

Mississippi Oral History Program

Simpson County Historical and Genealogical
Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Ernest Camper

Interviewer: Joe White

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An Oral History with Ernest Camper, Volume 1217, Part 3

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Biography

Ernest Camper was born in Pinola, MS in August 1911. He grew up on a farm that grew cotton and corn. Camper and his first wife had ten children and were married for thirty-seven years until her death in 1979. Camper remarried to Gussie Martin Gray and remained together for eighteen years until her death. During the 1960s Camper began driving a school bus in Mendenhall, MS.

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AN ORAL HISTORY
with
ERNEST CAMPER

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Simpson County Project. The interview is with Ernest Camper and is taking place on May 3, 2003. The interviewer is Joe White. Please note that the interviewer used a voice-activated recorder, which resulted in many words being cut off by the recorder because it was set not to record silences.

White: My name is Joe White. Today is Saturday, May the third, 2003. This interview is conducted under a grant from the Mississippi Humanities Council as a part of the oral history project directed by The University of Southern Mississippi. Today we are interviewing Mr. Ernest Camper at his home near Braxton, Mississippi. Mr. Camper, could you state your full name for us, please, sir?

Camper: Ernest Camper. I don't have no middle name.

White: No middle name. And when were you born?

Camper: August the first, 1911.

White: Nineteen eleven, my dad was born that year. At that time this area was considered Pinola. Is that right?

Camper: That's (inaudible).

White: Or near Pinola.

Camper: Near Pinola, on the Old Jackson Road. This (inaudible).

White: What's the name of this road, now? It has—

Camper: They called it Heed Neely Road.

White: Heed Neely Road?

Camper: That's right.

White: But it was known as the Old Jackson Road.

Camper: It's the Old Jackson Road. Mr. George Allen, Carl Allen and them—

White: In Pinola.

Camper: Pinola. Mr. George Allen (inaudible) when they built, you know, they had it to go up there, to go to Jackson.

White: They would leave Pinola, come by [Highway] 28, and cut up this road, which was known as the Old Jackson Road.

Camper: (Inaudible). It's the Old Jackson Road, (inaudible) daddy and other (inaudible), they drove to Jackson on stock wagons.

White: Is that right?

Camper: Be gone about a week (inaudible) went out again, and they'd make it to (inaudible) the next day. They did (inaudible).

White: —up and three days back, huh?

Camper: And the next (inaudible).

White: Must have been a farmer like you.

Camper: Yes, sir.

White: Were you a farmer most of your life?

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: And what was your dad's name and your mother's name?

Camper: Daddy named Walter (inaudible).

White: Camper.

Camper: (Inaudible) Camper.

White: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Camper: I had—

White: —die young, or did they move away?

Camper: (Inaudible) died (inaudible).

White: —do you remember about growing up on a farm in Mississippi?

Camper: I remember—(laughter)

White: Too much?

Camper: I remember I worked (inaudible), and I was the last.

White: You were living on a farm with your parents at that time?

Camper: I was at (inaudible). They turned me back. I did—

White: —work. Do you ever remember having any time to play?

Camper: Oh, yes.

White: (Inaudible)

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: Where'd you go to church during those years?

Camper: New Zion.

White: At New Zion?

Camper: Yeah. It used to be—(inaudible) for everybody now.

White: Pilgrim's Rest Church.

Camper: Yeah.

White: —see them mostly one spot.

Camper: Well, they had an empty spot, and (inaudible). Afterward they went—

White: —misunderstood then. I said, "Do, re, mi." You said, "I'm sorry. I misunderstood that."

Camper: And we practiced—

White: Sounding out like sacred harp singing then.

Camper: Yeah. You know, we (inaudible).

White: —music or all kinds of music?

Camper: Well, first it was—

White: —did you grow?

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: —any of it, or did you eat most of it?

Camper: We just made (inaudible).

White: (Inaudible)

Camper: (Inaudible) sugar cane.

White: Where'd you carry your corn?

Camper: The mill.

White: To Pinola or—

Camper: Yeah, (inaudible). Then Billy Walker(?)—

White: —Fortenberry(?) I think was the last person—

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: —cotton?

Camper: Yes. I had cotton and corn and (inaudible).

