Happy Birthday, Dr. Meek!

*Turning Back the Hands of Time*

Paul Meek, c. 1934, when he became Executive Officer of U.T.J.C.

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? ...He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

— Micah 6:6, 8

By Anne Meek

For the *Paul Meek Literary Legacy Speakers Series*

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It was a Saturday morning during the 1943-44 school year at the University of Tennessee Junior College in Martin, Tennessee. The Meek family was enjoying the time at home on Moody Avenue: Dad was in the dining room preparing his Sunday school lesson, David outside climbing trees with his neighborhood chums, and Mom holding forth in the kitchen, sending me to check the mailbox for a letter from Paul, Jr., who was serving in the Navy. Then, from the hallway, the phone rang loudly in the clarion tone typical of that era. Leaving his Bible and the Sunday school literature on the dining room table, Dad walked to the hallway, where the old black phone sat on a small recessed wooden shelf. Picking up the receiver, he answered as he always did, “Paul Meek speaking.”

The voice on the other end of the call was that of a Navy commander in Atlanta. “Mr. Meek, this Commander Jones with the U.S. Navy training command in Atlanta. We have been reviewing our cadet training programs. I regret to inform you that we will be closing these programs at a number of schools, yours included.”

When Dad asked the reasons for such an intention, the commander replied, “Your campus transportation, namely one open one-and-a-half ton truck and a Chevrolet passenger car, can no longer give satisfactory results in transporting naval trainees to and from the airport.”

Without hesitation Dad replied, “But, sir, we have a bus on order.”

The commander was surprised. “What capacity,” he asked, “and when will it be delivered?”

Dad assured him, “It has a capacity of twenty passengers and will be delivered in a couple of days … next Tuesday.”

The commander asked to be informed as soon as the bus was delivered, Dad agreed, and the conversation ended. Immediately Dad called Gene Stanford, the bursar, and Earl Knepp, who was responsible for transportation, to meet him at the office at once. There he asked Mr. Stanford to immediately arrange a loan of $2,500 at City State Bank, then delegated both men to drive to Cairo, Illinois, the next day to buy a bus on the black market.

When Mr. Knepp and Mr. Stanford arrived at the black market in Cairo, they heard bad news. They phoned Dad immediately. Mr. Stanford said, “The market here is so black that a $2,500 bus will cost $5,000. What do we do?”

With no guarantee that a bus would change the Navy’s decision but without a moment’s hesitation, Dad replied, “Buy it.” At this point, he had to arrange the additional $2,500 through a personal note at The Martin Bank and then wire the extra money to Cairo—I imagine he contacted Hal.
Ramer, president of the bank and a great friend, for this urgent action. Late that afternoon Mr. Stanford and Mr. Knepp arrived back in Martin. I don’t remember who drove the bus and who drove the car. But here’s what happened, once they were safely home, in Dad’s own words:

Martha Meek and I were given a ride that Sunday afternoon to the airport and back on the bus. Early Monday, pictures were taken with the university buildings in the background and the cadets loading up in the new bus and then getting out at the hangar at the airport, with these buildings in the background. Before noon on Monday these pictures were transmitted with a cover letter to the Naval Commander, informing him that a 32-passenger bus had been acquired with immediate delivery on Sunday—the day after his call—and that it is in service for transportation of Navy trainees to and from the airport, as the enclosed pictures revealed.

Once the news of the bus arrived in Atlanta, the Navy decided to retain the cadet training program at UTJC, and Dad prepared to straighten out his unauthorized actions with the University administration, again in his own words:

... When the bill for this $5,000 transaction reached the parent institution, a little tremor was felt on the hill at Knoxville. [The bill had been] sent without explanation. When it reached the treasurer’s office, there were summoned to his office Mr. Hess, the business manager; Mr. Walker, the treasurer; and President Hoskins. The three of them had me on the telephone. I reported that a complete statement of war training service would be on their desks the next morning and the financial report would relieve their anxiety. I was let off with this very kind statement by the treasurer, Mr. Walker: “If you have to do such as this again, call one of us.”

