

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
WITH
JAMES GARNER

20 JULY 1995

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

INTERVIEWED BY REGINA FORSYTHE
FOR THE Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW #

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Albert Gore". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial 'A'.

ALBERT GORE RESEARCH CENTER

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT



**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
JAMES GARNER**

Q. M. SMITH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #QMS.033

FORSYTHE: This tape is part of the Quintin Miller Smith Collection designated as QMS.1995.33. This is Regina Forsythe. I am interviewing Mr. James Garner. Today is Thursday, July 20, 1995. The interview is being conducted in the home of Mr. Garner located at 1514 Mercury Boulevard, Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The tape of this interview along with a transcription of this interview will become part of the Quintin Miller Smith Collection and will be available to the public. Future researchers may include portions of this interview in their publications. Is that all right with you Mr. Garner?

GARNER: That is fine.

FORSYTHE: What is your full name and birthdate?

GARNER: James William Garner. I graduated from high school at Manchester, Tennessee in 1935. I am 78 years old and I wanted to go to college. We had no money. I was raised in a very poor community and nobody in that community had ever gone to college. Two other young men and myself found a trailer, that was used for food, up on the mountain. It had iron thrasher wheels on it. We brought it down off the mountain. We fixed it up and put one double bed and a single bed in it and put a woodstove in it. We had a well and had our own coal lamps. Where I lived we didn't have electricity and running water, that sort of thing. We decided to come to school down here. So I hitchhiked down and looked the school over. I found out where the president was. He was in the Main building-- now called Kirksey. I went in and looked around. I didn't talk to anybody, but I checked out the school and found out that we had to be good showmen if we were going to get to go to college there. Two days after school started in the fall of 1935,(when I graduated [high school]in '35), I went to college here. We rented a truck and my dad and another fellow drove and pulled the tongue of this outfit down here and it rattled. We had to stop and grease it in Coffey County. Finally we stopped in front of the Main Building. Then we got out; we went up the steps and turned to the left to the office of Mr. Lyon. So I said to the secretary "The three of us want to see him." So he was pacing the floor looking our the window at this rattling thing that come up in front of the college and students were all around looking at it. So I went in and I was the spokesman. I said, "We have come to College. We have our own place to sleep and wood in there to build a fire so we could cook food. We have food we have brought from the farm and canned goods. We are going to cook. Now I have got five dollars and it takes fifteen to register. That is all I've got. My buddy has seventeen and one has twenty seven. That is all we got, now we come to go to school." He just walked around and around and he said "I have

been here a longtime and I have never seen anybody do this before, do you really mean you would like to go?" "Yes we do. We have come to go." He said "then you shall, if you really prove to me that you want to go." He called in Mr. Beasley; he was the Dean. They had a little conversation privately and they came back. He said, "There will be somebody out there who will tell you where to take this trailer." So we went back to the trailer and they guided us up to the barn. They just unhitched the truck and left it there and went home. Pretty soon car loads of men started arriving; they were newspaper men from all over. Men coming to interview these kids and to find out what was going on. It just went all over the country about this. The news picked it up and sent it many places. The next morning we slept there. We started a fire in our wood stove and cooked something to eat. Then the next morning they woke us up early, with a tractor. That tractor pulled us behind Jones Hall and on the end of Jones Hall they dug holes for the wheels and they put steps on both ends. I couldn't believe it; they put electricity in our trailer! I had never been around electricity much. So we could go around the end of the building and come in. Here w[ere] the bathroom and the showers. Everything we had, it was really good. The next day, after we got settled in, a fellow came up there named Mr. Hasty. He said, "you boys need to get ready to work. I am going to work you this afternoon." So the three of us left. Between the library and the main building was a walkway. In the middle of it, there was a lot of dirt that needed sod on it and that is what we went to do. I said "That man, the president is up there looking out the window, and is going to see if we really work." So we really worked; we worked very hard all afternoon. I blistered my hands; they worked us out. That made him convinced that we were going to [work]. So I cut the hedges for 35 cents an hour-- all the way down Tennessee Boulevard, down Main Street all the way to the Methodist church. There was a hedge there and I clipped it my hand. They didn't have the fancy stuff they have got today. Well, also, my job was to mow around the President's house. I always enjoyed that because Mrs. Lyon would invite me in and I could drink a Coca-Cola. I wasn't much used to anything like that. She would give me a Coke. They were real nice to us. So I went to school all that Year. And I got a school to teach at a place called Pocahontas in Coffee County. With one year of college, you could teach then. And I taught and at the end of that year I came back for the spring. The trailer was still there. Me and a boy named Fred Scarborough, who had worked with the Agriculture of this county for his whole career, were supposed to go home. I had to have a car to teach school. We were going home Friday the 13th to get more food. Fred didn't show up. So [I] went to the library and [I] went to the basement; he was sitting with the prettiest little girl you ever did see. Man she was pretty, her name was Geraldine Eaton, I said "Fred, get lost." So I made a date with her for Sunday night when I got back. I [went] home and my mother came back to meet me. I grab[bed] her and sw[ung] her around. I said, "I met the girl today that I am going to marry." She said "you never had a date with her?" I said, "No, [I] haven't but I am going to marry her." Five years later I got her. So Friday the 13th was one of the important days of my life, that is when I met her, she was a freshman, and I hadn't gone to school that year. So I would go to school when I could go in Coffee [County]. We registered people for

