

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
NELL MIDGETT

24 SEPTEMBER 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.105

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

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
NELL MIDGETT**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.105

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Q. M. Smith Collection designated as QMS.1995.105. This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Nell Midgett. Today is Monday, September 25, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mrs. Midgett located at 510 Woodmore Drive in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The tape of this interview along with a transcription of the interview will become part of the Quintin Miller Smith Collection and will be available to the public. Future researchers may include portions of this interview in their publications. Is that all right with you Mrs. Midgett?

MIDGETT: Yes that will be fine.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name?

MIDGETT: Margaret Nell Grandstaff Midgett

FORSYTHE: You birth place and date of birth.

MIDGETT: Wilson County, Lebanon, Tennessee. September 21, 1912.

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

MIDGETT: Frank Murphy Grandstaff, he was a farmer and a mechanic.

FORSYTHE: Your mother's name and occupation?

MIDGETT: Lucy Mai Neal Grandstaff Simpson, she married a second time, my father died. She was a housewife.

FORSYTHE: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

MIDGETT: Yes I have three brothers and one sister. My sister was named Mary Tabitha Grandstaff, Wilson Neal, Walter Edwin, and Will Frank, we called him Billy.

FORSYTHE: What was your husband's name?

MIDGETT: Elwin Wilburn "Wink" Midgett.

FORSYTHE: Why was he called Wink?

MIDGETT: Because he winked at the girls, that was what they always said.

FORSYTHE: Tell me more about your husband.

MIDGETT: He started the Business department at MTSU. Wink was a wonderful person. I do believe he was one of the most honest people I have ever met. He was under all the presidents except the last two, and president Lyon was emeritus when he came. He wasn't under Jones, then Lyon was the second one, but he was loyal to all of them. Now he might not have approved of everything they did, but he never was disloyal. I think that today is the thing that is lacking so much in this world. People work for people, and you may not approve of everything they do, but you are loyal to them if you work for them and are accepting their money. To me that is one of the greatest attributes that we have, and it is lacking considerably in this world.

FORSYTHE: What was important to your husband?

MIDGETT: His family, we have two sons - his family, his church, and his work, and I think his church would come first, then his family, then his work. That is the way it should be, because he was a member of the Methodist church and was very loyal, attended all the time. Wink had a very dry wit, and he published two books. One is well known, it is a book in accounting called, "The Accounting Primer." Then he wrote a little book on the experiences that he had called, "Corkus." It is the cutest little book and it has short stories about the things that happened while he was coaching. He came as a teacher and later coached, but he gave up the coaching and went into the teaching business entirely. He started the Business department by himself, then he had two. Just look what we have now. We are fixing to have this big building built where there are about five more departments. I am very proud of that.

FORSYTHE: What was the name of the church?

MIDGETT: St. Mark's.

FORSYTHE: What did he do there?

MIDGETT: Well he just never missed church. He was there all the time. He was a lay member, and I think he preached on a lay Sunday, once or twice.

FORSYTHE: You said you had two children, what are their names?

MIDGETT: Don Carter Midgett, he lives in Tullahoma; and Dan Earl Midgett, he lives in Hermitage Tennessee.

FORSYTHE: Did they go to MTSU?

MIDGETT: No Don did not, he is a graduate of Vanderbilt with an electrical engineering degree, but Dan graduated from MTSU with a business degree.

FORSYTHE: Your husband went to TPI?

MIDGETT: He went to Tennessee Tech, and from there he got a master's degree from the University of Kentucky. Well he was one of the most outstanding athletes they had. He played football, basketball, baseball and track. Then when he came here he started the golf team and coached football. He was selected the most outstanding athlete for about three different years on the teams when they went to . . . Well they didn't have NCAA then, but the Mississippi Valley conference, and he was selected the most outstanding player three different times when he went to tournaments.

FORSYTHE: Why did he stop coaching and start teaching business?

