

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
WITH  
ROBERT CORLEW

5 SEPTEMBER 1995  
MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE  
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
INTERVIEW #QMS.085

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

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

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MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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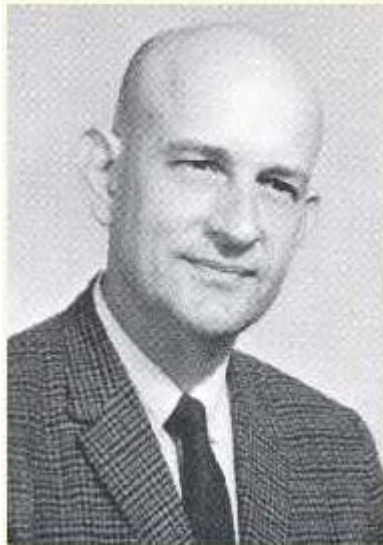
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# ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH**  
**ROBERT CORLEW**  
Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
INTERVIEW #QMS.085

FORSYTHE: This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Robert Corlew. Today is Tuesday, September 5, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the Gore Research Center, Room 111 of the Ned McWherter Learning Resource Center. 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, Dr. Corlew?

CORLEW: Yes.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

CORLEW: Robert E. Corlew.

FORSYTHE: Your birth date and place of birth?

CORLEW: March 24, 1922, Charlotte, Tennessee.

FORSYTHE: Your father's name?

CORLEW: Robert E.

FORSYTHE: His occupation?

CORLEW: He was a lawyer.

FORSYTHE: Your mother's name?

CORLEW: Mary Ann Laach.

FORSYTHE: What was her occupation?

CORLEW: She was a housewife and a music teacher.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

CORLEW: Two sisters, Sarah Matlock and Elizabeth XXX.

FORSYTHE What is your wife's name?

CORLEW: Mary Saille Scott Corlew.

FORSYTHE: What is her occupation?

CORLEW: Housewife.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any children?

CORLEW: Three. Robert E. III—he is chancellor of the 16<sup>th</sup> judicial district—then Daniel Scott—he is a local surgeon—and Mary Catherine—she is a schoolteacher at Riverdale.

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

CORLEW: No.

FORSYTHE: Did anyone else teach here?

CORLEW: Bob is an adjunct here. He teaches English and Law.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose to come to MTSU?

CORLEW: Well, the job was available. I had taught briefly at Bethel College. I went back to Vanderbilt and finished with a masters, and while there I met the son of the dean at that time, Dean Beasley—his son was Bill Beasley—and he told me about a job here, and I came down and interviewed and got a job in 1949.

FORSYTHE: Who did you interview with?

CORLEW: Well, I came first to Dr. Carl Sims, who was head of the social science department. Dr. Sims didn't have anything to do with the hiring, so he took me to Beasley and Beasley on across to Q. M. Smith. Mr. Smith made the decisions all the way around as to who would be hired, so you had to interview with Mr. Smith before you could get a job, so Mr. Smith hired me.

FORSYTHE: Do you remember anything about that interview?

CORLEW: Yes, I remember it very well. He said, "You are from Nashville?" and I said yes. He said, "Did you go to Peabody?" I said I went to Vanderbilt, and he said, "Well, we will talk to you. If you were from Peabody, we wouldn't talk to you; we have to many Peabody people around here now." So I went on to Beasley, and he had known my father, but he took me on across to Mr. Smith, and as you have picked up from other places, Mr. Smith had a difficulty in speaking, and it

was very hard to understand Mr. Smith, but I understood him as best I could, and he certainly wasn't embarrassed by his speech impediment, and so I talked to Mr. Smith and found out that Mr. Smith was from the county adjoining me. He was Humphreys County, and I was from Dickson County, so he also had know my father. I would like to think that I was hired on my academic credentials, but it was because the fellows knew my folks, I expect helped me some.

FORSYTHE: You came in '49. What were you hired to do?

