



**Agnes McGee** -- 4/9/2007

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Interviewed by Ruth Ellen Richardson*

Interviews with Agnes McGee, long time resident of Spotsylvania County, took place in May 1998 at her home, Bloomsbury Farm, on Rt. 208 near Spotsylvania Courthouse.

Miss McGee actively participated in the growth of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania County by serving on several boards and she grew up on a dairy farm in the area which she helped to work.

INTERVIEWER: Miss McGee, I understand that your father came to this country early in the 1900's. Could we begin by your telling us about that?

AGNES McGee: He came in January, 1913, from Scotland.

INTERVIEWER: Did he come with the idea of establishing a farm?

AGNES McGee: Well, he had worked on dairy farms all his life in Scotland, and he was married and he and mother had six children. He would deliver the milk to the hotels in Edinburgh in the morning after they milked and in the afternoon after they milked. So one day when he went to deliver the milk an employer of the hotel asked him if he would like to go to America and work on a dairy farm. He said, "Sure, I'll go," and forgot all about it. And about six or eight weeks later, this man had a cousin who worked on a dairy farm in Orange, Va., and had written him a letter. So Mother and Dad talked about it for a right good while, and then he decided that he would come and see what it was like, so he could get a job-- because in Scotland back then you could not own a farm 'cause they were all owned by the royalty.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Did he come immediately to Spotsylvania County?

AGNES McGee: No, he came to Orange, and he worked on a dairy farm up in Orange. And there is a magazine that's called the "Hoard's Dairyman" that is published and goes all over the world, and the man who owned the farm had given him a copy of it and in the back of it there was a help wanted ad for Captain Vance, who owned Mannsfield Hall Farm, which is now the [Fredericksburg] Country Club, for a herdsman for his Jersey farm. So Daddy wrote to him and explained

what he could do. So he sent Daddy the money, and Daddy came down on the narrow gauge railroad and he hired him. So he came down there and worked there for two years, yes. And then Captain Vance had a small farm a couple miles down the road from Mannsfield Hall, and he set Daddy up on shares and loaned my dad the money to bring Mother and the children over from Scotland. She came in January 1916.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

AGNES MCGEE: She took the train from Edinburgh down to Liverpool, England, to get on the boat, and the boat was a day and a half out to sea when a German submarine chased them and they had to go back in port and stay two days before they could sail out again.

INTERVIEWER: So, when your mother and the children came over they settled with him in -

AGNES MCGEE: Spotsylvania.

INTERVIEWER: At what point did he get Bloomsbury?

AGNES MCGEE: Well, he worked at Mannsfield Hall 'til about 1919 and then the man in Orange that he had first worked for in 1913 wrote him a letter and gave him a good deal. So he went back up there, and stayed up there for several years. And then he moved back to Fredericksburg in 1924-- I think it was-- and we bought a small farm, but he couldn't make a go on a small farm. So we rented a farm and we bought Bloomsbury in 1927.

INTERVIEWER: I see on the sign that this farm was started in 1740.

AGNES MCGEE: This house was built in 1740. Now, we don't know how many acres--it was 400 acres when we bought it-- but we don't know how many acres it was originally, because it went all the way to the Ni River, that way, at one time. And we think it was a land grant from the king of England because there's a small village in England named Bloomsbury and someone may have settled here and named it for their hometown.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

AGNES MCGEE: Because it's been named Bloomsbury forever.

INTERVIEWER: So you were quite young when the family moved to Bloomsbury. AGNES MCGEE: I was 12.

INTERVIEWER: --and your father was a dairy farmer. Tell us a little bit about your role on the dairy farm, or do you want to talk about that! (laughter)

AGNES MCGEE: I did everything; milking cows to plowing, little bit of everything - just what any farmer does.

INTERVIEWER: Lots of hard work!

AGNES MCGEE: Lots of hard work! Rewarding work! When we first moved here in 1930, we had a milk route. We delivered milk in glass bottles in Fredericksburg, and that's what my parents did when they were living on the little farm down from the country club. They delivered milk there. My two oldest sisters were further advanced in their education than the teacher who taught them in the one room schoolhouse. My dad -- there was a private school in Fredericksburg run by the Manders sisters-- so my dad sent my two oldest sisters there. And someone asked them if they knew where they could get some good milk. So they started delivering milk in mason jars. They would deliver the milk in the morning with horse and buggy, and then go to school.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of that school?

