(Tape 1 of 1)

An Oral History Tape Transcription

Of

Interviewer: Martha Mayo
Interviewee: James Collins

December 1, 1988
MM: December 1, 1988. This is Martha Mayo, Sterling Municipal Library. I’m having an oral history conversation with James Collins.

MM: You were born in Galveston?
JC: Born in Galveston, 1947.
MM: Ok. And grew up there?
JC: Grew up, attended high school, and uh ... served in the military out of Galveston.
MM: Ok, now how long were you in the military?
JC: Two years active Marines, and four years Reserve, and one year Texas National Guard.
MM: Ok.
JC: In La Marque, Texas.
MM: Now, but you were in Vietnam?
JC: Yes ma’am.
MM: What, now where abouts? Where did you fight in Vietnam?
JC: In the, what we consider the I Corp area, Da Nang, South Vietnam, 1st Marine division, 27th Marines.
MM: What was that like?
JC: Um ... to quote a phrase, “War is hell.”
MM: Yeah.
JC: It was a trying experience. It was an experience that, had anyone been there, anyone who has ever been there would never forget. You’re talking about 19 year-olds who probably, like me, had never been any further than 250 miles away from Mom and Dad.
MM: Yeah.
JC: And you wake up one morning and somebody says, “You’re 12,500 miles away from California.” You know, you say now this is not ...
MM: That’s a long way.
JC: That’s a long ways from Mom and Dad, you know. But it’s an experience and, though we didn’t really understand why we were there, I’m proud to be an American.
MM: Well tell me, you mentioned to me earlier about a, the battle you went, that so many went into and only a few came out.
JC: Um, this was Khe Sanh. I was attached to a unit that went in six months earlier – well, in fact they left San Diego or Camp Pendleton, California – with about 3,000 men, roughly. And six months after we got there, they were down to 40 people. That’s walking. Forty people walking. I asked the question, “Where was the rest of ‘em?” And their response was, “Dead or wounded.” So you’re looking at about 20 maybe 2,700 men that had ...
MM: Was it jungle, kind of fighting? What kind of fighting was it?

JC: It was ... It was a jungle warfare, but Khe Sanh is basically a city. Take Baytown and let’s go house to house. Let’s go, you know, let’s go just fighting in the heart of the city. Just like you would on a good old Western, you know.

MM: Yeah. And there were people, there were the Viet Cong was in those ...

JC: The Viet Cong were in the area and, you know, entrenched in and around the city, and the objective was to get them out and ... So that the town people could have, you know, their city back. But it cost quite a few lives on both sides. On both sides. Um ... I know at one time I was told that approximately 5,000 Marines died there. That’s just Marines. But then we were also told that for every Marine that died, two Viet Cong gave up his life. So, I don’t know, you know?

MM: It’s still very expensive.

JC: Yeah. You know, it’s a ...

MM: It must have been a shock to be 19 or 20 and see that sort of ...

JC: It’s a – like I said – it’s an experience you’ll never, you’ll never, you’ll never forget it. Never.

MM: Even your training probably didn’t really ...

JC: The training really didn’t – well, it prepared you in a way, but then after you got there, you know, it’s like, you know, they didn’t tell me this.

MM: Yeah.

JC: You know? And, uh ... where’s my drill instructor now? What do I do now? Do I move? Do I ... And then you learn over a period of time that a lot of the things they taught you in boot camp: leave ‘em there. Don’t try it. It won’t work.

MM: Oh, ok.

JC: You sort of have to get it OJT.

MM: Oh, Yeah.

JC: Listen to the guys that have been there six, seven, eight months before you. Listen to the guy that said, “Look I’ve been here two years.” You want to ... you want to try to follow the orders of the experienced soldier.

MM: Oh, I would think so.

JC: Yeah. Because you get to a point to where you can hear different things and know what it is.

MM: Yeah.

JC: You can hear certain sounds and know what’s happening. You can ... they got to the, some of them said they’d gotten to the point to where they could smell a Viet Cong.

MM: Is that right?

JC: You know, I mean [sniffs].
MM: Knew they were ...

JC: There’s somebody in the area here. That’s not right.

MM: Is there one incident that stands out in your mind?

