

**Boy from Hubbard's Cove:
The Life of Ernest James Cunningham**
James W. Cunningham

Ernest is Born

Mary Cunningham had wondered why her brother, Lewis, woke her so early that morning and brought her over to Uncle Mack Rhea's without taking time for them to eat breakfast first. "Aunt Ella will fix you something as soon as I get you there," he had promised as he helped her dress while her eyes came unstuck. He had even carried her a little while before putting her down to walk under her own power.

Usually, her mother woke her. This morning, Mary did not see her mother, and her other brother, Porter, was doing chores at the barn by himself instead of helping Lewis. She thought she heard her sister, Clarcie (nickname for Clara), and her mother in the bedroom, but the door was closed.

Now, word had come that there was a new baby at her house, a boy! She wanted to go home right then. She knew the way. Her mother had asked her some time back if she would like a baby at their house and she had replied, "Oh, yes."

Her aunt spoke kindly to her, "Wait a little while, Mary. I want to go, too. We'll walk over there together after supper."

It was the first Monday in August of 1905, hot and dry. As Mary ran ahead along the lane, small whirls of dust from her feet flew back onto the shoes and clean apron of her aunt.

Mary stayed very quiet as she and Aunt Ella stood near the bed and looked down at the baby, asleep next to his forty-six year old mother. No words can do justice to the moment of new sisterhood that occurred there at their home in Hubbard's Cove that evening.

She looked at the face of the newborn baby and noticed what looked like thread on his upper lip. "Mama, what's that on his mouth?" she asked with sisterly concern.

“He was born with a cleft palette. The doctor sewed it together on the outside. He thinks it’ll be all right.”

After they left the bedroom and eased the door closed, they spoke to Clarcie, whose teenage face was covered with gloomy apprehension. She insisted she was not going to wash any of his “stinking old diapers.”

Mary, almost six years old, said, “I’ll wash ’em.”¹

His Father’s Illness

Jim Cunningham developed jaundice in 1900 when he was only 43. His skin and eyeballs gradually yellowed. The doctor prescribed what medicine there was and told Jim to rest until he got well. For a time, he did rest. Lewis and Clarcie took over most of the chores from their father and Porter was old enough to help as well. Finally, Jim began to feel somewhat better. One day, he got up, dressed and went out in the fields to work. In a few days, he was laboring hard putting in a fence with some other men he had hired. Later that same day, he fell very ill and had to be helped to the house. Doc Farrar² from Manchester came in his buggy and examined him. The doctor told Jim and his wife, Lizzie, that Jim had gotten up and gone back to work too soon and had had a terrible relapse. He would have to have almost complete bed rest. From that time on he stayed in the bed almost all the time. Everyone had to be quiet in or near the house so he could sleep whenever he dozed off.³

The Death of His Father

Jim Cunningham lay dying in the same bed his five children had been born in. Everyone had hoped he would eventually get well if he would rest and eat right. He had done both. Lewis and Porter were doing all the heavy chores; Clarcie was doing household chores and helping her mother wait on Jim. Mary assisted Clarcie and was careful not to disturb her father. Even little Ernest had learned to play quietly so his father could sleep⁴.

¹ Aunt Mary told me this account of my father’s birth.

² Dr. C.M.H. Farrar, who had been born in 1848 and who practiced medicine until 1931. He had married a Cunningham, though not necessarily a relative of my grandfather’s. From 1888, he lived in Hillsboro. He must have had an office in Manchester.

³ Aunt Mary told me everything I know about my grandfather’s illness.

⁴ This was the only memory my father had of his father—that he had to play quietly so his father could sleep because he was in the bed sick.

In the time since Jim had gone back to work too soon and had a relapse of whatever had caused his jaundice, he had not gotten noticeably better. Doc Farrar finally told him, “Jimmy, you’ve got me stumped. I don’t know what’s the matter with you?”⁵

Finally, on May 20, 1908, when Ernest was not quite three years old, Jim died at age 51. He was buried in the cemetery at Wesley’s Chapel where they all went to church.

Ernest’s Childhood

After his father died, if not before, Ernest slept with his mother. He continued to do so for a number of years past the age when he should have had his own bed.

When he was small, Ernest would tease Mary and she would complain to their mother about it, but their mother wouldn’t do anything. Mary whipped Ernest one day and said she did it because his mother wouldn’t.⁶

Like any farm boy, Ernest had regular chores to perform. Because he was the youngest of five, they were not onerous.

The Death of His Grandparents

Jim Cunningham’s parents, Dick⁷ and Nancy⁸, had both died more than four decades earlier, so Ernest never knew them. Ernest, however, was close to his mother’s parents who lived nearby in Hubbard’s Cove. He and his siblings called them “Mam” and “Pap.” His grandfather, Jim Rhea, died on April 15, 1912 at age 79, and was buried in Wesley’s Chapel Cemetery. When he died, Ernest was six-and-a-half years old. His grandmother, Mary Rhea (maiden name, Winton), died on September 3, 1913 at age 74. When she died, Ernest was eight years old. She was buried beside her husband in Wesley’s Chapel Cemetery.

His Elementary School Years

Ernest probably started to school (first grade) in the summer of 1912, a month or so before he turned seven. He walked with his sister, Mary, from their

⁵ Aunt Mary told me this story.

⁶ My first cousin, Kenneth Ferguson, Aunt Clarcie’s son, told me this story in a phone conversation on October 28, 1989.

⁷ Richard C., son of Langston and Nancy (Robins) Cunningham.

⁸ Daughter of William T. and Micha/Mickey/Mecke (Powell) Berry.

home in Hubbard's Cove to Wesley's Chapel School, near the church. A new building for the school had been built in 1910. Ernest attended school at Wesley's Chapel until he graduated from the eighth grade. Another new building for the school was built in 1914. While he was in elementary school, the school year was probably about five months long, beginning sometime in July and ending right before Christmas. If so, he graduated from the eighth grade in mid-December, 1919.⁹

Wesley's Chapel was always a one-room school, with one teacher for all eight grades. There would have been a potbelly stove to heat the building when it was cold and an outdoor toilet or two.

His Childhood Friends

The John Deadman family lived across the fields near the mouth of the cove. John's son, Frank, was about Ernest's age and was one of his best childhood playmates. Frank's older sister Alma was Mary's closest friend. Ernest tormented and aggravated Alma and Mary every chance he had. Ernest also played with other children who lived in the cove, especially his Rhea cousins.

Moving from their Original to their Second House

Ernest's grandfather, Jim Rhea, had owned a good amount of land in Hubbard's Cove. He gave his daughter—Ernest's mother, Lizzie—land, either on her wedding day or in preparation for it, for her and her husband to live on¹⁰.

Ernest's father, Jim Cunningham, either built their first house himself or helped build it. He was going to build it 100 yards or so to the east of where he did, but they dug a well there and it fell in.¹¹ The house was on the road that goes from Highway 108 near Wesley's Chapel up into Hubbard's Cove. It was on the left side close to the road about 1¼ miles up from the highway, just past the little road to the left that went up to the old Wiley Sissom place¹². Jim and Lizzie lived in that house until he died. Lizzie and the children continued to live there until the late 1910s. It was this house where Ernest's sister, Clarcie, lived when he, Ann, and their son, Jim, would visit her in the 1950s. Clarcie would make apple cobbler for them using

⁹ In the 1920 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN, it says that Ernest had attended school after September 1, 1919. That means he probably graduated from the eighth grade in late 1919 or early 1920, assuming he started school (first grade) in the summer of 1912. It is possible he started in 1911, but did not attend school one year when Lewis and Clarcie were both living in Iowa, but I think it unlikely.

¹⁰ Considering where it was, this land, given to Lizzie by her father as a wedding present, was probably part of the land that had been owned by her great-grandfather, Moses Rhea.

¹¹ My first cousin, Kenneth Ferguson, Aunt Clarcie's son, told me this story in a phone conversation on October 28, 1989.

¹² That little road is now called Lano Sissom Rd.

apples from the orchard behind the house. She would reach out the kitchen window and pick mint leaves to put in the iced tea she served them.

Eventually, by 1920, Lizzie and the children still at home—Lewis, Porter, Mary, and Ernest—moved to the house on the other farm Lizzie owned¹³, which was near Hickory Creek on the northwest side not far from Highway 108¹⁴. Lizzie's father, Jim Rhea, may have left this second farm to her when he died in 1912 or given it to her earlier. The reason for their moving was probably this: Clara had married Walter E. Ferguson from the Asbury community in Coffee County between 1917-1918¹⁵. They were married in Iowa where he had gone to work¹⁶. Not long before 1920, they moved back to Tennessee. Lizzie decided to rent their original house to Clarcie and Walter, when the two of them returned from Iowa¹⁷. By 1930, Lizzie had sold the original house to them¹⁸. The house Lizzie and her four other children moved into on her other farm was a log house. Soon they learned their new house had a problem. When Hickory Creek in Hubbard's Cove would rise above its banks, which it did every other spring or so, the water would get up into their house. At these times, when they woke in the morning and got out of bed, they would step down into cold water.

The Death of His Brother, Porter

On August 27, 1920, soon after Ernest's 15th birthday, his brother, Porter, age 26, died from typhoid fever. He was buried in Wesley's Chapel Cemetery. Porter was engaged to be married when he died. He would ride his pretty gray mare to see her.

When Ernest and Ann first married in 1941 and boarded with Jess and Tolly Hoosier in Tracy City, Ernest pointed out that Porter's former fiancé and her husband were living in a house across the road and up a little from the Hoosiers. Porter's former fiancé was probably Lucille Willis (daughter of Hence Willis) from Pelham Valley who married Tom Berry, Porter's father's first cousin, in 1925. By

¹³ In the 1920 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN, it says Lizzie owned her home free of mortgage. This was the second home and farm.

¹⁴ The land the house was on is now owned by my cousin, Hoover Hancock, Jr. He told me there is a place there by the creek where flowers come up in the spring. By that, he assumed there had been a house there with flowers planted in the yard.

¹⁵ In the 1930 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN, they both indicated they had been married 12 years.

