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#### **N.4: Undergraduate Internship Program: Spring 2014**

Interview N-0028

James Vinson Carmichael, Jr.

21 February 2014

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## ABSTRACT – JAMES CARMICHAEL

Dr. James Carmichael was born in Marietta, Georgia in 1946. He is a professor of library science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a post he has held since 1989. He discusses his family's history in Marietta as well as his childhood and years spent in military school. Dr. Carmichael describes discovering his homosexuality and hiding it from his parents. He recounts a mental breakdown which he attributed to a need to "come out" to his father. Going on to relate portions of his adult life, Dr. Carmichael discusses his marriage with his wife, Bunny, as well as his alcohol abuse and path to sobriety during the 1970s. He reflects on the gay community of UNC and on the Carolina Gay Association, recalling what he saw as prevalent alcoholism and a lack of speech surrounding substance abuse within the gay community. He goes on to discuss the AIDs crisis of the 1980s, fears of the disease, and the loss of dear friends. Dr. Carmichael also discusses his relationship with the church, his own spirituality, and the importance of AA meetings to his life.

FIELD NOTES – JAMES CARMICHAEL  
(compiled February 25, 2014)

Interviewee: Dr. James Carmichael

Interviewer: Katie Crook

Interview Date: February 21, 2014

Location: Dr. Carmichael's office in the School of Education building, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina

THE INTERVIEWEE. Dr. James Carmichael was born in Marietta, Georgia in 1946. He obtained his undergraduate and master's degrees from Emory University and earned his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1988 in library history. He is now a tenured professor of library and information studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. A gay man, Dr. Carmichael discusses his sexual orientation, mental illness, alcoholism, and subsequent recovery in this interview.

THE INTERVIEWER. Katie Crook is a junior history and political science double major at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is in her first semester as an undergraduate intern with the Southern Oral History Program.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview took place in the cozy office of Dr. James Carmichael, on the fourth floor of the School of Education building. Though the office was dark due to the lack of windows, it was very comfortably decorated, with colorful knick-knacks on the walls and desks. Dr. Carmichael was more than friendly throughout the interview, refusing to shy away from any sensitive topics and answering questions thoroughly. His story consisted of many colorful characters and interesting anecdotes. A few brief interruptions occurred, including a doctoral student's visit to Dr. Carmichael's office and another well-wisher's visit. The tape recorder was paused during these brief interludes. Also, a minimal amount of background noise can be heard, including another professor speaking briefly in the hallway. Overall, however, the interview was very quiet and proceeded quite smoothly. The interview lasted just under two hours.

NOTE ON RECORDING. The recording was conducted using a Zoom H4N recorder, on loan from the Southern Oral History Program. A backup iPhone 5 was also used.

## TAPE LOG – JAMES CARMICHAEL

Interviewee: Dr. James Carmichael  
Interviewer: Katie Crook  
Interview Date: February 21, 2014  
Location: School of Education, Room 447, University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

### TAPE INDEX

<u>Time</u>	<u>Topic</u>
[Digital Recording, Starts at Beginning]	
0:01	Introduction: "I'm Katie Crook, here with the Southern Oral History Program..." Thanks for granting the interview.
0:33	Childhood memories, background, and family history. Born in Marietta, Georgia in 1946. "Marietta was not necessarily the bedroom of Atlanta..." Backwardness of Marietta, despite proximity to Atlanta; father's law practice in Marietta and father's family history.
1:55	Where father and mother were raised in Georgia; father's experiences on a farm in a "ramshackle farmhouse"
2:48	Memories of great-grandmother, born in 1858; her experiences as a blind woman; "she was about five years old when Sherman came through Atlanta;" close with grandmother (spent every weekend with grandmother on the farm)
4:00	Family's General store –Carmichael's—how family "survived the Depression;" family raised livestock; discusses poverty of family during Depression ("nothing fancy"); family "didn't even have rural electric" until TVA and "rural electrification"
5:35	Discusses father being "crippled" and his experience learning to walk again; describes father as a "very unusual person;" once again mentions father's history growing up in Georgia, getting involved in politics (legislator in the state house); discusses father's political career

