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# Alphonso Smith interview, Professor Emeritus, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, Wright State University

Lewis Shupe  
*Wright State University - Main Campus*

Alphonso Smith  
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**WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY**  
**Retiree Association Oral History Project**

Interview date: June 5, 2007

Interviewer: Lewis Shupe  
Professor Emeritus, Department of Communication

Interviewee: Alphonso Smith  
Professor Emeritus, Department of Mathematics and Statistics

**LS:** Today is June 5, 2007. I am Lewis Shupe, Professor Emeritus from the Department of Communication, and we're interviewing today Professor Emeritus Alphonso Smith, whom most of us know as Al, from the Department of Mathematics and Statistics. Al, it's good to have you here to participate in the oral history project that we're doing through the retirees' association.

**AS:** I'm glad to be here.

**LS:** To start, would you share with us how you came to Wright State?

**AS:** Okay, well, I knew Ned Moulton, Edward Q. Moulton, who was vice-president for all of campus instruction at Ohio State back in the late '50's and early '60's. I was a National Science Foundation Fellow as a graduate student, and we got paid once a month, and Ned Moulton was the person who was in charge of our pay and seeing that we were doing what we were supposed to be doing, progressing in our academic work, and I would have to go up and get my stipend from him once a month. As you may know, Ed was a very voracious fellow, a communicative fellow, and he would always want to chat with you and see what you were doing. So I had been doing that with Ned Moulton for five years I guess, from 1959 to 1964, and Bob Dixon and I were classmates. Well, we weren't classmates, Bob Dixon was a class ahead of me, but we had lots of classes in mathematics back at Ohio State during those days. Bob had left and gone to the University of Illinois, but still was in touch with Ed Moulton. He came back one Saturday morning, early, and knocked on my door. Those who know me know that I don't get up early, period, and certainly don't get up early on Saturday mornings, and I started not to answer the door. But I did, and it was Bob Dixon and he said that Ned Moulton had asked him to recruit people to form a mathematics department down at this new campus that Ohio State was responsible for, responsible for the science and engineering at that time. He wanted me to come down and be a part of the mathematics faculty, Ned Moulton had asked him to be the coordinator of mathematics, and he asked would I join. I had not heard of Dayton before then, I was a Tennessee person, but Bob persuaded me and I came down with the expectation of being here a few years, and it wound up to be forever.

**LS:** Now Ed Moulton was the person from Ohio State, as Earl Theskin was the person from Miami, who were the two people responsible for getting things organized.

**AS:** That's right, and Ned was responsible for hiring all of the people in Science and Engineering, that's what it was called at that time, Science and Engineering, the College of Science and Engineering. So that's how I came. Directly, I would say Bob Dixon was responsible for my coming, but he asked me to go over and see Ned Moulton, so I went over and saw Ned Moulton, in a different capacity this time. [At] that time, Ned Moulton had a big mounted- maybe you've seen it- I've got a picture of what this campus was supposed to look like in 25 years, with a hospital here, and a football stadium there, and an arena there, and he said this is what the campus would look like in 25 years. Specifically, he said that people from Ohio wanted this to be the "M.I.T. of the Midwest" for biology, with the medical school and all of that, but he said in order to have a good medical school or a good biology program, you need mathematics, so we want a good mathematics department, too. Now, people from the Miami side may have a different view on whether this was to be the M.I.T. of biology, but that's how Ned Moulton sold it to me.

**LS:** Well, no, the Miami people were from the other areas, like education.

**AS:** Yeah, right.

**LS:** But that map still exists, here in the archives, and in fact there's a little flying saucer, I think, in that.

**AS:** Oh, is that right? [Laughs] I have a copy of that map.

**LS:** Yeah, that still exists. What was your first impression when you came to Dayton?

**AS:** Well, I remember the first time I came down here was Memorial Day of 1964. On my radio all I could get was the Indianapolis 500 being run that day, and unfortunately there was a death at the Indianapolis 500. But I came down here, and Allyn Hall was under construction. It wasn't finished, there was a gravel road, the main entrance was a partly dirt and gravel road, and I drove around and actually got out of my car and walked in the building to see how the construction was. Of course it didn't mean anything, it was just the one building around at that time, but Ned had assured us that classes would be beginning in the fall, in September, but I came down on Memorial Day of 1964. I think I didn't come again until after I had signed a contract and I came down to look for a place to stay, and that must have started in the early summer of 1964. Of course, at that time the State of Ohio didn't pay moving expenses, so we were on our own and most of us hardly had enough money to get ourselves down here, certainly not enough to move things. So Ned Moulton, I didn't ask about this, but the way Ned Moulton arranged it was that he arranged for our contracts to begin August 1, so we had to come down for a "meeting" on August 1, and that is how we got paid for August, but that first month salary was our moving expenses. [Laughs]

