

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
WITH  
ELIJAH HARRIS

17 AUGUST 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE  
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.064

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

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

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MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH  
ELIJAH HARRIS**

**Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW #QMS.064**

**FORSYTHE:** This is Regina Forsythe, I am interviewing Mr. Elijah Harris. Today is Thursday, August 17th, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mr. Harris, located at 1400 Granny White Pike, in Nashville, Tennessee. The tape of this interview along with a transcription of the interview will become a 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 all right with you Mr. Harris?

**HARRIS:** Yes

**FORSYTHE:** What is your full name?

**HARRIS:** Elijah Robert, they call me Lij Harris.

**FORSYTHE:** Your birth date and place of birth?

**HARRIS:** August 21, 1908 in Antioch, Tennessee.

**FORSYTHE:** What was your father's name and occupation?

**HARRIS:** Henry Franklin Harris, he was a farmer.

**FORSYTHE:** Your mother's name and occupation?

**HARRIS:** Annie Morgan Harris, she was a housewife.

**FORSYTHE:** Do you have any brothers or sisters?

**HARRIS:** I had one brother, Frank Jr.

**FORSYTHE:** What is your wife's name?

**HARRIS:** Wynema Hall.

**FORSYTHE:** Do you have any children?

**HARRIS:** No children.

**FORSYTHE:** What made you go to MTSU?

HARRIS: Well I think it was similar to what everybody else did. Back then Davidson County only had one four-year high school and schools like Antioch Junior High School, they fed to Central High School. When I graduated from Central High School, at that particular time I lived at Antioch and had no transportation. I had to work in Nashville in order to go to Central because there weren't over two cars in Antioch at the time. I didn't go out for football or baseball my junior year because my job prevented it, but my senior year I got a job working at night and I went out for football and baseball too. I played in the first football game I ever saw at Central High School, because we didn't have football in junior high school. When I finished in 1928, I had a chance to get a contract with the Nashville Bars but I wanted to go to college and I knew that if I had a contract with a professional baseball team that I couldn't go. I met coach Faulkinberry and the team. They scrimmaged Vanderbilt. I asked coach Faulkinberry, "Do you have any help for football players?" He said, "If you make my team, I will give you a job" I said, "That is a deal." I met him at camp in Murfreesboro. I was a little late, but at that particular time I made the team and I started the 3rd game they had. I started every other game for four years except one game when I had an injured leg. Somebody asked me when I came home the first week if I was going to make the team. I said, "I've got to, if I don't, I won't eat." So I did get a job working in the cafeteria, so that is the reason I came to Middle Tennessee.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about working in the cafeteria.

HARRIS: I dipped ice cream for four years.

FORSYTHE: Who was your boss?

HARRIS: Lorrene Neece. She was a very lovely person. The ones that worked in the cafeteria were the best group on campus because we were together and very friendly and she was very nice to all of us.

FORSYTHE: How much did you get paid?

HARRIS: I didn't get paid anything, I worked for my food. I picked up extra jobs on campus. I took a course on industrial arts and I would put together a cedar chest on one weekend, sell it the next weekend, and made extra money like that to pay expenses to pay room rent and so forth.

FORSYTHE: What other jobs did you have on campus.

HARRIS: I worked on the farm, and did extra jobs for some of the professors there.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about the farm.

HARRIS: It was an agricultural college at the time, and they had a big farm and they raised cattle. Mr. Gracy was the professor and they showed cattle all the time.

FORSYTHE: What years did you go to school there?

HARRIS: I entered in '28 and graduated in '32, with a B. S. Later on I got a master's of education at Peabody College in 1946. After that I got an MED in education in 1949.

FORSYTHE: What was your major at MTSU?

HARRIS: It was industrial education and I minored in science and math.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose these fields.

HARRIS: We didn't have advisors, we just had to guess for ourselves. I took industrial arts because I knew that if I could have access to the machinery I could sell it. I took English and literature, history, science and math..

FORSYTHE: What was registration like?

HARRIS: It was very simple, we would have to rake up enough money to register, then we would have to pay our room rent. I think the rent then was about \$18 a quarter.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about living in Jones Hall.

HARRIS: Well , we didn't have air conditioning. In the early fall, a lot of time it would be so hot that we would have to go out on campus and spread a blanket and sleep because it would be so hot, also in the late spring. We didn't have air conditioning anywhere.

FORSYTHE: How many roommates did you have?

