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Transcript of Oral History Interview with Guy and Bess Scruggs

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. AND MRS. GUY (BESS) SCRUGGS

Date, place, and circumstances of interview: August 21, 1975
at the Scruggs' home at 642 College Drive, Abilene, Texas.

Dates of birth: Mr. Scruggs, May 27, 1899
Mrs. Scruggs, September 12, 1900

Position: Mr. Scruggs, retired; Mrs. Scruggs, housewife.

Former positions: Mr. Scruggs: high school teacher at Munday, Texas, 1921-1924; teacher at Abilene Christian High School, 1924-1928; teacher and coach at Abilene Christian College, 1932-1973. Mrs. Scruggs: second grade teacher at Munday, Texas, 1922-1924.

Education: Mr. Scruggs: graduate of Thorp Spring Christian College, ; B.A., Abilene Christian College, ; M. Ed., Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas, 1944; title of masters thesis, A History of Abilene Christian College. Mrs. Scruggs: graduated from Thorp Spring Christian College, 1921; additional work completed at Abilene Christian College.

Legal restrictions on interview: None.

Reason for choosing interviewees: The Scruggs family was working with Abilene Christian College during its expansion during the 1920's and through the time of the college's dire financial struggles in the 1930's. Mr. Scruggs' thesis on the history of Abilene Christian College is an extensive study of the college during those years. Scruggs and Morris also worked together as elders of the College Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas for many years. Mrs. Scruggs' father was S. N. Allen, for many years a member of the Board of Trustees at Abilene Christian College. Mr. and Mrs. S. N. Allen donated a one-hundred-and-twelve-acre farm to Abilene Christian College in 1944 to help establish the college's agriculture department.

COSGROVE: The date is August 21, 1975. We are in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Guy Scruggs in Abilene, Texas for a brief interview about the life of Don Morris. I want to say first of all Brother and Sister Scruggs that I appreciate this opportunity to talk to you and for you to tell me about the life of this man. I understand that you knew Morris first as a young boy.

SCRUGGS: I went to school with Don Morris from about 1915, and I knew him until he died, very, very well.

COSGROVE: What positive qualities of leadership did you see in him as a young man? Was he a rather outstanding boy and young man?

SCRUGGS: He as a good leader in high school just like he was in college. He was a debater and had very good success even though the Interscholastic League wasn't as important then in handling this, but we did have inter-school debates and Don was a good leader, and though he didn't take too much part in athletics, he was a good leader there in keeping up the enthusiasm.

COSGROVE: What do you know about his early life at Abilene Christian College? He came here, I think, in 1928 and remained until his death, but before he became vice president in 1932, do you remember anything about his work?

SCRUGGS: No, I don't. I don't remember about his work then.

COSGROVE: He was a speech teacher, we know. Was he involved in any work of fund raising or any special work for the college at that time?

SCRUGGS: None that I know of.

MRS. SCRUGGS: There's one thing I'd like to give here.

Recently, I was talking with Mrs. Morris, and we had talked about the difficulties/^{financially}that we had had together.

Don was teaching in Abilene High making three hundred dollars a month. When he was invited to teach at A.C.C., he took a hundred-and-fifty-dollar a month cut in salary to come to A.C.C. to teach and work in the speech department. Mrs. Morris told me that last night.

COSGROVE: We've spoken in time past about the great stock market crash and the disaster that it was for Abilene Christian College because they had just begun to develop their new campus out here on the northeast side of town and were selling lots very quickly to cover their indebtedness. Just as an academic question, Brother Guy, what do you think would have happened if the stock market crash had been delayed six months or a year?

SCRUGGS: From what I remember, talking to real estate men and members of the faculty and board, I believe if had had another six months to have worked on normally, a normal economic situation, I believe that we would have cleaned up all of our indebtedness with lot sales.

COSGROVE: What was the general effect at the school just soon after the stock market crash? Could you begin to tell right away the effect of it?

SCRUGGS: Well, it could hardly have been worse. It was just almost at a standstill. I was at the ranch until '28 to '32, and . . . , but there wasn't any money coming in and teachers got part salaries, and it was just real, real bad.