**LS:** Was it a shock for you?

**AS:** No, I guess I kind of knew what I was getting into. It was a shock for the students, I mean the size of the classes. I had been teaching an honors calculus course at Ohio State and the classes were small, 24 or something like that, and I think my first class here I had 75 students in my class. I had never been involved in a class of that size before, so that was a shock, but I think otherwise it wasn't a shock. Remember, I only expected to be here two or three years, so I was prepared and probably would have accepted anything.

**LS:** And all the classes were in Allyn Hall.

**AS:** All of the classes were in Allyn Hall, yes.

**LS:** All of the offices were in Allyn Hall.

**AS:** All of the offices were in Allyn Hall, right.

**LS:** Was that an advantage or a disadvantage?

**AS:** Well, I thought it was an advantage, I mean, there were several advantages of being here the first year, being part of the first year's experience here, not just being here the first year but part of the first year's experience. First of all, most of us were young and inexperienced, so we didn't have to come in and be a part of a structure and work our way up, although there were some people who were a little bit older than I was, I was 27 at the time. That was one advantage, so we were more integrated, and all of us shared offices on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of Allyn Hall, everybody, and I remember there were 42 full time faculty members, we had a lot of adjuncts, but there were 42 full time faculty members. I knew everybody, and everybody had coffee in the little coffee room, and we would huddle down there on occasion and we knew everybody, and it was a real camaraderie that developed among the people who were here that first year. So I thought that was an advantage. If those of us who were younger had gone to some more established place, it would have taken us years to have any real influence in terms of how things worked. One of the things I will say about Ned Moulton is that he assured us, he told us, that this place was going to one day be independent so we were responsible for making it what it was, and he wasn't going to tell us what to do. He would guide and offer advice, but we had to go and make this a place, so we felt that we were pioneers and really had some influence in what was going on, and I think that's the way Ned treated us.

**LS:** Who was the main administrator/president at that time?

**AS:** Well, Fred White, there was a duo thing, Fred White was the overall business manager, I think that was his title, business manager, and Howard Bales was Ned Moulton's primary assistant down here. On the Miami side, I don't know, I can't remember who it was. But Ned Moulton was our contact, Howard Bales and Ned Moulton, but Howard was mainly, I shouldn't say mainly, but Howard was making certain that if we had anything to really communicate- complaints, requests, asking for things- we went through Howard Bales. But Ned Moulton was the person we could go to directly if we wanted to. But I would say if anybody was in charge it was Fred White, Fred White was the overall head.

**LS:** What were the main issues and some of the obstacles or problems that you encountered?

**AS:** Well, the main issue was governance, I mean we were young and we were trying to find out how we should be governed. As youngsters, most of us were idealists and not really realists, I guess, and so we were trying to combat some of the older, but Fred White was very good, I shouldn't say combat, there were no combative issues we had with Fred White whatsoever, he was a good person. But just trying to, among ourselves, trying to decide how we should govern ourselves. One of the issues at that time was how we should accommodate the students who were mainly commuting, you know, this was a commuter campus, we had no dormitories and it was mainly a commuter campus. One of the issues was that this campus opened a year earlier than it was supposed to have opened. It wasn't supposed to have opened until the fall of '65, and it opened the fall of '64. I wasn't here in the area with all of the pre-publicity and campaign to get students, but we got the impression, certainly I got the impression, that students who came here came here as an afterthought. You know, they were students who weren't certain that they were going to college, but, "Ah, that place is open out there in the [corn]fields, I think I'll give it a try". So, that was the type of commitment that students, many of the students, had at that time. Assigning homework was a big issue, and I had a student who told me that he never cracked a book in high school and made A's, so why did he have to do all of this work now? So, I think the attitude of the students. That changed, of course.

