

INTERVIEW OF MAMIE BURGESS, II

conducted by Richard Savage, Fall 2008

Mamie Burgess was secretary in the Mathematics Department for over 30 years, beginning in 1966 and retiring in 2000. This is the second part of the interview.

R.S. Well, we've talked about the faculty, your work, and the chairmen. We haven't talked much about the students. Did you notice the change in the students over the years?

M.B. Probably not too much. Even though I had a lot of contact with students, especially during registration, I really didn't have a lot of contact with the same students, except our majors. I'll come back to registration later. I remember having as many as 70 and 80 undergraduate math majors early on and then by the time I retired in 2000 we were down to, I think, 17 undergraduate majors. There was that big a drop over the years in majors. Maybe it was a change in students in that students might not have been as well prepared to go into mathematics; perhaps the high schools had not prepared them. I don't know where it all started or whether students just weren't willing to do the work required to be a math major. We usually had 7 to 8 graduate students, but I think at the same time we had 17 to 20 undergraduates, we had only 3 or 4 graduate students. The change there was among the graduate students; there was a time that we just practically had no American graduate students.

R.S. Student workers we have now. Did you have those all through your time?

M.B. No, not in the quantity they have now. We would have 1 to 3 at the most. And then over the years, as the government stipends grew larger, it actually got to where we had too many.

R.S. More than you had things to do?

M.B. Yes, more than we had a use for. But there was for the most part, in the early days, just one.

R.S. You could keep that student busy then couldn't you?

M.B. Because of the lack of computers, there was more work to be done since it was slower and it just took a lot longer to get things done. You developed close relationships with these students because they were the only one. So I have some very dear friends still who were my student workers. Concerning students at large I can't really say that much. You would always see at the beginning of the year a lot of freshmen who declared math as a major, but there was always a big attrition, especially after the first semester. They began to see that it was not as easy as high school math had been easy for them and then, when they got to Tech, either they were just too immature to buckle down to study or they just thought it was harder than they wanted to work.

R.S. Ron Sircy introduced them to reality.

M.B. They had Sircy for calculus. That was a good statement. There was a big fallout every year, but those few folks that did stay were the ones who really loved math. I think everybody on campus had to have at least one math course or they used to.

R.S. They do still.

M.B. Everybody had to pass through these doors at one time or another. But, you either did it because you had to or because you like math and there was nothing in between. Those who did it because they had to usually didn't like it, they resisted it, and those who liked it were the ones who stayed with it.

R.S. I suppose your work changed a whole lot with the change in technology and equipment over the years. You were talking about just having your electric typewriter to start, the eraser and not much else, when you started.

M.B. I remember our first copy machine. It was very particular. You had to put the paper in a certain way or it would jam up. Dr. Patil was forever jamming up the copier. If you took the paper out of the box, it had a notch on the right hand top corner and it had to go in that way and it had to go with this side up, you couldn't turn it over or turn it around. He would invariably turn it upside down or turn it over and Ron (Sircy) would have to come up and take the machine apart and unjam it. Certainly after the advent of the computer, things really changed. It used to be you would have to do everything in triplicate with carbon paper. That was our copier back then. And everything like book orders had to be ordered on a separate sheet of paper in triplicate. We used a lot of different textbooks and everything changed when we started using computers. The way we kept records and the way we did things like the textbook orders started coming to us in a computerized form and all we had to do was check things off. It was a lot simpler.

R.S. It made your work a lot easier.

M.B. It did especially in the area of typing. Of course, in the mathematical world you've got symbols. Well, we've still got the IBM Selectric typewriters, selectric meaning that you could change the element. You could change the standard element which had just the alphabet and numbers and you could put another one on and it had the mathematical symbols on it. If I typed anything using equations, I had to alternate these elements. I used to type theses for graduate students. This was back before computers were ever thought of here. The spacing had to be just perfect: so many inches above, below, on each side, and especially at the bottom. I would get this equation that would take half a page and I'd get down to the bottom and lack two lines of the equation, and I'd have to type it all over.

R.S. Very exacting work and very slow.

M.B. We had to go back and retype the whole page and stop before you got to the beginning of that equation and go to the next page. I didn't do a lot of that. I never had to type tests because by the time you wrote it out so precisely for me to type the test, it was just easier for you to put it on ditto in the first place. It would have taken me a lot longer to type it and change elements back and forth, plus you would have to proofread it so carefully, because the least little thing makes a difference in the problem.

R.S. Little bit impractical to type out tests.

M.B. Yes. So I got out of having to type tests. A lot of secretaries had to. I did type Dr. Boles's tests while he was here for his 101 class as they were mostly true and false. That was easy, but I didn't have to type other tests because it was so exacting that it wasn't practical.

