8-7-2015

Interview with Betty Jean Ulmer McGregor

Betty Jean Ulmer McGregor
SC Mother of the Year 2009

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/scmotheroftheyear

Part of the Oral History Commons, United States History Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
McGregor, Betty Jean Ulmer, "Interview with Betty Jean Ulmer McGregor" (2015). South Carolina Mother of the Year Oral History Archives. 27.
https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/scmotheroftheyear/27

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the South Carolina Mothers Collection at Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in South Carolina Mother of the Year Oral History Archives by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact bramed@winthrop.edu.
Mrs. Betty Jean Ulmer McGregor – August 9, 2015
Winner of the 2009 SC MOY Award and 2009 National MOY Award

Dr. Disney: Good morning. My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to be here today with Betty Jean Ulmer McGregor, the 2009 South Carolina Mother of the Year and the 2009 National Mother of the Year. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Mrs. McGregor: Well it’s my privilege and I think this is a great thing that you’re preserving about our state and women.

Dr. Disney: Thank you, Betty. It’s an honor for me. You are the only National Mother on our list of interviewees so we look forward to talking and learning more about you and that experience of being named a State and a National Mother. To represent our state at the national level is amazing so, let’s get started first with some personal information about you. Tell us a little bit about when and where you were born and raised.

Mrs. McGregor: I was born in Cameron, South Carolina, which is the prettiest little town in South Carolina. It’s located on the Charleston highway between Columbia and Charleston. It’s 650 residents.

Dr. Disney: Wow, that’s wonderful. Tell me a little bit about your family and your early childhood experience.

Mrs. McGregor: My father went to a business college; my mother went to Lander. And, I think they were sweethearts a long time before they were married. When they got married, Daddy ran a grocery store and Momma was a volunteer but she organized a pecan company in Cameron, so I grew up with some of these things in Cameron and it was wonderful to be able to go down to the grocery store and get candy any time I wanted to.

Dr. Disney: That’s great.

Mrs. McGregor: I had two brothers, an older brother four and a half years older and a younger brother eight and a half years younger.

Dr. Disney: Wow, so you were the middle sister. A rose between two thorns.

Mrs. McGregor: You bet, and I was my daddy’s pet. Do you want to know anything about the school I went to?

Dr. Disney: I absolutely do.

Mrs. McGregor: Okay, Cameron School and in my graduating class, we had nine students and we all went for higher education, which I think’s a pretty good recommendation for the little school system I was in.

Dr. Disney: Absolutely.

Mrs. McGregor: One of the games that we played was Red Light, Green Light, now see that’s before your time.

Dr. Disney: I remember Red Light, Green Light.

Mrs. McGregor: Okay, and one of the things I loved to do was dress up. I think back, I must have been probably five years old. My friend and I dressed up. We had on high heels, we had on hats, we had parasols, that’s what we called them, parasols. And we walked down to Main Street and here the men sitting on the bench in front of the barber shop and they said, “Oh, we have two new ladies in town.” We said, “They don’t know who we are.”

Dr. Disney: That’s a great story. Is there anything else you want to share about your early childhood experience or about your education or your young adult life, maybe your goals and dreams as a young woman?
**Mrs. McGregor:** One of the things I did as a young person was I went to camp. I was Methodist and I went to camp every year, which I think was an interesting thing. In high school, I played basketball. Of course, I was the shortest thing on the court but you know, I was so dedicated in my senior year they even presented the medal to me because I was so dedicated. We didn’t even have a gym and we practiced on a clay court so Cameron has come a long way. When I finished Cameron High School, I was Salutatorian and then I went on to Columbia College from there.

**Dr. Disney:** What was your major at Columbia College and what were your dreams, goals, and aspirations when you were attending Columbia College?