AGNES MCGEE: I always heard it was Miss Kate Manders School.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go to school?

AGNES MCGEE: Spotsylvania. I went two years to College Heights when they had that school, and then I graduated from Spotsylvania -- it was Robert E. Lee High School then-- in 1936. (Second interview inserted here. See Tape 1, side B, dated May 27, 1998.)

INTERVIEWER: . . . I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what the school was like then? How large it was?

AGNES MCGEE: We went from first grade through eleventh. Didn't have any kindergarten or eighth grade back in those days. We had a principal, Miss Sanger, I started there in sixth grade and Mrs. Nellie Harris, was our teacher in sixth and seventh grade, and then we went into first year high school.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember some of the subjects you took?

AGNES MCGEE: We had to take math and English and we took biology, and then later on we had to take a foreign language, but the only one that was offered to us was Latin. We took algebra and trigonometry, that's all we had.

INTERVIEWER: How many students were in the school, or in your class?

AGNES MCGEE: Well, I think from the first grade through the eleventh there were about 150 originally, but when we went into high school we had, I think, 15, as well as I remember, -- but then there were only 10 of us who graduated in 1936 because people couldn't afford to send their children to school back in the 30's, and the boys had to drop out and help on the farms and such as that -- and at sawmills, which we had a lot of back in those days.

INTERVIEWER: So there were 10 in your graduating class?

AGNES MCGEE: That's right!

INTERVIEWER: Did any of those go on to college?

AGNES MCGEE: Yes, one. Billy Massey went to college, and he later on was the treasurer of Spotsylvania County, but he died when he was in office.

INTERVIEWER: Who else was in your class?

AGNES MCGEE: Isadora Hicks-- she married Emory Payne who at one time was supervisor from Chancellor District; and Margaret Seay-- she married a man by the name of Pritchett; Lucy Carter, and she left and went to Richmond to work; and myself; and Mabel Pritchett who married a man by name of Osterheld; and John Thomas Payne; and Claude Wright.

INTERVIEWER: You remember all of them!

AGNES MCGEE: . . . and Marion Hayden. Of the ten of us who graduated, eight of us had lived within ten miles of each other all our lives. Only two of our graduating class left the area: Marion Hayden went to Texas and Lucy Carter went to New Jersey.

INTERVIEWER: So you have kept up with your classmates over the years?

AGNES MCGEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get to school? AGNES MCGEE: Well we didn't have yellow school buses back in those days! One of the farmers had a flat bed truck and he put sides on it and benches and he picked us up. He went down to Leavells [where Leavells Road, Rt. 639, intersects with Courthouse Road, Rt. 208] and picked us up from there. Anyone [who lived] beyond Leavells that wanted to come to school had to walk up to Leavens--because most of them went to College Heights Training School from there on and into Fredericksburg. And then in the wintertime he would put sides on it and had a door on the back of it with window panes.

INTERVIEWER: To keep the wind from blowing you off!

AGNES MCGEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of heat did you have at the school? Did you have wood stoves?

AGNES MCGEE: We had wood stoves in every classroom. Lot of times we had to build the fire after we got there because the janitor would come early 'cause he worked someplace else apparently, and he would start the fires and sometime they would burn, and sometime they wouldn't. Now back in -- I can't remember whether it was '33 or '34, my dad took a team of horses and wagon and took a load of wood up to the school, and donated that to the school -- and in '35 and '36 the State couldn't pay to run the school nor the teachers for the whole full term so we had three weeks cut off each school year.

INTERVIEWER: Shortened the year! That school was located just about where the courthouse is -- the new courthouse?

AGNES MCGEE: Where the new judicial center is now.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of things did you all do for fun back then?

AGNES MCGEE: Well, we had recess, of course, and we would go out and play, and we had baseball, and softball, and basketball -- we used to play other schools.

INTERVIEWER: There were other high schools in the county then, too, I think.

AGNES MCGEE: It was Chancellor and Robert E. Lee, and then the black school, John J. Wright.

INTERVIEWER: How about in high school? Did you have dances?

