Interview
with
Robert T. Ashmore

University Libraries
University of South Carolina
Interviewer:

Robert Ashmore Eskew, his great-nephew

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Transcriber:

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Synopsis:

Interviewed just prior to his eighty-fifth birthday, Ashmore (1904-1989) reflects on his life, achievements, and values.

This interview with former U.S. Congressman Robert T. Ashmore was conducted by Greenville Middle School eighth-grader “Robbie” Eskew for a school history project. Eskew’s mother is also heard on the tape.
[Begin Tape 1]

Ashmore: My family owned their first car during World War I, about 1918. It was a second-hand Oakland.

Eskew: I figured it would be a Ford.

Ashmore: I remember, my father made some more money during the war, when more people had money and wages were better. He tried to buy a Ford, but during the war you couldn't hardly buy a Ford or any new automobile. Since he couldn't get a Ford, he bought this second-hand Oakland.

[Reading the question--] “What were some of your favorite radio programs when you were a young boy?”

I was a little more than a boy when radio came in. Amos ‘n’ Andy. I can't remember what some of the others were. We didn't have a radio when we were out on Old Spartanburg Road.

“What did teenagers do for fun?”

[laughter] We played baseball, marbles, and horseshoes. We went fishing or worked on the farm. That's not much fun, maybe, but it was good exercise. Sometimes, you could work on your Daddy's or your neighbor's farm and make a dollar a day. Ten hours. Started work at seven in the morning, take one hour off at noontime, and work until six in the afternoon. You worked until you heard the whistle blow at noontime. One of the big cotton mills on the west side of town always blew a loud whistle. You could hear it all over town at twelve o'clock. Then it would blow again at one o'clock when it was time to go back to work. It would blow again at six o'clock in the afternoon and it was time to quit.
We would ride bicycles and things like that. But especially fishing. Those who liked to swim would go to swimming pools. I remember on our farm, my older brother, my younger brother, and some of the neighbor kids, we would build a swimming pool on an old creek, down in the pasture. Of course, when a big rain came it would wash it away and you would have to rebuild it. Anyway, both of my brothers liked to swim. I never did like to swim. I never was any good in the water. I would help build the pond, though.

“Today's teenagers are faced with drug and alcohol problems. What kind of problems were teenagers facing in your generation?”

There was no such thing as drug [abuse] then. It was almost unheard of in this country. There was home brew. Home brew was an alcohol that was made after Prohibition came into effect. They kept people from manufacturing and selling whiskey all over the United States. When I was a youngster, some people made home brew in their own homes. I never did make it or drink it. I never did like alcohol. I saw what it did to too many people. Some members of my family and friends let alcohol ruin them and their reputations.

I remember one man in the neighborhood who was such an alcoholic that he would even drink the alcohol you buy in the drug store. If it had a high percentage of alcohol in it he'd drink it. I don't know how it didn't kill him. He lived to be seventy years old. He never amounted to anything, although later in life he married a second time and had two wonderful children. I think he had four wonderful children. He had two by his first wife, both of which turned out to be very good mothers and wives, good Christian women. His two sons by his second wife also turned out to be good citizens. But he couldn't control his desire for alcohol. I think his children were successful in spite of the influence of their daddy. Seeing what alcohol did to their father made them better children. They stayed away from alcohol and became good citizens. In a way, his alcoholic tendencies were a good influence. It influenced them to stay away from it.
“How old were you when you decided that you wanted to be a lawyer?”

I was in the ninth grade in Greenville High School. When I had [started] high school I was planning to be a doctor because of the influence of this young doctor in the community had on my life. He used to take me hunting and to see his patients. He led me to have a desire to help people who were sick. I was just a ten- or twelve-year-old boy. So I planned to be a doctor, too, until the ninth grade in Greenville High School. Then I had to study Latin. I didn't like Latin. I seemed not to be able to learn much about it. I failed in Latin. I had to take it over in summer school in order to get a diploma. In our ninth-grade class at Greenville High School, we organized the class and had a class president, a secretary, a treasurer, a committee on morals and deportment and so on.

