

Interview with Carl A. Barrett

Interviewer: John Elliott

December 9, 1972

Comments on my younger life. I was born near Winfield (also called Bugtown, Rapture; near Stewartsville), on the Barrett Farm. My father, Captain Joseph A. Barrett with the Union Forces, and my mother was Miriam Alice Overton. My ancestors, George Barrett and family, ventured by land and the Ohio River leaving Virginia, arriving in Indiana in the year of 1816. They homesteaded where was later known as Barrett's Switch. Attending school in New Harmony, there were a grand group of cheerful boys and girls. Winter sports of skating and sleighing, riding and parties; in the summer were swimming, holiday parties, strolling through the meadows and up the Indian mound and perhaps on to the Old Dam; frequently dances at the Opera House, lectures, events sponsored by the Library Workingmen's Association, or Institution. At the age of fifteen, I opened a sandwich shop. I do not quite recall just where I was able to obtain all the equipment for this sandwich shop; but, nevertheless, the young boys and girls and other folks in town seemed to support me, I suppose, regarding my age. Later on, a picture show came to New Harmony and they paid a small sum for passing handbills around town. I agreed that if they would teach me to operate a moving picture machine I would pass them for free, which was agreeable. Later on, at the fairgrounds I also would rent space and operate sandwiches and hamburgers and lemonade and so forth. Also I ventured out as far as Fairfield, Illinois during the fair week – I seemed to be able to make quite a bit of money due to these operations. And later on I leased a moving picture machine and opened a show at Fairfield, Illinois. Later on I purchased another machine and operated the picture show here at the Opera House in New Harmony, and later on I decided to open the third picture show at Poseyville, Indiana. During the summer months I would attend the classes sponsored by the Workingmen's Institute. They would engage an artist from Chicago to come down and conduct the classes and it gave me an idea that perhaps I would like to become an artist. I sold the picture shows and I ventured on into Chicago and I attended the Art Institute for several years.

Q: How old were you then, Carl?

A: Well, I probably was, oh, eighteen, I think, or something like that when I went, left for Chicago. And in later years, after I was at the Art Institute for some three years, I was offered a position with Harry Hawkins who had, who previously had completed a course at the Art Institute. And he was in business in Birmingham, Alabama, and I worked there in his studio for a year; then I returned to Chicago. While I was attending classes at the Art Institute, I also found that it was necessary to be able to finance myself so I, like many of the other boys, we did evening work – we would usher at the various theatres. And finally I was offered a position taking tickets at the Cohan's Grand and they paid a salary of ten dollars a week which in those days was quite satisfactory. Then later on, a party who was in control of the concessions, of the cloak room and the candies, was leaving the city and I purchased this from the party. And then later I contacted Mr. A.H. Woods who had two theatres in Chicago and I was able to sign a contract to operate the candies and the cloak rooms in those theatres, which proved to be of great value. One of the theatres was the A.H. Wood Theatre and the other was the Appollo. These two theatres were booking musicals shows such as Al Jolson, Schubert Revues, Blossom Time and many of that type of show. And I also developed then, I opened then a, the candy business, I began to manufacture, or to process my own candies under the name of Palais Royale, the French Chocolates of America and this was very profitable. And then as the years passed, the theatre, Central Theatre on Van Buren between Michigan and Wabash, was for rent (which was thirty-two thousand dollars a year rental); but I engaged a director and I began to produce some of our own plays. And especially interesting was, a young boy from New Harmony by the name of John Mott, that isn't his real name – that was his theatrical name – but his real name was Johnny Glump as we knew him as a boy. One of

