

A Woman Worth Knowing: Part 3

Interview of Edith Renfrow Smith '37 by Jackie Hartling Stolze

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Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I think Abby told me that...was it your grandmother was a slave or your great-grandmother?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yeah. Well, my grandmother was a slave. My grandfather was a slave and see, my grandmother was still living till 1920. And she...and you know my great-grandfather was a soldier in Napoleon's army.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And when he came to America, he took my great-great-grandmother, Jane, as his wife, although he did not...she was like his mistress. She was a slave.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. Let me make sure I get this right. Your great-great-grandfather was a soldier in Napoleon's army?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Uh-huh. His name was [inaudible 00:01:03] Gilmore.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So then your great-great-grandmother was his mistress?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Was his mistress. And when he was sick and dying, he asked his friend to take her as his slave, but he wanted to free her, but since she was an adult she could not be free.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No, adults could not be free. But you see, he had freed his three children that he had by her and sent all three of them to Ohio, to different Quaker families. His son, Aaron finished Wilberforce and taught in Kentucky and died in the Civil War.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh wow!

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And Anna Catherine was a butterfly. So she danced on a...one of those riverboats in Ohio. And my grandmother came all the way to Oskaloosa, Iowa with the Quakers.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

My grandfather ran away because he was born in Arkansas.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So he escaped?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And he escaped and took his brother's name, his brother's name was George. His name was Joseph, but his brother's name was George. And he took his brother's name and ran away because his brother was free and they kept him hidden in Kansas City for a year.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Because he was an escaped slave. And then he finally came up to Oskaloosa where he married my grandmother.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And then they...

Edith Renfrow Smith:

They had three children.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Had three children.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

My mother and her two sisters and her sister, her oldest sister's the one that had the triplets, the Lucas triplets.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow, that must've been exciting. Triplets didn't happen that often.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh no, but she had the triplets.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, I can imagine she needed some help with three babies.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, that's why my mother went to live with her in Grinnell and her husband was a baker and John Lucas.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, aren't you glad that your mother got to Grinnell?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh yes.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

It worked out good.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And see why I know so much about our history is my mother was a great storyteller and see, she would tell us all about the slaves and what happened to them. And my grandfather was Craig. He escaped and then his family finally were free after the Civil War and they moved to Pueblo, Colorado and they had the most beautiful members of Israel. Oh boy, cause they were mixed with Indian and White, and I wish I had those pictures of...one's name was Americas, other name was, oh what was her name, she lived in Tacoma, Netty. Her name was Netty she lived in Tacoma, Washington. And on my father's side, my father's mother was from Guinea. And she was very, very small. She about, five feet. Cause my father was only five foot eight and she had all and her husband was over six feet and they lived in Texas and Texas must have been a territory at that time because I don't know whether she had been a slave or what, but I know that getting married, they married in Texas. She had these three boys Will, Dave, and Lee Augustus was my father.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Lee Augustus?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Lee Augustus.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I like that, sounds very distinguished.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And you know, my father was 96 when he died in 1945. He had been...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Did your mother die first?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

No. Okay.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He died in '45. Mama didn't die until '61.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. How old was she when she died?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

87.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Okay. Good long lives it seemed like.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah and see my sister who, not my sister next to me, my next oldest sister, She was 91 and she died in '97.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

I bet it was wonderful listening to your mom tell those stories.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I'm the only one, I used to sit on her lap all day. "Mama, tell me a story. Mama, tell me a story." and she would just sit there in the evening and tell me all these [inaudible 00:00:06:42] nobody else listening to her. "Mama talk too much, Mama talk too much." But I loved to hear her tell it. And some of the stories that she told me, you would really believe in spirits because of all...and cause she said that my grandfather was 14 years old when he was sold to New Orleans.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

