

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
ERNEST HOOPER

20 OCTOBER 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

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

INTERVIEW #QMS.131

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
ERNEST HOOPER**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.131

FORSYTHE: This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Dr. Ernest Hooper. Today is Friday, October 20, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of his sister, Mary Francis Brandon, at 125 Brookhaven in Smyrna 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 Dr. Hooper?

HOOPER: Yes

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

HOOPER: Ernest Walter Hooper.

FORSYTHE: Your birth place and birthday?

HOOPER: Murfreesboro, October 30, 1920.

FORSYTHE: Your father's name and occupation?

HOOPER: Edgar W. He ran a clothing store for the first seven years of my life, then he was an insurance agent.

FORSYTHE: What was the name of the clothing store?

HOOPER: Well I guess when I was growing up in was Hooper and Evans, before it was Butler and Hooper, but Mr. Butler died.

FORSYTHE: What was the name of the insurance agency?

HOOPER: It was just Hooper Agency. He operated it on his own?

FORSYTHE: Where was it located?

HOOPER: Part of the time it was in the Commerce Union Bank, on the second floor, on the corner of the square. Then he was also a delinquent tax collector for the city. He operated out of the old city hall, which was on the corner of Spring and College, where the Baptist education building is now.

FORSYTHE: The Hooper and Evans clothing store was on the square also?

HOOPER: Yes at the time, it was over on the west side of the square, just south of the Mediterranean restaurant, but I am not sure. I know there was Horton's grocery and Hooper Clothing and Hayne's Hardware and all of them went through to the back. You could look out to the corral where the National Guard's horses were. He was in that business till I was seven, so I can't remember too much about it, but I remember that.

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

HOOPER: Mary Francis Jones, she kept house until about 1930. She had started out as a milliner, but then when she married, she raised children until 1931. Then she took a job as the manager of the Crichlow school cafeteria, and she did that until she retired in 1956. About twenty five years.

FORSYTHE: What are your brothers and sisters names?

HOOPER: The brother was John Hooper, and the sister is Mary Francis Brandon.

FORSYTHE: Your wife's name?

HOOPER: Grier McQuiston

FORSYTHE: Do you have any children?

HOOPER: Yes we have two, Jim and Mary.

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

HOOPER: Mary Fancis did. I had a half brother, Edmund, who went when it was still the Normal School. I am not exactly sure if he was attending the Normal School or the Demonstration School. For a while they had the first grade through high school, I think that he was in training, because he was born in 1900. In 1917, World War I, he wanted to enlist and they diagnosed him with tuberculoses and wouldn't admit him to the army. The doctors felt that it was so serious that he went out to Arizona and started teaching in a school for Indians. He taught for a while, and then went into the administrative part of the service, but I think he was at the Normal School was the he would have been 17. I have also run across a number of picture of girls that he dated and I turned those over to Marie Kirk in the alumni office. The pictures were out in front of Rutledge Hall and in front of the dining room. I don't really know, these just came in some things that his wife sent us after he died. We tried to sort them out and we figured these were people that he was in school with. My sister graduated from MTSU and my brother never finished high school.

FORSYTHE: What memories do you have of being a student of MTSU?