¹⁶ Their daughter, Carolyn, told me this in a phone conversation on April 9, 2010.

¹⁷ In the 1920 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN, it says Walter Ferguson was renting their home. From who their closest neighbors were, it is clear they were living in the original house where Ernest and his siblings had been born.

¹⁸ 1930 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN.

the 1940 census, Tom Berry had died and Lucille had married Tom Henley¹⁹. That's who she would have been married to in 1941 when Ernest and Ann were living with the Hoosiers.

Rabbit Hunting

For recreation, and to help the family obtain additional meat for the table, Ernest would hunt rabbits as a young man. He kept a rabbit-hunting dog.

His High School Years

When Ernest graduated from the eighth grade at Wesley's Chapel School in late 1919, there was no public high school in Viola or anywhere else near enough for him to attend. Later, when he heard there was going to be a public high school in Viola starting in the summer of 1921, he wanted to enroll, even though he would have been out of school for a year and a half by that time. One reason he desired a high school education was because he had always done well in school. He started ninth grade at Viola High School in late summer of 1921, just after he turned 16. The high school building in Viola had just been built when he began going there²⁰.

The citizens of Viola had decided to raise the money and donate labor to build the building for a public high school after Warren County refused to do so. They built a two-story structure where the Viola Community Center is today.²¹

Every school morning, Ernest got up before light and went to the barn to get his paint-faced horse ready. After breakfast, he would ride the six miles across the fields to the Viola High School. A man who lived two or three hundred yards from the school let him stable the horse in his barn there during the day with feed and

¹⁹ In the 1940 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN, Tom & Lucille Henley, and her children, Nannie L & James T. Berry, were living in the house that was listed immediately before the Hoosiers' house. Lucille's age was given as 46, the same age Porter would have been had he lived.

²⁰ Daddy told me this about the Viola High School building on Saturday, November 14, 1987, five days before he died, while David and I were visiting my parents in Nashville. This recollection of his, and my conclusion that he started ninth grade in the summer of 1921, are both supported by the written statement of Alice Milstead in "Viola," a reminiscence in *Going Back*, a mimeographed book on the history of Viola, published in 1989. She states that the "corner stone" for the high school (grades 9-12) building in Viola "was laid July 4, 1921." It is also supported by the written statement in *The Family of Herman Powell Stubblefield* by Charles and Carolyn Stubblefield (self-published, 2008), page 37: "Between 1919 and 1930 cancelled checks belonging to J.R. [Stubblefield] revealed that he gave generously to preachers, churches and other charitable causes.... [T]here was one check to the High School Building Committee in 1921 when a 4-year high school was built to replace the old Viola Normal School."

²¹ On June 14, 2011, I spoke by telephone with Mary Catherine (Mrs. W. C.) Gaffin at her home in Viola. Her father was Robert Stone who was a member of the Warren County School Board at the time the school was built and for some time thereafter. Mary Catherine said she remembered her father being concerned about the plaster on the ceilings not being right and preventing school from starting on schedule.

water while he attended classes. When school ended each day, he would ride his horse home, often arriving after sundown as the days grew shorter in the fall.

One day, while he was attending classes, a man who lived in Viola turned his horse loose. It went back to Hubbard's Cove and Ernest had to walk home. Neither Ernest nor his mother ever had any use for that man after that.²²

Going to high school was difficult for Ernest because of the distance he had to travel, but he had done well at Wesley's Chapel School and he wanted to be able to have a job someday where he could dress up. He had seen some men—doctors, lawyers, undertakers, and teachers—who wore a coat and tie to work each day and he wanted to be like them. All the men around his home were farmers who wore overalls, including his two brothers. Even storekeepers worked in shirtsleeves and had to lift heavy, dirty boxes and barrels. Ernest wanted a job where he worked with his mind rather than his hands.

His mother, his brother Lewis, and his sister Mary supported and encouraged him to finish high school, even though it meant they would not have him at home to work on school days.

There were three teachers at the Viola High School when Ernest went there²³. One of those teachers was probably Miss Vallye Cullum²⁴ who later married Ellis Hall of Viola²⁵. She possibly taught domestic science (home economics) at Viola High School²⁶, but she probably also taught music or English, since she later taught those subjects in the public schools of Amarillo, Texas after she married²⁷.

Ernest did well academically in high school. He also played the bass horn in the school band all four years. He graduated from Viola High School in 1925²⁸ when

²² Kenneth Ferguson told me this story in a phone conversation on October 28, 1989. He said he had heard it from our grandmother.

²³ My father told me this on more than one occasion over the years.

²⁴ According to Mary Catherine Gaffin in my phone conversation with her on June 14, 2011, she remembers going to the Church of Christ in Viola as a girl and having Vallye Hall beckon her over to sit by them. Clearly, she had fond memories of her. She was not sure that Vallye Cullum had taught at Viola High School, but she said she was a teacher at Viola Normal School which preceded the high school. Again, it seems likely that Vallye Cullum was one of the three teachers at Viola High School while my father was a student there.

²⁵ *The Jeff Hall Family* by Charles and Carolyn Stubblefield (self-published, 2003), page 28.

²⁶ 1920 Federal Census of Davidson County, TN. She was 21 and living at home in Nashville with her parents, John M. & Olive Cullum. It says she was employed as a teacher of domestic science.

²⁷ *The Jeff Hall Family* by Charles and Carolyn Stubblefield (self-published, 2003), page 29.

²⁸ The "Admission Units" column of his "Middle Tennessee State Teachers College, Murfreesboro Student Record" lists "16½" admission units "Accepted from 'Viola.'" At the bottom of this column, "Date, H. S. Grad." is given as

he was 19. Mr. Brandon, one of the teachers who was also the principal, encouraged him to go to college.

Maintaining the Cemetery

Ernest had attended Wesley's Chapel Southern Methodist Church all his life. He had also gone to school next door until he finished the eighth grade. He remembered many funerals he had been to there, especially those of Grandpap and Grandmam Rhea. He may even have had a vague remembrance of his father's funeral, though he had not quite been three. Most funerals he had attended at Wesley's Chapel would end by the simple wooden casket being taken out and buried in the cemetery there by the church. As long as he could recall, he had seen that cemetery cleaned off and gradually grown up again in an unpredictable but continuing cycle. Often, he had heard his mother and aunts and uncles say how pretty or how neglected it looked, but he had never really minded whichever state it was in. It seemed all right either way to him or it had until that Sunday morning when he sat by his mother at church and heard yet again a plea by some widow that the men of the church clean off the cemetery where so many of their loved ones had been laid to rest.

She was not talking to him; he was not a man. Or was he? He was certainly no longer a boy. During the school year, he rode his horse to Viola to high school each day of the week. Some no older than he were getting married.

Did he care how the cemetery looked? Wasn't it just filled with boxes of ashes and dust? No, he did not particularly care himself, but he loved these people. Not just his mother and aunts and uncles and cousins but the other people who were not even related to him but who had been kind to a boy with no father. Yes, he would join the other men who were volunteering to clean off the cemetery. He stood at the pew and addressed the congregation. Their faces accepted his offer with gratitude and growing respect.

"1925." The year of 1925 for his graduation from high school is consistent with him starting ninth grade in 1921 when the high school first opened. It is also consistent with a story my mother told me in 1988. She said Daddy had told her he played in the Viola High School Band for four years and the Viola Community Band for three years. Since he taught in Dunlap beginning in the 1928-29 school year, he probably did not continue to participate in the Viola Community Band anymore after that. The year of 1925 is also consistent with the fact that his first quarter of college began on March 9, 1926. On May 22, 1979, my father told me he had graduated from high school in 1925.

The Viola Community Band

Ernest had played in the Viola High School band all four years. After he graduated, he played in the Viola Community Band for three years²⁹. Since he graduated from high school in the spring of 1925, and moved to Dunlap in late summer 1928, he must have played in the Community Band from 1925 to 1928.

Ernest played the bass horn (he always said “double-bass” horn) in the Community Band, and probably also in the high school band when he was a student there. When he joined the Viola Community Band in 1925, it was under the direction of Ellis Hall, a brother of Alvah Hall, who at that time was a merchant in Viola³⁰. The business Alvah Hall ran was a general store³¹. Ernest probably bought clothes from Alvah Hall when he needed some and could afford to buy them.

Rufus Wooten

Rufus M. Wooten, a storekeeper in Hubbard’s Cove, was a great friend to Ernest when he was a teenager and young man. Ernest often went to him for advice. His encouragement was one of the reasons Ernest decided to go to college³². Mr. Wooten was on the Grundy County School Board for 20 years from 1923 or 1924 to 1943 or 1944³³.

When their son, Jim, was a child, Ernest, Ann, and he went to Viola to visit Mr. and Mrs. Wooten from time to time until Mr. Wooten died when Jim was almost five, and then they continued to visit Mrs. Wooten on occasion after that.

Going to College

Lewis had been thinking about it for some time. He knew Ernest wanted to go to Murfreesboro to Middle Tennessee State Teachers College. Now, it was the spring of 1926 and Ernest had graduated from Viola High School the previous year. If he was going to college at all, he would have to go this spring or summer and then

²⁹ My mother told me that Daddy had told her this.

³⁰ Daddy told me about Ellis Hall directing the Viola Community Band when he was a member of it, and him being a brother of Alvah Hall who ran a store in Viola, on Saturday, November 14, 1987, five days before he died, while my son, David, and I were visiting my parents in Nashville. This recollection of his is supported in “Businesses in Viola,” a reminiscence in *Going Back*, a mimeographed book on the history of Viola, published in 1989. It says that “Alva Hall” was a “merchant.” In the same book, Bonita Cain Curtis lists some of her relatives, including her mother’s brothers, “Ellis” and “Alvah Hall.” That my father began playing in the Viola Community Band in 1925 is supported by the fact that he graduated from high school in 1925 and by *The Jeff Hall Family* by Charles and Carolyn Stubblefield (self-published, 2003), page 29, where it says that Ellis Hall left Viola in late 1925 and moved to Texas where “[h]e conducted the Amarillo Symphony Orchestra from 1926 to 1934.”

³¹ *The Jeff Hall Family* by Charles and Carolyn Stubblefield (self-published, 2003), page 22.

