?

Smith: Well, she had a job when she was in the city, but then once we moved to New Jersey she got a job working for my uncle in Union City. He had a business in Union City so she worked there. And in fact I went out to do some work with him when I was a little older, when I started working and I had a job with him for a while. Then I worked in a paint store, and then I worked moving furniture for a rental company, Mr. Bock. He rented for parties, he rented tables and chairs, and glasses and dishes and all that stuff, and I had to carry it out of the basement, load it in the truck, and drive the truck, and empty the truck and drive it back, and pick them up at the end of the day, bring them back, and put them back in the basement. A nightmare of a job for a dollar an hour.

Q: [Laughs] Um, you had said that the neighborhood that you grew up in, that everybody there was poor.

Smith: Yeah, but they were normal people. They didn't seem poor. They didn't seem poor, they were just like normal people. And when you're a kid you don't know people's financial condition, you know, as long as you had food to eat you don't think, yeah.

Q: That's what I was gonna say.

Smith: You don't think of yourself as poor. I never thought of myself as being under-privileged, or in a bad neighborhood. I mean, that wasn't a bad neighborhood. They were ordinary people. You got Sam Wood, who was my friend, and we'd play ball. Sometimes you'd hit the ball against the building and play box ball, you know, you hit the ball and you're on the street and you played. [00:46:02] What's the problem, you know? You went to school, you played, you go home, you go to sleep, you know. If you had a television, you watched television, or you'd read books, read newspapers. I didn't read newspapers but I read, you know, comic books.

At that time, they had a great comic book called *Classics Illustrated,* and what it was, was—I wish I had all these props to show you, I keep forgetting you don't know about a lot of these things. It was a comic book, an illustrated color comic book, except the story were all the classics, you know, *Ivanhoe, The Three Musketeers, Two Years Before the Mast, Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* And every month they'd come out with another one. They started in the '40s. I had a whole collection and then I sold that when I was a kid, but now I've been getting them again. They're beautiful, so I know a lot about literature, and not because I've read a book. [Laughter] I've never, I didn't have the patience to sit and read a whole book. It just was not my thing. I read facts. I used to read the dictionary, I used to read the encyclopedia. I had a Funk & Wagnalls encyclopedia, I used to read that. So, yeah, insanely curious and a thirst for knowledge. So when I was a kid, I did a lot of reading, but not what other kids would read.

Q: So what was your experience like finishing school in New Jersey?

Smith: Well, that's a whole different story. The only thing I remember about the New York school—that's PS 94—the only thing I remember about it is the windows. It was a brownstone building, Civil War vintage, and they had gigantic windows. This was built before electricity, so the buildings had big windows. And I remember there's a big pole, a wooden pole with a hook on the end, and you'd hook it up to the window and you'd pull the window open. It would be a transom window. I remember that about the school. And what else do I remember? There was a play, I was in the play. And the only reason I remember that is because I had the phonograph window, I had the album, it's home. And it's a cast album that had come out and I can tell you what year it was, because I'm sure you're familiar with the J.M. Barrie story, *Peter Pan.* And *Peter Pan,* most people know about the Mary Martin version, which was 1954, I believe. It's Mary Martin, who was *Peter Pan,* and Cyril Ritchard was *Captain Hook,* and Mr. Darling. But

the one I know was before then, it came out in 1950, I believe, ’50 or ’51, *Peter Pan* on Broadway, my mother took me to see it, I was six years old, so that’s 1950. And I remember that, and it was Jean Arthur was *Peter Pan,* and Boris Karloff was Captain Hook*,* he was a real Captain Hook.

Q: Wow.

Smith: And there’s a cast album of it. And I have one—I had two. I had one that I had at the time, and I got another one since, it’s around here someplace. And the play, we did that play in grade school. And I was Captain Hook. I was Mr. Darling and Captain Hook because my name was written next to that on the back of the album, and also some of the other kids’ names who I probably would remember, boys and girls both, all American white kids.