One of my classmates was charged with some minor offense and we decided to have a trial. His name was Eugene Davidson. I'll never forget it. He was a friend of mine. I don't remember what offense he committed. It was something minor. He disobeyed some order or something in the school. The teachers suggested that the class try him. I don't remember whether he asked me to defend him, but I did. They prosecuted him for the offense, and I was his lawyer. I don't think I'd ever been in a courthouse before. I acquitted him. He was found not guilty by the jury of twelve of his fellow classmates. So that put me to thinking about studying law rather than medicine, [especially] since I didn't like Latin. I already liked to study civics, government and history, and that made me determine that I would be a lawyer.

I belonged to one of the two literary societies in Greenville High School. It was the Hughes Literary Society, named for a Professor Hughes. He used to be Superintendent of Schools in Greenville. He was such a good Superintendent that they named the literary society in honor of [him]. We had a debating team in both of the literary societies. I participated in the debates, although I wasn't as well-prepared, having come from a country school where we hardly knew what a debate was. I certainly didn't know anything about a literary society. I was selected, along with three other students to
participate. I was one of two people on the affirmative side [of the debate], two other students were on the negative side. I forget what the subject was that we were to debate. We had to study in the library and do a lot of research to determine what we were going to say in presenting our side of the debate. The other two students had to do the same thing in presenting their side.

We had three judges. I don't remember, but I think they were three teachers in the school. Believe it or not, although I was just a country boy, two years out of a little country school, our side won. That made me very proud. The principal of Greenville High School was Professor W. F. Warren. After the debate was over he came up and shook my hand, congratulating me. He said-- "I didn't know it was in you." That made me feel like I'd done a good job. The day after that I started going to the courthouse once in a while to listen to trials.

That gave me more interest in being a lawyer. I decided that I definitely wanted to be a lawyer. In my second year in Furman I started studying law. Rather than an A.B. or B.S., I decided that I wanted an LL.B. degree. There was a law school at Furman then. There must have been fifteen or twenty students in the law school. I finished law school in May 1927. I passed the bar examination and was admitted to practice law in South Carolina in January 1928. I've been a lawyer ever since.

“How did your family afford for you to go to college? Did you have to work?”

I sure did. I didn't have the money to live on the campus dormitory. I walked two miles in the morning and two miles in the afternoon. We were living in Overbrook then. In bad weather I would ride the streetcar which was close to home. Once in a while I would go in the family car. Generally, I walked four miles a day to high school and to Furman.

“What was college life like?”
It was pretty rough. I had to work in my daddy's store in the afternoons and weekends to make a little extra money and to help him run the store. I wasn't able to participate in many college activities. I was unable to play football or baseball. I did participate in the debating societies at Furman. I've forgotten the name of the two debating societies there. They were very much like the high school societies. I got to make a couple of trips on the debating team at Furman. I didn't have the luck that I'd had in high school, but I did debate several times.

“Where did you go to law school?”

Furman University Law School. It was later abandoned, or abolished, when World War II began because Furman didn't have enough endowment to keep the law school in operation. Law schools are expensive to operate. All the law books in the law library were expensive. College professors were good lawyers and you had to pay them good salaries. So sometime in the early ’30s, when the Depression was at its worst, they abandoned the law school. There hasn't been a law school at Furman since then. They did turn out some pretty good lawyers.

“How old were you when you decided to go into politics?”

I had started practicing law in January 1928. In the summer of 1930 I decided to run for county solicitor, or county prosecutor. There was a vacancy coming up, and I decided I would run for it. At that time I would have been twenty-six years old. I was elected. The Depression was so bad and expenses were so great in all county governments then, they decided to abolish the county court in 1932. So I [had] served two years as county solicitor [when] they abolished the county court. Since I was elected to a four-year term as county solicitor, they made me assistant circuit solicitor. I served there during 1933 and 1934.

Then, at the end of ’34, I had no public job. I was practicing law. There was a vacancy in the office of the circuit solicitor of the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit. That was where I'd
served two years as assistant circuit solicitor. So I ran in 1936 for circuit solicitor. Four lawyers ran. I won the race. I took office in January of 1937. I served as circuit solicitor until June of 1953, when I ran for Congress and was elected.

“What were the good things about being in politics?”

It gave you an income. Every month you got a check, whereas, practicing law you may make something this month and you may not make anything the next. For a young lawyer it was good to be able to have that monthly check coming in. It made you feel good to be able to serve your county, state, or country as a public official, to realize that your constituents had thought enough of you to elect you and give you a job that you wanted. It made you proud to have a name good enough to be able to ask the people to elect you to office. It gave you the desire to do a good job in the public office that you held. It made you want to be a good citizen and to serve to the best of your capacity. It enabled you to reach some of your goals and desires.

