In this oral history interview Allan From discusses his educational experiences, the influence of Professor Sims on Sims High School and the broader community of Union County, South Carolina, his Jewish heritage, the origin of his family name and his grandfather's store, I. From's, and its role in the African-American community. Born January 9, 1950, Allan From is one of two children born to Edith and Harry From of Union, South Carolina. From currently resides in Raleigh, North Carolina. Tom Crosby interviewed Allan From in Union, South Carolina, on October 11, 2009.
Tom Crosby: Today is October 11th and I’m in Union, South Carolina. I am at Days Inn Motel in Union and I’m in the process of recording someone who spoke at the Sims High all classes’ reunion on October 10, 2009. What is your name, sir?

Allan From: Yes, sir, my name’s Allan From and it’s spelled F-R-O-M.

TC: Okay. And the first name is spelled A-L-L-A-N, is that correct?

AF: Yes, sir, that is correct.

TC: Okay. If you don’t mind, most of us men don’t mind giving their date of birth.

AF: Absolutely not, January 9, 1950.

TC: I see. I still got you by a few years.

AF: Not many. You look good.

TC: Thank you. Okay now, who were your parents?

AF: Well, my parents were Harry and Edith From here in Union. My dad was born in Union in 1917 and my mother was born in New York City in 1922.

TC: I see. Now you have siblings?

AF: I do. I have a sister Gloria, who lives in Columbia, South Carolina.

TC: Un-huh, no brothers?
AF: No brothers, just Gloria and I.

TC: Okay. If I may ask, you are of Jewish background, right?

AF: Yes, sir, I am.

TC: Do you know when your, did your parents originate from another country?

AF: My grandparents on my father’s side, which is a southern side, my mother, as I said, was from New York, came from Europe to the United States in the 1890’s and his name was Israel From and his wife’s name was Bertha and they moved to Union in the 1890’s, is my understanding.

TC: Now From is sometimes with two M’s?

AF: Well, yes, sir. It’s originally spelled, actually the original family name is Fram, F-R-A-M. But when they entered the United States they were asked what their name was and the immigration people put it down as it sounded. So there were five brothers with the last name of Fram. Three of them retained the name Fram. My grandfather was From and he had another brother named Frim. So the Frim’s, Fram’s, and the From’s are all related. But the original name is Fram but at one time there was a Fram and a From in Union at the same time.

TC: I see. Now you presently live in Raleigh, North Carolina, right?

AF: Yes, sir, that’s correct.

TC: Now what’s your reason for being in Union, South Carolina this weekend?

AF: Well, the reason is that my family, my father passed away in 1993 but my sister and I wanted to recognize Professor Sims, who’s one of the most outstanding citizens in the history of Union County. It was, I saw in the newspaper several months ago that the new school was being built and there was an asking for a plaque to be erected in his honor and my sister and I, who still have a great deal of affection and love for Union, and had heard so many wonderful things about Professor Sims, wanted to help honor him and what he’s done for the county.

TC: Okay. What was his career, you might say, thru the years?

AF: Yes, sir. Well, he was, I met him a few times. I can’t say that I really knew him because he was a pretty old gentleman when I was coming thru but people spoke of him with reverence and respect, all people, both black and white. He was kind of a larger than life figure.
TC: And he had been principal of a high school, right?

AF: Yes, sir.

TC: And the name of that high school was?

AF: Sims High School obviously.

TC: Sims High School?

AF: That’s exactly right.

TC: Okay. Now you mentioned that he has been well respected by both black and white citizens of Union thru the years.

AF: Yes, sir.

TC: And Sims High School was built, opened in 1927. And this article stated that he had invited, half of the seats had been retained, should I say, for white persons.

AF: Right, that’s my understanding.

TC: Yeah, and this was in the courthouse where it took place.

AF: Oh, I didn’t know that. Yeah, okay.

TC: The occasion was held in the courthouse and half of the seats had been reserved for whites and half had been reserved for blacks. Okay. Then the same thing happened prior to the naming of Sims High School. He had been principal of an elementary school known as McBeth.