MIDGETT: He just decided that the business of the school was more important than the coaching. Q.M. was president at the time, and well the Business department was growing and they just needed him. He never could take off time to get a doctor's degree because the department was growing so fast. He got a masters before he came over here, and after we came here he never had an opportunity to go because he taught in the summer. The school was big and it was growing so fast there was no way, so he never did.

FORSYTHE: Why did he come to MTSU to work?

MIDGETT: Because Q.M. asked him to. See Q.M. had known him at Tech. At the time we came, he was teaching at Castle Heights and coaching there. Q. M. wanted him to come to Cookeville at one time and he almost went. But Col. Armstrong, who was head of the school at Castle Heights, wouldn't let him go; because he had a contract for that year, and he wouldn't let him go. So when Q.M. came here, he wanted him to come and start. He was the one that hired him to start the Business department, because they had no Business department here. He wanted him to come and start a Business department, and that is why we came. We came at the middle of the year. He had taught from September to December and we came here in January of '39. He started the Business department. See we were having quarters then, and that was the beginning of the new quarter.

FORSYTHE: When did your husband retire?

MIDGETT: In 1979, I think in June. They gave him a big going away thing, it was nice.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about Q M. Smith at TPI.

MIDGETT: I just know that he was a very good administrator, and I know he did so much. He built several new buildings, a new library, and a new cafeteria, and I think one dormitory while he was there. I think I am right on that. He did a lot to improve the school, because it was not a very large school, and he improved it. The budgets back then were so low, compared to what we have now. It just sounds like nothing, but he could always get money out of the legislature. I know one time he did do this. We had a Dames Club over at the University, and he was a speaker for one of the meetings that we had. This was several years before he retired. He said, "In about four years from now, we are going to have at least 7,000 students." I thought there was no way. Do you know that it was exactly that number when that year came. I have thought of that so often. That was just how his mind worked. He was very prospective, and was just good at it. He could look ahead and see how it was going to be. I have always thought that he had a vision that nobody else could even think about having, because when he said 7,000, I thought there is no way that can be. But it was exactly what he said.

FORSYTHE: What other memories do you have of Q. M. Smith?

MIDGETT: He was a nice man to be around. He was very congenial. We went with him and Laura, when she was pregnant with Nancy Jean, on a trip to North Carolina. We had the best time. We spent four or five days on the trip, and we always enjoyed them. I know on Sunday night we used to go over there, and Laura would have us over for a little snack after church. We just had the best time. It was a lot of fun. He was real friendly and congenial. I know when Wink was in Tech they had a dance. We weren't married then, and I know I had to dance with Q. M. I was scared to death, because I thought dancing with the president of Tennessee Tech; but he was such a nice man, very congenial, and out going. His speech impediment did not hurt him in his work. He always did well.

FORSYTHE: What do you remember about Mrs. Smith?

MIDGETT: Oh, she was Laura, vivacious and full of energy, and always smiling. She was very good natured. She of course was just a student at Tech when Wink was. They were in school together. She was a lovely person.

FORSYTHE: Did you go to the North Boulevard Church of Christ?

MIDGETT: Yes I do, and so did they.

FORSYTHE: Can you tell me about his involvement with the church?

MIDGETT: He always took an active roll in it. He was always there, unless they were sick or out of town.

FORSYTHE: We have some documents that he helped choose the new preacher there.

MIDGETT: I am sure, I don't know who the preacher was at that time. I can't remember that. I guess it was Brother Cunningham. I think it was, because they lived right across the street from them, so I am sure that is who it was. He came from Humphreys County. His mother came and lived with them in the later part.

FORSYTHE: While he was still president? I didn't know that. Do you know who I can talk to about his involvement with the church?

MIDGETT: No, because everybody that knew him then is dead. Mr. Hoyte Smith is the only man that I know that is living, that might be able to give you. . . . He is in his nineties and is not well at all. Now he may be able to give you something. I was there and I saw him but I didn't have that connection with him, you see, so I can't help you on that much.