“Did you ever serve in the military?”

Yes. When I was circuit solicitor a lot of young people were being drafted into the army to serve during World War II. I was a little too old to be drafted, but I wanted to serve my country anyway. At that time, every state in the union was granting public officials leaves of absence from their public job to go into the military and serve their country. So I asked for a leave of absence in December of 1942. I entered the military service as a captain in the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corp of the Army. That's the legal department. I served in the JAG until May 1946. Then the war was over. I returned home and resumed my job as circuit solicitor in July.

“Where did you serve?”

I served in the Fourth Service Command Headquarters. It was composed of the southeastern states: Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, South
Carolina, Virginia, Mississippi. I served in the headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, for about a year and a half or two years. Then I was transferred from there. They told those of us serving in the States that we were going to have to get out and go into the field.

[End of Side One, Begin Side Two]

Ashmore: I guess the biggest danger that I faced was going from New Orleans to Trinidad in a small boat. At that time there were a lot of German submarines around. We didn't know whether one was going to put a torpedo in our boat or not. That was the biggest exposure to danger. They could have dropped bombs on the military forces in Trinidad, but luckily they didn't. I was very fortunate. There wasn't too much danger or risk for me.

“How old were you when you decided to run for Congress?”

I decided to run for Congress in June of 1953, so I was forty-eight or -nine.

“How many years were you in the Congress?”

Fifteen years and seven months.

“What presidents were in office while you were in Congress?”

President Truman had just gone out of office. I saw him several times when I went there as a Congressman. President Eisenhower had just been elected in ‘52. He had taken office in January of ‘53. I went into service of the Congress in June of ‘53. I served under, or with President Eisenhower during his entire two terms. Then I served under President Jack Kennedy. He was a senator when I was in Congress. Of course, he was assassinated in November of ‘63. Then Vice-President Lyndon Johnson took over. He
served out the remainder of President Kennedy’s four-year term, then he was elected to a four-year term. I served under Johnson about six years. Johnson did not run at the end of his term. Richard Nixon was then elected president. The day he came in as president I retired from Congress. I didn't serve under Nixon as president, but I did serve under him during the time that he was Eisenhower's vice-president.

“What committees did you serve on in Congress?”

I served on the House Judiciary Committee. That's the committee that considers legal matters. I also served on the House Administration Committee, which was sometimes called the Housekeeping Committee. It handled matters of housekeeping in the Congress--the rules of the House, the money that you would receive as a member of Congress to operate your office and things of that kind. We also handled any questionable election of a member of the House of Representatives. If there was any question about it back home in the district where members ran, then the Elections Sub-Committee determined whether or not the election was fairly held. I was Chairman of the Elections Sub-Committee for thirteen years and determined a number of cases. Every two years there would be elections. In almost every election there would be one or more questionable elections which had to be determined by our committee. We would report to the full Congress on what we recommended regarding a questionable election. Then the House would vote on our recommendations.

At no time during those thirteen years while I was the chair did the House ever refuse to accept and approve my committee’s recommendations. I thought that was a compliment. I think the committee on elections was probably the most important committee on which I served.

“Why did you decide to retire from Congress?”

I figured that I was getting old enough to retire. I had served thirty-six years, first as county solicitor, then as assistant solicitor, then as circuit solicitor, then in the military,
then as a member of Congress. I was nearly sixty-five years old when I retired. I decided that I would live longer and probably enjoy life more, and be able to do more good by retiring, letting somebody else take over the job.

“Are you still practicing law?”

Yes. A little. I've just about retired from it completely.

“You will be eighty-five years old on February 22, George Washington's birthday. Is being in Greenville better today than it was eighty-five years ago?”

[laughter] Well, eighty-five years ago I was a mere infant living out in the country. I didn't know much about what was going on. As I grew up a lot of things came to pass. A lot of things influenced my life. A lot of people influenced it.

I served as secretary of the Sunday school, President of the BYPU, Superintendent of the Sunday school in my church. Then I was deacon and chairman of the Board of Deacons at White Oak Baptist Church. Those people influenced my life greatly. The church was a small country church. Some of the members seemed to think a lot of me and helped me along in my life. They gave me ambition and desire. Love of church, of friendship, friends and neighbors became very important as life went along. I have great gratitude and love for those who meant so much to me. My family; my wife, whom I married in February of ’42. We had a great life together and the finest daughter in the world. So I have a lot to be thankful for and to be proud of.

