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Interview with Charles H. McNutt

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RCB- This interview with Dr. Charles H. McNutt, professor emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Memphis, is being conducted on October 20, 2005, by Margaret McNutt and Ron Brister.

RCB- Charles, I appreciate your allowing us to talk to you today.

(technical adjustment)

RCB- Charles, when did you meet Mr. Nash the first time?

CHM- The first time I met Mr. Nash was in 19... I think it was '61. I was at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville at that time and Lewis and Kneberg were still there. The Tennessee Archaeological Society was having a meeting in Memphis whatever year that was. We came to it. Lewis and Kneberg had warned me about Charles Nash and his desire to steal the Tennessee Archaeological Society from them and they were truly worried about this so I had kind of a negative introduction to Mr. Nash. Of course, later I found that that the last thing in the world that Charlie Nash wanted was to control the Tennessee Archaeological Society. That's when I first met Charles.

RCB- What was your first impression of Mr. Nash?

CHM- I thought he was a pretty nice person, very friendly, outgoing .

RCB- Can you describe him physically?

CHM- Short, rather slight, birdlike. The main thing about Charlie... I can't... I don't know how to get this across but ... It sounds trite to say that he had twinkling eyes, but if you knew Charlie you know what I am talking about. He kind of sparkled in a quiet way.

RCB- You taught with him for a number of years. What was he like as a teacher?

CHM- Well, he never taught me, in class at least. He taught me a lot. His students liked him very much- were very fond of him. I do know he was

very casual, very self-assured and very casual in his classes. Students liked that. He was very direct and didn't have to put out any bull or anything like that.

RCB- Was he involved in your coming to the university to work?

CHM- I suspect he was. He probably recommended me to Charles Newton, who was the Chairman of Sociology, under which Anthropology was at that time.

RCB- When did you start at the University and what did you do there?

CHM- Here?

RCB- Here at Memphis State.

CHM- 1964 and I came as an Associate Professor.

RCB- How was Charles Nash as a colleague.

CHM- Excellent. He taught me a lot, told me a lot, and he was very pleasant to work with.

RCB- What was it you liked best about him?

CHM- The combination of his knowledge and informality.

RCB- What did you like the least about him, if anything?

CHM- I really can't think of anything. There's bound to be something.

(laughs)

RCB- You don't have to now, if nothing comes to mind.

RCB- Would you say he was a reserved or an outgoing person when he first met you- when he got to know you?

CHM- He was outgoing. He wasn't effusive or anything like that.

RCB- He wasn't a backslapper.

CHM- No.

RCB- How would you describe his personality.

CHM- The first thing people say about Charles is that he was a child of the Depression, which he was. That's why he went to North Africa. He said he could live there more cheaply than he could in Chicago. His personality- it's very hard for me to describe, at least without sounding corny. Charles was very satisfied with life. He'd had a hard time and was still having a hard time. His lungs were bad. But, he was very satisfied with life. He never seemed to be unhappy, very rarely complained, and for him life was kind of a lot of fun. Teaching was fun, running Chucalissa was fun, talking with his students was fun, and getting into trouble was fun. I remember one time Charles Newton came to me in the morning and said that the Administration, probably Gene Smith, had called him at home early and said "What in the hell are you doing building that road at Chucalissa?" and Charles Newton said "I didn't build any road at Chucalissa or pave it". Finally I asked Charlie. I said, "How did that road get paved." He said, "Well I asked them three times and they never would say no so I figured it was all right so I just did it." That's the way he worked.

RCB- Did he ever talk about his first wife?

CHM- Not that I recall.

RCB- What about Carole, his daughter. Did you ever meet her?

CHM- No

RCB- What about his second wife? She was living at Chucalissa when he was there.

CHN- Yes.

RCB- Did you know her socially.

CHN- Not socially and really very casually. Not very much.

RCB- What was she like?

CHM- I have no idea.

RCB- Was she reclusive- just a private person?

CHM- Private person.

RCB- Can you describe Mr. Nash's health in the years you knew him?

CHM- It was bad. As I say he had trouble- I don't know if he had emphysema- something was wrong with his lungs. I know at one time he worked in a paint shop and that's hardly ever good for you. One interesting thing about Charles, if I said "Charles, let's walk out to the top of the mound, Mound A at Chucalissa", he'd say "No". He said, "I will meet you at the top of the mound at Chucalissa, but, I will go by myself", because he wanted to go his own rate. He said, "I move slow and if I try to keep up with somebody, I'll get very tired. But, I'll get there." He said, "I will meet you on top of the great mound at Cahokia, but I will not walk up there with you." He really felt that he could and I suspect that he would have met me on top of the mound at Cahokia when I finally got up there. But his health was bad.

