

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
ROLLIE HOLDEN

29 AUGUST 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.078

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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ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
ROLLIE HOLDEN**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.078

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q. M. Smith Collection designated as QMS.1995.78. This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Mr. Rollie Holden. Today is Tuesday, August 29, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mr. Holden located at 129 Park Circle, Murfreesboro, 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. Holden?

HOLDEN: Yes.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

HOLDEN: Rollie Marvin Holden

FORSYTHE: What is birthday and place of birth?

HOLDEN: May 17, 1909, Overall, Tennessee.

FORSYTHE: Is that in this county?

HOLDEN: Yes. I went to school in Rockvale, but the post office address is Overall. I went to church at Rockvale and to school at Rockvale. It is between here and Rockvale.

FORSYTHE: What is your father's name?

HOLDEN: Thomas Franklin Holden, he was a farmer and a merchant.

FORSYTHE: Your mother's name and occupation?

HOLDEN: Frances Hollowell Holden, she was a homemaker.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

HOLDEN: Yes I have four brothers, Herbert, Horace, Thomas, and Cecil.

FORSYTHE: What is your wife's name?

HOLDEN: Katherine Butler Holden, she is a bookkeeper for Holden Hardware.

FORSYTHE: Your children's names?

HOLDEN: Well, Aurelia Holden, Elizabeth Jennings, and Leslie O'Brien, and Rollie Holden Jr.

FORSYTHE: Did anyone else in your family go to MTSU?

HOLDEN: I had one brother, Thomas, that graduated there, then all of my children graduated from MTSU.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose to go to MTSU?

HOLDEN: It was in the midst of the depression and I did well to go anywhere. If I had a desire to go anywhere else, I wouldn't have had the money to go.

FORSYTHE: You were telling me earlier what schools you went to.

HOLDEN: I graduated from Rockvale High School in 1929, and from MTSU in 1933, then from '33 to '37 I taught school in Smyrna and was athletic coach. From '37 to '42 I was coach and athletic director at Forrest High School in Chapel Hill. In 1942 I joined forces with Uncle Sam, and spent three years in the army, over seas duty in Africa and Italy, and was discharged in 1945. In '46 I traveled for Wilson Sporting Goods company. Then in '48 my brother Horace and I opened Holden Hardware on the square in Murfreesboro, in the same location that it is now.

FORSYTHE: You skipped over being a councilman.

HOLDEN: I was city councilman for eight years. I was a member of the Tennessee Legislature. In '47 I was a member of the state legislature. I was in the legislature when the sales tax was passed.

FORSYTHE: Can you tell me about the sales tax act?

HOLDEN: Well, it had a great effect on MTSU and all of Tennessee for that matter. When it was passed it was a two cents sales tax, and of course it was opposed by everybody practically, except the school teachers and a few other people. But when they decided the breakdown would be seventy percent for education and the other thirty percent to general funds, they decided to go along with it. Even though we had some opposition in the county, having MTSU here and the impact that it would have on it, I had no problems being for it. Being a school teacher myself, I was for it. All I needed was the backing of the community to put the sales tax in. Another thing that I did when I was in the legislature that I have always been proud of, we were one of the first counties in the state to have a general sessions court. Before we had a general session, justice for misdemeanors

was issued by the county magistrates. They were elected from the outlying areas of Rutherford County. It was a fee system. If somebody was arrested and the magistrate turned them loose, the officer didn't get a fee and the magistrate didn't get a fee. That was very unsatisfactory to me. I had seen some instances where I thought that it was being misused. I guess the biggest thing that I did while I was in the legislature, the thing I am most proud of, was the changing of the magistrate court to a general sessions court. There you would have a man that is paid so much a month and he is trained, is legal authority, and his decision didn't depend on the amount of money he was going to get out of it; so he could be fair. To mention some of the bad things that happened in the fee system, it got so bad that officers would get in the car with a magistrate and ride around the streets of Murfreesboro on a Saturday night. If they saw anybody that looked like they had a drink, even though he wasn't bothering anybody, they would arrest him on the spot and fine him. He would come to that magistrate and pay two dollars a week until he paid his fine off. It was also legal for him to have witnesses. So the magistrate could put down two witnesses and collect for them, when there were no witnesses. The man had pleaded guilty, he didn't need a trial; but still he got that money; and in case he didn't have it, the county paid it. That and several other things were about enough for one term.

