

Harold Combs

A Transcription Of An Oral Interview

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Interviewed by:
Patrick Tyler and
Melinda Roundtree

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Harold Combs Oral Interview

Patrick Tyler: Came from? What part of Missouri were you born in?

Harold Combs: I wasn't born in Missouri. See, that's another long story. I was born in Colorado.

Tyler: Colorado?

Combs: Yeah, I was born in Colorado.

Tyler: What part of Colorado?

Combs: Well, now, you know where . . . She left me there when I was a little bitta fella, little bitta fella, little bitta fella. I don't know whether I was walking or not. I doubt whether I was walking or not. And I went up in Iowa and she stayed up there quite a while.

Tyler: Iowa?

Combs: But, I'm trying to think, I'm trying to think now of the town that I was born. That's what you after.

Tyler: Yes sir.

Combs: I think that's what you after. Let's see. It's been years and years ago.
Let's see now.

Tyler: Do you remember the year that you was born?

Combs: Yeah, I was born in '96.

Tyler: 1896? In Colorado?

Combs: Yeah, and I went to service, I went to service, when I was just 21, see, and of course, that's been a long, long time ago, see? That's been over half a hundred years ago. You see what I mean?

Tyler: Yes sir. Could you tell us a little bit about?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: Your youth. Could you tell us a little bit about your youth, when you was growing up? How was life in Iowa? You said you moved to Iowa when you was very young?

Combs: Yeah.

Tyler: How was life there?

Combs: You said how old was I when I was borned up?

Tyler: No, when you went to Iowa. Did you go to Iowa?

Combs: Oh, when I went to Iowa. Oh, yeah, I was so small. I went up there to stay until I went in a coal mine up there in Ogden, Iowa, up there in Ogden. I can remember that and went in there with my aunts. My aunt married. He was a coal miner. He lost his eye in that coal mine up there and he was a, he was a pit boss down in there under the ground and so I went up there. See my father, see my father, died and I was a little, I was a little fella when my father died and so my mother had some kids. And she was just weighted down you know, and like that, and of course you know why she kept, she kept some of the girls and tugged around there with them. And I was coming up and she was going to make a, she was going to make a coal miner out of me in which I stayed up there and worked quite a while. I did and that was the year, see they used to pay off in gold. They used to have gold money around. See, ya'll don't know nothing about that. See, they used to have gold money and so (that's a long story, too). I used to have a whole lot of gold. (Laughs.) I was lucky and I got to be pretty good size up there and so I just started digging coal and slack come on up there

and so _____ she said we're going to send you on back down there to your mother. So they started me that way back. I didn't want to leave from up there.

Tyler: How was it getting paid in gold?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: Did you like getting paid in gold better than you like getting paid in paper money?

Combs: Like to do what?

Tyler: How was it getting paid in gold?

Combs: Oh, oh, listen, sometimes they'd pay you in silver, in silver, but such as the gold, they didn't handle the gold at that time up there, no gold at that time up there, but they paid you in mighty little silver money that you'd see at the mine. Most of it was paper. I think they said the silver money was unlucky. I don't know. Something like that. It was unlucky and they paid mostly in paper, paper money, and half of the time, they had, they had yellow, they had the yellow 20s, a 20 dollar bill was kinda yellowish. Did you ever see one of them?

Tyler: No, sir.

Combs: They drewed all them in, they drewed all in, and, and they sent 'em away for gold money. They drewed it all in and dimes and five dollars and fifty-dollar gold pieces and like that. They pulled it all in, all that gold and so . . .

Roundtree: You didn't keep any, did you?

Combs: And so I uh, finally, I finally come on, come on back, come on back uh over there in Kansas again. I come on back over there in Kansas again from there. And then, and then as I say a little later on I went, I went down there to Missouri and of course they was, they was drafting guys, all that was just about, all that was eligible to go to service, and of course that draft caught me.

Tyler: They caught you when you was in Missouri? Or Kansas?

Combs: It caught me when I was in Missouri.

Tyler: Okay.

Combs: And they said wouldn't be no hardly no time before, and it wasn't hardly no time before they called me. I had to, I had to go in.

Tyler: Can you remember what year?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: Can you remember what year this was, that they called you, drafted you to the Army, to the service?