JC: Uh ... well, yes, we, uh ... were fighting over a water well. A regular water well in the country on this little island off the coast of Vietnam. And our objective – well, there were several water wells there, but the Viet Cong had poisoned all but one. They needed the water for their, you know, for their use. And we needed, we wanted it for our use. So somebody had to give up the water well. And that was my initial, first initial, say, one-on-one contact with the Viet Cong. Um ... we were attacked one night and I still don’t know today how many of ‘em there were of them. But there were 14 of us. And our lieutenant said, “Hold, get the well.” You know, he said, “That’s as simple as I can put it. Get the well. We want the well. You guys set up around it. If they come there tonight to get water or whatever, you don’t allow that.”

JC: And that night about midnight, one of the Viet Cong threw a, what we called a four-second delayed grenade, in the directions of the squad leader and myself. And the only thing that we could do was watch this grenade roll toward us. You got four seconds to clear the area. But thank God it was a dud. It didn’t go off. And I think about two minutes later, there was a, one of my friends from North Carolina whose last name was Best, he said, “Watch it!”

JC: And we turned to see what he was talking about, and he just twisted his ankle and just opened up what the, what we had, a 30 caliber machine gun. And there was this great big Chinese guy that had somehow snuck in behind us, and was ready to waste the squad, everybody on that front line that was facing that river. And, but thanks to this guy, you know, he managed to ...

MM: He got him.

JC: Got the guy, you know, and ... You know that was my, you know that was my first time ever walking over and actually ... “Jesus, he’s dead.”

MM: Yeah.

JC: You know. Look at the blood just oozing out of him, you know? And it kind of, you know, kind of left me ... sort of numb, I guess.

MM: I guess it did.

JC: You know. But, uh ... after that, you know, my, you know, my squad leader said, “Hey, this is it.” Said, “Welcome to Vietnam.”

JC: You know, and – but like I said – it was a trying experience, and that’ll be a night that I won’t ever forget. Especially that grenade. In fact I can see it, you know, rolling, you know.

MM: I guess you can. You were in Vietnam 10 months?

JC: Ten months. Uh ... normally your length of stay there is 13 months.

MM: Uh-huh.
JC: I have a brother, Clarence Collins, who I told not to, to do so, joined the Marines. [Laughs] And I sort of expected him to come to Vietnam, but I was anticipating him waiting until my tour was up.

MM: Yeah.

JC: Ok, but anyway he, the priest over the unit, the um, what do we call them?

MM: The chaplain?

JC: Chaplain. He asked the entire unit says, “Does anyone have a brother in Vietnam?”

JC: Well, my brother told me later that a couple of guys stepped forward. Oh, but not good old Clarence, you know. No, no.

MM: [Laughs]

JC: Not Clarence, nope. So, he didn’t say anything, so nothing was done. You know? So he come on over with his unit. And I found out he was there by going to breakfast one morning ...

MM: No.

JC: ... in the cafeteria. And I saw some new guys there, and I said, “Hey!” You know. We asked a few questions. “Yeah! Clarence Collins, CC.” They called him CC. “Yeah, he’s down there asleep.” You know. But I didn’t have permission to leave my area to go to his area. So we never got visual contact or close enough to see each other. But then the next 48 hours, they were moved further north to the DMZ. So we communicated through letters. And somehow, my commanding officer found out that I had a brother there. And I, it was, and my, the lieutenant that was in control of us had 24 hours to get me out of the country.

MM: Well, two brothers couldn’t ...

JC: You can’t have two brothers, uh ... something relating to World War II with the Sev-, Sevil-, what is it? Sullivan?

MM: The Sullivan brothers who went down.

JC: Right. On all the ships.

MM: On all the ships, Yeah.

JC: Ok, well for that reason you can’t, you can’t have two brothers.

MM: I didn’t realize that.

JC: Uncles, cousins don’t matter.

MM: Ya, but brothers ...

JC: But brothers you can’t ...

MM: And your brother got home safely?

JC: Right. All of us returned home safely. No ...

MM: Do you have any other brothers who ...
JC: Uh, I had one other – no, no, we were the only two in Vietnam. I had one that lives in Maryland now, was stationed in Germany.

MM: Oh.

JC: And he was in some top secret unit. He never, hush-hush, you know. And he had a trying experience that we were glad to be able to help him out of, uh ... Some terrorists was monkeying around with the, his Commanding Officer’s jeep, whatever. And he come out, just happened to come out of the area where he was, and saw them. They had guns according to him. They looked at him. He had gun, and he just happened to shoot first.

MM: Oh my gosh.

