

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
RUTH SMYTHE

9 SEPTEMBER 1995
WHITE HOUSE, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.090

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

EDITORIAL NOTICE

This is a transcript of a tape-recorded interview conducted by the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University. The original recording and associated materials are archived at the center, whose collections may be accessed in person or via the web site gorecenter.mtsu.edu. After a draft of this transcript was made, the interviewer, or in some cases another qualified staff member, reviewed the draft and compared it to the tape recordings. In a few cases, the interviewee also contributed editorial corrections. This final transcript incorporates the corrections and other changes suggested by the interviewee and interviewer. The transcript follows as closely as possible the recorded interview, including the usual starts, stops, and other rough spots in typical conversation. The reader should remember that this is essentially a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written, word. Stylistic matters, such as punctuation and capitalization, follow the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition. The transcript includes bracketed notices at the end of one tape and the beginning of the next so that, if desired, the reader can find a section of tape more easily by using this transcript.

RESTRICTION

The interviewee has donated her or his copyright in this interview to the state of Tennessee through Middle Tennessee State University and has agreed that use of the recorded interview and transcript shall be governed by the director of the Albert Gore Research Center.

Researchers may read, quote from, cite, photocopy, and download this transcript without permission for purposes of research only. Publication is prohibited, however, without permission from the director of the Albert Gore Research Center.

ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
RUTH SMYTHE**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.090

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q.M. Smith Collection designated as QMS.1995.90. This is Regina Forsythe, I am interviewing Mrs. Ruth Smythe. Today is Saturday September 9, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mrs. Smythe located at 222 Portland Road, White House, Tennessee. The tape of this interview, along with the 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 all right with you, Mrs. Smythe?

SMYTHE: Yes.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

SMYTHE: Anita Ruth Jackson Smythe.

FORSYTHE: What is your birth date and birth place?

SMYTHE: April 29, 1906. Nashville, Tennessee. I lived there until I was six years old, and we moved to the country. I lived about two miles from White House. I went to a little one teacher school called, "Progress," but it was the most unprogressive thing on earth. The black board was painted boards, just a painted wall. There was one chart that had some phonics on it, but the teacher never referred to it. There was a great big map of the United States. I was close it, so I spent my time looking at the map and wondering if I would ever get to go to any of those places. Texas was such a great big state, and I wondered if I would ever go there. At play time, the teacher would let the little children go outside, while she taught the big ones. We played in the woods. We had a common water bucket. The boys would go to the next farm to get water. I had a drinking cup, though. An aluminum one. I guess I got my share of germs because I dipped water out of the bucket and to put in my sanitary cup. In the winter, I remember going skating on a pond nearby. The little girls would make play houses out of rocks and broken glass and moss. The main thing that I learned was the names of all the flowers. Anything with a bloom on it fascinated me, and I would take bouquets of golden rod, and in the spring I would give the teacher violets or pretty sourgrass blossoms, they were pink and blue, and I thought they were so pretty. When I was in the third grade, I went for a little while to White House School, and that was when I learned to spell. The teacher had us stand and spell orally. We would pronounce the word, spell the word as syllables, and "mark" the words as we called it. For instance, if a word had two vowels like "mate" the first vowel was

long and the second was silent. That is why I pronounce my name Smythe not Smith, because the "y" is the first vowel and it is long, the "e" is at the end and it is silent. After that I went to school at Fairmont, a consolidated school, there were three teachers there. I finished the eighth grade at that school. Then I went to White House High School, and I graduated there in the spring of 1925. There were only graduates, four girls, and we all became teachers. We took our own food with us. We roomed at a private home. One girl's father had a store, and she took can goods and anything we liked. The other girl lived on a farm and she took things like ham and preserves, things of that nature. My sister happened to have an electric coffee pot and a grill and I took that. So I did the cooking and the coffee making and the other girls furnished the food. Kathleen Durrett, is still living. She is 90 years old and still goes to the beauty shop, reads, we talk over the telephone quite often. She lives here in White House. The other lady was Grace Biggs, and she is deceased. The other girl was Flora Dennis, she also is deceased. Each of those girls taught for forty years. We all went to college, we all got our degrees, we all taught. I do not know whether they go their degrees at MTSU or not, but I did. We all started to college there.

