

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
HOUSTON CLAY TUCKER

11 JULY 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.024

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Albert Gore". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial 'A'.

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
HOUSTON CLAY TUCKER**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.024

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q. M. Smith Collection designated as QMS.1995.24. This is Regina Forsythe, I am interviewing Dr. Houston Clay Tucker. Today is Tuesday, July 11, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Dr. Houston Clay Tucker at 1020 East Clark Blvd., in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The tape of this interview along with a transcription of the interview will become part of the Quintin Miller Smith Collection and will be available to the public. Future researchers may include portions of this interview in their publications. Is that alright with you, Dr. Tucker?

TUCKER: Yes, sure.

FORSYTHE: What is your birthplace?

TUCKER: Nashville.

FORSYTHE: When were you born?

TUCKER: 1915.

FORSYTHE: Month and day.

TUCKER: November 26, 1915.

FORSYTHE: And where did you grow up?

TUCKER: I grew up mostly in Pulaski, Tennessee

FORSYTHE: When did you all move there?.

TUCKER: Well, my parents lived there, the family lived there in the beginning. The reason I was born in Nashville was my father was working in Nashville at the time.

FORSYTHE: What is your father's name?

TUCKER: Houston Clay Tucker, Sr. I'm a junior.

FORSYTHE: What was his occupation?

TUCKER: He didn't have a particular occupation. He worked in a grocery store for part of his life. He worked in a pool room. Do you know what a pool room is?

FORSYTHE: A place where you play billiards?

TUCKER: Where you play billiards. He knew a man who owned such a business, and he managed it for him for a number of years. My mother and father broke up their marriage when I was 9 years old, and I have not seen him since I was 9. He has been dead for a long time.

FORSYTHE: What about your mother? What is her name?

TUCKER: She was Lillian Johnson.

FORSYTHE: Her occupation?

TUCKER: Housewife. No, I'll take it back. When her marriage broke up, she went back to school. She became a bookkeeper, secretary. She went to business college in Bowling Green, Kentucky. And after a year there, she got a job and she worked the rest of her life. She worked for Martin College in Pulaski. She was the bursar of Martin College. This was after I had grown up. I had left Pulaski a long time ago.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

TUCKER: I have no brothers and no sisters.

FORSYTHE: What is your wife's name?

TUCKER: Dorethe Pigg.

FORSYTHE: And your children's names?

TUCKER: I have a son named Clark, a daughter named Susan.

FORSYTHE: What is your wife's occupation?

TUCKER: She taught at MTSU. She taught theater. The theater building is named for her and for me together, Tucker Theater.

FORSYTHE: How did that happen?

TUCKER: Well, she came here to teach at the same time I did. And we both taught. I retired two years before she did. She worked in the Theater Department. She directed all the plays. At that time, she had herself and a costume designer and a person to build sets. They were all members of the faculty over there.

FORSYTHE: Where have you gone to school?

TUCKER: Where do you want me to start?

FORSYTHE: Let's start with T. P. I.

TUCKER: I had an appointment to Annapolis my senior year of high school in Pulaski. That's the way they get students there. You have to be appointed by your representative in Congress. I had an appointment. I went to T. P. I. because my appointment to Annapolis was for two years in the future. So I figured I needed a year of engineering to help me. I went to Tennessee Tech for one year. I didn't know exactly how long I would be there. Turned out I was there one year. At the end of that year, I got an offer that paid my way through a second year of college. I accepted an offer from Marion Institute in Marion, Alabama. It's a military school like Columbia had for awhile. I spent the second year at Marion. I think it's on that...

FORSYTHE: Yes, that was in 1935. You were at Polytech from 1933 to 1934.

TUCKER: Those two years were the preparation for going to Annapolis Naval Academy. I had good grades, particularly at Marion, and Marion had a reputation of preparing students for entry into the Naval Academy. There were 50 students at Marion the year I went there that were trying to get in the Naval Academy or West Point.

FORSYTHE: Were you studying engineering there too?

TUCKER: Yes.

FORSYTHE: Did you get a degree there?

TUCKER: I got an associate degree.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about the United States Naval Academy.

TUCKER: My grades were good enough that, at the last minute, they told me I didn't have to take an entry exam. I was overjoyed with that. I entered the Naval Academy the first day of June, 1939.

