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## Oral History Project/ Betty Kilgore

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## American History 2, Fall 2015 / Professor Erskine

**Student Interview's Name:** Alexandra Hutauruk

**Interviewee:** Betty McClusky Kilgore

### **Time and Location of Interview:**

The interview was conducted in three sessions on October 16, 2015, November 3, 2015, and November 9, 2015. The session lasted approximately two and a half hours in total. Our meetings were located at the Morning Pointe nursing home in Chattanooga, TN. Only the interview and interviewee were present.

### **About Betty McClusky Kilgore:**

Betty was born on April 28, 1924 in Long Island (Bryant) in Alabama, but moved ten days later to Chattanooga, TN. She experienced the hardships of the Great Depression with her family. She was the only child of her father, Willis McClusky and mother, Odessa McClusky. Her father was once in the Navy (drafted to Cuba and South Florida) for two years. He later became a fireman, keeping up steam to keep the train from Chattanooga to Nashville working, but got pink slipped. Then he worked at Signal mountain as a janitor, and then again got another pink slip. During World War II, she was in 10th grade when she received her first job to register young men who had received draft notes, who were then abducted into service. Her mother raised chicken and sold them to buy newspaper. They got the newspaper a day late, so they learned about the World War II a day after. Betty married Hoyt Kilgore in 1968.

*Interviewer: Alexandra Hutauruk (AH)*

*Interviewee: Betty Kilgore (BK)*

AH: When was the first time you remember hearing about or recognizing what the Great Depression meant?

**BK: In 1920, I wanted a certain dress and coat, but we couldn't afford. I loved clothes, shoes especially. I heard a lot of bad things about Great Depression. I walked 3 miles to and from school, night and morning. My education was very poor, no library, no outside library. I did without things.**

AH: What one image do you picture when you think of the Depression?

**BK: I think about how hard my mother and dad worked. Mother worked hard and made all of our clothes. She taught a Sunday school class at the methodist church. She had two girls that always wanted to buy clothes from here. She made herself a navy blue crape with red buttons. She had a blue hat and red ribbon. She wore that outfit for three years, every Sunday to church.**

AH: How did your family manage in those times?

**BK: My dad had grown up there and his parents raised three sons Horris, Bill, and Willis. Willis was my dad. Their mother's brother helped gathering vegetables because he couldn't walk anywhere to work.**

AH: Where did you live and how did your family come to live there? And/or did your family have to move, where and why?

**BK: I lived in Chattanooga near Baylor School. My dad got a job with the railroad and he moved there before I was born. My family moved to Long Island, Alabama because he lost two jobs and there was no hopes to find another one. In fact, his brother was transferred to the cement plant in Birmingham. The brother later was transferred to Demopolis, Alabama where Lone Star built a new plant and he was put in charge it. He managed it the rest of his working days, retired at 65.**

AH: How many were in your family? Were other people besides immediate family (brothers, sisters, parents) living there with you?

**BK: My mother lost her first son at 18 months. I was next. A year a half later, she lost a daughter and was told not to have not anymore children. So I was the only child. While I was living in Sand Mountain, my family lived with my grandparents until we can find a house.**

AH: Describe your apartment or house. What did it have and what did you have before that you no longer could afford?

**BK: A large room with a attic that was forward and used as a bedroom for the three sons( once owned by my grandparents). My father and grand uncle used to stay in the attic.**

AH: What kind of meals do you remember?

**BK: Mostly chicken, rabbit, and whatever pork they had canned that was cook. we had no refrigeration or electricity to have things canned. We had beef and chicken when we went to Chattanooga.**

AH: Was your clothing store-bought? Homemade? Recycled hand-me-down? Made from feed sacks? Second-hand?

**BK: Never store bought, only shoes. in the winter, heavy ripped stocks and stickings, which are pinned underwear. It was cold at the mountain. Pajamas were made from feedbacks. My book bag was made from feed sack and my lunch (two potatoes, a red potato and white potato) wrapped in newspaper and put in my pocket. I held them as I walked to school for three miles to keep my hands warm.**

AH: How many pairs of shoes did the children typically get in a year?

**BK: Two. One for easter and took the old to wear to school. Depending on how well they wore, i didn't get another one until the following easter. If daddy could half sole it, he would. He would take his pocket knife, and daddy would shoe polish.**

AH: Describe what it was like at the school you attended during the Depression.

**BK: Well there was 6 grades in one room. The teacher had 6 groups, three to each side of the school. A big heater was in the middle of the school. The parents of the students cut and brought it school, stacking. The boys carried it inside if it was raining, enough for the next morning. The parents of the students cut the wood, and pulled it up to the school by mules and stacked it to the side of the building.**

AH: What kind of transportation did your family have?