FORSYTHE: This Progress School, Fairmont, and White House are all here in White House?

SMYTHE: Progress School and Fairmont are gone. The old White House School was done away with. The last school building has become the civic center, and we have a brand new high school here. The old school that I went to is not there anymore.

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

SMYTHE: Michael T. Jackson. He was a carpenter.

FORSYTHE: What was your mother's name and occupation?

SMYTHE: Sarah Margaret Cunningham Jackson. She was a house wife.

FORSYTHE: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

SMYTHE: Oh, yes. There were ten of us, and I was the youngest of ten.

FORSYTHE: What was your husband's name and occupation?

SMYTHE: Braxton Bragg Smythe. He was from Petersburg, Tennessee. He was a diesel engineer and worked overseas quite a bit.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any children?

SMYTHE: Margaret Irene Smythe Gentry, Braxton Bernerd Smythe. John Michael Smythe, he lives in Anchorage, Alaska, and Jane Caroline Smythe Parks, and she lives here in White House.

FORSYTHE: Did any of them attend MTSU?

SMYTHE: No.

FORSYTHE: Did any of your siblings attend MTSU?

SMYTHE: No.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose to attend MTSU?

SMYTHE: I just wanted to. One reason was that I did not have to pay tuition because it was a teachers college. When we went there, all we had to pay was our registration fee and for our up keep. I did not have to pay any tuition.

FORSYTHE: What did you do to register for classes?

SMYTHE: We went there and we were registered. I do not remember anything else. We had a catalog that would tell us where certain courses were given, and we would go and register with that teacher.

FORSYTHE: You said you went there in 1925?

SMYTHE: Yes, in the summer and fall term. I did not go back until 1927 due to illness. I stayed the summer term and got a better job. I went to teach at Cowen, Tennessee. I taught there one year, and the next year I taught at Tullahoma, and Coffee County, I taught three years. We got wind that the depression was coming. You know, it hit in 1929 and we were told that all the out of town teachers would be dismissed. I came back to Nashville and I was very fortunate to get a school in Davidson County. I taught there six years, and then I married. It was the Joelton School. Later on, after I married I taught there some more. I was out ten years, though. In the forties, I went back to teaching in 1947. I taught at John Early School one term and then the next year I taught at Jerry Baxter for two terms. Then my husband got a real good job in South Carolina, and we moved there. We lived there three years. He was the head, a government position there. During that time, I did substitute work at Graniteville, South Carolina. That is a little town out from Aiken, the capital of South Carolina.

FORSYTHE: What was your major when you were a student?

SMYTHE: English. I chose English because I have always loved words, reading, and words. I dislike math. I like English and history.

FORSYTHE: Did you have a job while you were going to school?

SMYTHE: No.

FORSYTHE: Did you live on campus?

SMYTHE: Yes, I lived in the dormitory, Rutledge Hall. That was in 1927. I knew Mrs. Rutledge, but it seems to me that she left while I was there. The new matron was a Miss Ray. There was a girl from Tracy City, her name was Aleen Ingram. She was a wonderful pianist, she could just play the keys off a piano. One night, after supper, we ate at the dinning hall, Aleen was playing. A bunch of us girls, there were six of us, started dancing. Boys were not allowed in the girls dormitory, except on Sunday afternoon for Vesper service. We six girls started dancing and we were having so much fun. Then the bell rang and we all had to go to our rooms. Then she called out each one of our names, and we had to go down and talk to her and explain why we were dancing. She asked me, "Why were you dancing?" I said, "Well, Aileen was playing and I love to dance. I've danced all my life and I just enjoy it." She said, "Why Ruth, I am surprised at you." I said, "Well I don't see why because I just love to dance, and have danced all my life." That was one little incident. Our room was 214, it was on the second floor. I roomed with Corneila Cantrel from Smithville, Tennessee. She was later Mrs. Cornelia Brasswell. And Lily Mae Fryer for Springfield, Tennessee. We were very fond of each other, but Lily Mae was not fond of her room mate, so she came down to our room every night to study. We had some classes together, but mostly we talked and cut up. We had single beds, Cornelia and I had a bed each, but when Lily Mae would come down, we would push our beds together and make room for her to sleep. I slept in the middle. One night the beds rolled apart and I landed on the floor. We would tease Lily Mae because she was not supposed to be in our room she was supposed to be in her own room and when the monitor came around, she would hide in the closet and pull the curtains around her face like this, "is she gone yet?" We told her that the monitor was gone, then she would come out and we would continue with whatever we were doing and some time she would spend the night with us.