JC: And it sort of, you know, liked to drove my mom batty.

MM: I bet it did.

JC: But she called us, Clarence and I, and uh, we went, “Look, look, he’s a soldier. He knows what he’s doing.” You know, “He’s fine.” But it so happened that one of the guys, one of the terrorists were killed and the other one was wounded ... real bad and uh, the only thing that really upset me as a brother was that his CO, his Commanding Officer, made him attend the funeral. And I didn’t understand that, you know, but ...

MM: I don’t either.

JC: But he’s fine now. He lives in Maryland. He’s married and just built a beautiful home up there, so ... You know.

MM: Oh my goodness.

JC: So my mom has closed the book on Uncle Sam. [Laughter]

MM: I guess so. I hope so.

JC: She ... you know, she has.

MM: Yeah.

JC: But other than that, you know, that’s basically us. That’s ...

MM: Yeah.

JC: That’s us.

MM: But now, tell me about your ... start, let’s see ... start with your, your grandmother. How many grandchildren does she have?

JC: Um ... last count 70. Um ...

MM: Now, and her name is what?

JC: Clara Gatlin.

MM: Ok, she’s a Gatlin.
JC: Right.

MM: Alright. And that’s your mother’s mother?

JC: Right. And ...

MM: Ok. So she has 70 grandchildren, and you’re one of ‘em.

JC: I’m the oldest grandchild.

MM: The oldest of the 70? Ok.

JC: Of the 70 grandchildren.

MM: And 63 great ...

JC: And we have 63 grandchildren. We have four more that should land sometime between now and 1989.

MM: Oh! So that would be 67.

JC: We have four more.

MM: Great-grandchildren.

JC: It’ll be 67 great-grandchildren.

MM: Oh!

JC: And the oldest great-grandchild is 17.

MM: Oh my goodness.

[Laughter]

MM: That’s a lot of people in the same age group.

JC: You know, so ... you know, we have stair steps.

MM: Yeah.

JC: Six months on up.

MM: Alright, so it’s through her, then, that the Gatlin connection comes.

JC: Right. Well, really through my grandfather.

MM: Yes, oh, ok. That’s right. That’s right.

JC: Ya, Yeah. Through Dave Gatlin. This one.

MM: Oh, Dave Gatlin in this pamphlet is your grandfather.

JC: Right. That’s my grandfather. That’s my grandfather.

MM: Ok. Alright now, you, your family traced its ...

JC: Roots.
MM: It’s history?
JC: Right.
MM: Ok.
JC: It’s well, what they call roots or whatever.
MM: Yeah. So when did you start that?
JC: Oh, we started in 1977. And it took us approximately two years and a whole lot of phone calls and driving.
MM: And everybody worked on it together?
JC: Everybody – there were several of us in the family that, in certain sections of the country, you know. Well, what did you get? You know, we’d exchange information and then we just compiled it together.
MM: Well, how did you even begin to get ... I mean, I don’t ... that sounds like a huge job.
JC: Well, it all started with some of the older people that are here like the Uncle Ike.
MM: Uh-huh.
JC: Some of us knew him. And he would sit and tell us ...
MM: Get his stories, Yeah.
JC: ... stories, you know, and how they used to – when they were trying to learn how to read – how they used to go and get under big, these big black pots and color themselves ...
MM: Cause it was illegal.
JC: Right. Because it was illegal for blacks to learn, to take, have any schooling at all.
MM: Yeah.
JC: You know, any type of education was, you know, strictly against the rules.
MM: Now where was that?
JC: And this was in Savannah, Georgia. And, uh ... and, you know, and then we had other people that lived in the area where my grandparents lived that knew other members of the family, and they could tell you who married who, and who ...
MM: Yeah.
JC: Whose son was who, and whose daughter was where and what ...
MM: Well how did you finally trace it back then to Georgia?
JC: We ... that was the ...
MM: That’s pretty far back.
JC: That was the stopping, well, that was the stopping-off point on the arrival from KenYeah.
MM: Uh-huh.

JC: So we first found out that they were slaves in Georgia. And then some of the relatives went to Savannah, Georgia. And we found that this Dr. Tom Gatlin had actually purchased some people that came from Kenya. And from those three people – Rachel, Georgia and Ike – then there’s five generations of us.

MM: Ok, so he purchased two brothers and a sister? Is that, or ... a husband and wife?

