

An Interview with

Larkin B. Baggett

Interviewed by

Mrs. Frances Oberschmidt

Mississippi

Department of Archives and History

and the

Lincoln-Lawrence-Franklin Regional Library

Oral History Project

Brookhaven and Vicinity

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Interviewer: Frances M. Oberschmidt

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Scope Note: The Lincoln-Lawrence-Franklin Regional Library
System conducted oral history interviews with local
citizens. The interviewees included long-term residents
of the Lincoln, Lawrence and Franklin County areas.

(Part one not recorded due to taping difficulties)

OBERSCHMIDT: What's that?

BAGGETT: This is a pair of forceps that my grandfather used to pull his slaves' teeth with.

OBERSCHMIDT: Oh, how unusual!

BAGGETT: And I know these things must be way over a hundred (100) years old.

OBERSCHMIDT: They're so sharp!

BAGGETT: They seem so sharp and they seem so crude but I guess back in those days they were the only thing they had.

OBERSCHMIDT: That's right. Yet it seems to have been - would you say "welded" together right? It functions good.

BAGGETT: Well, sort of like everyday pliers we use now and its slipped joint there but I can't understand why they were made so sharp-pointed.

OBERSCHMIDT: Possibly to get hold of the smaller teeth.

BAGGETT: It seems they would grip a tooth real good.

OBERSCHMIDT: Could I take this down and have a picture made of this?

BAGGETT: Sure.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, I'll do that and get it back to you.

BAGGETT: Alright.

OBERSCHMIDT: Coming on to your parents lives. Now when did your father move to Brookhaven? Your family?

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BAGGETT: Well, my daddy was born in this house.

OBERSCHMIDT: He was?

BAGGETT: Yes.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, your grandfather - when did he move to Brookhaven?

BAGGETT: I can't think the year; I don't know the year.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, about - approximate.

BAGGETT: But, he first came to Brookhaven I believe with a - a livery stable was located on the corner right here on Chichasaw and First Street. And he bought and traded horses and had a rental service for horse and buggies and things like that.

OBERSCHMIDT: That was after the railroad came in where he would have a need for that service more?

BAGGETT: Let's see. If my dad was born in 1866, I would say he put that over there around 1875 or 1880, something like that.

OBERSCHMIDT: Now the railroad was already here then.

BAGGETT: Yes, I'm sure.

OBERSCHMIDT: And the drummers used to come down on the train and I imagine they rented horses from the livery stable.

BAGGETT: To get to their places of business.

OBERSCHMIDT: To get to their places of business like you do the rented cars now. Well now, was Lincoln County still a part of Lawrence County or do you recall him saying?

BAGGETT: They were separate. I'm sure, because I remember one thing that when my grandfather lived in Monticello, he was a member of the Board of Supervisors. And of that time, each county processed and printed their own

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currency and each supervisor signed that - no, I believe the President of the Board at that time, my grandfather, signed that currency.

OBERSCHMIDT: Do you have a piece of that currency?

BAGGETT: And I wish I could find it. I had a number of pieces of it; they were denominations of a dollar, five (5), ten (10), and twenties (20's) in the paper money.

OBERSCHMIDT: I'd love to have that for the archives.

BAGGETT: I wish I could... Somebody picked it up one time and probably took the whole stack of them. You know, way back there, the authority would never be worth anything, so it was thrown away just like paper thrown around the house.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, the Civil War money was like that too. It's valuable now; it's a collector's item. No monetary value, but for collectors it's really something.

BAGGETT: Yes. I guess each county did that. I don't know who at that time was on the board here in Brookhaven, Lincoln County. But I remember seeing it on the Lawrence County bills many a time. "W. P. Baggett" were his initials.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, would you know what they used for a backing? Usually when the paper money is issued, there's got to be a certain amount of gold bullion or property or something to give it a balance.

BAGGETT: I wondered about that, but I...

OBERSCHMIDT: You never did hear that?

BAGGETT: It must be like today's issuing money - just print it.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, the dollar's not worth much now. You might say it's almost printed. Do you recall hearing him say anything about the

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old buildings? Now, what was near that livery stable there on that street?

BAGGETT: Well I've heard him tell this many a time. He was a boy - I would guess ten (10) or twelve (12) years old. He would take his shotgun and start hunting right where the courthouse is located now. That was all woodland and fields; from there on east was nothing in the way of buildings or houses. And I heard him say many a time he'd killed game out off behind where the courthouse is now.