**Mrs. McGregor:** I majored in English with Elementary Teaching. I was very involved at Columbia College, I was editor of the newspaper, The Postscript. My major was English and I wanted to be an elementary school teacher and I did my practice teaching in the third grade with one of the best teachers in the school system. One of the things I did when I was at Columbia College, I went on a Methodist youth caravan. Now what that was, I was a junior and in the Methodist church, they had a group of college students and one older person. We were trained and we would go into different places, different cities and churches and then we would work with the young people in that group. Most every church had a young people’s group. We would go in and stay a week and work with them and then we would move on to another one and what we were assigned was Minnesota and Wisconsin. Our team was from New York and Louisiana and Texas and of course, South Carolina. In Cameron, you have a little different accent. I remember this guy in one of those places, Minnesota probably, he said, “I cannot understand a word you are saying.” But that was really great. And then we would get back together as an entire group and share our experiences. One of the funniest things was they called on me to lead a round and I take my horse and I take my thing and I got up and said, “Take my hoease.” And they just broke down laughing and I thought, “Why are they laughing?” and I started again. I said, “Take my hoease” and they just started laughing and I said, “Take my horse.” But it was a great group. One of the interesting things was that you paired off every now and then with a member of the opposite sex, so this guy from Louisiana and I got to be very good friends and so I was going to invite him out to Columbia College to see what was going on in South Carolina.

**Dr. Disney:** That sounds very interesting. It’s good to meet friends from across the country that way. Tell us about how you met your husband.

**Mrs. McGregor:** It was a blind date. At Columbia College, my roommate – suitemate – was going with a Clemson guy, Sam was a Clemson guy and she was going to get somebody to date Same so he said when he saw me he thought, “Gosh, she’s not very big, is she?” But, anyway, that’s how I first met Sam.

**Dr. Disney:** Tell us about some of the activities you were involved in both before and after you were married in terms of family, education, work inside and outside the home, community, church, those kinds of things.

**Mrs. McGregor:** after I was married, I became very involved in the community. I did not teach, I was qualified to teach, but living in the community, they would not let me teach, so I never used my teaching abilities in the school system, but I did in other ways. One of the things that was important to me was when our children were older, they were involved in Cub Scouts, Brownies, these kind of things in the scouting system. Naturally, I became the den mother and the mother that took the scout troops and things like this, so that was important. And you know one of the interesting things is one of my little boys that was in the scout troop, when I got the award for the Mother of the Year, he sent me a card. Now we’re talking many, many years ago and he said what a great Cub Scout leader I was. So I thought that was unusual that he would
remember me like that. I was involved, I joined Shandon Presbyterian Church and I was Methodist. Sam said, “Are you willing to be a Presbyterian?” I said, “Absolutely not.” I was kidding. So I got involved with Shandon Presbyterian Church. The Garden Club of South Carolina, I was really interested in things you did in Garden Club and so I was a member of the Garden Club in Columbia and of South Carolina so I enjoyed that part of my participation into that. One of the things that I really enjoyed, I belonged to a group that would meet international students at the University of South Carolina coming in. We would meet them at the airport and we would come in contact with them in different ways to help show them some part of South Carolina. One of the guys I met at the airport, I said, “Have you ever been to South Carolina before?” and he said, “No.” I said, “Well I want to show you the best thing about South Carolina.” On the way to the airport, we would pass Krispy Kreme doughnuts. So we stopped at Krispy Kreme doughnuts and I said, “Now you may choose twelve.” Well, the crowd began to develop around us watching this guy finally decide on which twelve he wanted. So after he chose them and we got back to the car, he started eating one and he said, “Boy, are these good.” And he started eating another one and I said, “Woah, you’re going to get a sugar high. I wouldn’t eat anymore right now.” Being involved with international students was a great experience for me. Of course, when you have children you become a home mother and get involved with the school system. And of course, I worked with the Brownies and moved up to the Girl Scouts and the Cub Scouts and these in the scouting program because our children were in these things so that was one of the areas I really enjoyed being in. And of course, being from Columbia College, I was active in Columbia College Alumni affairs and did that. One of the things that my mother started was, my mother was a Huffmon, and she started a reunion of all the Huffmons and this is one of the things that I think was tremendous how families grow up and they move away from one another, you lose contact with one another. This way, we would once a year we would get together at a lake house and share what we had been doing the last year so I thought that was a tremendous thing that she organized. I was really involved with the Garden Club of South Carolina. I enjoyed that part, being involved with that, and I learned an awful lot. I never did excel in making arrangement, but I tried. That was great experience for me. Clemson Extension has always been a part of my life. I married a farmer, living just six miles from the city. I was pretty involved with Clemson University Extension and I had some tremendous experiences with that organization.