FORSYTHE: And where did you go after you got through with the Naval Academy?

TUCKER: In those days, you went four years to the Naval Academy, and you graduated with a bachelor's degree. It was in engineering really. They didn't say that, but that's what the curriculum was. You had to serve two years after you graduated. When you graduated, you were an ensign in the Navy. That's the lowest officer's rank. You had to spend two years for the Navy. I went to a cruiser, which was a brand

new, fifteen gun surface vessel. The war started about that time. I graduated and spent two years, one year in the cruiser and another year in a destroyer, which was a smaller ship. I spent a year in each one of those two things and then I applied for submarine duty. You had to attend a submarine school, and I did that in 1941. I was sitting in a submarine December 7, 1941.

FORSYTHE: Were you at Pearl Harbor?

TUCKER: No, I was at New London, Connecticut, where the submarine school was. I had just graduated from submarine school.

FORSYTHE: That was kind of scary, wasn't it?

TUCKER: No, I don't....

FORSYTHE: Even after you had heard about Pearl Harbor?

TUCKER: "Scared" is not the right term. It was a sense of not knowing what was going to happen to you. I knew I wasn't going to stay in New London.

FORSYTHE: I see the Bikini Atom Bomb Tests in 1946. What was that?

TUCKER: You've seen pictures of what happened there.

FORSYTHE: I've seen pictures of atom bombs, but not at Bikini Island.

TUCKER: Oh, yes, you have. You've seen it a million times. If you've seen one, you saw that one. That was the first one. Bikini is an atoll.

FORSYTHE: What is that?

TUCKER: That's an island formed by the building up of rocks in the ocean, corral island. It was like a big tub about twenty miles across. You went inside this curved island. The Pacific Ocean is full of these things. Bikini had some people living on it. They moved them all out, and we were going to test an atom bomb. We had already dropped two on Japan. Then we had orders to test a whole bunch of ships. There were all kinds of ships anchored there deliberately to be destroyed. We had two old aircraft carriers, for example. They hit them with an atom bomb. This whole island was engulfed in the bomb. Bikini became the testing place for this. They first planned to drop one that went off in the air. Then they ran another test, dropping the atom bomb. Well, we didn't drop it; we set it in place about 50-100 feet under the surface of the water. And that bomb was set off to blow up ships that were anchored there.

FORSYTHE: Where were you when the atom bomb went off?

TUCKER: I was on a tugboat about five or six miles away from the island.

FORSYTHE: Were you able to watch it?

TUCKER: Yes, we watched it.

FORSYTHE: Operation Crossroads, what is that?

TUCKER: That's it. That was the name of the operation.

FORSYTHE: After the war, what did you do?

TUCKER: I resigned my commission after Bikini. A little bit before that I resigned my commission and requested retirement. I was told that I would have to serve another year. I was a career naval officer and graduate of Annapolis, and they told me they would consider my resignation after they had gotten all the temporary people back home. I put in another year, and during that year I went to the Bikini testing. That was a tremendous event in the news. We were all learning what an atom bomb was. They had set one off out in Arizona, I believe it was, and dropped two on Japan. Then Bikini was next, I believe. It's been a long time ago.

FORSYTHE: Where did you get your master's?

TUCKER: At Peabody.

FORSYTHE: What was your major?

TUCKER: English.

FORSYTHE: And your thesis? You did a thesis?

TUCKER: No, I got an M. A. degree there and then I went to Vanderbilt.

FORSYTHE: You did a dissertation?

TUCKER: Yes, I did a dissertation on George Elliott.

FORSYTHE: And English was your major.

TUCKER: Yes. George Elliott was a woman author, if you remember.

FORSYTHE: That was in 1960.

TUCKER: Yes.

FORSYTHE: You came to MTSU in 1956?

TUCKER: Yes.

FORSYTHE: Do you remember your job interview?

TUCKER: Yes. The English Department chairman was a fascinating man. His name was Peck, Richard Peck. The college was just beginning to grow real fast. We had 2,200 students when I was being interviewed by Richard Peck. He wanted some male teachers. He had several women, good teachers. He had already brought William Beasley, Bill Beasley to serve in the English Department. He was in the thesis-writing stage, just as I was. Peck also took an interest in me and my wife. We were living in Columbia then. I didn't know what I was going to do, and I just went to Peabody because I got tired of working in the family business, which was Pigg and Parsons. That was a store here.