³² Mrs. Lizzie Wooten, Rufus’ wife, told me this when I visited her in the 1980s.

³³ Doreen Gonder, Rufus Wooten’s daughter, told me this in a phone conversation on April 8, 2010.

start teaching in the fall. There could be no money for full-time college, but Rufus Wooten, member of the Grundy County School Board, had promised him a school in the fall if he would complete at least a quarter of college work first.

Ernest would do all right in college. He had always been good in school. His teachers and principal had encouraged him to go to college, as had Mr. Wooten. The problem was that there was barely enough money to get by. Lewis had to help their widowed mother with the farm. Since Porter had died with typhoid fever five-and-a-half years earlier, Lewis alone had had the responsibility. At 67, their mother could only do so much.

There seemed to be no other choice. No bank would loan them money without collateral and they could not risk losing their mother's farm. A cousin of their father's was very well-to-do. He had the money Ernest needed for the spring and summer quarter if he would loan it to him. To Lewis, it seemed the only possibility.

Ernest dressed up and he and Lewis walked over to their cousin's farm. He had a lot of land as well as money in the bank. "What can I do for you?" he had asked them, after they discussed the current health and situation of various ones of their common relatives.

"Ernest has graduated from Viola High School. Everyone believes he will do well at Murfreesboro. Mr. Wooten promised him a job teaching school if he goes to college for three months. He needs a hundred dollars to go for the spring and summer quarters. He plans to teach school this coming year and will pay you back the money a little each month. We thought you might be willing to help him."

No, college was a waste of time and money. Hard work was all that was worthwhile. And he did not loan money. When they left, their cousin said, "Lewis, take Ernest home and put him behind Old Beck³⁴."

Both Lewis and Ernest were disheartened. Even though Ernest had the promise of a job if he would go to college for at least a quarter, he had to be able to borrow the money to go. Their cousin had been their only hope and he had dismissed the idea out of hand.

³⁴ A common name for a mule.

Should Ernest give up and just work on the farm? Would he spend his life looking up the rear end of a mule? Of course, both Lewis and Ernest knew Asa Stubblefield. Like their cousin, he was a well-to-do farmer in Hubbard's Cove; he was also their neighbor. The problem was that he was no relation of theirs. He was certainly under no obligation to help Ernest. Why did they think he would be any more willing to loan money to a young man for college than their cousin had been? They decided to try him anyway. They walked over there before going back to their house. Mr. Stubblefield was at home.

"Mr. Stubblefield, I want to go to college at Murfreesboro. If you will loan me \$100, I can go this spring and summer for two quarters. Will you do it for me?"

Asa Stubblefield reached into his pocketbook and took out \$100 in bills and handed it to Ernest. He did not even ask him when he would pay it back. Ernest's eyes were stinging and his heart was running away. He carefully expressed his promise to repay the loan quickly. Lewis thanked him with all the intensity he had. Mr. Stubblefield said, "All right."

Ernest never forgot him. He often said, even many years later, that Asa Stubblefield had been better to him than if they had been kin.

Ernest drove to Murfreesboro on Monday, March 8, the day before the spring quarter of 1926 began, in Lewis' Model T. He registered for classes, got a room in the dorm, and bought a meal ticket. The 1925-1926 school year was the first when the school was called Middle Tennessee State Teachers College. In previous years, it had been called Middle Tennessee State Normal School.

Ernest could only hope he would have enough money for books and supplies for the spring and summer quarters. Fortunately, he did have enough, with some few dollars to spare.

He had to sit close to the front of the class to hear and he did his very best to take good notes and to remember everything that was said. He studied very hard every night. As a result of his efforts, he did reasonably well, especially in the summer quarter. By the end of the summer, he knew that he could succeed in college if he could afford to go. He was determined to return the next spring and summer to complete two more quarters of work.

At Murfreesboro, he was a member of the “Rural Life Club”, the “Claxton Society,” and the Y.M.C.A. The Claxton Society was a literary society for male students that held debates and put on plays, probably in conjunction with one of the female literary societies. After he started college, Ernest would put on plays from time to time to raise money for the Wesley’s Chapel Cemetery Association. He invited some of his fellow college students to the church to help him put on those plays. They were a great success.

His Physique

As a young adult, Ernest was six feet, one inch tall, with dark brown hair and blue eyes. He was healthy and strong from farm work and hunting. A man he knew once said to him that with his physique, he could go far³⁵.

His First Teaching Job

The summer quarter at Murfreesboro ended on Thursday, August 19. Ernest had been granted a limited teacher certificate on July 20, based on his spring quarter of college work. When school started in the summer of 1926 (probably in July) at the one-room, one-teacher school at Chestnut Grove, Ernest was the teacher of the 30-plus students and all eight grades. The school was in Fults’ Cove near the Warren County Line. Ernest lived with his mother and Lewis in Hubbard’s Cove and rode a horse to the school each day. He had just turned 21 years old and some of his pupils were not much younger. It was his first teaching job. Rufus Wooten, a member of the Grundy County School Board, arranged for Ernest to have that school after he completed his first quarter at Middle Tennessee State Teachers College in Murfreesboro, as he had promised he would.

Ernest’s salary that first year was \$70 a month. As soon as he got paid, which was after four months, he went straight to Asa Stubblefield’s house to pay him back the \$100 he had loaned him.

He had a bad experience while teaching at Chestnut Grove School. Some of the students were nearly grown and had run a previous teacher off. Ernest had a 16-year-old girl in the third grade who weighed probably 150-175 pounds. One time, Ernest told her, “Sit down.” She said, “I’ll sit down when I’m ready.” She took the poker out of the coal bucket and tried to hit him with it, saying, “You old devil you”

³⁵ My father told me this story when I was in my 20s.

He took the poker away from her and sat her down. She went running out of the school.

In a while, her father and brother came to the school carrying a shotgun. Ernest calmly told them what had happened and then asked her father, "What would you do if she did that to you?"

Her father and brother turned and started to leave. Ernest said to them, "If you'll put that gun down, I'll take you on together or one at a time." They walked away.

After that incident happened, he determined not to teach there the next year or ever again.

His Hearing

Ernest's friends and family were aware that he had some difficulty hearing, but after he graduated from high school, it gradually grew worse. It is possible that his hearing loss was related to his having been born with a cleft palate. Either during his first two quarters in Murfreesboro in 1926 or, more likely, when he returned to Murfreesboro for three straight quarters in 1927, he took a job working the switchboard in the James K. Polk Hotel. He found he had to quit that job, because he could not hear well enough to connect the calls properly. His hearing continued to decline until, by the time he was 27, it was fairly bad. Hearing aids never seemed to help him or possibly he was just too vain to wear one. However, the main reason he never wore one was probably because he thought doing so might cause people not to hire him for a job in education.

Continuing in College: 1927-28

Middle Tennessee State Teachers College scheduled the times of their spring quarter classes so that full-time teachers could get two quarters of college work each year, spring and summer quarters. Ernest took advantage of that scheduling to complete both of those quarters in 1927. Mr. Lyon, the President of M.T.S.T.C., allowed him to keep laundry in his dormitory room in return for his room and board. He would take in the laundry other students would bring to his room; after it was washed and ironed, it was returned to his room to be picked up by them. To earn money, he also worked for a department store in Murfreesboro. So, rather than return to teaching in the fall, he decided to continue on at Murfreesboro. He completed the fall quarter of 1927, but did not enroll in the winter quarter there.

At some point while he was living in the dormitory at Murfreesboro, a funny thing happened. One of the chemistry professors was in the habit of pulling a child's red coaster wagon behind him with materials he used in his teaching. One afternoon as this professor was walking past the dormitory, the cotter pin came out of an axle end and that wheel fell off. The professor worked with it for a while, but became frustrated when he was unable to fix it. By that time, a number of the students, including Ernest, were watching his ordeal from the windows of their dorm rooms. Finally, someone took pity on him and went out to repair the wagon so the professor could go on his way. Clearly, the professor had plenty of book sense, but no common sense!

Beginning on January 2, 1928, Ernest attended the winter quarter at Tennessee Polytechnic Institute (TPI) in Cookeville³⁶. He apparently enrolled for classes back at Murfreesboro for the spring quarter of 1928, but did not complete the quarter for some reason³⁷.

Living in Dunlap

Possibly because of a connection he made while he was at Tennessee Polytechnic Institute (TPI) in Cookeville, Ernest had accepted a job as principal of a three-teacher school at Grassy Cove, near Crossville, to begin in the summer of 1928. However, he subbed in the band from Manchester that played at the Governor's Race Rally in Jasper sometime prior to the State Democratic Primary on Thursday, August 2. At the rally, he heard about a job opening near Dunlap in Sequatchie County, which was much closer than Grassy Cove to both Hubbard's Cove and Murfreesboro. After the rally, he drove to Dunlap and applied for the job.

Later, he drove his brother Lewis' Model T Ford to Crossville and sat up until 11 o'clock with two Barkers who were on the Cumberland County School Board. He could not get them to release him from the school in Grassy Cove. He left and when the money was voted for him to be hired in Sequatchie County, he sent a telegram to Cumberland County resigning from the school in Grassy Cove.

Ernest was principal of the school in Sequatchie County, Tennessee in the 1928-29 school year. The next year he moved to the new 10-teacher consolidated school in Dunlap City Schools as its Superintendent. He worked in Dunlap City for

³⁶ Tennessee Polytechnic Institute transcript for Ernest Cunningham.

³⁷ Middle Tennessee State Teachers College transcript for Ernest Cunningham.

two years, 1929-1931. He lived in Dunlap for the three years. On April 1, 1930, he was lodging in the home of Polk B. Smith in Dunlap³⁸.

The Great Depression Begins

It was in the fall of 1929, during Ernest's second year living and working in Dunlap, that the Stock Market crashed and the Great Depression began. He was 24 years old.

Continuing in College: 1929-1931

Ernest took courses at Murfreesboro during both the spring and summer quarters of 1929. He did the same in 1930 and 1931. He received permanent professional elementary certification on July 25, 1929, probably based on two years of college completed.

