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Carrie M. Bright

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## CARRIE McMULLEN BRIGHT

## ORAL HISTORY ABSTRACT

BORN: 1913 in China.

EARLY LIFE: family background; memories of people and lifestyle at the Southern Presbyterian mission in Hangchow; contact with Chinese; description and impressions of Shanghai American School; adjustments to American society as college student.

INTERVIEWER: Sarah Refo Mason

DATE: 11-5-76

PLACE: St. Paul, Minnesota

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## INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: I am talking to Mrs. Carrie Lena McMullen Bright on November 5, 1976, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Mrs. Bright is the child of missionaries who grew up in China. She was born in China in 1915 and remained there through high school. Her parents' brothers and sisters were also missionaries in China.

Maybe we could begin with your comments on the early southern background of your parents, their religious background and how they became committed to the mission field.

BRIGHT: Both my grandfathers, John Calvin McMullen and Alexander Stuart Moffett, were ministers in Kentucky. My parents grew up in that era of the great missionary movement, influenced by Robert E. Speer and others, late last century. Although my grandmother and father Moffett had dedicated and volunteered for the mission field, they were declined because they had three little children. After her death, a letter was discovered from my grandmother to her sister expressing the disappointment that they couldn't go, but dedicating her children to the mission field. As it turned out, six of her eight children went to China.

And in my father's family, he went to China and also two of his sisters, Kitty (Mrs. Stacy) Farrier and Nettie McMullen. So my family was pretty congregated around me.

I: They went what year?

BRIGHT: My parents went in 1910 with the Southern Presbyterian mission. They were stationed in Hangchow.

I: What class of Chinese people was this mission directed towards? I know the YMCA in Hangchow was associated with the gentry.

BRIGHT: In the early days my father went "itinerating" a great deal. This was among the country folk in the villages. Our section of the city was not the elegant section. Later on, Daddy set up a community center with a clinic.

I: Do you know what kind of methods your father used when he went to the villages?

BRIGHT: I never went with him. I remember he had a movie machine of some kind. He would hang up a sheet and show slides. This would fascinate the Chinese and collect a crowd. Then he would talk to them. This was one thing.

He had some Chinese evangelists working with him. Then, they would spread on out. I don't know how many churches they set up, but there were communities of Christians. Soon after I went off to high school in 1926, Daddy went out to the college, the Hangchow Christian College, and became the provost. So the rest of his life was in college teaching and administration.

I: And your mother, what did she do?

BRIGHT: She mostly coped with us. I was the oldest of five children. She had groups coming in and classes going on, and she would help out in the clinic.

I: She was equally committed to the missionary endeavor?

BRIGHT: Oh, yes.

I: What are your earliest memories of the compound where you lived?

BRIGHT: I remember the compound very vividly. There were three houses. Stuarts lived next to us. These were the parents of Leighton. Then after they went on, the J. Mercer Blains lived there. In the third house lived Misses Rebecca Wilson and Annie R.V. Wilson. The Wilson ladies had a kindergarten and school. I think Mr. Blain was an evangelist. Somehow these things didn't seem important.

I: Was there a doctor in this area? Was there a medical clinic?

BRIGHT: There was a British Mission Hospital in Hangchow. So that was well taken care of. There was a Baptist mission school.

I: There were a lot of Southerners in Hangchow. Do you think that gave a certain flavor to the missions stationed there?

BRIGHT: I don't know. I wasn't aware of it. Actually, it was quite a mixed group.

I: Some have commented that Southerners adapted more to Chinese life because of their slower pace and less industrialized background.

BRIGHT: Oh, I don't believe that, I can't imagine my daddy ever at a slow pace.

I: What was your school situation in Hangchow?

BRIGHT: The mothers got the Horace Mann school literature and started to teach us themselves, but that got frustrating. So they set up the Hangchow American School. This was a little two-room building that they built on the Northern Presbyterian compound. The mothers, two at a time, would take turns teaching the children for about a month. Then they would have some relief. I was in the first class in school. Elizabeth Wilson and Robert March were in my class. I think that our largest enrollment was 14. That was the center of our young life and friendship and activities.

I: So your main playmates were other missionary children? Were there British children?

BRIGHT: The British and YMCA kids, and the children of American professors out at the college.

I: Did you have much chance to play with Chinese children?

BRIGHT: Not really, I think, because I was busy in my school all day, and they were busy in their schools. I always regretted that I couldn't be in a Chinese school and learn to read and write and make friends among the Chinese.

I: But you did speak Chinese?

BRIGHT: Oh, we jabbered Chinese.

I: Did you speak it before English?

BRIGHT: Oh probably. I know we would mix it up.

I: How about Chinese adults? Did you have some contact with your parents' colleagues?

BRIGHT: Mostly with the servants, I guess.

I: Did they make much of an impression on your development?