HOOPER: I thought they had excellent teachers. The thing that I was impressed with was the encouragement of discussion and debate. I had debated in high school and I did in college as well, so that was part of it, but Dr. Golightly liked to talk to you about anything. You could take one side and he would take the other just to make a discussion even, though he clearly thought one way. That was one of the things that made me want to teach. When I was in the service, I spent a good deal of time in the hospital corps and had a good deal of night duty, so I had a lot of time to read. But the thing that I missed was there weren't more than two of the corpsman who had any interest in talking about things. I realized that teaching was one way where you could talk about ideas, so that is one of the things that I remember. Another was that it was a much smaller school then. I remember that when I was registering, if someone couldn't get into a particular course, they didn't mind trying to get you into another. I remember Clayton James making a special effort to get people into the classes they were interested in. When he moved to the retirement center, he gave me two or three year books from the time I was there. I discovered that he had made notes on the people who had graduated, had gone to work or to school, and tried to keep up with them as much as he could. I guess I remember that I was majoring in social science, but the people in English I enjoyed very much, Mr. Frazier and Miss Ordway, Phil Mankin, and Eva Burkett. I believe that she has died, she was the only one that was still living back a year or two ago. As I say, they tried to encourage you to think about things and come up with your own ideas. There were some, I am not going to name who it was, but it was a person in economics, I have always thought it was sort of ridiculous; he believed that you had to have objective ideas. I think economics is the last place you could expect to have that, but he encouraged you to study, and he liked to give you the objective true and false tests. It is easy to grade, but it is hard to say that this question is right in economics, and as I said I was interested in debating. Dr. Charles Lewis was primarily in education but he also taught some social science, and he directed the debating teams and took us on trips. There was one that I remember very pleasantly. He thought we ought to learn to bowl on one of them because we had some free time. I was also interested in the dramatic group. I did that with stage settings. The two that I had the largest roles was, "Our Town" and "You Can't Take It With You," both of those I remember. When I got back to teach in 1960, Wink Midgett came up and said, "Are you going to put on 'Our Town' again?" I remember that still. With the drama, Dr. Tarpley, who was a studying physician, was teaching and directing the plays. He was very good. Maybe I am not fair on this, but a friend of mine used to laugh about it, that when we were going to give "Our Town," the lead character, the stage manager, would have to be lazy, talkative, and not mind interrupting people. What else did he say, he said, "Quintin, either you or Ernest could play that part." Quintin always said, "You beat me on that." And I say, "You mean I was worse on that." But we enjoyed doing that. The other one, I guess you have heard stories about Miss Mary Hall, Miss Mary was the house mother at that time. I guess we gave, "You Can't Take It With You" about 1940. Anyway, afterwards she was kidding. I played the grandfather in that. She said, "Ernest you must be a role model for the grandfather, you are just cut out for that." As a junior in college that wasn't too flattering, but she

put it that way anyway. A number of people kidded me at the time. But as it turned out it had a good side as well, because while I was still in the service I came back and was stationed in Memphis. I was back here from time to time on leave. One of the times, the girl I was dating and I wanted to go to Nashville to see a play down there, and it was on Thursday night. Well they had strict rules and girls had to be in by nine o'clock on Thursday night. But we also went to see Miss Katherine Monohan who had retired and was kind of home bound. Miss Ordway, who had resigned, and I went and talked to Miss Mary and I said, "I know you can't let the girls go out on dates, but couldn't you let a grandfather take one to a play." She said, "Well I guess Ernest, we will wave that rule." So we got to go and see it. I expect she was anxious for us to see Miss Monohan and Miss Ordway. So I have pleasant memories about that. I remember stories about some of the people. Mr. Julius Bayer was in charge of the campus at the time and all the stories about him. One of them, when they were building the library which was where Peck Hall is now, somebody asked him why he kept plowing that, he had done it three or four times. He said, "Dean Beasley lost a dime, and I haven't found it for him yet, so I have got to keep on." He had a number of stories like that. It happened that I was in town when he retired, and at that time they did the retirements generally at the commencement. I was out on the porch with him, and I said, "Mr. Bayer, I am surprised that you are retiring but I just hope that when I retire I will look as well as you do and as strong." He looked down and said, "Ernest, starting from now you haven't got a chance." So he was an interesting character and very much concerned about the campus appearance. I don't remember what it was that my mother gave him, some kind of bulbs that he planted, but I know he brought her a dogwood. I had known him since I was in about the second grade, because he had served as a judge in a garden project that we had. I had decided to grow peanuts, and I managed to win the prize. He presented them over at what used to be the Louisa School. He was there, he was a member of the garden club. There was a story two or three years ago about some one being the first man to be a member of the garden club, but I knew they were mistaken, because Mr. Bayer was. That would have been about '27 or '28. Of course the rules were very strict about grass and so on. They said Miss Monohan would always flunk a person if she saw them going down the hall holding hands with a girl. I am not sure about that but I do know that one time we were working on a stage set and I was down in front of the auditorium, and a girl that was a cheerleader came in and got up so close that I was sort of surprised. She said, "Don't move. Miss Monohan is here and I don't want her to see me wearing shorts." Seems to me there was one other one in connection with that. One year we gave Claire Booth Luce's play "The Women" and there were some people questioned whether we should give it or not because there was a scene with a woman in a bathtub. They were wondering whether that was appropriate. We didn't have any trouble getting volunteers to work on the set that year. We made the newspapers because the girl who was there, (of course she had on a swimsuit), but she accidentally kicked the stopper off of the tub we borrowed and the water was running down toward the footlights. We had to close it and pull the curtains and try to mop it up, and that got into the newspaper. I had the clipping, I don't know where it is now. We had a lot of stories about Dr. Carlton Sims and I am not sure that these