Principal at Williamson County Junior High School

He became principal of the Williamson County Junior High School (grades 9-10) in Trinity, Tennessee, about six miles outside of Franklin, in the fall of 1931. He coached both the boy's and girls' basketball teams there. The girls' team won the tournament while he was their coach. He was principal there for three years.

Continuing in College: 1932-33

He took courses in the spring and summer quarters at Murfreesboro in both 1932 and 1933. At some point, he also took two two-quarter-hour courses, one in history and one in health—probably by correspondence—at George Peabody College in Nashville.³⁹ He probably took those courses while living and teaching in Williamson County.

Automobile Trips

W. L. Cunningham said that he and Ernest went to Dunlap one time and spent the night at the Methodist preacher's house.⁴⁰ He also said they went to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky together one time. W. L. said these trips occurred before he was married which took place sometime in 1933.

³⁸ 1930 Federal Census of Sequatchie County, TN.

³⁹ Middle Tennessee State Teachers College transcript for Ernest Cunningham. Western Kentucky State Teachers College transcript for E.J. Cunningham. Because Peabody/Vanderbilt has no record of his having taken any courses, they were probably correspondence courses.

⁴⁰ This was told to me by W. L. Cunningham at the first annual Cunningham reunion in 1990 at Viola. He had known my father at Middle Tennessee State Teachers College and they had paled around some. (W. L. Cunningham was a descendant of the John Cunningham who married Sarah Jane Swindle in 1812.)

Chicago World's Fair

Sometime in the summer of 1933, Ernest drove to and from Chicago to see the World's Fair. He probably went with a friend.

Continuing in College: 1934-35

Ernest took three correspondence courses from Western Kentucky State Teachers College in Bowling Green in 1934. He began the first one on January 20, and finished the third one on August 20.⁴¹ These and the earlier correspondence courses he took would have been easier for him, given his difficulty hearing at that point, than regular college classes on campus.

Principal at Altamont

At some point in the spring or summer of 1934, Ernest went to see Mr. Rufus Wooten who was on the Grundy County School Board. He told Mr. Wooten that he wanted to come back home to Hubbard's Cove to live, because his mother was old. Mr. Wooten arranged for him to become the principal at Altamont School.

When Ernest became principal of Altamont School in the summer of 1934, he lived with his mother and older brother, Lewis, in Hubbard's Cove. They probably did not have electricity in their home while he lived there; they would have used coal oil lamps. They probably did not have a telephone either.

Ernest's niece, Mary Katherine Ferguson, remembered spending the night with her grandmother, Uncle Lewis, and Uncle Ernest at their house when she was six years old (between 1934-1935). She said she used to sleepwalk and that one night when she was spending the night over there, she was sleepwalking and got her hand stuck in the crack on the hinged side of the bedroom door and made a noise trying to get free. Ernest got up and gently woke and comforted her until she went back to sleep.⁴²

Ernest drove his car to and from Altamont every day to work. This was not an unduly difficult commute since a new road from Viola to Altamont (now Highway 108) had been built a few years earlier, although it may have only consisted of crushed stone rather than being paved. He continued to live at home for two years until after his mother died in December, 1935, and he became principal of Grundy County High School in Tracy City in the summer of 1936. During these two years,

⁴¹ Western Kentucky State Teachers College transcript for E.J. Cunningham.

⁴² Mary Katherine told me this story in a phone conversation on April 10, 2010.

he visited in the home of Rufus and Lizzie Wooten in Hubbard's Cove almost every evening, seeking advice and guidance⁴³.

Ernest understood people. One time while he was principal⁴⁴ at Altamont, he had to correct a girl in class. She was taking it pretty hard until he caught her eye back at her seat and winked at her. After that, she was all right.⁴⁵

His Credentials in Education

Ernest graduated from Middle Tennessee State Teachers College in Murfreesboro with a B.S. degree in June, 1935⁴⁶. He had majored in history and English⁴⁷. The summer quarter of 1933 was the last time he was enrolled at Murfreesboro. He seems to have finished all requirements for the degree on August 20, 1934 when he completed his third and last correspondence course from Western Kentucky State Teachers College⁴⁸. MTSTC granted him high school certification on October 9, 1934, based on his having earned his degree⁴⁹.

He received permanent professional teaching certification in elementary (grades 1-9) on October 16, 1934. He also received permanent professional teaching certification in high school (grades 7-12) "based on degree" on October 15, 1934 in the following areas: English, Biology, Chemistry, History, and General Agriculture. A few years later, he received permanent professional county superintendent's certification on April 11, 1938.

The Death of His Brother-in-Law, Paul Cunningham

Ernest's sister, Mary, had married a Cunningham who was not related to her. On April 16, 1935, Mary's husband, Paul, a taxi driver in McMinnville, was robbed and brutally murdered by a young black man. The murderer was caught and later executed in the electric chair in Nashville.

The Death of His Mother

Ernest's mother, Lizzie, died in December, 1935 of pneumonia. She was 77. Mary got their mother up one morning not long before that and she said, "I prayed when your daddy died that I would live to raise you children. Now I have and I'm

⁴³ Doreen Gonder, Rufus Wooten's daughter, told me this in a phone conversation on April 8, 2010.

⁴⁴ At this time, the principal of a school was almost always also a teacher there.

⁴⁵ This was told to me by W. L. Cunningham at the first annual Cunningham reunion in 1990 at Viola.

⁴⁶ Middle Tennessee State Teachers College transcript for Ernest Cunningham.

⁴⁷ The MTSTC annual, *The Midlander*, Volume IX, 1934, p.26.

⁴⁸ Western Kentucky State Teachers College transcript for E. J. Cunningham.

⁴⁹ Middle Tennessee State Teachers College transcript for Ernest Cunningham.

ready to go.” She had broken her hip, but she could still walk with a stick until she got pneumonia.⁵⁰ Lizzie was buried beside her husband in Wesley’s Chapel Cemetery.

Political Involvement in the Democrat Party

On Saturday, May 16, 1936, Ernest was selected to be one of a number of delegates from Grundy County to the Tennessee State Democratic Convention. At that time, the Democrat Party was the dominant party in Grundy County as well as most of middle and west Tennessee.

Principal of Grundy County High School in Tracy City

In the spring of 1936, Ernest was finishing his second year as principal of Altamont School. One day, Allen McCormick, the principal of Grundy County High School in Tracy City, called Ernest and said to him, “Meet me in Monteagle.” When they met, McCormick told Ernest he was leaving Grundy County to become principal of Central High School in McMinnville, in Warren County, in the fall. Then he told Ernest, “I’d like to see you succeed me here.” Not long afterward, Ernest began to meet individually and privately with members of the Grundy County School Board to let them know he was interested in the position. The Warren County School Board met and officially selected McCormick as Central High’s new principal on June 11.

Soon afterward, the Grundy County School Board met in Altamont to select the new high school principal to replace McCormick. Will Jossi, who owned a store in Tracy City, was chairman of the board. Jossi wanted his son-in-law, John Anderson, who was principal of Shook School in Tracy City, to be selected. The Board’s vote was either 5-2 or 6-1 in favor of Ernest. The board members who had voted for him told him not to fight Mr. Jossi, but to let them do the fighting. (At some point during this meeting or one not long after, Mr. Jossi physically knocked Coleman Dykes down.) When Ernest accepted the position, he signed the high school warrants at Mr. Jossi’s store.

Ernest became principal of Grundy County High School in the summer of 1936, just before he turned 31. He moved from Hubbard’s Cove to Tracy City where he boarded in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Bill Abernathy. Their home was on the road past Shook School on the same side. Mr. Abernathy was a prominent attorney and

⁵⁰ Aunt Mary told me this information about their mother’s final days and death.

local politician. Ernest continued to live in their home until he married in 1941.⁵¹ Ernest remained principal of Grundy County High School for four years, until he was elected county school superintendent in 1940. For the 1939 calendar year, Ernest's total salary for being principal of the high school was \$1287⁵².

One spring while Ernest was principal of the high school, three senior boys were caught drinking. Ernest was going to stop them from graduating. Rupert Payne⁵³, a teacher at the high school and Ernest's friend and supporter, thought this was too harsh a punishment for the infraction, so Rupert contacted School Board Member Rufus Wooten and explained the situation to him. Mr. Wooten worked with Ernest so the boys could graduate. All three of the boys later became respected business people and members of the community.

Ernest Runs for County Superintendent of Schools for the First Time

Ernest had considered running for county superintendent of schools earlier, possibly in 1932 or 1934, but Rufus Wooten, a storeowner in Hubbard's Cove who was on the Grundy County School Board, told him, "The time's not right."

Finally, he ran for Superintendent of Schools of Grundy County against the incumbent, Lewis Rollings, in the Democratic primary either in 1936 or 1938. He lost the election by six votes. He did not ask for a recount, but accepted his defeat.

In one of his early races, probably this one, a horse bit a hole in the seat of his Ford car while he was out electioneering⁵⁴.

"WPA Girls"

Grundy County, Tennessee was one of the poorest counties in the United States in the 1930s. When the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created by President Franklin Roosevelt and funded by Congress in 1935, many Grundy County residents applied for and received WPA jobs.

⁵¹ At the time of the 1940 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN, he was listed as Ernest J. Cunningham, Lodger, in the home of Willie Abernathy in Tracy City, "Near Shook School."

⁵² 1940 Federal Census of Grundy County, TN, entry for Ernest J. Cunningham, Lodger, in the home of Willie Abernathy in Tracy City.

⁵³ Rupert W. Payne was the son of James H. & Nora L. Payne. He was born 1908-1909. In the 1920 and 1930 Federal Censuses of Grundy County, TN, he was living at home with his parents and younger siblings in Civil District 3 (Pelham Valley?). In the 1940 Federal Census, he was also a lodger, like Ernest, in Willie Abernathy's home.

⁵⁴ My mother told me this story.