FORSYTHE: You were in Murfreesboro in World War II?

MIDGETT: Yes.

FORSYTHE: Do you know about Smith's involvement in the Civil Defense?

MIDGETT: I know Wink had the ROTC. I know Smith had that brought in here because I was president of the Dame's club at the time. He called me in his office one day and said "Nell, you are going to have to invite the ROTC wives to join the Dames club" I said "If I do that I will have to invite the secretaries and everybody else. We just now have the wives of the people who teach in the University." He said, "We don't want that." I said, "I can't have one without the other because we can't discriminate. I just want you to know that if we open the doors to them, we open the doors to all of them." He said, "Well that is what I want," and that is exactly what we did. We opened the doors for the ROTC wives and the secretaries and anyone who worked there. Before it had just been the wives of the men who taught. At one time, Wink was head of the Athletic department, and he trained these cadets that came in here. They would have two and three hundred at a time that would come in here. He would train them. Wink did that until he joined the Navy, in '43, and went to service and was gone about three and a half years. Then he came back to the University and taught.

FORSYTHE: Did you stay here the whole time he was gone?

MIDGETT: No, my mother lived in Wilson County on a farm that Wink and I owned. We, my two children were one and two, went over there and stayed while he was gone and then we came back to Murfreesboro. We owned a little house on Lascassas Pike at the time. Wink used to walk to school and he had to walk through the pig pen where the pigs were. We always said they would run down and say good morning when he went across the field. But that was during the war, and Wink did that as long as they had them. He went to join the Navy and was too fat. He lost forty pounds so he could join the navy.

FORSYTHE: Tell me more about the Dames club.

MIDGETT: It was started, I can't give the date on it, but I believe it was 1927. Mrs. Golightly and IsaLee Freeman's father, Dr. Sherrod he was president at Johnson City. They went to Peabody together to get their doctors degree at the same time. When Mrs. Golightly comes back to Murfreesboro, she wants to start what they had down there called the Dames Club. That was the beginning of the Dames Club, just the wives of the teachers were all that was members. Of course it started as a small group, I think when we came there might have been fifty on the faculty. Everybody knew everybody. Not all of them were married, so they weren't included. I didn't come till '39, but I joined as soon as I came. I have been a member ever since, and still am.

FORSYTHE: What was the original purpose of the Dames club?

MIDGETT: I think just to get to know each other. We always had some kind of a project going, and we do even to this day have one. Now you might check on that with the president of the Dames club, I am one of these retired members, I just join and I don't go.

FORSYTHE: Can I just ask you questions in general? What was it like living in Wilson County during World War II.

MIDGETT: We had maneuvers all the time. That was one of the counties that they held maneuvers in. I would say that was before we actually got into the war, but they had maneuvers. We had maneuvers here in Murfreesboro too. Gene Sloan could tell you all about those maneuvers because he wrote all about it. The big old tanks would come through, and they would just tear up ground and farms. My mother and stepfather, they slept in their barns, and mama just couldn't stand it because they would be out there on maneuvers, sleeping in the barns. She would bring them in to give them hot meals. She kept in contact with one of those boys' mother for years and years. After my mother died, I kept in contact with that woman, she lived in Massachusetts for years and years. During the war, when Wink was in the service, we were stationed at Boston, Massachusetts, and they lived in Revere, Massachusetts. We spent two nights with her until we could find a place to stay, he and I and my two children. So my mother had befriended her son, and kept him, and she had kept us. So see you cast your bread upon the water and it comes back to you..

FORSYTHE: Did it bother you when they tore up your yard?

