

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
BEN EARTHMAN

9 OCTOBER 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

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

INTERVIEW #QMS.120

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
BEN EARTHMAN**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS. 120

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q. M. Smith collection designated as QMS.1995.120. This is Regina Forsythe, I am interviewing Mr. Ben Earthman. Today is Monday October, 9th, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mr. Earthman at 925 East Northfield Boulevard in 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. Earthman?

EARTHMAN: That will be satisfactory.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

EARTHMAN: Ben Moore Earthman

FORSYTHE: Your birth date?

EARTHMAN: May 19 of '33.

FORSYTHE: Who was your father, and what was his occupation?

EARTHMAN: Harold H. Earthman, he is best known as being a congressman representing this district in congress. After politics he was in the laundry business and had the first self service laundry in Murfreesboro.

FORSYTHE: Where was that laundry mat?

EARTHMAN: It was on Vine Street in the 500 block.

FORSYTHE: What years did you go to school at MTSU?

EARTHMAN: From 1952 to '56.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about being a student at MTSU?

EARTHMAN: Well I lived off campus, so I was not involved in that many campus activities. But I lived just off the campus, so I remember it was much easier to get a parking place. Also thinking as far as Mr. Smith was concerned, he was the president and provided solid leadership especially looking back with the handicap that he had.

People appreciated that he could do such a good job. That was one thing that I remember. The size of the student body was not over two thousand at the time, certain things like that come to mind. I also remember that anybody who ran for office in the student government always promised that we would have lights on the tennis court. That never happened for years. When I drive to visit my sister, I drive past the tennis courts and I always chuckle when I see the lights. Another thing that comes to mind, are the Bubber Murphy days in football. We were always assured of having a winning football season. As a radical change the young ladies, if they had a physical education class, and they wore shorts they had to wear a raincoat to class.

FORSYTHE: Did they have musical performances outside?

EARTHMAN: As a young boy in the '30s I had a lady who would take care of me sometimes. She had a niece who was going to MTSU and she was in the band. On Sunday afternoons she and I would go and hear the band play in Old Main. There were flowers, they had Cannes all over the place, I remember those, the red ones. Jamie Proctor in the more recent years, I have appreciated his work. His father was J. B. Proctor who was an outstanding football player, and Jamie is equally as outstanding in horticulture. He put the DNA design in one of the beds there on campus. I think back, it has been enjoyable to see flowers on campus from my earliest recollection and has carried on.

FORSYTHE: What memories do you have growing up next to the campus?

EARTHMAN: The main entrance off of Main street used to be fenced in and then there was another field that made an L right in front of the present administration building. They used to have cows in there. Then we were a mile and a half from the city square so, in my early days that was pretty far in the country. It had not grown up that much, although there were a number of houses around. I remember they would put the calves in one field and some other cows in the next field so it was pretty rural even though the university was there. I remember a mulberry tree that was cut down for the science building and the science building used to be the closest building to our house. The college farm was there and so it was a rural setting even though the campus was there. I used to get up in this mulberry tree with my BB gun and try to hit the squirrels. I would shoot them, but it wouldn't kill them it would just aggravate them. Some of the aggressive squirrels would charge back up the tree and try to bite me, so I was at war with the squirrels for the tree. When they cut the tree down for the science building, I didn't like that kind of progress. Of course I can remember Airport avenue is off of Elrod street. It was named because the landing strip for the airport was there, just right across the fence from Elrod avenue. We could see the planes taking off. I can remember Joe Black Hayes. His father worked there on the farm and headed it. At the Earthman house we had the first swimming pool in Murfreesboro, it has since been filled in. There were not very many public pools around. There might have been one at the country club on the old Shelbyville highway, where Indian Hills