- 7:30 Father's experience running against Gene Talmadge for governor of Georgia; Gene was a "race-baiter;" father was a progressive candidate, came from the "school of nice people"
- 9:07 Discusses how father negotiated a bomber plant to come to Georgia (Lockheed Plant) during WWII
- 10:15 Discusses mother's problems with pregnancies; "blue babies" and a brother who drowned; siblings; father's history as a professional (con't)
- 11:57 Discusses his schooling; he was a "discipline problem" and was sent to military school in the 1950s in New England (Choate); reflections on military school
- 13:04 Reflections on year in France at school; reflections on history of school, teachers, geography of school, mission during WWII, etc.
- 14:30 Went to France for "emotional maturity;" "didn't do as he was supposed to do;" father's idea to send him to France; experience as "being an outsider;" Southern writer at a military school; mentions his homosexuality for the first time (wasn't "quite out" in France); "dark year" in college to deny homosexuality and "nearly lost [his] mind"
- 16:00 Returns to reflections on French school and history during WWII; describes school as "international, ecumenical model;" back when "Christian wasn't a dirty word"
- 17:20 "More invisible" in France; felt he could escape a little from United States, high school mentality, "tyranny of masculinity"
- 19:10 "Strange" about military school –not having a home; grateful for the experience away from home and the "opportunity to be independent"
- 19:50 Reflections on going to school with women, which he loved; reflections on relationship with a Danish girl; discusses homosexuality and "coming out" to friends in France
- 21:08 Reflections on Southern home: "old Southern home built in 1843" and another way of life; story about mother and dust on a table
- 22:57 Reflections on Southern way of life courses at UNC; "coming out of the closet as a Southerner;" never really discussed homosexuality with parents; reflections on homosexuality at prep school; relationship with father and homosexuality
- 25:00 Mentions mother's alcoholism; never talking about homosexuality, which was a "problem" with parents; references his current hair as being "too long" for father

- 25:43 Reflections on time at American University, father's disapproval of NYU; discussion of "breakdown" that year; reflections on anorexia, mental illness, time at recovery center; got draft notice, but was exempt for his mental illness; diagnosed as "psychotic schizophrenic with manic depressive symptoms"
- 27:51 PAUSE (visitor to his office)
- 28:00 Interview resumed; Emory saving him; causes of mental breakdown (bad dreams about current girlfriend, horror movies, exhaustion, etc.); reflections on what really drove his breakdown – knew he would have to "come out" at some point and couldn't face father's reaction
- 29:43 Connections with gay community in Atlanta, reflections on classes at Emory, reflections on first boyfriend; "big chicken" in Atlanta
- 31:25 (con't) reflections on gay identity; "tortured years;" small, underground gay community in Atlanta; reflections on one gay bar (Miss P's)
- 32:15 Reflections on piece of literature that changed his life—City of Night; gets up to find book by Emory Professor about youth and Christianity (the "gay Dante's Inferno"); reflections on fast changes of the 1960s regarding gay community and the "wider world"
- 35:02 Reflections on becoming a "weekend hippie" in the 1960s; recalls fond memories of gay art gallery owner; recollections of his "ghastly poetry" in Atlanta, folk singer friends/writers; recalls "making love" to a woman for the first time, even though he already knew he was gay
- 37:02 Recollections on meeting wife Bunny junior year of college; not allowed to "just live together," so married instead; relationship between wife and family; reflections on why he got married (not ready to face homosexuality, "emotional blackmail")
- 38:30 Reflects on inner turmoil, if he was gay, he couldn't be liked by everyone; memories of "Mother David," the gay art gallery owner who proved to be gay hero.
- 40:14 Reflections on marriage to Bunny, divorce; reflects on unconventional wedding to Bunny (drugs, groomsmen with long hair, Bunny reading science fiction novels)
- 41:50 Discusses heavy drug and alcohol use; talks becoming an alcoholic after moving home with his alcoholic mother; "endless supply of good scotch"
- 42:40 Reflects on wife's knowledge of his homosexuality; reflections on husband of wife's friend (a West Coast poet)

- 44:35 Talks about “open marriage;” craziness of married years; reflects on worsening of alcoholism and mother’s alcoholism; reflections of sister’s husband, a drug addict; talks sister’s AA experience and divorce, remarriage, etc.
- 46:38 Reflects on sister’s encouragement of him to attend AA meetings; talks about sponsors at AA
- 48:10 Reflections on alcoholism and homosexuality causing such inner turmoil; “not being [himself] and not being honest” about sexual orientation; grateful that he “bottomed out” during his first library job in Milledgeville, Georgia; reflections on time working at a bank, his misery, etc.
- 50:00 Discusses time at Milledgeville, Georgia, living next to kind elderly couple; church membership and “searching;” talks about sobriety and discussion with family on Christmas Eve
- 51:44 Reflections on how much he hated himself on Christmas Eve, 1978; relationship with maid Mary Lee; sister asking him to attend an AA meeting and consequent sobriety
- 53:25 Reflections on gay AA meetings in Atlanta, meeting first gay lover; connections with gays; attendance of Southeastern Gay and Lesbian conference in Chapel Hill and fear of attending; met mentor (of sorts) Diane at this conference; reflections on learning about himself and his sexuality
- 56:00 Reflects on how he got to UNC (encouragement from lesbian AA sponsor in Atlanta to apply to UNC); fond recollections of his AA sponsor and associated friends; faculty relationships at Georgia College in Milledgeville; encouraged to obtain a Ph.D. by boss
- 59:40 Begins discussing influential people at UNC in his field (library history); motivated him to come to UNC; improved GRE scores to be able to come to UNC; discusses interview to get into UNC, love of students, school, professors, etc.
- 1:01:22 Reflections on first semester at UNC (“holy hell!”); greatly enjoyed students; seminar with influential professor Ed Holly in library history; fell in love with UNC at he discovered history “blossomed”
- 1:02:50 Reflects on gay and lesbian community at UNC in the mid-to-late 1980s; sometimes believed “he WAS the gay community;” first gay speaker at the AA meetings in Carrboro; story about sexual experience with guard in jail
- 1:04:17 Gay AA group at the Newman Center; discusses “political” Carolina Gay Association movement, which was “not well diffused;” reflections on older