And Puerto Rican was not—just like the *West Side Story,* there was a big separation between the new incoming Puerto Rican kids and the Sharks and the Jets, and the rest, but I was too young to really know much about that because I didn’t play with many of the kids who lived outside of my apartment, or my block even. Kids would walk around the city. We were at that time, unlike today, if you were seven or eight, nine years old, you’d just walk around and take the subway. Kids grew up fast in those days.

Q: Yeah, is there any place that you remember going on your own on the subway?

Smith: No, no, I remember. [00:50:56] I could have been on my own, I could have been with my mother, but I remember going to a factory. I remember going to a business that sold jars. Why? I remember even how it smelled. When I was a kid, seven, or eight, nine, it had to be early. Kids had different toys, okay? Now, I just came back from a trip to Cincinnati, and there’s a museum there, and the people were talking about going to see this new museum exhibit of Legos, plastic junk. We used to have toys that were educational, and fun.

We had a toy that, boys usually, but girls had them too, called an Erector Set. And the Erector Set, they had different models, like a smaller one, a bigger one, with more parts, and you can build things with this, and it had all metal things that looked like steel girders, and you could build bridges, and you could build ferris wheels, and you could build things that had motors and moved, and a crane. Oh! And you’d build it with nuts and screws, nuts and bolts, they’d give you a little screw driver, a little wrench, and nuts and bolts, you’d put it together, you’d take it apart. So I was very handy, and it was my kind of toy, like a lot of kids. Legos stuff, and plastic stuff, you don’t learn anything. So the games that you’d play, and the toys you’d play with very often were useful. Like Lincoln Logs, Lincoln Logs, do you know what they are.

Q: Mm-hmm.

Smith: Lincoln Logs, they're just a round piece of wood with little notches at the end, and you could put one on top of the other, and you could build things. That was a toy that was invented by Frank Llyod Wright's son.

Q: Hmm. I didn't know that.

Smith: Well, it was in 1914, he was in Japan building a hotel, and he was building it out of logs, and his son looked at that, and made a miniature version of it, and the next thing you know, Lincoln Logs. So you could be very creative and educational at the same time. So, and then, Monopoly, that was another game, and Monopoly is useful too, I mean that wasn't just, you know, some games are useful, and Monopoly you learn a lot of things.

Q: You learn how to navigate conflict with your family. [Laughs] Among other things.

Smith: Yeah, I remember going to get extra money—they had play money—because there wasn't enough. Because I had a friend that I would play with, and I remember playing Monopoly with one of my friends for three days. [Laughter] Three days, it was like Chess.

Q: How did it compare in New Jersey in terms of, I guess segregation by culture or race, or class?

Smith: Well, it's interesting because we lived in the poor section, which was a block or a building away from the rich section. And my mother was friendly with a fellow socially, and he ran a camp. So as poor as we were, I ended up going to camp from the time I was eight til when I left the city. It was only while I was in the city because after we moved to Jersey—I think I may have gone to camp for a couple of years then, even after, from eight to fifteen I went to camp. I went to camp in Maine, and the social director of the camp, the guy that owned the camp, lived on Central Park West, so he had all of these connections. So I went to camp with Arlene Francis and Martin Gable's son, Peter Gable, all rich kids, they were all Central Park West rich kids. And some of them actually ended up at the Bernie School besides because that was right there, 63rd and Central—right off Central Park. So these were all doctors' kids.

But when you were a kid, you're kind on level playing field with these kids. You don't know rich or poor until they get older, until they have cars, or you see their fancy houses. But I didn't know where these kids lived. I didn't know how rich their parents were. I didn't know anything about money. I didn't know about their cars. If they didn't have fancy—out here, you would know right away because they have all kinds of stuff, toys and expensive things, and it's not—I used to be involved with very rich kids, and very rich people, going to camp and school. I went to Bernie, and then I was in Manhattan at the time, so I was ten,

eleven, so, music? Okay. At the Bernie School, I was in the chorus, choir, chorus? And I was singing, okay. And for Christmas one year, it had to be ’54 or ’55, we were on a TV show, called *The Merry Mailman. The Merry Mailman* was a kids’ show, a daily show, a one-hour show, very crudely done, early TV was very crude. And it was run by a fellow, the mailman, his name was Ray Heatherton. Now Ray Heatherton was a singer, and a musician in the ‘30s, and when he got older, he became the host of this children’s show. So we sang Christmas carols, the Bernie School, and I was on TV. Most of those films have been destroyed, unfortunately, otherwise I’d try to find a copy and add it to my film collection. But I did meet Ray Heatherton subsequently, and his daughter, Joey Heatherton, who we invited to our opening night party when I produced a show on Broadway in 1987. So that’s the connection of music, and that’s the only music connection that I think I remember—besides playing old records—that I would sing with the Bernie School.

