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Interviewee Background Information

Name: 5 Benjamin Calvin Warren

Address: 1623 Laurion Dr. Givens, Al. 36265

Phone Number(s): 435-6388 435-7526

Approximate age or date of birth: 11-28-33

Mother's name: Martha Estella Smith Warren

Father's name: WILLIAM CHESTER WARREN

Places lived and when: HEFLIN, ALA BIRTH 1933-1951

OXFORD, AL. 1951-1962

JACKSONVILLE, AL 1962-1972-SCOTTSBORO, AL 1972-1979 JUCE 1979-present

Education: HIGH SCHOOL GRAD.

Religion: Baptist

Business, political and social memberships (past and present):

Board of Givens Hospital, Civil Service Board, Deacon

First Baptist, Sunday School Teacher

Present occupation: Couper Warren Pcs Hardware

Former occupation(s): Liberty National Ins. Co.

Special skills: _____

Major Accomplishments: _____

Local events in which you have participated: _____

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: _____

National events in which you have participated: _____

International events in which you have participated: _____

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes/No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: _____

Country from which you emigrated: _____

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: _____

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: _____

Additional information: _____

Warren Family (1850-Present)

HY 444 Dr. Jackson

by Eric Trull

The day was like many other fall days in Cleburne County, Alabama; blustery, wind swirling, leaves blowing, farm animals begging to be fed, and a definite chill in the air that seemed to cut right through your clothes. However, there was something decidedly different that day. This was to be an important day in the life of Chester and Estella Warren, for Estella was about to deliver another child, which was to be their youngest and last. It was the Fall of 1933, and a baby boy came into the world of Chester and Estella Warren. Benjamin Calvin Warren was to be the youngest of six siblings; four sisters and a brother. Calvin was raised in Cleburne County, Alabama in the early part of the twentieth century; a time that would prove to be a learning, growing, and spiritual experience for him. Mr. Warren now looks back at his life on that rural farm on which he and his brother and sisters were raised. Remembering not only the long hours and hard work he and his family had to do on their farm, but also the good foundation of life and strong religious impact his parents and family gave him. Mr. Warren was eager to help with this research into his family life and early Alabama. He felt that not only was he remembering a past that he cherished, he was also lending a vision of life in early Alabama to his children, grandchildren, and those yet to come. The legacy that is told here is more than just a family lineage, it is a true-life success story of a small town farm boy who strives to make a better life for himself and his family.

Mr. Warren relates the hardships his family has encountered over the years and the endurance that has brought him from that cotton gin in Cleburne County, to seeing the world as it is, and eventually to the ownership of his own business in Jacksonville, Alabama. He tells of his close knit family and how each member of the family has an



Chester and Estella Warren
Cleburne County, Alabama
c. 1920s

important part to play in the survival of the family. He goes on to tell of the hardships and troubles he went through as a youth. "It was all part of an important learning experience," he says, and he goes on to state that, "he would not change a thing about any of those years." Talking not only to Calvin, but to others in the family, we can see the life in his early years were not all bad. Life was also fun, and as a young boy, he acted and played just that way, like a boy.

With the help of Mr. Warren, I will trace a part of Alabama history from the small, rural community of Abernathy, Alabama to the college city of Jacksonville, Alabama . We will see the impact his family has played and is still playing through the lives of his children and grandchildren.

To gain a perspective on Calvin's early life, we must discuss the period of Alabama history during that time. The time was 1935, Bibb Graves was the Governor of Alabama. Governor Bibb Graves played a major role in the education reform of the Alabama school system. Further, Governor Graves can be given credit for his work to abolish the concept of criminals working off their debt to society on private farms; a system known as the Convict Lease Law. Governor Graves was not a prohibitionist, as were others of that time. Another shining light in his administration came with the passing of the ABC Board in the State of Alabama in 1937¹ which was an outcome of the Volstead Act of 1933; a constitutional amendment which repealed prohibition. The previous governor, a supporter of the prohibition amendment, Governor Benjamin Miller had served from 1931 - 1935. During much of this time, the state and nation as a whole

were under prohibition. When Governor Graves took office, he proposed that individual Alabama counties should decide if the county was to promote the sale of alcohol. In May, 1937, the first store to sell liquor opened in Montgomery, Alabama.

As we look back at the history of our state's politics, we begin to see the evolution of the Democratic Party and a person's view slowly shift from the far right-winged Democrat to the middle-of-the-road Democrat and eventually to the Republican views with a Democratic Party backing for elections. From the Post- Civil War era with Robert Patton as the first governor, Alabamians have always been engulfed with their politics. If not from personal experience, or as it happened most of the time, by word of mouth, each citizen would find out how they stood in Washington.