COSGROVE: Student enrollment dropped, I guess?

SCRUGGS: Oh, yes. Every phase of the program suffered because of it.

COSGROVE: What were the main duties of Don Morris after he became vice president in 1932?

SCRUGGS: Well, it was personnel work and getting what help he could from the outside of the school and the brotherhood and he worked some in, mostly in debating, and working here at school. That is as much as I know about it.

COSGROVE: After the school received the Hardin gift, the

annuity, Don Morris was in charge of that annuity from year to year for several years. But I wonder if he had anything to do directly with getting the Hardin gift?

SCRUGGS: I feel that he had a very great amount to do with getting that gift. He, you see, he went to Tulsa to see Mr. Mabee, and he had a man there who was an elder in the Church of Christ, that was secretary for Mr. Mabee, and they were talking about where there might be some money to be had, and this man told him that the Mabee Foundation had some money and that it was possible that it might be had with the right approach. And Don then was introduced to Mr. Mabee by this man, and Mr. Mabee knew of A.C.C. pretty well on one score, and that was the Acapella Chorus. And he listened to that very, very frequently and commended Don very highly for the school having such an asset as the Acapella Chorus. And Don told him then what he was trying to do, and we had been trying to do for years and years in raising young Christians and preachers and citizens of the country, and he told him that we were doing our best at this time to build a dormitory and asked if there was any chance, and the man told him right at once, said, gave him two hundred thousand dollars. And he just gave him a check for two hundred thousand dollars

and he came back home, and the Lectureship was in progress at that time, and so he got a call from Mr. Mabee, and he told him to come back up there, and he told him that he could not come because of the Lectureship, and he said Mr. Morris, you get in a plane and come up here, I want to see you now. And so he went up there, and he said if you can get steel, I want to talk business. And he said, "I have right here in my bag, a permit from the government for steel for that dormitory, and so he gave him a turnkey job on the dormitory, the Mabee boys' dormitory.

COSGROVE: Now, I asked awhile ago about the Hardin gift, and this of course is a separate gift; this is the Mabee gift. You remember the Hardin gift in the early 1930's. Brother McKenzie and two or three others did a lot of work to get that gift. I wonder if Don Morris to your knowledge did any direct work in getting the gift?

SCRUGGS: As far as I know, Don was helpful in that Mrs. Hardin was a member of the church, or her mother, I have forgotten which now . . .

COSGROVE: The first wife.

SCRUGGS: Yes, the first wife, and Don appealed to Mr. Hardin of the good work that could be done and that

would have been to the liking of his first wife because of what she believed in Christianity and Christian education.

COSGROVE: Now did Don Morris actually go to Burkburnett, Texas and approach Mr. Hardin in this way?

SCRUGGS: I understand that he did.

COSGROVE: Okay. After he became president in 1940 of Abilene Christian College, there was a doctrinal problem raging in the brotherhood about premillennialism and some great discussion and debate about it. Do you remember how Don Morris handled this?

SCRUGGS: It came up one time and we were having a meeting of men working on this in the brotherhood, and Charles H. Roberson was making a speech, and some of them called his hand on it, and he would not bow. And he kept on with his speech and wouldn't let them stop him, and Don was instrumental in backing Brother Roberson and wouldn't let him back down, or asked him not to back down on it, and that night when it got so . . . , they asked the singer to lead a song and to release the tension. Then, in Bennett building.

COSGROVE: And Don Morris kept his composure through all of that, didn't he?

SCRUGGS: Yes. Oh, yes.

COSGROVE: You know, there was another issue that waged with some preachers and church leaders in the 1930's, and this was about the college athletic programs, and particularly about the place of football in the college athletic program. Brother G. H. P. Showalter in the Firm Foundation was very strong against it. And since you were in the athletic department, I just wonder what was Don Morris' general reaction to this?

SCRUGGS: Don told the coaches that he was behind them, that he felt like we were right and we were developing the right kind of young men and had the right kind of influence in the student body and he would back them-- to go right ahead with their program.