Dr. Disney: That’s wonderful. Tell us about the early years of your marriage and the birth of your children.

Mrs. McGregor: Okay, like I said, when Sam and I got married it was really interesting because he said that he wanted me to marry him or maybe I wanted to marry him, I can’t remember exactly. I was so shocked because I had already decided I was going to marry him and I thought, “And you didn’t know this?” But anyways, like I said, Sam was a blind date. When we got married, we weren’t married very long before he was called in to service at Fort Benning and they said, “Do not bring any dependents because there is no housing available.” Well boy, you didn’t tell a new couple that, so we bought us a mobile home, twenty-five feet, and away we went to Fort Benning, Georgia. We were on the base and of course, the base that we were on there were a whole lot of young couples just like us, so it was great experience. Our first child was born at Fort Benning. $8.75 – that was a big price to pay, wasn’t it? Fort Benning was a great experience for us and then, of course, we moved to other places but we always took our little home with us.
Dr. Disney: Tell us about all your children – how many children do you have and if you want to talk through and tell us about anything they do today, anything you want to tell us about your children, we want to hear.

Mrs. McGregor: Okay, we had five children. I wanted three, Sam wanted four, so we compromised and had five. I have to say, they were exceptional children. Lib, our oldest, is senior pastor at Davidson College Presbyterian Church. Jean is a nurse down in down in South Georgia. Let’s see, Lib, Jean, Jimmy worked with Exxon Mobil as an engineer. He has retired and lives in Houston, Texas. And boy, we had some great experiences visiting Jimmy because he was stationed in a lot of places in France and England and Scotland so all that was great. Okay, Johnny, he’s a professor at Clemson University and you know one of the interesting things he just told me? He said, “You know” – he’s in Food Science – he said, “I learned to cook from you.” That was a complete shock. I remember he was very interested in food as a little boy. When we were in, I’ve forgotten which state we were in, and we were eating and it was quiet. Now this a group of adults, very quiet, and Johnny who was four said, “This is the hardest roll I have ever eaten.” He was destined to be in Food Science, wasn’t he? Sam, he lives in Rock Hill. He’s a pastor at Allison Creek Presbyterian Church. So we have eight grandchildren, they weren’t as prolific as their mother, and three great-grandchildren.

Dr. Disney: Wow, you must be very proud of all your children. That’s wonderful. So let me ask you this, what does motherhood mean to you?

Mrs. McGregor: Well, God has given you many blessings and one of them are your children. One of the things that, we were very fortunate. Sam and I have always just gotten along so well together and our goals were always the same. We thought that children should have responsibilities early. I remember they used to set the table when they first started. They would set the table and things like this and they would have a baby calf and take care of that baby calf. They would give it a bottle and feed it. Then the boys would work on the farm as they were growing up, they would do simple things likes feed the little baby calves and something like this. They had responsibilities in the home, too. One of the things was to empty the trashcans. Well this was a tough job and they would wait until Sam would be coming home and they would run out there and empty the trashcans. They all have excelled in college and have just been an outstanding group of young adults.

Dr. Disney: That’s wonderful, you must be so proud.

Mrs. McGregor: Oh, it was so blessed, so blessed.

Dr. Disney: What was it like to be named the South Carolina Mother of the Year?

Mrs. McGregor: It was a complete shock. The organization that nominated me is with Clemson Extension and so, when I was selected, I was in Houston during Christmas, and I had this phone call. It was somebody from the State Mothers and told me I had been selected as the Mother of the Year and it was a complete shock to me. Our son took a snapshot with me with my mouth wide open like this. But it was quite an honor, you know. When they had the little ceremony at Columbia College, I could invite some of my closest friends and our children were there and it was a very special thing for me to have my family with me. And I remember when I gave my little speech, and I said something about Sam and about our marriage and about our family and I said, “Not only that, but he cooks breakfast.” And they said, “That is really the best thing I have ever heard.” But it was, you know, why me? Why me? And I still don’t know why me. I probably filled out a good form, didn’t I?