HARRIS: One. His name was Emerson Hendricks.

FORSYTHE: Do you remember any of the pranks that were pulled?

HARRIS: One time, I forgot the boys name, but we pretended that we started a fight and he jumped out the window.

FORSYTHE: What did students do on the weekends?

HARRIS: Well, most of the time on the weekends we were involved in some part of athletics or working somewhere. You know you had to stay in condition all the time. If I wasn't doing that during football season, I was doing something pertaining to football, or working some where.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about the football team.

HARRIS: We did not have a large squad because financially they could not afford it. We didn't have a stadium. We played football in back of what they called the science building. We had a few bleachers there, but that was the only place we had to play. I guess over four years we played Western Kentucky, Murray state, Alabama, and a Memphis team. I would say we won over fifty percent of them and we were out manned everywhere we went.

FORSYTHE: Did you have any road trips?

HARRIS: We went to Florida one time and went to Memphis and to Alabama, but most were Kentucky and East Tennessee and place like that. We traveled by bus.

FORSYTHE: I want to ask you about some of the faculty members that were there. Let's start with Coach Faulkinberry.

HARRIS: Coach Faulkinberry was a very religious person and he knew the Bible. I was never in his classes but he taught a Sunday school class and he taught Latin. We thought the world of Coach Faulkinberry. He was a great coach and a great fundamental coach.

FORSYTHE: Dr. Golightly.

HARRIS: He taught psychology and he was kind of amusing sometimes. He gave a lot of true false questions all the time. Then we would grade them and he would say "true, false, true, false, true, true," and some of the students would come and imitate him all the time. We all liked him.

FORSYTHE: Philip Mankin

HARRIS: I took English under him, he was well liked but he was kind of a timid fellow. He was a good teacher.

FORSYTHE: J. C. Waller.

HARRIS: I took practice teaching under Dr. Waller, he was over the demonstration school. Even after I finished, I taught over there for about a year after that for practically nothing because they didn't have anyone to teach industrial arts.

FORSYTHE: Elizabeth Schardt

HARRIS: I took one course in French under Miss Schardt, you know she had a crippled hand.

FORSYTHE: Katherine Monohan

HARRIS: We came in contact with Miss Monohan a lot because if a boy even helped a girl up the steps, he would get called on the carpet because she was very strict. It was kind of funny.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about the library.

HARRIS: It wasn't a large place. We did a lot of studying and a lot of courting there too. You know, we would meet our girlfriends there a lot of times. Of course you know us athletes, we would always have a girl that would kind of help us in our courses.

FORSYTHE: Was the library noisy then?

HARRIS: No.

FORSYTHE: Dr. John Morris

HARRIS: He was a history teacher, he was a very kind person to all of his students. He would ask you a question and no matter what you would answer he would figure you were partly right. He would never grade you down on anything. We kind of figured him out to be partly right. I would say all the professors at that time were kind and helpful. At that time it was a small college and everybody knew everybody else.

FORSYTHE: What about P. A. Lyon?

HARRIS: He was very kind and helpful to students. I know usually when you leave a high school and go to college, they study your record, and he called me in and recognized me for my efforts that I had put forth in school. He gave me a good recommendation after I graduated.

FORSYTHE: What did you do after you graduated?

HARRIS: Back then there were very few jobs available. My roommate and I applied for a coaching job in Lawrenceburg. I withdrew mine because I really didn't want to compete with him. I really wanted to come back to Davidson County. I could have gotten a job in Milwaukee but Davidson County only had one vacancy in the system at that time. They told me they would give me a job the next year. They wanted me to coach, but I told them I wanted a job in administration. I waited it out that year and waited until the next year. You had to meet with the board of education at that time in 1933. They wanted me to coach, and told them I preferred not to coach. They said, "If you don't want to coach we will have to start you in a small school." I started in a two-teacher school at Smith Spring, and I taught the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. There was another teacher that taught the



