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Interview with Agnes Lawton

Agnes Lawton

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Abstract: In her November 13, 1980 interview with Lewis P. Armistead, Agnes Lawton relays her family history and career as a teacher. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: World War I, concentration camps, country/rural doctor, Civil War, Appomattax, Cross of War, Irish immigration, Mary Chilton, Pilgrims, Plymouth Rock, 19th/20th century religious practices, King’s Mountain Military Academy, Female Academy-York

Interview Session (November 13, 1980) Digital File

Time Keywords
00:00:00 Start of Interview/Interviewer’s Introduction

00:00:21 Question: When did your first ancestor settle in South Carolina? Answer: 1700’s I reckon. My grandfather was a sailor who came over from Belfast to Blairsville, South Carolina to marry and that was the start of my father’s people.

00:01:37 Question: The Winslow’s, is that correct? Answer: No, the Winslow’s were my mother’s. They were from Boston. My grandfather Hunter was from Belfast, Ireland but when could that have been?

00:02:00 Question: When did the Winslow’s come? Answer: They came before the Confederate War but I don’t know what year.

00:02:11 Question: And they were from Boston? Answer: My grandmother was and my grandfather was born here in York County. She came down to teach French and History in the old Female Academy.
00:02:30  **Question:** You have a tablecloth that belonged to the Pilgrims?  **Answer:** Yes, and a bedspread that was tucked in 1812 with the King’s Cross on it. I guess it came over with the Pilgrim’s.

00:02:58  **Question:** When did Rosanna move to the South?  **Answer:** She was my grandmother who came down from Boston to teach music and French and marry my grandfather right before the Confederate War. When she went to her sister-in-law’s as a bride they wouldn’t let her in the yard. They met her at the gate all draped in black because she was a Yankee.

00:03:33  **Question:** How did she feel about the South?  **Answer:** She hated them, just like they hated her.

00:03:47  **Question:** Where did she teach music and French?  **Answer:** At the Old Female Academy in York.

00:03:56  **Question:** And your father was born in South Carolina?  **Answer:** Yes, in York.

00:04:04  **Question:** And he fought in the Civil War didn’t he?  **Answer:** Yes, he was with Lee at Appomattox.

00:04:24  **Question:** And he joined the Army when he was 16?  **Answer:** Yes.

00:04:27  **Question:** Did he tell of any experiences he had during the war?  **Answer:** No.

00:05:07  **Question:** What type of man was your father? Was he a very religious man?  **Answer:** Oh yes, he was very strict. He was an elder in the Presbyterian Church and we had to go to Church all the time. Couldn’t wash our hair on Sunday or laugh. Communion Saturday morning, getting ready for it, and then Communion on Sunday.

00:06:19  **Question:** What types of person was your mother?  **Answer:** She was dainty, sweet, refined, and quiet. Papa was a nervous wreck from the war and we were very poor but mama was gentile and read a lot.

00:06:57  **Question:** You stated earlier that she met Wade Hampton?  **Answer:** Yes, well mama was just the perfect lady. She’s been dead 65 years and I still miss her.

00:07:19  **Question:** And she was born up in York?  **Answer:** Yes. But she’d go up to Boston to her kin people every winter when she was a young girl. And she’d spend the winter up there with her Aunts and she’d tell us how she’d go sled riding and quilt.

00:08:02  **Question:** Did she ever speak of her role in the Civil War while her husband was off
fighting?  Answer: No, see she wasn’t married during the Civil War. It was grandma that came down then. Mama wasn’t born until after the Confederate war. Wait, wait I told you the other day about how she met the President of the Confederacy [interviewer interjects: Davis? Jefferson Davis?] Oh yes, Davis…I get all mixed up. Mama was born right here in York and died here in York but she used to go to Boston to spend the winters lots of times.

00:08:55  Question: Did you ever go up to Boston?  Answer: Yes. I have a piece of stone from Mary Chilton’s grave. The stone was chipping off.

00:09:22  Interviewer: Mary Chilton was a relative of yours from the Plymouth Colony.  
Response: She was my 13th grandmother.