BRIGHT: Oh, they were part of the family. The amah lived right in the house. The cook was peripheral because we weren't allowed in the kitchen. Only that domain was safe from all of us. Then there was Dzaoling, the houseman, who was the manager of everything. The servants would all come in and have family prayers with us every morning after breakfast, and lead in prayer and all of the rest. They would sing the hymns with us. This would be in Chinese.

I: Were there any kinds of experiences you can think of in which you, as a child of missionaries who spoke Chinese well, that wouldn't have been open to others?

BRIGHT: I never thought of any relationship as being separate from my family. We were a very close family. A very intimate family and I never thought in terms of any life apart from that.

I: What about in the summer time?

BRIGHT: Oh, we went to Mokanshan. That was a whole larger community of missionaries from all of that section of the country. Oh, they were the most gloriously happy times of my life! Of course, we made friends in the summer and then later saw them again at Shanghai American School. We developed very close friendships, not only the other children but the parents also. There were special programs and concerts and stunt nights and community picnics and tournaments. The adults had endless meetings and services at the church.

I: How would you characterize the missionary community in the compound and also Mokanshan?

BRIGHT: In Hangchow, the various ones would get together regularly for services, parties and social gatherings. They were very congenial. As far as I can remember, I never sensed any "we and they" tensions of any kind; it may be that I was insensitive. I felt very much at home with all of the missionaries that I came in contact with. I think there was some tension maybe with the Blains, because we children kept running into their flower beds!



I: Did you feel that you could talk to other missionary adults just as you did to your parents?

BRIGHT: Oh yes. I suppose being isolated out there in a minority group threw us together in a closeness.

I: What about Chinese people who might have been a part of the community. Did any Chinese workers live within the compound?

BRIGHT: No, just the missionaries.

I: Where did the Chinese live?

BRIGHT: They lived all around. The compounds were not isolated fortresses; the Chinese homes were walled in, too. If you'd go through any residential section of the city, you would go through narrow alleys between high walls and you wouldn't see the lovely gardens and homes behind. It wasn't as if the missionaries were separating themselves from the Chinese. This followed a pattern.

I: What about Hangchow as a city to grow in?

BEIGHT: Oh, Hangchow is the showplace in China outside of Peking. Hangchow was the winter quarters of the Mandarin court. It had palaces all around the lake. It has beautiful mountains all around. The rivers nearby, the pagodas and temples and bamboo forests, we used to picnic in all these places. It was primitive, I suppose. We didn't have any running water. We did have electricity.

I: What about vehicles?

BRIGHT: We had our ricksha and the ricksha man. It would take us everywhere, of course. Going to Mokanshan, we rode a boat up the canal, a flat bottom sampan.

I: This was the Grand Canal?

BRIGHT: Yes. Then we got unloaded off the boat and loaded onto sedan chairs and shoulder poles and made a long procession going up the mountain. That was early on.

I: And that was something you always looked forward to?

BRIGHT: Oh yes! The last summer I was in Hangchow, they had built a road and there was a bus we could take. We had a family consultation and decided to go one more time on the boat. But after that, things changed. I am glad that I was there before the bus.

I: What was your response about going to Shanghai for school?

BRIGHT: Excitement. Of course, the first year I lived with the Eugene Barnetts. That was a marvelous experience. I had grown up with them in Hangchow and already felt like one of the family. So it eased the break of going away from home. Then the dormitory life was fun.

I: Did you have any Chinese language or history or culture?

BRIGHT: It was, as I remember it, an American high school curriculum. They had high standards and none of the kids had any trouble getting into colleges. Of course, it was the only high school there that was near us. People would come and speak to us at the school assembly about how fortunate we were

to travel and live abroad and have such marvelous experiences. We would be bored with this, but, of course, it was true. To us it was just normal; it didn't seem so special.

I: What do you think were the values your parents wanted most for you children to have?

BRIGHT: Our whole life there was faith centered. In terms of our priorities, we memorized half the Bible and the whole catechism and that sort of thing.

I: Did you have devotions every day?

BRIGHT: Oh yes, and we sang hymns. But these things were just assumed, taken for granted. They weren't taught. We learned early on from the examples of missionaries all around us out there. We learned of service. We also learned of carrying responsibility. I don't know how much of that was Presbyterian, or my parents' personal commitment, but that was carried over--responsibilities.

I: Would this have been true of most of the children at Shanghai American School regardless of what type of missionaries their parents were?

BRIGHT: The Shanghai American School had missionaries' children, military people's children, diplomatic peoples' children, and so we were quite cosmopolitan.

I: Was there much of a division between the groups?

BRIGHT: I don't think there was a division. There were differences. I think they thought we were rather pious. I sensed that the others were more aloof from the Chinese than we were. But it wasn't an issue. It didn't matter to me.

I: The teachers, now, were they mainly from the missionary community or did they vary quite a bit?