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the plays, was a mystery play "On the Stairs" and in this play we had Jimmy Crane, which was the son of Dr. Crane who conducted the series of newspaper articles regarding health. And Jimmy Crane had married Alice Brady and he was the star of our cast, and John Glump was our understudy. But John didn't like the name of Glump so he used the stage name of John Mott as the understudy. Well, Jimmy Crane failed to show up for two or three days so we let the understudy take the part and then continued throughout the length of the play. I had booked in many other types of plays at the theatre and later on it seemed necessary that ... I had other interests; I was devoting my time in organizing the Illinois Automobile Club. Late in the year of 1925 I received a charter to operate the Illinois Automobile Club. I opened an office in the Loop in one of the buildings and the business was becoming prosperous and then I was able to purchase at 34th and Michigan the former residence of Ambassador Morris, and I moved to that building, and then came the Crash, the Depression. But business seemed to increase because most of the motorists were not in a position to buy a new automobile, but they really wished to protect their cars and in the event of an accident, to have the coverage to give them proper protection. And this, I continued with this business for several years and then purchased the property at 24th and Michigan. There I erected the building that costs in the neighborhood of four hundred fifty thousand dollars – a beautiful club building and our business was increasing and increasing, and a few years later, in 1949 with some eighty girls and several branch offices, I retired. During the frequent trips I had made from Chicago down to visit my mother at New Harmony, I recognized that the oil business seemed to have great appeal. And I was able, with friends of mine, to make several leases around and later on I drilled a well on Mrs. Schultz's farm which was a very, very nice well. And then I began to explore other possible sites and began to produce quite a number of wells. It was very fortunate that we were able to get the lease at Hovey Lake and out of the seven wells that we produced there, all were flowing wells; in fact, one well was flowing some fourteen hundred barrels of oil a day, and of course, we had to put it on a choke and it reduced the flow down to some six hundred barrels a day. In the year of 1946 I formed the corporation which is known as the Rush Creek Oil Company, of which I am president. I have recently drilled two wells a mile deep, or around five thousand feet, and they have, they are productive. I think Then I purchased a drill rig and operated my own drilling rig for a while; but it became burdensome, too much trouble, because I could hire the work done for probably the same amount as it cost with overhead expenses, operating myself, so I disposed of my rig and passed the business around to some of our friends. The future for the oil business, while it's on the decline for the more shallow oil, say the depth of three thousand feet, I believe that the future for the oil industry here is for the deeper penetrations and I believe it will work from the experiences that I have had to the depth that I have drilled. Recalling the days when I was in harness, I felt that probably the last thing I will do in the field of art that's worthwhile, while I have made many etchings and watercolors; but what I think is the best example of my art was with the assistance of former instructor at the Art Institute, Mr. Art Fletcher Seymour – we designed and executed the twenty-two foot statue of Santa Claus in Mount Airy granite. I had purchased a thirty-two acre farm in the neighborhood of Santa Claus, Indiana and we dedicated this statue in 19--, Christmas 1935. The attendance was somewhere, more than five hundred people attended this celebration and the broadcasting company donated a coast-to-coast one hour for the dedication. I had purchased a log cabin that was built probably a hundred years ago and erected it there in Santa Claus Park; also a totem pole I purchased from Alaska. And there were nice roadways, and we had the entranceway that housed the flagpole; we had the entrance columns at the gate made from the stone from the old mill that Abraham Lincoln worked there as a youth in building this old mill. The story of how Santa Claus got its name – about 1855 they were celebrating at a party in Santa Claus

and a star fell, and they thought it was an omen from the heavens to name the town from Santa Fe (which it was at that time) and they changed the name to Santa Claus Town. Now in this thirty-two acres which I purchased, the story goes that this meteor fell in this park, and I excavated more of this depression there at some, oh some depth of thirty-five feet and lined it with stone and protected it with a fence; and that is how, really, that Santa Claus got its name. In the year of 1970, in the fall of '70, I sold Santa Claus interest to the Koch's interests, who had already had some development, plans at Santa Claus. I find that one of the awards for my efforts as an artist was, to me, a great joy. In the Black Hills of South Dakota are the four statues of our presidents – of Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln. I have been a member of the artists' club in Chicago known as "The Cliffdwellers" for many many years, there I had the honor and the pleasure of knowing Mr. Gutzon Borglum, the artist who designed and executed those statues. I've been very fortunate in my trips out there. I have ridden across in a little carriage on a cable up to the top of those statues four times with Mr. Borglum, and the last time, after Mr. Borglum passed away, with his son, Lincoln Borglum, making the fifth trip. And there on the back of the statues there are two peaks, granite peaks and in the second one they have carved out a small room which is listed and will be known as the Hall of Records of the United States. This Hall of Records is designed for perhaps some calamity and the history of the United States with our ABC's and our methods of bookkeeping, other interests of the founding of America, with those heroes, patrons that came over here to establish what we have today. This will remain, perhaps for years, or perhaps will be opened at some future date. During the period as president of the Illinois Automobile Club I also published a magazine and later I published a book of poetry in free verse which I designated as The Moods of the Wanderer. And one of the poems I wrote after years of experience and perhaps feeling that it was through my own efforts that I had gained whatever heights I had gained, and then as you grow older you begin to realize that it's friends that are really important in everyone's life. And I wrote a poem which I call "Pride" and as a photograph I have it in the background the Lone Eagle Peak of Colorado, and the poem is,

