

Steadman, Connie Marie Badgett ^[1]

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by Kelly Agan, Government & Heritage Library, 2018

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Connie Marie Badgett Steadman grew up in Locust Hill Township in Caswell County, North Carolina. Her father, Cortelyou Badgett, was a gospel singer and choir director, and she grew up singing gospel music with her family. They were known as the Badgett Family singers. She joined the Air Force after high school and spent 3 years in the service from January 1958 to January 1961, serving with the 1611th Air Transport Wing at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. After she left the service, she returned to North Carolina and later began singing with her sisters as the Badgett Sisters. The Badgett Sisters have kept alive a tradition of African American harmony and sacred song. In 1990, they received the North Carolina Arts Council's Folk Heritage Award.

Connie Marie Badgett was born on September 8, 1939, in Caswell County, North Carolina to Cortelyou Odell Badgett and Caroline Graves Badgett. Her family had eight children, and she was the youngest. Her father was a minister and gospel singer who sang and organized gospel quartets in Caswell County and eventually organized the family into a quartet, the Badgett Family. Connie began singing with them when she was five.

Connie Badgett went to a local Caswell County grammar school called the Fitch School. For grades eight through twelve she went to the Caswell County Training School, an all-black school during segregation. A highly motivated student, she graduated from high school when she was sixteen.

She recalled in an oral history interview that her father wanted her to go to law school. She had other ideas and instead moved to Washington, D.C. to live with her sister and get a job. At that point, she was determined to join the Air Force to become a flight attendant. But she could not join because she was not yet eighteen, and she was too young to work. So, she returned home and then when she was eighteen she went to Danville, Virginia to sign up for the Air Force. After signing up, she traveled to Roanoke, Virginia for swearing in. She was then sent to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas for basic training.

At Lackland she shared a room with two white women, and she recalled that was her first experience working and going to school outside the black community during segregation. Her roommates were also singers, and the three began singing together. After basic training, she was stationed at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. She began work in personnel operations, which was not her first choice: she wanted to be around airplanes. She was later transferred to flight maintenance where she was in charge of aircraft inspection reports. She also joined a service club where she became a solo singer.

Connie Steadman also recalled some of the discrimination and racism that she experienced in the service including not being allowed to be served at restaurants when she was traveling with other white service personnel. She also recalled an occasion when her white colleagues walked out of a restaurant with her in solidarity.

She was offered a spot at officer training school, but she was unable to accept the space due to a medical issue she was experiencing. She subsequently received an honorable discharge in 1961, although her condition had yet to be properly diagnosed.

She married Robert L. Steadman in Alexandria, Virginia in 1961. And in 1968 after she had begun to have children, she learned that the cause of her illness had been cancer of the uterus, and by that time it had spread throughout her body. She received chemotherapy at the time and has remained in remission since. The Steadmans lived for a period in Maryland and had five children. They divorced in 1975 in Caswell County.

After she left the Air Force, Connie and her sisters, Cleonia Graves and Celester Sellars, took up singing again with their father. In 1978, they met Glenn Hinson, a folklorist working for the N.C. Folklife Festival, who helped them get started with their first recording. Unfortunately, Cortelyou Badgett passed away in 1978 before the recordings could be made, although a tape recording of the four of them singing in a living room survives. In 1986, the Badgett Sisters at last made their first recording, "The Badgett Sisters – The voice that Refused to Die." Cortelyou Badgett made a one-man recording in 1954, performing all four parts of a song *a capella*, and a portion of that recording is included in the album.

In 1990, the Badgett Sisters received the North Carolina Arts Council's Folk Heritage Award for their contribution to African American traditional music heritage. They have performed sacred music and traditional hymns, gospels and spirituals as well as their own songs at concerts and events all across North Carolina, at Carnegie Hall, at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. and as far away as Brisbane, Australia. Connie Steadman has also performed at the annual African American Cultural Festival at the North Carolina Museum of History.

Connie Steadman has been an active participant in the Caswell County community. Among many efforts, in 2005 she was appointed to two County government boards, the Jury Commission and the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council. In the early 2000s, she also used her experience with cancer to promote a local Relay for Life event in Caswell County.

Recordings of the Badgett Family and Badgett Sisters:

"The Badgett Sisters – The voice that Refused to Die 1986 A Capella." 1986. Discogs.

<https://www.discogs.com/release/6750541-Badgett-Sisters-The-Voice-That-Refused-To-Die> [2] (accessed March 5, 2018).

Badgett Sisters recordings, from WorldCat. https://www.worldcat.org/search?qt=worldcat_org_all&q=badgett+sisters [3] (accessed March 5, 2018).

References:

MilColl OH, Connie B. Steadman Interview, August 8, 2013, Military Veterans Oral History Collection, Military Collection, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.

"Recent Appointments to Local Boards." *News of Orange County*, July 2, 2005.

Lyons, Kelly Starling. "Free festival celebrates African-American culture, food, music." *News & Observer* (Raleigh, N.C.), September 3, 2010.

"Steadman shares story to promote Relay for Life." *Caswell Messenger* (N.C.), May 18, 2005.

Firesheets, Tina Adams. "Sisters add songs to history lesson – Celester Sellars and Connie B. Steadman, otherwise known as the Badgett Sisters – shared stories and spirituals with students Wednesday." *News & Record* (Greensboro, N.C.), February 22, 2001.

Bumgardner, Ed. "Digging for Roots: Series Celebrates Native Music of N.C." *Winston-Salem Journal* (Winston-Salem, N.C.), January 14, 2000.

Rowe, Jeri. "Carolina Roots concert lets heritage be heard." *News & Record* (Greensboro, N.C.), January 13, 2000.

Connie Badgett Steadman. Photograph. Caswell County Photograph Collection. Flickr.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/ncccha/4110755477> [4] (accessed March 5, 2018). [Photograph of Connie Badgett in uniform while in the Air Force.]

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