AF: Absolutely, I remember that.

TC: Right, and he had invited the noted choir from Nashville, Tennessee, the black college there that begins with an F.

AF: Fisk.

TC: Fisk, Fisk University.

AF: Yes, sir, I know it.
TC: And this around 1920 I believe, somewhere like that, he invited them to sing in Union and half of the seats had reserved for white people and half for black. So that’s two times that he did that. So you have any idea what he was after by doing that?

AF: Well, you know, it’s kind of hard to say but my feeling would be is that he wanted to reach out to the entire community and involve everyone in a celebration of educating students here in Union County, particularly the black students. And he wanted the community to see what he had done. And obviously Fisk has been well known as one of the most outstanding, particularly historically black universities in the country, and by bringing in a choir as such high prestige and, you know.

TC: And I think he wanted to facilitate interaction and respect.

AF: Between races.

TC: Between the races.

AF: Yes, sir, I would certainly agree with that.

TC: Right, and that was, do I want to say unusual or it was interesting, let’s put it that way.

AF: I think it was interesting and I don’t, not having been around in the 20’s and the 30’s, it was probably difficult to pull off except that a man of Professor Sim’s.

TC: Statue?

AF: Statue and reputation could do that. One thing I said last night at my remarks is that he was the only educator in Union County, both black or white, who was called “Professor,” universally called “Professor” by both blacks and whites, which obviously means he was held in high regard by everyone. I think it was kind of maybe the sort of thing where he walked down the street, the seas parted, so to speak.

TC: And the heads would turn.

AF: The heads were turned and he just, from what my father told me, he just generated so much respect from all folks just for the way he carried himself and what he did and how he acted. He was certainly, to endure what I imagine he endured, he had to be quite some gentleman.

TC: And I think he also, you know, the interracial thing that he was trying to establish, you might say, I think that was part of his getting things done.
AF: Absolutely.

TC: Playing the politics.

AF: I would assume that he had probably was the best politician in the county, even though he couldn’t be elected, simply because of what he accomplished in this county.

TC: That’s true. Now I think you alluded a few minutes ago about the historical marker.

AF: Yes, sir.

TC: You want to say a little more about that?

AF: Well, again I think Professor Sims moved to Union I want to say in about 1905 and the Sims name has always been a very Union name. I think he has a fairly large family. He had seven daughters. And again I think it’s important, at least for my family, to try to be involved in recognizing folks from our county who have done so much for the county. He has influenced thousands and thousands of graduates.

TC: And people in general.

AF: And people in general because he was a minister as well. And so I saw that in the paper and I called my sister and she said what do you think Dad would do and I said Dad would say let’s do it. And so, you know, it was kind of a no brainer for us.

TC: Right, and then the clothing store that existed.

AF: Right, right.

TC: Now that was your uncle?

AF: Well, it was kind of interesting. My grandfather started a store in, he came here in the 1890’s. He was a peddler and then he opened the store probably in the early 1900’s. It was called I. From and then when he died my dad’s older brother and my dad ran it.

TC: Now excuse me. How is the spelling of this I.? From?

AF: F-R-O-M.

TC: No, the I. From?
AF: Oh, his name was Israel From but everybody called him I, so he used the initial I From.

TC: I and, of course.

AF: From.

TC: Dot, period.

AF: Yes.

TC: And then F-R-O-M.

AF: Then F-R-O-M.

TC: So for a number of years, I just realized, should I say, about a month ago and I thought about it, I said now, it was called I. From, so how do you spell it, I F-R-O-M. I had forgotten that’s I. with a period and then a capital F-r-o-m.

AF: And so my dad and his brother were in business for a number of years and then my dad split off from his brother in the late ‘40,s and opened Harry From’s, so there was Harry From’s and I. From’s in Union. As a sideline, I didn’t mention this, it’s my understanding from talking to an older gentleman who came in our store some years ago told me my grandfather was the first person on Main Street to allow blacks to try on clothes and shoes.

