

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Michael Cox interview

Conducted by Adina Langer

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Transcribed by Holly Smith

Born in 1944, Michael Cox grew up in the small town of Molena, Georgia, close to his World War II veteran uncles, George Mack Hamlett and Alvie Lowell Hamlett. While “Mack” served in the Army in Europe and “Lowell” served in the Navy off the Florida coast, both Hamletts documented their experiences with letters and photographs. Cox recorded his oral history interview at Kennesaw State University in September 2018

Full Transcript

Interviewer: My name is Adina Langer, and I am the curator at the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University. Today is September 25th, 2018, and I am here at the Sturgis Library with Mike Cox for a legacy series interview during which we will remember his uncle George Mack Hamlett. Who served in General Patton’s 3rd Army during World War II and his uncle Alvie Lowell Hamlett who served in the U. S Navy.

Interviewer: Do you agree to this interview?

Cox: Yes

Interviewer: Can you please state your full name?

Cox: My full name is Jere, J.E.R.E Michael Cox.

Interviewer: And can you please tell me when and where you were born?

Cox: I was born in Molena, Georgia, on April 12th, 1944.

Interviewer: Before we talk more about your childhood — I would like to go back a bit further and talk about your uncles. Can please explain how you are related to the Hamlett brothers?

Cox: Well, they were - my mother’s brothers. She was their older sister.

Interviewer: And— can you please tell me where and when your uncle George Mack Hamlett was born?

Cox: I do not know the date he was born but he was born also in Molena, Georgia, out from Molena, Georgia, rural route.

Interviewer: Ok and what about his brother Alvie Lowell Hamlett?

Cox: Again, — I do not know the date, but — he was also born on the outskirts of Molena, Georgia.

Interviewer: And how far apart in age are they or were they?

Cox: They were very close - maybe two years.

Interviewer: And what was the town like — Molena Georgia and you talk about the outskirts. So, can you talk a little bit about that area?

Cox: Well obviously it is a rural farming community — when they were born it might have had a population of – 300, 400 something like that. It went sort of downhill for a few years, but it is trying to revive itself — with- antiques shops and restaurants and so forth.

Interviewer: And what county is Molena in?

Cox: Molena is in Pike County. They were born just across the county line in Upson County.

Interviewer: And what did their parents do?

Cox: They were farmers.

Interviewer: What kind of farmers? What did they grow?

Cox: I guess the cash crop would have been cotton. Otherwise, they had a vegetable garden and — a few cows and — chickens things like that.¹

Interviewer: Did they own their land?

Cox: — Yes

Interviewer: — And how big was their family?

Cox: — They had twelve children.

Interviewer: And so your — you said it was your mothers' brothers so where did your mother fit into this family?

Cox: She was the third child. She was their oldest sister. She was born in 1910, I think.

¹. * Refer to Lowell's memoir "Reflections of Yesterday on the Farm" which describes the constant farm work throughout the year.

Interviewer: Did your mother and or your uncles tell you any stories about how The Great Depression —might have affected their lives?

Cox: —No not really

Interviewer: Did they talk about; I mean you can speak for your mother or your uncles talking about their childhood what life was like for them.

Cox: — well they were frugal. For instance at Christmas time, they would recalled having a shoebox that they would get fruit and things like that in, and the big argument would be who would get the bottom of the shoebox instead of the lid because more would obviously fit into the — bottom. But toys and things like that were kind of hard to come by.

Interviewer: Did they ever make things to play with? Do you think?

Cox: I am sure they did. Lowell for instance became quite adept with a sling shot not the swinging not the slinging but the — one you use with a rope and — a frame.²

Interviewer: And they spend a lot of time outdoors?

Cox: Oh yes

Interviewer: —So what was their schooling like?

Cox: — Well they went to school in Molena. I guess the last grade there would have been the eleventh grade then instead of the twelfth but — they all went — as far I know and completed you know those through high school anyway.

Interviewer: Your mother as well?

Cox: Oh yes

Interviewer: And was this a close family were they — close?

Cox: Oh yeah, they remained close throughout their lives.

Interviewer: — So you mentioned the sling shot, did they talk about other things they liked to do for fun?