Q: So when you were living in New Jersey, what would you come to Manhattan for?

Smith: Broadway shows. When I was in high school, I was pretty shy. Back in those days, I was very introverted and shy. So I didn’t have too much romantic endeavors. Also, I was two years ahead of everybody else. I was fifteen and a senior in high school, and I just turned sixteen when I graduated, so everybody was two years older than me in my class. But I was friends with them all, and with the grade—two grades after me, so I had friends in three grades. But I would come into the city, to see, by myself, in high school, I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Of course, I knew I saw *Peter Pan* with my mother, but then I was six. But after that I saw *The Music Man*, Meredith Willson’s *Music Man* with Robert Preston. That was ’57, 1957, ’58, ’59. I graduated in ’60. So my mother died in ’61, so that’s when I left New Jersey, but I was out of high school by that time already. I came in to see *Bye Bye Birdie* and *Saratoga,* I saw those shows in my junior or senior year in high school. And I’d come in by myself, fourteen and fifteen, thirteen. No big deal, I just got on the bus, the 44 bus, take it to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and go where you gotta go.

Q: I’m looking to see—

Smith: I had a bicycle. I used to ride around New Jersey with my bicycle. I didn’t have a bicycle in New York City. That scooter you saw, that little jeep, that’s the only thing I had.

Q: Did you ever think about going to Lincoln Center, once different theaters and musical spaces started to open up?

Smith: I’ve been to some of those places. Occasionally, I went to the New York State Theatre, I guess, I must have been there once. They rebuilt it three times already because the idiots who built it aren’t smart

enough to know how to build a theatre. Carnegie Hall, I loved to go to Carnegie Hall, I had a subscription there for years. Have you been to Carnegie Hall? Never? Well, Carnegie—

Q: I'm not sure, actually.

Smith: Well, you would remember it if you were there.

Q: Yeah, how have I not been?

Smith: The inside is like La Scala Opera House, or the old Metropolitan Opera House in Manhattan on 39th Street. Musicals, if you see pictures of it, they're always oval. Why are they always oval? It's a very big job to build things that are not straight. Straight lines are real easy. Wood comes straight, metal comes straight, everything's straight. Just try to build something on an angle. Curves, very complicated to get the right curvature. [01:00:53] So that's why they build everything straight. Lincoln Center, everything's straight, Avery Fisher Hall is straight, it's just a rectangular box with terrible acoustics. They rebuilt it three times, the greatest fool spent $550 million of his money, which probably came to him very easily. Because he just threw it away into another rectangular music hall. I think there's some curves in it a little bit, but nothing.

And if you go look at the classic, go to Carnegie Hall, or La Scala, or the old Metropolitan Opera, or go back two thousand years to the Colosseum in Rome—they're round! Because that's why the acoustics are better. And if you go to the library, or the museum, they have a little museum in Carnegie Hall, there's a book showing you, with lines, how music halls should be built. That's why I call Lincoln Center, "the trivial travertine travesty." They actually made a movie about it, a documentary. C.W. Post College made a movie about it and they filmed part of it there, where the fountain is.

Also, an interesting thing about Lincoln Center using the worst building materials, the worst travertine marble, old travertine with open pores, it's weeping—the rain, all the dirt weeps out. It crumbles and it cracks, it's falling apart. The plaza is granite, it's all crumbling and falling apart, and besides those ice cubes for light fixtures—the worst designs, the worst architect, the worst of the '60s in every way shape and form. And they've rebuilt it a number of times already, but not to any advantage.