**BK: Daddy used a mule and carried the corn that was in front for him, and had it ground for a corn meal. Other than that, we walked. Flour was carried by the mule as well.**

AH: What sort of activities did you do for fun/recreation?

**BK: Fished. Played on the creek bank. Caught crawfish for daddy to take the neighborhood fishing on the weekend and I caught waterdogs. Got covered in seaticks. I sat down in a puddle of mosques. I was set home to see my mother, she cut my hair real short and in the country we grew water and set it out in tubs to take baths, so she used one tub of water and put carasin (cold oil). No drug store where we lived.**

AH: Tell me about a game you remember playing?

**BK: No games. Our excitement was gathering in peoples house and playing piano.**

AH: How old were you when you began to work? Where? Pay?

**BK: I was 19 in April, went to work in July 44. The first job was standard coosa-plant. i worked in the machine shop for the maintenance super intendant. they payed me 32 cents an hour, i worked 8 hours a day, 5 days a week.**

AH: Tell me about a movie from that time period that is memorable and why.

**BK: We could go to the movie for a dime. Two girls with me would save our bus fair, and ride the bus downtown and go to the movie. Go to FW Woolworth ten cent store, buy an order of potato salad and a 10 cent coke. and that was our lunch. We went on Saturday when the movie changed.**

AH: Do you remember songs from the Depression years?

**BK: No, but i remember the first movie I went to. I went to south Pittsburg, TN, on a ferry boat to the princess theater and saw Sis Hopkins with Judy Conava. That was my first movie. She was about as crazy as Carol Bernett. Our dads gave us 50 cents, we used 10 cents for the movie, went to the 10 cent store and bought lipstick with the remaining. We laughed about that the rest of our lives. She died a couple of years ago. she was shoveling**

**snow, near her church. She cleaned her sidewalk going to the mailbox and they found her lying face down in the snow, died from a heart attack.**

AH: What were the fashion styles for girls? and/or boys?

**BK: I don't remember guys. Men would wear skirts and cotton blouse made from flower sacks. They put flowers and beautiful. Mother made brown blouses for me with button up the front, short sleeve, and a round collar. I started in school with the flower sack blouses she made for me. I had a corduroy skirt and a jacket. I had a blue lenin dress with white cuffs on pockets, white buttons to the waste, and I had a pink lenin jumper, v-neck, and a skirt with pleats all around.**

AH: How often was hair shampooed? What did you use to "suds" up? What was used to set the hair?

**BK: I washed it myself. I rolled my hair and mothers hair and two aunts. my aunt had two daughter. I washed all of them and wore it for church the next day. We used soap. We had no drug store. I had sandy red hair like my daddy and blue million freckles.**

AH: Do you remember Roosevelt being elected and your family's reaction?

**BK: Yes. My dad was cut and dry Demo, he went down the line and always, always voted Democratic. He said he had more under their ruling. The railroad was the first good job he had and he had walked down the mountain, across the river and then another mile to the first job at a basket factory. And that afternoon he walked across the bridge and walked across the river that way, then he walked 5 miles to his home. Life was much better for him. The railroad paid him much better than the basket factory. You know what basket fruits are? The one they put fruits and vegetables in? That's what he worked as his first job.**

AH: What disaster -- besides the Depression -- happened in your town/area during this era?

**BK: All the plants closed, but the round stove works. People had to have iron heaters as wood as well as cooking stoves. My grandfather worked till he retired years after that. It was near the basket factory where my dad worked. This is what happened in my part of the country.**

AH: Describe the role of your mother in the household. Including the jobs she had and how she took care of the kids.

**BK: Well the only job my mother ever did was um, work as a substitute mail carrier and that was on the mountain. There was an elderly man who was the mail carrier. Of course they did it by horse back. There was no highways, just rut where wagons had to run and in bad weather they still had to get out. As she had to run from Long Island three miles up the mountain, we called it, of Sand Mountain, and she had a route that she followed. She substituted when the elderly man got sick or the weather was bad, it was especially bad for him. Oh they thought tuberculosis, but of course back then you didn't know those things**

back then. So whenever he got sick, he called mother. She would ride horseback three miles down the mountain to the train station at Long Island, pick up the mail- separate it, and ride a horse back up the mountain and if she saw a yearn of corn lying on the street, the horse learned that if she would stop, she would get off and get that yearn of corn. And when he got to the top of the mountain which was three miles, it was a big spring, she would get off, take his brattle off, feed him the corn, shoot it, and he would get drink of water. And he learned that very shortly after that. Then she would saddle him up, take him up, saddle him around, and go back down.

