



1964

Interview with Mai Rutledge Smith Johnson

Mai Rutledge Smith Johnson

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LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

W460-1A-11

JOHNSON, Mai Rutledge Smith

JOHNSON, Mai Rutledge Johnson

Alumnae and wife of President D.B. Johnson

Interviewed: 1964/1964

Interviewer: Unknown

Index by: Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

Length: 03:58:26

Abstract: In a series of interviews from 1964-1965, Mai Rutledge Smith details her time at Winthrop as a student and the wife of Winthrop's first President, David Bancroft Johnson. Smith recalls the receptions held at the President's House and the efforts of President Johnson to expand Winthrop. Smith recounts details of the interesting people Winthrop has hosted over the years and the lasting impressions they made on her. Included in this interview are more personal details of Smith's family, their personalities, and her impressions of President Johnson's mother, Margaret Nance. The interview concludes with Smith comparing Old Winthrop to the new. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: D.B. Johnson, Tillman (Main Building) Hall, Benjamin Tillman, Guest Speakers, Winthrop History, Winthrop Buildings, Winthrop Faculty/Professors, President's House, parties, receptions, social customs, traditions, religion, fire escapes, blue line, Founder's Day, how D.B. Johnson lost his arm

Interview Session (1964/1965): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:00:35 *Question:* What went on when you came to Winthrop? *Answer:* September 1897. Chaperoned to the campus. Was met by the President's sister. MS talks about her impressions of the President's sister.

00:02:25 *Question:* Faculty lived in the dormitories? *Answer:* Yes. MS also talks about the development of campus and how it's changed since the time she first arrived.

00:04:38 *Question:* Teachers? *Answer:* MS took a business course, typing, etc. Lizzie Hall,

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Mary Marshall, etc.

- 00:05:35 *Question:* Did you march to the dining room? *Answer:* Yes. The dining room was in Tillman. "Everything was in Tillman Hall." The swimming pool was never used, because there was no light. "People weren't crazy about water like they are now." MS talks about Benjamin Tillman coming to Winthrop. There were about 350 girls at that time. There was no registrar. Emily Smith was the secretary after MS left. MS talks about more professors.
- 00:10:25 *Question:* Why did you give up job in President's office? *Answer:* MS wanted to get away to think things over (referring to relationship with the President). When MS left Winthrop, she worked for the Secretary of State, and then worked for Governor Max Sweeny.
- 00:12:45 *Question:* Did President Johnson visit you? *Answer:* Yes. Lived with a friend in Columbia. MS talks more about where she lived.
- 00:13:58 *Question:* Wedding? *Answer:* Married in Somerville on the hottest day in August. Had to close the summer school before President Johnson and MS got married. There was a bad thunderstorm, so no one could see them off on the train. Went to Niagara Falls for honeymoon. Traveled New York state and Atlantic City for honeymoon as well.
- 00:16:00 *Question:* You didn't know D.B.'s mother? *Answer:* No. She was elderly and wasn't able to meet all of the students. MS talks about being looked over by D.B.'s mother's servants. MS talks about the reaction of the student body about D.B.'s marriage to MS. There was a reception in their honor, held in Tillman Hall. Rock Hill was small at the time, so everyone came. It was hard adjusting herself. MS had to balance relationships with faculty and students. Married when she was 23. Had to do a lot of entertaining. MS got to know the Board of Trustees well.
- 00:19:15 *Question:* How long did D.B.'s mother live after you were married? *Answer:* 1 year. She was able to see MS's first son Bancroft. Died in Shelby. Buried in Laurel Woods. MS got along with D.B.'s mother. Says D.B. was devoted to his mother. His mother was in her 60s when she died. Talks about how D.B.'s mother met Mr. Nance. Aunt Molly Wright and Aunt Maggie – relation to President Johnson.
- 00:25:40 **[no question]** Continues talking about D.B.'s family. MS tells a story about D.B.'s mother meeting her neighbor – saw a panther. Talks about the pioneer days. D.B.'s father taught at a college. D.B.'s mother was the student of his father's at one point. "Mr. Johnson followed in his father's footsteps." D.B.'s father died of an illness.
- 00:29:56 *Question:* How did President Johnson lose his arm? *Answer:* 7 years old – playing

