

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

GIOIA SMITH

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Gioia Smith's home
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

16 January 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This oral history was conducted as part of a joint project of the Chemical Heritage Foundation and the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. This project was supported by the Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health under Award Number R25OD010521-01.



THE CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION
Center for Oral History

Title of the Research Study: Resources for Education and Action for Community Health in Ambler

Protocol Number: 817669

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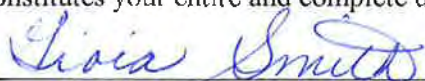
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ABSTRACT

Gioia Smith has lived in Ambler all her life. Her father worked at Merck Sharp & Dohme, and her mother was a companion. She worked for most of her life in the social service department at Head Start and is active in the NAACP, the American Legion, and her church.

Smith first became aware of Ambler's asbestos hazard when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began its cleanup of the Ambler Asbestos Area. She began attending EPA meetings then; she thought the asbestos warnings were frightening, but they did not discourage anyone from moving to Ambler, and she thought the piles were permanently fixed. When a proposed high-rise on the BoRit site brought the asbestos fears to the forefront again Smith still worried more about displacement of the nearby poor people and about taxes. She has some extended family in South Ambler.

Smith laments the loss of the small-town feel of Ambler, what her grandmother called "the Village," describing all the old small businesses that are gone now. She says that the revitalization of the town is due mainly to restaurants and to outsiders who come mostly from Manayunk; she would like to see more Amblerites enjoy their town and get to know each other again.

Smith continues to attend meetings of the BoRit community advisory group (CAG), though it has moved its meetings from the American Legion hall to Upper Darby Township. Her cousin, Otis Hightower, is also very active. She feels that the CAG does not reach out to the whole community, that those who are uninvolved need to be better informed; she has suggestions for how to reach them, emphasizing that face-to-face is most effective. She receives occasional EPA publications, she says, but others do not. Smith thinks that the site should remain fenced off, that there is no guarantee of safety strong enough to permit development. Nevertheless, Smith believes that asbestos is only at about the mid-level of Ambler's problems; people do not take it seriously because it does not affect their daily lives. She ranks unemployment highest, followed by the high cost of housing; the lack of places for kids to hang out and things for them to do; and the high cost of child care. She wants churches and neighborhood groups to come together to help solve these problems.

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<p>Family in Ambler for generations. Father at Merck Sharp & Dohme; mother companion. Wissahickon public schools. Family background. Uncles worked at Keasbey & Mattison Company; lung problems. Billie Jean Thompson her aunt; an activist; park named after her. Husband worked at Amchem and Union Carbide Corporation. She worked at Keystone Technologies, made light switches. Began at summer Head Start Program, moved up to social service department. Head Start became full day program, she stayed forty-six years. Obtained GED.</p>	
Learning about Asbestos	10
<p>First heard about asbestos at U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) meetings held at American Legion hall. African-Americans not very involved at first. Discussions among NAACP members. McDonald's Club: several older men with video of West Ambler before and after EPA. Aunt Jean Thompson organized people to attend meetings. Found asbestos somewhat frightening, but no one discouraged from moving to Ambler and no one left because of asbestos.</p>	
Becoming More Concerned	18
<p>Information about health risks; people now paying more attention. Had thought problem taken care of when piles covered, but fix not permanent. EPA office gone. High-rise near BoRit site brought up asbestos fears much more vividly. Still many worried more about taxes, displacement of poor. Family in South Ambler.</p>	
Former Ambler	20
<p>Little involvement with K&M; closing of plant caused large increase in unemployment. Descriptions of former businesses in Ambler; self-sufficient town. Now "restaurant city." Small-town feel gone. Everyone knew everyone; now many outsiders visit. Competition from malls. Her neighborhood was all African-American; now very mixed; don't know each other well.</p>	
More about Asbestos	26
<p>BoRit community advisory group (CAG) met first in American Legion hall. Vargas/Cook and Robinson their representatives. Otis Hightower her cousin, very active. CAG reaches only people who signed up for information; should reach out to whole community. Young people not interested; older people too few. Thinks asbestos areas should be fenced; not safe enough for any use. Problems of Ambler: unemployment; high cost of housing; no place for kids to hang out; no grade schools; child care costly, sometimes untrustworthy. Asbestos not main problem; people don't take it seriously. Need to bring churches together to help; need Scouts, instruments, after-school activities. First Friday beginning now. Encouraging more locals to enjoy Ambler. So many people at times, crossing guard needed, parking difficult. Some community organizing ideas.</p>	
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