

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
WITH  
RUTH BOWDOIN

5 OCTOBER 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

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

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

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

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MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH  
RUTH BOWDOIN**

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

**INTERVIEW #QMS.117**

**FORSYTHE:** This tape is part of the Q. M. Smith Collection designated as QMS.1995.117. This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Mrs. Ruth Bowdoin. Today is Thursday, October 5, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mrs. Bowdoin located at 220 Wilson Street Murfreesboro, 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. Bowdoin?

**BOWDOIN:** Sure.

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

**BOWDOIN:** Ruth Shiver Bowdoin.

**FORSYTHE:** What is your birth date and birthplace?

**BOWDOIN:** April 29, 1917, Dale County, Alabama.

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

**BOWDOIN:** George W. Shiver. He had several occupations. He was mainly a farmer, school teacher, and worked in other various capacities.

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

**BOWDOIN:** Pinkie Cochran Shiver. She was a housewife.

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

**BOWDOIN:** I had two brothers, both are deceased now. They were Hughey Edward Shiver, who was ten years my senior, and Andrew DeWitt Shiver five years younger.

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

**BOWDOIN:** Wilmoth Bowen Bowdoin. He was called Will. He was a schoolteacher and school administrator. He spent his last 25 years at MTSU. He was the first Dean of the School of Education, when the school achieved University status.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any children?

BOWDOIN: We have none. We would have loved to have had a family.

FORSYTHE: Tell me what you remember about Q.M. Smith?

BOWDOIN: I remember a good many things about Mr. Smith. I remember that he was very tall and distinguished. He was really handsome and so easy to get to know. One felt comfortable in his presence. I remember how well he related to children, when they got to know him. For example, two of his little neighbors that lived on the other side of the street, Beverly Rose and June Travis, were little tikes, pre-schoolers. Once Will told me that he went into Mr. Smith's office and he had one of them on one knee and the other one on the other knee and they were laughing and talking! Will assumed that Mr. Smith was either telling them a joke or a story. This touched Will because we had observed him in the home with his lovely wife, Laura, and his children, Nancy Jean and Bill. He had a very inspiring pattern of leadership. To the press Will praised President Smith as "a man of great vision and remarkable astuteness who was willing to give every employee every chance he deserved." He cherished the personal and professional association with him and felt that Middle Tennessee State College made excellent progress under his leadership. He was a good president deserving of honor.

FORSYTHE: Can you tell me about your husband?

BOWDOIN: We came to Murfreesboro in 1948. It was Will's first interview for a position at the college level. He had taught social studies in high school at Coffee Springs, Alabama, the school from which we both graduated. Later, he was promoted to the principalship at the elementary school where I taught third grade. In both positions he was under the guidance of our high school principal, Mr. J E. Williams whom we both really loved and respected. During this era one could get a teacher's certificate after two years in an accredited college and we were very fortunate to work under, J. E. Williams, our own high school principal, who gave us support and guidance. This, of course, was a warm, supportive atmosphere in which to begin our teaching careers. A funny thing happened when he was promoted to the elementary principalship. The school was a small consolidated country school without a library. Will said to Mr. Williams "I have an idea. I think we should go out into the country and gather up chickens, sell them, and start our library." Mr. Williams agreed. They borrowed a truck and baskets and went out into the communities where the children lived. There was "little money" but everybody was glad to see the principal coming to collect chickens! When asked if they would donate to the library by giving a chicken, the answer was typically, "yes if you can catch them." Generally the man of the house would be in the field, but if the children were home they would love chasing them! What an experience! But they did get the library started. You asked me to tell about my husband. We had celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary when my husband died on September 25, 1989. We were sweethearts in high school and he was

really the only person I ever seriously dated. I shall never forget the first day I saw him at school. He always laughed and said, "You know, we got together by chance." I was from Chancellor, Alabama attending Coffee Springs School. When we were in high school, his bus route was changed and he transferred from Samson to Coffee Springs High School. I would have never known him had not his bus route been changed. I have decided now that it was more than a coincidence; it was God's plan for us to be together. I am very fortunate to have fallen in love with him and he with me. He gave me encouragement and support. At Peabody College for Teachers he selected psychology as his minor and education as his major. In fact, he thought one time about becoming a clinical psychologist. Here is where I think God intervened again. Peabody College lost one of their staff members a PH. D. in psychology, and at that very time they were one less staff for eligibility to award a PH. D. in psychology. Will decided that he would major in education administration. I have always said to him, "Gee that was wonderful." He loved education, and I do not think that he would have liked psychology as well although he was a good psychologist! I did not have as much background in psychology and he helped me with my children with special needs. In many ways we were a team and with his help I became a better teacher because I learned so much from him. As I perceive our 50 years together, I think how good it was. We indeed, had a wonderful relationship. I prayed at the end of his life, that I would be able to keep him at home and give him the love and care that he needed and deserved to have. God gave me the strength to nurse him through three strokes. It was stressful, but it was my pleasure. Nothing hurts when you are taking care of someone you love!

