

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
MARGARET WRIGHT

12 JULY 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.025

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Albert Gore". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
MARGARET WRIGHT
Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #QMS.025**

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q. M. Smith Collection, designated as QMS 1995.25. This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Mrs. Margaret Wright. Today is Wednesday, July 12, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mrs. Margaret Wright located at 614 Shawnee Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The tape of this interview along with the transcripts of this interview will become part of the Quintin Miller Smith collection. They will be available to the public. Future researchers may include portions of this interview in their publications. Is that all right with you, Mrs. Wright?

WRIGHT: Certainly.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

WRIGHT: Margaret Beesley Johnson Wright, and it's B double E S L E Y.

FORSYTHE: What is your birth place?

WRIGHT: Nashville.

FORSYTHE: What is your birth date?

WRIGHT: August 8, 1918.

FORSYTHE: What was your father's name and occupation?

WRIGHT: Dr. Ben Howard Johnson. He was a dentist.

FORSYTHE: What was your mother's name and occupation?

WRIGHT: Sarah Beesley Johnson, and the Beesley's were from Murfreesboro. She was a housewife.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

WRIGHT: I have two brothers.

FORSYTHE: What are their names?

WRIGHT: Ben Howard Johnson, Jr., who has now retired from NASA and lives in Murfreesboro. William Nasar Johnson, who is retired from Union Carbide and lives in Orlando, Florida.

FORSYTHE: What was your spouse's name?

WRIGHT: My husband was Neil Hutchinson Wright.

FORSYTHE: What was his occupation?

WRIGHT: Music.

FORSYTHE: What are your children's' names?

WRIGHT: Our oldest boy is Neil Hutchinson Wright III and he is a Doctor of Humanities and is a professor at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Kentucky. He chairs the universal education department, which has over 300 foreign students, and he teaches two humanities classes. Humanities was his doctoral major. My other son is David Quintin Wright, who was named for Mr. Q.M. He is a professional horseman and owns and operates Hunters Court stables in Murfreesboro, on DeJarnett Lane.

FORSYTHE: Did any of your family members go to MTSU?

WRIGHT: My mother went there. She and Dr. Smith were in the 1911 class, the first year. My son Neil graduated there, his bachelor's degree.

FORSYTHE: Did your mother ever teach?

WRIGHT: Oh, yes, she taught in a one room school, eight grades, on the Franklin Pike, close to Beasley Road. It may have been on Beasley Road, I can't recall.

FORSYTHE: She graduated in 1913?

WRIGHT: Yes. It was a two year college then.

FORSYTHE: Did any of your other family members work at MTSU?

WRIGHT: Only my husband and I. My son taught there while he was getting his masters. I've had some strange experiences with that. After being retired for 18 years, I was in a shop here and the lady there asked me if I was related to Neil Wright, who taught English at MTSU. I had forgotten he had taught for several years. I said I'm trying to remember, my husband was in the Music Department. and then I remembered and told her yes. He had taught her, my son had.

FORSYTHE: What degrees do you have?

WRIGHT: I have a bachelors from Vanderbilt in pre-med, and music at Peabody, before they became one, and I have a Masters from George Peabody College, in music.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose to go pre med. at Vanderbilt?

WRIGHT: Because my father would have liked for me to become a doctor. When I graduated he said, "I've talked to the dean today, honey, and you have a good high average and your in med. school next year at Vanderbilt, if you want to be. What do you want to do?" I said, "Dad I really want to marry Neil Wright." He said, "O. K. I'll help you get your masters in music, then."

FORSYTHE: What years did you get these degrees?

WRIGHT: Oh, I'd have to go back and look, I went in the summers, because I taught in Nashville, the first year at Isaac Litton High School, which is no more. I graduated in '38, so I went that summer, went in the summer of '39, summer of '40, then Neil and I were married in '39 and we taught in Bristol, Tennessee. It must have been '40, that I got my masters, I could look on my degree and tell you exactly, but I really can't recall.

FORSYTHE: How did you meet your husband?

WRIGHT: We were on a program at the same time at Father Ryan High School in Nashville. We were both seniors in high school at that point. He though I looked so much older than he did, that he wouldn't ask me for a date. Later, as freshmen at Vanderbilt, I was pre-med and he was pre-engineering. We were in the same chemistry lab, and I looked up and there he was across the desk. I made the fumes and so he asked me for a date for the next Sunday night. He told me because I had long hair, a fake fur coat, and I was driving my own car(because my mother couldn't take me everywhere I wanted to go), that he thought I was at least four years older than he was. Actually, he was about a year older than I was.