RCB- Was it bad all the time that you knew him or did it get progressively worse?

CHM- That was a constant situation.

RCB- Did he ever discuss his attitude or his memories or feelings about working for the University of Tennessee during the WPA years on TVA projects?

CHM- Yes, a little bit. He talked about working at Hiwassee Island and at Camden at the Eva site. Again, Charlie, he seemed to enjoy the whole thing. He got credit, I guess it was in the Eva site for his work.

RCB- It was Hiwassee Island.

CHM- Was it Hiwassee Island?

RCB- Where he was credited for field work...

CHM- ...credit there. He did a lot of work at Eva, also. He did a tremendous amount of work for which he was never really given much credit. A lot of it just wasn't written up. When I went up to there my first year here...I went up to Kentucky Lake and Charlie gave me all kinds of advice and things like that. Again, it's something Charles just enjoyed. Charles just enjoyed living.

RCB- What about his experience in the Tennessee State Parks? Did he ever talk about that much, whether they were they good to work for or difficult?

CHM- I think he laughed one time , said he was supposed to be the Tennessee State Parks Archaeologist when he came to Chucalissa. He said he didn't think he was, actually he didn't know.

RCB-, What was his attitude about the University?

CHM- Well, the university was there for Charles. I'll just put it that way.

RCB- I remember his telling me shortly before he died that he had really enjoyed his job. He had liked circumventing the obstacles that the bureaucracy had put up, but he had gotten tired. He said that he didn't enjoy it much any more as he got sicker.

CHM- Yes, the university was a challenge. Actually, Charles developed Chucalissa with the help of the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society. I guess they are the first ones that really hired him. Then he developed Chucalissa and had field schools out there for the express purpose of selling Chucalissa to either Southwestern (Rhodes College) or the University. Frankly, he said that he thought that Rhodes would buy it, but the University of Memphis did. He was very happy it took place

RCB- What was his average day like? Did he come to campus each day or stay at the museum and come in once in a while?

CHM- I'm not sure how often he came to campus for classes. That's the only reason he came, but he would stay in his office most of the day when he did come. He wouldn't teach and run.

RCB- So, he was available for students.

CHM- Yes, both on campus and Chucalissa. He got a tremendous amount done at Chucalissa. Of course, he ran the summer field schools and started a lot of things with the local Indians, Choctaw Days or Cherokee Days... whatever they are... Choctaw Days.

RCB- Did he have any hobbies that you knew of? Did he like to read, play golf, listen to music, play an instrument? I don't remember him ever talking about anything like that.

CHM- He didn't play golf and he didn't play an instrument to my knowledge. I don't know of any hobby.

RCB- Where did he go on vacation? Did he ever travel?

CHM- I don't know that he ever took a vacation. I think he was on vacation.
(laughs)

RCB- I like that. Did Mr. Nash ever discuss his days at Beloit- his experiences, why he chose the school, why he went into archaeology or anything like that.

CHM- No, but I used to tease him about Beloit. People from Beloit are weird. They're not weird in a certain way but they are all weird individually, the ones that I have known and I have known quite a few, a characteristic that may be attributed to Beloit, I'm not sure.

RCB- Would you say individualistic is what you refer to or eccentric or a different kind of personality.

CHM- Unusual, they're just unusual people.

RCB- What about his graduate experience at the University of Chicago? Did he ever mention any of his professors there that he particularly liked or his experiences.

CHM- Very little, very little

RCB- Did he ever discuss his parents, brother, or sister?

CHM- No.

RCB- Who were his friends? I seem to remember that ya'll spent a lot of time at Berreta's together at lunch.

CHN- Yes, but Charlie wasn't there. I don't think he went to Baretta's.

RCB- I thought he went with you.

CHM- I think he brought his lunch in. I'm not really sure. He may have gone a few times.

RCB- I thought ya'll went to lunch all the time there.

CHM- Well, Newton and I did. That was Newton's other office.

RCB- I've got you. But you don't recall any friends he had outside of the profession?

CHM- No, I think the people he worked with. He was very fond of John Hesse. He was very fond of Jerry Smith.

RCB- What was he most proud of. What did he seem to be most happy with in his life.

