



Edith Renfrow Smith

July 14, 1914 - January 2, 2026

Edith Renfrow Smith, 111, of Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood, formerly of Bronzeville. Educator, memory keeper and supercentenarian, granddaughter of freedom seekers, first Black woman to graduate from Grinnell College, friend of Herbie Hancock. Lived by her mother's motto: "Nobody is better than you."

Inclusive Funeral Care feels it best that Mrs. Renfrow Smith's obituary be left to a professional journalist. Please read Neil Steinberg's obituary from the Chicago Sun-Times (text is below). Neil wrote about Mrs. Renfrow Smith several times over the years. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/columnists/2026/01/04/edith-renfrow-smith-obit>

Also, visit Mrs. Renfrow Smith's page on the Grinnell College website: <https://edithrenfrowsmith.sites.grinnell.edu/>

Mrs. Renfrow Smith chose to donate her body to science through the Anatomical Gift Association.

At Mrs. Renfrow Smith's request, there will be no services at this time.

"If you have an education, no one can take that education away from you." - Edith Renfrow Smith, panel in Renfrow Hall loggia, Grinnell College.

In loving memory of Edith Renfrow Smith '37, DHL '19 — educational groundbreaker, community builder, and lifelong Grinnellian — we invite all who were touched by her extraordinary life to honor her legacy. Gifts made in her memory will be collected and directed toward scholarship support, helping future generations of Grinnell College students pursue the education she so deeply believed in. Memorial gifts may be made at <https://give.grinnell.edu/renfrowsmith> or by calling the Grinnell College Office of Development and Alumni Relations at 1-866-850-1846.”

Arrangements by Inclusive Funeral Care, 773-318-1305 or www.InclusiveFuneralCare.com.

From Chicago Sun-Times:

Edith Renfrow Smith was born in Iowa two weeks before the start of World War I. Her earliest memories involve the end of the war in 1918 and a neighbor who came home having lost both legs. She met aviator Amelia Earhart while an undergraduate at Grinnell College, where she became the first Black female graduate, class of 1937.

After graduation, she came to Chicago to work at the YMCA and was living in the city Friday when her long, extraordinary life ended.

Mrs. Smith was 111. She had celebrated Christmas with family but then stopped eating.

“She felt it was time,” said her daughter, Alice Frances Smith, 80. “She said she was tired.”

Mrs. Smith was one of perhaps a thousand “supercentenarians” — people who live to 110 — in the world, and a living link to history. She clearly remembered her grandparents, born in slavery, her memory so sharp she was included in the SuperAging Research Initiative at the University of Chicago, a similar study at Northwestern and a genetics study in Boston.

Mrs. Smith was revered at Grinnell, honored as a pioneer and role model to young women.

“To be in her presence was to travel through time and space because Miss Edith was a memory keeper,” said Dr. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, the chair in gender, women’s and sexuality studies at Grinnell. “With ease and pride, she recounted two centuries of her family’s history, dating back to the 1830s ... We followed her meticulous recollections to explore her extended family’s deep Iowa roots, which were laid before the Civil War. She guided our knowledge of other Black families who called Grinnell home in the early 20th century, and she made visible the Rosenwald Scholars. This handful of Black men attended Grinnell in the 1920s and ate Sunday dinner at her family home. Although all of her five siblings were college educated, it is from the Rosenwald Scholars that Miss Edith first ‘caught a vision’ of attending Grinnell College specifically.”

Mrs. Smith was granted an honorary doctorate in 2019. “Grinnell has been my life,” she told the audience.

In 2022, a dorm was named after her — Renfrow Hall, a new facility designed to encourage interaction between students and community residents.

“We have much to learn from her steadfastness and perseverance, her excellence and her belief that we can do better,” Grinnell President Anne F.

Harris said at the ceremony. “She has taught so many over generations. It is deeply meaningful and fitting that this building focused on students, their residential and learning experiences, and situated at the intersection of the town and the college, will bear her name,”

She was born July 14, 1914, in Grinnell, the fifth of six children. Her father, Lee Renfrow, was a chef at the Monroe Hotel. Her mother, Eva Pearl, took in laundry.

In 1940, she married Henry T. Smith, a milkman for the Borden Milk Company. They had two daughters, Edith Virginia and Alice Frances.

The family moved to Bronzeville, where they lived across from Wayman Hancock, a meat inspector.

“Those kids were in and out of our house,” she told the Sun-Times in 2021. “[Virginia] used to live at Mrs. Hancock’s house because Mrs. Hancock had plums, and she loved plums. Herb and my oldest daughter were babies together. They were just big enough to look out the window. He became a musician when he went to Hyde Park High School.”

“Mrs. Smith lived across the street from us,” Herbie Hancock, the jazz great, remembered in 2021. “She and my mother were the best of friends. Mrs. Smith deeply respected etiquette and manners; whenever I visited the Smith family, I knew I had to be on my best behavior. Our whole family had a deep respect and love for the Smith family.”

Mrs. Smith held several jobs, including working a secretary for Oscar De Priest, the first Black man elected to Congress in the 20th century, though he had left Congress by then.

In 1954, Mrs. Smith became an elementary school teacher. She retired in

1976 but continued to volunteer at Goodwill and the Art Institute for the next 40 years.

She enjoyed making jelly, wine and baking pies. She was a member of the Chicago Temple, and parishioners visited her every Saturday at her home on the North Side.

She is survived by her daughter, Alice. Her other daughter, Virginia, died in 1998. Mrs. Smith's husband died in 2014.

At her 110th birthday, Mrs. Smith said: "The Lord gives you the birthdays, and you take 'em. You have no choice. Take what you have, make use of it, and be thankful for what you have. Don't let life pass you by. Remember, this is your life. It's wonderful to live long enough to enjoy just being here."

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Tribute Wall

AI

“ Edith and her husband were my parents' landlords when I was born. I have so many great memories of her. I've never met anyone like her. What a wonderful woman to have had in my life.



April Isaac - January 07 at 09:40 AM

PA

“ Edith and I became friends in 2014. After Mr. Smith died - my hospice agency took care of him. Edith came to meet me and to discuss how to make more supportive services available to the community near her home. We became breakfast buddies. She especially liked cinnamon rolls! We talked a lot about travel and life experiences. Later, we became pen-pals and that was a lot of fun! My best regards to Edith's family and the people she loved and inspired.

Pat Ahern - January 05 at 08:09 PM

ND

Edith Smith was a dear friend of my mother, Vinelle Myrie. who passed three (3) years ago. She was a Christian and a very kind woman. Her intelligence was awesome extremely knowledgeable and was a great story teller. Her skills in baking and canning fruits and vegetables were remarkable. She told stories of her childhood that were so inspiring. My condolences to her family!
Nadine Daley

Nadine Dakey - January 26 at 05:57 PM

HE

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Heather Eilander - January 04 at 04:07 PM



“ 4 files added to the album Memories Album



Team Inclusive Funeral Care - January 04 at 02:39 PM

LA

I was saddened to learn of Mrs. Smith's death. I always looked forward to seeing her in the dining room of the retirement community where she and my mother lived. She was still "sharp as a tack" and smiling and engaged with the world. On occasion, she'd bring delicious home-baked goods to the dining room for her friends and neighbors: she was thoughtful that way. And I still remember my mother's pleasure as she showed me the birthday card that Mrs. Smith gave her. She was a remarkable woman--and remarkably kind, too. Her graciousness and intelligence will be missed. My condolences to her daughter, the Grinnell community, and all who were fortunate enough to know her.

Laura Adler - January 05 at 01:19 PM