CORLEW: They had at that time what they called the social science department. Within the social department, there was history and political science and geography and economics, so I taught geography and history for the first year. I was primarily a historian and hadn't had much by the way of geography, so after the first year Dr. Sims transferred me to history entirely and was much happier in that capacity, but I taught Western Civilization and American History, then later on I taught some advanced courses, but then I just taught those courses. I was here for a few years, then I went away for two years to the University of Alabama to work on a Doctor's degree, so I was back then in '53. By that time the school had changed a bit. Dr. Sims had decided to retire, so when I came back, he had retired, and Mr. Smith had hired another department head in his place, so we had a little bit of an adjustment to make, but for the most part, the faculty was pretty much the same as when I had first come here, about the same as when I got back from working on my doctorate.

FORSYTHE: What positions have you held?

CORLEW: Well, I was hired as an instructor and then I went on up through the ranks. Of course if you stay long enough and give good service, you are promoted to assistant professor then to associate then to full professor. 1963—a new president was in at that time, Mr. Smith had retired in '58, I guess, and Quill Cope, who had been commissioner of education under Frank Clement, was president—and in 1963 he decided to reorganize the school, and he created some new departments. He took history out of the social science department and made it a separate department. He did that with all of those disciplines within another year or so, but history was the first department to be created from the social science department, and Dr. Cope appointed me as chairman of the department in '63. Chairman of the department is a pretty hard job. It is very time consuming—sometimes we say it is labor intensive—and I intended to stay in that for a short time, but the years went on, and I was department head for fifteen years. About that time in 1978, the dean of the school of liberal arts, Dr. Tucker, retired—that was another of Dr. Cope's reorganization plans was to create separate schools with a dean over each—so he had appointed Dr. Tucker as the first Dean of Liberal Arts. Dr. Tucker retired in '78, and by that time Cope had retired and Dr. Scarlett had come in, so in '78 I became Dean of Liberal Arts and held that position seven years. Then six years later, in '84, I became vice president of academic affairs, and I held

that position until 1990. I have been here a long time—about forty years—but the campus is very familiar to me.

FORSYTHE: Where was your first office?

CORLEW: We were in the old administration building, which is now known as Kirksey Old Main. I was on the second floor, and we shared that office with Dr. Sims and Strickland and several other faculty members. It was satisfactory. Things in those days were much more primitive than they are now. I didn't think about it at the time, but we were very crowded on that third floor. There was a social science and English and the education department all there, then they grew that. They had to spread out and build more buildings as the years passed, but I don't remember what the enrollment was when I came in 1949, but it was relatively small, less than two thousand. But it was so small that you knew all of the faculty and a great many of the students you knew—they would meet you on campus and you would know them by name. The school grew very rapidly after that.

FORSYTHE: Can you tell me where all your offices were?

CORLEW: After the history department was organized—which was '63 and I was named head of it—we moved over to what we called the speech building. I am not sure what we call that now. But anyway, speech and theater, I believe it was named for Dr. Boutwell. I was there for something like ten years, then we moved over to the building that is named for Dick and Virginia Peck, which for many years we called the New Class room Building, so I was there for several years as department head. Then the Dean of Liberal Arts also had an office in that building, and when I became dean, I just stayed on the same floor and moved around the corner and stayed on in that building. When I became vice president, I moved over to the Cope Administration Building, and I was there when I retired.

FORSYTHE: How had the history department changed?