CHM- I don't know. I just don't know.

RCB- He didn't go into that sort of thing?

CHM- He certainly enjoyed archaeology and doing it well. I think he regretted that he hadn't written more. But toward the end he did some writing, finished his master's thesis.

RCB- I was always impressed with Mr. Nash's library. I thought it was an incredible...

CHM- That's true.

RCB- ...group of books for a man like that. He had a number of different interests and they were reflected in his books. He knew all of them. They weren't just shelf decorations. Did he ever talk about his books? He obviously loved them.

CHM- The only book I remember, because it became a bone of contention somewhat later on, was a copy of Phillips, Ford, and Griffin.

RCB- Perry Bynum's copy?

CHM- Perry Bynum's copy.

RCB- Yes, that was going on when I was there. Jerry gave that to Dr. Bynum.

CHM- ...gave it back to Dr. Bynum.

RCB- Dr. Bynum was a little touchy about that I remember. Do you know where Mr. Nash got his ideas for the exhibit concepts he had- the outdoor reconstruction, the ideas of building the entrance trench and the ...?

CHM- I don't know. I don't know what the prototype was. Was it Moundville?

RCB- I think Moundville started in the '30s. I don't know if he ever went there or not.

CHM- He would have known about it, certainly.

RCB- I don't know if Wickliffe ever had any reconstructions. I do know that...

CHM- Wickliffe wouldn't have started that early.

RCB- His, uh...we have photographs from... Have you been to the UT site... you go to the Tennessee Arch Net and UT has their WPA photos...

CHM- Oh, yes.

RCB- ...and it shows Nash and some other guys doing house reconstructions on the ...near the Kentucky Lake project, which really surprised me. I didn't know he had started that early on that. But they were bending the saplings over, tying them...

CHM- ...weaving them back.

RCB- weaving them, yes. I thought he had just done that at Chucalissa. So, apparently this is something he had been thinking about quite a while.

CHM- This is what Madeline describes in her Tribes that Slumber. I didn't realize that Charlie was doing that.

RCB- Yes, according to the photographs they were doing that. He always seemed to have kind of a special fondness for Madeline Kneberg. I don't know if he had a crush on her or not. He always spoke very well of her. He never said very much about Lewis.

CHM- No.

RCB- We talked about his strong points- which were his positive attitude. Academically did you consider him in pretty good shape for the job that he had?

CHM- Oh, yes.

RCB- Scholastically? Do you know of any weaknesses, any professional weaknesses he had.

CHM- I would say the lack of publications really hurt him in the sense he was kind of hiding his light under a bushel basket.

RCB- I know, along with the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society, the penal farm crews were an important part in the development of Chucalissa. Do you know anything about the history of that- how he was able to get the County Commissioners to assign crews to Chucalissa. He mentions that in his Chucalissa burials book briefly.

CHM- Yes. I imagine Charlie just called up the commissioners to see if he could get some prison labor. He loved to talk about Captain.

RCB- Captain Sharon

CHM- Captain Sharon

RCB- Captain Sharon was a mess. Captain loved to talk about Mr. Nash, too. He always called the students educated idiots. A great guy.

CHM- Charlie was always impressed with one inmate who made all his own tools.

RCB- Driver.

CHM- Is that who it was?

RCB- Yes, Driver, yes. Made all his own tools and a lot of the tools Nash continued to use. You had mentioned earlier the Choctaw- Nash's work with the Choctaw. Do you know why he selected the Choctaw particularly and what his inspiration on bringing them up was? I guess some of them came down from Golddust, didn't they.

CHM- I don't know. Yes, probably from Golddust. Because there were the Choctaw---what was the big Choctaw family in Memphis that Charlie got crosswise of... the Solomons.. for whatever reason he never had any of the Solomons working at Chucalissa and that caused some problems.

RCB- Did he... how do you think he ... I sure a lawyer would jump all over me about this... how you think he felt about the Indians? Was he concerned about their sensitivities? I realize that by bringing them into Chucalissa to act as interpreters and help there as an interface between the museum and the public, that does indicate something. Did he ever give an indication that he felt that museums were not really doing their jobs in including native peoples in their interpretations? Was this a big thing for him or just a good way to get the job done?

CHN- I think it was a natural thing for Charles to do. He really wasn't the kind of person that would say these people should do this- other museums should do this. That wasn't like Charlie. I think he just thought it was a good thing to do. That's my idea.