While he was principal of Grundy County High School, Ernest often accompanied the basketball and football teams on the bus when they competed at the other school. On Saturday, January 14, 1939, he rode with the basketball teams to play Central High School in Manchester. As usual that evening, the girls played first, then the boys. The first game was hard fought, with Manchester winning 24-22. Several Central High supporters insulted the Grundy High team from the bleachers during the game by loudly, repeatedly, sarcastically referring to them as “WPA girls.” Ernest heard it, and it made him angry, because those girls couldn’t help it if their families were poor. However, he did not say anything about it to anyone.

The next school year, on Friday night, October 6, 1939, Grundy’s football team traveled to Manchester to play Central High. Ernest rode on the bus with the team. Right before the game, he stood and addressed the team, something he had never done before, because that was the coach’s prerogative. He told them how the girls’ basketball team had been mistreated at Manchester back in January. He finished by saying, “Boys, I want you to win this one for me.” Grundy County defeated Manchester that night, 32-0.

Myles Horton and Highlander Folk School

An expose of the Highlander Folk School in Grundy County, written by John McDougal Burns, was published in the Nashville Tennessean newspaper on October 15, 1939. This article claimed that the school taught communism to the labor leaders who came there for training. The following fall, Ernest joined with W. H. Cox, C. H. Kilby, E. W. Cheek, J. E. Cheek, Horace Moore, Alvin Henderson, and W. R. (Rupert) Payne to form a group calling themselves the Grundy County Crusaders. The Crusaders asked the leaders of Highlander Folk School to leave the county, which they refused to do.

At some point, Myles Horton, co-founder of the school, attempted to organize a strike of Grundy County’s WPA employees for higher wages. Ernest was involved in calling the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI) in Nashville to send agents to Tracy City to break up the strike, which they did.

Ernest Begins to Court Ann Martin from Battle Creek

Ernest and Ann met or had their first date in 1939 at a bridge club held at Clara Shoemate’s restaurant or house in Monteagle. Clara was a famous restaurateur and innkeeper on Monteagle Mountain for decades. Perhaps, she had bought Claramont by then; Claramont was later her restaurant and inn. It was an

impressive large stone house that had earlier—before Clara owned it—been frequented by Al Capone on his trips between Chicago and Tampa. Ernest and Ann played bridge regularly at Claramont for years after they were married. Ernest was an excellent bridge player, but Ann was only so-so.⁵⁵

Ann taught at Monteagle Elementary School from 1935 to 1946, Ernest was Principal of Grundy County High School from 1936 to 1940, and perhaps someone in Monteagle or Tracy City played Cupid. Anyway, they were dating regularly by the fall of 1940 when Ernest began serving his first term as Superintendent of Grundy County Schools.

Mulligan Stew

During the five years Ernest lived in Tracy City before he married, he paled around with some of the older men in town. At some point, during these five years or possibly later, some of the men would get together periodically to cook a mulligan stew. Jeff Fults, a prominent member of the community, would usually join them late when the stew was ready to eat. When they would ask Mr. Fults how the stew was, he would invariably say, “It needs just a little more pepper.” Perhaps, they did add a little more black pepper after he said that, but he still always said the same thing. So, one night they decided they would fix him good. They put so much in it that no one could hardly eat it. After he had arrived and was eating the stew, they asked him how it was. Without letting on at all, he said, “It needs just a little more pepper.” Ernest enjoyed the camaraderie of these older men. Perhaps he did so because as a fatherless boy he cherished the company and attention of his Grandfather Rhea and his mother’s brothers⁵⁶.

Superintendent of Grundy County Schools

Ernest was elected Superintendent of Schools in the Democratic Primary on August 1, 1940.⁵⁷ He defeated J. L. Rollings, the incumbent, by about 300 votes. He took quite a risk to run, because he either had to or felt the need to resign as Principal of Grundy County High School in case he won, so that another person could be selected in time to make the necessary preparations for the 1940-1941 school year. John Anderson, the principal of Shook School in Tracy City, had officially been made the new high school principal on July 8, 1940.

⁵⁵ My mother told me this.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Rhea, Jesse Rhea, James Rhea, Jr., Mack C. Rhea, and William M. Rhea.

⁵⁷ In Grundy County at this time, winning the Democratic Primary guaranteed winning the General Election.

The Presidential Election of 1940

Sometime between when school started in the fall of 1940 and Election Day on November 5, Ernest went with Ann down to her parents' home in Smithtown on Battle Creek for Sunday dinner. Possibly, Ernest went home with her several times on Sunday during this period. On one particular Sunday, not too long before the election, Ann's mother's brothers were all there: John T. Raulson, a prominent lawyer who had been the judge of the Scopes Trial; Joseph L. Raulston, a well-respected medical doctor; and Samuel H. Raulston, a justice of the peace and school teacher who had served in the state legislature for a term or two around 1910. All three men were strong and influential Republicans in Marion County. Ernest felt like all he heard that afternoon was "Willkie this and Willkie that." They were much older than he, so he held his peace that afternoon out of respect for their age. However, after the election, which Franklin Roosevelt won in a landslide in both the popular vote and the Electoral College, Ernest mailed them each a "Get Well" card with no comment other than his signature.⁵⁸

Ernest's and Ann's Marriage

Ernest married Ann Louise Katherine Martin on Monday evening, July 7, 1941 at her sister, Mary Jo Hubbard's home in the Albemarle Apartments in Chattanooga with only family members invited⁵⁹. Reverend A. C. Adamz of Tracy City was the minister.

Ernest and Ann drove to Asheville, North Carolina and stayed in a hotel downtown for the first part of their honeymoon. They then drove to Gatlinburg and stayed there before returning to Tracy City to live. They first lived briefly in a rented house owned by Fred Abraham in the Dutchtown part of Tracy City, but soon were living with Jess Hoosier and his wife, Tolly, and her sister, Martha Wagner, on the northeast corner of what is now the intersection between 7th Street and Hobbs Hill Road. They lived there until Ernest bought the funeral home in Tracy City in early 1942 and they moved into the upstairs residence there.

Attack on Pearl Harbor

Ernest and Ann has been married for five months when they were leaving the morning service at the Methodist Church in Tracy City on Sunday, December 7, 1941. Someone came running up and announced to everyone leaving the church

⁵⁸ My father told me this story several times as I was growing up.

⁵⁹ I doubt if my father's brother, Lewis, was there. He was in ill health, and would surely have been my father's best man rather than Uncle Charles had he attended.

that our naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii was under attack by the Japanese. The person had just heard it on the radio.

E. J. Cunningham Funeral Home

In late January, 1942, a year-and-a-half after being elected Superintendent of Grundy County Schools the first time, Ernest bought the funeral home in Tracy City. Mr. and Mrs. E. C. Norvell had been the owners, but Mr. Norvell had recently died. Ernest had been friends with Mr. Norvell, even though Norvell was a Republican and a much older man. Ernest and he had loafed around together some and gone to the fair at Winchester a time or two.

When Mr. Norvell died, a number of people wanted to buy his funeral home, including the people who owned the funeral business in Winchester. Ann was opposed to them buying a funeral home at first; the idea of it repelled her. However, when she saw how much it meant to him—that it had been a dream of his for a long time—she gave in.

When Ernest went to see Mrs. Norvell to ask her if he could buy it, she said she would rather he have it than anyone else. She told him he could pay for the house in installments, but that he would have to raise the money for the funeral equipment and fixtures. He went to the bank in Viola near where he grew up in Hubbard's Cove and where he had gone to high school. He knew the banker, but the banker refused to loan him the money because Viola was not in Grundy County. Next, Ernest went to see Joe Henley, Sr., a Tracy City merchant, who was President of the Coalmont Bank. Henley refused to loan Ernest the money on the grounds that Ernest did not know anything about the funeral business. Finally, Ernest went to see Carl Roberts, who was Vice President of the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company and President of the Tracy City Bank. Roberts told him that if Ernest would fix the note and bring it to him, he would give Ernest a check. The amount of the loan was between four and five thousand dollars, a large sum for that time and place.

Ernest bought the E. C. Norvell Co. Funeral Home and Burial Association between January 22-28, 1942, and it became the E. J. Cunningham Funeral Home. Lawrence Meeks, who had been the mortician and manager of the funeral home under Mr. Norvell, remained in the same capacity after Ernest became the owner. Meeks was nine or ten years older than Ernest. Ernest also retained the Burial Association part of the business, which sold caskets and vaults. As part of his funeral business, Ernest also operated an ambulance service. He and Ann moved

into the residence upstairs over the business. Ernest paid Carl Roberts some of the money every time he was paid for a funeral until the note was paid off. He always remembered Carl Roberts fondly and with gratitude for having been willing to loan him the money he needed to buy it.

Not only was purchasing the funeral home a shrewd financial move, but it seems that it was also a wise political move. At the beginning, Ernest Cheek, a Tracy City druggist and merchant, had predicted that the purchase of the funeral home would defeat Ernest politically. However, he had underestimated the public relations that Ernest would develop as he provided good ambulance, funeral, and burial services for people in the county.

Ernest's Son

After at least one miscarriage, Ann Cunningham became pregnant again in 1946. On January 22, she gave birth to Ernest's first and only child, James William Cunningham, who was named for his paternal and maternal grandfathers, respectively.

Running for Re-Election

For a few years, Ernest had to stand for re-election every two years. After that, he had to run for reelection every four years. In his first campaign for re-election in 1942, his opponent was Glenn E. Bonner of Pelham. In 1944, he was again opposed by Glenn Bonner. In 1946, if he had to run, he was unopposed.

Ernest had two opponents in the Democratic Primary on Thursday, August 5, 1948. Ernest won, Frank E. Rollings came in second, and Lou Hill Foster came in third. Apparently, some negative handbills about Ernest signed by a Mrs. Mills were distributed right before the primary. After the election, Frank Rollings denied in print in the *Grundy County Herald* the rumor that he had been behind the handbills.

In 1950, Ernest was unopposed, if he had to run. Starting in 1952, if not before, Ernest only had to run for reelection every four years. The Democratic Primary of 1952 was held on Thursday, August 7, his birthday. He defeated Glenn Bonner by only 21 votes. The Democratic Primary of 1956 was held on Saturday, April 21. His opponent in that race was Douglas Goforth, who had been principal of Shook School. Ernest won by 333 votes. In 1956, Ernest also had an opponent in the General Election on August 2, Mark Phipps running as an Independent. Ernest received approximately two-thirds of the vote in the General Election.