FORSYTHE: Why don't you tell me that story you told me a while ago?

WRIGHT: The one about when President Smith came down to interview Neil after the war?

FORSYTHE: Yes

WRIGHT: Neil had finished his masters degree and had applied for several jobs. Mr. Smith had heard about Neil through Peter Dill, Dr. Dill here in Murfreesboro. So he called and asked Neil to come over and he would interview him, if he was interested in the job. Neil said yes he'd be delighted. During his undergraduate years,(they were the depression years), Neil had played in a dance band and gone to school full time. He played in the dance band four, five, or six nights a week,

so he had lost a lot of weight and he decided he would change to music from engineering. He got so tired of filling out the forms that said, "What was your last position", and he would have to put teaching trumpet at Peabody Demonstration School. He was bored with that line, so he put, on this particular application for entrance for the next quarter, "My last position was prone in the gutter." When President Smith interviewed him, Neil looked across the table and that was the application that President Smith had in front of him. He was hired anyway.

FORSYTHE: Let's go ahead and talk about Q. M. Smith. You told me something about sidewalks?

WRIGHT: Oh yes, he said that wherever the path got wide enough between the buildings on the campus, he would build a sidewalk, and he did. He was an amazing man. He knew so much about what was going on, on that campus. The school was smaller than, he didn't need a dozen assistants to keep him in touch with departments, and he knew what was going on just about all over the campus. He was wonderful, and very supportive, starting with the music department.

FORSYTHE: What kind of President was he?

WRIGHT: He was a wonderful president. He planned ahead. I remember when he had a committee of the faculty working on a ten-year plan, in the early 50s actually, for the school.

FORSYTHE: What do you think was his greatest achievement?

WRIGHT: That's a hard question, he had so many achievements. Actually, you knew of course, that he was youngest college president, ever to be president of a college in the United States, when he was president at Cookeville, TPI.

FORSYTHE: Yes, I saw a news article about that.

WRIGHT: I didn't know if that had come to your attention.

FORSYTHE: I'm glad you told me.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about Mrs. Smith?

WRIGHT: Oh, Laura was absolutely wonderful. She was the most gracious lady, a lovely mother, and just a wonderful person. She made all the faculty feel like they were her family.

FORSYTHE: What did Q. M. Smith do with the new faculty?

WRIGHT: He and Laura would always visit them, as soon as they were the least bit settled in, sometimes before they were settled in. Their home was always open to the faculty. They were very gracious. They were close friends of ours.

FORSYTHE: What years did you work at MTSU?

WRIGHT: 1946, we came here in the summer, having both been in the service. We retired in May of 1977.

FORSYTHE: You stayed together all the way.

WRIGHT: Well Neil, did it, I was just there to help.

FORSYTHE: Why did you choose to work at MTSU?

WRIGHT: Well, Neil had a choice. It happened at that year, at that time, Stephen Foster University in Texas, had a new president who had known Neil in college. He wanted very much for Neil to come and do the same sort of job there that he was later to do here. I'm trying to think of the name of the town, but I can't. It is in Southeastern Texas, and you could look up Stephen Foster University. We chose to stay in Tennessee, our families were both in Nashville, and at the time, we had a son, not quite a year old, when we moved here after the war. We loved it here, it had been mother's home and her birth place, but that had little to do with it. It was just that Murfreesboro was very wonderful to us, and we loved it.

FORSYTHE: Do you remember your job interview?

WRIGHT: Only that Mrs. E. May Saunders, who had taught my mother in 1911, in music, and President Smith asked Neil and me to come up. I had not met the Smiths at that time. In the interview I was not really interviewed as a professional, I was more interviewed as a person, I think. But Miss E. May was very like a mother to us. She had been, not officially, chair of the Music Department, but she was what held it together, and she was quite well-known in music education throughout the state, a real pioneer. We met in the president's office and I felt from the first time that I met her that Miss E. May was very sympathetic and very helpful and she certainly was, as long as she lived.

FORSYTHE: Tell me how the Music Department changed from the time you began, to the time you retired?

WRIGHT: That's a little bit difficult. We had ten majors when we came here, actually there was not an official major, but if you graduated with enough hours in music, you could be considered one. There were Neil as guidance director of the department, sort of, and Miss E. May Saunders as director of education, Ruby Taylor Sanders in string program, and I taught adjunct piano and organ and marimba and class voice. It was a matter of doing whatever needed to be done. Neil directed the

band and the chorus. He later founded the varsity choir, which was the group that did oratorio and opera. At the beginning of '47, I founded the Sacred Heart Singers, which was an ensemble of twelve singers most of the time. We traveled a lot and we did a lot of programs here in town for city public schools, churches, wherever it was needed. When we retired in 1977, I believe there were 19 faculty members, and well over 100 majors. Thirty-one years is a lot of time to cover in a short time without sitting down

FORSYTHE: Where was the Music Department located?