White: Right. I remember reading—

Camper: —(inaudible) acres that I got a full bale of cotton.

White: Where'd you sell your cotton?

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: —gin in Pinola.

Camper: Yeah, I sure did (inaudible) cotton. (Inaudible)

White: We need to talk about your first wife here now. What was her name?

Camper: She was Rosie (inaudible).

White: —was it Minnie Brown(?)?

Camper: That's right.

White: OK. Was she from out in this area, too?

Camper: From the New (inaudible) area.

White: New (inaudible)?

Camper: Yeah.

White: Around (inaudible).

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: —some pretty big trees back then, didn't they?

Camper: Sure did. There's a few of them big (inaudible) Piney Woods. They still call it the Piney Woods (inaudible).

White: How wide were some of those stumps that were left over there?

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: (Inaudible). You still burning wood?

Camper: Yeah.

White: You burn it at a fireplace?

Camper: I got gas heaters.

White: Gas heaters now? I was going to ask you, you and your wife, how many children did you have?

Camper: Ten.

White: Ten children. Can you name them?

Camper: Seven boys.

White: Six boys.

Camper: Seven boys and three girls.

White: Seven boys and three girls.

Camper: That's right. (laughter) I told him, "The Lord seemed to hold you (inaudible)." (laughter) He looked at me. (laughter)

White: You did a lot of work in the garden to help the Lord (inaudible). (laughter)

White: I (inaudible). I made some collard greens big as I don't know what.

White: —can a lot of stuff back then? What all did you put up?

Camper: Everything, peas, butter beans, (inaudible).

White: —could find enough huckleberries to can, but I do love them.

Camper: Oh, there used to be so many on this place. Lord have mercy.

White: —I know that. Huckleberries and dumplings.

Camper: That's (inaudible) and then (inaudible).

White: —sell any vegetables on a regular basis around Pinola (inaudible)?

Camper: I (inaudible) some peas a while, down there where the (inaudible), but I can't call the name of it.

White: I'm trying to think. Can't think—to school. Where'd you go to school?

Camper: Spring Hill (inaudible).

White: We're talking about what kind of foods you ate and raised, growing up. You said y'all had canned a lot. What kind of meat did you have?

Camper: We usually have hog meat.

White: Hog meat?

Camper: Hog meat more than any kind else, and we raised cattle, too.

White: —(inaudible) meat, is that what you call that? (laughter)

Camper: I call it beef meat.

White: Beef meat.

Camper: —kill one and the community would come around and—

Unknown voice: It's OK.

White: What about hogs? How'd you kill the hogs?

Camper: We'd put them up in the—there'd be some of them—

White: How many hogs would you get at a time?

Camper: Sometimes two or three or four, but they weigh four or five hundred pounds.

White: Yeah.

Camper: Big hogs.

White: —mixed up, huh?

Camper: Then you make it like, you know souse is? Like—

White: Souse, yes.

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: —like it used to?

Camper: It tastes pretty good (inaudible).

White: (Inaudible). I've seen it. I don't think I've eaten it.

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: The light wasn't coming on, and your voice just wasn't triggering anything. When you get ready, we'll cut it on.

Unknown Voice: We're ready. It's on.

White: All right. Go ahead and finish telling me about the souse.

Camper: I'd have to help my mother. She'd take the liver and (inaudible) and grind it up together. Boil it first and then grind it all up together and mix it up. (Inaudible) She called it liver pudding. That stuff was good. A lot of folks—one man, I don't know who he was, he came along, and he wanted to know did I know any of the women what make that kind of (inaudible). He had had some (inaudible). And I told him, "No. My mama's dead. All of them women (inaudible)." I didn't know. And he (inaudible) around you know, like you do a pumpkin, peel that hull off, and then (inaudible) preserve it. And he wanted some of that. He wanted to know did I know

any of the women what (laughter) still make that. I told him, “No.” He was wanting some more watermelon rinds (inaudible).

White: I believe you told me y’all did some hunting, too. What kind of hunting did you do for food?