FORSYTHE: There was something about the Sewart Air Force Base that you did something to help with that?

HOLDEN: Well, when they started to mention the thing about the air base closing, we thought if the base closed things would get bad. I was chairman of the Chamber of Commerce at that time, so a group of us went to Washington to see the senator and representatives up there. We think we got it delayed for a little while, but then when we did lose it we found out that we were better off without it, because look what has happened at Sewart Air Force Base now. So it wasn't as big a deterrent to us as we thought it would be. I guess one of the things that I am proud of as a businessman in Murfreesboro, I was elected to the Chamber of Commerce. We didn't have any industry in Murfreesboro. About the only thing we had that hired people was the University, and we had a Tennessee College where the middle school is now. We had three creameries, the Carnation Milk Company, and Rutherford Cooperative Creamery, and Wilson's Produce Company. We had a hosiery mill, which is where the First Tennessee Bank is now. Then we had the Sally Ann Baking Company which hired people and distributed bread; but outside of that we didn't have anything. When I was elected to city council, everybody said that we needed industry, so we began to think about that. The next year when I became the president of the Chamber of Commerce. we had a meeting of all the businessmen around town. We wanted to know what can we do to get industry. It was our conception, at that time, that if you wanted industry you had to buy it, you had to offer them compensation. At this meeting the merchants around said, "I will give this much money" and so on. We had another meeting after that to sort of bring our thoughts together. Ellis Gray, who was a former member of the city council, mentioned that somebody

came through Murfreesboro that had a factory here, and this industry hired men. It was a stainless steel industry that would pay better than ordinary. So, we looked in the files of the Chamber of Commerce and found it was Schwartzbaugh Manufacturing Company. We got in touch with Mr. Charley Schwartzbaugh and he and his son John came here. That was the first factory. Then after that the next big one would be State Farm. Jack McFarland had a friend who was the head of all the outside operations named Dick Stockton and he had spent some time here during maneuvers. He and his wife lived in town, and he and Jack became friends. When Jack found out that they opened up a branch office in Nashville, he got in touch with Dick Stockton and said, "Why don't you come to Murfreesboro?" Dick said, "I never thought anything about it, I didn't know that you all were interested." Well he made the statement, "You all are in Nashville where you have the insurance companies down there and you are just a little fish in a big pond." Dick Stockton said, "You get your people together, and I will see if I can arrange it." So the whole community got together and made this pitch for them to come, and they came. That seemed to open up everything. After that GE came and Chromalox. It was a matter of them knowing that they were welcome. We didn't give them anything. I know another thing I want to give the Commerce Union Bank credit for. Before Schwartzbaugh came, we had another manufacturing company in here, Lux Clock Company. They came here and Eddie Seddon who was the unpaid secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, he and I and other members of the community met with Mr. Lux and his son. We thought we had things worked out with them. After they left we read in the "Tennessean" where they were going to Lebanon. So we got busy then, and Sam Lassiter made an appointment with us to go to the Commerce Union Bank and see what we can do, why they got in place of us. We found out they used the bond route, and we didn't know anything about bonds at that time. They told us down at the Commerce Union Bank, that if we got a good tenant to let them know about it, and they would check on them, and they would sell the bonds. So when Swartzbaugh came here that is the route we went. We went to the Commerce Union Bank and they made arrangements to sell the bonds That is what we used.

FORSYTHE: When you were a councilman, what projects were you involved in then?

HOLDEN: We built the old city hall on East Main Street, right across from the First National Bank. The building is now owned by the First Baptist Church. That was our headquarters for the Chamber of Commerce. It was originally the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and we met there and had our chamber downstairs. We built the one on Broad Street and that was one of the high points. During that time, the general growth of Murfreesboro happened. I happened to be there at just the right time. The people of Murfreesboro wanted industry. You can see what is happening. We have grown so fast that I am sort of wondering if we should put the brakes on it, because we are running out of money. We can't build schools fast enough to take care of the population. One of these days we are going to run out and not have any. I wish it had strung out over a long period.

FORSYTHE: When did you start going back to MTSU?

HOLDEN: 1929, I graduated in '33. My major was history, and economics. I lettered three years in basketball.

FORSYTHE: How did you get on the team?