R.S. You've spent quite a bit of time in Latin America. Tell us about that.

M.B. I believe the reason we went to Nicaragua was we just wanted to do something different, Thomas (Burgess, Mamie's first husband) especially, and I was too young to know any different, so I said okay let's go. He got a job teaching math and science in the American Nicaraguan School in Managua. He went in September of '67 and then came back for Christmas and got me and the girls (Deanna and Lauren). We drove to Nicaragua when we went.

R.S. That must have been an adventure.

M.B. It was. The director of the American school there hired me sight unseen as secretary for the school there. I worked for a year and a half as secretary to the director of the Nicaraguan School in Managua and yes, it was an adventure. The girls were 2 and 7. We bought a 1968 Volkswagen truck. I don't know if you ever saw one or not. From the front they look just like the van. You had two seats like the interior of a car then it has a pickup back end. The bed wasn't very deep and the sides would fold down so it would be a flatbed.

R.S. I've heard of them like that, but I don't think I've ever seen one.

M.B. Well we bought one. We took possession of it one evening very late, packed it up that night and headed for Nicaragua the next morning. It took us a week to drive there because we drove to Arkansas and spent a night with my family on the way down, then we drove to Dallas to spend the night with Thomas's family, then the next day we drove to Laredo, Texas and spent the night there, and then crossed the Mexican border the next day. We drove across Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and to Managua in Nicaragua. At each country's border we would stop and have to go through customs the next morning. Those countries are like driving across a state here and it's not always an easy day's drive. It was an adventure. We knew no Spanish, neither one of us.

R.S. But you got along.

M.B. We got along. The good Lord was just with us. It was very interesting. I loved it. The people there were so great. I really enjoyed being there.

R.S. You said earlier that you wanted to get back to talking about registration at Tech.

M.B. You know what registration is like today and you remember the box system, don't you?

R.S. Yes, it's totally changed from when I was a student.

M.B. You had the wooden boxes with the IBM punch cards and you had to haul them all over to the University Center. There would be about six or seven boxes. Each course had its own little group of cards, and before we went, we would determine how many students were the maximum number, we'd put that many cards in the box, and when we ran out they were gone. We would always leave a little leeway and in special circumstances we could put someone in. You never knew if those people that you gave those cards to were actually going to register for that class. A lot of times they didn't follow through with registration. You had no computer to go and check that you had a class of 35 because that's how many cards you had given out. When class time came there might only be 28.

R.S. A student would pick up a card just in case they couldn't get another class.

M.B. Right!

R.S. So they'd have some cards and not use them all. Was there a method to let a few extra students in?

M.B. At that time the magic number was 35 for a class except for the upper division classes and we would put 35 cards in the box, but I would order 50. To do a course listed 400 or 500, I would put maybe 25 cards in the 400 level and 10 in the 500 level in the same box. That way if all the 400 levels filled and someone else wanted one and the 500s were not taken, I'd take one of those out and I'd put a 400 in. It was all manual. After the peak registration, the boxes came back over here and I kept them on tables in the workroom in the office. It was just constant all through the day going back and forth trying to see if we actually had cards. During registration, people would be lined up down the hall, or out the door and on the front porch, trying to get into the office to get registered for a class or to change sections. If you were trying to change sections and there was no card there, we thought the class was full. Until we actually got the class rolls, which was usually at least three days into the term, we didn't know who was actually in the class or if the cards were just out. Registration was a whole lot different then.

R.S. It was a long, lengthy process and not as efficient.

M.B. Allan told me that Brian had been thinking of some questions. I expected him to come up with something off the wall.

R.S. He suggests here that I ask if you have any special likes, dislikes or pet peeves.

M.B. Regarding the work?

R.S. Yes, I suppose.

M.B. Well, not really. As I said earlier, I feel really blessed that I've been in this department. After talking to secretaries over the campus about their departments, their chairs, their faculty, I was very, very happy with my job here. The one big pet peeve over all the years of the different faculty—and you were one of the worst : : :

R.S. Thank you, Mamie. We can edit that out!

M.B. No! That stays! : : : were forms that needed to be filled out and returned to the office, whatever they were. Faculty who would for various reasons wouldn't get around to getting the materials turned back in to me, that's the one thing that made my job harder than anything else.

R.S. I'm sorry. It sort of got lost on the desk a lot of times.