AGNES MCGEE: No, we had plays. We used to have PTA meetings and our parents would come and we'd put on plays for the PTA. The younger children would sing at PTA meetings. Some of the teachers that I remember are Marguerite Massey, who married William Morton, and Meryl Strickler --Meryl Chilton, she was, and she married Dick Strickler, and Stokeley Coleman taught us when we were sophomores. Now, Stokeley Coleman, Marguerite Morton, and Meryl Strickler all came to teach in 1932 and they had just graduated from college and you couldn't find jobs very well. So, Stokeley taught for a couple of years and then he went to law school at the University of Virginia.

INTERVIEWER: ...and became the commonwealth's attorney-

AGNES MCGEE: -- of the county.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting. What about the medical care in the county in the 30's? Do you remember what that was like?

AGNES MCGEE: We had only one doctor, Doctor Harris, and he lived right there at Spotsylvania Courthouse and had his office in his home. He was the only doctor that I knew. Now I think there were some on the edges of Orange and Louisa that some people in the lower end of the county would go to them, but most people came to Dr. Harris or went into Fredericksburg to the doctors.

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of your neighbors along the road here?

AGNES MCGEE: Well, Elwood Gayle owned the farm across the road. He had a dairy farm but he also had a car dealership in Fredericksburg. Then, the Alriches' [John and Alice Alrich] had a farm up near the courthouse. And then the other way, Ashton White at Sunnyside Farm had a dairy farm, and then there was a dairy farm at Millgarden, which is now apartment houses and subdivisions.

INTERVIEWER: How was you family affected by World War II?

AGNES MCGEE: I had a brother-in-law who was in the service. He had gone into the service before World War I and he just stayed in. Therefore, he was a career soldier. So, World War II was declared in December-- the seventh I think it was, or eighth, and before Christmas that year he was already on his way. It didn't affect us too much here on the farm, because farmers had more gas rationed to them than other people in order to keep the war going and produce food and such as that.

INTERVIEWER: So you were able to get the milk delivered. When I drove up this morning, I noticed out front you have beautiful boxwoods. Can you tell me-- have they been here as long as the house?

AGNES MCGEE: My mother planted those back in the early thirties. It must have been '33, '34, '35, somewhere along in there, and the clippings came from Belmont. Mr. and Mrs. Gari Melchers had come from Holland and they were used to good dairy products in Holland and they couldn't get what they liked here. So, someone had told them about us --we had Jersey cows then-- so they came and bought a Jersey cow from us. And she sent all those clippings over to my mother and she planted them. Now, I can't remember exactly when it was--'33, '34, '35 somewhere in there.

INTERVIEWER: So it was a Jersey cow in exchange for some boxwood clippings!

AGNES MCGEE: That's right!

INTERVIEWER: ... the boxwoods have lasted a lot longer than the Jersey cow! Did you meet the Melchers?

AGNES MCGEE: Oh, yes. We went over there several times, and she came -- oh, she [Corinne Melchers] was a delightful lady -- and he [Gari Melchers] took us down into his studio and showed us his paintings.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's interesting! You've been so active in the board of supervisors meetings, as far as an observer. I wonder, did you ever consider running for public office?

AGNES -NICGEE: Many years ago I had a lot of the older people in the county wanted me to run but I had to help my dad, after my mother passed away in 1943, I had to help my dad run the farm, keep house

for him and such as that, and I really didn't have time. And, I don't think I'd be interested in running, particularly in this day and time -- with all these newcomers that we have --they want so much for what they want to pay for it. They want everything that they left in Northern Virginia where the taxes were high, but they still want the tax rate to stay the same. Common sense tells you that it doesn't work that way.

INTERVIEWER: When you first came to live at the farm had the electrical power come out this far?

AGNES MCGEE: No, electricity only came to Four Mile Fork -- and we moved here in 1930. It was 1931 that electricity went from Four Mile Fork to Spotsylvania Courthouse. We had to guarantee to pay \$13.16 every month for three years in order to run the line here and you had to have a certain number of households who would join on it. So we were glad to get it. When we had the house all wired and turned the electricity on, that first night, we turned all the lights on in the house and walked part way down the driveway and looked back to see the electricity in the windows.

INTERVIEWER: Um -- that was exciting!

AGNES MCGEE. And it was in the summertime that we had the electricity turned on. Oh, we thought we had really graduated. My mother said, "Oh, I didn't realize I had such a dirty house."

INTERVIEWER: Well, how did you manage before you had it?