RCB- That's good enough. We'll talk about his field supervisors a little bit. I think Nash worked out in the field early on but as his health got worse he depended more and more on his field supervisors. Let's see, John Hesse was out there. Jerry Smith was an early supervisor- '61 through '63 I think. Then Dan Printup came in '64 through '67. Did Mr. Nash ever talk to you about them, about his feelings about them, his work ethic? He had worked with WPA. I don't know if any of that filtered down into his later supervisory techniques.

CHM- Well, I think he was certainly very satisfied and impressed by all three of these people, Hesse and Smith, and Printup.

RCB- Nash, if I remember correctly, always kept very involved in the excavations.

CHM- Oh, yes. He'd go out there every day.

RCB- ...check the excavations, check all the forms to make sure they were filled out properly.

RCB- Did he train his supervisors much or did he just sort of bring them in, orient them...

CHM- I think they were... John Hesse probably just observed, learned by observing. I don't think John was ever actually on a field crew, field school. Jerry was. Dan Printup was not, to my knowledge.

RCB- Mary dug there on the temple mound, early on.

CHM- Taking photographs.

RCB- Is that what she took? OK. I didn't know. I'd seen her name pop up in the field notes.

CHM- Yes.

RCB- How did he feed about his classroom students? You said he enjoyed teaching. Did he feel the students in this area were pretty much up to par? Did dumb down his classes for them?

CHM- Yes, they were the best ones he had. He used to sit and talk to them. Who was the young lady, sort of a blond, that had the beat up car without a gas tank (cap)... it had a piece of tin foil on it... and she played on the first integrated sports team in Memphis State .

RCB- Was her last name Kincaid or something like that?

CHM- Judy Kincaid. She and Charlie would probably tell off color stories for hours.

RCB- She was a mess.

CHM- Yes, Charlie loved her.

A lot of people... I know Lou Adair was very fond of him. I guess they both had the same work ethic and attitude.

CHM- ...no nonsense.

RCB- Linda DeLucxa I remember was a real fan of Mr. Nash.

CHM- Who?

RCB- Linda DeLuca. I think her Dad was a dentist and she did a dental study out there (Chiucalissa). I'm trying to think of some of the other people... Rodney Gates. Did you know him? Was he still around when you got here?

CHM- He was around, but I didn't really get know him.

RCB- Kirk Osoinach

CHM- Kirk Osoinach was still here when I got here.

RCB- Can you tell me a little bit about Osoinach?

CHM- I sure can't.

RCB- I don't know very much at all about him. I know that Nash and Gates wrote that article for the Tennessee Historical Quarterly. It was delightfully written. It sure shows Nash's sense of humor. I think Osoinach did a paper with him on the Choctaw, if I remember correctly. Was it called Pasfalaya?

CHM- It might be.

RCB- I can't remember just offhand.

RCB- How was Nash regarded by his peers- his fellow archaeologists.

CHM The ones that knew him, were very fond of him, but again, with the lack of writing and... Charlie didn't want to be known professionally. He was certainly a professional, but he didn't want to...he was very happy with himself.

RCB- Did he attend conferences- SECA, SAA, and other conferences?

CHM- I think he went to some of the early Mid-south Conferences. I'm sure he went to some of the SEAC's but I'm not really positive. It wasn't easy for Charles to travel, I know that.

RCB- So that probably explains that.

CHM- Uh, huh.

RCB- And you mentioned that writing was kind of a challenge for him, that he wished he had written more?

CHM- Yes, yes.

RCB- I always seemed to think that he really enjoyed the detail work, the cartography, drawing the maps, the data forms, and things like that. Does that sound sort of right?

CHM- Yes.

RCB- And this was kind of early on, but did he ever talk to you of the New Archaeology, of Binford and guys that were popping up toward the end of his career?

CHM-No, I don't think he paid them much attention.

RCB- If you had to characterize, would you say he was more of a practical field archaeologist or a theorist.

CHM- Oh, very much the former.

RCB- So, he really wasn't that interested in getting into the minutia, unlike Jim Ford who would sit down and talk till dawn?

CHM- Oh, no.

RCB- You had talked a little bit about his teaching style. You said he was pretty casual in the classroom. I took a couple of courses under him and I was amazed at the breadth of his knowledge about a lot of things.

CHM- You had a ----- . I never had a course from him.