first three grades. Back then, the only contact you had with the board of education was when you went to get your erasure and chalk and you didn't see anybody till Christmas time. In the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades we had about fifty-five students and I guess I developed for my own self, you teach 5th then 6th then 7th then 8th and every body will listen to what you say. A lot of times I worked out one test and I expected the 5th grade to go to one level and so on, then I soon found out that 5th graders were going to the 6th grade level and some of the 7th grade were going to the 8th grade and it worked out very well. They wanted me to have more experience and they transferred me to Turner school, it is one of the larger elementary schools, as assistant principal. I started working there in '37. Turner school was pretty large and I was in charge of all discipline and physical education and I taught civics and math. Back then I didn't know it but another teacher and I were doing team teaching. We had heard of it, but didn't know we were doing it. You see I would teach civics and math and the other teacher would teach the rest. I was there four years. Then I was transferred to Bordeaux Elementary School as principal there. It was a school of about four hundred and fifty students and we had about six teachers. We had big classes. I taught the 8th grade. I was there about two years because that was about 1940, then I had a call from Uncle Sam to go the navy. I served in the navy for three years. I was in charge of all recreation and physical training at Indianapolis, Indiana at a coal station school. After I got out of the navy, I was assigned to Jerry Baxter School in East Nashville, I was a principal. I started in 1947 and was there about seven years. It was in one of the best communities that I have ever been in. Students and parents were very cooperative. At the time, we had a gym and we had an intramural program all the time. I coached girls and boys basketball until I could hire someone else. Then I was transferred to Cumberland High School and I was there for five years. You had to move as they wanted you to move. It was a good school. I didn't teach, they wouldn't let me. Back at that particular time, the juniors had to pass an achievement test, and if they didn't pass they had to take an extra course in math. I didn't have any teachers that wanted to teach it, I had to teach it myself. I soon found out that some of the students who had been failing all the time didn't know all the fundamentals of math. I kind of became the , "Oh I see" teacher, because I would explain something to them and they would say, "Oh I see. " They didn't see before. I think that is the fault of a lot of teachers, they teach over the heads of some of their students. Then, since I had been a principal in elementary, junior high, and high school they sent me to Antioch . It was a K-12, and they wanted to change it to a high school. I didn't want to go because I was born and raised there, but they sent me anyway. I was there thirteen years, 'til '71. It was quite an experience. The population was increasing all the time and a lot of students. The first year I eliminated the elementary, and I was given the assignment of projecting the enrollment over the years. I projected that we would have in the senior high school, 1850 students. Really, through the years, the enrollment increased so fast that I was rezoned four times. We tore down the old building and built a new one, and that was during integration. I had four phases of the building program and they stopped me because of integration. I think that was a mistake. We spent too much time

building the school and not completing it. That is the time they started comprehensive high school. I didn't believe in comprehensive high schools. I believed in community high schools. Now they have trouble in comprehensive high schools because they don't have that sense of community. I think back to MTSU and we were one big family. After I retired, I am a Methodist, and the Methodist church asked me if I would set up a corporate administering program for ten churches in East Nashville. I worked at that for eighteen months and of course I turned that back over to them. Then I worked for an insurance company for about two years. Then I helped my sister-in-law. She got her an antique shop, and then she decided that she didn't want that much work, and I have been doing it ever since..

FORSYTHE: How did integration affect the schools?

HARRIS: I guess I have to be careful in saying this ,but when I transferred to Antioch they had 1-12 and that is when they started the blacks in the lower grades. Then when they began to force integration in all grades, the whole picture changed. It seemed like the blacks and whites were getting along fine till that happened. That just seemed to separate the whole thing. There was more trouble.. That is when busing started.

FORSYTHE: What other things affected education?

HARRIS: When we started team teaching. You would have one teacher teaching math and science and so forth. After that when they started open class instruction and they wanted me to have several sections of large groups, I didn't want to do it. At that time they were doing Apollo Junior High School, and it was all open class instruction. Then I didn't particularly like, the government furnished the money to experiment with that type of program, and after the money ran out, the program faded out.

FORSYTHE: What is open class instruction?

HARRIS: You put all of one grade in one big building to teach them and have movies and so forth. My objection was that instead of teaching the fundamentals of math and science they didn't do it. Then they would come to high school, and I would try to put them in second year math. They couldn't do it, because they didn't have the background in it.

FORSYTHE: What else affected education?

HARRIS: If they had expanded the area for blacks and whites to mix without forcing it all the time, it would have been much better.

FORSYTHE: What about in the '60's, how did that effect schools.

HARRIS: I don't think it helped schools at all, I think it kind of lowered the standards of the schools. When I was at Antioch, we didn't let them take everything they wanted. We had the basic courses and they had to stay all day. Now it has become a problem because they let students take two or three courses and work half the day, they didn't have the school at heart.

FORSYTHE: Thank you very much.