- hooky from school. His cousins were building a railroad. They were loading rock on flat cars. Got on the flat car. D.B. jumped on the track a train was coming down. The train crushed his leg and arm. Almost lost his leg, but they were able to save it. Up to that time, D.B. didn't care about school, but he realized he would have to become more dedicated to school. Would have to make his living using his head.
- 00:32:40 *Question:* House? *Answer:* Frame house with open fireplaces in every room. Remodeling of President's house. Tells a story about brass and dines. MS compares old President's house to remodeled President's house. Recalls hosting receptions at President's house. Board of Trustees had to spend the night at the President's house. On commencement, the Board would arrive on Friday and leave on Tuesday.
- 00:38:45 **[no question]** Benjamin Tillman. MS recalls Tillman's personality. Tillman not hesitant to share what he was feeling. Discusses the strong language Tillman used to use – profanity.
- 00:42:25 *Question:* Garden? *Answer:* Grew all of the vegetables they would eat. Chicken yard. Strawberry patch. More discussion of receptions – the President had to bear the cost of these receptions. Friends and faculty would pitch in to help cook/prepare the food for receptions.
- 00:47:40 *Question:* Englishman speaker? *Answer:* Doesn't remember. Interviewer shares her knowledge of the event. John Langdon Davies asked to make the 4th of July speech. Davies stayed on campus for a week and invited a girl to go on walk with him one day. Considered risqué.
- 00:50:50 *Question:* Margaret Nance's sister, "Molly"? *Answer:* Had two daughters and three sons. Molly married a Reed. Lived in Tennessee and visited President Johnson and MS. Martha Davis taught Latin. Discusses Latin teachers at Winthrop. Every year there was a Latin forum.
- 00:54:10 **[no question]** Guest lecturer President Johnson had every summer school – C. Alphonso Smith. Classes would be huge. Brought Alphonso Smith to the Naval Academy.
- 00:57:15 *Question:* Receptions? *Answer:* MS says so many events occurred that were tragic then but seem funny now. Chandelier crashing during a reception. Another time, the fireplace in the parlor emptied of its soot and covered everything. President Johnson noted for remembering people's names – MS recalls a reception for the Daughters of the American Revolution where he covered up not knowing someone's name. MS remembers a freshman testing President Johnson's ability to remember her name; he had only met her once. It was not a myth.

- 01:01:35 **[no question]** Interviewer tells story.
- 01:03:00 **[no question]** MS shares a joke President Johnson told her. MS regretful that she didn't get President Johnson to tell her more, but there was no time to re-hash the day. MS and President Johnson loved to play backgammon and read a lot. Faculty members would come over to play games. President Johnson played games with faculty – he loved games. President Johnson would play backgammon every night with his mother before he married. "I used to love to beat him." President Johnson and Professor Brown played chess together – shares story about President Johnson staying out late one night to play chess with Professor Brown.
- 01:10:05 *Question:* Training School? *Answer:* Classes conducted in Tillman Hall. President Johnson went north to get money. Getting the land was a problem – owned by a land company. State didn't give much money for the education of women, so President Johnson had to go out of state to get money – got Mr. Morgan (????) interested in donating money. MS and Johnson proud of Training School. Archibald Rutledge, poet laureate of South Carolina, said he always thought of the towers of the training school reminded him of the towers of Oxford. Catawba Hall is a historical building. MS shares her opinions on the importance of maintaining and restoring historic buildings.
- 01:15:30 **[no question]** Acquiring Carnegie library no strings attached. Johnson Hall was from Rockefeller money. Gymnasium from Peabody money. Had to get money from outside the state.
- 01:16:19 *Question:* Lot you owned? *Answer:* Bought a lot off the corner of campus. MS could have a place to build a home. After President Johnson's death, the Board wanted to use the lot to expand the college. Used the lot to practice football. Board bought lot from MS and built MS a home elsewhere.
- 01:18:20 **[no question]** MS talks about two missionary friends. Invited to speak to the student body. The beginning of MS's conversion. Started teaching Sunday school – had a large class. MS said she was elated if she could get a Baptist.
- 01:21:20 **[no question]** Interviewer tells a story about Kinard.
- 01:21:40 **[no question]** MS talks about the evolution of her religious beliefs. MS Baptized in a municipal pool in Washington. Speaks more about baptism. Taught the lady's class for a while. Discusses emersion. After President Johnson's death, MS had to give up a lot of her friends. MS recites her feelings on spirituality and religion.
- 01:31:00 **[no question]** MS continues talking about religion and missionaries.