TC: Yeah, I have heard that. I’ve heard this about his permitting blacks to try on clothes. He was said to be the first?

AF: My understanding is that, I was told that he was the first so I ask well, how did that happen, what did you do beforehand. And the gentleman said when we bought shoes we would take a string in.

TC: Or a little piece of stick.

AF: Or a stick and said my shoe is so long or my foot is so long, I need a shoe this long.

TC: Would you believe that I remember my dad doing that, my father?

AF: Really?
TC: Yeah. We were children, of course.

AF: I can certainly believe it.

TC: I just thought about it. Yeah, I remember his doing that. Okay, now any additional comments you’d like to make with reference to what the family, no, I’m sorry. I just forgot something. With reference to blacks trying on clothing, there was another aspect, business aspect of your grandfather’s place. I think it was mentioned last night about, we call it installments now, you know, getting things.

AF: Lay-aways.

TC: Lay-aways.

AF: Right, yeah, my dad did lots of lay-aways.

TC: Yeah. I think you mentioned something about the money or did somebody else mention it?

AF: That was Lewis [unintelligible] I think that mentioned something.

TC: Do you remember what he said?

AF: He said my dad charged one percent interest and everybody paid it. (Laughter) He said he treated everybody exactly the same.

TC: I see. Okay, do you have any additional comments or questions that you’d like to make at this time?

AF: Well, I’d like to say that I thoroughly enjoyed last evening at the reunion.

TC: At the all classes’ reunion.

AF: Even though I did not go to Sims I know lots of people who did and I think y’all are to be congratulated for the event that you put on with so many people there from so many different years. And it’s a tradition and a legacy that you need, the Sims graduates need to keep alive.

TC: Now you said you. I was hoping you retracted that because I prefer not to do another one but I’m going to see if we can do it though.

AF: Well, you know, those who.
TC: Have an interest.

AF: Yeah, have an interest, I think it needs to be the Sims graduates need to continue that legacy because it is such an important part of the history of not only for the blacks of this county but for everyone in this county.

TC: That’s true. May I ask you about what it was like, you went to school during the segregated time here in Union.

AF: Yes, sir, that’s correct.

TC: So you went to Union High School?

AF: That is correct.

TC: And the other people went to the all black school, Sims High School.

AF: That’s correct.

TC: So any comments you’d like to make along that line or your experiences?

AF: Well, I think I always questioned it and I think probably most southerners were this way. Why was it this way? But I think back in those periods, especially a person my age going all the way back, it was just one of those things that was kind of accepted. I thought living in Union that racial relations were pretty good. I thought people treated each other with respect.

TC: Okay, may I interrupt you?

AF: Yes, sir.

TC: Do you think Prof Sims may have contributed to that?

AF: Absolutely.

TC: On the basis of maybe what we said earlier?

AF: Oh, yes, I certainly do but I think, you know, you could go past (unintelligible) Prof Sims, who certainly I would say was at the top of the rung, so to speak, and you could go to people like, I’m trying to remember, the Free family and the Lymas family and a number of ministers here who worked to improve race relations, the Farr family, Curtis Farr, for example. I remember him. They were, white people traded with them.
They used them to, you know, as carpenters or to repair shoes and so I think it’s important that it wasn’t only Professor Sims but I think there were many others who had the same sort of reputation and support in the community. And I think that that made things go along well. Now that’s from my side but I’ve asked a number of people who are black many years later, what was it like growing up in Union? I mean I only know what I know but you were on the other side and having to go to different bathrooms and drink from different water fountains. Of course, I remember those days. I said was it as I remember it or was it worse or was it better or what was it really like. You can tell me now.

**TC:** I think as you said earlier, it was just an accepted thing. That’s how it was. However, I used to, I walked by an elementary school down in the suburb of Santuck and right by it and pass it and walk another mile or two, okay. And I used to wonder now why is it that we have to go to this school and they are there. And really that school did not look as good as my school, in terms of construction. I don’t know whether you know where it was located or not, the white school there in Santuck.