In the early 1920's and 1930's America was experiencing the worst depression it had ever gone through. The two most effected industries were the Forestry Service and the iron and steel works. Since there were fewer people actually working in industries as a whole in the 1930's than in later years, fewer people were to be effected by the depression. Following the depression, there were studies performed concerning the small farmer, one study in particular was done by Senator John Bankhead, of Alabama. This study brought two writers from Fortune magazine to Alabama to live with a farmer and his family for six weeks. The resulting Fortune magazine story told of the hardships the farmers had to endure in the south.

In 1932, the depression was at a low point and the Republican party was deemed by the people to be unable to turn the economy around so they turned to the Democrats and Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal. The New Deal was a plan

which would put federal money back into the country's economy. With groups such as the Agriculture Adjustment Association and the Tennessee Valley Authority, the country was starting its slow, but long walk back to the top of the economic world. The Democratic party had, for the most part, taken most of the control of the legislative houses in Washington and Alabama and the party had two of the biggest politicians there to move things along, Alabama Senators John and William Bankhead.

During these the early years, young Calvin and his family were farmers. His father had a cotton gin and a grist mill to help make ends meet financially. The family also helped make sorghum syrup from sugar cane. "To say we were rich would be the farthest thing from the truth," Calvin told me. "For the most part we made a large part of our income from *Truck Farming*." Truck farming is when a farmer grows his produce and instead of taking the produce or goods to a store or retailer, he gets it all together in a car or truck and peddles the goods on the street or from door- to- door in the city. Mr. Warren stated that the family would gather the goods about three days a week and go to Heflin or Blue Mountain, Alabama and Tallapoosa, Georgia to sell their farm goods. "The family would leave early in the morning and not return home until all the goods had been sold, generally very late in the evening," Calvin said. "Each member of the family had his or her part in the days work and we kept busy," he goes on to say. As well as truck farming, Chester Warren, Calvin's father, owned one of the cotton gins in Cleburne County. Calvin says that, "I can remember many days when I, my brother, and my sisters would work well into the night to get the cotton from the fields to the mill and from the mill to the storage house." "Many times", he says, "we just fell asleep there on the cotton



WARREN / SMITH Family
BLUE MOUNTAIN, AL. c.1930

bails. Having a father who owned one of the cotton gins made us a little more well known in our town and school,” Calvin concluded.

School was important to Calvin’s parents and they wanted their children to be literate. Although the parents did not urge the children to seek out higher learning in a college, they did not hold the children from it. Chester was a farmer and schooling had little to do with his running of the farm. When asked what he thought about besides the farm, Calvin says, “Religion has played a major role in my life.”

Being Primitive Baptist, the Warren family attended a church which only held services one Saturday and Sunday out of the month. The family would visit other churches the other three weekends. The preacher of the church would walk about ten to fifteen miles on Saturday, preaching Saturday and Sunday. To keep from making the long journey back, he would often times sleep at the Warren’s house so he could preach a sermon that Sunday. Following church, the preacher would accompany the family home for lunch. After everyone had eaten, Chester would drive the preacher home.

The small church in Abernathy, Alabama played a big part in the lives of Calvin’s family. Sacred Harp singing, better known as *Fa- So- La*, was one source of entertainment for the family. Another source of entertainment, Calvin remembers were the nights he, his brother, and his sisters sat around on the floor listening to gospel songs on the radio and hoping the signal was strong enough to receive the Grand Ole Opry.

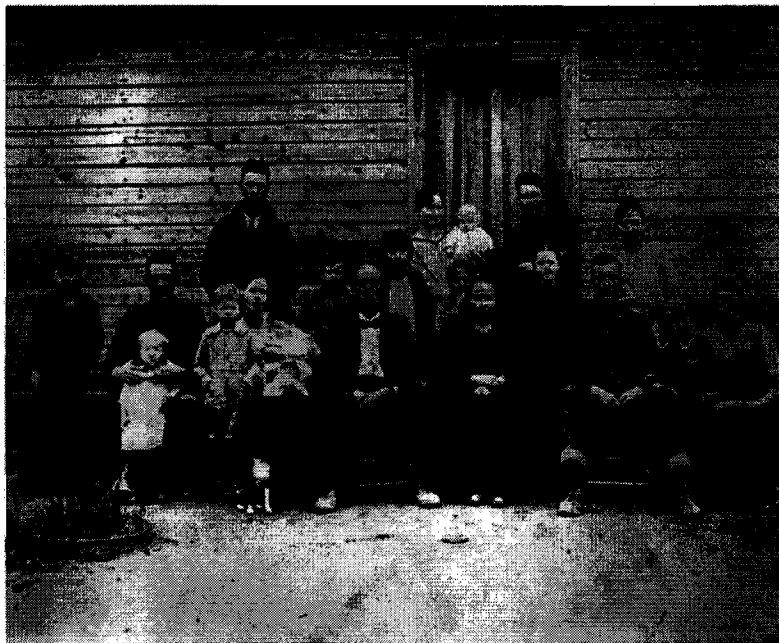
Family played a huge part of the Warren children’s lives. More often than not, the house would be filled with the pattering of feet and the voices of aunts, uncles, and cousins that often came to visit. During these visits, stories of childhood would