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- 01:35:30 *Question:* Artist course? *Answer:* President Johnson first wanted to have an Opera singer come to Winthrop. First one was Frieda Hempel. Rock Hill was small and MS didn't know how the town would take it. It was expensive but there was a packed crowd. Next had Madame Schuman-Heink. Will Rogers came to campus – MS recalls the jokes he told. These events took place in Tillman Auditorium. MS says President Johnson always wanted the best for Winthrop.
- 01:42:35 **[no question]** Had receptions after the event to meet the artists. MS describes the clothes she would wear for these receptions. MS recalls other artists who visited Winthrop – Lilly Ponds, Rosa Ponselle, and Jane Adams. MS remembers hosting Jane Adams – confusion about dinner. Williams Jennings Bryan came to Winthrop too. MS says he was a wonderful guest.
- 01:48:15 *Question:* Social customs? *Answer:* There were dances, but no boys. Some girls put on bloomers to represent boys. President's reception to the Senior class had boys come to campus. Juniors wore plain, white dresses. Senior dressed up in evening clothes. MS misses the uniforms and church line. Referring to the church line, "As a whole it was just a conglomeration of color." Even when the uniforms were done away with, the students still tried to wear the same dress for the blue line. Spectators would watch the girls march. "I can't tell a Winthrop girl from anybody else." MS understands how the uniforms were done away with. Students not allowed to smoke then. MS says President Johnson put women on a pedestal.
- 01:53:13 **[no question]** Fire escapes. When they were first installed everyone wanted to try them out. The Training School was first in Tillman. One day there was a great commotion. Mrs. Russell wanted to see what was going on; she assumed it was a group of students trying out the fire escapes. Several members of the Board of Trustees and President Johnson were on the fire escapes. Students testing out fire escapes kept the escapes slick – was good for them.
- 01:55:53 **[no question]** English Pageant. President Johnson took out rain insurance. Beautiful event held on the back of campus. MS talks about a tornado that went through Rock Hill. 4TH of July celebration – John Langdon Davies.
- 02:00:10 *Question:* President Johnson's servants? *Answer:* Jane Camel was the cook – originally owned by the Douglass's. Amy and her husband Bradley lived out back, Bradley was the college driver. MS describes Amy's personality. MS says the servants were faithful.
- 02:05:00 **[no question]** Funny story of Amy. Portrait given by the Johnsonian – was a great secret. Nobody was to know anything about it. MS wasn't even supposed to let the servants know about it. Amy knew something was happening in the sun parlor, where the portrait was being done. Amy was distressed about the gentleman coming over

every morning. Amy thought the honor of the family was at stake. Demonstration of how loyal servants were in those days.

- 02:09:00 *Question:* Bancroft's illness? *Answer:* Bancroft at Training School. In October, he came home complaining about his leg. Bancroft was feverish. Bancroft suffered from a serious inflammation. Had to take Bancroft to Philadelphia. Later taken to Baltimore. Apparently the position he slept in affected his leg. No one knew what caused it. Bancroft was a stout child growing up – rough housed with friends. MS wonders if this caused an injury. Bancroft had diphtheria, whooping cough, a bad optic nerve and gradually caused blindness. Susan has little sight. "They don't sit there and feel sorry for themselves."
- 02:16:35 *Question:* Grandson and a great-grandson? *Answer:* Yes. Live in Arizona and visiting MS. MS talks about her family. MS recalls a story about Berg (???) in Training School and plays the students conducted.
- 02:23:45 **[no question]** Engagement of Dr. Kinard and his wife. Rumors spread and the student body played a prank.
- 02:26:01 **[no question]** Ida Jane Dacus. MS learned what she knows about libraries from Mrs. Dacus. Alice Jones lived in Chapel Hill – was the first person to use the expression "weekend." MS says people didn't have weekends in those days. Alice Jones's class donated the statue of Minerva to the library. Mrs. Hughes taught typing and short hand – "She was straight laced."
- 02:29:05 **[no question]** Mrs. Grant was a "typical old maid."
- 02:30:10 **[no question]** The Browns. MS and Mrs. Brown would call on new faculty members. Professor Brown and President Johnson played chess together.
- 02:31:15 **[no question]** Heady Brown started rural schools/fresh-air schools. MS says, "people seemed to go crazy over fresh air."
- 02:34:29 *Question:* Faculty? *Answer:* Used to snap his fingers at people. Mrs. McBryde. Recalls President Johnson speaking Latin to servants and the servants' reactions. MS shares opinions of faculty and early courses offered.
- 02:46:00 *Question:* Opening meeting? *Answer:* Always held in Tillman. Marched in, two-by-two in beautiful gown.
- 02:48:50 *Question:* Entertaining? *Answer:* People married at President's House. Lucille McCrory married at the President's House, for example. Lilly Phelps married there. Mrs. O'Brien's body was brought to MS's home before her funeral. MS held bible

study classes on Saturdays.