Camper: Squirrel hunt in the daytime and rabbit hunt; coon hunt at night and possum. (Inaudible) possum. I had a coon dog, and he’d tree both possum and coon. My daddy hunted all his life (inaudible) squirrel hunted (inaudible) squirrel. He would see there was all kinds of squirrels in them woods, that long, (inaudible) pine trees (inaudible) before the Great Southern Log Company come in. And there were red squirrels (inaudible) all over (inaudible). And we children, we went walking across the woods to go to school. Had to walk right across yonder, in them tall pines, they’d have big pine (inaudible). You ever eat pine mash?

White: Pine mash?

Camper: Uh-huh.

White: I don’t believe.

Camper: And them big, old cockleburs, they make pine mash dropping that kind of ball on the end of it, and we’d just peel it off and eat it. It was good, too. (Inaudible), walking and picking up pine (inaudible) going and walking. The Lord did a million ways to get children something to eat, look like.

White: Well, were you hungry much?

Camper: Well, used to my daddy was pretty lucky. Some of them said they didn’t get nary a biscuit every Sunday morning. They didn’t think they got it, but my daddy was pretty thrifty. We got a biscuit every morning. (Inaudible) got them in the morning.

White: He didn’t waste anything, though, did he?

Camper: (Inaudible) (laughter) (Inaudible) And I’ve known him to buy a whole barrel of flour at one time and then a half a barrel at a time. And some children, well, some was (inaudible) biscuit on Sunday morning. I remember some children, they had a hard time. I tell you, but—

White: Was it during the Depression? Was it any different than it was at any other time?

Camper: Well, it hadn’t never been no good time when we come along. (Inaudible) because you couldn’t get nary a bit of money hardly no way. I remember my—Ellis Beard(?), did you ever know him?

White: Ellis Berry(?). I know that name.

Camper: (Inaudible) had some cows over there (inaudible). He gave me a dime, and if you'd get a nickel or dime, you thought you had something.

White: Had some money, huh?

Camper: Yes.

White: Well, do you ever remember having to take off from school to farm, or did you pretty much go to school all winter?

Camper: I went to school (inaudible). Way we'd do it, every evening you come in from school, you (inaudible) to the field, working, (inaudible). See, school didn't last many months back then.

White: It didn't?

Camper: No. See, every evening we wouldn't be through gathering the cotton still when school started early. We'd come home just right on to the field and start working.

White: How many months a year did you go to school? Do you remember what months they were?

Camper: It was three or four, I think.

White: Three or four months. Now, how many years of schooling did you have?

Camper: When I started, the teacher I had, she fussed at me, said I shouldn't have stopped school (inaudible). I got to ninth grade. We started, but schoolteachers looked like the poorest folks was in the world.

White: Yeah. (laughter) They didn't have any more than anybody else.

Camper: Yeah. Our school teacher Mr. Willoughby(?), he had one old black suit, and he had (inaudible) slipped off, I reckon (laughter) when he (inaudible). I said, "I don't want to be no—they ain't got nary a bit of money." They was poorer than anybody else, and I quit. I got in ninth grade, started ninth. I didn't (inaudible).

White: You didn't see any advantages of going on.

Camper: I said they was poorer than anybody else, (laughter) and I said I (inaudible). I went to making crossties, hewing and working.

White: Making crossties? Where'd you do that work?

Camper: (Inaudible) woods around here.

White: Oh, you cut your own crossties?

Camper: That's right. My uncle over there (inaudible) plenty timber. And I made, before I hauled them, I made one hundred crossties. I worked so hard in my life. Lord have mercy. I reckon that's the reason (inaudible). I done some work. Did you know them Slaydons, Willis Slaydon(?)?

White: Yes, uh-huh.

Camper: Well, they hauled them. Loaded a hundred ties on the trailer right over there, and it come out across the lot out there, and it'd been a dump there, but they done filled the hole. But that took (inaudible). It was dry (inaudible) like the (inaudible) when they put one hundred on that trailer.

White: Who'd you sell them to?

Camper: (Inaudible).

White: Yeah, down in Georgetown.

Camper: Georgetown. They (inaudible). Me and my cousin over there, (inaudible). I had to pay thirty-five something for the hauling them, and then it was on his (inaudible). We (inaudible), and I didn't get it. Out of all them cut, I may have got \$20.

White: Twenty dollars.

Camper: Yeah. I don't know.