**LS:** What did you say to him?

**AS:** I told him that we expected him to put about two hours of work in for study for every hour in class. He didn't complain, you know, but he was bragging about how little he had to study in high school and got good grades, and now he was doing all of this and not doing well. But that was one of the things, the other was that both students and faculty, I think, didn't want to come out here. There was no service, no public transportation service out here, so the only way you could get out to the campus was by car. There was no real housing immediately around the campus as it developed. There were no eating facilities, people had to bring their lunch. So some people, both students and faculty, complained about having to come out here as much as they did. That was one of the issues about the curriculum, whether we should have four hour classes or five hour classes, whether we should force students to come out every day of the week versus

coming out three days a week, many of whom were part timers and they couldn't come out. So, that was an academic issue, and I think that went on until the campus got independence in 1968. Because the people at Ohio State, on the Ohio State side in Science and Engineering at that time, were accustomed to having five (1) hour classes that met everyday, and the people from the Miami side were accustomed to two and three hour classes that met two or three times a week. So that was a real issue, a somewhat divisive issue in the two camps.

**LS:** It's interesting to be sitting here in the library, in this time and place. Tell us about the library?

**AS:** Well, you know the first library, if you could call it a library, was in the area right around "The Moat", in Allyn Hall, that island right around the moat, and that's where everything was housed at that time. It wasn't much of a library, I would say, but that's where the library was, it was accessible, I don't know what the holdings were at that time. But somebody gave us a grant of \$250,000 to buy books. There was, I don't know whether it was a Princeton or Harvard or some Ivy League institution had put together what a book list should look like, what a library should look like, a college library should have these holdings, and I think in order to purchase those holdings, the \$250,000 went a long way towards satisfying that requirement, it may have gone all the way, I don't know, but it went a long way. But that was the library for awhile, and the second or third year Fawcett Hall [Oelman] was built, and our offices, the people in Science and Mathematics, moved over into Fawcett Hall [Oelman]. We actually watched the construction of Millett [Hall] a year or so after that, but I understand you are interviewing Marc Low next week, I hope you will take advantage and not let Marc Low get away with being too modest. His father was the consultant on the construction of the library in Millett Hall, when Millett Hall was built. Marc's father, actually, had the library named after him at Oklahoma State University, he was a consultant in Washington, and we brought him in to consult and build the library. So I learned a lot about construction of libraries, that books are very heavy and so the reinforcement columns had to be bigger and stronger in a library than in regular buildings.

**LS:** Now in Millett, you had to go downstairs, didn't you, to get to the library?

**AS:** Well it was on the first two or three floors.

**LS:** But there was a stairwell that led down.

**AS:** Well there was a stairwell, but fortunately, and I just finished telling this story a week or so ago, Millett and Fawcett were connected by a tunnel. Millett and Allyn, I'm sorry, Millett and Allyn were connected by a tunnel, [pause], Fawcett was the second building, and I just said Millett. Allyn Hall and Fawcett Hall were connected by a tunnel, and we found that convenient. So when Millett was built, there was a tunnel connected, and then later when, I've gotten confused about the buildings now... Oelman was the second building. Oelman Hall was the second building, Oelman and Allyn were connected by a tunnel, then when Millett was built it was connected by a tunnel, and then

when Fawcett was built it was connected, so that was the Quadrangle. So it was sort of accidental that those buildings were connected by a tunnel, particularly accidental because, I don't know if you know, but that part of the campus is over some springs, and those springs are forever giving out water, and that's why the tunnels are wet. There was some issue about whether we should continue to build over that part of the campus as opposed to going out in the woods, which was another controversy about preserving the woods. It was decided, and I think rightfully so, but it was decided that we would manage the springs over which that part of the campus was because the advantage of having the tunnels was greater, and so that's how the tunnel system came into being.