HOLDEN: I was tall, not that I was good, I was just tall.

FORSYTHE: Who was the coach?

HOLDEN: Mr. Faulkinberry.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about him.

HOLDEN: He was a likable sort of fellow, but he was stern and he demanded respect. He did a good job, everybody speaks well about him.

FORSYTHE: What was your minor?

HOLDEN: I guess economics.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose those two fields?

HOLDEN: Well, when I first went there I wanted to be an agriculture agent, and they had a pretty good agriculture program there at one time. Mr. Knox Hutchinson and B. B. Gracy were the agriculture teachers. The year before I went there, business got so bad that they did away with most of the agriculture program to where they had just a few courses. They just didn't have a major in agriculture any more, so then I went to history as a second choice.

FORSYTHE: Did you live on campus?

HOLDEN: I lived on campus two years, one year was when I roomed with Albert Gore. My freshman year I commuted from home, then another year Grady McLoughlin. The year after, the crow's nest [on top of KOM], Grady and I rented what we called the "white house." It's the big white house across from the campus on, I forget the name of the street; but as you look out the Memorial gym, you look down the short street about two blocks there. You will see a big white house.

FORSYTHE: Is it near the funeral home?

HOLDEN: No, it's back this side, it's right across from the gymnasium. Not the Murphy Center but the gymnasium on the side of that. If you look there is a street that goes down, it is a dead end street, a big white house. It was built to take care of girls, and Mr. McCrary who built the house had a misfortune and his wife died the

first year. Of course he wanted to rent it out, it had sixteen rooms. I went to Mr. Lyon who was the President at that time. Mr. Lyon wanted to turn Jones Hall over to women anyway, so he was glad to let us go down there. We took those sixteen rooms and we had two and three in every room. We stacked them up down there and we called it the White House. That was one year. That takes care of all of them.

FORSYTHE: What did students do for fun?

HOLDEN: Well we didn't have any money, so we couldn't get into any trouble. I guess we used to play a lot of bridge. Of course back in those days you didn't have to have the things you have now. All the girls had to be in the dormitory by 6:00 at night, so you didn't do much dating.

FORSYTHE: What did you do on the weekends?

HOLDEN: Most people went home. Sometimes I would go home and sometimes I would just stay around town, but I would say that there wasn't anything going on in the weekends. They used to have a little place across Tennessee Boulevard called the Rosary. The Rosary is the second house past the main gate, the old entrance to the college, the second house at that time was not built. It was just sort of a log shed called the Rosary, and that is where everybody went for sandwiches and cold drinks. In fact, I worked there quite a bit in the afternoon and at night. That is where most of the loafing was done. When six o'clock came the girls had to go to the dormitory, then everybody went their way.

FORSYTHE: What other jobs did you have?

HOLDEN: I took the census one year. Then in the summertime, I had a brother who had a filling station here. I worked in the filling station, practically all summer.

FORSYTHE: Where was the filling station?

HOLDEN: It was on College Street where the Middle Tennessee Electric headquarters is now, on that corner.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about being on the Sidelines?

HOLDEN: Well, I enjoyed getting out and seeing people. When I was in grammar school, we moved from the farm up to Rockvale, and I worked in a little grocery store up there. It was owned by a Mr. Ben Stegall, Chancelor Whitney Stegall's father. He gave me my first job, and I worked there one summer in the grocery store. I was in either the seventh or eighth grade. Then after that, during my years in high school, the store down in Rockvale, I worked for a man down there. I would help put up stock. When I was a senior in Rockvale, my family moved back to the farm and started farming again. I was just used to waiting on people and doing

things. I don't know how she got the idea that I would make a good business manager, but I think maybe somebody knew me and knew that I had been working odd jobs around. So when Miss Ordway wrote me that letter I went in to talk to her and she told me about Ed Bell. I had never met him. He was a very smart person but very opinionated. As you can tell from this here, he was a rebel as we would call him now; but he was smart. We just hit it off very well. He liked his job as editor, and I liked my job as business manager. I enjoyed going downtown and selling ads to the merchants. That is what my job was, just selling ads. I did that for three years. Then the last year, Mr. Lyon didn't want to have a yearbook at all because of the economic conditions. We got him to let us have this scaled down one here, which didn't cost him much money.