CORLEW: Considerable growth. I don't know how many people they have now. I expect the history department—at that time they had nine—and people taught a variety of subjects. Shortly after I became head, I tried to develop great specialization. In other words, I would say, "Here is Dr. Strickland, who is a Europeanist, here is Dr. Windham, who was interested in sectionalism, and Dr. Moore who was interested in recent United States history." I tried to restrict them to those areas, and when we would hire somebody new, we would say, "We need a person in colonial American history," or "We need a person in Asian history," or something like that, so in that way the department changed quite rapidly as specific fields began to be utilized. I tried to diversify the faculty. When I became department head, we had the women faculty, and I hired two women within a very few years after I became head. Back in the forties and early fifties, there were no blacks at all teaching, no Afro-Americans, so by 1963, the Topeka case had been adjudicated, and we were supposed to be integrating, but we were integrating very

slowly. But anyway, by the early sixties there were blacks who were enrolled, and so during the later sixties, I hired the first black instructor, a very able young man without any experience, Lee Williams, who had just taken a master's degree from East Tennessee State, but once he had been with us for a few years, he wanted to work on his doctorate, and he left us and went to the University of Georgia, and he is now head of the department at the University of Alabama, Huntsville. I kept a African-American after that all the time, so they usually didn't stay with us too long. We had young people, and they wanted to go back and get their doctorate. Another after Lee Williams was Revis Mitchell, and Mitchell stayed with us five years then he went to get his doctorate, then after that he went to Fisk, and he is vice president of academic affairs at Fisk. So most of the minority people that we have hired have been very successful; they have gone on to other jobs, so that is another change that I made while I was chairman. All the time we were attempting to upgrade the faculty. The faculty that we had was very satisfactory, but when a job would open, I would try to find someone with good training and a very strong degree. The tendency had been to hire people mainly from Peabody—a good institution—but they emphasized professional education. I tried to get people from other areas. The department now has a couple of Harvard professors, people with Harvard degrees, and one from Yale and so forth, so it is widely diversified, so in a number of ways, the department has made many changes. Teaching techniques have changed considerably. With the use of the computer and a variety of technical operations, we have improved upon teaching. Of course, nothing can beat the old personal touch. I think the classes are bigger now, and that requires more technology. When I first came, the classes were smaller. I remember having classes of fifteen people or less—beginning courses would be larger, thirty or forty—but we tried to keep the pupil ratio down but have not been to successful because of the cost of education is quite high.

FORSYTHE: Can you tell me more about integration on this campus?

CORLEW: I guess it was the early sixties that blacks began to enroll here, always in very small numbers. I remember 1962 was the first time I had an Afro-American in my class. I remember the first class that I had a an African-American, I also had the governor's daughter—Governor Ellington's daughter—and I thought I had a rather different class, one a minority and one the governor's daughter. Anyway, integration has come very peacefully here, and it was a great change for both blacks and whites, and in some areas integration was accomplished with great difficulty. In some other Southern states had great difficulty—Arkansas and Mississippi for example, problems in South Carolina—but I don't remember demonstrations or violence of that sort. I think has been accomplished very peacefully and satisfactory. We have tried in recent years to get 10% minority, and I think Cliff Gillespie tells me that we are about there or maybe a little higher, but we are about meeting the demands for the requirements of the Federal Courts.

FORSYTHE: You talked about hiring women?



CORLEW: Yes, I hired two women faculty. Of course, there were women faculty in other departments—not many, and no women department heads. There were two women in English, and there were several in education because women usually enter the elementary fields in larger numbers than men do. But in the history department we had only nine males, but shortly thereafter we hired Dr. Thelma Jennings, then Patricia Scharba. They both stayed with us 'til retirement.

FORSYTHE: Did it cause a problem hiring women?

CORLEW: No, I don't think so; in some areas it might get the men a little disturbed, but I don't remember the historians getting upset. As long as people are competent you don't get much criticism. There were those who would suggest other people but we hired these people, and the women have always proved to be very satisfactory.

FORSYTHE: Let me ask you about the presidents you have worked under. What do you remember about Q. M. Smith?