The basic plan of it, very interesting. It's a U-shape, and the fountains in the middle facing Broadway and The Empire Hotel. And four blocks along Amsterdam Avenue, a plain blank wall facing the Amsterdam Houses, putting their back against the Amsterdam Houses, shutting out the world. Terrible, the whole thing is disgusting. And the purpose of it? Wonderful, I love music, I'm obviously in the music business. The purpose is great, but everything about the way it got started, the Metropolitan Opera House needed a

new place, so he got involved. I mean, even his involvement with Jones Beach, you know the story about Jones Beach?

Q: You'll have to remind me.

Smith: On Long Island here? Well, they built Jones Beach in Long Island, and the Belt Parkway, so that you wouldn't be bringing people out from Brooklyn to this beach, they designed the roadways low so buses couldn't—that was kind of, people have suggested it this way, some people say, no, no, no, you know. Beautiful architecture, the buildings, whoever used Art Deco architecture for Jones Beach, it's beautiful. But Robert Moses, I haven't read the book yet, but my friends tell me about this book, *The Power Broker,* that just came out recently; I'll have to read that book and see what more he is guilty of.

Q: Yeah, people recommend—it's long, so it could actually be good as an audio book. If you're someone who can pay attention while something is—

Smith: Yeah, I would do that.

Q: Yeah, yeah, try the audio books.

Smith: I don't have time to read books. It's a funny thing you should mentione that because just last night for the first time ever, I read a book from one end to the other, a short book. But I don't think I've read three books, maybe not even three, since high school. I don't read books. I read newspapers voraciously, and I'm interested in everything. And I read things about what to do—factual things, I'm interested in facts. Novels, no. I'm not interested in stories, stories I get from movies, because I like the dialogue, and I like the actors, and I like the music. So when you read a book, you get the words. That's nice. If you've got an imagination you can imagine it in your mind, but it takes time, and it's hard to do all at one time, although there are people who have plenty of time, they can sit and read a whole book at one sitting. Not me. So I've read very few books as such, but movies, plenty of movies.

Q: Yeah. So when did you end up moving back to the city, New York City.

Smith: Well, so I was out of there in '55, and I lived in Weehawken until '61. I went to school. I graduated '60, I got into—I won a science fair in New Jersey, the North Jersey Science Fair, and because of that—[shuffling papers] it's in here someplace. What happened was, I was a snob at fifteen, and I didn't want to go to Fairleigh Dickenson because they had just started an engineering program, and they were trying to build up the school so they—amazing I can find anything in this office [opens file folder and pulls out newspaper clipping]. Here's the newspaper article but there it's blown up.

Q: Oh, wow.

Smith: So, I could have gone to school in New Jersey, but I decided to go to school in Brooklyn. So I went to Brooklyn Polytech. I got into Cooper Union, and I got into—I could have gotten into Rensselaer, or Harvard, MIT, any of those big schools, Stevens Tech, but I couldn't live away from home because I had no money, so, I got three scholarships, so school was no problem to pay for. So I went to Brooklyn Polytech, and that was in 1961, at seventeen. I was sixteen when I started at Brooklyn Poly, sixteen, and then September 16th I started Brooklyn Poly, and I went there for one year, commuting back and forth from Weehawken to Brooklyn.

And then in November of '61, my mother dies. So now I've got no place to live and no place to go to school, no place to do anything. I was homeless for a while living in the back of my Packard car. I had cars. That's one advantages of, or disadvantages of being thrown out of Manhattan: I could have cars in New Jersey. So I could have a whole different life, a completely different life. If I had stayed in New York, how different life would have been, because some of the people that I knew and would've met, and combinations of all the people that I went to camp with, all the super rich people. Movie stars, movie actresses, one's a song writer, *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?,* I went to camp with his son. Interesting people living on Central Park West, still. But today every place in the city is expensive, so it doesn't make a difference, but then certain places were expensive only: the Upper East Side, Fifth Avenue, Park Avenue, but if you go further on the east side, it wasn't rich. The west side, poor. Very interesting, but now everything's expensive, so you can't tell where rich people live. Soho, Greenwich Village, millions of dollars a foot for apartments, a hundred million dollars for apartments, a 115-story monstrosities they're building. They've destroyed the city. It's a shame what they did to our beautiful city.