AH: What did your mother do at home if she was not working?

**BK: Yes. Before the war was over. A man came by from Fort Paine, he needed a place to spend a night during the week. He was taking a job running a peddling truck around the mountain and he would come on the west side or the east side i guess.. yeah, east side. And if he could spend the night, he would make the other side of the mountain and go back to Fort Paine. It turned out that he had worked with my grandfather in Britchboard, out at the stove works. So they had an extra room and someone had been killed at a hunting accident and they were happy to have him and learn how the people were doing down in Britchboard, cause they had they lived in the country sights. And that is how mother got thread, tape, material of all kinds, the man would even bring buttons to match the material she bought. And that saved her lots. She didn't have to buy it and pay postage. And she could get soap, spices, things like that from this peddling truck. He would take eggs as payment and he ended up taking up chickens as payment.**

AH: Did the New Deal help your family with aid or assistance? If yes, please explain.

**BK: It didn't help us, no. My dad didn't apply for it. He said, "I'll work for it." And that's what he did.**

AH: Do you recall the recovery of the Great Depression and how you're family specifically got back on two feet financially.

**BK: Yes, the only way the seniors could go to school and get a diploma was to go down that mountain, 5 miles and cross the river with a ferry at Britchboard and catch a bus and go another 3 miles to the high school. And in really bad weather, when weather was rough, they took them over in a small wooden boat. They didn't run the ferry and I refused to go. I couldn't swim and it frightened me, so i told my daddy, I just wouldn't go to school anymore. So he got busy and said "you gotta go to school." He went to Chattanooga and ran into a man that was an iron worker. He tied steal, when they put up a building a reinforced the building with steal, they put that thing together and tie it with heavy wire. My father told him I was very upset and didn't want to go to school and I was very unhappy, so he said, well we can see what we can do about that. So he told my daddy to be an iron worker. He had married the daughter of the man that my grandfather of the family, was the man who hired mother as the substituent. A man named Simms and his son in law, after 20 years we came back to Chattanooga, I guess I was 4, I was a senior when we came back. Daddy found an apartment and he got a job working at the volunteer ordinance and that's**

where they made things for Uncle Same to fight the war. And we rented an apartment in East Lake, lived with a grandmother, mother, and teenager that had gone to school. She had worked at the railroad and bless her heart, she saw that i intended to get by school, and that i wanted a decent job so she called me one afternoon for my first job, which was standard couture thatcher and got paid 32 cents an hour, overtime. And they said, betty i want you to come by and get off that bus at 4:30 and i will take you in to meet the boss. She said you are a good girl and i think you deserve a break and I thanked her profusely and i was there. She took me in and i met a fellow from Alabama named Woodall who worked for the railroad. He was the general major and that was in July of 1944. July 14th. And I came to work on Saturday morning for half a day. That was my first day of work at the southern railway. I was hired as a file clerk. I filed the waived bills, send the shipments going across our lines and show were it originated, i'll route it to the where the destination was.

AH: What advice would you give young people today about the best way to make it through hard times?

**BK:** Make the best of what you have and vow to do better when you get the opportunity. Any assignment a teacher gives you, do it, if not its foolish. Take every education you get because its important. I had the best English teacher in town. Do the very best you can. Make the best out of everything. Don't complain because there are people who are worse. There were people in the country that didn't have the experience my dad did. He grew up out there. He knew how to stagger crops so we had early beans, early potatoes, and we had late cabbages. We buried them in a basket of crap grass, put sole against them, and we had fresh vegetables until the next spring. We learned to wrap tomatoes and we wrapped green tomatoes, gathered them when they thought they were going to frost. He could read the sunset and knew they were going to frost that night. It'd be cold in the morning. And we handle those things very carefully, wrap them individually and put them in a box, put in the attic, and when we wanted a tomato, after the tomatoes were gone and the frosted killed the vines, mother got a couple out and laid them in a window cell, and the sun would ripen them in half a day. We had nice sliced tomatoes that night, always through Christmas. Also, we had fresh cabbage, father would cut the cabbage and leave the big leaves on them, which most of the time you'd cut and throw away, he dug a hole in the bank and filled it with red crap grass in there and stacked those cabbage heads, stacked those big leaves up over them and when mother wanted cabbage for slaw or to cook, he would take one out, cut off the outside leaves, give them a treat, bring a cabbage and mother would cook it and make a slaw or whatever. Its knowing tricks like that that saved our lives, but daddy grew up that day. He had an uncle who read a lot, Uncle Willis, his name sake, he spent 20 years in the navy before World War 1 and read extensively. He read all kinds of books. I remember he had an animal book, real thick, i learned more in that book. He taught school but he didn't like it.

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