RCB- I took a world civilization course and he really knew the Paleolithic, Neolithic, and Mesolithic, of Europe so well, I guess from his African work- North African work. All the stuff... he knew his material and if he didn't he sure got up on it before he talked about.

CHM- He was well informed. He was very well informed.

RCB- I think his library reflected that.

CHM- Yes.

RCB- Did he ever mention any favorite books?

CHM- No.

RCB- Did he ever mention anybody he particularly respected as an archaeologist? We talked about Madeline Kneberg and her work. Did he ever talk about her or Lewis?

CHM- No, but he probably wouldn't talk to me about Madeline Kneberg.

RCB- Are you not a Madeline Kneberg fan?

CHM- No, well I'm not one of her fans.

RCB- Oh, I understand. Did he ever do work with James Griffin. I remember Jimmy Ford parked his sherd machine at Chucalissa. Do you remember that thing?

CHM- Oh, yes. I think he liked Jim Ford. But again, Jim was at that time, very informal field man, very much not into theory.

RCB- Do you know if Nash ever corresponded with Griffin about ceramics, or not?

CHM- I don't know either. I would suspect everybody else did.

RCB- Did Phil Phillips ever come down

CHM- I doubt it. He didn't travel very much. Of course, Steve Williams said he only went to one meeting, Phillips.

RCB- Well, that pretty much ends the formal questions. Is there anything you would like to say about Charles Nash?

CHM- No, just what we have talked about. This almost happy glow that Charles put out. Really in spite of he had a hard life, but he really enjoyed living and doing archaeology. Doing it and talking about it with younger people... the whole thing.

RCB- Did he ever mention why he never went back to grad school?

CHM- No, but I suspect it was financial in part.

RCB- You know, David and I... and Margaret and I are all working on a biography of Charles Nash. That is what this is all a part of. David has gotten Nash's correspondence with TMN Lewis during the WPA and its just fascinating. It's interesting to hear them rattling off not only all these scared sites, the cornerstone of southeastern archaeology, but the minutia they had to deal with. Nash submitted a 7cent reimbursement request and Kneberg...

or Lewis wanted to come visit one of the sites Nash was working on. He had to write Washington to get permission to go from Knoxville, probably 50 miles from the site. Just ridiculous, just absolutely ridiculous... always short of tools, always short of supplies. Nash would write saying. "I need a roll of drawing paper". Lewis said "I think I can get one in for you in two weeks". You know, that kind of thing.

CHM- I don't know if it was Charlie Nash or Bill Haag who said in regard to the WPA days, he said, "It wasn't too bad if you had a hundred men and they would bring you two hundred shovels, but when you had 200 men and they brought you one hundred shovels, that was bad."

RCB- I just can't conceive of these young men like Nash out of graduate school coming in there and being given that immense responsibility for payroll, for procurement, purchasing, supervision, training. It is just amazing. Dan Swan has this wonderful story about Bell in Oklahoma who was in the CCC. They took the boys out to a site and they said "Is anyone here who can read and write, step forward". So a group of them stepped forward. "Is anyone graduated from high school?" and Bell stepped forward and they made him supervisor at the excavations at Spiro, because he had graduated from high school. So, it just stuns me to think of the work that these men did under those conditions. It was astonishing.

CHM- Chuckles.

RCB- Lewis, in his letters is as much a detail person... I get the impression that Lewis was really less an archaeologist, I know he was an historian by training, and more a project manager...

CHM- Oh, he wasn't an archaeologist.

RCB ...although he does give Nash a lot of suggestions on archaeology, particularly when he first starts.

CHM- Does he?

RCB Yes. It goes from Dear Lewis and Dear Nash to Charles and Tom, ...or Chuck, that's what he called him. So it's fascinating to read. Dan has also made available Nash's class notes from Chicago... Radcliff-Brown lecture notes. It's incredible... really wonderful stuff to work with. It's going to be a great project. David's found photos of Nash at Kincaid and of course in North Africa, the expedition from Beloit. I'm amazed nobody's ever written up that Kincaid field school. That was such a pivotal experience in southeastern archaeology. I'm just amazed nobody's ever written it up. It's just great stuff.

CHM- Yes, uh huh.

RCB- Well, if you don't have anything else then we'll end the interview. I will ask if you would mind if we interview you about your career sometime?

CHM- Well, I don't know about that (laughs).

RCB- We'll just do it in the same form with the questions. If there is anything you don't want to talk about, say no.

CHM- Well, OK. Let's do that then.

RCB. Thank you.

CHM- Thank you.