14?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

At 14 and that's the first time he had been away from his mother and he was sold to a plantation in Algiers. And he was so unhappy and so upset because you know he was the last boy and they [inaudible 00:07:37] and he was just a baby and he just couldn't get...So in order to make himself sick, he ate fat meat, drank swamp water, and put tobacco juice in his eyes.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

My gosh.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So naturally, he was partly blind because of the tobacco juice. And so they wouldn't keep him in Algiers. You're no good if you can't work.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So they sold him back to New Orleans and he was sold to a plantation in Mississippi, across the river. And the overseer was a nice overseer and my grandfather carried on and had such a fit. And see, my grandfather was very fair. So consequently he was a house slave and he was a valet to the master and the overseer said "Get me some money from your master's pocket [Inaudible 00:08:48] and at a certain time of the moon, you can run away." At a certain time of the moon that's what he did. That's why he...hat's when he ran away and he ran and how he got back to Arkansas, I don't know.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

So but he did?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He did run away and then he couldn't stay in Arkansas because he was a runaway slave. And so then he ran all up to...he got to Kansas City, Kansas. And that's where they hid him for a year.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

And he had the blindness, partial blindness?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah, he was partially blind. All the rest of his life he was partially blind, but he was a barber. And when he got to Grinnell he was my...he was his own lawyer. He sued practically everybody in Grinnell. If he had been white, he would have been a judge. Even though,, you see, he didn't have that much education.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Uh-huh but he must've been smart.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He was. And my sister, who worked at the congressional library, my sister, Alice, she was just like my grandfather. She sued practically everybody. And she lived in Suitland, Maryland. And she sued about everybody there. And she was going to...and you know that's what she did, she sued in small court, claims court. And when she came here, she was 88 years old. She was going to start that here but she didn't live long enough.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Almost sounds like it was a sport or something.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was fun. I don't know...I don't know why she sued, but everybody...but she's just like my grandpa. I don't know where they...and whatever he sued about you was something then that somebody had done in Grinnell.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. Uh-huh.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

It was against what he thought they should do to a black person.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Uh-huh. Yeah. Well good for him, he was fighting for his rights.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

He fought. He fought for his rights.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

People have to do that. They get work done.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

You know, we came from a bunch of fighters.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Good for you.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And my mother, she always...that's another thing she always told us. She says, "Never go to a cow's tail, always go to his head."

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

That's good advice.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

See that was excellent advice. And cause she says the tail doesn't know anything.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. A very good point.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Yeah.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Well, were some of those stories kind of scary for you as a kid?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

No. No, because she didn't make them scary and it just seemed like part of living when she told us the story she said that one of the slave masters had killed his wife and he married a beautiful young girl from Baltimore. And they used to have those latches to the bedroom door, and she said one of the maids that worked upstairs said that they couldn't keep that door locked, couldn't keep it latched. Because every night they'd hear like...

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

...and it was open.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Wow.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And then she told about...you know they always had...if they didn't have the kitchen outdoors, they had it down in the basement. And she said that evidently the slaves, you know they would help slaves who were running away, and they would hide them behind the wall in the house. And she said all...and somebody had gotten killed...and she said that all the pans, every time they put the pans up on that wall, they'd all come down.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Really?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Well see that's what I'm talking...those were all the kinds of stories my mother told me. That's why I said, I don't go see anything. Cause I said, Mama told me about all of the things that happened to people. Like the...cause everybody's going to see The Color Purple.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

And I said, I don't need to go see The Color Purple, mama told me all about that so I'm not gonna go see. No, I don't need to see it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah, you don't need to. You heard about it, right?

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I heard about it firsthand.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

So I don't need to hear about it. And to me it was...it's very depressing when people...there's things that happened to people and there's nothing they can do about it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Oh, I know. Me too.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

I want...if somethings happened, I want to do something about it.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Right. If you can't do anything then it just kind of eats at ya.

Edith Renfrow Smith:

Oh, it's just too much.

Jackie Hartling Stolze:

Yeah. I'm the same way.