FORSYTHE: A clothing store?

TUCKER: Yes.

FORSYTHE: That was your wife's family?

TUCKER: Yes. She had come over here and taken Saturday classes. She drove over with several ladies trying to complete college degrees so they could teach. My wife had majored in English, acted in the arts and acted in theater. So when he heard about me, he met my wife first. He was impressed with her work, and just as I was finishing at Peabody getting my master's, Peck called me one day. He said, "Congratulations on your master's degree. How would you like to come to MTSU and teach just one year? I can't offer you any more than that." I said, "I'll take it!" He said, "You'd better listen to how much it's going to pay or how little it's going to pay." I said, "I know that, but I need a year's experience in teaching." I hadn't taught anywhere before, unless you count submarines in New London. I was captain on a submarine that was training officers that were in submarine school. I guess that counts. So Peck said, he named a figure of how much he could pay me in one year. I've forgotten the exact figure, but it wasn't much. I said, "Since it's one year, and you can't go beyond that, I'm going to stay in Columbia, and we'll commute." The first year I taught here, I commuted from Columbia three days a week.

FORSYTHE: What did you teach?

TUCKER: I taught freshman English and world lit.

FORSYTHE: How many classes did you have to teach?

TUCKER: Three. No, four, I think.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about MTSU during that year?

TUCKER: I didn't have much to remember. I drove over and taught classes and got in the car and drove back to Columbia every day.

FORSYTHE: You didn't hang around.

TUCKER: No, that was the only way I could do it.

FORSYTHE: What was parking like? Did you have any trouble?

TUCKER: No, there were only 2,200 students there.

FORSYTHE: Let me ask you about Mr. Smith at T. P. I. What kind of president was he at T. P. I.?

TUCKER: He was an unusual man. He had been in World War I and was gassed. He had terrible trouble with his voice. The gas affected his voice, and he had trouble speaking. People liked him. I think I was in his office one time while I was at Cookeville. I was in his office when Peck took me in and introduced me and reminded him of who I was. He remembered me. Naturally, he remembered. He was very pleased that he had three students going on to Annapolis. I saw him that one time. Then I was commuting one year. The next year, I was offered a permanent job, except they didn't have a slot for another year. I said, "That's good because I'm going back to study for my Ph.D. Smith said to me, "If you go back to school,..." That's the way his voice sounded. He made me the proposition that he would guarantee that I had the teaching position in one year if I would spend that year going back working on my Ph.D. I had one year teaching here, and the next year, my wife was offered a job. She taught here while I went to Vanderbilt and spent a whole twelve month period on my Ph.D. I completed everything except the dissertation, but I got a dissertation plan approved. All I had to do was write it then. I started writing in the summer of that year. When the summer was over, I was teaching. I taught that one year on campus while Smith was still on campus.

FORSYTHE: How did the faculty relate to Smith at MTSU?

TUCKER: My opinion's not all that good because I wasn't here, really, but I think they liked him. There are a lot of stories about him, particularly with the funny voice he had. People could imitate him. With the voice he had, he wasn't always delivering speeches to the faculty.

FORSYTHE: Do you remember some of the stories they told about him?

TUCKER: No, I'm afraid I don't know any stories on him, except his strange voice. Everybody liked to imitate him, which is a little bit cruel, I think.

FORSYTHE: When you came back that following year, what did you teach at MTSU?

TUCKER: I taught first and second year English, freshman and sophomore English. In the third quarter of that year, we changed. We were still on the quarter system then. We were still on the quarter system as long as Smith was there. I taught fundamental, beginning English. I had classes of freshmen and sophomores. The next year I started teaching world lit. There were three courses in this. You rotated them. He hadn't had anybody to teach that in some time. I started teaching, and I continued to teach world lit the whole time I was there. I taught some world lit one year and another.

special notation here?

FORSYTHE: This is a continuation of the interview with Dr. Houston Clay Tucker by Regina Forsythe on Tuesday, July 11, 1995.

FORSYTHE: On this list, you have the formation of the Department of Speech and Theater. Can you tell me about that?

