

LAWTON M. CHILES JR. CENTER FOR FLORIDA HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM, FLORIDA SOUTHERN COLLEGE

Oral Interview With: Dr. Carroll Blake Gambrell, Jr.

Interviewer: James M. Denham

Place of Interview: Estates at Carpenters
Lakeland, Florida

Date of Interview: March 19, 2015

M = James M. Denham ("Mike")

C = C. B. Gambrell

M I'm with C. B. Gambrell, Jr., here in his residence and I'm glad to be here. Today is March 19, 2015, and we are here to discuss his memories. This is our very first day taping and I want to introduce Dr. Gambrell.

C: Good to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

M Wonderful, Dr. Gambrell when were you born, and where were you born?

C. I was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on December 1st, 1924, in the West End Baptist Hospital.

M. Who were your parents and how long were they married before your birth?

C I don't know how many years they were married, they were never separated. My father was twenty-eight when they were married, and my mother was 24. They were married

M. He grew up in Oconee County, North Carolina. .

C., South Carolina.

M South Carolina, which is in the mountains, correct?

C. At the foothills of the Smokey Mountains. The nearest city was Walhalla, South Carolina. The road goes up from Walhalla. My mother, during all of that time was a high school graduate from Yazoo City, Mississippi, and she had an older sister living in Birmingham where her husband was in the construction business, and so she came to Birmingham also looking for work. She went to the Birmingham Business College and graduated from there and was right away employed by the Haverty Furniture Company. She worked for them for a long time. She and my father met at a Methodist church in downtown Birmingham.

M. Now Birmingham, back in those days, was really booming I would imagine.

C

C. The direction that my parents both, my mother left the furniture business and joined Wimberly and Thomas Hardware Company. She was their senior secretary person for a good many years. When she and Dad left home, I would ride with them to the nearest school, Barrett Grammar School. Sometimes there was no one there and they would put me out, and in the winter time, I stayed near a hot steam pipe that was pretty comforting until school opened. Then, I don't know why it was thought to be a position of some importance, but if you got to open the outside door of the Principal's office, you were pretty high up on the respect scale. I migrated to that position for quite a while.

M. What were your favorite subjects in elementary school? I guess you didn't have subjects up until high school.

C.

C. I didn't, but he would come home on the weekend. They supplied him with a pickup truck. When our son was just a little thing, he named his grandfather, "Granddaddy Pickup."

M. Obviously, your mother was not working. She was a homemaker, or is that not true?

C. She worked on and off with the Wimberly and Thomas Hardware Company for a great many years. But, I believe at that particular time, she was working.

M. Okay, that was probably pretty unusual back then, wasn't it?

C. It was, a bit.

M. Now, you grew up and you lived a lot of your adult life in strict segregation.

C. Yes.

M.

M. Was that the main attraction, going downtown to the city to go to the movies?

C. Yes, and there was a big city auditorium downtown that often had athletic type events. I remember that my Mother and one of the other ladies in the neighborhood, Judge Thrift's wife, they liked to go to the roller derby. We'd load up our car full of people and go downtown to the roller derby quite often; at least once a week and sometimes more often.

M. What do you remember as the first political awareness, either the first political campaign, state or National?

C. I should probably interject here into the conversation that I took three years of ROTC in high school.

M. Okay, let's go into that a little bit.

C.

with her and I dearly loved that subject and her teaching was excellent – at least for me anyway. That tied in with doing something with in engineering.

M.

C. Oh, yes. One of our famous high school friends, Thomas McKinney, had joined the Marines and was there on Guadalcanal, we had somehow learned that, and we had a (he) 0.2learn

enlisted reserve corp. right there in the Colonel's office. My Dad left happy that I was in the Army. He had been in the Army years before. Well, I started the second quarter. I was about half way through the second quarter when here came orders. I didn't get to finish out the year; I got to finish out the quarter and then went on active duty in April of 1943.

M. Now, did you have a girl friend at that time?

C. Yes, Olive White, she was one of the White girls. There were lots of them, and her dad worked where my Dad did, the International Harvester Company. I didn't even know her, but she appeared in English class one day as a transfer student from a high school in Cincinnati, Ohio. And all of the kids started making fun of her, being a Yankee and whatever, and that really wasn't true. She cried, and I thought poorly about that. They took advantage of her, so I began to show her some attention. Later on we married. She's in the nursing home with a case of Parkinson's disease.

M. So walk me through the process of enlistment and what it was like to be put in the Army; where did you go first?

C. Well, I was called to duty to report to Fort McPherson, Georgia, that was an Army post in Atlanta, and I went over there and I was there for three or four weeks. Much longer, all the other recruits came in and were there three or four days and they were gone. They kept me there and I don't know why. It doesn't matter. They gave me a job to do and was supervising, I did know several other people. One of them was a football player from the University of Alabama. He was a good person. When I was finally called up they sent me to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, to engineers basic training. That when the engineer path began to surface in the Army records. I went there for basic training and I was there for, I don't know, maybe a month or so, and they took our platoon and marched it over to one of the Army buildings where they had desks and pencils, and all that, and they gave us an intelligence test. Well, we didn't know what it was, or why it was, or anything else, so it turned out that I scored high enough that they sent me to a classification center at the University of Wyoming and we slept on the basketball court in Army cots. While I was there, it turned out, that was the processing order to send me to study engineering at Yale University. I was there at Wyoming while all the other people I had entered with had already left, and I was hanging behind. Well, they chose thirty-eight of us, put us on Pullman railroad cars and off we went to New Haven, Connecticut and when we got off of the train, they met us and took us to the dormitory and then they said when you have time to catch your breath, you need to report down here on the lawn. So we did. Who was at the lawn when you had

brought that to their attention. They sent me to the Air Corps Hospital nearby and I was operated on me and reconstructed some of my insides. Then the big question came up, "What's going to

Church in downtown Tulsa by Dr. Storer. That was on a Saturday night, and got up early the next morning and went to church. He recognized us from the pulpit, and that is an enormous