

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
EDWIN VOORHIES

27 JUNE 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.015

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Albert Gore". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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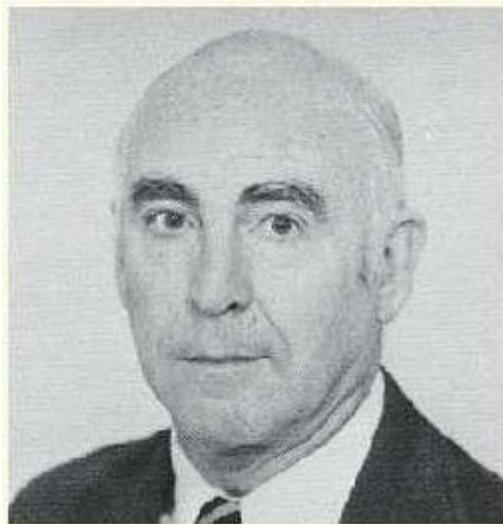
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ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
EDWIN VOORHIES**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.015

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q.M. Smith Collection designated as QMS.1995.15. This is Regina Forsythe, I am interviewing Dr. Edwin Voorhies. Today is Tuesday, June 27, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the Gore Research Center, Room 111 of the Ned McWherter Learning Resource Center. What is your full name?

VOORHIES: Edwin Springer Voorhies, I'm the Springer that was named after my mother's side of the family. Edwin was my grandfather on my father's side of the family's first name.

FORSYTHE: Your birthplace?

VOORHIES: I was born on the Buffalo River in Lewis County, about eight miles south of Hohenwald, Tennessee. I was born on my grandfather's farm, and he kept that farm for a number of years while I was growing up. Then my mother and father moved to Hohenwald, Tennessee, where my father had a drugstore, and my mother was a grade school teacher.

FORSYTHE: That farm, what kind of farm was it?

VOORHIES: It was just a river bottom farm, where he grew wheat and corn and pasture land for cattle. Right on part of his farm, were major swimming holes, that the town boys from Hohenwald used to come and swim in. You could stick a plank underneath a rock, and have a diving board off into the deep, cool water.

FORSYTHE: Your birth date?

VOORHIES: May 18, 1919.

FORSYTHE: Your parents' names?

VOORHIES: My father's name was Old Cecil Voorhies. My mother's name was Lucile Springer Voorhies.

FORSYTHE: Their occupations?

VOORHIES: My father was a pharmacist and my mother was a school teacher.

FORSYTHE: What was the drugstore?

VOORHIES: He owned his own drugstore in Hohenwald. As far back as I remember, [he owned the drugstore]. He went away to pharmacy school and came back, and by the time I came along he had a drugstore.

FORSYTHE: Where did your mother teach?

VOORHIES: She taught in a Hohenwald school, fourth grade.

FORSYTHE: Your wife's name?

VOORHIES: My wife's name is Marjorie Childress Voorhies.

FORSYTHE: Her occupation?

VOORHIES: She was just a housewife, but after all our children left home, she came and finished her degree in elementary education here at MTSU. When we married, she was a junior at Peabody in Nashville, so she just had a little way to go. Before that, she was a secretary and worked at Vultee Corporation during the war.

FORSYTHE: Where were you married?

VOORHIES: We lived in Nashville. In 1930, my father moved to Nashville, and had a drugstore at the corner of 32nd and West End. The depression hit, and he just lasted a year and went broke. My mother taught school in the Nashville city schools until 1967, when she retired. My father traveled and sold drugs. He traveled throughout the state of Tennessee, for a number of years after that. Mother taught at Eastland School, and Batey's School in East Nashville. We moved across town. I went to Knox School and Clemens School on the west side of town for one year, and moved out there. My wife went to West High, and we only met after the war.

FORSYTHE: Were you married in 1930?

VOORHIES: We married in 1948. That's the year we moved to Nashville.

FORSYTHE: And you had children?

VOORHIES: Yes, three children. One boy and two girls.

FORSYTHE: Their names?

VOORHIES: Kenneth and Ann and Jane.

FORSYTHE: Did they go to school here?

VOORHIES: The two girls did. My son went to Georgia Tech. That's where I went. He liked it pretty well, he's still there. And we have seven grandchildren now.

FORSYTHE: Tell me their names.

VOORHIES: Kenny has a boy named James, and a girl named Amy. Ann has two girls, Laurel and Rebecca. Jane has two boys and a girl. The older one is Katie, and then there's Andrew and Reid.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

VOORHIES: No, I had a brother that when I was four years old that only lived for a week. I grew up being an only child.