FORSYTHE: What was your husband's birth date and place?

BOWDOIN: December 4, 1915. He was born in Coffee Springs, Alabama.

FORSYTHE: How did he end up at MTSU?

BOWDOIN: Well, it is a long story. His father was a farmer. His mother was in her thirties when her husband died and Will was only fourteen years old. His mother had two other children: his brother was five years and his sister was ten years his junior. At that early age Will was thrust into being the head of the home. His mother was a strong lady, but she was not educated. She had a lot of practical education; she read and listened to the radio news. She was very insecure after having lost her husband. Will took over the role of the home manager and missed school part of one year in order to pick velvet beans and cotton. He had to make sure that it got done. That first year, he did not think that he could go to school because they had to clear the crop. In retrospect, I know how much he really did give his mother and his family. He gave of himself and was always concerned about his role. With little money and a farm in debt, the depression years gave him great concern as well as anxieties. He was determined to get an education and to have an educated family. His mother was also very determined that her

children would be educated and all three finished college. Which was very commendable.

FORSYTHE: Where did your husband receive his education?

BOWDOIN: He was educated in the public schools of Coffee Springs and Samson, Alabama. He attended Troy State Teachers College in Troy, Alabama, despite his father's death. He attended three continuous years, although to get a teaching certificate one was required to attend only two years. After high school I was not financially able to go to college. These were the depression years and I worked in a shirt factory for a year after I finished school. That enabled me to save enough money for college. (It is interesting to note that the tuition at Troy State then was \$25.00 per quarter. Our books were something like \$5.00 second hand.) In Troy, Will lived in a house with a widow, he and five other boys. They would bring food from home, and she would cook for them. That would her means of making a living. I did the same thing. Three other girls and I lived with a widow. We brought produce from home—meat, canned beans, peas, corn, anything you could raise on the farm. There were very few student jobs at the college. Since neither of us was financially able to stay in the dormitory, we did not have the privileges that others might have had. I had to study, anyway, I did not have time to work.

FORSYTHE: After your husband graduated, what was his first job?

BOWDOIN: His first job was as a teacher in the high school from which we both graduated. Subsequently he became principal of the elementary school there. As I have noted the principal of the high school was principal when we were there, and he knew Will's qualities. He was happy to have him as a colleague.

FORSYTHE: You taught there also?

BOWDOIN: Yes, I taught third grade. School terms in Alabama were then only for seven months which left us a full quarter and a half to attend Troy state Teachers College each spring and summer until we completed our degrees.

FORSYTHE: What did you all do after you left that school system?

BOWDOIN: World War II came along. Will served in the army and was sent from place to place for training. When possible I would go with him. I would get a teaching job as a substitute teacher because I did not want to take a permanent position in order to be able to go with him. We were not separated too long.

FORSYTHE: What did you do after the war?

BOWDOIN: Having the availability of the GI Bill, which was a wonderful blessing for all of the veterans at that time, my husband was ambitious and wanted an education. He immediately entered George Peabody College for Teachers. I taught at Aiken

Elementary School, near Vanderbilt University and Peabody College, while he was going to school. He was in school for three years, getting his Master's degree and completing course work for his PH. D. degree. In 1951 a tragic thing happened! I was diagnosed with an incurable and inoperable cancer of the lymph system. The cancer, having spread so widely over my body, prompted the doctor to predict that I would live six months to a year. I was then teaching second grade at Crichlow School in Murfreesboro and Will was Chairman of the Department of Education. My husband began to seek all the help he could find; he never gave up and I was a fighter! After getting information from Vanderbilt's Medical Center, he decided that I should enter Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York City. Having no approved drugs at that time the doctors decided on radiation. It worked! During this time a wonderful thing happened! A lovely hospital volunteer looked in on me daily. I was reading Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's *A Guide to Confident Living*. She asked whether I liked the book. My answer was, "Other than the Bible it has given me more strength than anything I have read." "Would you like go meet Dr. Peale? He is my next door neighbor in Pauling, New York?" In a few days he came. Sitting on the side of my bed, he listened to my story and I remember his saying "No one has the right to assess your days on this earth unless they have heard your prayers!" Then he gave me a package containing a mustard seed necklace with a note which read "If thou has the faith of a grain of mustard seed, all things are possible," Matthew 17:20. I prayed that God's will would be done and I asked that if it were that I should live I would be able to serve Him in some special way. When I left the hospital the word was "You are arrested but not cured. Your cancer will recur. You will need to return for tests every three months." For about twenty years, I returned but the cancer didn't! Because of Dr. Peale's insistence my life story was published in the February issue, 1988 of his magazine *The Guidepost*.