the draft in 1940. So I volunteered; I was the first man to volunteer from Coffee County. I spent five and one half years in there. I had been going in camp during the summer time [and] three years before that to six cavalry. I helped test the first Jeeps that they ever had in the army. They sent me to San Antonio Texas. [The Army] got a whole bunch of different people and they formed the first battalion of military police in the United States. We didn't know that at the time, but all these young men like me were going to become officers of the new corps . So I was one of the first ten men ever commissioned military police of the United States. They sent me up to train further. I was in Africa and I had a great deal of Africa corps, nine thousand Germans and ten thousand Italians there in the desert about 175 miles away from Casablanca. We rotated all those men and sent them back to the United States as prisoners of war. I came home with the last bunch and retrained. [Then I] went to England for the invasion. I hit on D day, in England, on Omaha Beach. [Later], the president, this year, invited me and about four thousand to set with him on the fiftieth anniversary of it, when everybody in America watched this. I have got the badge and all that. I didn't go at that time. My family had never heard me talk much about the war. We raised three children. So my wife wanted me to go. I didn't go then, but we went about three weeks later. I walked the beach for about three and one half hours. [I] emptied my heart of all the pain [of] seeing so many people die and nearly not making it myself. I saw all that up on top of the hill where I [got] all the vehicles out. You see, military police are very important people, they handle the traffic in battle. [Military police] [move] the traffic and [tell] it where to go. Before, I couldn't talk about that much because it is terrible to be out wading in the water and see a vehicle running and push the dead man and out and find the first live soldier and tell him to drive it. One of the hard ones for me to tell about are the three times I walked beside the a truck and three times they killed the drivers. I would just push him out and get another man in. So I led a pretty well charmed life. I fought all across. I was in every battle, that was fought there. I was decorated 13 times in World War II. I have the purple heart. I also have the soldiers medal, which is equivalent to the medal of Honor, only it is for saving lives instead of killing the enemy. I am very proud of that one. I got shot the last day of the war in Salzburg Austria, so I have the purple heart on all sorts of things. But that is not important. I came back home then and I had been an officer. I found out that all I ever made as principal of a school there was 85 dollars a month in a year, and that wouldn't hardly support a man and his wife. We had had a daughter; I had gotten married to my wife as soon as I got to be an officer. I felt like [it], so we got married. I went over seas and my daughter was born on the second day of August during the invasion. It was a month after she was born that I ever knew I had a daughter. So I came back from the war and decided that I must change professions if I wanted to make a decent living for my family. So I did. I decided to go to pharmacy school. I came back over here and Mr. Q.M. Smith became a dear friend of mine. I was one of the first GIs to come to this college and come back on the GI bill. They didn't think that was going to be a big thing, but it turned out. I consider the most important thing they have ever done about educating many of the people in America went on the GI bill. [It] brought the level of our education up in the

country and their jobs up as well. I took my pre-pharmacy courses out here, with Mr. Q.M. He was president of the school at that time. Then I went to the University of Tennessee and got my doctor's degree in pharmacy--one of the first that did that. I graduated in 1946. That is a story on the brief history on that sort of thing. Mr. Beasley lived to be in his eighties and he would talk to me many times after that. He said that is one of the most important things that put MTSU on the map was this trailer. It went all over the country and they heard about this school from every where and they got many letters. As a matter of fact, [Mr. Beasley] said there was a lady from up in Massachusetts that wanted to send all three of you and pay everything and let you go to college and let you go first class, but I felt and Mr. Lyon felt that we would be better off if we had to work our way through school. They never went, my partners, never went on to school after that first year. I had the trailer; it stayed there for some time . Finally, I sold it and it was moved off of campus.