COSGROVE: Through the years in your athletic work, did Morris continue to back you and encourage you every way he could?

SCRUGGS: Every way he could. Yes.

COSGROVE: What do you consider were some of the main contributions that he made to the athletic program at A.C.C.? Did he help to enlist athletes?

SCRUGGS: I don't know.

COSGROVE: Of course, he spoke to the board to get support, didn't he?

SCRUGGS: Yes, he spoke to the board and at times some young men he knew personally, I remember some, he worked with

and helped the coaches get. And he never did back down from those who thought athletics were a hindrance. He didn't let this opposition bother him.

COSGROVE: He attended athletic contests and was very enthusiastic about it, didn't he?

SCRUGGS: Oh, yes sir. He sure was.

COSGROVE: During the 1950's and 1960's and early '70's, there was quite a bit of student activism within the country and on various campuses of the land, a lot of trouble and turmoil. Was A.C.C. ever bothered by open demonstrations of students of any kind?

SCRUGGS: Not at all that I know of.

COSGROVE: How do you think that Don Morris helped to keep down this kind of thing?

SCRUGGS: He and the dean of students, and with the student leaders; he kept in close contact with the student leaders and asked them to come to them first if anything came up of that nature, and I feel like that helped hold it off.

COSGROVE: Don't you imagine that the daily chapel and the Bible classes and the Christian influences and all of that helped a great deal too?

SCRUGGS: By all means, yes. I've heard so many that when they came back here, they like to come back to

chapel. Students up through the '50's, we never had very much trouble with hardly any of them that didn't want to go to chapel.

MRS. SCRUGGS: And the young men coming back from World War II, many of them had to leave college classes and go into the service, and when they came back, their greatest thought was to come to the chapel. Many of them said that during the hard times when they were in serious trouble, the thing that helped to cause them to have courage and confidence was to remember the chapel services at A.C.C. And Mrs. Morris told me last night, I had a visit with her, and she said that there was a young man who came back to college and he had to stand in line for registration. He was beginning to get impatient due to the fact that he had been standing in line for so many years in military functions, and he was just about ready to walk away, and he was showing his concern when Don Morris appeared just talking and greeting with the students and just shaking hands and making them feel welcome. Mrs. Morris said that yesterday she picked up this letter in which the young man wrote to her giving this tribute to Brother Morris. He said, "I was ready to leave the line, I was showing discontent in my face when Don Morris walked up and put his arm

around my shoulder and encouraged me for wanting to get further education," and said, "After the warmth of his conversation and his feeling toward the students, I realized that I could not leave A.C.C. because they had what I was looking for."

COSGROVE: During the late 1940's there quite a bit of question on campus about social clubs. Were there some abuses going on that brought all of that up, or was that just a general question?

SCRUGGS: General, I believe.

COSGROVE: What was Don Morris' reaction on that controversy? How did he handle that?

SCRUGGS: Well, he was in favor of clubs. He was a club member himself as a student, and he found that a lot of good came out of the clubs and as far as [unintelligible] I don't know.

COSGROVE: He was very calm and a calming influence, wasn't he?

SCRUGGS: Yes. Very much.

COSGROVE: Also, a question that was frequently batted about in those days during World War II and then during the Korean War was the war question and whether a Christian could serve in military combat. Did Don Morris ever express himself on this or take a definite

stand?

SCRUGGS: I don't know. I don't know how he talked about it or felt about it or defended it or what.

MRS. SCRUGGS: My opinion is that he never let things like that become an issue.

COSGROVE: He left that up to the individual to decide in other words?

SCRUGGS: Yes.

COSGROVE: I wanted to ask, too, about a thing that I had heard about his mediating in labor disputes. Do you know anything about that?

SCRUGGS: Not anything.

COSGROVE: I had heard somewhere that he helped in some labor problems at the cement plant in Maryneal and some other problems that arose; he went and helped them to work out their disputes. You are not aware of that?

SCRUGGS: I am not aware of that. That is where the Aldreges were from, and you might find some help there.