TUCKER: I was first director of the School of Arts and Sciences. We had English and history. We had the sciences, biology, chemistry and physics. We had economics. I named most of them. They were all departments in the School of Arts and Sciences. All those different departments were that way. We had an emphasis in English that a student could study speech, but he really was in the English Department. He was majoring in the English Department, majoring in speech. What we did at the time I have written "Theater and Speech" down there, the first thing we did when I became director of that school was to take speech and theater out from the English Department. The English Department had all kinds of little things like that dumped on them over the years, in a sense. The faculty wanted a department of speech and theater. We got that done. We separated that out from everything else.

FORSYTHE: And the next thing you did was the formation of the departments of history, sociology, geography, political science, and economics?

TUCKER: We organized this into departments.

FORSYTHE: Development of the master's program. Can you tell me about that?

TUCKER: The reason we formed the Department of Speech and Theater, we formed all these others that I've listed, the Departments of History, Sociology, Geography, Political Science, and Economics---economics was pretty soon moved over to the School of Business. What we had done was formed four schools, each one with a

director. Then we put everything into departments and schools. That's what you have now.

FORSYTHE: You did that.

TUCKER: Yes, I was one of four people who served as department head of the department of the school, what is really the school.

FORSYTHE: What about the formation of the master's program?

TUCKER: In Smith's time, there was no graduate work done except graduate work in education, that is, in teaching. We had that when I came to MTSU to teach. Things were not broken up into departments, and that's what we were doing there that I wrote out for you. That started after Smith was here. He had nothing to do with that.

FORSYTHE: What about the development of the first doctorate program?

TUCKER: Yes, we did that. That was not long before I retired. We started with English and history and then phys. ed.

FORSYTHE: You retired in 1978?

TUCKER: Yes.

FORSYTHE: The addition of the Speech and Hearing Therapy to the Department of Speech and Theater?

TUCKER: There is a part of speech that is taught to teach people to stand up and lecture in front of people. If you were going to be a teacher, the idea was, you had to be able to deliver lectures. And you have speech involved in this. And some course in speech was a part of a major. It still is. If you go over and list as a freshman, you will have to take English, a certain amount of science, a certain amount of other little things of which speech is one. It's a required course.

FORSYTHE: What about the development of the Historic Preservation Program?

TUCKER: There's one man that headed that, and he is Jim Hooter, who is still over there. He was a history professor. He came under the department head, which was Corlew. I was dean of the school in which these two teachers operated. Hooter dreamed up this course, this whole historical preservation. It's a different department. It's got a home in a house over there on Main Street. Hooter is the one who literally sat down and dreamed up this and proposed it. It was approved. It went through his department chairman, his school dean, which was me. I had nothing to do with the work you had to do to get this done. I was no part of that. I was responsible for the department chairman and the history teacher. That's

been a very successful program. They thought President Clinton was considering offering him a job in Washington, which I think he'll take. It sort of depends on how much money is going to be in the national budget for that, whether he is going to be in that position over in Washington for a time. That is still up in the air.

FORSYTHE: I went through the annuals and catalogs and found some English faculty. I will call out the names, and you tell me what you remember about them.

TUCKER: OK.

FORSYTHE: Dr. Robert Abernathy.

TUCKER: He was in the Education Department. He taught education courses and told good stories.

FORSYTHE: What kind of stories did he tell?

TUCKER: Oh, anything. He was an after-dinner speaker, but he was not in the English Department. He was in the Education Department, and he was a good public speaker. He went out and recruited students to come to school here.

FORSYTHE: Guy Anderson.

TUCKER: Yes, I know him. I did alot of recruiting myself, and he's one we hired in English.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about him?

TUCKER: He's still around.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about Dr. Cope?

TUCKER: I think he was a better college president than he ever got credit for. He was a man that kept everything right in his head. He knew what was going on everywhere because before he left everyday from the campus to go home, he walked somewhere and walked in unannounced. He kept up with what was happening in the University that way. It's a very good thing to do. He'd walk in on a teacher teaching a class and say, "Go right ahead. I'm visiting." That's pretty slick, I'll tell you.

FORSYTHE: How did faculty relate to him?

TUCKER: I think they liked him. I can't really say. It gets into personalities. I can't judge everybody like that.

