

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
PAUL ABERNATHY

12 OCTOBER 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.126

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
PAUL ABERNATHY**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.126

FORSTYTHER: This tape is part of the Q.M. Smith collection. This is Regina Forsythe, and I am interviewing Dr. Paul Abernathy. Today is Thursday, October 12, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Dr. Abernathy located at 2102 Greenland Drive in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The tape of this interview along with a transcription of this interview along with a transcription of this interview will become part of the Quinton Miller 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?

ABERNATHY: Yes.

FORSTYTHER: What is your full name?

ABERNATHY: Jay Paul Abernathy.

FORSTYTHER: And your birth-date?

ABERNATHY: February 9, 1936.

FORSTYTHER: And your birthplace?

ABERNATHY: Woodberry.

FORSTYTHER: And your father's name?

ABERNATHY: Robert.

FORSTYTHER: And his occupation?

ABERNATHY: He was an educator.

FORSTYTHER: And your mother's name?

ABERNATHY: Jin Hendrickson Abernathy.

FORSTYTHER: And her occupation?

ABERNATHY: She was a housewife.

FORSTYTHE: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

ABERNATHY: One sister named Jane.

FORSTYTHE: And your wife's name?

ABERNATHY: Sande Baird Abernathy.

FORSTYTHE: Do you have any children?

ABERNATHY: Five.

FORSTYTHE: What are their names?

ABERNATHY: Randy, Mike, Dana, Scott, and Alan.

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

ABERNATHY: Alan and Scott have degrees from MTSU.

FORSTYTHE: Why did you choose to go to MTSU?

ABERNATHY: It was home....I lived here in Murfreesboro, and my dad was associated with MTSU. It was a good school for what I wanted in XXX and XXXX.

FORSTYTHE: What years did you go there?

ABERNATHY: I went 1954-1957.

FORSTYTHE: What memories do you have of being a student?

ABERNATHY: Well, I remember my first quarter. I started right after I finished high school in the summer of 1954. I took twelve of inorganic chemistry with Dr. Wisner who was quite a tough teacher. We had two weeks of weather in 1954 where the temperature was over 100 degrees for two weeks. We had no air conditioning in the science building at that time. We were down in the basement with the Bunsen burners going in our t-shirts working in the heat. I remember it was quite hot. I guess that's a real memory that first quarter. It was busy, and we worked hard and had some fun doing it.

FORSTYTHE: Who are some of the teachers you had?

ABERNATHY: One of my outstanding teachers I had, Dr. Eldrid Wiser was an outstanding teacher, but he was quite tough. One of the things I've remembered throughout all these years that I'll never forget was that in that first quarter in the hot weather of 1954, we were in the amphitheater having lecture, and Dr. Wiser would ask students to come up to the front so that he could quiz them. We had a young lady he asked to come up to the front, and he was quizzing her quite intensely, and he was sitting leaned back in a chair smoking a cigar and his feet were propped up on the table. The young lady was getting frustrated, and she passed out right there in the amphitheater. Dr. Wiser never got up. He just sat there in his chair smoking his cigar, and he asked if a couple of young men in the front row would help her out of the amphitheater. So, that was just a memory of how tough he was, but a very good teacher.

FORSTYTHER: Did you live on campus?

ABERNATHY: No, I lived here in Murfreesboro.

FORSTYTHER: What was your major?

ABERNATHY: Pre-med.

FORSTYTHER: What did you do for fun?

ABERNATHY: I played sports, basketball and tennis.

FORSTYTHER: Did you have a job?

ABERNATHY: I worked up at what is now Murfreesboro Medical Clinic in their lab doing lab work part-time.

FORSTYTHER: Tell me about your father.

ABERNATHY: He was an English professor. It's interesting that he taught my mother in the sixth grade at Woodberry and picked her out early on. He had just gotten out of school. He was ten years older than my mother. He also coached basketball at Woodberry. He had a state championship one year from Woodberry, but he picked my mother out early on and asked my mother's mother if he could marry her when she became of age. People that were in class with my mother tell me even today that my dad watched her like a hawk and wouldn't let any of the boys talk to her or speak to her. When she eighteen and finished high school, he married her. He ended up director of field relations at MTSU. That's where he retired. He was the Goodwill Ambassador for MTSU. He promoted MTSU to high schools in the surrounding area. He was a speaker, and he would go and give commencement speeches, and at the same time promote MTSU, trying to

recruit students. I can remember when I was still in high school, he gave me the job of photographing all of the building for MTSU and slides. He'd show the campus to the students. He had quite a sense of humor and was always pulling gags, and later I'll tell you one he told me regarding Q.M. Smith. I can remember him telling me about this one when I was in high school in the early 1950's. Everybody liked Q.M. Q.M. had a sense of humor. He was fair and easy-going and would always speak to you. He went down to one of the new men's shops that opened in Murfreesboro. It was a little XXXX for men. He bought him a little dirty dark blue hat and started wearing it. He was quite attached to it. My dad decided he'd play a little trick on him. He got the hat off the hat rack one day and replaced it with one exactly like it except one size smaller. He left that for about a week. Then, he would exchange it was for one size even smaller. Q.M. began to become very concerned because he thought his head was growing. He couldn't hardly get his hat on. He was concerned so much that he went to a physician. He thought he had a brain tumor. He was examined by a physician who said everything was okay, but he was still quite concerned. At this time, my dad started reversing it and putting the larger hats on. They started getting bigger, and then Q.M. got very concerned that his head was shrinking.