**LS:** Well, good. How has your department grown since the first days?

**AS:** Well, we've certainly grown in number. I think there were five or seven, I forget the number, of us that first year, and we taught all of the daytime classes. Some of the evening classes were staffed by adjuncts from the area, and some of the evening classes were over at the base at that time, because Ohio State hadn't completely divorced itself from running the science and math classes at the base. But we were small, of course we were small, but I think we were large by that 42. Remember we were 5 or 7 out of 42 [total faculty], which is a big proportion. Many of the departments had one person. Bob Thobaben was in Political Science, he was one person. So we were large by the standards of that time, and most of us, at least all of us except two, were from Ohio State or had Ohio State ties. The Lows were the exception, Bob Dixon had brought the Lows, Marc and Leone, from Illinois with him. But all of the rest of us, Don Schaefer for example was my office mate at Ohio State, he and I came down, and Phil Coppage and I had been in classes at Ohio State, so as you might expect, there was a strong Ohio State tie.

**LS:** Now by Ohio State tie, I assume you are talking about connections and not the wearing apparel?

**AS:** Yeah, that's correct [laughs]

**LS:** If you could use one word to describe Wright State then, what would it be?

**AS:** Well, "new". I guess if there's one word, it was "new". If I can use "tie" again in a different capacity, there were no traditions. I mean, we were free to explore, make our own mistakes and we certainly did, but we were free to explore and develop the campus as we saw fit, for the most part. You know, there were certain academic standards you had to adhere to, but I think "new" would be the one word. I wouldn't say green, which somebody else might say, but I would say just "new". I think we were innovative, [we were] non-traditionalists, although traditions developed and in the end we may not have been so non-traditional.

**LS:** Can you think back to a tradition that evolved right from the beginning?

**AS:** Well, I can think of one that was supposed to have evolved, but didn't evolve. We came here in the mid '60's when a lot of campuses were having trouble with sororities and fraternities, and issues about hazing and discrimination in sororities and fraternities. It was decided that this campus would not endorse or restrict sororities, you know, there would be no official endorsement of any sorority [or fraternity]. I think that has changed, I think there are sororities and fraternities, but that was a policy that was decided upon early here. I don't think any problems, at least I know of no problems that have developed with the sororities and fraternities on campus. But there were a lot of problems in the '60's with sororities and fraternities, and so some campuses had to de-certify some sororities and fraternities, and it was decided here that we would neither endorse sororities nor fraternities. I think that worked for us for awhile and probably it evolved and so it is probably working now that the university does officially endorse sororities.

**LS:** Does "Over the Hill Gang" ring a bell with you?

**AS:** Are you referring to me? {Laughs}

**LS:** That's the reference to past presidents or vice-presidents of the faculty, right? You had your moments.

**AS:** Yeah, I had my moments. Of course, Jim Sayer has had many moments. Well, I think that was a tradition that developed with the faculty vice-presidents. I think Emil Kmetec may have been the first, I don't know, but I think faculty governance certainly evolved over time, and I think it became a good counterbalance with the administration. I remember when I was faculty vice-president back in the late '80's, I enjoyed my time. I don't think I would have done it again. I admire Jim Sayer, I don't know which term it is of his, probably his fourth or fifth?

**LS:** I think seventh.

**AS:** Seventh, okay. But I enjoyed my time. I think you learn a lot, you learn a lot about the university. I certainly felt that at the end of my stint, I had just learned how to do the job. But I wouldn't have wanted to start over and do it again. A tradition that developed was that the faculty, well, now it is called the faculty president, but the faculty vice-president used to convene all of the past faculty [vice] presidents, quarterly, and frequently they would put you on the hot seat because they would tell you that you should be doing this or you shouldn't be doing that, and why aren't you pressing this more. I always hated those meetings when they came up because I knew I was going to be put on the hot seat. But they were good, and I knew at the time they were good because they kept you focused and kept you from getting lazy, I guess. So those were good things, I guess the analog might be the President of the United States holding press conferences, you know, he is usually grilled and he gets a lot of questions he shouldn't have, but anyway those meetings were always friendly, they were stern and contentious, but they were friendly so that was a good thing.