“If you had an opportunity to talk to my generation and to give them the benefit of your age and wisdom, what would you say to them?”

Well, I would say a lot of things that I've just said. Love your friends; love your country, your church, your family. Be especially grateful to them for what they have done for you in life. Stay away from whiskey. There's no good in it. Dope and drugs of any kind are
nothing but trouble-makers. They will destroy your life if you use them. Anything that's addictive will do nothing but harm to your life. They may bring a little pleasure at the time, and give you excitement. You'll think that this is fine to get high, that it feels good. It makes you feel like you're sitting on top of the world, like you're something great. That's temporary.

Nothing that has that kind of influence on you can be anything but harmful to you in the long run. It'll influence you to do things that you wouldn't do if you were sober. Those things make your character and your powers of resistance weaker. They overcome your good judgment, and the things that you learned at home with your parents. Stick to the things that are of value, and it will help your life be of value to your fellow man, your God, your country, and your loved ones. Forever be grateful for the things that others have done for you. I think one of the great sins of most people is ingratitude and not expressing thanks and appreciation for what your friends and loved ones, your God and your country has done for you.

[Tape stops, then restarts]

Ashmore: I would just say that I was born on a farm. I went to a one-room school house for the first two or three years of my schooling. The name of the school was White Oak School. It was located on the grounds of White Oak Baptist Church about three miles from the city of Greenville. It had one teacher. All pupils were in the same room. The school was behind the church, right at the edge of the cemetery. I got one whipping in all of my years of schooling. I got that from my cousin who was the teacher in the school. I made some smart aleck remarks to the teacher one day when school was out and we were leaving the grounds and on our way home. I was influenced to make those smart remarks by my older brother and a neighbor who was younger than I. I'll never forget it. They told me some smart thing to say back to the teacher. The next day I got a whipping. I never got another one in my life in school.
This one-room school house was abandoned in about my second or third year in school. Then a school house was built about a mile further out in the country. It was also known as White Oak Grammar School. They didn't call them elementary schools then. At that school we had two teachers. One class had first, second, third, and maybe fourth grade. Fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades were in the other school room. We played marbles, mumblety-peg, baseball, and things of that kind. I was a little larger then and was able to participate more in recreation. But that was about the extent of our recreation. Of course boys would scuffle, wrestle, box and sometimes get into fights on the school grounds. I remember several fights during those years.

I guess I must have been in the sixth, seventh or eighth grade when this doctor in the community, Dr. Bill White, decided that he would like to have me as his companion on some days when he would be riding around visiting his patients. I would go with him a lot of times and learn how to hunt and fish, too. I'll never forget him. He meant a lot to me. He was a good friend and one who influenced me. He caused me to first decide that I wanted to be a doctor, too. He would tell me about treating his patients. That made me decide that I would probably like to do the same thing.

“Do you remember any one special teacher? If so what is his or her name? What did they do that made them special?”

I would say the teacher that I remember best was the one who taught me civics, the study of government. Also, the teacher that taught me geography and history. They gave me a desire to know more about my country, about the states, and the history of the country. This teacher that I especially liked was Professor Hughes, I believe. I'm not sure about his name. He made me like civics, government, and history. Especially civics.

“Did you have a lot of homework?”
Not too much in the country school up to the seventh grade. But after that you started having some homework in arithmetic, algebra, and trigonometry. They made you do homework and I didn't like any of them.

“What kind of grades did you make?”

I probably made nineties. Good grades in civics, spelling and history. In math I made poor grades. I didn't like it. Later, I didn't like Latin. I didn't want to study it and had no desire to know anything about it, so I flunked it. I'm sorry I did.

“What was the population of Greenville when you were young?”

About twenty or thirty thousand.

[Tape stops, then restarts]

Mom: Uncle Bob's father, Robbie's great-grandfather, owned all of the land around the family home. This includes the land on which Greenville Middle School and East North Street Elementary School is situated. Mr. Ashmore sold this land to the Greenville School Board for $1,000 per acre. He sold them a total of eleven acres. His store was located where Cooper's store is located now.

[End of interview]