**AF:** I think so.

**TC:** It was like a rectangle.

**AF:** Right, I didn’t get down to Santuck too often. *(Laughter)*

**TC:** You didn’t go to the suburbs.

**AF:** I didn’t get to Santuck or Carlisle too often.

**TC:** So anyway, and then the white kids had busses too and they would throw things out the window and things like that. Of course, we didn’t like it. And so that’s kind of how it went. It was just a kind of accepted practice, you might say, not that everybody liked it, of course, but just didn’t really think about it much.

**AF:** It was just the way it was.

**TC:** Right. And then would you like to make a few comments about I think it was football that was pretty good at Sims High School. I’m not so sure about Union High.

**AF:** Union High.

**TC:** The answer is no.
AF: The answer is clearly no. We did not have many winning seasons and I can remember as a kid that I think Sims at one time played down at the city park and on Thursday nights, which was always strange in a way because they played Thursday.

TC: On the same field.

AF: On the same field.

TC: That is Union High field.

AF: And Union played Friday nights and a lot of white folks would go to the Sims games because they were the team that really played great football.

TC: Right.

AF: And Coach Moorer was another one who was an institution in this county. People loved their football and they, you know, didn’t matter who played it, they liked it.

TC: It gave them something to do and they were good.

AF: Well, they won ninety-six in a row so you can’t get much better. I think the streak was just broken a couple of years at a school in California.

TC: Oh, yeah.

AF: But obviously he sent many, many people on to college and some to the pros. And Coach Jefferies is an institution in and of himself.

TC: May I tell you about a person I interviewed about six weeks ago. He was one of the coaches from Carver High School. That’s the school.

AF: In Spartanburg.

TC: In Spartanburg that stopped our streak. So I interviewed him. He’s about eighty-nine I guess, something like that. His name is Roy Henderson and he grew up, it kind of relates to the racial thing. He grew up in Washington, Pennsylvania, over in western Pennsylvania someplace, a relatively small town I think. And he said that at his elementary school, and this was around 1935, ’38 there were white kids and black kids in the same building. But the interesting thing is this is the state of Pennsylvania, the North, and all the black kids were in rooms by themselves with black teachers. And all the white kids were in rooms by themselves, as I said, the same building, with white teachers.

AF: That’s interesting.
TC: That’s how close to segregation can you get? Supposed to be integration, you know, in the North. And I found that very interesting.

AF: Well, Pennsylvania I think they’re.

TC: It’s more southern in Pennsylvania too I think.

AF: Right, you look, historically black schools were essentially started because black folks couldn’t go to white schools. But Chaney State in Pennsylvania is a historically black school and I think a state school and Wilberforce in Ohio is the same. But I want to add one other thing that I’ve noticed when I come down here. This weekend I’ve seen a number of people and they said, some people say I know you’re in town for the Sims celebration. Or other people have said to me, white people, what are you in town for and I’ll tell them the Sims celebration and every one of them to a person has said that’s a wonderful thing to do. And to me that shows that there has been change in attitudes and they said we’re very happy that you have come down for it and that’s a nice thing that your family is doing by honoring Professor Sims. And so although things are not perfect, nor will they probably ever be.

TC: There have been some improvements.

AF: I think there’s been improvement because obviously.

TC: Oh, there has.

AF: Obviously I couldn’t imagine a response like that some years ago.

TC: Some forty years ago, for example.

AF: Absolutely not but everyone is thrilled and I think they’re very proud of the new school and its tradition.

TC: So we will go down and we should be there in thirty minutes.

AF: Yes, sir.

TC: For the dedication of the Sims High Middle School.

AF: Absolutely. Thank you, sir.

TC: It has been an honor and a pleasure.
AF: Same here.

TC: And we are more than happy to receive your two thousand dollars towards the construction of a historical marker.

AF: Well, it’s an honor for our family to honor an icon like Professor Sims.

TC: Well, thank you.

AF: Thank you, sir.

TC: I really appreciate it.

AF: My pleasure.

End of interview