FORSYTHE: Who were your partners?

GARNER: Waymond Lowrey and Corbey Argo-- their names are listed on that. We had this together and so they did teach school. However, they didn't come back to the college. Mr. Argo spent his career. I guess he finally graduated down here. I don't know. But they are both dead now and have been for sometime.

FORSYTHE: What was your major?

GARNER: Education I guess [that] would be the way to say it.

FORSYTHE: Did you student teach?

GARNER: No I had already had all mine. I taught for five years in Coffee County.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about T.J. Golightly.

GARNER: He had me [as] an experiment. As a matter of fact, I got fifty cents an hour for being interviewed and taking tests. I believe it was about ten or twelve of us. Dr. Golightly was one of the first of the psychiatrists in the country. He had a brilliant mind [and] he was a most unusual man. He would give us tests like ,for instance, [where] they would get up and look at you and they would put T or F. You would put down what you thought [they were thinking]. I got to where I could do about eighty out of one hundred of those which was very high. Now [on] some of the others, I couldn't do as well. On one or two [tests], I could do even better. We did all kinds of tests to see if we could communicate with each other in many ways. We took all kinds of tests with Dr, Golightly. He wanted me in his group every time I would come back to school.

FORSYTHE: Dr, Charles Lewis

GARNER: It was Dr. Lewis and [his]grandson. He always talked about his grandson in every class. Billy-- I believe [that] was his name. So I remember that more than anything. He was a good teacher.

FORSYTHE: Neal Frazier

GARNER: He was a religious fellow. He taught religion and things like that. When I came back from the war, I took some of his extra time. He died suddenly and Q.M. Smith called me in and I taught the rest of that semester. I taught his classes on Bible and so on.

FORSYTHE: Philip Mankin

GARNER: He was a most unusual fellow. [Nobody really knew] Mr. Philip much, but he was a very bright fellow. He had a most unusual sense of humor, but some people he related well with and some people he just sort of ignored them. I was one that he communicated with.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about Mr. James

GARNER: I learned a great deal about health from him. I believe it was once a week they assembled in the auditorium for vespers service and he was setting next to me. [Then], all at once, he just passed out. It really got to me. I dashed out and told them. His wife came in and she just put a piece of candy in his mouth. He was all right in a minute. That is when I learned about diabetics. Diabetics are brilliant people most usually and he was a very fine teacher. He was diabetic all the time and after I came here at the prescription shop he was one of my patients until he died. He was a very humanitarian type individual. [Mr. James] knew how to help people who wanted to do something with themselves. He encouraged me many times.

FORSYTHE: Edna Scofield?

GARNER: She taught geography did she not? She took an interest in me and two or three others students. She was never married or anything. We would go study about things in her house. She would just ask questions about what we thought about this and that and the other in her geography world. We visited in her apartment, which is out where the hospital is now. She was a Catholic and I didn't know many of those kind of people. I went to her church one day, one Sunday. I had never been to a Catholic service and she explained it to a group of us students just as if she was in a classroom. She was a hard working[and] hard driving. [She] wanted everybody to learn everything.

FORSYTHE: E May Saunders

GARNER: She was a music teacher and I can't read a note of music. She taught me to do a part in the Messiah that she had. I memorized it and had to do it for her. She didn't have anybody to do what she wanted me to do.

FORSYTHE: Dean Beasley

GARNER: Dean Beasley is one of my favorite people. He was a remarkable man in many ways. He gave his whole life to this school and he was very good at it. He saw to it that many people got to go to college that would never have gone-- me being one of them.