Q: Yeah. Where did you end up living?

Smith: When?

Q: When you went from living out of your Packard?

Smith: Oh, so I stayed with one of my high school friends for a little while, which I didn't remember that at all. And then I got an apartment with three of my classmates from Brooklyn Poly, one Israeli—the other Israeli went to Pratt, he wasn't as smart as Romi was—and a psychopath from Brooklyn, and we all got together in an apartment in East New York, on Jerome Street, 458 Jerome Street between Blake and Sutter, and that was some rough neighborhood.

I had to give up my car. I had to sell my Packard, and got a motorcycle. Of course, you didn't need insurance or a license, you didn't need insurance or helmets or anything, you'd just buy a motorcycle, you could drive around the city, kind of like the people are doing today with their stupid—

Q: The scooters—

Smith: Disgusting. The people running the city are dumber than stones. Motorcycles without license plates, without insurance. Why are they permitted? Sure, it's a small motorcycle, it's not a big motorcycle, it's a small motorcycle. They go just as fast and kill you just as easy. Stupid people, they can make a fortune in money. Bicycles, just ride your—I got hit by a bicycle once, I got a concussion. Oh, yeah, no insurance, no license. Bicycles, sure. And the bicycle lanes, congestion, congestion pricing? Why is there congestion? They make congestion. If it's a four lane—all the crosstown streets are four lanes wide, two lane and two parking. Now we have two lanes for parking and one for bicycles. There's one lane left for traffic, if you're lucky. And then they have bus lanes too. We can go on for a whole day about what they've done to the beautiful city that I loved. I won't go there anymore. I just won't go, too complicated, too dangerous.

I was never afraid living in the city. I was a little kid, I wasn't afraid of anything. What's there to be afraid of? It was no problem. But now, go to the subway, huh! My mother told me, don't stand near the edge. Right, because you can fall into—what are you, gonna look for the train? People do that all the time, they stand there looking to see if the train's coming. When it comes, you'll know it's there, you don't have to stand there. You stand with your back against the wall. Of course, there's something new, people are getting pushed in front of the trains all the time. And they don't do anything about it, a crazy city.

So, yes, so I moved out when I was seventeen. I don't remember the move, don't remember being there. I went to junior high school there—that, I remember a little bit, not much. Don't remember what I had for lunch, don't remember where I had lunch [laughs]. I remember some of the classes. In high school, I remember more because I had the science fair project, plus I was a chemistry teacher for Student Teacher Day. I remember that, got my picture in the yearbook.

Q: What did you end up doing after studying engineering?

Smith: Oh, so I dropped out of school, I had to drop out of school, and I got a job. I had to work, I mean, I had no money. I got a job in an auto wrecking yard, a junkyard, cutting up cars with acetylene torches. Extremely dangerous work, a dollar an hour. So I wasn't happy doing that, so I got a better job in a gas station, on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Linden Boulevard, pumping gas, from eleven at night till nine in the morning, the graveyard shift, by myself, outdoors, in the winter, in the worst neighborhood

in Brooklyn, by myself. My boss was too cheap to hire anybody to help me, so I used to get held up every other night. That's the way it is. Didn't think anything of it, that's the way it is. So then I started working on my own cars, started—I had a lift so I started fixing cars, and I was very handy so I took engines apart, put them together, did a lot of work. I taught myself how to do autobody work. And then Sal Trainer, a friend of mine, a big heavy guy, he used to come in the gas station all the time. He said, "Richie"—I was Richie at that time. I was Ricky when I was little, then it was Richie, then it became Rick. After *Casablanca*, it became Rick. He said, "There's a gas station across the street. Why don't you go see if you can rent it?" So I did.