FORSTYTHE: What did Q.M. do to him when he found out?

ABERNATHY: Well, I think he took it in good humor.

FORSTYTHE: What years did your father work at the school?

ABERNATHY: Well, I don't know exactly what years. I'd have to check that. He worked there in the forties, and I guess he retired in the sixties.

FORSTYTHE: What stories would he tell about MTSU? Do you remember any of them?

ABERNATHY: Well, he accompanies the singers a lot of trips, and they had a lot of fun. He would take the singers in a vehicle to various schools where they performed, and they were always having a lot of good times. Neil Wright and Margaret Wright were singers that went around with MTSU.

FORSTYTHE: What was important to your father?

ABERNATHY: The thing that was really important to my father was friends. He really enjoyed friendships. He had friends all over the country. He had a terrific memory. He could remember someone's name he hadn't seen for ten years and speak to them in various places of the country. The most important thing for him was friendship and fellowship. He traveled quite a bit. After he left MTSU and retired, he became an after dinner speaker and was humorous. He would make talks all over the country to entertain

people. He'd never forget a person's name or face. It would amaze me how he could remember people and people that he was affiliated with in education all over the state and country.

FORSTYTHER: What do you remember about Q.M. Smith?

ABERNATHY: Of course that was a long time ago. But, I remember that he had respect, he was a fair man, and that he was friendly and always had time for me.

FORSTYTHER: Do you remember Ed Baldwin?

ABERNATHY: Sure, I went to school with his son through the grades of training school. I don't remember a lot of about. I know his son better.

FORSTYTHER: What do you remember about growing up here?

ABERNATHY: It was a small town. Everybody knew everybody. You'd go downtown on the square and have a fountain coke. You never saw a stranger. It was a small friendly town. MTSU had about 2,800 students. Of course, it wasn't MTSU at that time. It was just a small friendly town.

FORSTYTHER: Do you remember John Gerald Parchmen?

ABERNATHY: Yes, I remember him. He was a friend of my dad's. I never had any classes under him. I just know him to speak to. I don't know any details about him.

FORSTYTHER: John Patton?

ABERNATHY: Oh, yes. John Patton was a wonderful man. He was one of my favorite teachers. I had him several biology courses. He was a student's favorite. He was an excellent teacher, and he really enjoyed the students. He would take special time with the students and give them special attention. I remember once when I wanted to get a parasitology course in, but there was no way I could get it in before I finished and went on to Med School. So, he gave me that course one on one so that I could get in it. That was the tupe of guy he was. He would just bend over backwards for a student, but he gave me that course one on one.

FORSTYTHER: Ellis Rucker?

ABERNATHY: I had him in genetics, and he was a good teacher. He was a little eccentric, but he was a very good teacher. I enjoyed his classes.

FORSTYTHER: Eugene Strobel?

ABERNATHY: I had him in biology too. I think I had him right after he came to MTSU. He must have come here in the mid-1950's. I always enjoyed knowing him and seeing him later on until he became mayor at Bell Buckle. I enjoyed renewing relationships with him. He was a very good teacher.

FORSTYTHE: Were you talking about Eldrid Wiser earlier?

ABERNATHY: Yes. I was in training with his son, Buddy Wiser at the University of Tennessee in surgery. We worked together there in Memphis for awhile.

FORSTYTHE: Do you remember Dean Beasley?

ABERNATHY: Dean Beasley was a good friend of my dad's. They were always joking, cutting up together and having a good time.

FORSTYTHE: Robert Corlew?

ABERNATHY: I had classes under Robert Corlew. He was a very excellent teacher and outstanding educator. I played tennis with his son, Scott and helped to locate a Murfreesboro practice of surgery. Then, he went on to train as a plastic surgeon. I helped talk him into coming back here to practice.

FORSTYTHE: Bealeah Davis?

ABERNATHY: Yes, I remember her in Phys. Ed., her P.E. classes and her square dancing.

FORSTYTHE: Homer Pittard?

ABERNATHY: I went through high school with Homer Pittard.

FORSTYTHE: Charles Murphy?

ABERNATHY: Everybody knew Coach Murphy. He was just always a very friendly type of guy. He was a very successful football coach. Of course, he's my neighbor and just lives across the street. I still enjoy seeing him and talking to him.

FORSTYTHE: What other memories do you have of your professors there?

ABERNATHY: Dr. Watts taught me physics. He was very didactic and very specific. The toughest course I ever had at MTSU was his physics course. I had some really outstanding chemistry professors. I am trying to remember if it was Dr. Watts or Dr. Shields.

FORSTYTHE: James Wade Guilford?

ABERNATHY: Yes, that was my physics teacher.

ABERNATHY: Do you remember Miss Mary Hall. I can remember my dad telling me a story about Miss Mary Hall. She marched into Q.M.'s office very infuriated one day and was going to turn in her resignation. She had just heard that he had approved putting in a beer machine at MTSU. She wanted him to have her resignation the day that got on the University. She was not going to be associated with any university that sold beer. It turned out that it was root beer. So, they had to explain that to Miss Mary Hall that it was non-alcoholic.