COSGROVE: Now there are other issues that come up of a moral nature in our society: the question of legalizing gambling, betting; the question of legalizing alcohol and liquor. Did Morris take a strong stand on moral issues of this kind?

SCRUGGS: Very strong stands on that and whiskey and beer elections and such as that. He would go to the

other congregations and to the other churches and get them to help everywhere we could when this issue would come up.

COSGROVE: And he was quite a civic leader wasn't he?

SCRUGGS: Oh, yes. Abilene sent Don and Alberta to Europe on a great vacation just to show their appreciation for what he had done for Abilene. That speaks to answer for your question.

COSGROVE: Do you recall specifically some of the things he did of a civic nature? The clubs he was in, et cetera?

SCRUGGS: He was in the Rotary Club. He was on the City Council, I don't know how long.

COSGROVE: I'd like to ask too, and Brother Guy, I'd especially like to ask you since you've worked at Hardin-Simmons University and even completed a degree there, did he maintain very cordial relationships with the other schools in town?

SCRUGGS: The very best.

COSGROVE: Will you tell me anything especially that he did to cooperate with them?

SCRUGGS: He was very careful on the problem we had with the other schools if it should come to problems especially like with McMurry. He was very careful to

keep that in hand.

COSGROVE: Now, what kind of problems with McMurry.

SCRUGGS: Oh, inter-school, student rivalry.

COSGROVE: What did he do to keep those things in hand?

SCRUGGS: He just kept in good touch with our leaders among our students, and then when it did come to a problem, he and the dean dealt with it very carefully and promptly, and not let it get out of hand to begin with.

COSGROVE: What contact did he make with the leaders of the other schools to work along this line? Was he very close to them?

SCRUGGS: He was very close to them and they had every confidence in him. A lot of the men at Simmons and some at McMurry were in the Rotary Club with Don. They kidded each other about their inter-relations and and always kept a lot of fun about it so that helped.

COSGROVE: Did he ever clash with one of the leaders of the other schools over anything that you know of?

SCRUGGS: I don't recall. I don't recall of any.

COSGROVE: Do you think of anything else about the life of Don Morris and about his leadership that maybe would be appropriate for this paper?

SCRUGGS: He was just dedicated one hundred per cent to

Abilene Christian College, to the church, and fearless in it. He wouldn't back down. He wasn't afraid to express himself any time.

COSGROVE: Were you an elder of the College Church of Christ?

SCRUGGS: Yes.

COSGROVE: Was he also?

SCRUGGS: A very, very good leader.

COSGROVE: How did he conduct himself in elders' meetings?

SCRUGGS: He kept quiet until everybody had expressed themselves, and now he says, "I think this way . . ." and he and J. C. Reese and some usually waited, and we got the cream of the crop at the last. And I have seen that happen just time and time again. He just sat there in a deep study and, "Well, now let's see, I believe that . . ." He was a very, very fine leader.

COSGROVE: Did he ever have to get harsh or stern, I'm talking now about the school work, with some student or some teacher that was out of line?

SCRUGGS: Yes, sir. He never would back down on teachers or students when they were in the wrong. He wouldn't compromise at all, and most of the time he was able to come out very good with these, and with teachers and faculty and then students, and sometimes they, he wouldn't

back down on principle.

COSGROVE: Did any of the teachers tend to hold a grudge against him for being firm and resolute?

SCRUGGS: Yes, we've had some that were pretty grouchy about it and didn't think he ought to throw his weight around like that, but that still didn't bother him if there was principle involved, and I know that you have heard that same thing with others you have talked to.

MRS. SCRUGGS: I think that you could say they would disagree with him some way in a matter, but that they knew that he was holding to a definite principle and that he loved them in spite of the differences they might have. They respected him because they knew he loved them.

COSGROVE: Folks, I appreciate so much this interview and the information that you have given me.

SCRUGGS: Well, we appreciate helping, especially happy because I loved Don long, long years, and it would take us the rest of the day and night, everything that happened in school and life together as children and children's children and we put him and his family as among our greatest friends.

COSGROVE: Okay. Well, thank you again.