OBERSCHMIDT: That hardly seems possible. I can remember Byrds fields where Wildwood is now - almost in the center of town. We'd walk three (3) or four (4) blocks and have a picnic there and thought we'd gone a distance and it was all woods, but now this town is moving further out and it's great, it really is. Do you remember anything him telling about any of the other buildings?

BAGGETT: If I had time to recall each building or block, I'm sure there would be a lot of changes. There was a number of houses in the town, especially on the corner, but most of the corner lots have been changed up and taken over by service stations, you know. Like Day's, that Texaco station on South Jackson Street and the houses along there. And the houses used to be up here on the corner where Murry Davis' old station is located.

OBERSCHMIDT: Wasn't there a a store there? Roses store? Seems to me like when...

BAGGETT: Roses or Davidson's; I was trying to think of that last night, who had that store.

OBERSCHMIDT: When I went to high school, I was a freshman in the

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new building there on Monticello Street and there was a great wooden store there. And I thought Roses had it.

BAGGETT: I believe you're right. I believe you're right.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, wasn't there a Baggett Building?

BAGGETT: I don't believe.

OBERSCHMIDT: There's a Larkin Building there on Whitworth; isn't it facing the west, on east of the railroad facing west?

BAGGETT: Well, see at the time my dad was living in Brookhaven, why, there was a family of Larkins here too. But they weren't any connection except just good friends, I believe. In fact, he was named for the Larkin family; they got his first name from there.

OBERSCHMIDT: Now, had that family moved from Monticello with them? Or do you know?

BAGGETT: No, no, just. I guess they just met here in Brookhaven and were friends.

OBERSCHMIDT: Do you remember any of the hotels?

BAGGETT: Well, the Inez Hotel, it used to be, is not operating now, but was known as the "Shirk," I believe. Is that right?

OBERSCHMIDT: That's right.

BAGGETT: Operated by maybe Dick Shirk or somebody like that. But that's about the only hotel I believe that Brookhaven has ever had.

OBERSCHMIDT: There was something across the street there, across on the corner of Monticello. Do you remember one time they cut the building down and made a filling station? They cut through the bottom part of the building; they had an opening made a filling station?

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BAGGETT: Well, you know Watkins old filling station across from the hotel? Watkins station?

OBERSCHMIDT: That was it. Well, what was the name of that hotel?

BAGGETT: Well, there were some rooms upstairs, weren't there? Up over the service station.

OBERSCHMIDT: Was that a boardinghouse or a hotel?

BAGGETT: I think just rooms.

OBERSCHMIDT: Rooms?

BAGGETT: Yes, furnished rooms. But other than that. Then the Lincoln Hotel came along later on but that wasn't way back.

OBERSCHMIDT: Wasn't there a Noble Hotel around somewhere? Could that have been the Noble Hotel?

BAGGETT: Where Watkin's is?

OBERSCHMIDT: Yes.

BAGGETT: I don't think there was a hotel. I think just above there was just a rooming place. The Noble Hotel sounds familiar but I can't place it.

OBERSCHMIDT: I'm like you - it rings a bell, but I don't know what it is. What were the first car businessmen, salesmen? Owners of car businesses? When did the car come in or do you know?

BAGGETT: Oh, Mr. Kees was among one of the first. He opened about 1918, I believe, his dealership. Mr. Watklins, the man who had the filling station on, across from the hotel there, he had a dealership a long time ago too. Had two (2) or three (3) old off-brand cars like a Velie and so-forth that didn't last long.

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OBERSCHMIDT: A what?

BAGGETT: A Velie.

OBERSCHMIDT: Never heard of one. How do you spell it?

BAGGETT: V-E-L-I-E.

OBERSCHMIDT: I've never heard of that.

BAGGETT: But Mr. Kees in 1918, I think, when the business he had Mack trucks, Willis Overland, and seems like some other make of car. He took over Chrysler - Plymouth about 1925 and I went to work for him in 1928. At that time he still had Plymouth and Chrysler and he kept that line until 1955 and took on Buick which he still has.

OBERSCHMIDT: Now, was that Mr. Kees or Gerald who took on the Buick?

BAGGETT: Gerald Kees.¹

OBERSCHMIDT: About how long did he live?

BAGGETT: I think when he passed away, he was around sixty-five (65), sixty-eight (68) years old. He took on the dealership in Eighteen ('18) so he died pretty young.

OBERSCHMIDT: How long has Gerald had the business?

BAGGETT: Since his father died, somewhere around 1955?