MIDGETT: Well you just had to take it. There wasn't anything you could do. That was just part of it. They didn't tear up more than they had to. They were very good about it. The reason they used us, they said that this area was so much like where they were going to be that they needed to know about it. It was during the winter, and

they would run out in the cold and the snow and all. I remember when I had my first child. I had a nurse that stayed with me for about ten days, about two weeks after he was born. We lived out on Lascassas Pike and they would come down, all those convoys and everything. Wink wanted to learn to fish, so he had him fishing rod; and he would sit out on the end of the porch and throw his fishing rod out to the end of the walk, and then reel it in. He was learning to cast. So one day, Mrs. Howard was sitting on the porch, and she had on a white nurses uniform. They went by and Wink was sitting there casting. They turned around and looked at him, and Wink always said they must have thought I was crazy, and that was my nurse sitting there with me.

FORSYTHE: What else do you remember about the war, what about rationing?

MIDGETT: He was stationed at Plattsburgh, New York. That was where he was first sent when he joined the navy to get his training. He was going to be there for six weeks, and at the end of the six weeks, he was going down to Boston to Harvard. He went to Harvard for three months. He was in communication, and I wanted to go. You had to have a ticket for gas, and everybody I knew in the community saved up their tickets and gave them to me so that I could go to Plattsburgh, New York where he was. His sister and I and my two children, drove from Lebanon, Tennessee, to Plattsburgh, New York. It took us about three days to go, and from there we went down to Boston Harbor. We found a place to stay and I stayed there and then we came home. From there he was sent to New Orleans, and I left my children at home and went with him to New Orleans, thinking each day that he would be called out. We stayed five weeks before he was called out. I left one of my children with my mother and one with his sister while I was gone. When we came home, tires were rationed too, and we kept having blowouts. We stopped on the Pennsylvania turnpike at a rest stop, and a man, we never knew his name, gave Wink a tire or we would have never gotten home. It was an ordeal. It took us five days to go from there to Tennessee. We had snow and ice the entire way, and the car gave out, and I had to sit on the side of the road.

This is a continuation of the interview with Mrs. Nell Midgett by Regina Forsythe on Monday, September 25, 1995.

FORSYTHE: You told me he played golf, tell me about that.

MIDGETT: He was a real good golfer. They had such a good time and they thoroughly enjoyed each other. They looked forward to that. They played every Wednesday afternoon, and they would all take off and go play golf. I thought that was good for all of them because they all got to know each other. They got to be together, it was recreation, and they could forget all the worries that they had behind them. I think that was very good for all of them. It was Smith, my husband, Newby Freeman, and Mr. Judd. Mr. Judd was the bursar, and Newby was head of the Industrial Arts department, he also helped Wink coach. Smith was president, so

that was the four. They got to know each other non-professionally, which is good.

FORSYTHE: Were there any other hobbies he had besides golf?

MIDGETT: He had that farm, and I am sure that took the rest of his time. He took the farm up after the golf and about that time they quit playing golf. The war came along, and Mr. Judd was beginning to get older. They just didn't do it anymore.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about when the MacArthurs came to town in 1947.

MIDGETT: He was in on that. It was a big day. They had a barn raising thing here in Murfreesboro for the service. They went out on the bus and went all around raising money during the war. They all went on a bus to different places around here. I know that Smith was in on that particular day.

FORSYTHE: What about Smith's involvement in the buildings on campus?

MIDGETT: He built a new boys' dormitory and that is named for him. He built a new library. He built a new girls' dormitory and a new industrial arts building.

FORSYTHE: Did your husband have some trouble when he first came here because I remember seeing a bunch of newspaper articles where Coach Floyd was fired and your husband was brought in.

MIDGETT: No, Wink didn't coach when he first came. He was the assistant coach. Then when Hurk left, he was made coach. But Hurk Alley left here and went to coach at Vanderbilt.

FORSYTHE: If I remember correctly the article made it sound like your husband was going to take over coaching.