FORSYTHE: Where did you go to school?

VOORHIES: I went the first four years to Hohenwald, and to Nashville city schools the rest of the time through East High. Then we moved out to East Nashville, because mother taught out there, and we'd be near her school. As soon as school was out, we'd go back down to Hohenwald and stay with her parents, in order to save rent for the summer during the depression. We'd move back to a different place, until later on my father came back and bought a drugstore at the corner of 16th and Woodland out in East Nashville. He operated it for about 10 years, and then he died in 1945. So about 1936 to 1945, he had the drugstore at the corner of 16th and Woodland. Mother taught at Batey's school, which wasn't very far from there. So I went on and graduated from East High, in 1937.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose Georgia Tech?

VOORHIES: I wanted to study engineering, and I learned about the co-op program at Georgia Tech. There, you go to school a quarter and work a quarter. That's the only way I could afford to go. By saving birthday and Christmas money all my life, I had \$164.64 in the savings bank. That took care of my first quarter. Being an out-of-state student, I had to pay \$90 a quarter tuition at Georgia Tech. The Georgia students only had to pay \$50 a quarter, but I had to pay \$90. By the time you got board and books, that \$164 barely got me through that first quarter. I hitchhiked home broke. I got a job down at Nashville Bridge Company, working for about fifty cents an hour, sixty hours a week, six days a week. I put my money in the bank, lived at home, and made enough to give it one more quarter.

FORSYTHE: What did you do at Nashville Bridge?

VOORHIES: I started out scraping rust under the bottom of those barges, getting them ready to paint. After a while, I became a welding checker. I played baseball for the Nashville Bridge Company, and the boss came to the games, and he gave me a better job later on. I still didn't make much money, but I made enough to pay my next quarter's tuition and board. I measured the amount of welds each person welded on one of those barges, and wrote his name on it, so if it leaked, we'd know who to blame. Nashville Bridge Company gave me a job, I can't criticize them and don't intend to, because they saved my life. They gave me a job, when a hundred people were outside the gate, but they gave me a job because they knew I was going to college. At that time, you worked ten hours a day, six days a week. The boss said "if you walked, why, walk on out the gate, we'll get somebody in here to run on top of those slick barges in cold weather." It was dangerous, and they didn't pay much attention to safety, but that's the way everybody was at that time. They didn't have the federal laws to patrol safety, and they didn't have the federal laws to say you were only supposed to work forty hours a week and get overtime for the rest. There's just a lot of things that were a whole lot different then than now. I said I started to work for fifty cents an hour. That was not true, I started to work for twenty-five cents an hour. Fifty cents an hour is what we paid the college students later. But that was 1938. The first of the year in 1938. It was twenty-five cents an hour, sixty hours a week. When the boss said get something, you ran, and you didn't complain about anything. I'd have to go scrape rust down inside those barges when it was hot, and they did have blowers, they had fans to keep you from dying in there. But it was very hot in the summer, and very cold in the winter. The reason we'd have to get it ready to paint, is that was the last phase on the riverbank. They would jack up one side of the barge, put it down on greased skids, and it would slide in the river, and splash water halfway across. There would always be a gathering to watch them launch those barges. It was interesting.....

FORSYTHE: What years were you at Georgia Tech?

VOORHIES: I started in the fall of 1937, and I graduated in May of 1942. The co-op program at that time was a five year program, where you alternated quarters for four years and then went three consecutive quarters. You did the twelve quarters of work in eleven quarters.

FORSYTHE: What degree did you get?

VOORHIES: Mechanical engineering, bachelor's degree.

FORSYTHE: That was your major?

VOORHIES: Yes.

FORSYTHE: Did you have a minor?

VOORHIES: No, they didn't do it that way then. But they had the program all spelled out for you, especially the co-op program. I didn't have a single elective all the way through, because at that time, we did in eleven quarters what other students did in twelve. They speeded us up, and had a limited number of students in the co-op program. They had special classes for co-op students, so they designed the whole thing for us, because without any electives, they planned the whole thing from beginning to end.

FORSYTHE: What did you do after you got out of Georgia Tech?

