



Carnahan Family Oral History Collection (SP0050)

Collection Number: SP0050

Collection Title: Carnahan Family Oral History Collection

Dates: 2000-2001

Creator: Primm, Alex, 1945-

Abstract: The Carnahan Family Oral History Collection consists of nineteen cassette tapes featuring interviews with family members of Governor Mel Carnahan. They were interviewed by Alex Primm two to four months following the Governor's death in a plane crash on October 16, 2000.

Collection Size: 0.5 cubic foot
(9 folders, 19 cassette tapes)

Language: Collection materials are in English.

Repository: The State Historical Society of Missouri

Restrictions on Access: Collection is open for research. This collection is available at The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Springfield. If you would like more information, please contact us at springfield@shsmo.org. Patrons must view the digital copies of the film. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

Restrictions on Use: The Donor has given and assigned to the Society all rights of copyright, which the Donor has in the Materials and in such of the Donor's works as may be found among any collections of Materials received by the Society from others.

Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] *Carnahan Family Oral History Collection* (SP0050); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Springfield [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-Springfield].

Donor Information: The oral history interviews were donated to the State Historical Society of Missouri by Alex Primm on May 16, 2019 (Accession No. SPA0057).

Processed by: Processed by Erin Smither, June 4, 2019. Revised by Kathleen Seale, December 4, 2020.

Biographical Note:

Albert Sidney Johnson (ASJ) Carnahan was born January 9, 1897, the son of Robert Thompson Carnahan and Tabitha Orlena Box. He was the youngest of eleven children, nine of whom survived to adulthood. Tabitha Box Carnahan, whose father died in the Civil War fighting for the Confederacy, was a lifelong Democrat. Despite not being able to vote she was politically active, knocking on doors and campaigning for Democrats because, in her opinion, the Republicans had “killed her daddy.” ASJ’s father also had strong political opinions and was upset when women were given the right to vote in 1919. Though ASJ’s politics would differ from those of his parents he was influenced by their opinions and activism.

In 1925, ASJ married Mary Kathel Schupp, who was a lifelong resident of Carter County. Her father, Henry Schupp, fled from Germany to avoid the draft in 1851. Mary was born in 1895 when her father was sixty-two years old. He died when she was nine years old. ASJ and Mary had two children. Robert Eldon “Bob” Carnahan was born on April 26, 1926, and Melvin Eugene “Mel” Carnahan, born eight years later on February 11, 1934. ASJ was a teacher in Elsinore. For many years he was the school superintendent. Sometime prior to 1942 ASJ ran for Carter County Collector and was beaten badly. He decided that he would no longer focus on local elections but would run for national office. In 1944, he ran successfully for the House of Representatives, where he represented the 8th District. He served a two year term. He lost reelection in 1946, was elected in 1948, in the election that brought Harry S. Truman to the presidency. He would serve until 1960.

Bob Carnahan joined the Navy after graduating from high school in 1943. He was sent to Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau as a member of the V12A program, which sent young recruits to college to prepare them for military service. In 1944, at a church service, he met Oma Colbert and eventually married in 1947. Together they had four children, Robert, Betty, Katy and Mary Ann. Bob and Oma settled in Rolla, where Bob and Oma had a local radio show featuring their music. It aired for five years and the couple auditioned for the Ozarks Jubilee show in Springfield. Bob dabbled in several businesses including real estate. He bought and ran the Rose Cliff Hotel in Van Buren, Missouri which opened in 1958. They ran the business for two years, before returning to Rolla to focus on the real estate business. Bob retired from that in 1976, and moved back to Elsinore to run his father’s charcoal business, located on the farm ASJ had purchased in 1950. ASJ slowly added to the farm until it consisted of over 2,000 acres. As he grew older, and his health failed, his sons bought the business from him. ASJ passed away in 1968, at the age of 71. By 1976, the charcoal business was failing, but Bob managed to make it a profitable business. Two fires at the plant led to bankruptcy. Despite winning 2 million dollars in a law suit over the cause of the fire, Bob retired and moved back to Rolla. He died of heart failure in 2006 at the age of 80.