Dr. Disney: You must have. Well, you raised five children on a farm, I mean that’s a lot of work. You did all these activities you shared with us earlier. I mean, how were you able to
Mrs. McGregor: Well now, my job, I did not work on the farm. The only thing I did was I kept the books. Which was my contribution, I kept the books and I don’t know that there was ever a problem because not having a paying job, I could do what I wanted to do and get involved and I was just real blessed. And we lived next door to Sam’s mother and daddy, which was a real blessing to me and to our children, that they would get to know grandparents and this kind of thing.

Dr. Disney: That’s wonderful. And your husband was cooking breakfast, so that’s a big help.

Mrs. McGregor: I’ll tell you what, you know, Sam and I have been so blessed in our marriage. I married the right guy, that’s for sure. We’ve had so many wonderful experiences and so many outstanding experiences. He was named the National Young Farmer of the Year and so we crisscrossed with country with his honor. And then, when I received this and he was my guest as we crisscrossed the country again.

Dr. Disney: Wow, so you both are national award winners. Tell us about what it was like to be named the National Mother of the Year. Tell us about that process. How do you go from being State Mother to National Mother, how does that work?

Mrs. McGregor: Well, it was a shock to begin with. When we went out to Portland, I believe it was, for the National Mother of the Year Ceremony. That group of women from all these states, I never felt any competition at all. We were all in the same category and we shared the experiences with one another. It was at the banquet that they announced the National Mother and I was just overwhelmed, why me? Why me? And I still think, I shouldn’t say this, but I still think the reason that I got it was because of my little speech. We had to do, each one of us had to do a three-minute speech. And they had told us what the topic was, “My family is a garden” or something like that. So, we had to submit our speech to begin with and that kind of thing, to the judges and they had already seen the speeches. So when I got up there, we’re talking twenty-five people talking to three-minute speeches, now you know that’s exciting, isn’t it?

Dr. Disney: We want to hear your three-minute speech, tell us what you remember about it, what’d you say?

Mrs. McGregor: It was really interesting, we would sit in a row right in front of where we spoke, where we go up on stage. Somebody would get up and do a speech and go around then we’d all move down one. Anyway, when my turn came, and McGregor was one of the last ones, we knew it was three-minutes and they would buzz you when it went over three-minutes, so it was about “Your life is like a garden” or something. When I got up to say mine, mine was different. I had written mine like a poem. I said, “Betty, Betty, South Carolina Mother, how does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockleshells and pretty maids all in a row? Oh no!” And then I went into my family, children and what they did, and I ended on a serious note. Then, I said, and it happened to be my birthday, and I said, “Since today is my what, seventy-fifth birthday” clap clap clap clap and I start over. “Today is my seventy-fifth birthday, I think it qualifies me to give advice. Be kind to your children, they may pick our your nursing home.” I think, if it was, I think that speech was so different from what all the speeches were.

Dr. Disney: It sounds like it was really creative and it really captured the audience. If you have a copy of that speech or anything else from your year as National Mother that you would like to go to the Louise Pettus Archives, we would love to have that.

Mrs. McGregor: I have a copy of the speech, believe me.
**Dr. Disney:** We would love to have that at the archives.

**Mrs. McGregor:** I would love to share it.

**Dr. Disney:** Is there anything else you want to share about being State Mother, about being National Mother, about the Governor’s Mansion, I think you went to meet the Governor as well. I think you also have this beautiful sculpture you want to share with us. Anything.

**Mrs. McGregor:** It was just an overwhelming experience. I never went out there in competition, I went out there to share with other State Mothers and I became close to some of them. We continue to be friends. I have a scrapbook that must be ten inches thick and I have so many congratulatory notes. So one section is for being the State Mother and one section is for being the National Mother. It was just such an overwhelming experience for me and to see these women from all across the United States that excelled in motherhood.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s wonderful. Well I just want to take a minute and say congratulations on being the 2009 South Carolina State Mother and to be the National Mother of the Year for that year, for South Carolina and representing the nation. It’s quite an honor, congratulations.