WRIGHT: In the basement of the Old Main, which is now the Kirksey Building. Our music majors enjoyed saying that they recognized everybody by their feet and their footwear, because that's all we could see out of the windows in the basement. The dean's office was right across the hall on the first floor, right above the basement. Practically ever afternoon, as my class boys went filing out of my class studio, they would bump into the dean getting a coke from the coke machine early in the afternoon.

FORSYTHE: Where was the department located after Kirksey Old Main?

WRIGHT: I don't know how many years we were in the basement. Oh, they called themselves the Music Moles, because we were in the basement. I don't know how many years it was before we moved into the old cafeteria, but that was a wonderful time. We had more space. We had five faculty. We had more practice rooms. It was just a big addition to the department to have that much space to work in. The week that our second son was born, on my 41st birthday, the best birthday present I ever had, we were moving from the old cafeteria into the Saunders Music Building. Neil backed his MG into a tree in his excitement to get to the hospital. A tree that had been there all those years, that we had been in the old cafeteria.

FORSYTHE: Did he knock the tree down?

WRIGHT: No, the tree almost knocked him down, but he made it.

FORSYTHE: Your office was in the basement of Kirksey Old Main?

WRIGHT: We were there for a number of years, then in the old cafeteria, then in the Saunders Music Building.

FORSYTHE: I looked through the annuals and catalogs and got some peoples names from the Music Department. I'll call their name out and you can tell me what they remember or a story?

WRIGHT: Sure.

FORSYTHE: Ruby Taylor Saunders. Sanders?

WRIGHT: Sanders is correct. There was some confusing there because of Miss E. May Saunders - only with people that did not know them both well. Mrs. Sanders was a lovely lady, she had taught violin at Tennessee College, as well, as MTSC. It was Middle Tennessee State College in those days. She founded the orchestra there, and she didn't direct it but she always had someone else in the department direct. She played first violin with it. I often played timpani with it if she needed timpani, if she needed another percussionist. Sometimes I played cello, but when Ken Pace took over the orchestra, he said he really valued me as a member of the string part of the orchestra because I knew when not to play. When it got too difficult, I knew to be quiet and fake it. I took cello, violin, and viola when I was in college but I never had much time there, because keyboard and instruments was my thing and voice.

FORSYTHE: E. May Saunders?

WRIGHT: Oh, Old Miss E. May was the salt of the earth, a wonderful lady. When she started teaching at, what was it, the Normal then, she had probably only a bachelors degree. I don't remember where it was from, but every summer she would go to Columbia University and work on her masters. She got it and she became a real pioneer in music education, as I mentioned before.

FORSYTHE: Horace Beasley?

WRIGHT: Horace was a papa to the music department when Neil didn't have time to be, but they both were. He was really interested in his students. He was a trombonist. They loved him dearly, and he is still quite active, here in Murfreesboro with the retarded children's program. He actually helped start that. They have a child who was born, well not born retarded, but from inhaling fumes from when Horace was in the army in Texas, became retarded. Don was a wonderful boy, and they've taught him at home and cared for him at home and done all they could do throughout the state for retarded children. They also have a daughter, who is outstanding. She lives there as a technician in a medical laboratory, and they have a son, Colley Beasley, who was recently honored by the Band of Blue--being taken into the Band of Blue Club.

FORSYTHE: Jean Bills?

WRIGHT: Jean Bills was the wife of Raymond Bills. They both came to us from Eastland. Raymond was the pianist and Jean was the cellist. She very graciously taught adjunct for many years. I don't know whether she was ever a full-time member or not, of the faculty, but she certainly served well.

FORSYTHE: Raymond Bills?

WRIGHT: Raymond has been a very successful piano teacher and performer.

FORSYTHE: Dr. John K. Colbert?

WRIGHT: John Colbert was only here a couple of years. He was a trumpet player, and he left us to go to Butler University. He did a great job with the band, he did a fine job with teaching brass.

FORSYTHE: Tom Naylor?

WRIGHT: Tom Naylor, also a trumpet player, taught well for many years and succeeded Neil as head of the department for, I believe, fifteen years. He did a fine job of administration.

FORSYTHE: John Fisher?