FORSYTHE: What about Dr. Scarlett ?

TUCKER: He lives here. When he retired, he came back and lived here. I see him every once in awhile.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about the English department. How did it change from the time you began to when you retired?

TUCKER: I can't say how it's changed. You've got to remember that I am nearly 80 years old. It's been seventeen years since I've spent any time there. I quit seventeen years ago.

FORSYTHE: Where was your office?

TUCKER: My office was in the basement of what was the old gym right behind Old Main. There was an auditorium in that building at the time. In the basement was my office.

FORSYTHE: Where was your office when you came back in 1959 after your year at Vanderbilt?

TUCKER: After that, we had an office in the old library, which was sitting right where Peck Hall is today. Small building, but it was the library at one time. It was the library when I first came here. The library we have now was built just after I came here, and now it's inadequate.

FORSYTHE: How did people react to the library when it was built?

TUCKER: I think everybody was overjoyed with that.

FORSYTHE: What about when Peck Hall was built?

TUCKER: They liked that too. Everybody had an office. Of course, they've outgrown it.

FORSYTHE: Is there anything else you think we should talk about?

TUCKER: I might say that in building Peck Hall, nearly everybody that was going to occupy it spent a year in offices in a dorm which is no longer there.

FORSYTHE: Which dorm was that?

TUCKER: One out toward the library.

FORSYTHE: Jones Hall?

TUCKER: Yes. That was while Peck Hall was being built. We had to knock down the old library building and put Peck Hall there. Peck had an office over in that building.

I had one in the administration building at that time. I spent two or three years down there. Cope wanted his department chairmen close to him. I was responsible when we finished Peck Hall, I insisted while we were discussing what was going into it that I wanted the dean's office and the chairmen's offices as close to their teaching faculty as you can get. I wanted to be down the hall from English, and across the hall from History, and so on. You can understand why, as a dean, I would like to have it that way. We got that done; we moved the chairmen out of the administration building into Peck Hall. By the time you do this, you need to do more. It takes a year or two years to get that kind of thing done when you are building a new building. When it's ready to go, you are just about ready to dig up another hole to put another building because you're growing so fast. I spent most of my time one year interviewing and hiring 40 new teachers in the Department of Arts and Sciences. I spent a lot of time off campus. I had to go see these people and try to hire them. It was at a time when the University didn't have as much money as it has now. You had a hard time hiring somebody. I remember we were going to start a philosophy major, a Department of Philosophy. We got that done while I was a dean. I remember we interviewed a very attractive, sharp fellow from Yale, and I had no way to get that man on the faculty at MTSU. It was a matter of money. He got a Ph.D from Yale; he's going to teach somewhere one level below that. He is not likely to get as far along. All of that is changing though. There's nothing in the world any better than a university like we have right here, in spite of the feeling that Vanderbilt's much better. Don't kid yourself. We've got something over there that Vanderbilt doesn't have, and you can wake up any morning of the week and find it, if you need it. They've got a lot of things that only Vanderbilt can do. We do too. I've heard people praise the English Department in past years. That was the department I was closest to because I was an English professor. Cope figured out a way to hire me to be the dean.

FORSYTHE: How did he do that?

TUCKER: Dr. Cope called a faculty meeting and he got up and said "We are going to separate the school into departments. We are going to have four to begin with and here is what they are. We are going to have to have a director for each of these departments. I want to have from each faculty a letter addressed to me in which you name your choice for such a person for every one of these positions. I want you to name somebody that is already on our faculty and name another person who is not on our faculty that you would like to see have the job. And I want those on my desk by such-and-such time". I went back to my own office and wrote a letter saying that I wanted Richard Peck to be the Dean of Arts and Sciences. I got a call from Dr. Cope "Can you come over here and talk to me for awhile." So I went over and he said "I have gone over the letters recommending people for the Dean's job. Your name came up more than any other person's name for the position of Director of Arts and Sciences." I thought "Oh, No!" He said "Well, I am offering you the job". I said "I know and I understand. But I don't want to do that. I'll bet Peck is number two on the list." He said "You are

right, but he will not be appointed Dean." I said "What do you mean, he will not be appointed?" He said "Because I've got you, and he is older than you are. You are the right age."