Cox: —no not really [undecipherable 4 😊59[]]

Interviewer: Did they work on the farm as well did they help out with chores?

² *See page 6 of Lowell's (L) memoir for in depth descriptions of toys they made

Cox: — yes, they worked very hard on the farm.³

Interviewer: And — so, one question I had so —Mack, George Mack Hamlett becomes pretty adept at photography. Did he ever tell you how that started in his life?

Cox: No, he just had a little — I guess it is what you would call a Brownie camera and took it with him.

Interviewer: — Did — George oh I guess I should call them I should call them Mack and Lowell right.

Cox: Lowell — right

Interviewer: Ok so did Mack or Lowell or your mother. What was your mother’s name again?

Cox: —Ruby —

Interviewer: Did they tell you about the start of World War II?

Cox: — The start I do not recall any specifics about how it began except of course the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and all that which was in most history books.

Interviewer: And you would have been?

Cox: Not born

Interviewer: Not born at that point I mean the war was almost over.

Cox: Right—

Interviewer: Now did the family have access to a radio or anything like that?

Cox: —Yeah, they had an old big Victrola or some sort of radio. —⁴

Interviewer: Inside the house

Cox: Right

Interviewer: And — did so it a typical day in the house did they gather around the radio in the evening or anything?

Cox: No one ever discussed that with me

Interviewer: Ok yeah— So when the war started did — Mack and or Lowell did they join the service right away?

³ *For specifics please refer to Lowell’s memoir. Lowell states the family never did without. Didn’t know they were poor.

⁴ *See memoir regarding getting electricity in the home in 1938, finally getting a family radio, and listening to broadcasts from Walter Winchell as “war clouds gathered overseas”.

Cox: — well Mack was still in High school.

Interviewer: So, were they registered for the draft?

Cox: yes, I am sure they were

Interviewer: And is that how they ended up in the service they were drafted?

Cox: I think so, yes.⁵

Interviewer: — So can you talk did I — I know you at some point you ended up having a conversation with your uncle about his experience. Did he talk about his training at all?

Cox: — no

Interviewer: —I know at least one of his letters home was from Camp San Luis Obispo⁶ I not sure I am pronouncing that correctly in California. — Would that have been his first time away from home?

Cox: — Maybe a few trips to Atlanta—but as far as any distance yes.⁷

Interviewer: And do you do know where he departed for overseas duty from would that have been California? Or — [undecipherable 7:|43|]

Cox: Well, he was in Europe, so I doubt

Interviewer: Well, that would not make any sense yeah — Did he talk about what his trip to Europe was like?

Cox: — no he did have pictures taken aboard ship which I have always assumed to be the Queen Mary⁸.

Interviewer: And —where did he first serve when he got to Europe where did he go?

Cox: He went to England

Interviewer: England — And what was that experience like for him?

Cox: Well, there was a —from all the letters and so forth it was a unique experience. I recalled I believe in one of the letters he said they talk different than us, but you can still understand them, and he discussed their money and the denominations of the money and what not.

⁵ *See memoir L quit his job at Thomaston Mills (textile mill) to join the Navy he was not drafted – July of 1942.

⁶ <https://calguard.ca.gov/cslo/>

⁷ * Memoir L recalls his 1941 high school class of 13 taking senior trip to New Orleans.

⁸ <http://ww2troopships.com/ships/q/queenmary/cruiserecord1940.htm>

Interviewer: And — From England where did he go?

Cox: — He went to France several days after they landed in Normandy

Interviewer: And did he tell you about what that experience was like?

Cox: — He just said he got there in time for the breakout at St Lô⁹ and then went on into Germany and whatnot. And the only occasion that we really discussed it was on December 24th of 2005 on that one night.

Interviewer: And did he tell you at that time about how he would have received any news about the world while he was serving? Was it all through letters or through other means?

Cox: Well, I would assume letters or something like that.

Interviewer: And he maintained a pretty regular correspondence with his family. — so, you mentioned the letter from —England we already talked about that. Do you remember some of the other letters what he talked about?

Cox: Well, I have not read them in a long, long time. Some were talking about the French for instance how they welcomed everybody when they were finally liberated the cities and whatnot. And others were descriptive of what he had seen of the as they went on into Germany and the— disaster. And he called them barns of the people who had been executed.