inevitably be told and reminiscence days past would spill from their lips. Then, and even today, family and where you came from was how life was and is still viewed. “It’s hard to even get the children of today to listen to what you say, let alone try and keep their attention long enough to tell of my childhood or even the days of when their great-grandfather was a little boy,” Calvin said. He went on to say, “The one thing I had to do was listen to those who were older than me and especially if they were talking about our family past.” Coming from a large family, discussing family history would prove to be interesting and informative, but no easy task to grasp the family lineage.

Chester Warren, Calvin’s father, did not help matters in that he also came from a even larger family. Chester’s father, Calvin Robinson Warren, and his mother, Mattie Hale, had five children together: Selester, Vesta, Chester, William, and Nellie. When asked about his grandfather, Calvin Robinson Warren, Calvin said, “My father, Chester could only talk about his step-father Jim Smith with his children since he was not old enough to remember his real father. After Chester’s father passed away his mother married Jim Smith whom he talked about fondly.” Jim Smith was a good man and liked by all. Although his occupation was farming, in the small county in the late 1880’s, a blacksmith was also needed. Originally from Newnan, Georgia, the Smith family migrated to Alabama hoping for a better life than what they had left behind in the Civil War battered state. Jim and his brother Benjamin and their families eventually settled in Cleburne County, Alabama Together, Jim and Mattie had four children: Herman, Gaines, Pauline, and Otis. This made nine children in all, six boys and three girls.



The Smith Family c. 1900s. From Right To Left: Joseph Enoch, Benjamin Aaron, Shaw H., Rhoda Caroline, Robert, John David, and James (Jim) Henry



Family of Benjamin Smith c. 1920s. Rear Row Center Right: Chester and Estella Warren

Estella, Calvin's mother, had two brothers, Nolen and Roy and a sister, Dossie. Estella's mother, Aery Anne, had died when Estella was just a baby and her father, Benjamin, married Fannie Story Hulsey. Ms. Hulsey had a child, Bennie, from a previous marriage. Together with Benjamin, Fannie gave birth to Estella's half-brother and half-sisters: Eula, Beulah, Inez, Drucella, and Henry. The family was now an even dozen. Estella loved her daddy very much and would remember and teach her children many of his sayings and carry them with her to her grave. "She felt that if her daddy had said something, then it has to be that way," Calvin said. This characteristic was one thing she passed down to all of her children. During the late 1800's and up into the early part of the this century, a person's family work force was determined by how many members there were in the family.

This becomes even more obvious when you realize that Benjamin Smith, husband to Estella's mother, and Jim Smith, step-father to Chester, were brothers. Although this tied the families closer together as a work force, the children were not confined to just working on their own farm. After the children's chores were finished at home they would hire themselves out to neighboring farms for wages. Spending money was a tight commodity and would prove to be a non-changing aspect of the lives of the people in the south for several generations.

During the depression years, Calvin remembers, ". . .the topic of politics arising only once." Politics were not as important as raising a crop and making a living. In the south "cotton was king." While Franklin D. Roosevelt was President, the price of cotton began to fall. Since cotton was the main crop of the south, all southern eyes looked to the

government for help. The answer President Roosevelt gave the farmers was, “. . . to dig up their crops.” Roosevelt claimed that once there was no cotton on the market, the prices would slowly rise and by the next season the price of cotton would be twice as high. Calvin’s father and other local farmers thought long and hard on this proposal. Not planting cotton would be a difficult decision to make. Any one of the farmers could trace their family back and tell of how the family had migrated to Alabama for the sole act of growing the dream crop, “cotton”. The decision was made and for the next few years the cotton belt would shift. Cotton would become scarce in Alabama and the new crops would be wheat and corn². The following years, the cotton prices did what Roosevelt had said and the southern farmer began to slowly put more trust back into the federal government.

