

**Excerpt from  
Original Transcript of  
Interview with Albert Lee Smith  
By Steve Suitts  
1970**

SS = Steve Suitts

AS: Albert Lee Smith

ALBERT LEE SMITH

Taped interview - Steve Suitts - Side One

SS: In the beginning, that is do you remember when you first met Mr. Black?

AS: Well he, I first met Hugo Black when he came to Birmingham and I can't tell you the date, but he never finished college. He finished Alabama Law School in a shorter time than they usually finish, and put out his shingle in Ashland, Clay County, county seat of Clay County.

SS: That's where he was born isn't it?

AS: Born in the . . he was one child of twelve children I believe. I'm not certain about the number of children. He uh, [you want a smoke?]

SS: No sir, I don't smoke.

AS: There was a little building there on the square at Clay County. Nearly all these counties in Alabama, if you are familiar with them, the county seat is a square -- the courthouse in the middle and,

SS: Town's around . .

AS: Stores around. Well they had a fire and burned his, his office. Burned his library and everything. He just picked up and came to Birmingham. I'm a Baptist and he's a Baptist and I met him at the Baptist Church, I think, first. And um, he never did have a partner. I mean by that, he never went into a firm already established. He hung out his shingle and got an office about this size. Started by himself. He was one of the brightest men I ever knew and one of the most affable and friendly fellows. He was a good friend of mine all these years. Many years. Still is.

SS: Was this the First Baptist Church you met him at?

AS: He taught uh -- I don't know whether I met him at First Baptist -- but he taught a class at the First Baptist Church for years. Sunday

School class.

SS: What year of kids did he teach, do you know?

AS: You know I, dates don't mean anything much to me but I can give you some sort of running account of what I know about Hugo Black. Anyhow, he got to be a good friend. I lived in Easley, across the lake from Howard College. And

Hugo was here by himself. Nearly every Sunday he spent Sunday with us out there. After Sunday School he'd come out and have dinner with us, midday dinner and he'd spend the day with us. Now, he did real well in that business. His first political venture -- he ran for Solicitor of Jefferson County -- they're called in some counties prosecuting attorneys, I think. Mr. Heflin was District Attorney here. And he'd gotten on the bad, wrong, foot. He'd didn't tend to his business, so they said. Now, I don't know whether it'd be a fact. But, this year that he ran for the solicitor there was four or five people ran. Great group of them that ran for solicitor. And, it was a question of trying to crystalize the anti-Heflin in one of the other of the group. Fellow named McArthur ran, and I don't remember now all of them. But, we got out a little slip about five inches long and we printed on both sides of it -- Black or Heflin, which -- and you dropped the thing, any way it'd turn up, you'd see that sign. We just filled the whole town with that stuff a few days before election. And that was a very bright idea that one of his friends got up. I don't know whether Hugo got that idea up or not, but anyhow, he won on the first run. He didn't have to run it off. He made a very excellent attorney and he always had a conscience and he didn't jump on the prosecute some sorry fellow that was in the gutter, you know. Black or white. Nol proessed a lot of those cases I know of and gave them a good talk and probably did some good to 'em. Regular criminal, he'd give 'em hell. So he held

that job several years and then he went back to practicing law. He was outstandingly successful at the practice of law. He got the -- at that time the largest judgment ever gotten against a corporation. If my memory serves me correct it was Seaboard Airlines, it was \$35,000. And he would not take a case as a representative of a corporation. In fact I was in the life insurance business, we made loans. And I asked him if he wanted to be attorney for closing loans. He said "I find that you can't mix it. I represent one side and I've been trying to do that." Now I made some notes and those are some of the things that I put down, now let me see. Well, when he started to run for the Senate. Before he started to run for the Senate actually, he was elected for this solicitor's job, we were coming across the bridge walking about here, there were a bunch of bachelors roomed together, and a fellow named Lee Cross was in the group -- incidently he got to be the vice president of the National City Bank, Lee Cross -- he asked Hugo, said well, I guess you [gone] run for a high office a little later what you got your eyes set on. He said "well, I'm going to be United States Senator some of these days." Just like you'd say pass the butter. He was a positive kind of a fellow and he knew where he was going. Was what I'd say about Hugo. Now, when he ran for the Senate we got him an old second-hand Ford car -- two, one he kept in South Alabama, one in North Alabama -- and he actually went around and shook hands with the voters. I tried to do some help for him I had an organization of life insurance general agents. I had about 50 agents and I had every one of them saying kind words for Hugo. And, he had a lot of close friends. For instance I went over to Talladega one time, was trying to sell clerk in the courthouse there some insurance. He said, "Mr. Black's just been in here." And I said "You gone vote

for him and he said "Yes" he said "now two or three of these other men running for Senate just went to see the probate judge or the judges, but Hugo saw every man in here that had a vote." I think that has a lot to do with his success politically.

SS: Astute political move.

AS: Now, we uh, he had a big rally here at the old Jefferson Theatre. It's torn down now, it used to be down here on the corner of 18th Street and First Avenue, a week before the election, and he said : at this meeting, you know to this crowd there that night, he said "Now I can't get my name in the Daily Press, especially the Birmingham papers,"said "they won't, said "this meeting tonight"showed a little article about that big way off, with some ads, you couldn't find it hardly, he said "But, next week, after the election, Hugo Black's name will be in boxcar letters on every paper of the state of Alabama and probably larger on the Birmingham papers than others." Of course he was elected and that was what happened. I might go back and tell you one little instant -- you're interested in little anecdotes -- well, when he ran for, after he was elected [here's an aside to some-one I couldnt understand (cp)] After he was elected I came down, I used to ride down the streetcar. And one of the leading lawyers of a leading corporation group said well I guess the country's going to the devil, said Hugo Black's elected to the Senate. I said, well I thought you fellows all supported him. He said, why? I said well, you wanted to get him out of the pittures, he's making your corporations pay too much. The fellow shut his mouth and didn't open it again all the way from where we got off the car til we got down to the office. Never, just walked along. That's a true story. He was a close friend of mine for years. We traveled around a lot together. We were both bachelors. We went out West two or three times. Visited Barney Whatley who was out West, or we met at Glenwood Springs usually. That's a place out

between Colorado Springs and Salt Lake City. Very nice resort. And Barney Whatley used to be in business with me here and he went West on account of TB. And incidentally, he's still living and doing, has been very successful in the legal business. He's retired now. All this stuff I'm talking, you're getting all of it, you don't have to put all this stuff . . .

SS: I'm interested . . .

AS: Im just sort of talking off the cuff. . .

SS: That's fine.

AS: We made two or three trips to New York and neither one of us had much money but we went to see some nice shows and we spent every night in the place there. Turkish bathes, you could get a bunk in that place for a dollar a night. So that's where Hugo and I'd spend the night, in this place. You'd always take your money and give it to them and they'd lock it up and give you the key to the box you know, so nobody could rob you. But, we had great times together traveling around.

SS: When you said that you went up to see the uh, some shows do you mean plays or movies?

AS: Theater, wasn't any movies then. Way back then, no movies. They was shows. Hugo was a teetotaler. He never drank liquor. Never drank beer. He was a true dry person. I never saw him drink anything stronger than coffee.

SS: Wonder why that was?

AS: What?

SS: I wonder why that was, why he was . . .

AS: Well, you ought to cut this thing off a minute and I'll tell you why. . . .

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