Of course, Dad agreed to do so, having been suitably chastised by the top administrators at the University in Knoxville. But I’ve always thought that his quick agreement to contact them ahead of taking action was his second white lie. In a situation when immediate action is absolutely necessary, a leader will avoid any bureaucratic process that would take precious time. In this instance, avoiding delay was critically important, because, as it turned out, “within a few days no buses were available at any price.”¹ So one white lie and one black market bus did indeed preserve the training program and thereby saved the college. All facilities and personnel remained in place for the challenges that came a couple of years later, when the war ended and the G.I. Bill provided the means for veterans to enroll at UTJC, yielding a total of 649.²

¹Carroll, Robert L. The University of Tennessee at Martin: The First One Hundred Years. Hillsboro Press, 2000, p. 63.

²Ibid. See also Carroll, p. 188.
BOYHOOD

Paul Meek, age 12 or so

Home—Born here February 9, 1897, on the family farm south of Martin

Church—Bethany Methodist Church, built in 1887, dissolved in the 1960’s

School—Eastern Academy, a mile south of home
We should feel that the school is a failure, if we are merely preparing students to enter college. If this were our primary aim, our contribution to society could be judged by finding out what our pupils had learned; we are infinitely more concerned about what they become. If McFerrin cannot send her boys and girls from her halls with stronger bodies, with better trained minds, with better habits of thought and speech, with kinder and more sympathetic hearts, with higher ideals and purposes in life, with a greater determination to achieve something worth while, than when they entered, then we shall feel that our work is a failure, no matter how good [the] grades our graduates may make in college (p. 12).

NOTE: Rev. Cleanth Brooks served on the Board of Trustees of McFerrin School; he was the father of Cleanth Brooks, noted writer and scholar who was one of the New Critics in literature.
GRADUATION, THEN DISAPPOINTMENT

Suitcase packed, ready to catch the train to Nashville to enroll at Vanderbilt, father asks Paul not to go—bad crop year the reason

Paul Meek, graduating senior
McFerrin School, 1914

Sam Myrick and Paul Meek, Martin

1914-1915, good crop year, changes plans to major in agriculture at the University of Tennessee
Track team
March 1916,
Paul in center
of back row,
high scorer as
freshman and
sophomore

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, 1915-1919

Table of Contents marked by
"Study" and copious notes, more for
Robert Browning than any other poet

YMCA at Black Mountain, NC, c. 1917-18; Paul Meek third from left, back row
FROM U.T. TO U.S. ARMY
AND BACK TO U.T. TO FINISH COLLEGE

Students Army Training Corps
"Stick Around Till Christmas"
July 18—September 16, 1918
Fort Sheridan, IL

September 20—December 26, 1918
Second Lieutenant, Infantry
University of Notre Dame, IN
(Love note to Martha on back)

Paul Meek and Martha Campbell
June 1919
1920: First football coach, Harlan, KY
1922: Marries Martha Campbell
1925: Principal of Harlan High School; John Paul Meek born
1928: Back to farm at Midway
1929: Superintendent in Harlan
1930: Negro and white teachers to be paid on same basis; David Campbell Meek born
1933: Completes master’s degree at University of Tennessee
1934: Interview with Pres. Hoskins re position at U.T.J.C.
EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF U.T. JUNIOR COLLEGE TO CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT MARTIN, 1934-1967

Paul Meek ............ in front of old Administration Building ...............Anne Meek

John Paul and David in front of first Meek home in Martin, on North McCombs Street c. 1934

First Methodist Church

The Meek home at 229 Moody Avenue
Victory garden in the Gatlins’ backyard, with Theresa Gatlin and Paul Meek behind the plow

Among the Veterans brought to UTJC by the G.I. Bill was Horace Dunagan, father of Nick Dunagan, a future chancellor of U.T. Martin.