Ernest was well-respected for his honesty and fairness. At one point, the coal miners' union held an election and asked Ernest to supervise it.

The Death of His Brother, Lewis

Ernest's oldest sibling, Lewis Green Cunningham, died on February 9, 1945. He was only 57. He had had lung trouble since before he was a soldier in World War I. After being gassed in Flanders, his lung trouble was worse for the rest of his life. He may have had tuberculosis. Lewis lived with his mother until her death and never married. The area around the house where they lived is known as the "Lewis Cunningham woods."⁶⁰

Educational Leadership

When Ernest became the Superintendent of Grundy County Schools in 1940, there were a large number of one- and two-teacher schools in the county. By the time he was elected for his final term in 1956, he had closed almost all of these small schools and replaced them with new or expanded consolidated schools. This was extremely difficult to do politically. Every community with a school wanted to keep it, so it was ticklish and politically risky every time he closed one. Also, he had to be a prudent manager of the capital outlay funds received from the state in order to build the new or enlarged schools needed to consolidate the schools being closed. That he continued to be re-elected during these years shows that he was politically astute in how he conducted this most challenging part of his job.

During the 1940s, school attendance was a major problem in a poor mountain county like Grundy. Parents who had not attended school much, if at all, sometimes saw no need for their children to exceed them in education. During his race for re-election in 1942, he was criticized by his opponent at one point for not using the law to force parents to send their children to school. He told the following story in response.

During his first term as superintendent, there had been a case on the mountain where a boy repeatedly laid out of school. The principal had warned his mother that she must see to it that he go to school, but his absenteeism had continued. Finally, the mother was called to appear before the county judge. Her mother came with her. Ernest was in the courtroom to testify. It was obvious that they were very poor, perhaps undernourished. The judge levied a fine. The mother's mother reached into the pocket of her tattered apron and pulled out a small jumble

⁶⁰ His name is often misspelled as "Louis."

of dollar bills to pay her daughter's fine. Ernest couldn't take it anymore and asked, "Can't we give her another chance, Judge?" The judge relented. After he told them that story, Ernest said to his audience, "If you want someone to make those people pay a fine when they probably don't have enough to eat, you'll have to elect somebody else, because I won't do it."

School Census

On Thursday and Friday, April 4-5, 1946, Ernest conducted a school census in Grundy County in which a team of 70 teachers visited every home in the county with one or more school-age children. This census was conducted to determine which children were not attending school and to improve relations between the school and the home.⁶¹

His Secretaries in the Office of County School Superintendent

Elizabeth O'Dear (Mrs. Kense O'Dear) was Ernest's secretary for a number of years. She eventually graduated from Murfreesboro State Teachers College in 1953. She later became a teacher at Grundy County High School. Edith Lowe became Ernest's secretary in the early 1950s, after Libby O'Dear left the position. Edith remained his secretary for the rest of his tenure as superintendent.

Location of the Office of School Superintendent

In the early years when Ernest was Superintendent of Grundy County Schools, his office may have been in the court house in Tracy City. By the early 1950s, if not before, it was on the ground floor of a building that may have been an annex to the court house in Tracy City. Of course, this was very convenient for Ernest, given where he lived. By the late 1950s, however, all county offices were required to be in Altamont, because that was the county seat. When the office had to be moved, Ernest never complained about commuting to and from Altamont each day to work.

Social Life

On Thursday evening, June 6, 1946, Ernest and Ann attended a party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. M. T. Silzer. The guests played bridge, listened to music, and enjoyed cold drinks.⁶²

⁶¹ *Grundy County Herald*, April 11, 1946, page 1.

⁶² *Grundy County Herald*, June 13, 1946, page 4.

On Saturday night, September 7, 1946, Ernest and Ann attended a costume party and supper at the home of Mr. and Mrs. M. T. Silzer. The guests played bridge and listened to music.⁶³ What costume did Ernest wear? Since she was about five months pregnant, what costume did Ann wear?!

Selling the Funeral Home

Ernest owned the funeral home in Tracy City for eight years, selling it on Tuesday, February 28, 1950 for \$15,000 to John High of McMinnville. (Ernest put the money in U.S. Savings Bonds and kept them there until the bonds matured. In 1960, that money would enable him and Ann to pay the down payments necessary to buy the Ben Franklin Store on Harding Road in Nashville near Belle Meade and a home in west Nashville's Charlotte Park.)

At some point after February 28, 1950, Ernest, Ann, and their son, Jim, had to move from the residence above the funeral home in Tracy City so that Robert Hill Foster and his family could move in. First, Ernest and his family moved briefly into a small house without an indoor toilet on the right past Mr. Hale's service station and across the railroad track. In a few months, they moved into a cute little house that Cap Wiley owned just past where Fritz Flury lived on the same side of the street. In a few more months, they moved into the house where they lived for 10 years, until August, 1960. This house was on the northeast corner of 5th and 6th Streets in Tracy City (the lot extended back so it was also on the northwest corner of 5th and 8th Streets). Their neighbors on the left facing this house were Mrs. T. I. Ingram and her son, Henry, the electrician. Haskell was another son, who lived in Knoxville. Aileen, who had married Tommy Lynn, was a sister to Henry and Haskell. She and Tommy lived in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and later in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The house had two bedrooms, a living room, a den/dining room, a kitchen, and a bathroom off of one of the bedrooms that had a good-sized closet off of it. It had a basement under the back two thirds or so of the house with a coal-burning furnace that was fed by a stoker. The heat from the furnace came up from ducts through grates in the floor. There were two fireplaces back-to-back in the front bedroom and living room, but they were almost never used. Not long after moving into this house, Ernest and Ann had the back of the house remodeled somehow. It seems they added a hall between the bathroom wall and the kitchen that lead to the backdoor. The construction included a new set of wooden steps down from the

⁶³ *Grundy County Herald*, September 12, 1946, page 1.

backdoor. There were two apple trees in the backyard, not far from where the steps landed, one tree to each side.

Making a Garden

Behind their backyard was a good-sized section of land the width of the lot. Ernest decided he would make a garden on that section. He used his push plow, a manual cultivator with a wheel that you walked behind, to plow the ground. He planted a variety of vegetables. He used bean poles and tomato stakes to stick the green beans and tomatoes. He always had a good garden while they lived there. He had a shed on the south side of the backyard in which he stored garden implements, manual push mower, and other tools.

Red Cross Drive

In 1951, Ernest was Chairman of the Red Cross Fund Drive for Grundy County.

His Niece, Carolyn's, Graduation from High School

In 1954, Carolyn Ferguson, Ernest's sister, Clarcie's youngest child, graduated from Central High School in McMinnville. Ernest attended the graduation and gave her a nylon cooler bag, useful for carrying sandwiches, etc. for a picnic.⁶⁴

Friends

Ernest had many friends. Once his son asked him how many of the people in Grundy County he thought he knew. He said he knew everyone who lived in the county. When Jim expressed incredulity, he said, "Well, there may be a few people who recently moved into the county that I don't know yet."

Ernest and Ann had several couples who were their close friends. Bill (W. N.) Paris and his wife were good friends. Bill was the Grundy County Trustee. Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Roberts were also close friends. "Doc Tom" was the dentist in Tracy City; Mrs. Roberts taught piano lessons. They had a son, Billy. Jess and Tolly Hoosier and her sister, Martha, had remained close friends since the period of time when Ernest and Ann lived with them before moving into the residence above their funeral home. Jess worked for the railroad and was Mayor of Tracy City during the 1950s.

⁶⁴ Aunt Clarcie's daughter, Carolyn, told me the information in this paragraph when I visited with her in McMinnville, TN on August 25, 2010.

Smoking a Pipe or Cigars

Ernest smoked a pipe which he filled with Prince Albert tobacco that came from a red tin with an elegant picture of Queen Victoria's husband on the front. He later smoked Hav-a-Tampa cigars.

Secretary-Treasurer of the Grundy County Fair Association

The Grundy County Fair was held at the Fairgrounds in Tracy City each year, Monday through Saturday, usually around the third week of August. Ernest was Secretary and Treasurer of the Grundy County Fair Association during the 1950s, and perhaps earlier. In addition, he often had other duties. For example, in 1951, he was Superintendent of Community Exhibits for the Fair. For another example, in March of 1956, his duties as Treasurer were expanded as the Fair Association began the process of replacing the Exhibition Building that had recently burned.

Bitten by a Black Widow Spider

Ernest kept a pair of work gloves in his shed or in the garage he rented from Henry Ingram. One day, he put those gloves on and was bitten on the finger by a black widow spider that was inside the glove. Before long, Ernest was very ill. He went into the house and went to bed. Ann called Dr. Littell who came to their house to see Ernest. Ernest stayed in bed a day or two until he was able to get up and go back to work.

Continued Political Involvement in the Democrat Party

In the presidential elections of 1952 and 1956, Ernest was Grundy County's campaign manager for Adlai Stevenson to become President of the United States. In 1956, the vice presidential nominee on the Democratic ticket was Tennessee Senator, Estes Kefauver. One year after that, Senator Kefauver drove to Grundy County because he heard that a family had named their new baby boy for him. The senator rode with Ernest to the house to see the baby and thank the parents for the honor of having the baby named for him.

His Cars

Ernest had a car in the late 1920s at college in Murfreesboro, though it may have belonged to his brother Lewis. In the 1930s, he owned a Ford. Around 1950, he owned a white Dodge. During the middle-to-late 1950s, when Lon Varnell of Sewanee owned the Chevrolet dealership in Tracy City, Ernest bought a new Chevrolet every two years, trading in the previous one each time. He had a 1956

and a 1958 Chevrolet. He bought a used car, a 1953 Chevrolet, for Ann to drive at some point in the mid-to-late 1950s.

Ernest always liked to take good care of his car. When he and Ann first moved to the house on the northeast corner of 5th and 6th Streets in Tracy City, he rented a garage that wasn't being used from Charles Schaerer who lived a little ways up on 5th Street. That way, he could park his car out of the elements. Later, he rented an unused garage from his next-door neighbor, Henry Ingram, that was at the north end of the Ingram lot. Ernest also would regularly use the garden hose to rinse the dust off his car before driving it.