- 02:53:45 *Question: Dining Rooms? Answer: Everybody wiped the dishes clean and set them for the next meal. Everybody did this. Wanted to instill these duties in their students to prepare them for home life. MS talks about the students – some came from leading families of the state. MS talks about life in South Carolina after Reconstruction and how few people had money even when Winthrop was created. MS talks about her uncle. MS talks about the KKK in South Carolina.*
- 03:00:30 *Question: Church services? Answer: Every student was required to go to church, even in the morning. MS talks about Sunday night service. President Johnson allowed the students to not wake early for mass.*
- 03:04:25 *Question: Maiden speech? Answer: Winthrop chapter meetings. MS couldn't go often, because she had to take care of the children. MS had to defend Dr. Sims at one point. MS said there was discord among the alumnae and that kept students from attending Winthrop.*
- 03:08:55 *Question: Phelps had a problem with Alumnae Association? Answer: MS says Phelps was never really understood. He lost his only son. MS talks about bringing the Little Chapel to Winthrop and bury President Johnson under the floor. MS talks about the convenience of steam heat. MS describes the layout and design of the President's house. MS retells stories of receptions past.*
- 03:15:20 **[no question]** MS says how thankful she is for Presidents' wives. Mrs. Kinard had an open house for women in town to meet the faculty wives. MS started the tradition to have an informal meet-and-greet with new faculty. Mrs. Kinard was here before MS was a student. MS will remember Mrs. Kinard fondly. Mrs. Kinard insisted MS stay with her when Bancroft was ill (MS couldn't stay in the President's house, because it was being painted – Mrs. Kinard opened her house to her).
- 03:20:10 **[no question]** MS feels closest to Mrs. Sims. MS recalls seeing a play with Mrs. Phelps in Charleston.
- 03:21:44 *Question: Dinners? Answer: Had faculty dinners and would invite the wives of faculty. Not everyone at once but a few at a time. One time, MS was hosting the governor Heyward, and her son Berg was anxious to meet him. Berg was sick at the time and Governor Heyward went to the nursery to meet Berg. MS recalls a story about her daughter Susan reciting a poem.*
- 03:27:50 **[no question]** Winthrop's Birthday was observed. Took students on picnics, since it was a small school. Would entertain faculty on May 12th. Made a social affair of the occasion. Faculty was required to bring a plate, fork, and spoon. Everything else was

taken care of. MS felt close to the faculty in those days. English Pageant given on the 12th of May? Started a Saturday morning prayer circle for town girls. MS says it's important for Presidents' wives to be close to the students.

- 03:35:10 **[no question]** Poetry Society. Established when Professor John Thompson Brown was here. It was suggested that Winthrop has a speaker once a year. Called it the Knights of the Round Table. Poetry Society lasted a while. Faculty members were supposed to write original poems. This society eventually dissolved.
- 03:37:20 **[no question]** Recalls when the college got its first automobile. President Johnson tried driving the automobile but never caught on. President Johnson insisted MS learn how to drive – didn't want to at first, but she was later happy she could drive. MS drove President Johnson around town. First automobile from the Anderson Motor CO. MS nervous about being seen in a sedan – didn't want people to think they were putting on heirs. MS talks about protecting herself from rain when she drove. MS compares cars from the past to cars of the present.
- 03:41:27 *Question:* Airplanes? *Answer:* "I don't know that I care for the airplane."
- 03:42:40 *Question:* Founder's Day? *Answer:* Observed the 10th of January, President Johnson's Birthday. One Founder's Day, Johnson wanted to honor faculty members who had been at Winthrop for a long time.
- 03:45:55 *Question:* Story about Bancroft and Berg? *Answer:* MS tells story.
- 03:49:00 *Question:* Joynes Hall? *Answer:* State legislature didn't see the need to build Dacus Library and Joynes Hall. Had to build a shed over the bricks to protect them, because it took so long for the two buildings to be built. Joynes Hall opening had a reception. Rock Hill was so small at the time; teachers could get a room when they arrived. Building Joynes was very necessary. Teachers used to have to walk the streets to get a room or they would go to a boarding house. There was a cafeteria in the basement of Johnson Hall.
- 03:54:40 **[no question]** Churning ice cream for the students. Mr. Barber was the first baker for Winthrop. Mrs. O'Brien was the first housekeeper.
- 03:57:05 **[no question]** MS talks about William Jennings Bryan again. He was a spiritual man who had a Sunday school class in Florida.
- 03:58:25 *End of interview*