"For me the road of life has been a stormy one, yet I have gained the heights of success alone, unaided, save for courage all my own. And mixed were my feelings of exultation and esteem, for power and wealth were at my command, secure and invulnerable I thought. Then I chanced to look below and there I saw the kindly faces of a hundred forgotten friends who had helped me on my way, and shame and humility mellowed my tempered pride."

And I've also found going through life that one would be a very, very lonely person without the dear friends. I am indeed grateful for the good fortune that has come my way. I have been able to travel with my dear wife Laura twice around the world, around and through South America. Especially an interesting place is Machu Picchu, the lost city in the Andes and Punta Arenas, the most southerly city in the world. All through South America, most all of the countries I've visited in South America; also the same in Africa from Capetown to Johannesburg up through the parks, especially to the Kenya Club. Then to Ireland, Norway, to Hammerfest, the most northerly city in the world, which is three hundred sixty miles beyond the Arctic Circle, on around through Sweden, Finland, Russia, from Stalingrad to Moscow and around through the countries around Moscow, and back through the Kiel Canal and across Ireland. One of the very interesting countries of course, is India, from New Delhi to Jaipur and the wall that runs from Jaipur across the mountains is of very great interest. Also of interest, I think, is the trip through the Mediterranean, the Greek islands, into Turkey, through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles; into the Black Sea, at Yalta, Rumania, Bulgaria and many of the ports that you'll find of great interest on

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a Mediterranean trip. Of special interest is the Rock of Gibraltar. Only recently, in the last year, have the tourists been permitted to travel through the various caves or excavations that have been made through the Rock of Gibraltar. I travelled that and on the top of Gibraltar, of course, are the famous apes of the rock and it is quite a nice – perhaps not a city but a large town on back of the rocks which very seldom comes to the attention of the general public. Of course, the British fortifications are in evidence. On these voyages, I've also visited Hong Kong twice and as the average American is delighted to say that he has purchased a suit made in Hong Kong. And very fortunate we were to be able to visit the Japanese Expo which was very, very outstanding. In the early thirties I drove down from Chicago to visit my mother and while here the editor of the New Harmony Times Mr. Clarence Wolfe, hailed me and gave me a story that they had an option to purchase some land down by the, on the river, at the ferry boat landing; that many of the folks had signed up for small amounts, contributed, purchased this land but during the Depression were having difficulty raising the money. So I asked him how much it was and he said, "Well, five hundred dollars." And I said, "You want me to give you this money?" And he said, "Well, we hope you would." So I thought, "All right, I will." And about two months later in the New Harmony Times, it was after he had the deal recorded he named it June Barrett Park in honor of my daughter which, I was very thankful and very happy about. As for me, my old hometown is one of the garden spots of the world; that is, it's not unlike thousands of small towns throughout this glorious land where fine people dwell in harmonious consent and where the strain of the rising tempo of compact industry is absent and life is peaceful in its simplicity. Yet year after year the youth of these quiet countryside's bid farewell to their love and loved ones and venture forth to our great cities seeking their fortune, or to appease their hidden desire to reach an elusive goal. The passing years seldom efface the deep affection for and the desire to return to the land of their childhood. And to the adventurous and to the countless thousands who remain home to keep the home fires burning, this story and my thoughts are respectfully stated.