OBERSCHMIDT: Well now, he was working with his father during World War II.

BAGGETT: Oh yes. Let's see, World War II.

OBERSCHMIDT: It ended in '45.

BAGGETT: I was just thinking; no, he was out of school then.

OBERSCHMIDT: Yes, I know he was.

BAGGETT: Yes, yes, sure was. Went to Tulane in 1928 and Gerald

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enrolled there about 1929 or '30. Just a year or two (2) difference.

OBERSCHMIDT: Difference in their age. Well, that Mack truck has stayed popular, has been a good truck all these years, hasn't it?

BAGGETT: I believe, did I say Mack? I meant to say White.

OBERSCHMIDT: White; I've never heard of that one.

BAGGETT: White is an old-time company. They still make them. I believe they do.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well now, who had the Ford agency?

BAGGETT: At the time, Mr. L. J. Laird was the first Ford dealer in Brookhaven. He had it back about 1925 or '30, I'm pretty sure.

OBERSCHMIDT: Or before that because Daddy bought a Ford when I was five (5) years old so that would be in 1915.

BAGGETT: Yes.

OBERSCHMIDT: It's kind of hard to get all of those dates straight.

BAGGETT: You know back in those days before they had just a number of dealerships in town like one (1) or two (2) or three (3), Brookhaven was worked by the salesman out of Jackson and I know my daddy bought two (2) Nash cars way back in 1918 and prior to that date from a man in Jackson and had to take it back to Jackson to have it serviced.

OBERSCHMIDT: And that was a long trip, dirt roads back then, wasn't it?

BAGGETT: Altogether.

OBERSCHMIDT: I remember it was told that the first one was bought the week I was born but I don't know who bought it.

(Pause in tape)

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OBERSCHMIDT: This is a picture of what?

BAGGETT: This ia a picture of my dad's first car, A 1911 Buick. There's so many odd things about it that it would take me a long time to tell you in detail what few things I recall. When it came out, when he bought it, it had no windshield. He later installed one; was protection against insects and rain and dust and whatnot.

OBERSCHMIDT: Rain would be the important thing.

BAGGETT: Rain, the main thing. It had side curtains which you had to stop and put up in case of a shower. And this is the carbide headlamp tank right here. You put carbide in there and added water and blew the pressure in there by your mouth which the pressure went through this tube to the headlights up here. You had to open a door and strike a match to light the carbide headlights. It was just about like a flashlight now would give you as much light.

OBERSCHMIDT: Well, you'd have to work to run you car, wouldn't you?

BAGGETT: Yes. And the front-end of the car, this radiator cover here and the headlamps were brass. If you touched one, this radiator cover be a big old black spot there, so you had to keep the car polished every day because people were always playing with it or feeling it, you see, to see what it was made of. It drove like the old T-Model Ford; it had a clutch and a brake pedal. And you pressed the clutch pedal down, give it the gas (you're in low), then let up on it and you'd be in high. And the right pedal was your brake pedal. Similar transmission and clutch and everything as the old T-Model Ford.

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OBERSCHMIDT: I can remember driving an old T-Model Ford that had the clutch and the brake and the backing pedal.

BAGGETT: Yes. I think one of the biggest troubles with old cars back in those days was the old tires which weren't too good of a material. I don't think they knew how to vulcanize and make rubber into tires that would stand the heat and the cold and I don't believe they even had any tread on them, just a slick groove. So if you got into a mud puddle, you were bound to stall; you couldn't come out of there on its own power. It had no traction. And if it had a speedometer; I don't guess they would give more than a couple of thousand miles and had to buy new ones.

OBERSCHMIDT: In other words, it was an expensive thing to own.

BAGGETT: It sure was.

OBERSCHMIDT: And you had to work for it instead of it for you.

BAGGETT: I've forgotten what he had paid for this old car but at the same time Dad bought this one, Dr. O. N. Arrington bought one, the same model. And after a few years of service on both of them, they had so much trouble, Dad sold his to Dr. Arrington for seventy-five (75) dollars so he could use the parts off of his onto his. I never will forget that.

OBERSCHMIDT: I reckon not.

BAGGETT: Because he just almost gave it away because I think something maybe broke on this car that he couldn't get a part - maybe the crank-case, something like that. But the rest of the car was in pretty good shape.

OBERSCHMIDT: That shows you supply and demand and education makes a big transition for us, doesn't it?