are appropriate because I did not hear either one of the two. The most astonishing was that he had a wonderful sense of humor but he was very strict about timing. If you weren't there he was going to lock the door and you couldn't get in unless you had a very good excuse. A classmate of mine said this happened but I wasn't there. But he said there were two people teaching music, Miss E May Saunders and she was rather large, and then Miss Ruby Taylor Sanders who was rather slim and he said that this girl came in late. Dr. Sims said, "Why are you late?" She said, "Miss Sanders kept us so long in the class that I couldn't get out." He said, "Is that the broad a--or the narrow ..., oh sit down and let's start the class." I can't vouch for that but he told me that one. But I have heard two or three people tell the story, this was after I had graduated. As a matter of fact he had a class that was all veterans. Dr. Sims was completely bald. There was a student that came by and put his hand on Dr. Sims head, and said, "Your head feels just like my wife's derriere." He didn't use that term, he didn't know French I guess. Dr. Sims said, "Darned if it doesn't." Now I have heard that one from three different people that said they were in the class. But he was very strict about that. They have a story that I didn't hear, I can imagine both things working though. His class was about the middle of the second floor, his office classroom, and down at the far end. Miss Mary Frizzell, she usually let her classes out early, and Dr. Sims kept them till the bell rang. They said he went and slammed the door as the students came by talking. The story was, "I don't see why you don't keep your door shut, anyway." He said "I don't see why you can't keep your mouth shut." She said, "It is much easier for you to keep the door shut." He said, "I'll buy that." Now those are characteristics of the two people, but I don't know that actually happened that way. I guess it is all right to tell this one, because I did tell it in a commencement speech. I emphasized that just getting the degree was not enough. Dr. Sims told me about degrees when I was a student. Although he had a Ph.D. from Chicago, he said, "You know you start out and you take a BS. Now any boy that grows up on a farm yard knows what BS is, and then you go ahead and take an MS which means More of the Same, and if you get a Ph.D., that is Piled High and Deep, I did hear that one. He liked to tell stories of people that he had known.

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

HOOPER: 1938 to 1942, I started in the fall of '38 and finished in June of '42. Then I went into the service.

FORSYTHE: You were telling me about chapel earlier.

HOOPER: They assigned seats in chapel and I was assigned one about the second or third row from the back. I wanted to hear the speaker, so I sat down close to the front on the right side. I got a summons because I wasn't in the seat that I had been assigned to. Dean Beasley asked me about it, and said, "I think I saw you there." I said, "I was sitting right behind you, I thought that was a good place to hear," and he excused me for that.

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

HOOPER: Well I do remember that when he was coming here from Tennessee Tech, in Cookeville that there was a considerable controversy because he had apparently divorced his first wife, and married his secretary. But I don't think I ever heard any one say anything critical of Mrs. Smith. It was just that that was 1938 and it wasn't expected that you would have divorces. I never knew anything about that affecting the relationship with anyone. That was just sort of gossip before he got here. He performed the usual presidential duties. He did have a little bit of a handicap in his speaking, I think it came from gas in World War I. I think he was the first graduate at Tennessee Normal and then went into the service. But anyway I never noticed that, that effected him in any way. The only controversy that I know of had to do with the fact that he either fired or refuse to extend the contract with Philip Mankin who had been teaching English for several years and was a very popular teacher. Philip Mankin was an excellent teacher, he was sort of eccentric in many wayshe was also a very fair person. I took English with him, we were on the quarter system then and I had English with him the first and second year. I think the quarter of the second year, I was involved with something in speech or drama, and I wasn't studying as well, and I knew I wasn't doing as well. But taking the final exam, he said, "Ernest, we are going to disprove an old adage, the adage that once you have made a grade you have got it from then on." I don't remember what I made but I think it was probably a "B." Even though he was very friendly, he was also very fair. He left and I saw him a few times, he would be back visiting his family, his mother was here. But he went to Vanderbilt and I think he taught the rest of his career at Eastern Kentucky State, but I am not sure about that. This didn't happen during school but I mentioned Miss E May Saunders and after I came back, I lived over on Second Avenue. She lived on the Boulevard, and one day when we had a terrible snow, I was walking to the grocery. I thought about the fact that she was there and might be having problems, and I called and asked her if she needed anything. She said she certainly did, she would like to have two cans of tuna fish. I carried them by. She was worried about not having anything to feed her cat, so that is what she needed. They tell me that she and Dr. Sims went to a meeting in Nashville and were coming back at night and Dr. Sims was dimming his lights. She said, "Why do your lights change like that?" He said "Well I keep them on bright except when I meet a car." She said "How do you do that?" He said "There is a button right here." She said, "Is what that is for, I have wondered about that all this time." That is another second or third hand story. Another one was Mr. Horace Jones who taught mathematics. He was the son of Robert Jones, who was the first president, and then he married Dr. Lyon's daughter. He was teaching math, and I was taking trigonometry with him. He introduced the course by saying, part of trigonometry was mapping. He said if you go up to the map and see Cannon County, which was hill county, you will find that a lot of the deeds read, "so many rods this way, so many rods that way" then it will say "hence to the beginning" because they can't figure it out exactly. Well we laughed about that but it turned out to be a great advantage because one time he assigned a problem and I had worked it at night. When he asked if anyone had worked it, I was the only one that held up my