FORSYTHE: Was the monitor another student?

SMYTHE: Yes, she would come around to see that every person was in her own room at ten o'clock.

FORSYTHE: Was she paid to do this?

SMYTHE: The matron appointed her to do it, I think they had a monitor on each floor.

FORSYTHE: Could you describe the room?

SMYTHE: Well, there were tow closets, the wash basin was in the center, they had to go to the shower room to take a bath, but there were no doors to the closet, we had to furnish curtains, material, and I believe that summer there were so many students there that there was another girl that stayed with us, her name was Helen Sawyer

from Franklin and she was a very sweet girl, and she slept on the top, that is about all, there was nothing in the rooms except the beds, I remember just sitting on the bed during my compositions or whatever study I had to do.

FORSYTHE: So you didn't have a desk or a chair?

SMYTHE: There might have been a chair.

FORSYTHE: Were the closets built in?

SMYTHE: They were just spaces, they had two walls but there were no doors, just an open space with a curtain hung across.

FORSYTHE: The beds were they metal or wood?

SMYTHE: Metal, with rollers. The floor was concrete, and if we pushed them the beds would roll, and that is what happened I guessed we wiggled and caused the beds to separate. That is why I ended up on the floor.

FORSYTHE: Did you have a rug on the floor?

SMYTHE: No, we didn't have a rug. There was a mirror over the basin.

FORSYTHE: You showed me a picture of a house where you roomed with people, tell me about that.

SMYTHE: Now that was in 1925, in Murfreesboro, with a Mr. and Mrs. Sam Chester, I remember their names.

FORSYTHE: Were you and your roommates all in one room, or was it three separate rooms?

SMYTHE: We were all in one room, and the lady had antique furniture, great big bed, and there was not room for a table, so we ate, on a great big trunk. There was a great big bed, it filled up the room, and I think there was a dresser. I am not sure, that is all I remember, I don't know where we hung our clothes, but anyway, Kathleen didn't like to get up early, and I was the cook, I made the coffee and I prepared the breakfast, and Kathleen would rise up and say "Is the coffee done?" So I would give her coffee. We did walk, that was two miles in town, and we walked from there down East Main, up Tennessee Boulevard and then all over the campus, we didn't have to walk so much because all of our classes were in the Main Building, so we didn't have to walk so far then.

FORSYTHE: Did you eat at the Chester's home?

SMYTHE: We ate our breakfast there, I remember the first, she was just a your married lady, she had these two kids, and her husband was real nice, we didn't see much of him,

but the first night we were there, she invited us to supper, and we thought that was very kind of her, but she wanted to make us feel at home, and all she had was a steak, it was rare, the blood ran out of it, and she had black berry jam, and light bread. I ate blackberry jam and light bread. I couldn't stand it, I don't know why she had that steak with the blood running out of it we just couldn't eat it. I was going to tell you something funny that happened in Dr. Golightly's class, he was the education teacher and one of his projects was to have each one of grade the papers of all the rest of the students and about sixty of us in there, so he told us that we could come in during a vacant period and work as long as we could, but he wanted each one of us to grade other student's papers, and I went in one day, and I picked up a paper, and I said "good gracious, whose hen scratching is this, I can't read it" and there was a man in the room and he said "Let me see that" he said "that is my paper" I was so embarrassed I didn't know what to do, guess who it was? It was Medford Bowman, he later was the Dean of Austin Peay, I was very much embarrassed, but I still couldn't read it. So I was very careful after that what I said about people.

FORSYTHE: You told me a story before about one of your roommates dating Albert Gore?

SMYTHE: That was Lily Mae, he was in one of her classes, and she said he was very smart, and he asked her for a date, and said that they wanted to go swimming, so she asked me if I would go to, and his roommate went, and I didn't like him a bit. But I just thought that was interesting, but they didn't go together regular, they just had the one date.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about the faculty, let's start with President Lyon.