members of the CGA (of which he attended only one meeting); did not feel comfortable at CGA

- 1:05:54 Reflections on gay AA meetings in Chapel Hill (what kept him sane); forming a gay community around the AA meetings (“you could count on one hand the number of people [in the AA meetings]”); reflects on closeted alcoholism of the gay community
- 1:07:10 (con’t) reflections on alcoholism in gay community; recalls lack of talk on substance abuse in the gay community (though gays could only socialize in bars at the time).
- 1:08:02 Discusses activism; conference in San Francisco on library instruction (ALA conference on bibliographic instruction); reflections on library science and the famous professors with whom he worked
- 1:10:00 Reflections on the gay community and the AIDS crisis; friend Larry who died from AIDS; discusses lack of AIDS information in the United States (“no mention of AIDS in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*” by 1986)
- 1:13:10 AIDS discussion (con’t) and how it affected gay AA group in Greensboro; friends who died in Chapel Hill of AIDS
- 1:14:42 Reflections on AIDS crisis; made the gay community feel that they “were not numbers in a bar;” recalls the AIDS quilt square he made for friend who died; AIDS “knocked him for a loop”
- 1:15:52 Discusses his own experience with AIDS; not as sexually active, so contracting AIDS did not bother him; discusses relationship with Danny, a lover
- 1:17:40 Discusses his loneliness in his 40s; how he turned his life around; “there are other forms of love besides sexual love;” reflects on Emily Dickinson’s letters and how they affected him; “I think my talent in life is being a friend;” talks about how service and “contributing to a bigger whole” gives him great satisfaction
- 1:19:44 Reflects on his cats (shows me pictures of them); how much he cares for them; reflects on death of cats and friends; how he had to deal with death; appreciating life for what it is
- 1:21:50 Discusses his complete sobriety; contemplating suicide; pulled out of depression by eccentric friend Deborah in Chapel Hill; recollections of “dear friend” Dr. Jim Holt and partner; talks his “new hobby” of fashion
- 1:26:13 Reflects on tension between professional life and sexual orientation; gives a story about a study he conducted on the “male librarian” at UNC; talks reverence of professor Dr. Les Asheim



- 1:29:16 Discussing John D'Emilio and lack of gay history in academic literature; reflects on influential essay "The Gay Academic;" talks about friend Barbara and her picketing for gay rights
- 1:32:00 Talks "coming out" party with friend Ernest the hairdresser; recalls first time he called friend Barbara, the gay rights advocate;
- 1:33:30 Reflects on time in San Francisco at the ALA conference and "gay parade;" "dykes on bikes"
- 1:35:32 Recalls his involvement in gay history, beginning in the early 1990s; returns to talking about lack of gay literature until the 1980s; discussion of John D'Emilio (the "real pioneer" of gay history); discusses difficulty of getting sexuality courses approved by department
- 1:37:30 Relationship with the church and religion; "not much of a believer" in church; reflects on AA meetings being his sort of church; describes himself as being more spiritual than religious
- 1:39:50 Discusses tension between Christian churches and sexual orientation; relationship with childhood friend playing "doctor games;" describes the very religious as "being in a different century;" discusses his interest in religion (testing as a minister on a vocational test); discusses "foundational text" *I am Thou*; emphasizes his belief system as spiritual, not following organized religion
- 1:43:27 Recalls his "reading matter" and lack of television at home; keeping up with public intellectuals and "world of ideas"
- 1:44:20 Growth of gay AA meetings; finishes previous story about the male librarian survey; admires professor Ed Holly, a very religious man "without a touch of prejudice;" (gets up to find biography on Ed Holly)
- 1:47:40 Closing remarks; feels as though he is leaving information out of his life story; talks his lack of political activism; getting to know gay community in Chapel Hill through the AA meetings; talks about legal problem of not allowing gays to marry; talks about his "in-between period" of "totally closeted" and completely out; mentions the "social revolution" of civil rights, gay rights, etc.; equates the gay movement with civil rights, election of Barack Obama, etc.
- 1:51:40 Closes by mentioning how he was too passive and has begun contributing to student government; ends interview "Thank you so much; this has been such a great interview..."