Mel was eight years younger than Bob and shared the political aspirations of his father. He met his wife Jean Carpenter in 1948, while living in Washington, D.C. They attended the same school, George Washington University. In the early 1950s, Mel and Jean moved to Rolla,

Missouri because it was a central location in the 8th Congressional District and Mel saw an opportunity to take his father's place when he retired. In 1966, Mel ran unsuccessfully for state Senate. He spent several years focusing on local politics. He served on the school board, was active in the community, and ran a successful law practice. In 1980, he ran successfully for State Treasurer before later becoming Lieutenant Governor. In 1993, he became the Governor of Missouri where he served two terms. In 2000, Mel campaigned for a position in the U.S. Senate against incumbent John Ashcroft, but Mel would never hold national office. On October 16, 2000, Carnahan and his advisor Chris Sifford, boarded a private plane piloted by Mel's son Randy. Problems with the instrument panel led the plane to crash 25 miles south of St. Louis, killing all three men. Two weeks later Mel Carnahan posthumously won the Senate race and his widow Jean was appointed to fill the seat for two years. She lost reelection two years later. Mel's children Russ and Robin remained active in Missouri politics. Robin served as Secretary of State from 2005 to 2013. Russ represented southern St. Louis in the House of Representatives from 2005 to 2013, losing his seat due to drastic population changes in the 2010 census resulting in the loss of a congressional seat for the state of Missouri. During redistricting, the 3rd Congressional district was remapped and Russ's bid to represent the new combined district in the primary was lost to William Lacy Clay, Jr.

Carl Burton Carnahan was born in Ellsinore, Missouri on November 16, 1930, the son of Moses Carnahan and Octa Leland Sutherland. Albert Sidney Johnson Carnahan was Carl's uncle. Carl served in the United States Air Force, married Esther Marie Nie and together they had two sons, David and Bryan. Carl worked as a bee keeper for over forty years. He lived in Ellsinore, Van Buren, and spent fifteen years living in Carl Junction, Missouri. He passed away July 19, 2002 at the age of 71.

Wanda Edwina Roark was born in Ellsinore, Missouri, on July 26, 1929, the daughter of Ora May Roark and William Thomas Roark. She married Ernest Bryan Carnahan, Jr. on January 29, 1949. Ernest was the second cousin of Bob and Mel Carnahan, their grandfathers were brothers. Ernest was a veteran of World War II, serving two years in the Navy, and was present at the flag ceremony conducted at Hiroshima, Japan. Ernest worked as a farmer for many years, was a member of the Masons, and also served sixteen years as the Carter County Clerk. Edwina taught public school for one year, worked for Bell Telephone in Poplar Bluff, Missouri for several years, spent twenty years working in a garment factory, and served as the director of a shelter for the handicapped in Van Buren, Missouri. Edwina and Ernest had two sons, Ronald and Donald. Donald passed away in 2001 at the age of 45. Ernest lived to 86 years old, passing away on April 12, 2012. Edwina lived five more years passing July 9, 2017, she was 88 years old.

Arrangement:

The collection has been arranged into the follow two series:

Immediate Family
Extended Family

Scope and Content Note:

Immediate Family

This series contains cassette tapes featuring interviews with Mel Carnahan's immediate family including his only brother Bob Carnahan, wife Jean Carnahan and son Russ Carnahan. The interviews were conducted by former Rolla journalist, Alex Primm. Bob's interviews, conducted in his Rolla, Missouri home, contain information about his father's career and private life, information about Mel's political career and experiences growing up together. Bob also discusses his own private life, children, and career. Alex Primm interviewed Jean in her Rolla, Missouri office. She discusses growing up in World War II era Washington, D.C., meeting Mel in Washington, their life together, and his political career. Russ was interviewed in his Jefferson City office and discusses memories of his grandfather, Albert Sidney Johnson Carnahan, his father's 1966 campaign and other aspects of his father's life. Some sections of Russ's interviews are of poor quality and difficult to understand, and seem to be from equipment malfunction rather than decay. The cassette tapes are arranged chronologically by interview date and the tapes for each individual are kept together.

Extended Family

This series contains cassette tapes featuring interviews with Mel Carnahan's distant relatives, including his cousin Carl Burton Carnahan, Edwina Carnahan the wife of Mel's second cousin Ernest Carnahan, and Mildred Carnahan. Carl Carnahan shares his extensive knowledge about the family and its history including his father Moses Carnahan, who was the older brother of Albert Sidney Johnson Carnahan. Moses died in 1944, at the age of 53, due to complications from exposure to poison gas in World War I. In 1932, Moses survived experimental surgery to remove one of his lungs, but never totally regained his health. Carl talks about his grandparents and cousins, Bob and Mel. Edwina and Mildred focus on family genealogy and the family's history since the first Carnahan settled in Ellsinore, Missouri. Edwina talks about her own life and career and her memories of Albert Sidney Johnson Carnahan and Mel. Mildred talks about herself very little. Her maiden name was Pyeatt and she was married to James Carnahan.

Container List:

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