SMYTHE: I liked president Lyon, and he helped me get my job in Cowan Tennessee. I appreciated that so much, I was in the dining room with my roommate Cornelia Cantrell, and she came in and said "there is a man on the porch that wants to see you" I said "What color is he?" I thought she was just teasing me. She says "he is white, and you better go see" I said, "when I get through eating I will", I just thought she was teasing me she said "really, you get on out there" I went out and there was a man standing there, a nice man, and he looked at me, and said "Yes, you are the one" My mouth flew open and I said "What have I done" he said "you haven't done anything, you are Miss Jackson aren't you?" There was another Miss Jackson, there were two Miss Jacksons, I think that was Miss Gillinkine class. He had talked to Professor Lyon, he told me that he had an opening in the 4th grade in Cowan Tennessee. I said "where is Cowan?" he said "It is down in the southern part of the state, you just get on the train and come down there and we will be looking for you, I will meet you at the train" he did and I boarded at his home, he and his wife in Cowan, and enjoyed that year very much. His name was E. A. Bell.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about Miss Gillintyne.

SMYTHE: She was wonderful, she was a large woman, she was from East Tennessee, and she was a good teacher, I liked her very much. I remember one time she said that she liked people who had personality, her parents scolded her for liking an old man, who near by, he was an old drunk, but he was interesting, and I liked to hear him talk, and that is why I talked to him. I liked her so much and she said she was from East Tennessee, and she said that people would ask her where she was from and they would say, well we knew that because of the way you said mountain. Then there was another teacher, I think she was an education teacher to, but I remember when Lindbergh flew across the ocean in 1927, she told us about it, she said "history has been made today, this young man from St. Louis has flown across the ocean, and landed in France, you remember that because this is history" I can't remember her name to save my life.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about Neil Frazier

SMYTHE: Neil Frazier was a wonderful person, a kind man. He taught literature and he would read poetry to us, he wasn't a dynamic person he was just comfortable and nice to be with, and his wife, she was special to me, she would say "Ruth, have any poems?" I would say "Yes but they are not very good." "Well let me have them anyway" she would gather stuff for the Sidelines, and she would gather my poems and stick them in the Sidelines. I thought that was just wonderful. That is about all I remember, I know that they were both very kind, and I remember Miss E. Mai Saunders, she is a mess. She wore her hair on top of her head, and she wore plain old clothes, she looked like somebody's old granny, and she would have us sing "do, rae, me" and if we didn't get it right, she would say "Go to grass" some of the boys would say things that didn't apply to the music, and she would say "Go to grass." One of the girls said something about that.

FORSYTHE: George Davis

SMYTHE: He taught geography, he lived in Murfreesboro, I think I had one course with him, he had a daughter named Elizabeth Davis, I remember him as a very good teacher, but very stern.

FORSYTHE: Did you student teach?

SMYTHE: I taught at Kingwood. That little one school I taught out from Murfreesboro, about six miles, I taught the first four grades, I had about twenty five or thirty students.

FORSYTHE: How did you handle teaching four different grades at one time?

SMYTHE: There were two teachers, the principal had four grades and I had four grades, I don't know we just did. Of course there weren't as many in the classes. Let me see, that was the year, that was in 1926, I went to school in '25 and then I dropped out the first part of 1926, then I didn't go back to school, but my sister was going

to Peabody and she overheard two girls talking about a school near Murfreesboro and they didn't have a teacher, and they were wondering, my sister was sitting there and said "where is the school" they said "Murfreesboro" My sister told them that I wanted to get a school and who should I see, Mr. Ned King, he was the superintendent of schools in Rutherford County, so my sister Margaret wrote a letter and signed my name to it and made an engagement with Mr. King, she also wrote me a letter and sent me some money, money was the main reason I went to State Teacher's College, nobody had any money in those days, and she told me to pack my suitcase and be on the bus to Murfreesboro at 10 o'clock Saturday, so I did. I met Mr. Ned King, I was a green horn, I was scared to death, she took me home with her, and I had never taught a day in my life, I did not know what to do. But she gave me some advice, and I soon learned, then she took me to a Mrs. Hatman for a place to stay, I had a room, and I paid \$30 a month for room and board, and they didn't have school buses, there was a Mr. Baskin that had a two horse wagon with a top to it, and seats along the side, and he would stop put front of a hoe and pick up the teacher, and me and the other people and that was our school bus. I really enjoyed that. Then the next year, I went back to school in the summer of '27, and that was when I got the school at Cowan, Mr. Lyon helped me with that, he was a nice person, I liked him very much. What else you got there?