00:09:29  Question: She was from the Plymouth Colony?  Answer: Dates back to the 13th. She was the first woman to step off the Mayflower onto Plymouth Rock.

00:09:52  Question: How many brothers and sisters do you have?  Answer: I have two brothers. One of them was in World War I.

00:10:01  Question: And his name was?  Answer: He was captured by the Germans and as he was marched through the towns they would spit on him. Early one morning he said he looked up and the Germans looked like giants, they were surrounded. He was in [garbled] way up near the Russian border for the rest of the War. He was so weak when he was released. Out of 600 he was the only American. He volunteered and was sent with the English army. He got a Cross of War, pinned on him by the King.

00:11:04  [no question] For bravery. He crawled under barbed wire, he was a Doctor, rescued three soldiers and dragged them back underneath to the trenches while under fire and waited on them. And then he came home here after the War and died at 62 from the effects of the War. He practiced after the War.

00:11:30  Question: And what was his name?  Answer: [Names brother]

00:11:36  Question: That was your husband, wasn’t it?  Answer: No that was my brother.

00:11:40  Question: What did your husband do?  Answer: My husband was a farm demonstrator in Hampton County and he was in World War I too but he was gassed and it affected his mind so I couldn’t live with him anymore.

00:12:10  Question: How long was your husband overseas?  Answer: Three years.

00:12:15  Question: Did he also fight for the English?  Answer: No, he was with the Americans.
Question: He was in Europe also, wasn’t he? Answer: Yes. My brother would go back to Ireland for his vacations but for the War he was in the trenches until he was captured.

Question: What was his condition after the concentration camps? Answer: He was terrible. He was so weak he couldn’t come home. He stayed in Ireland for a long time. When he was captured he only had the clothes he had on. They stayed in a barracks and the only heat they had was from the sun coming in the windows. They had to wash each other’s clothes. Those were the only clothes they had the entire time they were there. And the Red Cross didn’t help him one bit.

Question: Did he ever say anything about the meals he received? The meals in the concentration camps? Answer: Yes, they would open up cans of food and when they punched it open it would be so rotten that it would reach the top of the ceiling. The cans would just explode and they had black bread made out of sawdust. When they had potatoes the soldiers would ask for the peelings and take their time eating them [the peelings]. He would get a letter from my mother and there would be wire around it. The Germans would stand on the outside of the fence and read the letter but not even read it to my brother.

Question: Where did Phillip go to medical school? Answer: Charleston. He had 9 years in the grammar school here, KMMA (King’s Mountain Military Academy) here in York and then he went to Charleston.

Question: So he stayed around the York community practicing his profession? Answer: Yes, he stayed right here and died right here in York. Everyone loved him because he never sent a bill, he would never let anyone pay him. One time a baby was born with club foot and he got a pair of kid gloves from mama and he cut them up and sewed them. He put them on the baby and the baby’s feet got better. Can you imagine how much that would cost now? He was a born doctor.

Question: How about your other brother? Answer: Well, he ran a grocery store in Lincolnton and he died of a heart attack young. He was just 62, my other brother was just not that old.

Answer: And what was his name? Answer: Lindsay. My mother was a Lindsay you see.

Question: How many sisters did you have? Answer: I had five and one of them is still living, she’s 91. She’s in a nursing home.

[no question] There were 8 children and we were bad although we didn’t think we
were. This brother of mine, we had high top button shoes, and he had a button hook to put on his shoes. He had the button hook tied to a string and was swinging it around trying to get closer to my sister’s eye trying to get her to move and she wouldn’t move and it caught the button hook in her eye. Didn’t hurt her of course. And one time, this same brother and sister, we girls all had long hair and he emptied a jar of molasses on her hair. And another sister was real stubborn. She wouldn’t get dressed for school on morning so father sent one of us out to get a switch and the only switch she could find was made out of a rose bush, with thorns. So she brought that back. Of course he never touched a one of us but he got exasperated.

00:19:08  Question: Which sister was that?  Answer: Her name was Kay.