FORSYTHE: Knox Hutchinson

GARNER: Knox Hutchinson was assistant secretary of agriculture to our country. He had a farm out here and his son still had it. It is along the river there. He had me and two or three other fellows out and said, "I want you to catch a big fish. Let me show you how." He had a plug and I had never fished with a plug. He tossed it out there and showed me how. On the first cast, I caught a great big bass. Man, we had a time, but I caught it. I will always remember that. His wife [came] down and [provided] us lemonade while we were fishing in his front yard.

FORSYTHE: George Davis

GARNER: Mr. Davis taught me more botany than anybody I have ever seen. They are [tearing] down his home on Main street. It is being torn down today. That is where he lived. It was almost in the country; it is just a block or two from where I live here. He would take us on field trips and explain to us about nature and many things like that. He taught me to appreciate the world that we live in from the growth of plants and that sort of thing.

FORSYTHE: Ollie Green

GARNER: She was in chemistry and she was top notch. When I came back from the war, chemistry has always been easy for me. Nothing to it, it is just automatically easy. I went into her class and she was getting into ill health in those days. She was older and she would not feel like teaching the class. [So], she had me teaching the class one whole semester off and on. She was a real nice person. She never married and she gave her whole life to teaching her math. She was proud of her students who went off to school and [to] accomplish things.

FORSYTHE: B.B. Gracy

GARNER: B.B. Gracy was a Gideon. I am a Gideon [as well]. [These are people] that [hand] out the bibles everywhere. Well, he was in athletics. His son was a friend of mine and we played tennis together an awful lot at the university. [His son was] the one who got wounded in the war. [He was] shot through the back and was helpless

from the waist down. [He] lived for many years here. His father built a special home for him. One of his hobbies was growing orchids and he was very good at it.

FORSYTHE: WC Hastings

GARNER: He was in charge of the plant of the school. He was over me. The first year I was there was one of the coldest winters we have had in history. We would shovel coal all night long into they furnace to keep everything warmed up on the campus. He was over all of this, Mr. Hastings was.

FORSYTHE: Miss Mary Hall

GARNER: She was a remarkable woman. When she was almost 90 years old, we traveled to Hawaii, Japan, Thailand, through Australia, and a lot of places in the world. She just bounced like everything. Her father was a doctor up here at Kittrell. My friend Billy Taylor lives in that house now. He bought it from her a long time ago and he has fixed it back up. Miss Mary spent all of her life educating people. She was very good at it.

FORSYTHE: Roy Simpson

GARNER: Mr. Simpson was a very unusual man. His wife had a flower shop near the college. Even after he retired, he worked with flowers. He was also was remarkable in many ways. He was superintendent [of what is] called Southeast Baptist now. He just took time off from everything and really got that Sunday School functioning.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about PA Lyon

GARNER: He was a fine looking man and he was a gentleman of dignity. He dressed up all the time and was as sharp as he could be. He was a native of this area. He was a friend of my wife's grandfather. Mr. Lyon was the one responsible for the me being able to go to school.

FORSYTHE: QM Smith

GARNER: He didn't talk very plain. He had difficulty talking. He was one of the most remarkable men I have met in my lifetime. After he retired, he would come by my prescription shop. He worked across the street from me in a bank. [So], he would come over every day and give me some words of wisdom. He was a brilliant man and he could make the finest speech you ever heard, even with [his speaking problem]. He was one of the best speakers you would know. He knew how to organize too. He was the one who really organized the university so it could function in a new age.

FORSYTHE: Tell me about Old Main. What shape was it in?

GARNER: It was in good shape. The columns are still up there. It was as in as good a shape as you would find anywhere. There was only one boys' dormitory in those days and there were two for ladies. A lot of them had to stay off of the campus. As a matter of fact, a lot of the kids would go to eat down the street. They would have tickets and so on. I couldn't so I would have to cook my own. We had to bring it with us.

FORSYTHE: What did you do on the weekends?

GARNER: I went home most of the time and to get more food.

FORSYTHE: What did students do for fun?

GARNER: Well, I found out that you could buy five tickets for the movie. They were the same price as four, so I would sell tickets a nickel cheaper than they would buy them. I would buy ten tickets and I would sell eight of them and then I would have ten to go to the show. So I would get a girlfriend when I was a freshman. I would walk to town. There weren't many cars on campus and nobody could afford that stuff anyway. We were used to walking.

FORSYTHE: Well thank you.