I was nineteen years old, and I rented a gas station, and it was an old abandoned broken down gas station. I didn't want to sell gas, but I had two bays, working on cars and putting in engines, and when your car engine went bad in those days, you wouldn't throw the car away. There was no car leasing, none of that stuff. So you'd just, instead of buying another car, you'd just go to the junkyard and get another engine. Fifty dollars, you start the engines up on the ground before you put more gas in the carburetor, you put the battery in, "Voom!" It starts up, see that it runs, you sell it, the guy buys it. And then what do you do? What are you going to do with the engine? The kid, Richie, will put it in for you up the block. That's me. So I put engines in the cars, by myself. It took me two days, I got fifty dollars, that was like two dollars an hour. That was much better, much better. [laughs] And it was great, it was great. Then I started hiring, I had one helper, then I got another helper. Then I had a nice little business going there, and people were waiting six months for me to do work on their cars, and I did autobody work, and I did very beautiful work. I'll show you pictures.

Q: What was your business called?

Smith: [rifles through cabinet for business card] Richie's Pit Stop. And then it was Richie's American because I had American gas. First, we had Sinclair gas. It was a gas station, so I sold gas too, at 25.4¢ a gallon. I thought I brought those cards here [referring to business cards], I just found them the other day.

And then when I moved out here, I had a different business. But why'd I move out here? Okay. Because I had my little gas station in Brooklyn, from '63 and '64. I worked in the gas station in '61 and '62. The end of '61 my mother died, so in '62 and '63, I had a gas station that I worked out, a junkyard gas station. I had my own place, '63, '64, '65, or '64 and '65. And then some time in '65, the landlord came to me and said, "You gotta move." "What do you mean I gotta move?" He said, "They're condemning all the properties here. They're taking all our property away. They're gonna build a low income housing project." "Low income, what am I? Chopped liver? I'm low income." Housing projects. You know how many housing projects are in the city now?

Q: Two hundred?

Smith: That's a great guess. I mean, a housing project is not one building.

Q: Right.

Smith: It's like the Amsterdam Houses, it's a whole lot of buildings. It's a big complex. To have five of them is a big deal. Coop City, enormous. Starrett City, enormous, twenty, thirty buildings. My friend used to build kitchen cabinets for the housing projects in New York. He said there are 342 housing projects in New York City. Unbelievable. One sixth of all the people in New York are on subsidized housing.

Q: And another statistic I've been seeing more is that 40% of people live in, um, not rent controlled but—

Smith: Rent stabilized?

Q: —rent stabilized housing, which is way higher than I thought. That's a lot of people.

Smith: No, New York is—now they're calling it a "sanctuary city." It's very nice that it's a sanctuary city, but somebody's gotta pay for that. Now they want to—the newest bizarre concept is "congestion pricing." So on the Long Island Railroad, you pay $14 in prime time to come out here, twenty-six miles. On the subway, you pay $2.75 and you go 207 miles, and never get off if you don't want to, you could just keep riding forever. Like the song, *The MTA*, from the Kingston Trio in 1956, it's a great song. You don't know that song?

Q: I don't think I do.

Smith: [Singing] "Let me tell you a story about a man named Charlie on a tragic and fateful day. He put ten cents in his pocket, kissed his wife and family, and took a ride on the MTA. Did he ever return? No, he never returned, and his fate is still unlearned. He may ride forever underneath the streets of Boston. He's the man who never returned." It was a very popular song the Kingston Trio had about the MTA, in Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Transit Authority.

Now they want me to pay to drive into the city, more than already the gas that I'm paying, the tolls that I'm paying, the license plates that I've been paying, and the insurance I'm paying, and now they want me to pay for the privilege of driving into Midtown traffic, which they have caused. Traffic isn't caused by the cars, it's caused by the City of New York giving the lanes to bicycles, which shouldn't even be in the City of New York, they should be in Central Park with the horses and the carriages, and no cars. Central Park

wasn't built for cars, it was built for horses and carriages and bicycles. You want to ride bicycles? Ride in Central Park, don't ride in the streets because congestion in the streets, and parking, and double parking, and rich people parking, and limousines parking, and everything else. You can't drive! And I'm paying to drive. Then I want to pay extra? I should pay to subsidize the railroads? They can put their money into the MTA? How about the people that ride the trains pay for my gas? How about we do it that way? Turn it around. What kind of nonsense is that? And besides the fact, if they want to charge you to drive to the city, what are they gonna do with the parking garages? They don't want cars. If they say the money is gonna go to the MTA, well, wait a minute, if you're gonna charge people a lot of money, they're not gonna drive into the city, and they won't have any money to go to the MTA. You can't have it both ways. Either you're gonna have a lot of traffic, and it's no good. Or you're gonna have no traffic, and it's no good. So either way it's no good.