WRIGHT: He was only here, I believe, a year or two. I remember very little about him, except that I played one or two of his organ compositions that he did when he was here.

FORSYTHE: Michael Domenic Gattozzi

WRIGHT: Oh, Mike Gattozzi. He is now living in Tuscaloosa. He went from here to the University of Alabama. Violinist, very fine musician, wonderful person.

FORSYTHE: Charles Hansford?

WRIGHT: Charles was a doctorate in music education and was here for some four, five, or six years. His wife Tempi Hansford taught piano adjunct with us for some of that time.

FORSYTHE: Tempi Hansford?

WRIGHT: She was a wonderful musician, an excellent teacher, and a good mother to their children.

FORSYTHE: Lawrence Harvin?

WRIGHT: Lawrence Harvin is now director of the Middle Tennessee Symphony Orchestra. He came here as a violinist, was born and raised in Florida, He has done a tremendous job of promotion and musical performances with the Orchestra, which has now become the Middle Tennessee Symphony.

FORSYTHE: Earl Hinton?

WRIGHT: Earl Hinton was in music education. I believe he just retired this past year. He started a radio program of music education that was popular throughout the state. He did it in coordination with music educators from East Tennessee State University and Memphis State. It pretty well covered the state. It was a very innovative program.

FORSYTHE: Phil Howard?

WRIGHT: Phil Howard is a wonderful man. They threw away the pattern when they made Phil. He has a great sense of humor, he taught well, very conscientious, and an extremely good pianist. He taught piano for a while, then he got too heavy with musicology and music history. He is a dear friend and a fine person.

FORSYTHE: George Kuhnert?

WRIGHT: George was one of our students in Bristol at Tennessee High School. He graduated here and taught at the Campus School for several years then he went and took an assignment in Indiana and was Young Man of the Year. His bands and his course were very effective and musical. He taught about ten years there and felt the call to go back to school to become an Episcopal priest. He was first assigned to Gatlinburg and then various other churches which needed building up. Sadly enough George died a year or two before 1989, when Neil died of cancer. Good teacher and splendid musician.

FORSYTHE: Harriet Patterson?

WRIGHT: Harriet Patterson is Mrs. William Patterson, she still lives in Murfreesboro. She graduated at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and coached with the Metropolitan coaches. She has a beautiful voice. She was our soloist at First Presbyterian Church and did a great job of teaching. Again, all of these people were interested in their students and took a personal interest in their lives. They were sort of parents away from home.

FORSYTHE: Kenneth Pace?

WRIGHT: Dr. Pace died some years ago. He was a clarinetist, directed the orchestra for a while. Actually he retired here and died within about a year and a half.

FORSYTHE: Edson Clifton Perry?

Wright Oh, Mr. Perry was only here one year, violinist I believe.

FORSYTHE: Audrey Gilbert?

WRIGHT: Audrey Ingerhausen Gilbert. She taught piano with us and is still a very dear friend. She finally felt the need to found a German department at MTSU. She

gave up teaching piano, she's still a very fine pianist, to devote her full time to building the German department, which she successfully did.

FORSYTHE: Werner Rose?

WRIGHT: Werner Rose was from Yale University. Very fine pianist, very young man. He was here about three years, when he left us to build a piano department out West. I can't remember which university he went to, but I've seen him in conventions since then. He is a tremendous pianist and added a great deal during the time he was here.

FORSYTHE: Milton Ryan?

WRIGHT: Milton Ryan was a violinist. He was only here a brief time. I can't really tell you a lot about him.

FORSYTHE: John Dixon?

WRIGHT: John Dixon taught piano with us. There is, in one of the books you are taking, a little article from the paper. She joined our staff in 1947 and taught piano with us for a number of years. She and her husband bought Bell Jewelry store, down on the square. She resigned to give full-time to that. She did teach with us for a number of years, piano adjunct.

FORSYTHE: Mary Dillan Scott?

WRIGHT: Mary is an organist and pianist. She served for a number of years at the First Baptist Church, First Presbyterian, and First Methodist church here and she added a great deal. She took over the piano class when I no longer had time to do it. She taught a much more sophisticated system. I went to the University of Chicago to study the technique of teaching class piano, because having taught only private piano, I wasn't quite sure how it should be done. By the time Mary took over the program, they had individual pianos with electronic controls. She did a fine job of that, as well as, teaching privately.

FORSYTHE: Dr. Jerry Perkins?

WRIGHT: Dr. Perkins is a graduate of Cincinnati Conservatory. He has given Carnegie Hall recitals, very successfully. He has produced many fine students.