VOORHIES: Well, I took ROTC at Georgia Tech. In May of 1942, they speeded up our graduation by thirty days - we ordinarily graduated in June, but we graduated in May. Then we went to summer camp in ROTC. That's normally six weeks, but they reduced it to four for us. I went to Chesapeake Bay, at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds. I was in Ordinance. Ordinance furnishes guns and ammunition vehicles. I was in the Air Corps Ordinance. They didn't have an Air Force, but they had the Army Air Corps, and I went six weeks to ordinance school, and was assigned to Savannah Army Airbase, Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia. I was trained there in [an] ammunition company. By December, 1942, I landed in Casablanca. So, I went to North Africa before the year was out. That was a speeded up program. But everything was hectic in those days. Then, I spent a year and a half in North Africa, several months in Corsica, and several months in Italy. For all practical purposes, I was in the army three years, and spent all three years overseas. Then I came home and was discharged.

FORSYTHE: And after your discharge?

VOORHIES: Then I went back to Georgia Tech for one quarter, trying to get my feet on the ground after the war. I decided that rather than take an offer to go somewhere else, I'd come back to Nashville, because that was home. I went back to work for Nashville Bridge Company for a little while, and they offered me a good promotion. I had to decide whether I was going to stay there the rest of my life or leave, so I left and went to work for Vultee, in the engineering department. During the war, they built aircraft. It's the one out by the old airport in Nashville, and it's still there in the same building. I was working there, and met my wife. We married and decided we'd leave Nashville, and I went to Kingsport to work. I worked for the Blue Ridge Glass Corporation in Kingsport.

FORSYTHE: What did you at Vultee?

VOORHIES: I worked in the engineering department. At that time, they'd got a contract for ACF Brill Buses. They were city busses that we were building instead of airplanes, and I had to look after and design, and watch the manufacturer.

FORSYTHE: Why'd you decide to go to Kingsport?

VOORHIES: I went back through the alumni placement center at Georgia Tech. [The job] was in Tennessee, not in middle Tennessee, but not too far away, so it looked like a good opportunity. I went up there and worked a couple of years.

FORSYTHE: At the Blue Ridge Glass?

VOORHIES: Blue Ridge Glass Corporation. They manufactured patterned glass. Architectural glass they call it - rolled glass with patterns on it to put in buildings. Glass making was an interesting process. I worked as an engineer there.

FORSYTHE: Where did you go after that?

VOORHIES: I came here.

FORSYTHE: How did that happen?

VOORHIES: After our first child was born in Kingsport, my wife and I decided that we'd rather live in middle Tennessee. At that time, it began to dawn on us that our parents were getting older, and we'd like to be closer to home, but not in Nashville. So I wrote some letters and I wrote President Smith. I got a phone call for an answer. As I told you before, he spoke hesitantly and he said "I'm Q. M. Smith with Tennessee State College" and he said, in effect, "I have to go to a meeting in Washington, and I'll be passing through Kingsport, and I'd like to meet you and talk to you." That was my first reply, a short time after I'd sent out letters with resumes. He was looking for somebody with an engineering background. I met him at the Kingsport Inn downtown, for the first time. We talked about an hour or so, and he offered me a job.

FORSYTHE: What did you talk about?

VOORHIES: We talked about what he was doing here at the campus, what my background was, and what he foresaw in trying to improve MTSU (MTSC at that time). I told him I'd like to help him do that. At that time, I told him I'd like to bring my wife back to look at the situation, and we did, and made an agreement when we came back and looked around.

FORSYTHE: What was your first impression of Q. M. Smith?

VOORHIES: I was impressed. I did have trouble understanding him at first, but I got used to that after a short time. He was an impressive person, he was tall and straight and forthright and intelligent, but yet very considerate of other people. He was a very impressive person.

FORSYTHE: What did your wife think of the campus?

VOORHIES: She was glad to come back to middle Tennessee. Without knowing it, it became apparent to me that I would like to spend the rest of my life working on the college campus, for several reasons. I had worked enough in industry to understand that it had its rewards, but it wasn't a way of life that I would prefer for the rest of my life. It was good experience, and I learned a lot, but I was ready to [settle down]. Rather than work that hard and help somebody else make more money, or make more money for myself, I'd enjoy more working with students and helping them than I would making money for somebody else. I think President Smith observed that part of me quicker than I did. I think that was one of the reasons that I thought I would like to work on a college campus, and one of the reasons I'd sent in a resume in the first place. But, he was in some ways difficult to work for. I certainly had as much respect for him as anybody I'd ever seen before. And he helped me in so many ways, as I said before, but the reason he was difficult to work for was very simple. He and Dr. Cope were very much interested in the place, and as interested in my job as I was in it. So, half the decisions I made, and half of them they made. But I had trouble keeping up with who was making which half. And I told them both that. And they sympathized with me, and tried to help me all they could. And I understood them, and they understood me, and we got along pretty well.