**Mrs. McGregor:** Yes, I really enjoyed it and I think I made thirty speeches across South Carolina and a couple outside of the state.

**Dr. Disney:** Well that’s great, so that year you really utilized, people of the state utilized your talent and wisdom that year so that you could give speeches and give back and share some of your thoughts.

**Mrs. McGregor:** Well I was honored that they would want to have me share my thoughts.

**Dr. Disney:** Is the sculpture on camera? Can everyone see that? I just want to make sure that everyone can see the beautiful sculpture that you were given, that’s awesome.

**Mrs. McGregor:** That’s specially designed for the National Mother of the Year. So this is one of those things that I have that helps me remember what a great experience that was.

**Dr. Disney:** Thank you for bringing that today. It’s beautiful. I want to ask you a few broader questions and tap into your wisdom that you’re bringing with you today. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

**Mrs. McGregor:** You know, equal pay for equal jobs. I live in a Presbyterian community with a lot of old, I hope they don’t take it the wrong way, “old people,” retired people is a better way to put it. And I asked them the same question because we come from a lot of different backgrounds, a lot of different things that they were employed in and they have a different perspective than I probably do about things. That’s one of the things that they all commented on. The salary difference between a man and a woman.

**Dr. Disney:** I think that’s important. You talked about being able to raise your children at home. And many women today seem to have to work outside the home for a wage and raise their children inside the home, and being able to balance that, work outside the home for pay, work inside the home, community service and other types of civic engagement. It seems really hard for women to balance those things. Do you think that women today, women that are working and trying to juggle all these things may have a more difficult time balancing those things?

**Mrs. McGregor:** Oh, I would think so. It’s hard for me to comprehend how you can have a family and do all the things a family involves and being a part of their lives and having a job outside the home. There are only twenty-four hours in a day. And I really am impressed how women are able to balance this. And I’m sure that’s because of their spouse, I’m sure that makes a difference, two people that share the responsibility. But, I am so impressed. Now, one of the things that I had a blessing for was I had a mother-in-law next door. So, that was a real blessing for me, too.
Dr. Disney: I think you’re right about the spouse as well. You mentioned having a partner who is there to share all those things and all those responsibilities. And it sounds like you made a good choice and you found a partner who is truly a partner that you all shared all the things that you were juggling and balancing. It seems that that’s a really big part of being able, for women and men, to be able to do that. To be true partners.

Mrs. McGregor: And Sam and I had just such a wonderful relationship. He died two months ago, but we were just so blessed with one another. Shared so many wonderful experiences together and never got mad at one another, it’s unreal, isn’t it?

Dr. Disney: That’s beautiful. We are so sorry for your loss and so glad that you’re still able to share all of these wonderful memories.

Mrs. McGregor: And you know, one of the things was four years ago, we moved to the Presbyterian community in Lexington. That was a major move cause you sold your home, you sold the farm, and you moved to a different location and you moved with a lot of neighbors. I never had that many neighbors. When you have 200 neighbors, it’s really interesting to see people’s backgrounds because you meet them, but you don’t talk about your backgrounds. One of the things that I do at the Presbyterian community is that I interview the new residents, we have a pictorial directory, we have a snapshot of the person being interviewed and their life, they fill out interesting things with their background. To be able to see that, because you don’t know that when you see somebody, you’re just amazed who’s out there and the things they’ve contributed to make this a better world.

Dr. Disney: And that’s exactly why we’re doing this project. We want women, young women at Winthrop University, to be able to have this intergenerational conversation, to learn about women across the great state of South Carolina and different activities and you know, the way work has changed and partnerships and all these things and we’re so honored that you’re sharing that experience with us today.

Mrs. McGregor: Well it’s a great privilege for me to be able to share it with you.

Dr. Disney: Thank you. I want to ask you do you think women’s roles as mothers are adequately recognized by society today?

Mrs. McGregor: Gee, that’s a hard question to say. Well, I sometimes think that you’re not put in the same category as a stay-at-home mom as you are as a working mom. I guess I’m saying that I think that working mothers, they have an occupation and are looked upon as something they’re doing to contribute. And that mothers who stay at home and work with their children, they’re contributing too because of their activities that they are capable of doing, taking care of your children, scouts, garden club, all these outside activities that women who work probably do not have the opportunity to get involved in. So, it’s two roles you’re playing, one, the question was if you think what now?