As Calvin talks about his family, there is no way to avoid questions concerning the segregation that was prevalent in the days of his father, and even his father’s father. Since days before the Civil War, the south has been plagued by the act and question of racism and segregation. Since Calvin’s father and his grandfather were too poor to actually own their own slaves, the subject of racism never entered young Calvin’s mind. A definite difference was noticed and a color difference was more than apparent, but it was “. . . just something that was lived with,” Calvin says. For very little pay, Calvin’s mother had a black woman come to their house to help with chores. “J. C. Kelley,” he remembers fondly, “would come to the house about three times a week to help do the laundry or other things. Although she was a friend to the family, at meal times J. C.

would have to eat at the table my father had put in the kitchen. “I loved her, but couldn’t understand why she always ate out in the kitchen.” Even though there was obvious segregation in the house, instead of dwelling on the fact of segregation, friendship between the races would show through. “More often than not, we joked with J.C. about her color instead of looking down on her,” Calvin remembers.

Mr. Warren also talks of the loss of culture and history. He and his wife have four children, three girls and a son. The times he talks about the past or the family’s history, he feels that the same interest is not there. Not knowing if it is communication or if children of today just do not care, Mr. Warren feels he can’t pass along his history.

Although Calvin’s great-grand-father was a school master, education was not as important as their farms to his father or his father’s father. However, Calvin and his wife stressed education to their children. With two of his daughters having already graduated from college, his son a college graduate and in seminary in Kentucky, and the youngest daughter planning to start back to college next year, he says “today you need college in order to succeed.”

Calvin’s family was always Primitive Baptist, but he and his wife migrated to Southern Baptist. He and his wife, Ruby, began taking their children to church from the time they were born and taught the ways of God. With seven grand-children, all of which are in families that attend church, he says he could not be more proud. As far as the shrinking size of the family unit, he feels that the lack of need of farm hands plays a major role, and also the problem of education costs. Today’s prices of education are so high, a couple does not want more children than they can afford to educate.



*Fannie Hale, Mother of
Mattie and Calvin's Great-grandmother*



*Alcy Williamson, Grandmother of
Estella and Calvin's Great-grandmother*

Mr. Warren left me and his grand-children with a word of advice, "keep church in your life. Church is first and foremost in life and if it's kept there all the other things will come to you."

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Looking back, Calvin can recall parts of his family's history back in to the later 1800's. The migration of the Smith's boys, Benjamin and James, from Newnon, Georgia will be the starting reference. Although this paper will end up as a look into Calvin's family a point must be taken to see where his immediate family came to be.

In November of 1933, Benjamin Calvin Warren was born to Chester and Eatella Warren. He would be the youngest of the four sisters and son already occupying the family. Their lives would prove to be quite hard and trying ; but it would also be the best learning experience he would ever have. Calvin's father, Chester, was born in February 1900 to Calvin Robinson Warren and Mattie Hale Warren.

Growing up in the early years of the nineteenth century was bad, growing up in the south at that time was worse. Chester was a farmer, just like his father before him. Farming at this time was bad physically and economically. With the main concern being their farm, the children had little time for school. Not being a major topic of necessity, the Warren or Smith family was lucky if graduation was in their future.

Estella was born April 1903. She was born to Benjamin and Aery Ann Smith. Both Chester and Estella would see a parent die while they were still to young to remember the parent and the effects he or she would play in Chester or Estella's life.

Growing up, both Chester and Estella came from large families. The purpose of the family at that time was to aid in the labor force of the farm. Although farming was the main occupation of the families, other lines of work were taken. In the later part of the nineteenth century, Estella's step-father would be both the community black smith as well as tending to his own farm. Chester, Calvin's father, also engaged in job opportunities. Not only was Chester a farmer, he also owned one of the county cotton

gins as well as a grist mill. As a family unit, families would not just tend to their own farm, they would also help at other members of the families farm too.

As history reveals to the world, the south's reconstruction did not start and end after the Civil War. Although politics did not play a major role in the lives of the southern farmer, it was still important. From the time of the *Great Depression* back to the time of post- Civil War reconstruction we see who and how government played a part in the lives of the small farmer. Looking at both the state legislative house all the way to the White House, we will see what extent was taken to rectify the problems of the south. We will also see what role Bibb Graves played in the reformation of Alabama's school board as well as the repealing of the prohibition law of the time.

Lastly, the topic to segregation is covered by Calvin. Though segregation was and still is apparent in the south as a whole, vary little is actually said about the topic in this research. Mr. Warren did not feel that he could justly talk about the subject due to the fact he did not know what exactly it was when he was introduced to it.

As Calvin talks about each part of his life, we will be able to connect the goings on in not just the state but also the country with those parts in his life. From the topic of farming being Calvin's father's occupation, to his father's father and even before him. The idea of more kids in the family to work the farm during the hard days during the 1929 depression to today not having more children than a family can afford to educate.