MIDGETT: That was not true. Wink did not take it over because Hurk Alley was the one that Q. M. hired. When he left, then Wink took over. Q. M. made him coach then. He coached and taught both. . . . [tape recorder was stopped for a while] Then when Q.M. left, Quill Cope came. Now Wink and Quill, I always laughed and said, that when Wink was at Tech, Quill was a water boy on their team, and when we came down here, Quill was a star and Wink was a water boy. So I always said it was reversed when they got down here. But he had know Quill in school up there. He was a manager of the football team, he didn't play but he was there. Quill was a good friend. I did not know Mary Kate until they came, but we did know Quill. He stayed ten years, and then he left and went from here to UT, and then he died. But again there was a lot of things that Quill did. He built several new buildings too. I know that he built the building right across from Old Main, what is that big building?

FORSYTHE: Peck Hall

MIDGETT: He built that. That was where the old library used to be. He was going to build some more buildings all down through that quadrangle, and Wink told him, "Quill if you put another building in that quadrangle, I am going to shoot you. That is the prettiest part of the campus and you are just ruining it." He had put the Cope Administration building at the bottom of it, and he was going to fill it up. I reckon Quill listened to him because they never did build another building. It is a pretty layout through there, but he had planned to put another building in there.

FORSYTHE: What about Dr. Scarlett, what do you remember about him?

MIDGETT: Well now, Dr. Scarlett came and we were a college, and he raised the standard of the school from a college to a university. When he began to hire new teachers, he would never hire anybody unless they had a doctor's degree, in that way he could raise the standard of the college to a university. That is what he was trying to do. He was the first one to raise the salaries. He brought them up from a low level to a much higher level than they had been before. Everybody got a raise. Of course some got more than others, because those with doctor's degrees could get more than those without. The ones who didn't have doctor's degrees, he kept them. He didn't fire them, because Wink was one of those and he was just as good to him as he could be. I highly respect him. He was a wonderful administrator. He was responsible for the Learning Resources Center, and the Bubber Murphy Gym, and so many different new buildings while he was there. I know I haven't named them all, but they were the two largest ones.

FORSYTHE: Did you ever take classes at MTSU?

MIDGETT: No I didn't. I graduated from David Lipscomb. It was a two year college.

FORSYTHE: When did you go there?

MIDGETT: From 1930 to '32. I majored in public speaking and I was an elementary teacher. I taught one year and I went to work for the United States Tobacco Company as a stenographer. I learned to type myself. My sister had a job there and she was pregnant and going to have a baby. I got her job. I learned to type, and I worked there seven years. Then I had children. Then I went to work as the secretary for the North Boulevard Church and worked there twelve years, off and on. Then I ran a bakery for a year. That was the hardest work I ever did. You got up at 3:00 in the morning and bake doughnuts and sweet rolls and coffee and have it all ready for people in the morning, bread, pies. We had a good bakery. I had two girls that helped me. First I had a baker, and he left and went to Florida, he got a better job. Then I baked and had two girls that helped me. Then we got another baker, and we sold the bakery to that baker.

FORSYTHE: What was the name of your bakery?

MIDGETT: Home Bakery. It is now down on Broad Street. It has spice in the name. I was on the square right between...there was a shoe store, then mine, then a card shop, right across from Goldsteins.

FORSYTHE: You and your husband ran it?

MIDGETT: I did all the work and he did all the bookkeeping. We had a girl that helped us, Lucille Youree. She is still living. She worked for me the whole time we were there. She must be getting close to her nineties. When we sold it, I sold it with the stipulation that she was to still work. I don't know how long she worked after that.

FORSYTHE: What memories do you have of being involved with MTSU?

MIDGETT: Of course I was just the wife of the teacher and the coach, but I went to all the games whenever he coached. I never missed any. I took the children. They were little, but they enjoyed it. I remember more when he used to play for TPI, when TPI and MTSU played. I remember more of then than when we were married, because I had more responsibilities. I enjoyed all of the games and always went to all of them. I never did miss any of them.

FORSYTHE: What years did your husband go to TPI?

MIDGETT: He went '30 to '34.