FORSYTHE: This is a continuation of the interview with Mrs. Ruth Bowdoin by Regina Forsythe on Thursday October 5, 1995. Tell me about your husband receiving his Ph.D.

BOWDOIN: Yes, he got his Ph.D. June 5, 1952 and it was one of the happiest days of our lives. When all of the exams were over, we were really rejoicing! He had completed most of his course requirements with approval for his dissertation when he visited Middle Tennessee State College for his first interview with the president, Mr. Q. M. Smith. He came away with good feelings, very impressed with the quality of their discussions and with his hospitality. He invited Will to return and bring me to meet him. At that time we also visited with Dean N. C. Beasley who took us to lunch at the Corner Café uptown on the square. We enjoyed his company and appreciated his hospitality.

FORSYTHE: What was your husband hired to do?

BOWDOIN: In 1948 He was hired in the Education Department as an associate professor. He was very fortunate; Mr. Smith felt that because of his credentials from Peabody,

he was capable of skipping the instructorship. Mr. Smith was very good to us and I feel we were very lucky. Soon Will got promoted and became Director of the Student Teaching Program. When Mr. Beasley retired and Dr. Kirksey became the Dean of the College, my husband was promoted to his position as Chairman of the Department of Education. This was in 1954. Mr. Smith and Dr. Kirksey both had developed confidence in Will because they recognized his organizational skills and his ability to work with his colleagues and the public, as well as with education groups statewide. In 1964 Dr. Quill Cope, the president when the College moved to University status, asked Will to serve as the first Dean of the School of Education. Will was happy in his work as the Chairman of the Education Department and had not applied for the position. Due to Dr. Cope's confidence in him he took the position with the stipulation that his tenure would only comprise a four-year period. He organized the School from its inception, worked indefatigably giving his very best efforts. As the first Dean of the School of the School of Education at Middle Tennessee State University, he organized the school which at that time included the Departments of Elementary Education, Secondary Education, Home Economics, Physical Education and Health, Art, Music and the newly organized Department of Psychology. He was challenged with his work but after the four year term Dr. Cope reluctantly released him to honor his promise to return to full time teaching which he enjoyed for his last two years. He retired in 1971. He wanted me to retire from Murfreesboro City Schools where I had taught, served as instructional supervisor and was presently founder and director of Murfreesboro's Preschool Program, locally known as the "Classroom-On-Wheels", a nationally award winning program. Because of my strong feelings for at-risk families and the desire to alleviate some of the educational deficits accruing in the home, he understood that I simply could not retire at that time. (You asked me to tell you about the Classroom-On-Wheels which will follow.) In the meantime, Will continued his interest in education. Dr. Sam Ingram, who was then the State Commissioner of Education, invited him to conduct a research study on teacher education programs in Tennessee. Later Dr. Ingram said that his was the finest work that he had observed. Far ahead of his time, he advocated many things that we are now in 1999 getting around to incorporating. The next year the State Certification Department was hopelessly behind in awarding certificates to teachers and Dr. Ingram assigned him to become the Director of Certification for the State of Tennessee. Since teachers could not receive their salary until certificates were issued, Will put his spirit and complete efforts into getting the job done. When he saw how many certificates had to be processed, he wondered how he would ever do it. I never doubted. On September 25, 1989 at the age of 73 my husband of fifty years died of complication from strokes. One of his former students, Judy Trent, said of him: "Dr. Bowdoin was a "gentle giant" of a man! In his honor MTSU I have provided scholarships for needy students who aspire to become teachers and by the year 2004 there will be several more added. I cherish the knowledge that he will live in perpetuity at this great University. For me that is a cherished thought!

FORSYTHE: Thank you for letting me come interview you.