JC: A brother and two sisters or then some kind of way. We don’t ... 

MM: Oh. But they kept, anyway that ...

JC: Right.

MM: The family ...

JC: Right.

MM: ... stayed together.

JC: Stayed together. And we understand that there was some children that were ... From what we can gather, Racheal was a bright complected woman; she didn’t look like she was from Africa.

MM: Uh-huh.

JC: So she was Dr. Gatlin’s cook.

MM: Yeah, I understand.

JC: And she had 11 children for him. But they were sold immediately. So there are others of us that we’ll never know. We won’t ever know.

MM: They were sold as infants?

JC: They were sold as babies. You know, I mean that was unknown. Unheard of. You don’t do that. You know, so ...

MM: Isn’t that just appalling?

JC: Yeah, you know, it’s ... you know. But that was ... that was then. That was the time, you know? That was ...

MM: She never got to keep a child?

JC: No. No. Simply because she was black and he was white and that was taboo.

MM: Yeah. Yeah.

JC: You know, so ...

MM: Well now, you know the family came from Kenya. Do you know anything about the--?

JC: No, we don’t know anything about the ... the tribal part of it, or whatever because they were brought from Kenya by other slave blacks to the coast of Africa to be sold.
MM: Oh.
JC: So they had blacks ...
MM: Yeah.
JC: ... capturing blacks.
MM: But there are no stories about ...
JC: But we never, we could never ...
MM: ... that came down about that?
JC: No, we could never get heads or tails of that. We never could get any additional information that – no more than just, that’s where they came from.
MM: That’s where they came from. Yeah.
JC: But we don’t know what tribe or what language or what ...
MM: Oh.
JC: We just know that this was home, and ...
MM: Yeah. Yeah.
JC: Somehow they ended up on the coast of Africa, and put on ships and ... you know.
MM: And bought.
JC: And brought over. But from what we ...
MM: But what, were they lucky that it was Dr. Tom Gatlin that purchased – was he, was he a good owner?
JC: They were, yes, yes. Now, from, according to Uncle Ike, he never abused ‘em, he never, you know, he treated ‘em, everybody equal. You know, he didn’t beat ‘em, or misuse ‘em. And in fact, when – in 1867 – when they left Savannah, Dr. Gatlin moved to Keachi, Louisiana, to be near them.
MM: He did?
JC: As a friend. He moved. And his place is there today. He had ...
MM: And it was strictly because of them that he moved?
JC: You know, because of, yes because of: hey, they’re gone, you know. And I’m leaving Georgia, too. But then ...
MM: Well for goodness sakes.
JC: But then after that we don’t know what happened to Dr. Tom Gatlin.
MM: I see.
JC: After that we don’t know what direction he took.
MM:Didn’t keep up I guess, no.

JC: No, we didn’t keep up with him. You know, when they, I guess they said hey, we’re free. We’re no longer ...

MM: Sure. Don’t have to. Yeah.

JC: ... your task master now, so ... you know.

MM: For goodness sakes.

JC: But from those people, you know, this is why we’re here.

MM: And they settled, they ... why did they choose Shreveport to settle in after the Civil War?

JC: Well, I guess when you’re ... when you’re running away from something, you know, and then they, I think they had just opened the state of Louisiana for people that were looking for a haven.

MM: Oh. Ok.

JC: To go from point A to point B for freedom. They had just opened up the st-, I think in 1839 or somewhere along there. Uh ... they had just opened that up then, and then in 1867, my family undoubtedly had heard Louisiana is the place you outta be, so they ... 

MM: I see. Well did they buy land? Were they able ... that, that would be pretty hard.

JC: No, they lived on um ... what do you call, sharecrops?


JC: And, you know you, whatever you produce you share it with the original owner.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And this went on for years, probably generations.

MM: Oh.

JC: You know, all the way down to my grandfather. Then later on, he was able to purchase an acre. And then he bought, he ended up with about 25 acres of another piece of land in another little city called Logansport. And this is now where we have our ...

MM: Family.

JC: Family, uh, well they call it the Gatlin Estate. I call it grandma’s house. [Laughs]

MM: Ya, uh-huh. She still lives on it?

JC: She still lives there. She has a six-room house where she raised ...

MM: Now what, which Mrs., which grandmother? That’s not Mrs. Clara?

JC: This is ... yeah, this is Mrs. Clara. Um-hmm.

MM: Oh, ok.
JC: That’s the only grandmother I have now.