Family Trips to Florida

Several days before Christmas in December, 1957, Ernest drove with Ann and Jim in his 1958 Chevrolet to Florida. They visited Daytona Beach and Saint Augustine, where they toured the old Spanish fort. On Saturday, December 28, they went to the Gator Bowl in Jacksonville and saw Tennessee defeat Texas A&M (coached by Bear Bryant) 3-0. After the game, Ernest was unable to find his car in the huge parking lot. For years after that, his son Jim never went anywhere with his father without making sure he would remember where the car was parked.

After school let out for Christmas in December, 1958, Ernest drove the family to Florida for the second time. They took Highway 41 down into central Florida where they saw lots of orange groves and stopped at a roadside stand to drink fresh-squeezed orange juice. They crossed Tampa Bay on the causeway and Sunshine Skyway to tour St. Petersburg, Clearwater (where they visited friends or some relatives of Ann's), and Sarasota (where they went to the Ringling Circus Museum). They then drove south down the Tamiami Trail to Miami Beach where they spent Christmas. Then they drove up through Ft. Lauderdale and the east coast of Florida on their way home to Tracy City.

In the summer of 1959, Ernest drove the family to Florida for the third time. They visited Coral Gables, Daytona Beach, and Saint Augustine. Ernest loved going to Florida. He enjoyed the warm weather and seeing places he had heard or read about but never seen.

The Grundy County Election of 1960

Ernest was challenged again by Glenn Bonner for Superintendent of Schools in the Democratic Primary on Saturday, April 30, 1960. This time, Mr. Bonner won

by 228 votes. At that time, Ernest had served longer than any other school superintendent in Tennessee save three, but he had finally been defeated.

Purchasing a Ben Franklin Store

Ernest had been investigating different franchise businesses for a few years in case he were ever defeated for reelection to school superintendent. So when he was finally beaten in the Democratic primary at the end of April, 1960, he immediately went into action. He contacted the Butler Brothers Corporation in Memphis and told them he was interested in buying a Ben Franklin Store. In June, Ernest, Ann, and Jim took their fourth trip to Florida. They drove to Kissimmee for the purpose of seeing a Ben Franklin Store that was being built in order for Ernest and Ann to determine whether they might buy it. However, they did not think that store's location was a good one. While they were there, Ann had an interview with the principal of an elementary school in St. Cloud, but she did not receive much encouragement about her prospects of getting a teaching job in the area. They then traveled to Daytona Beach and stayed in a motel. On the way home, they spent the night in Allendale, SC, and visited Columbia, SC.

In July, Ernest, Ann, and Jim drove to Nashville at least once to consider two or three new Ben Franklin Stores they might buy, including one on Nolensville Road, later bought by a Mr. Loy, and the one they did buy, in the H.G. Hill shopping center at the intersection of Harding Road and White Bridge Road. Ernest knew the Superintendent of Schools for Davidson County and scheduled for Ann to have an interview for a teaching job with that system on one of these trips to Nashville. She was hired as an elementary classroom teacher. She was incredibly fortunate to be hired to teach at Martha Vaught Elementary School, not far from the store they were buying.

They drove from Tracy City to Butler Brothers Corporation in Memphis in late July where Ernest and Ann agreed to buy the new Ben Franklin Store franchise on Harding Road in Nashville, borrowing \$25,000 from Butler Brothers to add to what they had saved. This loan was to be repaid in five years. The money was to pay for the store fixtures, including the lighted sign with big red letters that would go on the front of the building. The total cost of those fixtures was approximately \$27,000.

A Trip to Dallas, Texas

Ernest, Ann, and Jim continued on from Memphis, across Arkansas to Tulsa, Oklahoma where they spent the night. They drove though Oklahoma City and down

to Dallas where Ann's sister, Sammie, her husband, Jack Truitt, and their 2-month old daughter, Jackie, were living. Ernest, Ann, and Jim stayed in a Holiday Inn on Lemmon Avenue not far from Sammie and Jack's house which was not far from Love Field Airport. One night, Jack and Sammie took Ernest, Ann, and Jim to Cattleman's Steak House for dinner. Since they did not have an air conditioner in their car, they were amazed at how hot Texas was that time of year.

Moving to Nashville

In August, they drove to Nashville at least once to find a house to buy. They bought a new house at 6432 Thunderbird Drive in Nashville from Mr. Griswold, the builder. They paid \$14,000 for it. On Thursday, August 25, Ernest and Ann closed on their new house. They took a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage of \$13,050.00 at six percent interest from Fidelity Federal Savings & Loan. They moved into the house over the next few days after closing, using a moving company to transport their furniture and any other large or heavy items from their home in Tracy City.

Their new house was a ranch-style. It had three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, a den, and a bathroom. It had a basement under about two-thirds of the house. This basement included a one-car garage. The rooms were all small except for the living room which was adequate and the den which was quite large. The house had radiant heat—electric coils in the ceilings. It was not air conditioned. Soon after moving in, Ernest had a large window air conditioner put in the den and a small one put in a window in one of the bedrooms.

Ernest and Ann continued to own their home where they had lived in Tracy City. After moving to Nashville, they rented it out. They eventually sold it, probably sometime between late 1968 and late 1971.

Joining the West Nashville Methodist Church

As soon as they moved to Nashville, Ernest, Ann, and Jim joined the West Nashville Methodist Church by transfer of letter from the Methodist Church in Tracy City where they had been members since Ernest and Ann were married. They joined West Nashville rather than St. John's Methodist (which was closer to their house) because the pastor of West Nashville at the time was R. L. Benton, who had been pastor of the Methodist Church in Monteagle in the middle 1940s. Ernest thought an awful lot of him.

Ernest apparently taught the Men's Bible Class for the first time on the first two Sundays in December, 1960⁶⁵. Perhaps, he was filling in for the regular teacher who had to be away.

Operating the Ben Franklin Store

The first three and a half years of store ownership were difficult for Ernest. He worked long hours and did not make much money. In August, 1961, about a year after his Ben Franklin Store opened, a new large shopping center (Belle Meade Plaza) opened not far away with a large Kuhn's variety store that competed directly with him. It must have been discouraging, but he responded by working hard and trying different ideas to be competitive.

Chance Encounter with an Old Friend

One Saturday in late summer or fall, probably of 1961, Ernest was walking with his son from his store to have lunch at the Belle Meade Buffet, a cafeteria in the Belle Meade Plaza a quarter mile or so away. As they walked through the Belle Meade Plaza parking lot toward the restaurant, a car drove past them, then quickly pulled over to the side. Former Tennessee Governor, Frank Clement, leapt from the car and walked quickly over to Ernest to shake hands and say hello.

Family Trip to the Gulf Coast

In late June and early July, 1961, Ernest drove Ann and Jim down to Florida and west across the Panhandle, at least as far as Fort Walton Beach.

Wesley's Chapel Cemetery Association's Memorial Day

Ernest always tried to attend the annual Memorial Day event at Wesley's Chapel in Hubbard's Cove. It was held on the second Saturday in July.

Ernest was involved with Bill Gunn in inviting Frank Clement to address the gathering at Wesley's Chapel Cemetery Association's Memorial Day, Saturday July 14, 1962 and Clement agreed. He was running for governor again that summer.

Ernest and his son were there that day to greet Clement and hear him speak and to see the people who came. Later that day, as they were walking through the cemetery, a woman came up to Ernest. She said she had not seen him since she was

⁶⁵ Evidenced from the fact that he owned a copy of *Peloubet's Select Notes on the International Bible Lessons for Christian Living, 1960*, from his underlinings in that book, and because I don't remember him ever teaching Sunday School in Tracy City.

a girl. She said she remembered his mother and how large his mother's goiter had been. Ernest thanked her for coming up to him. He had tears in his eyes.

A Trip to See Clarcie

Ernest's sister, Clara, whom everyone called Clarcie or Clercy, had lived in the house in Hubbard's Cove where she, Ernest, and the other siblings were born and where she and her husband, Walter Ferguson, lived and raised their children from 1919 or 1920. In July or August of 1955, she had moved to Indianapolis to be near her daughter, Mary Katherine. In 1957, she had moved to Detroit to live with her other daughter, Carolyn, and be near her son, Kenneth. After she had some health problems in the spring of 1962, Ernest decided he wanted to go see her. So, Ernest drove Ann and Jim to Detroit to visit Clarcie in late July or early August, 1962. After their visit in Detroit, they drove north into Canada through Ontario and down by Niagara Falls into New York State. They continued sightseeing for several days down to West Point, New York City, Washington, D.C., Charlottesville, Virginia, and then returned home to Nashville.

The Grundy County Election of 1964

During the 1963-1964 school year, several people from Grundy County contacted Ernest and asked him to run for school superintendent again in 1964. Glenn Bonner who had defeated him in 1960 announced for re-election in January. After a good amount of soul searching, Ernest officially announced his entry into the race on March 5. He drove from Nashville to Grundy County and back regularly to campaign. When the Democratic Primary was held on Saturday, April 25, Ernest defeated Bonner by 101 votes. This was quite an achievement, given that he had not lived in Grundy County for almost four years, and that he continued to operate his store in Nashville during the campaign. Clearly, his record as school superintendent from 1940-1960 was remembered and respected.

Ordinarily, that would have been it; he would have returned to Grundy County in August to serve another four years as superintendent. However, there was a problem with the sheriff's race in the Democratic Primary. At first, the incumbent Jim Meeks had been declared the winner, but because of irregularities reported in the voting in Coalmont, Lewie Winton had demanded and received a recount. After the recount, Winton was declared the winner. In response, rather than accepting the results of the Democratic Primary, Jim Meeks entered the race for county sheriff in the General Election as an independent.

Even though there had been no irregularities reported in the voting for school superintendent, Glenn Bonner used the public's confusion over what had really happened in the sheriff's race to imply that something untoward had happened in the school superintendent's race as well. He, too, announced as an independent for the General Election to be held on Thursday, August 6.