Interviewer: And did he take pictures of everything that he had seen?

Cox: Well, he took a lot of pictures. That night in December my mother was gravely ill, she would pass away the next day, but he told me about the pictures. I said gee — you know you should save these they are a historical record and all that. He said no I do not want to see them again ever. They're in a box. You can have them when I am gone.

Interviewer: So— can we talk a little bit more about that letter. So, he sent a letter on July 7th, 1945, from —Rhinebeck Germany — in the letter he talks about encountering a massacre — the aftermath of a massacre — and he includes some really good photos. Did he tell you more about that experience?

Cox: Well, he said - I assume we are talking about the same thing- that his unit had been there. There had been a German unit ahead of them that had prisoners. They could have let the prisoners go and then Mack's group would have had to take care of them. But instead of that the Germans executed the prisoners that they had and— went on. But Mack's unit finally caught up with the Germans and that was the end of that story.

9 <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/st-lo-breakout>

Interviewer: Did he tell you about the role U.S— soldiers took in getting the local German populus to bury the bodies?

Cox: Yeah, he — said they drug out and compelled people from the cities to come out. Some old men what 50, 40 ,50 years old- old men to —see and bury the bodies. Yes.

Interviewer: — And when he talked to you about this did, he seem, it seems he did not want to talk about it more. Did he seem upset about those memories?

Cox: He did not. Yes, I would say that he was upset. He did not willingly recall them, but I said sort of gee what did happen? You know for instance like at the Battle of the Bulge was it really that cold? Were they sleeping two to a foxhole and what not? He said oh yeah, the people were freezing to death there. And he went on to tell another story about that particular circumstance if you want to go into that now or later.

Interviewer: Yeah, please tell me.

Cox: Anyway, he was a part of a field artillery unit, and they were all set up to fire they heard firing behind them, and they realized it was Patton’s tanks and they were supposed to be behind the tanks. So, he said all of them kind of looked around and went very quickly and quietly took everything down and went away as quickly as they could.

Interviewer: Yeah, we have a tendency to think it was all so well organized but when you are on the ground.

Cox: — Right

Interviewer: —So how did this night come about that he told you these stories?

Cox: Well as I said my mother his older sister was gravely ill and — he was in the hospital room with my wife Judy and Me. And — I asked him gee where were you on December of 1944? And so that is how he started to recall.

Interviewer: Did he tell you any other stories that you remember from that night?

Cox: Well, he just — he said that — they had a really good Christmas dinner with real turkey and all the while they could hear the guns you know firing and knew exactly where they would be the next day. But he appreciated the meal.

Interviewer: And— can we backtrack just a tiny bit to — Lowell’s experience. —Where did he serve?

Cox: — He apparently was in Key West in Florida. He was in the Navy and my recollection is he was a tail gunner on a I guess a PVY submarine hunter¹⁰. So many people do not

10 For more on the development of equipment to counter U-boat attacks in the American theater, see: https://uboat.net/allies/documents/usaaf_asw3.htm

realize that German U-Boats were all up and down the coast of the United States. And anyway, that is where he was and what he did.

Interviewer: And what was it like to be a tail gunner on one of those planes?

Cox: Well, he told one story about the plane dropping from gee I have forgotten how many thousand feet it was to just a few hundred feet over the water. And —of course, he got a really close view of the ocean there. But out of and that was one of the stories though the only story he was specific about but yeah, I do not know if they ever located any submarines or not.¹¹

Interviewer: And how did you get a sense of how he ended up in the Navy or was that just the luck of the draft?

Cox: I assume to be the luck of the draft.

*L joined. Did not get drafted

Interviewer: — so, he took some photographs too?

Cox: Well, he took some and some were taken of him asleep on an airplane wing and things like that.

Interviewer: — so, when were the brothers reunited after the war?

Cox: After the war I assume '46 something like that.

Interviewer: Did either of them share stories about how they experienced the end of the war and where they were when the war was over?

Cox: —Not really, no

Interviewer: What about your mother— did she tell you what it was like at the end of the war?

Cox: No, they were just glad that it was done.