MM: Oh, ok.

JC: And, uh, she has a little six-room house where she raised, I know of, nine of the kids there.

MM: Oh, my.

JC: And she stays there by herself now. And she travels quite a bit. She goes; she has children in Denver, and, you know, North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Detroit, Michigan, and ... again we’re scattered, and ...

MM: Do you ever see those?

JC: Yes, yes. We ... we either see each other or we call.

MM: Oh!

JC: I haven’t heard from you, what is your malfunction?

MM: Now see, they’re ... they’re your uncles and aunts.

JC: Aunts and un-, right, right.

MM: Ok, I see.

JC: And we’re all ... there’s a high school also in Baytown, in uh, Logansport where from, I was the first grandchild to ever attend the same school where all 13 of the children graduated.

MM: Oh!

JC: So I went from the first to the second grade there.

MM: Uh-huh.

JC: Then we moved to Galveston.

MM: I see.

JC: But, if you go to this one particular high school, well you can go back five generations.

MM: Is that right?

JC: You know. Right there in Logansport.

MM: Isn’t that wonderful?

JC: And, uh, right. It is, it’s something ...

MM: To have that sense of roots.

JC: Uh-huh. Yeah. Of where we are, you know, and who we are.

MM: What brought your family to Galveston? Why did you ...

JC: My dad worked hauling, what is it? Lumber? Puck wood, or whatever, in the summertimes in Logansport/Longstreet/Keachi, Shreveport area. Ok, and when naturally when it got cold, the rains
come in, they couldn’t get the trucks back there. So my father has uncles that were living in Galveston. So they told him about the waterfront. The, the longshoremans.

MM: Uh-huh.

JC: So Dad would, in between season, Dad would work in Louisiana, then he’d go to, come to Galveston for the winter and work on the waterfront.

MM: Yeah.

JC: So that’s … so finally mom, after three boys, four boys, mom said this is enough. Now we either stay here in Louisiana, or we go to Texas. No more of this back and forth and dragging the kids out of school. So we, Dad finally agreed and said, well let’s go to Galveston.

MM: Oh!

JC: So we all planted our roots on the island. They’ve been here forty … 41 years now. On Galveston Island. And, uh, so …

MM: Is it a good place to grow up?

JC: Uh, I love it! I’ve been around the world, and y’all can give me Galveston.

MM: Is that right? That’s good to hear!

JC: Yes, you can, you can give me Galveston. You can keep your Los Angeles and your Philadelphias and your New Yorks. But you can give me my Galveston. That’s my home.

MM: Yeah.

JC: You know? And I love my home. My high school and everything that I … I went to one of the oldest black high schools in the state of Texas.

MM: What, now what was it?

JC: Central.

MM: Central. Ok.

JC: It was moved from Marshall, Texas, to Galveston.

MM: Oh.

JC: And, so I have that honor.

MM: Yes.

JC: You know, to … there’s two of us. My brother that went to Vietnam; he and I were the only two.

MM: Y’all are the two oldest in the family?

JC: Right. And, uh, everybody else went to Galveston Ball. Which is a good school, too.

MM: Yeah, but …

JC: But, yay Central!
[Laughs]

MM: Yeah! Well you were telling me something about one of your grandfathers wouldn’t allow the children to work until their ...

JC: Yeah, this was my grandfather, uh ...

MM: That’s Mrs. Clara’s husband?

JC: Right. Dave Gatlin. Everybody called him “Dreamer.” I don’t know why, but he was “Big Daddy” to us.

MM: Uh-huh.

JC: And as far as I can remember, uh, he would never let his kids work, you know, outside of the home unless he was somewhere in the area. You would never go, the girls could never go and clean up Mrs. Washington’s house. The boys, if Mr. Johnson wanted his yard cut, my grandfather had to be in the area. You were never allow to go and do anything for anybody, because he had this thing: you’re a Gatlin. And as long as you’re a Gatlin, you don’t do that without my permission. So most of the girls especially, they were 18 or older before they got their own job.

MM: Uh-huh.

JC: You know.

MM: But they had a real sense of who they were.

JC: Of who they were. I mean ...

MM: A real pride.

JC: Right. Right. I mean, you’re not, my grandfather used to say, “You’re not just anybody, son. You’re not just anybody. You’re a Gatlin.”

MM: And the community accepted that, too?