AGNES MCGEE: Oh, we had lamps and I never will forget. I used to hate to clean those lamp shades because you had to be so careful with the lamp shades, 'cause they'd break. But you got two of them for five cents. But five cents was hard to come by back in those days. So you had to fill the oil lamps every morning, and clean the lamp shades, and that was one of my jobs -- in the summertime. Now, I didn't have to do it before I went to school. (Second interview ends here.)

INTERVIEWER: I know you've seen a lot of changes occur along this corridor.

AGNES MCGEE: Oh, a lot of changes. When we moved here in 1930 you didn't see ten cars a day go by Rt. 208 was Rt. 51 then, and everybody went by, you knew who it was.

INTERVIEWER: It's not that way any more. How do you feel about all this change?



AGNES MCGEE: Some of it's good -- some of it's not so good.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have something to do with the development of the flag?

AGNES MCGEE: Yes, I was appointed on a committee by the board of supervisors, along with the late Mrs. Waller, and two other people, and we designed the flag and the seal. We did the seal; I don't think we did the flag.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Another thing I think that's interesting about your property is the fact that you have been caretaker of the historic monument here. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

AGNES MCGEE: Well, it was erected in 1901, because it's where they had a little skirmish - which was the last little skirmish of the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse, and it was erected to the First Massachusetts Artillery Regiment. And I have a picture that was taken in 1901 when they dedicated the monument and a lot of the folks came back.

INTERVIEWER: A lot of the veterans from the battle?

AGNES MCGEE: --and their families.

INTERVIEWER: I think this was called "Harris Farm" then.

AGNES MCGEE: It was called "Harris Farm" during the war, the Civil War, because people by the name of Harris lived here and I guess the soldiers just thought 'cause it was Harris' they just named it Harris.

INTERVIEWER: When were you first aware of the significance of that monument?

AGNES MCGEE: I guess ever since my parents bought it, because we've always had people that come from all over the United States. In fact, just Saturday [May 16, 1998], I had a busload of 48 who came to see it and they were from all over the United States. I have had as many as 165 people at one time.

INTERVIEWER: That's quite a crowd. How has that impacted the use of your property?

AGNES MCGEE: It hasn't bothered. We never told anyone they couldn't go down there --because it's down in the lower pasture field and we never told anybody they couldn't go down there to see it. We didn't think it belonged to us. It really belongs to the public.

INTERVIEWER: The American public! Was there a time when President Coolidge was here?

AGNES MCGEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: -for the monument?

AGNES MCGEE: No.

INTERVIEWER: I'm remembering something I read about that event, but that must have been something else.

AGNES MCGEE: That must have been something else -- that was before we bought the farm -- `cause he was President, when? in the 20's? We didn't buy the farm until 1927. Paid \$12,000 for four hundred acres.

INTERVIEWER: I think the monument has been deeded to the APCWS [Association for Preservation of Civil War Sites].

AGNES MCGEE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did that come about?

AGNES MCGEE: Well, I sold-- when the developer decided-- well, let's go back. In 1972, the State of Virginia passed a law that you could not reassess property at 40% of fair market value. It had to be assessed at 100% of fair market value. And I was not in the dairy business then, I just had a small beef herd and in one year my taxes went from \$1,100 to \$5,200 and there was no way that I could continue to live here and pay that. So I sold the woodland, 238 acres of the woodland, and that left me with 140 [acres]. So the man who developed the subdivision-- [ Miss McGee left the room to answer the door] --The developer wanted to buy the rest of the farm except for a few acres that I kept with my house. So I decided to give an acre and a half around the monument to the APCWS. That's how that came about.

INTERVIEWER: I notice that you have houses-

AGNES MCGEE: -- not too close

INTERVIEWER: Quite different though, isn't it?

AGNES MCGEE: Yes, quite different!

INTERVIEWER: ...the changes in the county and especially right along here on [Rt.] 208...used to be very rural as you said you hardly ever saw a car come by, and now the county has become an urban county, and as a person who sits in on the Board of Supervisors meetings, you've really seen that happen day by day, haven't you?

AGNES MCGEE: Lot of changes, like I said, "Some good, some not so good." Some growth is good, but it looks like we have more residential growth than we do have commercial growth and with all the residents and the school children, we are having to build so many schools, and taxes come from real estate.