Interviewer: Did they have the sense that the war was done only — so there are two moments there is VE Day and the end of the war in Europe and then VJ Day the end of the war in the Pacific. For Mack since he was in Europe —do you know if he would have celebrated or had some, you know, happy moments with the people.

Cox: Oh, I am sure he did and like I said I have not read any of the letters in a long, long time. So, he might have referred to it there.

Interviewer: Did— both Mack and Lowell settle back in Georgia after the war?

¹¹ *L was assigned patrol bomber squadron with a crew of 14. His duties were gunner, radar operator, mechanic and flight engineer!

Cox: — yes, they both went back to where they were reared and bought a car together. And I recall one story that they were on a dirt road an unpaved road in today's terminology. And there was a stream they had to cross that had no bridge on it before they hit the paved road. So, they would stop and wash the car in the stream before they went on the day whatever they had.

Interviewer: So, tell me a little bit more about these cars. This is something you had you know we have some photographs of them with their favorite cars. How did they kind of come to have this love of cars?

Cox: — I really do not know they just — Lowell was always into speed and racing and all that as a matter of fact he drove his own family vehicle in some races in the '50's. But— they just would go to the Atlanta races and when the racetrack in Hampton opened.¹²

Interviewer: And do you know if either of them took advantage of the GI bill?

Cox: I do not know

Interviewer: Did they buy homes or anything like that —after the war?

Cox: I do not recall them buying a home before the gee before they were married. So, I do not know how the financing might have been arranged for it.

Interviewer: So, you were born in 1944 what were your earliest memories of your uncles?

Cox: Well, my mother was ill, and I went to stay with my grandparents, and they were both still single and I was always treated like royalty almost. As a matter of fact, I did not wanna come home but one of them had a watch that glowed in the dark and oh gee that was great just to see that. And they let me wear it every once in a while, things like that.

Interviewer: And can you tell me more about your family your mother your was —did your mother meet your father locally; was your father in the picture?

Cox: Well, my father met her when he was about twelve years old, and she was about a year and a half two years older and he decided that that was the girl he was gonna marry. But he was he had been born in what was called Indian territory back then in Oklahoma. And had relatives that lived in Atlanta and one that lived in Molena. As for how he got there I do not know but say he came down to visit and that is how they initially met. And so, it turned out he was right, and she was wrong. [|laughs|] They got married and lived very happily until he passed away.

Interviewer: Did he pass away when you were still young?

12 The Atlanta Motor Speedway is located in Hampton, GA. <https://www.atlantamotorspeedway.com/>

Cox: Well, I was twenty-two.

Interviewer: And was your father Native American?

Cox: —The rumor is that his grandmother had either been a Creek or a Cherokee his grandfather had opened a trading post in what is now Griffin, Georgia. And had married either a Creek or Cherokee women.

Interviewer: And— the community that you grew up in was it — very segregated? Was it clear that you know white people lived over here, and African American people lived somewhere else?

Cox: Well, one of our best neighbors — when I was older was a Black couple. And—(I was about 13 or 14) I would hunt and sell rabbits to her but back then you could buy shot gun shells by you know four or five at a time instead of the whole box. So, I would sell them to her for a quarter and shot gun shells cost a dime so that was great [|laughs|] gave me an ammo.

*L reflects on hunting with Black neighbors

Interviewer: So, what was your childhood like?

Cox: Well, it was— To me it was great I lived out in the country which I appreciated. I had to go thirteen miles to high school. But— I really enjoyed the woods and the nature and all that.

Interviewer: And — What — was your father's name I realize that I do not think we have mentioned it?

Cox: His name was Granville G.R.A.N.V.I.L.L.E Grant, Granville Grant Cox.

Interviewer: Granville Grant Cox

Interviewer: And were your parents engaged in farming as well?

Cox: Well, he worked in the textile industry but then he wanted to be a farmer too. But — somehow, we never got around to clearing all the land that needed to be cleared and just left it wooded.

Interviewer: So, you had a reasonable amount of space but not a lot cultivated or anything.

Cox: Right well, we had about a hundred or so acres that we owned and then from there to let's see I guess Manchester, Warm Springs and all that was just woods. There was nothing there except a couple roads and that was it.