is. That was a large pool but they always had a problem keeping water in it, it had a crack in it or something. We had a small pool there and people came and helped us use the pool. Joe Black's younger brother Bucky Hayes went under and was drowning. His father was across the fence in one of the fields in front of the Cope building and he had his overalls on. We hollered and he came over and jumped in the pool and rescued his son. He had some of those long wooden matches and one of the things that I remember was after he got Bucky out of the pool, the top of the pool had quite a number of those matches floating on it. Also Mr. Byers, the man for whom the building there off of Greenland was named was the superintendent of the farm. I can remember as I would hunt with my BB gun, I would venture onto the college property and he didn't like for me to shoot his robins. I was quite a hunter, or at least I thought I was, but I guess I was just a mean little boy. I remember he chased me around in his pickup truck and said, "You aren't shooting my robins are you?" But the relationship was good when I behaved. I remember there were two or three big sink holes in front of the Cope building and eventually they filled them up, but they have always said that there is an underground river that runs southeast to northwest between the countryside and the Cope building. When we had rains the water would come over Tennessee Boulevard and from time to time it does flood the west side of campus, in front of what I call Training School, Campus School. That is where we all attended. The river flows underneath.

FORSYTHE: When was the Earthman home built?

EARTHMAN: It was the same year that my younger sister was brought from the hospital. That would have been sixty six years ago, 1929.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about going to Campus School?

EARTHMAN: It was some very enjoyable days. You remember the people you went to school with and also you remember your teachers. I remember Miss Anne Ashley. I was in the fifth grade, and she had a segment of her teachings when she had the boys and girls to dance with her. In the fifth grade the boys shuttered to think they were going to have to dance with girls. At that time Training School went through two years in high school. We had a good basketball team, and football was played more in my sister's time range. Russell Faulkinberry, his father was the coach there in Middle Tennessee, and Russell was a good football player. Also, J. S. Holmes, (there is building named for his father), and Elmer Taylor, his father was the game warden. We knew all about him. He was hard but fair, he would arrest his mother if she had shot one too many doves. Jim Bell and several others, they had enough just being two years in high school, they played the teams form area high schools. They held their own pretty well, that stands out in my mind as far as athletics. Those of us who were not as good in athletics, we would come down in Mr. Smith's front yard after school was out and we would play, whatever the season would be. I lived close enough that when supper was ready, one of my little sisters would step out and say, "Supper is ready!" They wouldn't

like for me to mention that now. Most of us lived within a rocks throw from the president's yard, but we would play most of the afternoons some sport there. That sticks out in my mind.

FORSYTHE: What memories do you have of Q. M. Smith?

EARTHMAN: Well, it would be distant memories. He never did call me in to ask my opinion on anything, but as I eluded to earlier, he was a man that you had great admiration for, especially with the handicap that he had. That didn't present a major problem to him, and he went forward just as anyone would do. I think the community in general admired this in him in. He did, regardless of that fact, provide leadership for the college. He was a highly respected member of the community, and he was a man that did receive the Lord in his life as well as making other contributions to the community.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about some of the people on campus? Dean Beasley?

EARTHMAN: He was an integral part of the foundation of the university, and was know by the entirety of the student body, and whatever his tenure was, it was a number of years, and I know that he was in on the foundation of the university.

FORSYTHE: Dean Kirksey?

EARTHMAN: I had some courses that he taught. He would also have been highly respected. He was a man that was able to give good guidance to the students.

FORSYTHE: Norman Parks

EARTHMAN: I remember him well from several aspects. Our views politically were a little different, and he knew it. I knew where he was coming from, and we didn't agree, In my estimations he would to take pot shots at the class. States rights was a big thing at that time. In fact my father was the state campaign manager for Strom Thurmond when he ran on the states rights platform. Dr. Parks knew that. He said, " If I have accomplished anything in this class, I don't want anyone to leave this class and be a states righter." The other people knew to whom he was guiding that barb. He always talked about the "Repooplicans", so you could tell he didn't think the "Repooplicans" were any better than the states righters. Of course I never called him a "dummycrat," so I never wanted to get into a confrontation with. I just quietly sat there.