JC: And the community, uh ... we still are, we’re well known in that area.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And everybody knows Mr. Dreamer.

MM: Oh!

JC: That’s all you had to say, and you could get gas at the filling station. [Laughs] You know.

MM: Oh.

JC: But, he was a Pentecostal minister, but he was a no-nonsense man. Don’t come with your foolishness. Now if my children did something, you tell me. And we’d hope you didn’t tell him.

MM: Yes!

[Laughter]

JC: Cause it just might, you know.
MM: It’s pretty rough if you did.

JC: Yeah, if my grandchildren did something, were to do something, we, again, hoped that you didn’t tell him. But he believed in discipline. He believed in having children. And he believed in questioning to death the poor guy that was dating his daughters.

[Laughter]

JC: Uh, they had a time limit for you to stay there, and they had a signal when it was time for you to leave.

MM: So your daddy went through that.

JC: And my mom.

MM: And your mom, Yeah.

JC: Yeah. Well, they were already married, but the younger sisters under my mom, they had to hear this, [clears throat]. That means the guy is to be standing up.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And when Grandma come through there and accidentally hit the light switch. “Oh, I’m sorry.” And turn it back on, he should be headed out the door.

[Laughs]

JC: Now the next thing you will hear will be that belt.

MM: Ewww.

JC: Across your back.

MM: Ewww.

JC: Because those people didn’t, you know, that, I mean that’s what they ...

MM: Yeah.

JC: You know, that was their rules and their regulations.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And you didn’t come there unless the grownups were there. You said yes ma’am and yes sir, and no sir and no ma’am. You was questioned about who your family was, and ... and if there was something in that family that they didn’t like, you weren’t coming back there.

MM: Yeah.

JC: You know, and if Grandma gave you, looked at you and saw something she didn’t like in you, you weren’t coming back. So ...

MM: Pretty rough.

JC: You know, I mean that, but that’s the way that they did it then.
MM: Yeah.

JC: You know. And ...

MM: It worked out pretty well, too.

JC: Yeah. And it worked out most of the girls hoo-hawed and cried and got all upset and bent out of shape, and then they end up marrying somebody else.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And Grandma would say, “I told you. I told you that little ol’ boy Sylvester you was head over – now look at him. Where is he now? In prison.”

MM: Now that’s the one you call Mrs. Clara, but you’re the only one that calls her ...

JC: Right. I’m the only that can call her Mrs. Clara.

MM: What happens if somebody else does?

JC: Uh, she would probably come unglued.

MM: You don’t want that, right?

JC: No, and we don’t want that. We, my grandmother and I being the first, you know, we’re very close. She was very instrumental in helping me put Vietnam behind me. And because of that we got to be real close.

MM: But did you have a problem when you came back?

JC: Yes, uh ... like most Vietnam veterans or any veteran of any war. There was a lot of hostility. There was a lot of, you know, what the hell was I doing there? And, you know ... and, where were you, turkey? Um ... I’m over here fighting and you’re sitting back here eating ice cream.

MM: Yeah.

JC: Um, there were times, uh, when my nerves were shot to death, you know, just, you know, just little to nothing I’d come unglued at the seams.

MM: And what, you were staying with her then?

JC: I was staying with my mom at the time. And the phone would ring, I would snatch it out from the wall without answering it. And I would chase my little brothers a half a block if they slammed the screen door.

MM: So noises just ... set it off.

JC: Noises, and anything. Anything if people stared at me, you know, I had a problem with stares. And I would go out to eat and I would never, I had a problem with sitting in an open restaurant. I would sit with my back against the wall. And I would have flashbacks, and ...

MM: You did?

JC: And for years I wouldn’t watch Westerns.
MM: Yeah.

JC: Or anything that John Wayne did as far as war movies. I sort of, in my own way, blamed Mr. John Wayne for some of the guys that died in Vietnam.

MM: Trying to be ...

JC: Um ... you know, this idea of making war seem like it was something glamorous.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And when a lot of us got there, we found out, uh-uh this is not the case. This is real. You know, this is not John Wayne, this is not Clint Eastwood. You know, this is the Real McCoy. And a lot of things, you know, but ... Thanks to my grandmother, you know, she took me home with her, and talk to me, and done a lot of praying and ...

MM: Yeah.

JC: And, by two years, I ... give it up. And hadn’t had any problem since.

MM: Oh is that right? That’s good.