Q: There's a lot of issues with transportation.

Smith: But you see, it's the lack of intelligence of the people who have these jobs. Politicians in my general opinion, they're stupid. Just because you don't have to be smart, you don't need any certificate that you went to school, you need no proof of education, you need no proof of work experience, previous experience. The best jobs, the highest-level jobs in this country, are done by people who have no qualifications whatsoever, no proof of any qualifications. Even the top guy only has to be thirty-five and native-born. That's because in 1789, when they dreamed that up, they didn't want another King of England, so you had to be native-born, and thirty-five was an old man. The lifespan was forty-one!

Q: Yes. Yes.

Smith: So now, what you have, they chase people like me out of the city, who would've been a benefit to be in the city.

Q: Yeah, right.

Smith: The hell with them. Yeah, that's very interesting. Yeah, I really don't remember going out of the city, it's very strange.

Q: So I wanted to ask if you have any thoughts on why there is so much interest in this old neighborhood: Lincoln Square, San Juan Hill?

Smith: I'm amazed. I'm amazed. Well, there's probably interest in every area of the city for various reasons. They could be interested in the Upper East Side, where Ruppert Brewery was, now it's the 92nd

Street Y. There's some interest in that. There's interest in the Mews on 34th Street, and there's interest in Greenwich Village, there's interest in Tribeca, there's interest in Soho, there's interest in all those areas, and there's interest maybe in Hell's Kitchen, because of the Westies gangs. Who knows, there's lots of different things that are of interest, you know, there's movie theatres, all the stage hands, it's very interesting.

I produced a show on Broadway—see, you learn things with everything you do. In terms of the stage hands, jobs are father-to-son, handed down, generation after generation. And how these people got those jobs, they were people who worked in shipping. All the docks were right there, and these people all knew how, a 150 years ago, to work all the rigging on the ships, the ropes, the masts. So they were the perfect people to be running the stage, and the curtains, and the props, and the lifts, and so they hired them, and that's how that—these were all the Irish, and the people who got jobs in the city, they were Irish, a lot of them. Police, firemen, the immigration groups.

So the Upper West Side has been a neglected area. And the whole reason it came to be, unlike other neighborhoods—you know, they always tear down a building here or there, or sometimes they fall down, you know—and I can't think of anytime they tore down a whole city block of the city at one time, with like fifty or a hundred pieces of property. But what was really remarkable about this is the fact that they tore down a whole neighborhood, eighteen buildings—eighteen square blocks or sixteen square blocks, whatever it was—unheard of before or since. What replaced it, which in concept, it was great—what they really should have done is built a whole arts complex on a real special piece of real estate that they threw away, Roosevelt Island. It used to be called Blackwell's Island. And that would've been a perfect place for museums, and theatres. Totally quiet, no cars, no trucks, no nothing, a great place. They could've had a have cultural—and walking only. It would have been a wonderful place, especially a unique piece of real estate, they just turned it into another cheap housing project. I went out with somebody once that lived there. More cheap, crummy housing. It's a shame, but that's what they did.

But they build Lincoln Center, which was a great concept, but why would you pick a viable neighborhood? Our neighborhood was not any worse than Hell's Kitchen. It was on a higher level, in fact, especially as you get close to 70th Street, and Alphabet City was worse. We never had homeless people living—we never had buildings abandoned. I never remember, in my neighborhood, there was never an empty building, never homeless people, never people living out on the streets, never people on the sidewalks. No, no, no. It was just a middle class, or lower middle class—not lower class. Everybody, I don't think anybody in those buildings was—they had rent control, I guess. I don't know what people did, I was too young to know about the money aspect. But they all seemed like reasonable people to me that worked. So, I guess now the people that paid attention to the fact that a neighborhood, why would they do that? Why would they pick a place like that to build?