hand. He said, "Ernest, go up to the board and explain it." I couldn't think of the conclusion, and I said, "And thence to the conclusion." He said, "All right Ernest, I will accept that." He was a marvelous mathematician. If he worked something out in his mind, it was always perfect, but he told me that he needed trifocal glasses. If he put something on the board, he couldn't always see the things, and he might come out with the wrong answer.

FORSYTHE: You told me a couple of stories about Dr. Cope earlier.

HOOPER: Well Dr. Cope had a gift for relating to people. When I came here, I already had a good impression of Dr. Cope. I had begun my teaching at a college for blacks in Memphis. After the Brown vs. Board of Education, decision, we in Memphis, a group of us, worked in a thing entitled Integration Incorporated to try to help with problems. Dr. Cope was Commissioner of Education at the time, and he sent our a memorandum that had an opinion from the attorney general that the State Board of Education didn't have the authority in the counties. But he said the state board was anxious to have integration come with a minimum of friction, and he hoped that he could help out. He talked about the possibility of seminars and so on, so I was very impressed with that, that he was concerned about it when he was commissioner. When I came here, I talked with him and told him that I wanted him to understand that I had so many friends from Lemoine, that if they visited, I would expect to have them in our home, and I wondered if that would be offensive. He said, "As long as they were coming as friends, I see nothing about that, but I would be concerned if you were doing it as a demonstration thing." He certainly felt that way. In 1968, he was leaving, but I didn't know it at the time, that college was merging with a junior college, and the Dean had to be away to finish his dissertation. The president called and asked if I would come and help with the merger. I talked with Dr. Cope and he said, "I would be glad to help in any way I could. " When I got there I was pleased, President Price showed me the letter. It said, "I have agreed that Ernest can take the leave for '68 -'69. But I am going to hold to you one promise, that you won't try to persuade him to stay any longer than that." Then I told you that he was very friendly when I went there and they assigned me what had been a storage room, next to the auditorium. I was working in there and he said, "Ernest, you can go home now. I am going home, and when the boss goes home, you can go home." When I was giving a make up exam, I was up on the second floor, and I was sitting in the window, because there was no air conditioning and it was cooler. He was picking the dead blooms that where in the urns in front of Old Main. I looked out and said, "I am sure glad to find that there is some use for a college president." He said, "I didn't learn this from study, Mary Kate taught me how to do this. She said the maintenance people are very good but they don't pay attention to those urns, that is my responsibility." I know she was very much interested in how they appeared, because I saw her working with crews from time to time. But he was also the sort that you could be very frank with. After my first year, he said, "Ernest have you enjoyed this first year without having to serve on any committees. I said, "Yes, that is great. He said, "Well I would like for you to consider one." We had the self study for the Southern Association in '62, and he asked me to be chair of the curriculum.