VOORHIES: Another funny story. We were over in the Maintenance Department, which was in the hangar. One of the carpenters was in there doing something. I said "Why are you doing that? I thought you were over doing something else." He said, "President Smith told me to do that". I had been having a hard day, and I said something to the effect that "I think I will go have a talk with President Smith. He can decide which one of us is going to run this Maintenance Department, me or him." I looked around and President Smith was standing right outside the screen door, and had heard what I said. From then on, he was a lot more considerate. He realized the situation I had been in. He was in the habit of all those years of seeing a carpenter and wanting something to be done. I said, "I'll tell you what I think, I think the place will be a lot better off if we'd finish a lot of jobs, instead of starting so many and not finishing any of them." And he said "well, if you think you can do that better than I can, I'll let you do it." And he did. That was one thing I remember. And that was the kind of fellow he was. He was so much interested in the welfare of the place, that when he'd see something going wrong, he was frustrated. And I understood that, and he understood I understood it, and we got along fine. I think that inadvertent remark, without realizing he was listening, helped me in the long run.

FORSYTHE: What date did you start here?

VOORHIES: August 1, 1949. I drove back and forth to Kingsport on weekends. I lived in Jones Hall, and that was an experience.

FORSYTHE: What was your title?

VOORHIES: I was Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds, and instructor in Machine Shop.

FORSYTHE: How did you manage to do all that?

VOORHIES: I did it very well. But, I worked long hours. When we came here, we looked for a place to live. I was looking for an apartment when there was just my wife and I and a brand-new baby. We'd look around and buy a house later. I found two rooms upstairs for sixty dollars a month out on Woodbury Road a ways. I brought [my wife] at the next opportunity, and we went out and looked at it, and they'd already rented it to somebody else. So, I ran across a house on Crescent Avenue, which is just a block from campus, a three bedroom house. I think we paid \$6,500 for it. It's the house where one of our faculty members, Frank Essex, who's retired now, still lives. It is a nice house. As I recall, I had saved a little money, and we had bought a little house up in Kingsport, and we had that money to make a down payment. The monthly payments with a four percent loan, including taxes and insurance, were \$49.50. That was a lot better than sixty dollars for two rooms upstairs. It had a nice yard for the children. It turned out to be a real nice place to live, and I could walk back and forth. I'd carry a ring of keys on each hip, because we didn't have a master system at that time. I'd take off walking every morning at seven o'clock, and get home about six that night. I was walking all day, because we didn't have any trucks.

FORSYTHE: What was your pay?

VOORHIES: It was \$300 a month to start with. After six months, President Smith gave me a fifty dollar raise, which was unheard of at that time. I sure did need it. So, I knew he was doing all he could.

FORSYTHE: Did you work continuously for the school until you retired?

VOORHIES: No. In 1955, in December, we had our third child, and we were working and didn't take a vacation. I stayed in the Army Reserve. Everything was so fouled up in WWII, that if there was anything to do to help out, I wanted to do it, so I stayed in the Army Reserve. It was interesting, because in 1950, the Korean war broke out, and all my friends at Georgia Tech who had taken ROTC were called to active duty. But I was in reserves, so they already had me and they didn't call me. My friends had to go to the Korean war, and I stayed here and trained in the reserves. In any case, we got a little [extra] pay, and I got two weeks active duty in the summer. That was the nearest thing to a vacation we ever got. We didn't spend any money for anything, and except for that Army Reserve pay, we wouldn't have made a living. I told President Smith that, and got a job and doubled my pay all at once in Huntsville, Alabama at Redstone Arsenal. I told President Smith if he ever could afford to pay me a living wage, I'd consider coming back, and he said "we'll see what we can do about that. Don't check out your retirement, and we'll leave it in there." A year and a half later, he called me and offered me the chairmanship of the Industrial Arts Department. We made an

agreement that I'd help him with new buildings, and I got halfway in between what I was making here before, and what I was making there. It was enough to make a living. And my wife was delighted, because she enjoyed living in Murfreesboro much more. When I went to work in Huntsville, we found a house and I made a down payment on it, and by the time I took her down to look at that one, they'd already sold it to somebody else. So we lived in Fayetteville, and I bought a house there and drove fifty-three miles one way. I went in a carpool, and got tired of that too, so we were happy to get back to Murfreesboro.