**LS:** During your tenure, was there any major event that occurred or development at Wright State?

**AS:** Well, there were several. One is, I came in at a time when there was real tension between the faculty and the Board of Trustees. Not so much the faculty and the President, but faculty and the Board of Trustees. I felt that certain factions of the administration, not Mulhollan, sort of took advantage of that fission. Something that I think Bob Kegerreis never would have done. So there was a lot of tension between the faculty and the Board of Trustees at that time. I was just telling someone that, for the most part, I never took work home that I had to worry about. I mean, I took work home that I had to do, but there were two times when an issue came up between the faculty and the Board of Trustees that I thought was going to lead to a real impasse, and I really worried about that when I was home. That was over grades, I'm sorry, over student evaluations of faculty. The Board of Trustees wanted to force a uniform document where the students would evaluate the faculty, and, of course, some colleges were resisting any evaluation. Science and Mathematics had an evaluation, and the faculty governance position was that we should have student evaluations of the faculty, but it should not necessarily be uniform, that we should take advantage of the differences in teaching modes of the various colleges. The board was insisting that there would be one. So, that was one issue. The institution of football was another, I think that happened right after I left faculty governance, it may have been during. But that was, it wasn't contentious, but there was a study made and, of course, the president at that time wanted to bring football in, and we were insistent that it would drain academic resources. But that was a friendly debate. The other was converting from the quarter to the semester system, I don't know if that is still an encore thing, but those were three of the debates, contentious issues that were present. I always prided myself as one of the things that I think, I was on the side of not going football, and I thought that was one of my big victories, but temporarily, because who knows what will happen in the next ten or twenty years. But I tell people, in today's economy, what would it be like if Wright State had to support a football team.

**LS:** If you could go back now, what would you do differently? Anything?

**AS:** Oh, I'm sure there are things I would do differently, you know, as I look back I'm sure I made mistakes. But I think overall, I tell my friends when they complain about things that have happened in the past, I ask them, "Are you happy with where you are now?", and most of them will say yes, and I say, "Well, it took all of that to get you there". So, I think I will apply that to myself. I think that I'm happy with Wright State, I'm happy with the way things are going right now, have turned out, so I think maybe it took all of those mistakes to get me where I am and maybe to get Wright State where it is.

**LS:** What questions would you like to ask other faculty today about Wright State?

**AS:** Well, can I turn that question around a little bit?

**LS:** You can turn around any way you want.

**AS:** One thing I think that we all should be mindful of is where we came from and how we got there. I think too many people come in now, both administrators and faculty, who are unconcerned about where we are, how we got where we are, and what the history of the institution has been, and most times they might not care. This occurred to me about eight years ago when I was down in ESPM, [Excess and Surplus Property Management], and I saw some picture frames down there...

**LS:** Now tell us what ESPM is?

**AS:** ESPM is the place where surplus equipment is sold at surplus prices, bargain bin prices, so things that are no longer needed, discarded, but maybe of some value to somebody, is sent down to ESPM and it is sold down there at bargain prices. I'm a frequent visitor of ESPM. But I was down there a few years ago, and there were some picture frames, nice picture frames that were down there. Unfortunately, in that picture frame there was David Rike, shoveling dirt for the breaking ground for Rike Hall, and several other what I would consider momentous pictures. They were being sold as picture frames, but there were pictures, some of them were signed, with the gold plate down there at the bottom, and I got upset and I called Lillie Howard and told her about it. You know, these were historic things and now they were down in ESPM to be discarded or sold as bargains. The frames were cheap, you know, but it wasn't the frames, they were nice frames, but it was the history of Wright State that was being put on the junk heap, and I was somewhat upset about that. So what I would say to the present generation is to be mindful of the past, and I'm happy that you're doing these interviews and archiving some of the feelings of people who were here earlier, and I hope that this interview doesn't end up on the junk heap, also.

**LS:** Of course it won't. Is there anything that I didn't ask or that didn't pop into your mind that you would like to share before we close the interview?

**AS:** Well, I guess you asked this, did I have a happy ride here? I sure did, I enjoyed my stay. [As] I said, I expected to stay a few years, and I wound up staying 29 years, and I guess I only left because there was an early buyout. But, as you note that I am frequently around, I hope not too frequently, but I've enjoyed my stay here and I've enjoyed all of the people here, and I hope to enjoy them for a few more years.

**LS:** Well, thank you, Al. If, after this if you think of something we can always add an addendum to your interview. We appreciate your participation.

**AS:** Well, I'm sure I will think of something I should have said, five minutes from now, five days from now, five weeks from now.