00:19:24  Question: How did your family survive during the depression years?  Answer: I was teaching school, in ’33. When I left Winthrop College, my first year teaching I made $30. Paid my board and keep with that. I was still teaching during the depression and I had maybe $2 or $3 in the bank. The bank failed

00:20:22  [no question]  When we were children we walked to school. And there were no such things as bread lines, we wouldn’t have used them anyways. We believed in fighting for yourself and that’s what we did.

00:20:43  Question: What did your brothers and sisters do during that time?  Answer: One sister married well, a lawyer who lived here in York. She wore fine clothes. I was teaching and she would give her old clothes to me. Another sister married a telephone man. The one that’s living now married a merchant. One was an old maid and stayed here at home and helped me take care of my boy and took care of my mother.

00:21:50  Question: Were you the only daughter that went to College?  Answer: No, one sister was real smart. She went to Winthrop and my old maid sister went to Converse but my other sisters didn’t go to College. The one sister got a scholarship to Winthrop. I imagine it paid for everything because we didn’t have enough to send anyone to college. And I went on my father’s insurance, we had to cash in his insurance. When I sent my boy to Clemson I had to cash in my insurance, it was history repeating itself.

00:22:38  Question: Do you remember how much the tuition was?  Answer: No. It wasn’t much. I was teaching school and I wasn’t making much and I hadn’t been able to save so I had to cash in my insurance to send my boy to Clemson.

00:23:01  Question: And you graduated in 1916 from Winthrop?  Answer: Yes, I did and he graduated from Clemson in 1940 and went right straight to the war.
Question: What was your major at Winthrop? Answer: Elementary Education. Shares opinion on Winthrop. Sent granddaughter to Coker for two years.

Question: And Johnson was President of the College? Answer: D.B. Johnson. We called him D. He lost one arm when he ran away from school. He wore a long cape that came between his waist and his knees.

Question: What were the professors like at that time? Answer: Ooh, I don’t want to talk about them but I’d rather talk about them than the matrons. [Brief mention of the current lack of matrons on campus.]

Question: Can you tell me some stories about that? Answer: Well, told you about the night we graduated. Our matron was the meanest thing. After we got our diplomas we stood outside her window and called things to her. When I was in training school, we had to go there for three months for student teaching, and I think I was the dumbest thing. When I went back after one year, I spoke with the teacher and she put her arms around me and mentioned how much I disliked working under her. I agreed. We just didn’t like each other for anything.

Question: The rules and restrictions were pretty tough? Answer: Oh yes. Had to walk on Sunday morning, eat breakfast every morning, go to Church on Sunday’s or you would get punishment. Had to go up before President Johnson one time as a freshman, I was scared to death. Of course he was as gentle as could be. We were on restriction, couldn’t leave our rooms for a half hour before dinner for about 6 months. There used to be benches scattered around and we’d have to be careful not to sit on the one near the fence in case a man would pass by and speak to us.

Question: And you couldn’t see any males? Answer: Oh, mercy no. If your brother would come to see you, you would have to sit in the parlor with one of the matrons.

Question: You couldn’t go out on dates or anything like that? Answer: No. They had an old train and the only time we’d get to go home was at Thanksgiving and Christmas (about 15 miles). The matrons would have to meet us and escort us back to the building. There weren’t any cars then. The first two years I was at Winthrop I wrote Mama every day and begged to come home.

Question: What were some of the courses that were taught? Answer: French, math, English, history, and agriculture. [Shares memories of Winthrop, background noises make hearing interview difficult.] A lot of rules. You couldn’t talk in the dining room and you had to be on time. The practice (teaching) home is when it got difficult. The woman said she saw dust when the chapel bell was ringing and I had to scamper across campus on my short legs. We had gymnastics. Our gym suits had high collars,ibs and shields, long bloomer pants, and long sleeve shirts. How are
you going to do gym with all those clothes on? When we were seniors they had a swimming pool and a privilege for seniors was to let us go swimming whenever we wanted to. No one need how to swim.

00:33:21 Question: How many students were there? Answer: Under a 1,000. I don’t know.

