

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
PERCY DEMPSEY

22 SEPTEMBER 1995
MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.103

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
PERCY DEMPSEY**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.103

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q.M. Smith collection designated QMS.1995.103. This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Mr. Percy Dempsey. Today is Friday, September 22, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the Gore Research Center in Room 111 at the Ned McWherter Learning Resource Center. The tape of this interview along with the transcription of the interview will become part of the Q.M. Smith collection and will be available to the public. Future researchers may include portions of this interview in their publications. Is that okay with you, Mr. Dempsey?

DEMPSEY: Yes, fine.

FORSYTHE: I want to ask a few questions about yourself so people will know who this is.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

DEMPSEY: Percy Emerson Dempsey.

FORSYTHE: What is your birth date?

DEMPSEY: June 11, 1916

FORSYTHE: Birthplace?

DEMPSEY: Hollister, North Carolina

FORSYTHE: And your father's name?

DEMPSEY: Percy E. Dempsey.

FORSYTHE: And his occupation?

DEMPSEY: He was a railroad man.

FORSYTHE: And your mother's name?

DEMPSEY: Francis Virginia Dempsey.

FORSYTHE: And her occupation?

DEMPSEY: She was a sales lady.

FORSYTHE: For who?

DEMPSEY: Well, in North Carolina, it was for ladies XXX to XXX. She had her own business there, too for awhile. She was with Taylor's and two or three places. She had her own business for several years.

FORSYTHE: What was her maiden name?

DEMPSEY: Francis Virginia Fisher?

FORSYTHE: Do you have any brothers or sisters? DX; I have no brothers and no sisters. My sister passed away many , many years ago.

FORSYTHE: What was her name?

DEMPSEY: Mary Lee Dempsey?

FORSYTHE: What is your wife's name?

DEMPSEY: My wife's name is Lucy Mae Dempsey. She was a Lane.

FORSYTHE: I know you have Percey III. Do you have any other children?

DEMPSEY: I have another daughter...Helen Francis Harris. She's divorced now.

FORSYTHE: Let's talk about Q.M. Smith. What memories do you have of him?

DEMPSEY: Oh, Lord, he was one of the finest gentlemen I have every known. He was a dedicated scouter to youth in general and did so many wonderful things to the scouting program in Middle Tennessee. One of my favorite things was that we used to backpack out before the houses were built all the way out to his house behind his house on Pitts Lane. Those little fellows would go to cook lunch and they'd always forget something and would always go and get it from Mr. Smith. They'd go up and I'd have to go up there to get them because they 'd go to borrow an onion or borrow a spoon or borrow something and I'd have to get them because they wanted to talk to Dr. Smith. One of the favorite things we were having when he was on the district and council level, he went through a training course different stations ... first aid, knot tying, all such things as this and it lasted all day and we had one section of

semi-floor XXX when we used the flags to send messages and we pulled up there one day, and Dr. Smith was the patrol leader. The guy said, " That fellow on the hill over there is going to send you a message. I doubt if you can get it." He sent the message and the guy turned around and said, " I don't guess you got it, did you?" And Dr. Smith said, "Yes, I did." The guy said, " I guess you can send it." Q.M. Smith said, " Let me have those flags." And, he sent a message real fast and asked him if he got that. He had been a signal man in WWI so he knew what he was doing. But, we've laughed about and after the completion of that training course late that afternoon, each one of them had, there was a table with hamburger meat and vegetables and everything on it and aluminum foil and they had a long tray of charcoal burning and every person had to make what we call a hobo pattie. Dr. Smith was right in there in the middle of it. You didn't get him. He could do whatever anyone else could do. I would say off hand he was one of the finest gentlemen and contributed as much as any person living to the entire Middle Tennessee Area to the Boy Scouts of America. And, his son ...I first met Dr. Smith because his son joined my troop over at the old scout lodge over here on XXX Blvd. That's where I got to know Dr. Smith. He's a wonderful gentlemen...one of the finest I've ever known.

FORSYTHE: So, he spent a lot of time with the scouts.

DEMPSEY: Yes ma'am. On the district level which covered all of the heart of Tennessee District then, and then the council level covered thirty-eight counties. I believe he was on the executive board, and I'm trying to get this info. for you from the scout office. I made several calls and I can't get who I want to give me that information. I'm going to research and have them bring it over to me typed and I'll bring it over and give it you. I think he was district chairman for the boy scouts here, and I think he was on the executive board of the boy scouts of America Middle Tennessee Council.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about the Q.M. Smith award.

DEMPSEY: That was given. The first one was in 1974 for a scouter that exhibited good leadership or for outstanding service to boys. It is still given in honor of Dr. Smith. I was fortunate enough to be the second recipient of this award. I'm honored to be pictured with him there while I was receiving it.

FORSYTHE: So, this award is given every year at the district banquet usually in February.

DEMPSEY: It's about six inches tall (the trophy)

FORSYTHE: How do you earn this award? What do you have to do?

DEMPSEY: You never know who is on the committee to select, but it's from leadership...things that you do for boy-scouting in the Trail of Tears District. It covers many, many troops here in town in different places.

FORSYTHE: So, it's not given to a scout. It's given to administrators..

DEMPSEY: It's given to scoutmasters or assistant scoutmasters...leaders. It's a leadership award.

FORSYTHE: Do you want to tell me about awards that Q.M. Smith won?

DEMPSEY: Well, the Silver Beaver Award is the highest award that a local council can give, and Dr. Smith received that in 1963 and the Long Rifle award is the highest award that you can get in a district. He received it in 1964. In that book, there is some information put together talking about the council and so forth. I thought you might like to have that.