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BAGGETT: Sure does. But this is an old relic. Now, this car is located right here in front of our house on 132 East Chickasaw Street. Over here behind it is the old Cassedy Law Office. Do you remember that?

OBERSCHMIDT: I remember that.

BAGGETT: And it was there for a long time before it was torn down and a station built there by Loreco Oil Company. Operated by different ones.

OBERSCHMIDT: Middleton from Wesson.

BAGGETT: That's right. And over here across the street was Mr. Sam Magee's old house. He raised a number of boys and girls over there.

OBERSCHMIDT: He adopted a lot or he just took orphans and raised them, didn't he?

BAGGETT: I don't think so. He had a - let's see - yes, I know he had a nephew because Little Sam was not his child. I never will forget old man Sam Magee came running home one day and hollered to the wife to get the kids all in the house - a lion got loose in Canton, Mississippi.

OBERSCHMIDT: In Canton, Ms.?

BAGGETT: Out of the circus.

OBERSCHMIDT: You don't mean it? Well, speaking of the circus, do you remember much about circus days? We had a holiday.

BAGGETT: Oh yes. I used to enjoy them. I couldn't wait that morning to get up and go see the circus unload on trian.

OBERSCHMIDT: Where did it usually unload?

BAGGETT: Right down here on Chickasaw Street, I mean Whitworth Avenue. Either here or up there further north.

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OBERSCHMIDT: On the north crossing in Brookhaven or further up where...

BAGGETT: Up along about the old Ben Seavey houses up there.

OBERSCHMIDT: I can remember getting up. I remember one time I was real young and Daddy was going to take us to see them unload and he told me to set the alarm clock. And we'd always go downtown to the restaurant for breakfast and that was really something then; you know you just didn't eat downtown. So I got so excited I set the alarm and I set it about three (3) hours too early. We got up and went down. Nothing was open. Daddy came back and said, "Well," said, "you're just too anxious. I ought not to take you." But I wanted to set the alarm because he loved to watch them himself. He was just like a kid at circustime. He made every one of them and we did too. And I just love a circus.

BAGGETT: I couldn't wait for them.

OBERSCHMIDT: Unloading was just - it was just a holiday to see them, how they could manage.

BAGGETT: Yes. Seems to me we had holidays because most of the kids didn't go to school anyway. They were going to stay out and see the circus.

OBERSCHMIDT: That's right. And they'd always - as a rule we'd take our lunch; go out early so we could see the menagerie they had lined up where we could see it all. And I remember Mother used to make hamburgers for us and those were the best hamburgers. I don't whether it was the excitement that made it so good or whether she just made them better but they tasted that on that day.

BAGGETT: They sure did.

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OBERSCHMIDT: I remember something about your mother - she used to swim so well.

BAGGETT: She was crazy about swimming and she had some way she floated and lay out there on top of that water with her hands and legs motionless for an hour at a time. And we used to go to Fair River out here about once a week and that was the coldest water, spring-fed.

OBERSCHMIDT: Oh, I love Fair River.

BAGGETT: By the way, I saw old Vick Lovell's father jump in that water a many a time when the water, when it was freezing cold. And he said he went out there and took a swim every morning the year round.

OBERSCHMIDT: Now that's where the old campsite was? The Lovell place?

BAGGETT: Yes, that's right. Had a bridge across it you remember? Had camp-houses out there. But Mr. Lovell was in good health, lived a long time. But he took that daily swim every morning and we were out there hunting one morning. I saw him jump in that water when it was freezing cold.

OBERSCHMIDT: Ice on it.

BAGGETT: Ice on it.

OBERSCHMIDT: You know, the ironic thing is, I grew up going out to Fair River - that was just the place. And then Ted and I and Cliff and Bessie bought the farm that that river divided. We were on the opposite side of where the old swimming hole where they usually went. In other words, you go across the bridge and we bought that property and later on sold it to the Stewarts for a ranch.

BAGGETT: Oh, yes.

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OBERSCHMIDT: There was about five hundred thirty-five (535) acres there. But it's how life comes around, you know.

BAGGETT: Getting back to the automobiles again, on the way to Fair River there's one pretty long, steep hill out there. At the bottom of the hill you couldn't get a real fast running start to pull it because there was sand and gravel so deep there, you couldn't. But by the time you got to the top of that hill, your car would be knocking and pinging and so hot that it would be boiling. And at that time it seemed like a steep hill; now it's just a little old ordinary grade.

OBERSCHMIDT: That's right.