White: That's some hard work.

Camper: Now, you didn't get that much, but it was a heap then. But I know I carried (inaudible) had twenty-four pine and twelve oak (inaudible) had to go to (inaudible) there, put off the pine in Georgetown (inaudible). I didn't make over seven or eight dollars (inaudible).

White: But you said you hauled pulpwood during some of that time, too. Where—

Camper: I (inaudible) truck (inaudible).

White: You hauled your own pulpwood? You bought your own ton-and-a-half truck?

Camper: That's right. I'd gotten married then. I got a—

White: You had to feed some of those children that were coming along, didn't you?

Camper: That's right. And then I had three boys. After they got pretty big, they (inaudible) boys. I didn't have (inaudible) chainsaw (inaudible). I had two (inaudible).

White: But you cut the pine trees on your land mostly, huh?

Camper: (Inaudible) I cut some of them on somebody else (inaudible). I just said the Lord blessed me so wonderful to be living (inaudible) ninety-two years old.

White: How long were you and your first wife married before she died?

Camper: Thirty-seven years.

White: Thirty-seven years. When did she die?

Camper: July of [19]79.

White: July, 1979.

Camper: Yeah.

White: And you married again. This seems to be a good time later to go ahead and mention that. Your second wife was named?

Camper: Gussie(?). She was Martin before she married, but her husband had died, was a Gray.

White: Gussie Martin Gray.

Camper: That's right.

White: She was.

Camper: That's the way she (inaudible) Gussie Martin Gray Camper. (laughter)

White: And how long were y'all married?

Camper: We was married about eighteen years.

White: Eighteen years. When did she die?

Camper: (Inaudible)

White: Some of these more recent years are harder to remember. I have the same problem.

Camper: I just can't keep up. I looked at it not long ago and said, "What year did Gussie"—(laughter)

White: Yeah. I'm facing the same thing now. I can't remember the last year nearly as well as I can remember twenty years ago.

Camper: I can't. I forget so bad. And I ain't been (inaudible), but I don't know (inaudible). I know when the first one died. She died in [19]79. Well, I didn't stay single over a, just a little over a year. I was married (inaudible) I stayed thirty-seven—

White: Well, somehow in the middle of this, you started driving a school bus, too, didn't you? When did you drive a school bus?

Camper: I drove the—(inaudible) I know she kept up with it. In the [19]60s I think.

White: What school was that for?

Camper: I drove to Mendenhall, Harper School in Mendenhall.

White: Harper School in Mendenhall?

Camper: Yeah. My children lived here. My brother-in-law, he drove a bus (inaudible).

White: New Ham(?) School?

Camper: Yeah, they was going to New Ham, but I was going to Mendenhall. I started picking up over here, going to Mendenhall (inaudible) school.

White: Your brother-in-law went to the school one direction, and you went to school in the other direction. Did your children go to school in Mendenhall then?

Camper: No. They were going to New Hem(?).

White: They went to New Hem.

Camper: He was picking them up. I didn't start picking children till way up here in D'Lo and going on out that a way. And I'd go all the way to (inaudible), picking up students, and he'd go to so far over there and go back (inaudible).

White: That's back when the schools were still segregated in the [19]60s.

Camper: That's right.

White: Did you keep driving a bus after the schools were integrated?

Camper: (Inaudible) while they integrated. I had done quit then. I (inaudible) quite a few, but I had stopped before they integrated.

White: Well, what's some of your good memories or your bad memories about driving a school bus?

Camper: Well, it was just keeping control (inaudible) one of the main things, but I kept them pretty good under control. And a lady, they had a play one night, and she (inaudible) even want to go to the (inaudible). She went and come back. She got off the bus, and she said she wouldn't fool with them young ones; said she'd go crazy (laughter) (inaudible). I told her they have a time running me crazy. (laughter)

White: You practiced on ten kids at home. You knew how to handle them, didn't you?

Camper: (Inaudible). But I could control them pretty good. They, one or two of them (inaudible), had to get hard on them some, but most of mine (inaudible). Well, you had to kind of know how to do something your own self, too, to deal with (inaudible). One old boy, he got, "How come you don't bother with nobody but me?" I said, "You the one doing the (inaudible). You ain't doing right. Quit (inaudible) I won't fuss at you." I didn't have no trouble. Had two girls that would fight (inaudible) stop.