The “old-timers”: John McMahan, Paul Meek, Gene Stanford, George Horton, Earl Knepp
Louise and David, Paul and Rachael

1968 Committee to raise funds for UTM Stadium
Left to right: Doug Murphy, Mayor of Martin, Duke Drumm, WCMT Radio Station manager & chairman of fund drive; Dean Paul Meek; Hal Ramer, Martin Bank President

UTMB Dean Paul Meek (right) obviously enjoyed his role as host to the University of Tennessee Board of Trustees when they held their meeting on the UTMB campus Monday. In the photo above he is shown chatting with Trustee Tom Elam of Union City, U-T President Dr. Andrew Holt, Governor Buford Ellington and Trustee Wayne Fisher of Dresden.
October 19, 1950
The phone rang during the meal, and I answered. . . . A woman’s
voice said, “Long distance from Union City for Mr. Paul Meek,”
so I called Dad. When he came back to the table, I noticed nothing
unusual about him. In a few seconds, though, he had announced
that in the papers tomorrow we’d read that U.T.J.C. is a four-year
school.

--from Anne’s school assignment

In 1961 Jessie Lou Arnold of Martin became the first black student to
enroll at U.T. Martin Branch. Jessie Lou is a member of the Arnold
family, who lived across McClain Road from the site of the Meek
home shown on page 4 of this booklet. Growing up, Paul Meek
played with Harris Arnold in a “little red wagon” under the trees out
in front of the house. Jessie went on to graduate school at the
University of Illinois, married Paul Pryor, and now lives in
Gaithersburg, MD.
Paul Meek President
Of Education Group

Paul Meek, dean of the University of Tennessee at Martin, was elected president of the Tennessee College Association at its annual meeting held in Nashville recently.

Other officers are Raymond Rankin, president of Tusculum College, vice president, and Dean R. F. Thomason, of The University of Tennessee, secretary.

The association passed a resolution commending the basic purpose of the overall provisions of the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Some changes relating to certain provisions of the act and the administration of the program were recommended.

The Reverend William H. Nace presents a plaque to Paul and Martha Meek honoring their support for a religious atmosphere on campus and efforts to establish the Tennessee School of Religion.

Jean McNatt, Katherine Howell, Martha and Paul Meek, Macon Green, Ivy Barker at Secretaries’ Reception, 2/19/67

I used to go with Daddy [Norman Campbell] to the UTM basketball games, and once we got there, I was allowed to roam a bit. Once, when I was 9 or 10, Dean Meek secretly pinned a clothespin onto my shirt tail. I can't remember how I knew it was your dad that pinned it on me, but somehow I did, and when I found it, I sneaked behind him and pinned it on his coat tail. When he found it, back it would come to me. This passing back and forth of a clothespin went on for several years, and it wasn't just at basketball games. Sometimes I would come home from church and find that clothespin attached to my dress. I loved the fun of it, and it still makes me smile to picture Dean Meek, distinguished man that he was, with a clothespin dangling behind him. I've often wondered if he played the clothespin game with other children. It certainly made me feel special.
--Ruth Campbell White, letter dated November 27, 2006

RETIREMENT, SEPTEMBER 1, 1967

Time to go fishing!

Paul Meek and Andy Holt

Paul Meek and Archie Dykes, incoming chancellor
Left to Right: Rachael and Paul Meek, Martha Meek, Rebecca Meek, Paul Meek, Lisa Roney with Mary Melati Meek in front, Anne Meek Roney, Kelly Roney, and Paul Winston Meek; Louise Meek, David Meek Jr., and John Duncan Meek were not able to join the family, as a result of college entrances.
THEN IT WAS NOVEMBER

He was a man who understood nurture,
Taking the nature of a plant as given,
Providing soil and light and water
To produce health, growth, and fruit.

At home in June he showed me
New leaves on the candlestick trees,
Once orphan’d by my fitful care,
Thriving now for him.

He took the children down the hill
To pull the first tomato,
Exulting in their firm young hands
Around the firm young fruit.

With his left hand he gripped my arm,
Inscribing flourishes with his right,
Marking the growth of a green young pine—
Eighteen inches in two months!

Then it was November, and you and I
Drove home through the darkness,
The daylight revealing his death
And the young pine tree no longer green.

Inside the storeroom, dampish smells
Of rose food and stale sweat upon old clothes
Shrouded tools, trunks, and his inventions.
There I found his ax, graced with the patina of his care.

So I, whom he had loved, with the ax,
Which he had polished, obliterated
The traitorous brown-needled tree,
Intolerable evidence of nurture’s failure.

--Anne Meek