CORLEW: Well, Mr. Smith was a very capable person, tall and handsome, and he was a rural person—came from the back woods of Humphreys County—but he was a polished person. He had read widely, and he got along very well with people. He was very dictatorial—maybe that word is a little too harsh—but he ran the school sort of like a high school principal would, but if one got along with Mr. Smith, he or she got along fine. Mr. Smith was the type of person who was always on the job. You could count on him being in the office, and whatever job he held—he came from Tennessee Tech—he dedicated himself to it. Back in those days, the president would have to go to the legislature and talk to legislators about appropriating money. Now we have the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Board of Regents, but back then all we had was the State Board of Education, and of course, the legislature would appropriate the money, so Mr. Smith would have to go up and talk to the legislators, and he would have a few friends who would push them out of following, but he would say we need a new classroom building, and so we need to expand, or we need a library facility, and Mr. Smith was as good as any of the presidents in selling himself or the school to the legislature. Mr. Smith, as I say, reached about 65 in about 1958, and Quill Cope replaced Mr. Smith. I think Mr. Smith was in good health—he could have stayed a little longer—but Frank Clement was governor at that time, and he wanted to find a position for his commissioner of education, and he was going out of office at that time. Dr. Cope was interested in it, and he was a country boy too—he came from Sparta—and he had been to New York University and gotten a doctor's degree, so he was appointed to replace Mr. Smith in '58. He served for ten years until '68. He had a chance to go to the University of Tennessee as full professor there. He had been here ten years—I don't think anyone was asking him to leave—but he thought he needed to make a change. He went over to the University of Tennessee and died while professor over there, very shortly after that. His widow moved back to Murfreesboro and still lives here. But Cope was

a strong person. I don't think he was as polished as Q. M. and maybe didn't deal with people quite as well as Q. M. did, but he was very conscientious, and you never heard of him not being in the office. Both Smith and Cope operated under the open door policy; if you didn't like your dean, you could go in and tell him about it. Mr. Cope also was very interested in moving the school along, and he did a good job in getting money from the legislature and in organizing the school in a little different way and upgrading it. I think Quill Cope would listen to people pretty well. Really the brains behind all this reorganization was Howard Kirksey, who was Dean under both Smith and Cope, and so almost whatever Kirksey would propose, Cope would accept, so some reorganization took place, so when Cope left he had things in good shape. He was then replaced by Dr. Scarlett, and Scarlett was the first president who came from outside. Always in the past they had hired some local person, but Scarlett came in from outside, and he had a little difficulty adjusting. He didn't know the people. He came as the school year had begun, but Dr. Scarlett was a person who devoted himself to the job. He had an office in his home, so often he wasn't in his office on campus. I don't know why he did that; that got some criticism. Of course if you are going to be president, you have to win some football games [he says facetiously]. He hired as coach one of his old friends who couldn't win. The only year that coach was here we won one game and lost nine, so a lot of people didn't think Scarlett didn't know anything about higher education because he couldn't win football games. Of course, basketball we have never done too well. There was a lot of criticism of Dr. Scarlett, but I thought he did a good job. He was a very quiet mannered person, but he stayed on the job, and after ten years then he went to Memphis state and taught for a while, then he moved back to Murfreesboro. So Ingram was the next president after Dr. Scarlett and stayed on until about '89. He was a very pleasant type person, he was not a scholar, but he got along with people extremely well. He could get along with the legislature; he was higher successful. He was conservative in his expenditures of funds, and I think that is what you want of any public servant, I remember somebody said Dr. Ingram spends the states money just like it was his own. I think that is a very high compliment; lots of people throw it away and waste a lot of taxpayers money. I think higher education spends far too much money now on a great variety of things. One thing that we haven't spent money on is a new library, which we need very badly, but we spend too much money in higher education, and the tax payers are not going to put up with it too much longer. But anyway, Dr. Ingram was president for eleven years. He always urged faculty on to better things and better quality work. Ingram was the type who would visit around on campus when he had time. You as a teacher might look up and there might be Ingram sitting in your class there, or he would pop up in your office, so [he was] a person who knew a great many faculty members who knew them all by name. So then I was vice president under Ingram, and Ingram retired and the state brought in an interim president for one year, and I stayed through half of the year with Dr. Prescott. When he heard I was retiring, he urged me to stay on with him until he left, but I had other plans, so I went on and retired. But Prescott was also a very agreeable person. He was getting up into his early seventies—he had a career at Tennessee Tech, he had