White: Well, are the roads in any better shape now than they were in when you were coming along?

Camper: Yes, sir. Now, I reckon that's what kept me upset. You know from right over here to D'Lo, all back in there, over where (inaudible)? You know where that is?

White: Vanzant(?)? Sure.

Camper: I went all over there and on up (inaudible). Wasn't nothing but [makes sound like bumpy ride]. (laughter) It wasn't even blacktopped (inaudible). I hit the blacktop right there, almost at D'Lo, but that was [makes sound like bumpy ride] all the way. I said, "I believe that (inaudible) shook me up." I drove a long time. I don't know how long. But it was sure enough some bad roads, all the way (inaudible).

White: Have you sold off some of your land around here, or you still got most of your farm intact?

Camper: It ain't none of it farming, but it's all—I will—

White: Still got your land, huh?

Camper: Sure.

White: That's good.

Camper: My brother, too. He (inaudible) his wife and children live there. I willed it over to the children (inaudible) whenever I get gone, (inaudible) still (inaudible). But none of them don't live on it now. My boys, two of them in Illinois (inaudible). One is in Moss Point.

White: Scattered all over.

Camper: Scattered, and girls, they, several girls, they (inaudible). One of them's in California. She's married to (inaudible) up there. One is up there, and the other in Mendenhall, but one, the baby girl, lives right over there in that (inaudible).

White: Well, you still got close family then?

Camper: Yeah.

White: Well, that's good. That's very good.

Camper: And then my sister-in-law and them live right (inaudible).

White: Can you think of anything else that we haven't talked about that you'd like to talk about on this tape?

Camper: Well, I (inaudible) about the third (inaudible) to interview me. (laughter)

White: Well, you're going to be on national television, then, (laughter) maybe by the time the next one comes by.

Camper: (Inaudible). Some of them ask so many questions, I just—all about my kinfolks and all. A lot of kinfolks around (inaudible) down that way. We got a first cousin down there. (Inaudible) And he (inaudible) my granddaughter, she did it for (inaudible).

White: Keeping track of family, huh?

Camper: That's right. (Inaudible)

White: Well, that's a good thing to do, is record memories of family and family and friends and times past. That way you've got a good record of them. Well, I appreciate you talking to us, Mr. Camper. Thank you.

Camper: (Inaudible) I'm the oldest one in the church.

White: Oldest one in the church still, huh?

Camper: That's right. They often ask me something down there. (Inaudible) about fed up (inaudible) so many questions (laughter) try to (inaudible). Well, they's one lady over here, she's about a year different. I was born [19]11, and she's [19]12. (Inaudible) ain't been very too long ago, they wanting, the church out there, wanted (inaudible). Well, it's a little worser and worser. I'm getting older and older. But they ought to have the history pretty good, look like, because I (inaudible) died back then, you had to—they got one fellow around here in a little, old T-model truck. (Inaudible) clear out to Brookhaven to get (inaudible). And so she died that evening. They didn't have time (inaudible). We (inaudible) her home was up yonder, and it was too late before they got to go get (inaudible) again down here, she was just (inaudible) got laying out on (inaudible). And my daddy, we had to take sticks and just, all (inaudible) swollen so big, and I knowed I was a boy when I holped, look like they used to roll log (inaudible) anything like that. We had log rollings, and we had sticks of (inaudible) just wait till they come, and we just (inaudible).

White: Wasn't any funeral homes back then.

Camper: Yeah. (Inaudible). Always been that ever since I remember, somebody going to say something funny (inaudible) at night, they'd lay them out on a cooling board.

White: Right.

Camper: (Inaudible) One fellow asked (inaudible), "Tell us where is he going? Is he going to (inaudible)?" Said the cooling board caught on fire. (laughter)

White: It's been a long time since I heard them talk about, use the phrase cooling board. I have heard that before. (laughter)

Camper: (Inaudible) where you got it (inaudible). They had some folks been telling something ever since I was (inaudible), but I remember laying them on a cooling board.

White: Well, I thank you for talking to us. I appreciate it.

(end of interview)