Q: I think your comments about Central Park West might have a little bit of a relation to it of we want to—

Smith: Gentrify or upgrade the area?

Q: Or to make these amenities available to, mostly wealthier people, but under the auspices of, "it's here for everyone."

Smith: Well, you know, the people on Central Park West didn't go west. They went to Central Park. They lived on the park and they went in the park. And of course, we went in the park too. I went in the park all the time. Everybody from the city went to the park. And once you're in the park, you kind of, it eliminates the rich or poor, you're all in the same environment together, and you don't have fancy clothes or anything, people didn't do that. But the people that lived on Central Park West went to work, or went downtown, or they went this way or that way, but they weren't East Side people, they weren't Fifth Avenue or Park Avenue either. These are Central Park West, Central Park West and is still the West Side.

And you still had, and still to this day, I'm sure, the Upper West Side is the largest group of Democratic voting people in the country. You're talking 90% or above are West Side, left-wing people. And while some on Central Park West may be more Republican or Right people, they don't strike you that way. Because I went to camp with these kids, and these were like regular people to me, these weren't—I wouldn't have considered them Upper East Side people, where you could tell the difference. Just like when you live in a part of Pennsylvania, you know if they're from Altoona or they're from Lancaster, you know? [Laughs] You could tell.

So the Upper West Side, we were just a little closer to the industrial area because, remember, half our block were not residential. We were the furthest west residential people in the Upper West Side. And when you go further north, the residences went all the way down to West End Avenue, which was pretty high-level, and Riverside Drive, which was really out of—I mean, that's a whole other, that's Fifth Avenue, that's Central Park West. Whether it was Riverside Drive or Central Park West, it's one in the same. And in between, you had the rest of everybody else, the working class people. Where we were, it just happened to be a very narrow part of the city until you get to the industrial part where all the garages were. And you gotta have a place for taxi cabs to park at night, and to be repaired. And the automobile district is still there, it's still Eleventh and Twelfth Avenue. They manufactured automobiles in the city at one time, Eleventh and Twelfth Avenue. I had my Packard—when I lived in New Jersey, I had a Packard. I brought it to Packard of New York on Eleventh Avenue and 54th Street to have the transmission fixed. You know, you need these things.

They're doing the same thing out here. They're trying to wipe out all the industry. They're trying to wipe out all the commercial areas and build nothing but residential. I don't care about residential. You need places to get a car fixed, you need the autobody shop, you need an asphalt plant, you need a cement plant, you need these things. Where are you gonna put them, in Ohio? Very interesting.

But I think—and I'm so excited about the idea that you have this organization that's paying attention, and I know they're trying to keep this building on 66th Street from going up. More crookedness. You're dealing with crooked and stupid politicians, I mean, this the problem. It's very hard to get past that. And we had our congressman here. Our congressman, he's in the newspaper every day. This district, George Santos got selected. It's what I've been saying for years, it's true: no resume, no proof of education, no proof of any prior employment. How do you put a guy in a position like that as a legislator? But there he is. [Laughs] I've been saying it for years! And if he got in, how many people that are there already are of that same position that we never checked to see? And that's who's making the rules, who's making these hundred-story buildings all over, and Billionaires Row, they call 57th Street. Live on the 110th floor of a building, you gotta be crazy. Sliver buildings, they outlawed them—in '82, they outlawed sliver buildings. I was in the last one, The Colonnade, 57th between Eight and Ninth, when I finally moved back to the city, for a time. I made a mistake selling that apartment. But I was spending a lot of time out here, and I wasn't going to the city much anymore.

Q: Well, I guess we can kind of wrap up this interview part and then take a look at some photos, if you're ready. Is there anything else that you wanted to add that I didn't ask you?

Smith: There probably will be. I'll think of things along the way.

Q: [Laughs] Alright, well let's conclude this and then I'll turn things back on. Alright, thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]