FORSYTHE: This is 1933.

HOLDEN: Right in the midst of the depression.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about Ed Bell's devil's workshop.

HOLDEN: Well Ed was getting a little flack from some of his articles in the Sidelines. He was getting a little bit too critical. We had some teachers on the faculty that Ed didn't particularly like. Some of his writings showed his contempt for them, and of course they called him in on that. Then he sort of took off on them. He had this article that was critical of Mr. Lyon. Now he would be able to do that, but back then he couldn't, so they booted him out.

FORSYTHE: He only did one copy of the devil's workshop?

HOLDEN: He had some articles but the one I always kept is the one that got him shipped.

FORSYTHE: What did he do after school?

HOLDEN: He went to work at a newspaper and then a printing company. He wrote a couple of books too. But Ed was a very smart person. He died with a cerebral hemorrhage. He was an editor of the Courier printing company at that time. It is now in Smyrna but at that time it was published in Murfreesboro and covered the whole county.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about some of the faculty, what about Dr. Sims?

HOLDEN: Dr. Sims was one of my favorite people. When I was elected to the legislature, I wanted to introduce a general sessions court bill. I went to Dr. Sims and asked him if he would lead a group in Murfreesboro composed of the different associations and organizations in town and let them get their members together and see if they wanted a general sessions court. For instance the Kiwanis club voted whether they wanted a general sessions court, the League of Women Voters, or the VFW's, the churches. He got all of those organized. It came back

and everyone was in favor of it except the county court. Some of the members didn't want to give up that job they had. But that didn't faze me because I knew not too many other people didn't want it. Just those people that made a living on Friday and Saturday night that stayed with the officers all night arresting people, because that was when the poorer people got drunk. They picked up even though they weren't disturbing anything.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about Dr. Golightly?

HOLDEN: I enjoyed his classes but I guess he was a little bit ahead of his time. He was one of those people that was sort of flighty. He was a wonderful person and everybody liked him. I would say he was a little flighty in his opinions, from my standpoint at that time.

FORSYTHE: George Davis.

HOLDEN: A lot of people laugh about Mr. Davis. He was very diplomatic in what he thought. I remember one story that they were out on a field trip and there was a cedar tree. He asked one of the boys to name it and the boy said it was a Christmas tree. Mr. Davis flunked him.

FORSYTHE: Neil Frazier.

HOLDEN: He was a fine person and a very dedicated person.

FORSYTHE: Anne Ordway.

HOLDEN: I loved her. She was a great person, very intellectual. She always wore a big, long string of beads. She would roll those beads, pull on one side and push on the other, while she was lecturing.

FORSYTHE: Philip Mankin.

HOLDEN: I never had a class with him. His characteristics were a little different than what most people were. Some people liked him and some didn't, but he was a brilliant man. He went on to teach at Vanderbilt, so he was very smart. Maybe just a little ahead of his time, maybe his mannerisms now would not be looked on with suspicion as they were back in those days.

FORSYTHE: Knox Hutchinson.

HOLDEN: He was very nice to me. He gave me two or three jobs. When he lived there he lived in a house that was in front of the barn, where the new health building has been built. He lived there and ran the farm back there. He always had jobs to do around the farm. He always gave me jobs to do, so I always thought a lot of Mr. Hutchinson.

FORSYTHE: Ollie Green.

HOLDEN: I never had any geography under her, but they say she was a good teacher. She was strict.

FORSYTHE: Tommie Reynolds.

HOLDEN: I don't remember having anything under her.

FORSYTHE: Catherine Monohan.

HOLDEN: I was afraid of her from the time we got there. Mrs. Monohan was very opinionated. The story goes about her that she saw a boy going down the hall holding hands with a girl. She just went up to them and told them that kind of display wouldn't be had.

FORSYTHE: Dorothy Bachtel.

HOLDEN: She was in biology. I had some biology under her, but I had a little help. Grady McLaughlin, the boy I told you about, was her assistant, so I had a little help.

FORSYTHE: Betty Murphy.

HOLDEN: She was the librarian. I didn't spend much time at the library.

FORSYTHE: Clark Woodward.

HOLDEN: I didn't do any shopwork, but he was one of the outstanding teachers in the country in his work. He was good. He had students all over. He taught shop and woodwork.

FORSYTHE: J. H. Bayer.