Dr. Disney: I said do you think women’s roles, but I left out part of the question and you already answered it beautifully

End of Video One of Mrs. Betty Jean Ulmer McGregor’s Interview

Beginning of Video Two of Mrs. Betty Jean Ulmer McGregor’s Interview

Dr. Disney: I meant to ask, do you think women’s roles and women’s work as mothers are adequately recognized by society? And you just kind of spoke to that beautifully, we tend to think of working moms as moms who work outside the home, but what about all the work that
stay at home moms are doing? They’re also working, but we often don’t think of it as work. And I think that you kind of got at that with your answer beautifully. We don’t recognize all the work that working mothers working inside the home are doing. All the activities it takes to keep that family successful and to raise those children to be productive citizens of society and the scouts and the clubs and the den mother and the homeroom mother, all those things. You seem like you’ve just captured that so well.

Mrs. McGregor: Well, I’ve been real blessed in my life. I was blessed as a child, having parents that showed love to me. As I went through school and college, the experiences I had, I was blessed. To choose the right guy, that’s a real blessing and the life that we had was different. One of the things we did on the farm is we had a lot of school children, we were only six miles from the veteran’s hospital. Little school groups would come out and Sam would show them through the dairy and then they would come out in our backyard. He wanted to show them where milk came from, ‘cause they didn’t know where milk came from originally. They would come out in our backyard and we would have little cups of ice-cream and give them this kind of thing. You know, we’ve been bless through the years to be able to reach out to other people, young and old.

Dr. Disney: And you’ve epitomized for me, a lesson I’ve learned throughout my life doing oral histories and talking with women, I never ask a woman, “Do you work?” because all women work. So I ask, “Do you work inside the home, do you work outside the home, or both?” I think that all the work that goes into maintaining a family and being successful, I think you’ve helped kind of shed some light on the kind of work mothers do inside the home. I appreciate that.

Mrs. McGregor: Oh well this has been a real privilege to me and I think this organization, the State Mothers, I think this is a wonderful group where you recognize women and it’s been a real privilege for me to be a part of this and to experience these things and I feel it was a wonderful blessing and a wonderful honor, for me and my family.

Dr. Disney: Thank you so much. Before I let you go, I have one more question for you. What does feminism mean to you?

Mrs. McGregor: Well, I hated that you were going ask that, I was afraid so.

Dr. Disney: When you hear that word, what do you think of?

Mrs. McGregor: Well, it may be that we live in a society where maybe women aren’t defending themselves. We have like two categories you can be in, stay at home and get involved in the community and activities and where also you are a working mother. I do not put men down, I do not do that. I hope men don’t put women down. Sometimes, I think that we are faced with that problem.

Dr. Disney: With either side putting the other side down? Not giving people the respect or the dignity they deserve.

Mrs. McGregor: Correct. Right.

Dr. Disney: I agree with you. Let’s hope we are creating a world through our children and grandchildren where women and men give each other equal respect, equal dignity, equal access to opportunities, equal pay, that you mentioned earlier.

Mrs. McGregor: I think I can say Amen to that.

Dr. Disney: I think I can say Amen to that, too. Do you have any questions for us or anything else that you’d like to share?

Mrs. McGregor: Well, I’d just like to say one more time what an honor and what a privilege it’s been to be nominated on the state level and of course the national level. You know, without this organization, I would have never have had this opportunity to have this be a part of my life. I really do appreciate all that they’ve done.
**Dr. Disney:** Thank you so much. We are so honored, I am so honored that Martha Cranford and Shirley Fishburne brought me into this project so we could create this oral history project that will be held at the Louise Pettus Archives that Winthrop University. We’ll be able to share this interview and the others that we are doing. So thank you for giving us your time and sharing your experience with us. And congratulations again on being South Carolina and National Mother of the Year for 2009.

**Mrs. McGregor:** Well thank you for all that you’ve done to preserve this.

**Dr. Disney:** Betty Jean McGregor, thank you so much.