FORSYTHE: Dr. Parchment

EARTHMAN: Most of what I knew of him, I knew through Mr. Ernst Craig. Mr. Craig greatly admired him and he fancied himself as an intellectual. We always kidded him, because our mutual friend, every bone he picked up was a dinosaur bone, and he would go around and would have quite a bone collection.

FORSYTHE: When you were growing up next to the campus, did you notice a difference between before the war and after the war?

EARTHMAN: Well yes, because all the men came back and they had this housing, barracks as most people called it, for the married students. There had also been a number of students before the war that had been very lackadaisical students. After the war, their attitude toward life had changed quite a bit. Some had married and that always changes students. I think the war made them a little more solemn about things. The housing for the vets wasn't the poshest of places but they were good experiences. They had a lot of laughs and they had a lot of camaraderie because the married students were all in the same boat. They had different challenges that the single students didn't have, so I saw it from the housing standpoint.

FORSYTHE: Where was your property line?

EARTHMAN: It was about three and a half acres. The part that touched Main street was very narrow, and it went beside what is now St. Marks Methodist church and made some what of an L-shape behind the church. There used to be a hedge that made an L going down toward the Cope building due east there behind our property. It was kind of nestled in behind St. Marks Methodist church.

FORSYTHE: Was it where the entrance to the school is now?

EARTHMAN: Yes

FORSYTHE: Did it go all the way to South Baird?

EARTHMAN: No. We owned some property in several lots but it did not connect all the way to Baird Lane. The Stewart Hall apartments, what is the parking lot, he owned that property. This goes back not too many years ago, but the university thought they owned it. They had it filled in for a parking lot. It turned out it belonged to my father. He worked that out with them, they just swapped property around. One time we owned the Stewart Hall apartments, my sisters and I, so when that came about, that is when the University found out they had filled in someone else's property and made a parking lot out of it. We worked around it and since then we have sold the apartments. But our property went North and South to the West of where the walk bridge is now. It was on both sides, parallel to the Main entrance.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any other memories you want to share?

EARTHMAN: I can remember on the East side of our property, the University would have owned that property way back. Dr. Black, Virginia Woodfin's mother and father, owned that, but some big trees had fallen over and there were some grape vines there. My friends and I would go play Tarzan and we would swing there. Later on when we were smoking Rabbit tobacco, we would cut off some if the grape

vine and try to smoke it, but as I remember that wasn't a very pleasant experience. It was kind of a tough way to learn to smoke. Then we would dig holes out there and cover them up and try to lead people that we didn't care for too much hoping they would fall in the hole. But we were everything we should have been as young fellows. Then there was a sty, a place that had steps going over the fence so we wouldn't tear the fence down. I can remember having one of those. Those are some of the things that I remember. But it was very enjoyable growing up. Christmas before last I was invited to an open house and some of us old timers were together. We were remembering the forties and fifties and we all came to the conclusion that Murfreesboro was an interesting place to live in those days. Of course the University was a part of it. I guess it was more like a family in those days, because the town was smaller. I made the statement that back then, if I went up on the square and there were three people that I didn't know, it was strange. Now if I go up there and there are three people that I do know it is strange. We had what we called the "Spit and Whittle Club" on the square. The old timers would go up there with a piece of cedar wood (the Pattersons had the world's largest cedar bucket), and cedar was a big part of the community. People were accustomed to going up to the square to B & T's Buchanan and Tarpley's on the square. Back in those days men would have a real sharp knife and they would see who could curl the shaving off of the cedar. Another thing, back in the forties was when the maneuvers came and they used middle Tennessee as a training ground. They were trying to get the fellows trained for war. I guess they thought that if you could survive the woods of Tennessee you could survive anywhere. We would see tanks come down Main Street, turn on Tennessee Boulevard, go north, then pulling out toward Lascassas. Those of us who were young would try and get the different patches to trade them. My wife's mother was a dietitian at Middle Tennessee State College, and she went to the Rutherford Hospital for a number of years. My wife tells the story of how the soldiers would come to the area around Kittrell, and her motherly instincts would cause her to feed the soldiers. Many of them had sons that were away for the war, and it was a natural thing.