M.B. Other than that, I really can't think of a single faculty member who was totally obnoxious or really hard to work with or hard to get along with. That says a lot for the number of years that I've been here and the number of faculty that have come and gone over that period of time. There were some obviously that were not as pleasant as others. They all had their eccentricities, idiosyncrasies, but we had really, really good faculty over here. I liked my chairs. I liked my physical office space. I loved my co-worker, Vickie (Mayberry). I liked the other secretaries in the building, which for many years was just the one for Physics, me, and then for Computer Science. We always had a good working relationship with every secretary. Physics used to have a major turnover in secretaries and I've always gotten along real well with the other secretaries in the building. I think I always had a good relationship with other secretaries campus wide. I don't like conflict and I always try to live my life in such a way that I don't irritate anybody if I can help it. I just try to be helpful to the students and the faculty and just do the best that I could and I really don't have any major complaints about this department. It was always good to me.

R.S. How about the split in the department back in the '80s? Was there a lot extra work dealing with that?

M.B. Yes, there was quite a bit of work in the actual division. First of all, physical space had to be allocated. There was some conflict there. Not major, but there was some because naturally one wants this and the other wants that. Not a major problem, but other than that I think the biggest thing was just paperwork, separating out the files. I worked with the lady who they hired as secretary when they first moved out. I worked with her about a month. She came into my office and I acquainted her with the faculty, the procedures. The budget had to be separated out. It wasn't difficult, but it was time consuming. You know that Dr. Roger Lessman, Dr. Don Ramsey, Dr. Leland Long were all math teachers, and Barbara Briggs stayed in math but she taught Computer Science; Steve Khleif, too. Those were all mathematicians who retrained as computer science teachers so those people that went with the Computer Science Department had been math teachers up to that point.

R.S. David Hume too.

M.B. Yes, David Hume. It was not like having to get used to the new department in the building. It was the same old faces; they were just down the hall. Other than that, I think the split went rather well.

R.S. Seems to have, from my memory of it. I'd been here a few years before the split.

M.B. I don't think we had any major problems. Just a few minor disagreements over space allotment and that smoothed out.

R.S. Thinking back over the years, when we had faculty

meetings, way back, I don't think we had a secretary there keeping notes. In later years we did. So I guess we've added to some of the secretarial work. How'd that come about?

M.B. Let's see when did we start doing that? It was probably during Alice Mason's administration. I think it was because there had been some disagreements over he said/she said. I guess when we started it was just to make sure that there was no confusion as to who said what.

R.S. I remember a lot of disagreements at that time. I guess it was just to be careful about what was what.

M.B. Up to that point there had not been all these issues in faculty meetings because everything was pretty much brought to a vote. And then this one particular faculty member always needed to raise objections to everything and filibuster the faculty meetings. But up to that point, there had been no need to take minutes because probably the most momentous occasions has been changing from quarters to semester systems and the split of the department. But then somewhere in there the university system changed and there were more and more committees doing different things whereas before it had been just a kind of consensual departmental agreement. Invariably you had people that didn't agree with what the committee recommended. For the most part it was basically a stop gap measure; that we could prove we said what or didn't say what. I think it was probably mid-Alice's tenure. She was chair for 12 years and it was probably somewhere in the middle of that time that I started taking the notes.

R.S. Brian has one last question for me here that I haven't asked. He suggests that you tell the story about how you met your second husband, Al Goulet.

M.B. It was November of '93, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. I had started to Nashville (I lived west of Baxter), and I would get on the interstate at Exit 276. As I pulled onto the interstate, this carrier truck moved over to the left hand lane to let me on. He went on around me and when I got my speed up, I passed him. I had my CB radio turned on. I wasn't talking, but it was on and as truckers often do, he told me it was all clear to pull back in. We started talking on the CB radio. We talked to Lebanon and he asked me if I'd stop at the truck stop there and go in and have a cup of coffee with him, which I did. It was a public place and I was sure it would be all right. So we sat there and talked awhile and he got my phone number. When he left I thought, "Yeah, that's the last I'll ever see of you." But he called me that very night—he was on his way to Memphis. We had always had a family dinner on Thanksgiving Day, but that year I had said to the girls that since it was always a problem for them to go to their in-laws at noon and then come to my house at night, we wouldn't do Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday. We'll do it on Sunday instead. So, he called me that night and asked me if I had any plans for tomorrow. It was the first time ever in my life I did not have plans for Thanksgiving Day. I said no I don't. He said well I'm coming back through how about having dinner with me. So he came by the next afternoon, Thanksgiving Day, we had dinner that evening and he went on his way. He'd call me every once in a while when he would be coming through. He'd stop and we would go out and eat

supper. He got to where he called more and more frequently. To make a long story short, over the next year and a half we had a long distance relationship. I didn't really see him that often because he didn't have a lot of time to stop. We married on April 29, 1995, but he only lived 3 years. He died in October of '98. But that's how I met him, talking on the CB.