JC: You know, hadn’t had, never. You know, just no, you know. You got to drop a bomb on my bed to wake me up, you know?

MM: Well, good. Are you starting to tell your little girl some of this family ...

JC: Not ... Not yet. She’s ...

MM: But she’s gonna get her share of all this.

JC: Right. Right. She’s gonna get her copies, and she’s gonna be told, you know, that you’re somebody.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And that you’re in a good family. And that you can be whatever you want to be. And if you don’t want to be anything, then that’s your choice. But then it won’t be because, you know, you were surrounded by people that were, weren’t anything.

MM: Yeah.

JC: Because, you know, you have, you know, we have firemen, and nurses, and doctors, and you know future doctors, you know.

MM: Did you really?

JC: Right. We have two first cousins that are down at Xavier University in New Orleans, and one at Washington State. Go Huskies! And, uh ...

MM: Good grief! That’s a long way.

JC: So they, they want to be ... they want to be doctors. So we’ll have three doctors, hopefully, in the family.

MM: That’s wonderful!
JC: So, you know, she ... she’s in a good family.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And, uh, she’s ... my, my ... the apple of my eye, she’s ... you know.

MM: Yes. Oh.

JC: But other than that, you know, we’re just a simple family. A blessed family.

MM: No. I don’t know, it sounds pretty special to me.

JC: You know we’re blessed. We’re a blessed family. We, we’re very church oriented, and uh, in fact if Grandma found out you hadn’t been to church in the last two Sundays, she’ll want to know why. And, uh, she will call and ask you, “What is your malfunction?”

[Laughs]

JC: If your car won’t start, you know, something ...

MM: You better have a good answer.

JC: You better come up with a good reason, you know. But, uh, but overall, you know, the family, we consider ourselves just being blessed. Just a blessed family.

MM: That’s wonderful.

JC: That’s just, that’s it, you know. That’s ...

[Tape cuts off 28:52]

MM: Is that your grandfather? Your ...

JC: Great-grandfather.

MM: Uh-huh, your great, yes your great-grandfather.

JC: Yes, uh ... we called him Papa. He, um, had coffee cans, any peach cans, just whatever he could open, and that’s the, this, these are the places that he would put his money.

MM: Oh.

JC: Bury it in the yard. He wore a money belt around his waist until death.

MM: Oh my goodness.

JC: He didn’t believe in banks. He said he, you can’t prove to him that those white people are not taking his money. [Laughs] So ...

MM: Yeah. Yeah.

JC: But that was Papa. And, uh ... he didn’t mean any harm, he just didn’t understand the banking system.

MM: Yeah, well, maybe he had reason to feel like he did.
JC: You know? And I think when he passed, they, every, you know all of his children – my grandmother included – all of ‘em had shovels. They – that place looked like a, a punji pit when they got through with it. You know, “Look under this tree here!” You know. “Here’s a can here!” You know?

[Laughter]

MM: Yeah, full of money.

JC: You know? “Man, there’s $50 bills in here!” You know, so …

MM: Well do you remember any other relatives? Back beyond your grandmother that you …

JC: Uh … I knew my dad’s grandfather. Grandpa Floret. And I knew his stepmother, and she was a Cherokee Indian. And that’s all I know.

MM: Oh, uh-huh.

JC: And I used to walk behind her trying to figure out why her hair would almost touch the floor and she would never walk on it. You know. But I was real little, I didn’t read …

MM: Yeah, Yeah.

JC: You know, and I remember Grandpa Floret because he gave my brother next to me, he gave the both of us a little pig.

MM: A real one, you mean?

JC: A real one.

MM: Oh.

JC: He had about 40 of ‘em out there, and he said, “Well that one right there is yours, and that’s yours.” And but we never went back to, to see whatever became of the pigs, but they were big, huge …

MM: Big ones.

JC: You know? But, uh, I was fortunate in getting to know both sides.

MM: Yeah.

JC: I even knew my father’s grandmother.

MM: Oh.

JC: Grandma, uh, Momma Della, we called her Momma Della. But when I met her, she was sick. Very sick. And I, the only thing I remember, she had crystal hair. Crystal, crystal hair.

MM: Yeah.

JC: And she was a tall woman, a bright-completed woman, and when I touched her she was hot as if she had fever. And I don’t remember when she died.

MM: So you were little. Real little.

JC: I was five? Five. But I remember Momma Della, you know.
[End of tape]

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