Whether some of Ernest's supporters assumed he would win again and did not bother to vote in the General Election, or some changed their vote to Bonner because they thought Ernest had somehow won the Primary unfairly, or the Republican candidate's few hundred votes were taken more from Ernest than Bonner, this time Ernest was defeated by 45 votes. He returned to operating his Ben Franklin Store full-time with resignation and renewed dedication to make the business a success.

His Son Goes to College

Soon after his son was born in 1947, Ernest had bought an annuity that would accumulate a certain amount of money to send Jim to college. College had always been Ernest's and Ann's goal for their son. In the spring of 1965, Jim's application for admission was accepted by the University of Virginia. On Friday, September 10, 1965, Ernest and Ann drove Jim to Charlottesville for him to move into the first-year dorms at the University of Virginia the next day. On Sunday, Ernest and Ann drove back to Nashville.

A Successful Merchant

Ernest owned and operated the Ben Franklin Store at the intersection of White Bridge and Harding Road in Nashville from late summer 1960 to mid-summer 1977. After the extreme challenges of the early years, the business gradually became established, doing its best in the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. It was never a huge success, but it did well enough that Ernest was able to save what was at that time a good amount of money. That became the money that paid interest to supplement their pensions so that both Ernest and Ann had the money they needed to live comfortably for the rest of their lives.

One of the frustrations of the early years in the store was getting good, honest, diligent people to work for him. In the final years of the store, he was blessed to have at least three women who were wonderful employees: Lucy (Lucille) Coleman, Geneva Frances, and Helen Dillard. Lucy was so competent and trustworthy that she could open or close the store without him being there. After Ernest liquidated the store's inventory and fixtures and retired, Helen sent him a

letter. At the end of it, she wrote, “‘Thank you’ again for being the nicest ‘Boss’ I ever had.”⁶⁶

Paying Off their House

Even though they had obtained a 30-year mortgage, Ernest and Ann paid off their house in eight-and-a-half years. Ernest’s strategy was to make a second house payment every month he could afford it, because that second amount would come entirely off the principal, thereby increasing the proportion of subsequent regular payments that would go against the principal. The mortgage on their house was fully released by Fidelity Federal on April 16, 1969. This was especially quick, given that their son had started college in the fall of 1965 at the University of Virginia, paying out-of-state tuition and expenses without any financial aid or student loans. The annuity Ernest had bought in the late 1940s helped some, but was only a fraction of what was required.

His Son Graduates from College

On Saturday, June 6, 1970, Ernest drove Ann and himself from Nashville to Charlottesville. The next morning at 10:00 AM, they attended Jim’s graduation from the University of Virginia with a B.A. in English Literature. That afternoon, the three of them drove partway back to Nashville. They returned home on Monday.

The Marriage of His Son

Jim married Patricia Alice Marr on August 24, 1974 at Lou’s Chapel, on Battle Creek, in Marion County, Tennessee, near where Ann had grown up. Jim had met Pat at the University of Georgia where they were both doctoral students in reading education. In the wedding, Ernest served as Jim’s “Best Man.”

His Son Becomes a College Professor

In the summer of 1975, Ernest’s and Ann’s son finished his Ph.D. degree in reading education from the University of Georgia. Back in the spring, Jim had been hired as a faculty member in education by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He began teaching there in July.

Birth of His Grandchild

On Monday, September 20, 1976, when he was 71 years old, Ernest became a grandfather for the first and only time. David Ernest Cunningham was born at

⁶⁶ Letter from Helen Dillard, Rt 2 Box 679A, Dickson, TN 37055 to Mr. E.J. Cunningham, 6432 Thunderbird Dr., Nashville, TN, postmarked 1/24/1978.

Watts Hospital in Durham, North Carolina. Ernest's son called him at his store in Nashville from a pay phone around 3:30 PM CDT to tell him that it was a boy. His employee, Lucy, answered the phone and told Ernest the news while Jim remained on the line. Ernest expressed his great joy!

Because Ann was still teaching at in Nashville, now at Dalewood School, and Ernest was still operating his store, they were unable to travel the 500 miles to see their grandson. They first saw him at Christmas time when Jim and Pat brought him to Tennessee for a visit. He was three months old. How thrilled they were with how fine he was!

His Retirement

Ernest liquidated the inventory of his Ben Franklin Store over a number of weeks beginning in May or June, 1977, and then sold the fixtures and equipment later in the summer. He finalized all of his accounts and went out of business. He had just turned 72 years old when he retired.

He had been a teacher and principal at various schools for 13 years, Superintendent of Grundy County Schools for 20 years, owner and operator of the E. J. Cunningham Funeral Home for 8 years (while he was school superintendent), and owner and operator of a Ben Franklin Store in Nashville for 17 years.

Teaching Sunday School

Ernest was a member of the Men's Bible Class at the West Nashville Methodist Church from the time he, Ann, and Jim joined the church in the summer of 1960 until he was unable to attend church regularly late in his life. He probably taught that class for the first time in December, 1960, and for the last time in November, 1978. For a number of years, certainly including the last half of the 1960s, he was the regular teacher of that class. He always purchased a book for the year, such as *Tarbell's Guide*, to help him prepare the lessons he taught.

Visits with His Son and Grandson

Ann retired at the end of the 1976-1977 school year and soon began receiving her state teachers' pension. Ernest liquidated his store's inventory in late spring and summer of 1977. Jim, Pat, and David drove to Tennessee in late June to visit them. Ernest and Ann drove to a motel in Waynesville, North Carolina to meet Jim, Pat, and David for the weekend of October 21-23, 1977, when David was 13 months old.

Jim, Pat, and David drove to Tennessee for Christmas, 1977. Ernest and Ann drove to Jim's house in Graham, North Carolina on Tuesday, May 2, 1978 to visit for several days. They returned to Graham for another visit on Thursday, September, 28, 1978, a week after David's second birthday. Jim, Pat, and David drove to Tennessee for Christmas, 1978. Monday, May 1, 1979. Jim and David flew to Nashville for Thanksgiving, 1979. They drove to Tennessee for a week on May 27, 1980.

Ernest and Ann drove to Jim and Pat's new house in Gibsonville, North Carolina for a visit on Thursday, September 25, 1980, a few days after David's fourth birthday. They left on Monday, the 29th. Jim, Pat, and David drove to Tennessee to visit with Ernest and Ann over Christmas, 1980 and again in June, 1981.

Ernest and Ann drove to Gibsonville, North Carolina again around the time of David's fifth birthday.

Jim, Pat, and David visited Ernest and Ann in late May of 1982 and again at Christmas time that year. They drove to Tennessee to visit with them again in late May of 1983.

Ernest and Ann visited with Jim, Pat, and David at their home in Gibsonville, North Carolina for the last time in late March, 1984. Ernest was no longer driving and Ann had driven the whole way. Because it was five hundred miles from their house, it was a hard drive for her. Ernest became disoriented in Jim's house and said he had to go home soon after they arrived. They only stayed a day or two.

Gratitude

Ernest was always grateful for what he had. Like anyone else, he could worry, but it was rare for him to do so. Jim never heard him complain about his lot in life. On the contrary, many times when they were riding together in his car and he would see a man doing a hot, dirty, or hard physical job like digging a ditch, he would look over at that laborer and say, "That could have been me."

In his later years, Jim never visited his father without him telling his son how fine his house and yard were and how blessed he was to have them. He was proud he could pay his bills and had money in the bank in case he needed it.

Declining Health

At some point after he retired, Ernest was found to have developed high blood pressure. He began taking blood pressure medication and continued to do so for the rest of his life. In his last years, he weighed close to 250 pounds.

Starting in 1981 or 82, when he was 76 or 77, Ernest began to be forgetful and repeat himself. He never manifested the signs of Alzheimer's disease like wandering off, thinking he was not home when he was, or becoming agitated. However, he clearly had some kind of mild dementia which his general practitioner physician referred to as "hardening of the arteries." In 1983 or so, Ann had to take the car keys away from Ernest because he seemed no longer able to drive safely to church, the grocery store, or the Belle Meade Buffet where they frequently ate. From that time on, she did all the driving. He became insecure, always wanting to make sure Ann was nearby and had not left him. Yet, he remained jolly, reliving happy times from years gone by.

His Death

Ernest Cunningham died on November 19, 1987. He was walking through the house when Ann heard him fall with a very loud impact. She ran to him, kneeled, and held his hand. He had fallen over backward onto the bare hardwood floor. She looked at the clock: it was 3:43 PM (Central Standard Time). She called the rescue squad. She thought he was dead within two minutes after he fell. He was pronounced dead on arrival at St. Thomas Hospital. The attending physician gave the immediate cause of death as "myocardial infarction," in other words, a massive heart attack.

He was 82 years old. He had been born at home and he died at home. He was never hospitalized in his life.

His funeral was held in South Pittsburg, Tennessee—near where Ann grew up—on Sunday, November 22. He was buried at Wesley's Chapel Cemetery across from Hubbard's Cove in one of the six grave lots he had owned there. In his will, he left everything to Ann. After her death 15 years later on December 8, 2002 in Burlington, North Carolina, Ann was buried beside him.

A Life Well-Lived

Perhaps, somewhere there is a true example of a "self-made" person, but Ernest's life is an example of the opposite kind. He always felt that any adversities he had overcome and any successes he had achieved were made possible by the

support and encouragement he received from others. As long as he lived, he told and retold stories of people who had made a difference for him in particular situations. He, at least, was convinced that his life would have been very different and accomplishments far fewer had it not been for the many people who took an interest in him and helped him. He was filled with gratitude toward them as long as he lived. When his son was grown and tried to thank him one evening for all he had done for him, Ernest dismissed the sentiment quickly by saying, "Just do the same for yours."

Ernest was fair-minded, honest, and always tried to handle the money he was responsible for with integrity. He always went to church and tried to live a life in accordance with Christian principles. People respected and trusted him. He was good to work for.

Ernest loved people. He always tried to be nice to everyone. He was jolly, quick to smile and laugh for any reason or no reason when he was interacting with someone. He was comfortable meeting new people and he remembered them when next they met. People liked him. For that and so many other reasons, his was a life well-lived.