00:33:40 Question: What did you do for entertainment? Answer: Nothing. Well, after dinner you could go to the little store in the basement and if you were still hungry you could buy something extra but I never did that. We had speakers come. Helen Keller was there one night. She was up on stage and Miss Sullivan, her first teacher, would put her hand under Helen’s neck and Helen would put her hand under Miss Sullivan’s and that’s how she talked. She said the 23rd Psalm. We couldn’t tell what she was saying. We’d applaud and she’d nod her head, she’d feel the vibrations through the stage. She was a beautiful young woman.

00:35:16 Question: And she came to Winthrop? Answer: Yes.

00:35:37 Question: You were in a number of clubs like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Key Club? Answer: Yes.

00:35:50 Question: Warden Winthrop Literary Society? Answer: Oh yes, the Winthrop Literary Society.

00:35:58 Interviewer Statement: Also the Winthrop Athletic Association. Answer: No, you just had to take gym. I could have been in the DAR. My older sister joined but by the time I was there you had to be invited to join.

00:37:00 Question: Right after you graduated you went into teaching in the York Public Schools? Answer: I taught the first five grades. Then I went to Pacolet. No, it was the other way around. I made $30 when I first left Winthrop. When I left went to Laurens (?) I was raised to $50. After 41 years my retirement is not much.

00:38:24 Question: What are some of the changes that occurred during the 41 years that you taught? Answer: I was 39 years in York and for most of it I was the only 5th grade teacher. We had a wonderful superintendent. We had chapel every morning, read the bible, prayed, every class took turns reciting Psalms in chapel. [States her opinion on prayer in school and the Supreme Court decision regarding such.] [Views on religious self-study.] You couldn’t miss a day of school as a teacher. When I had a brain operation I worked up until the day I went to the doctor’s in Rock Hill. I did have Scarlet Fever one time. After I retired in ’59 and was substituting, sometimes three principles would call me so many teachers would be out.

00:42:51 Question: You went to Richmond to have your operation? Answer: Yes. I was up
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there for a month.

00:43:07 **Question:** What was medicine like at that time? **Answer:** I was at the Medical College in Virginia and it was wonderful then, in ’44. Penicillin was discovered while I was there and they tried it on a man with pneumonia. The hospital just went wild. I was in a room with 15 other women. That was the room you weren’t supposed to come out of alive.

00:44:17 **Question:** Then you went back to teaching? **Answer:** Yes. I had my head shaved. The little boys would come sit around my bed at night and we’d have the best time. They called Dr. Coleman ‘Old Moneybags’ and they were scared of him. 15 other women in there and they’d stick a big needle in my head to draw the blood out.

00:45:40 **Question:** When you were teaching in the public schools what was the communities reaction to the blacks...? **Answer:** We didn’t have blacks then but they didn’t like it of course.

00:45:51 **Question:** What was the communities reaction? Did they protest? **Answer:** They didn’t like it of course.

00:46:00 **Question:** What were your own views? **Answer:** Declines to answer.

00:46:19 **Question:** What year did you retire from teaching? **Answer:** 1959. I taught school for 41 years and substituted for 10.

00:46:34 **Question:** What do you think of the school system today? **Answer:** I think it’s the rottenest thing next to politics.

00:46:50 **Question:** The teachers are unqualified? **Answer:** Not at all. [States views on modern teacher education.]

00:47:13 **Question:** So what did you stress when you were teaching? **Answer:** Everything. Discipline mostly. I tried to teach my children everything that I’d missed when I was coming along. We didn’t used to have good teachers. The first requirement of a good teacher is to like your pupils and try to understand each one of them. I used to always visit every pupil that I taught.

00:48:22 **Question:** Did you teach many black children? **Answer:** I didn’t teach any, there weren’t any then.

00:48:50 **Question:** Where was there school? **Answer:** Way down on the other side of town. Now it’s a white school and a black school mixed. I couldn’t teach now. [Views on modern schools.]
00:49:52  *Question:* Getting back to your father for just a second, he was a member of the KKK, wasn’t he?  *Answer:* Sure he was and I’m proud of it.

01:12:54  *End of interview*