been vice president of Academic Affairs—I never understood why the commission sent him down here for that brief period of time. I think the commissioner knew him and asked him to come down for a year. He and his wife came down; I thought he would just stay in Cookville and drive back and forth each day, but he actually moved to Murfreesboro and lived in the President's Home for a year. So that rounds out all the presidents; the present president was hired after I left.

FORSYTHE: Let me ask you about some of the faculty members who were here.

CORLEW: Well, faculty members usually come and go pretty quickly; not many of them stay on as long as some. Dr. Moore for example who retired in July of this year. Dr. Moore was here for almost forty one years, Gerald Parchment was here for about forty one years, but for the most part faculty member come and go. Of the faculty members who were here when I came, all have died by now. I can't remember any faculty member who was living when I came here who is still living. As I say that, I remember Ellis Rucker and also Eldred Wiser, who was head of the Science and Chemistry department—they were here when I came here. A number of people came when I came. The school was growing very rapidly when the Second World War was over. Among those who came in '49 was my good friend Eddie Voorhies. He was dean for some years, and he and I were closely associated on a number of matters, but other people who came at the time I came—John Scott, for example, have died, Charley Greer came—he was the basketball coach—Dean Haskew came in the sixties along with his associate Bob Jones. When I was vice-president, I tried to meet each person hired. There were so many being hired that I would meet them and then I would forget them. Of course, if you don't see them every day, it is easy to forget them. So many faculty members—I guess there are 700 now along with a number of adjunct professors and part time people—so that faculty has changed and is increasing.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about Dr. Sims.

CORLEW: He was head of the department when I came aboard. He had been here for a long time. He had been at the University of Chicago and gotten a Doctor's degree. Doctor's degree are a dime a dozen today, but back in Sims' days, not many people were doctors, and not many people were hired here. Some just had a bachelor's degree. Just like when I was in elementary school, there would be people teaching who just had a high school education, so at that time Carl Sims—I think he began teaching here in the '20s—but he had the doctor's degree from the University of Chicago, and he had also been to Cumberland University and gotten a law degree. Then also he had money, so all that gave him a great deal of prestige and confidence, and he would strut about the campus and say what ever he wanted to the dean or the president or whatever because he knew they weren't going to fire him, then he ran for elective office after he retired, so he was popular. He was well known—he had a variety of investment—so people when they saved up a little money, they would come ask Dr. Sims how to invest it, so

he was sort of the great guru here for years. He had a farm, and people would ask him what to plant. He enjoyed life; had no children; he was one of the more interesting people that we have to look back upon as faculty members. He was in demand as a speaker; he would tell a lot of jokes. His very good friend on the campus when I came here was Bob Abernathy. I am sorry that he is not living—he would make a very interesting person to interview—and incidentally talking about interviews, we had Dr. Ernest Hooper to interview Dr. Quill Cope, so we have the Quill Cope interview, and it is in the interview. Also we did a tape on a member of the first faculty, and his name was Robert H. White. He was at the time the only living person who was a member of the first faculty, and I interviewed him. That is on a typed script over in the library. You probably need it over here in your collection. Anyway, I wish we could have gotten Bob Abernathy. Bob and Dr. Sims were very good friends. They were known for their joke telling. They were both in demand for speaking. Bob didn't teach—he directed continuing education and get faculty members to teach them, and he had a variety of other tasks. He was a very pleasant person; knew a lot of people. So Sims was certainly an able person; he got along well with the students and taught some history. Also in the old social science department was Bob Martin, who taught economics, and Ed Baldwin, who taught geography, and I really don't know how long they were here. But they were two of the faculty members of the fifties and sixties. Also teaching here at the time was a woman named Ollie Green. Miss Green had taught science, then they had shifted her to geography because it was said that the head of the science department couldn't get along with her, or she couldn't get along with them. I think that is illustrative that the older faculty members could do a lot of things. But her interest was in science, and she taught chemistry and then moved on to geography, where she taught for a number of years.