Combs: Let's see, that was in '18, '18, that was '17.

Tyler: 1817?

Combs: That was 1917.

Tyler: And after the war, well, could you tell us a little bit about it? Did you do any fighting in the war?

Combs: Well, ah, I ah, I was up there on the front. I was over there in, I was in, Metz, Germany, Metz, Germany, that's a city over there, over there in Germany. That's a city. And I was over there and ah went in the trenches, went in the trenches over there, let's see, went in the trenches over there, let's see, two, three, four. Must have been about six weeks, something like that that I was in the trenches over there, about six weeks. And when the armistice was signed, why uh I can remember that pretty well. We all jumped out and they was over

there, and we had our guns laying up, laying up there just waiting for the signal. They was fixing to cave Metz in. That's where all them prisoners was at, and, so they came out. Some was just about nude, you know naked, just had a little piece over their private part and all, everything was naked. _____ they never had a shave or haircut, you know, hair all matted down and it looked like wild people, you know. And like that. It was pretty bad, they were weak and had to carry, carry them out, drag them out and every other thing. And then a few days, a few days after that, they_____. We commenced talking about back this way, coming back this way, we just commence talking about it. They said, no, said, probably you won't go, get to go back for several months, six months anyway, see. Other people got to come and take your place, you see, just because they stopped pouring, you know, why they, you know, the other peoples got to come and see over them again and push us on back home then. And so there we was again, see? _____ get in trouble. Biggest trouble is crossing that ocean out there. I was 13 days, 13 days and nights crossing it getting over there, out there in that big sea. That's about the biggest ocean in the world, I guess, that's the Atlantic Ocean, going 'round and 'round about way and like that and it took it quite a while. Guys, some was lucky like myself, lived and some, of course, lost quite a few people going over. They died seasick.

Tyler: Did you, after the war, you came back over to the states and moved here to Champaign?

Combs: No, I come back and I went to work there in Kansas City, Missouri, for a while. The Depression was on. See, you all ain't never did see the Depression. But you heard talk about it. The Depression was on when I come back and that was another great sight. You couldn't buy a job, see. They promised you when you went over there that you gonna get this and get that, but you didn't when you come back. But you didn't. They didn't do it. And so you couldn't buy a job. And giving the boys, you know, I guess what they could, you know, food here and there. And then when, a great while before I got a job up there at the [Stony] Court, there in Kansas City. Great big, great big, great big rooming, great big rooming house, think had 90, 90 apartments. Stony Court, 90 apartments. Got a job up there, janitor, doing janitor work and would get off twice a month. On the job twice a month. 'Course I had living quarters there, and like that.

Tyler: Can you remember what year you moved here to Champaign?

Combs: What year I come to Champaign? I said I come here in '28.

Tyler: 1928?

Combs: Yeah, uh hum, yeah.

Tyler: How was life here when you moved?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: How was life here in Champaign when you moved here?

Combs: Well, it was just about as bad, just about as bad, just about as bad. Everything was just quiet, quiet, quiet, quiet. That was all over, you see. That Depression was all over. It wasn't just in one place, it was all over, all over, all over the country.

Tyler: Did you get a job when you came here?

Combs: When I come here? After so long a time, you see, I don't know exactly how long I lived before I took up, took up carpenter work. And I done that and decorated, painted. I been behind people that build, commenced to building, commenced to building. And that was pretty much all around. They was building, building, making more room, more room, more room for people, and like that. And I was following a construction guy that I worked with this guy. And he'd take these houses by the contract, lots and put houses on them by the contract. He kept going pretty steady, pretty steady. I worked there and then after, after I done so much carpenter work, why I commenced to decorating. When I come out of the house, the house was ready to be sold or rented, just anything, you know. It was through. I'd polish the floors, shine the floor, everything and the woodwork, I'd stain, varnish the woodwork or if you wanted the woodwork

painted, why, you know, just whatever you was wanting done, you see if you were going to take the house, and you know, and like that.

Tyler: Can you remember some of the houses? Do you know what area of town did you build these houses, help contract these houses?