INTERVIEWER: Things that cost money!

AGNES MCGEE: Things that cost money!

INTERVIEWER: Well, can you think of anything else you would like to have recorded on tape with Historic Fredericksburg?

AGNES MCGEE: When I do any traveling people ask me where I am from. I always say, "Fredericksburg, America's most Historic City," which it is. Some other cities try to claim that, but I don't see how they can what with all the historic things that are in the town and Spotsylvania. I now say, "I'm from Spotsylvania which is adjacent to America's most historic city, Fredericksburg."

INTERVIEWER: With a lot of history on its own! Well, at one time Fredericksburg was part of Spotsylvania --isn't that right?

AGNES MCGEE: No, the cities -- that's something that Virginia is different, because cities were always a town or city by themselves. They were never part of a county. That's what history taught me long time ago.

INTERVIEWER: You have served on a lot of boards in the county. I know you were on the social services board for awhile.

AGNES MCGEE: Yes, I served on that for seven years.

INTERVIEWER: What other organizations or boards were you on?

AGNES MCGEE: I was on the electoral board -served on that for eight years-until we had a Republican Governor. I was a Democratic member, and the state law says that the governing body -- the electoral boards -- if there is a Democrat you have two Democrats and one Republican. If the Governor is a Republican you have two Republicans and one Democrat and I was the first member of the electoral board to come up after we got a Republican Governor after so many years-- so I got "booted" off. Not "booted off" but I just knew I had to leave. I served on that for eight years, and I have served on so many other boards and commissions -- equalization board I served on that, and the longest I ever served... was when the board of supervisors appointed me a member of the committee to revise the comprehensive plan and I served on that for 18 months. I missed one meeting in 18 months -- and that was a long haul. I was glad when that was over.

INTERVIEWER: Was that to revise the zoning?

AGNES MCGEE: It was the whole plan for the county . . . comprehensive plan takes in everything in the county.

INTERVIEWER: That must have been an interesting task.

AGNES MCGEE: It was interesting and it was a lot of work, but I enjoyed it, 'cause we had people from all over. We had 19 or 20, I've forgotten which, who served on that.

INTERVIEWER: . . . from all over the county, and there's a lot of diversity in the county.

AGNES MCGEE: Now it is! I don't miss very many meetings of the board of supervisors. But when we were in the dairy business and I was filling silo, or getting up hay, or doing stuff like that, I couldn't go to a day meeting. They used to have a day meeting and a night meeting. And now they have afternoon meetings. I can see why they don't have night meetings, 'cause I have stayed there as long as two and two thirty o'clock in the morning to make sure I was listening to what they were saying. I don't miss very many.

INTERVIEWER: Tell us something else about the dairy business.

AGNES MCGEE: Well, we used to deliver milk in glass bottles and when I first used to go and help my dad we sold it for five cents a pint and ten cents a quart; and then it went up to six cents a pint and twelve cents a quart, and when we stopped delivering in the 30's, it was seven cents a pint and fourteen cents a quart. Now how much do you pay for a quart of milk? If the poor old dairy farmer got half of that he's be well off.

INTERVIEWER: How about all the regulations that came in about the milk?

AGNES MCGEE: Oh, my goodness, yes! You had two inspections a month and you never knew when the inspector was coming. Lot of time he would come at six o'clock in the morning while you were milking, or he'd come at four or five o'clock in the afternoon, think he'd catch you doing something you weren't supposed to. They would inspect your barn and your milk house and all such stuff as that --and we always got anywhere from ninety-five to a hundred.

INTERVIEWER: Very good! . . .and you had locals along the road you used to deliver milk to....

AGNES MCGEE: After we stopped delivering in milk bottles we sold to the Farmers Creamery in Fredericksburg.

INTERVIEWER: Did you keep any of your customers?

AGNES MCGEE: No, once you sold that out you couldn't keep any--- you couldn't sell wholesale and retail both, so we just gave up the bottling and just took the milk in cans every morning to the creamery.

INTERVIEWER: Well, can you think of anything else that you'd like to tell us about this morning?

AGNES MCGEE: Probably tell you a whole lot of things you would not want to hear.

INTERVIEWER: Go ahead!

AGNES MCGEE: No, I guess I've said enough.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you very much for talking with us.

AGNES MCGEE: You're welcome.

