

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW  
WITH  
ERNEST HOOPER

20 OCTOBER 1995

SMYRNA, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE  
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
INTERVIEW #QMS.132

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  
ERNEST HOOPER**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.132

**FORSYTHE:** This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Dr. Ernest Hooper. Today is Friday, October 20th 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of his sister, Mary Francis Brandon at 125 Broadhaven in Smyrna, Tennessee. Tell me some of the stories you were telling me about Murfreesboro, about the mule that drowned.

**HOOPER:** Homer Pittard had written about that in his book about MTSU, but he said that he didn't know if it was true. I asked my half brother who went to school out there and he said not only was it true but he knew whose mule it was. His mother was a McKnight and I think it belonged to an uncle, but anyway he verified that. I would say that the stories that are the most fascinating, some of them are written down in some books by Mrs. Elizabeth Howse Ridley, "The Falling Stars" and "Flowers for Grace" and "The Falling Leaves," [the Gore Center has all three] books about growing up in Murfreesboro. Some of them I have an interest in. In one she said when she was a child her mother would let her and her sister go to the carnival on the square. She would give them fifty cents each, provided they promised not to go into the girlie show. I asked Mr. Harold Earthman about that. I said, "Surely they didn't have girlie shows on the square." He said, "Yes. They had the tent facing the court house so that no one could see who was going in." I said, "They never saw you go in there?" He said, "I never went through the front door, I slipped under the tent." She had a number of stories about the square in Murfreesboro and Mr. Earthman could verify a number of them. He had some stories of his own. I was able to verify some of them by a neighbor of mine who lived close to him when they were growing up. He said that one time the city got a new fire wagon, using horses, and he wanted to go and see it. Apparently there were having quite a show about it, but his father wouldn't let him go. He and a little boy next door were frustrated that they couldn't go, and they decided that they would start a fire. They started a fire in an alley but they caught the barn on fire as well. He said they got to see the fire wagon all right and he said when his father punished him that night, he said, "I am not doing this for getting the fire wagon there, I think it was a pretty shrewd way to get it there. I am punishing you for lying to your mother and telling her you didn't have a match when you went into the house to get the matches." He told a number of stories like that about himself and about school. He said one time at breakfast he had some jam and biscuits left over so he put them along in a separate bag. He had his lunch in a bag and put them in his pocket. He said he was under the desk eating the jam and biscuit and his teacher said, "Harold, what are you doing?" He said, "None of your damn business." The teacher said, "What did you say?" He said, "Eating a jam biscuit." He told stories about the tornado, cyclone they called it. I learned something about this from a woman who was 83 at the time, she was the

mother of a friend of mine. I asked her what she knew about the tornado. She said at the time she was working at a place on the square and lived out on Maple, about the second block from town. She said that after the cyclone had hit, she went out on the porch to see, and there were a couple that were out there. The man owned a livery stable out on West Main. She said that she didn't think of anyone celebrating a cyclone but she saw skyrockets and Roman candles and found that there was a store that had dynamite and fireworks in it. Well we talked on and she told the story about a young man who ran a cafe on the East side of the square. She said it was the swankiest cafe in town, and I don't think she remembered his name but he was Jewish. He had his apartment in the back of the cafe, but she said up above they had the telephone office. When he heard the timber crashing against the side, he rushed up to see if the operators were all right. I looked up in the Nashville paper and they described a tornado that had gone across Rockvale and Patterson and told about the family that was killed in it. I thought that the story was there were no people killed. It turned out that there was a tornado about a week before the one that hit the square. I got interested in it and it listed these two operators as the heroins. But what she was saying was the young man went up and asked if they were all right, and they said, "Yes we are all right. " Then he saw that they were red-faced and he said, "Why are you so red-faced?" They were blushing because he had gone up in his shorts and they weren't accustomed to that. She said that the man that she worked for, their building wasn't seriously damaged, but there was a skylight and something had come through the glass, in through some folded cloth and into the counter. She said that he said he would see how much money he could get out of it. The paper reported that he would give it to the Smithsonian Institute to show what cyclones could do. Mrs. Ridley, or Mrs. Howse as she wrote, told that the cyclone hit part of the square on the North East corner and destroyed two buildings. My father was in the clothing business with Mr. Butler there and it hit there Next door to that was a shoe store that my uncle operated and it damaged it pretty badly. It jumped over and bounced and hit the Presbyterian church and destroyed what was the sanctuary, but it didn't destroy the back of the building. Mrs. Ridley reported that the next day they had sort of a Thanksgiving service about the fact that nobody was killed. The most serious injury was a man that had his leg hurt. I learned about him when I saw him riding horse back years later and my daddy told me. Mr. Ridley said that the church was damaged but it didn't destroy the organ. Mr. Ridley said that he thanked God that no one was killed. He especially wanted to thank God because in the back of the church on Academy and Lytle, Alice Ray's house had a frame attachment to it, and there was a young woman there and she went into the brick part of the house, and the frame part was destroyed. Mrs. Ridley put it that Dr. J Addison Smith thanked God for the call of nature that led that woman out of the frame house and into the brick house.

FORSYTHE: Can you tell me about integration at MTSU?

HOOPER: That was one thing when I talked with Dr. Cope about the matter of my black friends. He said, "That is fine, we really need some people who are going to be able to get along with blacks. " I really didn't see any problem. I am sure there must

have been some, but with the black students I had, I recognized the fact that many of them had a limited experience, and I tried to help out on that if I could. I think one of the most rewarding experiences I had was with a student who came in to see me after I had explained what was required in grading and so on. She said, "Dr. Hooper, I think I had better drop your course. To be honest, I have flunked it twice, and after I heard what you required and expected, I don't think I could do it." There was still about two weeks for her to decide so I signed it. You can make up your mind about it, but if you want to try it I will be glad to try and help you. She decided she would try it, and I may have been a little bit biased but I was sure she had a solid "C" The most important thing that I could help her discover that the problem was that she would read something and she didn't understand what it meant, and didn't realize it. But I think that was rewarding and that she just didn't realize that she could ask for help like that. That is one of the things that you are grateful for. I don't really know of any problem that I had in any class with any of the black students, I don't know of their feeling, any bias. The only one I can think of that came to me the day before graduation and said "If I don't make a C I can't be on the cheerleader squad next year" well there wasn't anything I could do about that and I hope he didn't think that had anything to do with race. I had never had any sense from any student that they felt that way. Partly I guess because I tried to present in the courses a fair treatment of the races. I usually started courses by saying that we study history to try and learn from the mistakes of the past. I am sure that there were students who did feel that there was discrimination against them.

FORSYTHE: Is there any other stories?

HOOPER: I can't think of any.

FORSYTHE: Thank you.