Interviewer: Did anyone in your family ever meet President Roosevelt?¹³

Cox: Did not meet him but of course you know he died on my birthday when I was like a year old. And people still say— you did not remember that but then I described the flag draped casket and all that sort of stuff that went through Molena carrying him back home. So, you know I remembered it. [||laughs|]

Interviewer: And the folks in your town were they generally fans of President Roosevelt?

Cox: — I cannot really say for sure I assume they were most everyone in the area seemed to really appreciate the man.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned you lived thirteen miles from your school, how did you get there?

Cox: — a bus and then when I was lucky, I would catch a ride with somebody who had their own vehicle.

Interviewer: When you got a little bit older.

Cox: Right

Interviewer: Did you have any siblings?

Cox: Yeah, I have an older brother and an older sister.

Interviewer: —So, most of your life no one talked about WWII?

Cox: — No

Interviewer: It was just sort of just this happened then all [undecipherable 25: |10|]

Cox: This happened and if I wanted to learn about it, I would learn in history books.

Interviewer: —So, it was just this chance encounter in 2005 that kind of made you the keeper of the legacy.

Cox: Right, and I knew that he had — Mack had served in you know the Third Army.¹⁴ And I knew that he had a great respect for Patton. He did not want to say a thing derogatory about General Patton he —would correct you. [||laughs|] Cause the man was always I asked him that night was he always that out front? He said yeah, he was, and he did not know he could be here then all the sudden show up 10 miles down the road and telling everybody and giving them encouragement.

¹³ *L recalls hitchhiking to Barnesville in 1936 to see Roosevelt make a speech, seeing him wave from his train going to or from Warm Springs and finally flying escort for Roosevelt's ship carrying him to Yalta to meet Churchill and Stalin.

¹⁴ For history of the Third Army see: <https://www.usarcent.army.mil/About/History/Extended/>

Interviewer: What do you think are the most important aspects of your uncle's service experiences?

Cox: A important aspect gee I never thought about that. He had a duty, and he did his duty and— as he described it is we had a job to do. Which you know you expected to kill German or enemy soldiers, but he saw so many civilians and so forth suffer and you know die. We had a job to do we did the job, and we were glad to get back home.

Interviewer: What do you think that future generations should know and remember about WWII?

Cox: — How it happened and— how the political system led up to Hitlers being able to do what he did. Well people say we could have stopped him, we could have stopped him, but they did not. As far as Japan goes, I think that the emperor and generals there so far as I can ever tell what his name Tojo¹⁵— and Yamamoto¹⁶ of course planned that attack on Pearl Harbor. But you know they were more responsible for the attack on there and I will not go into a trade problems and all that but primarily I guess the rise of Hitler and how that came about.

Interviewer: Did your family ever talk about the impact of the atomic bomb?

Cox: No

Interviewer: And you know you grew up probably more sort of in the Cold War kind of era was that ever something did people talk about communism, or did they have concerns about that kind of thing?

Cox: Well, they had some concerns but of course it is the United States. I do recall the drills duck and cover get under your desk and all that sort of stuff. And you know there was a situation that you know a kid maybe third grade if I grow up you know what I want to do that kind of thing. That was the atmosphere back then.

Interviewer: So, there was this sort of sense of possible danger.

Interviewer: What do you think has changed the most sense your childhood?

Cox: — internet [|laughs|] and how rapidly people can communicate —information you know right or wrong.

Interviewer: And what trajectory did your career take what did you do after school?

Cox: Well, after school I — I went to work for a local industry and then for a county in metro Atlanta. First I designed roads then worked for land acquisition and all that sort of stuff.

15 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tojo-Hideki>

16 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Yamamoto-Isoroku>

Interviewer: Are you an engineer?

Cox: —No, no I just sort of gravitated toward that and you know did it. People accepted my work (which was signed off by a registered engineer⁰ and roads got built. [|laughs|] So that seemed to work out.

Interviewer: Sure, — Is there anything you would like to talk about that I have not asked you yet?

Cox: — No not really you know

Interviewer: Sure — Well thank you very much for sharing your story and your family's story with us today really appreciate it.

Cox: Well you're welcome, I am glad to do it and glad to be here.