BAGGETT: But your few horsepower and your gasoline test and so forth, a car just couldn't pull that hill.

OBERSCHMIDT: And now they can just pull a mountain without even shifting.

BAGGETT: That's right.

OBERSCHMIDT: Man has really developed a whole lot of wonderful things, hasn't he?

BAGGETT: Yes, yes.

OBERSCHMIDT: Do you remember our Baptist picnics?

BAGGETT: Yes, I sure do.

OBERSCHMIDT: Your mother was always in charge of the swimming for the girls.

BAGGETT: Yes.

OBERSCHMIDT: I remember we were out at Clear Branch one time and Dad came out for lunch. And I went up and I was worrying him about it, I said,

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"Oh, Daddy, watch me swim." So he didn't want to be bothered with me so he just took me and threw me out and threw me out in water that was deep. He thought I was swimming, you know. He'd seen me mud-crawl or whatever you call it. And your mother got me just as I was going under the third time; she was out there swimming.

BAGGETT: Is that right?

OBERSCHMIDT: And she said, "I'm going to teach you how to swim before you leave." And she did. She had so much patience to do things like that.

BAGGETT: Yes, she enjoyed that. My wife almost drowned at Fair River one time out there. They were - she was swimming and she went under several times and some young fellow saved her life. She had gone down two (2) or three (3) times. Can't think of the name of the fellow who got her out of there.

OBERSCHMIDT: Do you remember the gravel pit lake? Did you ever swim out there much?

BAGGETT: Very little. I remember it. At that time, when I remember it, they used to have a big pavilion out there on the lake which was used for dancing and picnics and parties. Remember that?

OBERSCHMIDT: Yes and I remember that trolley that went across the lake.

BAGGETT: Yes.

OBERSCHMIDT: We'd get on there and ride and then rode back and ride over and rode back and oh we just had a lot of fun and a lot of blisters.

BAGGETT: Yes. You know one of the things about Brookhaven that was an annual event that was looked forward to every year was the Fourth of July

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picnic put on by McGrath's store.

OBERSCHMIDT: That was something.

BAGGETT: They ran a special train from here to Crystal Springs to Lake Chatauqua. They furnished the train, the fare, the eats, and everything for a day. And the people in Brookhaven just closed up and went up there.

OBERSCHMIDT: Now that was the employees only that went, wasn't it?

BAGGETT: No, everybody went.

OBERSCHMIDT: I never did go there. In fact, I didn't realize how big it was until one of my interviews, one of the interviewees, told me how big it was.

BAGGETT: Yes. It was a big thing and it was just an invitation to people in Brookhaven to come on and go with McGrath's store.

OBERSCHMIDT: McGrath did a lot of wonderful things for the public.

BAGGETT: That's what broke them up too.

OBERSCHMIDT: Yes, that and credit, too easy with credit.

BAGGETT: Yes.

OBERSCHMIDT: The style shows that they had were almost equal to Broadway now. They were just fantastic. Of course, people...

BAGGETT: Out on the roof of the shed there.

OBERSCHMIDT: Good music, good singing, good style show.

OBERSCHMIDT: And the costumes were always lovely and authentic and all of that. We just really looked forward to it twice a year for years. And they had band names - I remember, what was this Negro that was so great?

BAGGETT: From Brookhaven?

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OBERSCHMIDT: No, from Natchez I believe. He's one of the nationally known Negro bands. Came all the time and played. I can't recall his name.

BAGGETT: I can't recall. They had a lot of good Brookhaven talent too. I can remember I always enjoyed hearing Junius Johnson sing. He had a good voice.

OBERSCHMIDT: He had a marvelous voice. You remember he sang to Alice when they married? "I love you truly"? And I remember that was the most romantic thing; I was just a teenager you know, there that was just really something.

BAGGETT: Where was the wedding held?

OBERSCHMIDT: Out on their front, on that porch. Don't you remember? It was in summertime.

BAGGETT: I can't recall it. I know I must have been there.

OBERSCHMIDT: It was a fantastic thing. She was so beautiful and he was good-looking too. Made a handsome couple.

BAGGETT: He could play the piano and sing; he was just a good entertainer. Just one of the best.

OBERSCHMIDT: That's right. Well, he got it natural; all those McGrath's were that way. You know his mother was Katie McGrath.

BAGGETT: Yes. McGraths and Johnsons were good people, did a lot for Brookhaven.

OBERSCHMIDT: Yes they did. Do you remember McGrath Springs?

BAGGETT: Out here on the highway?