R.S. Not many people would have a story like that.

M.B. No. I firmly trust in God to take charge of my life. Thomas had been dead at that time five years and I just told the Lord that if you've got somebody out there for me, you're going to have to show him to me because I don't know where to look. And I just dropped it. I wasn't going around looking for somebody. I wasn't dating anybody. I just firmly believe that it was ordained by the Lord because if I had left my house one minute earlier or later or he had driven a different speed, we would not have met exactly at my exit at that point in time. At 70 miles an hour it wouldn't take 30 seconds for either one of us to be out of sight. So, I just thank the Lord that He led me to him. We had a wonderful 3 years before he had his heart attack. Over the years, I guess I've seen the whole gamut of the human relationship. Births, deaths, divorces, marriages, loss of parents, loss of spouses, deaths of family members. Those things bring you closer together because you share. In this department at least, it was kind of like a big family. Everybody seemed to care about what was going on with other people lives.

R.S. That makes for a nice place to work.

M.B. It was. I don't think I could ever have been happier anywhere else. When Thomas was so sick for so many years I was always able to leave work if he was in the hospital or I had to not come in on the spur of the moment. I always had a chair that was very sympathetic about my situation and worked with me well. It made my stressful life a whole lot less stressful because they were so understanding. I never considered changing jobs. And I tried to do a good job.

R.S. We enjoyed having you over the years. We appreciate it. Have we covered everything, you think?

M.B. Here's one thing I remember. One day I was looking through the files for something else and I ran across my personnel folder. My salary, and I don't know whether it was the very first year or somewhere in my very early tenure here, was \$2,800 a year.

R.S. Times have changed.

M.B. I guess it was fairly average for the time and place. Looking back at it, it just seemed like practically nothing. So yes, I'd say things have changed radically. But overall I think Tennessee Tech is a good place to work.

R.S. I'll agree with that. I haven't looked to go anywhere else either.

M.B. I retired when I did because I had seen too many people get sick or die shortly after they retired after they had worked on years past when they could have retired. I just wanted to be able to enjoy my time, as much as I have. It wasn't the job and I didn't quit because I was unhappy with my work. Actually, Al and I had planned to do some traveling. I was planning to

retire the end of December of '98, because I was eligible for retirement November 1. I said I would finish out the semester. I already had my papers filled out. I hadn't turned them in, but I already had them filled out to retire at the end of that year. Then Al died October 23. I lacked enough time to draw widow's social security, so I had to work another year and six weeks, including a few days in January to get my holiday pay. I said that I'd work through the end of January to help the new person get through registration, because I wouldn't have wanted to bring a new person in right at that time. After the semester started, and things settled down with registration, I left at the end of January 2000. I've never regretted it. Since retirement I've done some medical missionary trips to Central and South America. I do gardening. I love my flowers. I love to work in the yard. I read. And I have worked temporary jobs over the campus for the last eight years; a lot of temporary jobs.

R.S. They keep calling you back in.

M.B. The advent of Banner (the new computer operating system for TTU) has pretty much stopped that because unless I take some Banner training, which I'm not inclined to do at this time, I wouldn't be much help to anybody. About all I could do now is to be a receptionist. I couldn't really do the computer work that is required now. Maybe that was just a signal that it was time to quit. I feel blessed in having good relationships wherever I worked on campus. And I've really enjoyed the medical mission trips. I've been to El Salvador. I've been to Mexico, I've been to Nicaragua, and I've been to Peru twice. I'm planning to go back to Peru and Nicaragua this coming year.

R.S. Sounds interesting and rewarding.

M.B. It is. It's hard. You work five days, have one day for shopping and sightseeing and two days traveling. A lot of times you work from early in the morning to late in the evening and see as many as 800 or 900 patients a day. Of course I have no medical training whatever and I'm not fluent in Spanish, but my Spanish is good enough. On the last two trips, I have done nothing but translate for the doctors. Other times, we filled prescriptions, collected urine samples, washed out ears, whatever needed to be done. That's been very rewarding.

R.S. Sounds like you have a lot to do.

M.B. I try to stay busy. I'm happy on my little shelf. I enjoy my family. I have two daughters, three grandsons, a great grandson and a great granddaughter. They're all real close. In fact my youngest daughter, Lauren, was the secretary in the Biology Department. So the tradition goes on.

R.S. I appreciate your coming. I think people will find this interesting. I know I have.

M.B. I think the department has been good for me. And I hope I have been good for the department.

R.S. For sure you have.

M.B. Thank you for inviting me, Richard.

R.S. Thank you, Mamie.