FORSYTHE: What about Roscoe Strickland?

CORLEW: I hope you can get him on tape. He came the same year I came, 1949. Very well educated, he had a bachelor's degree from Duke, a Master's from Pennsylvania, and a Doctorate from North Carolina, and he would have been my first choice for department head. He taught European—mainly modern European. He stayed until 1972 when he became president of a small school in Virginia, and he stayed there until he retired. He owned property in North Carolina. Then he moved back here. His wife was a lawyer, and she set up a practice when they moved back here. He was widely respected as a scholarly type teacher. Very conscientious in developing his lectures, he never went before a class without being well prepared.

FORSYTHE: Norman Parks.

CORLEW: He came as department head in 1953, and he had been at Lipscomb and maybe at the *Nashville Tennessean* as a writer. When he came here, he was teaching at Vanderbilt and was looking for a job elsewhere, so when Sims told Smith that he

wanted to retire, Smith hired Parks. I am not sure how long he stayed here. In '63 I left his department with the historians, and he became the head of the department of political science, so he stayed on into the seventies and then retired. He did writing—not many of our faculty did writing then, but Parks was able to teach well in the classroom and also to write. I don't know of any books that he wrote, but he would write articles in magazines. He was also a very well qualified person. He read widely and was respected.

FORSYTHE: Clayton James.

CORLEW: He was here when I got here. Mr. James had grown up in the public school system. He had been principal over at Lebanon, and he had aspired to get on at universities from time to time and was taken in here—I am not sure when; I would guess right after the war. He was Dean of Students. It was not too significant a job because there were not too many students, but anyway, he was Dean of Students. Then back into the classroom, he taught sociology. He and Parks were good friends. I didn't know Mr. James too well, but since he was the first Dean of Students, I was chairman of the building naming committee at that time, I recommended that we name the student union building for Mr. James. He was a good teacher, but he was not a good scholar like Dr. Parks. He read widely, but he didn't do any writing, but he was popular with the students, and he taught in a field that was hard to teach in—sociology. And he didn't have many courses in sociology; he just read wide in the field, and then as I remember, after he became teacher, he took some courses in either the Vanderbilt or Peabody Sociology department. So Mr. James was another one of our early teacher. He reminds me of another one, Ernest Hooper, because he and James were very close friends. He grew up in Murfreesboro, went to school here, and then went to Chapel Hill and took a degree at North Carolina. He came back to Tennessee after that and taught at Lemoine, which is now Lemoine-Owens. Then he became Dean at Yankston either North or South Dakota, but he was up there and unhappy, and he kept close contact with James, and James recommended him to Parks and Dr. Cope, and he came here in about 1962, and he stayed with us until he retired. But Ernest Hooper was a very dedicated type teacher. Now to get promoted, you have to do some writing. Well, Ernest never did any writing, but he studied, and he could fit into any capacity. I would say to Dr. Hooper, “Your degree is in the Civil War, but the person who does colonial history is not going to be here this semester—could you do it?” He would say, “Give me some time to look over it, and I will.” Then we developed the historic preservation program, and Ernest Hooper taught local history in that preservation program. He was a very versatile person.

FORSYTHE: What about Eugene Sloan?

CORLEW: He is of that generation, but he is still living. Gene was our public relations person. He got out and got the stories and gave the university good publicity. He was really a working person. Public Relations was such a small area that when I

first came here, he taught also, and he taught in the social science department. He would teach Western Civilization. He might have had a course in journalism. He was the person who was extremely dedicated.