BRIGHT: My French teacher was a Russian refugee from the Russian court, she claimed. She came all the way through Siberia to Shanghai. I had a Latin teacher, Mr. Cevedo, I'm not sure if he was Italian or what. He was a character. He would let us read our translations of the lessons in order to get them finished quickly and then philosophize. He would talk to us about any subject under the sun. We were entranced with him. I didn't learn any Latin, but I learned a lot of other things.

I: Were those part of the large Russian immigrant population in Shanghai?

BRIGHT: Yes. And I had a Czechoslovakian who tried to teach me piano. He was interesting. It was a big world there in Shanghai; we were out in the middle of it.

I: Since you were a teenager there, do you remember any kind of identity development there?

BRIGHT: I don't think it worried me much. I don't remember being concerned about my identity.

I: When you came to the States, was there something more of a question in your mind?

BRIGHT: I realized then the high school I had been a part of must have been quite different from the high schools that the other girls came from. I was terribly insecure about little social niceties--the way people would talk on dates or what you would do. I was very self-conscious about those things at that age.

I: Maybe we should identify the year, and where you came to college from China.

BRIGHT: It was 1930, at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. I remember one high moment when I had been there only for a year and somebody said, "I didn't realize you were 'mish' kid."

I: They used that term?

BRIGHT: They used that term. And I had arrived. I had become un-different in the sense that I belonged.

I: Did Agnes Scott have any religious background?

BRIGHT: It was a Presbyterian-related college. It had quite a solid religious undertone and activities.

I: So missionaries wouldn't have been thought badly of?

BRIGHT: Oh no, but it was just a little difficult fitting in socially. At first they thought I was strange because I spoke differently.

I: You didn't have a southern accent?

BRIGHT: Well, I suppose my parents did. But growing up in Shanghai, it was quite cosmopolitan, and they all thought I was pretty foreign.

I: What about different attitudes that you noticed when you came to the South?

BRIGHT: I suppose one of the things that I couldn't understand or identify with was the prejudice against the Negroes. I was amazed at the strength of the prejudices among some of these southern girls. Of course, this was a long time ago.

I: Had your parents ever talked about racial situations in the South?

BRIGHT: No.

I: They hadn't prepared you in any way?

BRIGHT: No. I vaguely remember when we came on furlough when I was in first grade and the first Negro I ever saw, that took some sort of explaining. Of course, I saw them on furlough. But I wasn't prepared for the type of separateness that had built up.

I: Did you ever speak about it at all or was it something you kept inside of you?

BRIGHT: Oh, I was quite open about it. I was looked at askance because I was a liberal on these things.

I: Some children of missionaries who have had the same experience in encountering this racial situation have said it was very hard for them to speak out because they wanted so much to be accepted as Americans.

BRIGHT: That is true. That was part of it, because it was terribly important to be accepted as the normal American person. I didn't go on any crusades about this, but I participated in whatever activities would involve integration--integrated conferences and groups and all of that.

I: Did you expect that you might go back to China or did that ever enter into your plans?

BRIGHT: I didn't have any plans about it. Of course, by the time I finished college, life was pretty chaotic out in China. You couldn't make plans about going back because you never knew what was going to happen next.

I: That was already the Japanese-Chinese war.

BRIGHT: Then I got married. Now I don't particularly want to go back.

I: Why is that?

BRIGHT: I guess I have romanticized it all in my recollections and I just love to remember it the way I remember it. I'm sure that it would be so different now. It would be a whole different world that I would have to relate to in an entirely new and different way. I just cherish these distorted, I'm sure, but happy recollections.

I: How do you think your background in China and in the missionary community has affected your present attitudes?

BRIGHT: I think appreciating other cultures and problems of other people and identifying with their needs--it all grows out of that experience.

I: How do you view the new China?

BRIGHT: I have a lot of curiosity about it. I don't know much about it except what has come out in the news media. I think a lot of what I remember so happily is probably gone, changed. I really do not particularly want to go back now. I just can't imagine going back to Hangchow and seeing high-rise buildings on the lake when we used to ride by in rickshas. The gap is too much. I'm discouraged with some of the things I hear about how much it has changed. I think so much of what was essentially the Chinese flavour and character has been repressed or regimented. But I'm sure the people must be better off, physically, and you can't forget that. I'm waiting to find out more about what really has happened.



I: Do you think that you have a different point of view towards Asians from the general run of Americans?

BRIGHT: I think I would because I would feel more familiar with the peasants and their manner of life. I can identify with them more easily because I have seen it, been in the midst of it.

I have seen China so dominated by the Westerners that I thought it was unfair, and I am sympathetic with their need for self-identification. I'm not that sympathetic with the Red China regime, but I remember even when I was there, the time of Chiang Kai-shek's rise to power, that I could identify with his need for national self-identity.

Of course, Chiang's armies were pretty ruthless. Daddy was all involved in refugee work and various relief work. But I think that, by and large, the missionaries went along with his unification and modernization of China. He was a Christian, you see, and so they liked that.

I: This is all that we have time for, but thank you for giving us this and your recollections.