FORSYTHE: What do you have to do to earn these awards?

DEMPSEY: Just be a good, hard-working scouter. It's recognition for your leadership abilities and your leadership to boys.

FORSYTHE: Do you know how Q.M. Smith became involved with boy -scouts?

DEMPSEY: No, I'm sorry I don't. It was probably on a district level. Whoever was chairman of the board at that time probably recruited him to work with us. He made the many, many merit badge training courses for the boys. He made the staff over at the gym available and we'd have it once a year, and we'd come over here and the gym would be half full of boys studying merit badges. He would furnish the leadership...coaches, football players, baseball players, Jack Deer. They always worked with him. He was always available to us for anything we needed in scouts. He was just one of those individuals you don't find too often.

FORSYTHE: Do you know what year he began?

DEMPSEY: No, I'm sorry I don't.

FORSYTHE: What was important to him?

DEMPSEY: I think it was important to him to see all boys, college students and all given the opportunity to do something they enjoyed and do something they were learning from.

FORSYTHE: Did he ever talk about himself?

DEMPSEY: I never heard him mention anything.

FORSYTHE: I know you said he was a signal man. Did he ever say anything about that? DEMPSEY: No, I just found out. I asked him after that training course. He said he was a signal man in WWI. I think it was on a ship. I'm not sure about that. In the navy, I think. He was always something. You couldn't be around him without him telling something funny. I used to ride down to meeting with him down to Nashville. A lot of people asked me how I understood him. I understood every word he said because I'd known him and talked to him so much. He was really an interesting and laughable type guy.

FORSYTHE: What would he talk about?

DEMPSEY: Oh, just general things, maybe something that happened on campus that day. As I understood it, his office was always open to any student or anybody that walked up there. You didn't have to check with anybody. You could come in and knock on that door and you got in to see Dr. Smith.

FORSYTHE: Did he ever talk about his church? DEMPSEY: Not that I recall. I'm sure he probably mentioned something about it being right across from the campus and all, but I don't recall it.

FORSYTHE: What about his family?

DEMPSEY: Well, we talked about Bill and about after he got into the service. I kept up with him through Dr. Smith. But, other than that, it was regular, routine things that we were both doing.

FORSYTHE: Can you tell me about the role of Boy-scouts in Middle Tennessee?

DEMPSEY: They do a lot of good. For instance, they do service projects about every length from about star to eagle. They have to do service projects to gain that. They do a lot of community work. We have had them to go out to this little orphanage on Woodberry Road and build a fence, tear out a wall, redo a wall, paint it. We've done cemeteries that have been vandalized that people have gone in and broken stones. The boy scouts have went in and cemented the stones back, clean them, cut all

the brush out and clean the stones with clorox and get them really white and pretty. I have one now that is trying to do a blood drive for the community. Scouting is just one of the most wholesome, worthwhile projects a young man can get into. We try to teach them this and that's what the program is all about.

FORSYTHE: How long have you been it?

DEMPSEY: I joined the boy scouts in 1927, and I was awarded my 50 year pen about three years ago when we had our district February meeting over here in the cafeteria. I've been working with them, and I feel like I've always been a scout because the training I got at my early ago was wonderful, and I've tried to live that way. I try to get boys now to live that way. I've done so many wonderful things. I've backpacked all across the Appalachian trail from Montana down to Damascus, Virginia, and I've hiked the trails of Samuron, New Mexico. XXXXXX eight times, and I just enjoy being and doing what we do with them.

FORSYTHE: When you joined the scouts, tell me about that.

DEMPSEY: I joined troop 4 in Raleigh, North Carolina with some of my neighborhood boys that were already members of it. We did backpacking and all in places now we used to see all the time. The Raleigh Durham airport was as far as we got out of Raleigh. Now, that's one of the largest airports in the country. I've always and I try nowI made a promise to myself that I would always try to live my life in accordance with the scout laws. If I do that, it starts out with a scout is trustworthy and it ends up with a scout is reverent. I tell youngsters now that if they do that, I can prove to them you can have a bigger time and as good time as anyone in the world, and you're living by a good code. If you live by the scout laws, you've done pretty good. If I had the opportunity, I wouldn't change a thing.

FORSYTHE: When did you move to Murfreesboro?

DEMPSEY: I came back here retired from the army in 1950. I married a young lady from here. I tell people often that it was the best day's work I'd ever done in my life. We'll be married fifty years come this January. Wonderful young lady.

FORSYTHE: What did you do after you retired from the army?

DEMPSEY: I went to work for the airforce at Seward Air Base. I was deputy and Canon finance officer out there. After I retired from that, I worked

some with my son who is a CPA. I worked for awhile for Vocational Rehabilitation of the state of Tennessee. I enjoyed it tremendously.

FORSYTHE: Tell me what you did there.

DEMPSEY: I was one of the assistants and we kept them busy. We arranged with the factories here in town to let us bag such as Samsonite. We bagged all of the nuts and bolts that went with certain things that had to be put together. Just different industry work they needed somebody to do...we did it over there. We would work with them and get them. Some of them were mentally handicapped; some of them were physically handicapped. They were some of the most lovable people in the world. I had to stop going out there visiting after I left because they would all drop what they were doing and come over and hug me. I was created a work stop, so I had to quit going out there visiting. It was a wonder full, wonderful experience. Then, I just decided to quit everything and not do anything. I do still do some volunteer work with boy scouts but that's about all I do.

FORSYTHE: Thank you for coming in