HOLDEN: He was a wonderful person. We all liked him. A story on Mr. Bayer. Charlie Kerr's brother, Bob Kerr, was lounging around the cafeteria one day about noontime where everybody loafed. Mr. Bayer came by and saw Bob sitting under the shade tree. He said, "Bob you have been over here for three years and I have never seen you with a book in your hand yet." Bob Kerr said "That ain't nothing. For all those three years, I have never seen you with a hoe in your hand."

FORSYTHE: Bonnie McHenry.

HOLDEN: She was a fixture in the president's office, and I always felt very close to her. From that time on she was a very close friend of my brother Horace. She and her husband and my brother and sister-in-law were close friends thorough the years. I

kept up with Bonnie as long as she lived. She was a very fine person. She was secretary for everybody there from Mr. Jones on through P. A. Lyon. I don't know when she retired. I think she was there when Cope was there.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about President Lyon?

HOLDEN: President Lyon was one of the most dignified and personable people that you would want to meet. He always carried himself well. He was the best extemporaneous speaker that I have ever heard. In his chapel remarks, if he wanted to bring up a subject that he thought needed tending to, he had a way of going around and coming back to it. When he got to it, you knew exactly what he was talking about, but he had made the picture before he got to the point that he was trying to make. I always marveled about him. He was a good individual. Unfortunately for him he didn't have a college degree. That was finally his downfall. They passed a regulation that all presidents of state colleges had to have a degree. It wasn't that he wasn't capable of running the college, he just didn't have the background.

FORSYTHE: I want to ask you about being president of the Blue Raider Club.

HOLDEN: Kenneth Ezell, Henry King Butler, and myself, right after World War II got the idea that we ought to have some sort of club to help support athletics. Bubber Murphy came along about that time. We had a meeting or two and decided to organize the Blue Raider Club, so that is how it started. Kenneth Ezell was the first president, and Henry King Butler was the second president, and I was the third. You know what it has done for the college now.

FORSYTHE: I want to talk to you about your roommate now. Tell me about Albert Gore.

HOLDEN: Well let's see. Albert was a student who had his mind made up then that he was going to do bigger things. He had been to the University of Tennessee two years and I am sure because of financial reasons had to drop out. He taught school in one of the grammar schools in Smith county, then he came to Murfreesboro. He and I were roommates in Jones Hall. I was not a good student, but he was. He was always reading letters, he got a lot of mail. He was always reading and writing letters. I asked him one night, "Albert," I was going somewhere, "come on and go with me." He said, "I can't, I have got some letters to write." I said, "Why do you want to write those letters all the time?" He said, "These letters are from kids that I taught in grammar school, and I am going to run for county superintendent next year. I expect all of those kids to get their mothers and fathers to vote for me." Well the present superintendent of schools in Smith County had been there for thirty-four years. He was well thought of, but Albert thought it was time for him to move on. He was going to run against him, which he did, and he lost by thirty or forty votes. During the time the old man died and the county court elected Albert to take his place. Then from there, he went on to

be senator. Gordon Browning gave him the job as Secretary of Labor. He picked him up and gave him his first big break.

FORSYTHE: You told me you were his campaign manager?

HOLDEN: Yes, when he ran for the senate. That was sometime after World War II. He and Alvis Huddleston had worked together when he ran for representative. Alvis came to me, when he got ready to run for senate and wanted me help him with Albert's campaign, which I did. From then on, he and I ran the campaigns as long as he ran.

FORSYTHE: Was he a serious student?

HOLDEN: Yes. One incident that some people may remember, back in those days, none of us boys wore pajamas, but Albert. Albert wore pajamas. One day he missed his pajamas, and somebody had gotten them out of the room and taken them up on the flag pole. They were flying in front of Old Main on a flag pole. But Albert was always pushing, he wanted to do better things.

FORSYTHE: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

HOLDEN: I always enjoyed my years at MTSU, I feel very good about going there. I am glad that my children all went there. One of them went to UT and got a degree but she came back here and got a masters back here. I am just happy to say that I am an alumnus of this institution, and down through the years, I don't know of anybody that has done any better than what we have been able to do. Dr. Walker is outstanding, we are very delighted with Dr. Walker. He is the right man for the right job at the right time.

FORSYTHE: Thank you.