When we talked about it there were several questions, and he was very frank about it. He said, "I would like to do this, but to meet the standards we will have to do this." He was very honest about that approach. I didn't have any difficulties with Dr. Scarlett except one brief one, and when we got it straightened out, he apologized. We couldn't have done it much different than we did. When Sam Ingram came I was very pleased because he had been there in the Education Department. The first five or six years they asked me to handle the transfer students to the History Department, I guess because I had some administrative experience in the dean's job about transferring work. I made a recommendation to Sam, and he came over and said, "Ernest I have read you memorandums, and you obviously know what the requirements are. As long as they are meeting the requirements, you tell the student if you feel like recommending something. You can promise them that I will approve it. If I don't lit it, I will tell you not to do it again." I was impressed with him that way. I guess I could tell you something that happened when I was a student. I was working the dramatic arts and we didn't have much equipment. If we were building something and needed something that we didn't have, I would go down and talk to the janitor. He was Billy Morris Haynes, and he would not only lend it to me but he would help me out if it was something that he could do. I was very fond of him. When I came back he was still there at Old Main and we were such good friends that when he retired I tried to keep up with him. I learned a lot about the school about how people operated, and I have heard so many stories about Billy. Dr. Kirksey told me that one year Billy said, "Dean, the groundhog has predicted that we are going to have a good pleasant spring early", and it turned out the weather was so bad, Dr. Kirksey asked him "How do you explain that?" He said "You just can't depend on that younger generation of ground hogs." Clarence Greever taught in education but he was very interested in outdoor and wildlife. He had an aquarium with a snake in it, but he said that Billy would not clean up unless he stayed in there with him. If he went in without the door open, Billy would lock it so that the students couldn't go in without somebody there. I carried Billy out to see Pete a number of times, they were good friends too. There were a number of others that were good friends of his too. I felt very fortunate all the time I was there. I would hear about friction in various departments, but in all the time I was there, I never knew it if there was any in the History Department. I found it to be the most ideal situation. Bob Corlew was chairman from the time it was established and then Bill Windham from then on. I thought both of them were so fine that I never thought of any real problems with that department.

FORSYTHE: What changes were made while you were there?

HOOPER: Well when I came back it was the department of Social Science, that was in '60 and I guess it was divided into a department of History in '63 or '64. Bob Corlew was appointed chairman. I guess at that time we had about five or six hundred people. We had twenty eight hundred when I came back so it has grown enormously. I guess one of the things that was of interest to me, when they started the historic preservation program, they asked me to teach a course in the search for local history. I said that they asked me because I was the only Murfreesboro native on the staff. It

might have been that I was the oldest member, but anyway, I had no experience in that. I had to do a lot of research and reading. I worked on it very hard. I had the chance to talk to a lot of people who were native Murfreesboro citizens and get them to talk to the class. I already had an interest in it but just hadn't pursued it very much. I had a lot of help from Homer Pittard.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about Homer Pittard?

HOOPER: Well he was a professor of education then director of alumni relations, but he had this tremendous interest in local history. He was active in the historical society and I worked with him on that. I worked on that. I am very fond of him and very grateful for what he did both in history and in education.

FORSYTHE: Tell me what you remember about Dr. Corlew.

HOOPER: Well he was phenomenal to me that he could do as much research as he did and still do the administration and teaching. I found it hard to believe that he could get that much done, and I would say we were always on good terms. I remember when they had their fortieth wedding anniversary. I congratulated Mary Sale, that she had stayed with him for forty years, I had to retire after about twenty two years, that was all I could take. He was a very good friend. I am very fond of him, both of his boys and his daughter too. As I said, I never had any problems. I can't say for sure that everybody felt that way. He was perfectly fair in evaluations, and salary distribution. I really can't say that anybody complained about him or Windham. I am sure that people sometimes wanted to offer a course but nobody that I know of complained. This morning I left with Jim about seven or eight folders of various committees that I worked on to see if there is anything of value there, also some newspaper clippings that I had kept.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about Dr. Windam?

HOOPER: Well I would say he was the perfect administrator. He worked very hard at it. He was a marvelous teacher as well. Before I really got to know him, I had heard from niece who had babysat for them, what wonderful people they were. We developed a very close relationship because when they first came we were members of the same church. We got to know them that way. It turned out that they were married on the same day we did, so we always exchanged things. We were about as close as you could get in college relationships I guess. I know that he not only did that but I heard what a great teacher he was from his students. I was grateful that he could do the administration and still keep on teaching. I would say that as a student I knew a great number of the teachers for who the women's dormitories are named Mary Hall, Schardt Hall, Monohan Hall; and McHenry. Miss McHenry was the secretary to, I think she started with Lyon, and Smith, and Cope. She was the sort of person that if you wanted information you might ask her first and then ask the president. That is often where you learn about things. As a matter of fact when Dr. Scarlett was there they did some study on the lines of organization and responsibility, and I filled it

out. But when I got to the comments, I said that I didn't care too much about the lines as long as I knew where Ella Ray Parks, Lena Keathley, and Elizabeth Turney were, I could get the answers. But anyway, Miss Bonnie could generally get the answers. If not she could tell you that so and so knew about it. One thing that I remember about her was that when we came back we lived on Fairview for a while then moved to Second Avenue and I generally walked to school. I seldom drove, but somehow I got a parking ticket in the mail and I took it by the president's office. Miss Bonnie said, "You don't drive over here, you walk." I said "I am pretty sure I wasn't here that day," she said, "Let's just tear it up and throw it away." So naturally I thought she was a fair person.