

Taking Care--Documenting the Occupational Culture of Home Care Workers  
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2014-2015  
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Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

**Annie Smith interview, 2014-11-21 : interview conducted by Helen Marie  
Moss**

**INTERVIEW LOG**

00:00:00 Housekeeping, signing forms. Born in Arcola, Mississippi in 1945.

00:01:00 Live in Southeast Portland.

00:01:18 Home care worker since 1983 - Became a home care worker when husband had an accident and went into a nursing home, had a stroke, was in a coma after surgery. Was there 1.5 years, and then when woke up was paralyzed from knees down. I took training orientation from the state and I took care of him until he passed in 1997.

00:02:25 In 1998, a friend of mine asked if I would take care of his mother. Got a provider number from the state, and started getting paid. They would not pay me to take care of husband, but other people were paid!

00:02:45 Pay \$3.37 in 1993 - when I started getting paid, it increased to \$5.75.

00:03:00 Story about union organizer Jean Yamamoto. She was coming to her door in Cedar Hills. Never been active in unions, was active in civil rights movement in Mississippi, and in Oregon, knocking on doors for voter registration. Jean was very persistent, convinced her to come to a rally in Salem. When she didn't have a ride, she picked her up and took her - so she couldn't get out of it. Started from there in 1999, when we got first contract.

00:05:30 Other jobs - first job when teenager, had her first son so they kicked her out of school. Got a job at a restaurant - Old Southern Tearoom - had to dress up like Aunt Jemima! Darker you were, the more they liked you. Met a lot of people - all white. Catered parties, too, on steamboat.

00:07:34 Left Mississippi in 1977, came to Oregon, went to PCC (Portland Community College) started first African-American Cultural Club at PCC. Took accounting, and graduated in 1983.

00:08:23 Got a job as a receptionist, through college program. Then shipping and receiving at a sheet metal shop; the shop is still there.

00:09:28 Worked until 1985, then got married, stopped working until became a home care worker.

00:09:40 Two clients: one downtown and one at an assisted living.

00:10:02 Difference between home care jobs and other jobs? The caring. See that the other person can be able to live in their own home. Story about 93-year-old "feisty" client who only wants one caregiver, but has multiple caregivers. No supervisor but her, so have to work it out between them.

00:12:00 Skills, abilities needed? Patience, have to care about people. Clients are old and have medical problems, may not have family. You are like family because you are in their personal space, have to be honest, not pilfer.

00:12:51 How learn? When you have a family, you learn it. Have to care about people but not take it to heart. Be patient, loving.

00:13:33 No formal training.

00:14:00 Typical day - description of day with her client, starting from ringing the bell downstairs. Need to let them take the lead in their house. Come in and do job from "task list" that State gives them both.

00:15:36 "Our job is to make your house look like it did when you were up on your feet."

00:16:15 Do you become close? Of course. It is hard when they have to go into a nursing home or pass away. Story about a client, who passed away while she was there, grateful children.

00:17:48 Set boundaries - story about client buying a shampooer for carpet - had to tell him, not on task list, can't do that. They do get upset, but some things we are not supposed to do.

00:18:57 Get together with others? Union meetings, it is hard because we don't work together or see each other. That is hard, no camaraderie, can't talk about client, against rules.

00:20:00 Homecare workers do have terms they use, they understand each other.

00:20:50 Story about blind client whose hours were cut back, and started trying to do things herself, and could not do it. We home care workers could not be there enough. She would fall.

Had to involve the neighbors. Finally she had to be put in a nursing home, even though it was more expensive than increasing hours.

00:24:09 Compassion and sense of humor are most important.

00:25:12 Gratifying - being able to be there for the client, on time! Story about client who she jokes with about his cooking skills, and what a mess he makes. But he loves to cook, my job is to keep him happy, and fuss a little bit.

00:27:05 Most challenging - when client is sick and nothing you can do but make them comfortable.

00:27:28 Clients call them housekeepers to friends, not caregivers.

00:28:00 Difference being in a union? It is a big deal. At the bargaining table 2 times: last time long bargaining, there until late at night. Not leaving the table until we get a raise and health care.

00:29:26 She told organizer to have them "show you the money."

00:29:46 Without the union, we'd have less people doing home care work. Just indentured servants, housekeepers. State not your boss, but they really are. Client is the boss.

00:30:50 Got a decent raise.

00:31:13 Spoke at a downtown rally marching across the bridge. Been up to Sea-Tac to help with getting the \$15 minimum wage.

00:32:04 What is it that people don't know about your job? Compassion, treat them with respect.

00:32:33 Hobbies? Loves to dance, listen to music, talk to kids in neighborhood, bring them candy.

00:33:50 How do you think the community, at large, perceives you, values you? They do, all my neighbors see me when I come home. I know other home care workers who live nearby, Ukrainian woman she knows, who takes care of Russian clients, we talk.

00:36:39 End of interview.