

Meet your Tremont neighbor: George Booth Smith

One of the things people enjoy most about living at Tremont are the residents. Where else, for example, can you hear about World War II from a member of the famed "Buffalo Soldiers"?

Born in Kansas in the early 1920s, George Booth Smith was one of the few children back then who could claim both parents and grandparents who were college graduates.

When his father died of pneumonia at age 23, Smith went to live with his paternal grandparents in Kansas City, Kan., leaving his mother with his baby brother to care for while she taught school.

She later joined the Kansas City family with his little brother, and Smith recalls a happy childhood in his grandfather's big house.

Smith's grandfather was a successful businessman who owned a drug store, a grocery store and a movie theater, but with the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Depression, even those lucrative sources of income began to evaporate.

By the late 1930s, when Booth was finishing high school and ready for college, the money that was to put him through college was gone, and Smith realized he would have to make his own way.

The best way to do so, he figured, was to join the Army for a few years and thus have a base for his higher education.

As occurs so often, life is what happens while you're making plans for it, and by the time Smith had fulfilled his commitment and

received what he thought was a permanent discharge, World War II was squarely in his path, and he was called back "for the duration."

African-American men had participated in the Army from the Revolutionary War and had become famous as the Buffalo Soldiers, a cavalry unit especially gifted at riding, caring for and training horses.

That had been Smith's work for his brief time in the military, but by the time he reported to Fort Benning, Ga., the horse cavalry had been phased out and replaced with the mechanized cavalry.

Smith had loved horses, especially breaking and training wild ones. He applied to Officer Candidate School. Of his class of 281, 12 were African-American. Six of the 80 total graduating were African-American. Those 80 became second lieutenants.

The armed services since have become completely integrated, but in those days of segregation, these pioneering young officers had to prove themselves over and over.

Attesting to the character of this man is the fact he can today speak frankly and matter-of-factly about the walls of prejudice he encountered, but without a trace of bitterness or rancor. He served throughout the war in the Pacific and was awarded the Bronze Star and three battle stars before the war ended and he at last could come home to go to college.

Before shipping out for the Pacific theater he had



PHOTO COURTESY OF TREMONT

TRAILBLAZER: George Booth Smith was a 2nd Lt. in the Army during World War II.

met and married a beautiful young woman, Cynthia Pearson.

After the war, with his newly earned master's degree in library science, Smith got a job as librarian at Langston University in Oklahoma. There followed a brief stint at Virginia Theological Seminary for the purpose of getting its library accredited.

Then he went to Raleigh, N.C., as city librarian. It was a good, steady job doing work he loved, but he sought to maximize his income.

He had heard good pay and perks were available to Post Office workers, so when notice of qualifying exams for postal work came, he applied.

The top three scorers were to get the three available jobs in Durham. When he received notice of a very high score yet no job offer, he talked with one of the new hires whose score was well below his own. Making an appointment with the local postmaster he asked why he didn't get the job.

Smith immediately set out for Washington, D.C., with his certified test scores in hand. He was able to get an immedi-

ate appointment with the Postmaster General, who was aghast to hear his story.

In Smith's presence he called the Durham postmaster, made sure he understood the facts correctly, and said, "If this young man does not have a job by the time he gets back to Durham, Durham will have a new postmaster."

In 1985, after four children and a long career as a letter carrier, Smith retired. When his wife got ill, he cared for her at home for two years before she died.

Today, Smith is proud of his children, who he regards as trailblazers.

One of his daughters is an assistant district attorney in North Carolina.

His oldest son, George Smith, became an FBI agent in 1975. In 1988 he became the first black supervisor special agent for Organized Crime and Drugs for the Houston division of the FBI.

Now residing in Houston, it was the younger George who insisted his father move to Houston to be near him, and George Booth Smith arrived at Tremont in late 2010.