FORSYTHE: Mary Ellen Fountain

SMYTHE: She also taught in Davidson County. She was wonderful, I liked her very much. Now Agnes Little, I didn't like her, when I started out I was going to take home economics, well Miss Agnes Little changed my mind, she had a little group of folks around her, her little pets, and she talked all the time to them, and the rest of us would, if we wanted to ask her something, we would have to interrupt her, and that bothered her. She had us to make a skirt, and she told us exactly what to get, and I thought she said, to get jersey material, I misunderstood her, well she hated me because I got jersey, it is stretchy you know, and I took that one course and I changed my major, I despised that woman, she was so hateful, and then when I was teaching in Tullahoma, I taught with her niece, but I didn't let her know that I had ever heard of her, I disliked her very much, she was a little woman, she had the proper name, little and cute, she thought.

FORSYTHE: Betty Murfree

SMYTHE: She was the librarian but I never had any classes with her.

FORSYTHE: Was the library in the little building, or was it in Old Main?

SMYTHE: We called it the new library, I presume at one time the library was in the Main Building, but it was finished and it was just as nice as it could be, as I said it had that apartment down underneath, and Miss Tommie Reynolds lived there

FORSYTHE: Vera Ray

SMYTHE: She was the matron that canvased me for three days. I didn't dislike her at all but she was strict, she was matron after Miss Rutledge.

FORSYTHE: Coach Stevenson

SMYTHE: Yes, they required us to take physical education, and there were two thousand that summer of 1927, all the classes were crowded, sixty was the average pupils in each room, and we would get out on the campus, and he had some kind of little elevated thing, and he would direct us, and we would take physical education, they whole gang of us, everybody.

FORSYTHE: Tell me more about Mr. Golightly

SMYTHE: He was an odd person, a typical professor. He was very smart, and I think that I got more out of his class in education, than anyone.

FORSYTHE: Did you have to take any sciences?

SMYTHE: That first quarter, I was supposed to take chemistry, I did fairly good with the sewing and cooking, I liked that but I had to take chemistry and I was scared to death of those little old Bunsen burners, and one girls got burned real badly, and after that happened I decided I was not going to do that. I decided that is I had to do that I was not going to be a home Ec teacher. That is the main thing that made me quit, that and Miss Agnes.

FORSYTHE: You went back in the '60's to get your degree?

SMYTHE: After I married and had all of my children, my youngest daughter was ten or eleven years old, she was in the 6th grade, I decided that my husband was making enough money that I could go back and quit teaching, so I went back and I was determined to get that degree, and I did. I started in the fall of '63, I go my degree in '64, well you see in the mean time I had gone to Peabody, and I took extension courses from Austin Peay and Murfreesboro, and wherever these courses were given, I would take advantage of them, while I was teaching, and I had several summers at Peabody college, so I had enough, and I went back and got my degree in one year.

FORSYTHE: Tell me the difference from 1925 and 1964?

SMYTHE: The numbers, there was just so many people, when I was there in '27, most of them were young people, most of them were young people when I graduated, but I was so glad to get my degree that I didn't care, I was so glad to get it, because I finally got a decent salary, and it has meant so much to me since I have quit teaching. I had a room out in town with Mrs. Mason and I walked about two or

three blocks. When I was there in 1927, we were required to purchase a thing called "The Term Paper" it was written so that you could just go by that to write your term paper, well in Dr. Golightly's class, there was a bunch of young men, just kids, and of course I was the oldest one in the bunch, and when he told us that we had to write a term paper I said "I will go to the library, I had lost mine over the years, I went to the library and I asked if they had a copy of "The Term Paper" and I wrote my paper by that, and I got an A, the only A I ever got, they had teased me a lot in that class because I was older, and they knew why I was there, and he got up, and he made me feel so embarrassed. He said "I told you all to write a term paper, not this is a term paper," he got up and read my term paper to the class, and I was so proud of it, and I have still got it, he gave me an A on composition. I will just get it and show it to you.