Combs: Why uh, let's see, what's that street name over there? There's whole string of them houses right there, right there between Goodwin, between Goodwin and Wright Street, over there in Urbana, whole string of 'em. They, let's see, Beech Street. Beech Street. That's where I lived for quite a few years there on Beech Street. I did have a house there and uh, of course, I could come out the door and look over there on the job where I was working, so I could come out the back door or even the front, usually the front, and look right on over there where I was working. It was right on this side of, you know where the fairgrounds at, there in Champaign?

Tyler: Yes sir.

Combs: Well, it was just, let's see, one, two, three and about three, something like about three blocks from the fairgrounds over there. You know where Beech Street's at over there?

Tyler: Yes.

Combs: You know, all right, you know where Beech and Mathews? I lived right there on the corner of Beech and Mathews, on let's see. Coming from the, coming from the, coming from the fairgrounds, I lived on the, on the, ain't that the west? Let's see, yes, that's the west. It was on the west side of Beech, right on the corner, right on the corner. Beech and Mathews, right on the corner. Let's see, one, two, three, four. Let's see, it's got four rooms, four rooms, and the basement wasn't — I didn't complete the basement, but anyway. I had a, got a furnace put down there in the basement for that house, so I lived there. But until a sickness come back on there again.

Tyler: How many years did you live in that house?

Combs: Let's see, I got that house in the, in the '50s, I think it was '53, in '53, yeah, 1953.

Tyler: When you first came here in '28, where did you stay?

Combs: I stayed on Poplar. I stayed there on Poplar Street.

Tyler: Poplar Street?

Combs: Yeah. There in Champaign.

Tyler: Who did you stay with?

Combs: Let's see. My sister.

Tyler: What's your sister's name?

Combs: Her name was [Rayno].

Tyler: Could you say that again?

Combs: She's dead. She's dead. She's been dead, let's see, for about 20 some years.

Tyler: And her name was what?

Combs: Her name was Rayno.

Tyler: Rayno?

Combs: Yeah, Margaret Rayno, Marguerite Rayno, Marguerite Rayno.

Tyler: Okay. How was the community?

Combs: And I have, I have another sister, 'course she's, she's very, very sick. I just buried a sister here. She, this other one, she lived in Bloomington, and I just buried her. I didn't bury her, but, you know, she died and of course, why ah, she died about a month ago, about a month, about a month ago, something like that. It ain't been over five weeks, it ain't been over five weeks, put her away over there in Bloomington. This one that I'm talking about now, why she's sick and she's over there at her daughter's house. She couldn't stay there, 'cause she's alone, she's alone woman and she just lost my nephew. He just died. He died here about a year, he died the year and . . .

Tyler: And what was his name?

Combs: Huh? His name was Harold, same as mine. They gave him my name, 'cause I was the only boy in the family and so they just named him after me.

Tyler: Did you have the same last name?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: Did you have the same last name, too?

Combs: Yes, same last name, yup, so they just named him after me. I was the only male in the family.

Tyler: How was the community?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: How was the community when you first came here?

Combs: How was this community?

Tyler: Yes, the black community?

Combs: Well, you know they, you see, ah there's a lot of people that fell in, fell in and fell out, fell in, fell out. You see there's a lot of people come up here from the, you know, from the South, down in there and like that and, it was, you know, just like any place else. There's some communities, that are pretty good and some ain't so good. You know what I mean? And like that and so. Therefore, it's pretty hard to say something about those people, but you know some are, you know, some are, to make a long story short, some will shoot craps and some will drink and then some will go to church and like that and different things like that, see? Well of course, now it was just about almost on a 50/50 base. The good and the ones that wasn't, you know. You called them that wasn't so good. It

probably would take a little smile. You understand what I mean? It'd take a little smile, you know, or a glass of beer, or something like that. You know, you know, they kinda look down on such people, but listen, you go into some of them psalms and like that, you'll find some very, very good people, see? But you know, but see, that they won't have it that way, you know. See, I've dealt with, I've dealt with both kinds and I find good and bad in both, in both, in both sides. Good and bad in both sides.

Roundtree: How did the people treat you? Were they nice? The people in the community, were they nice to you?

Combs: Well, yes, they was nice to me and too, and too, see they didn't know, they didn't know anything about me, but they knew what few people I had around here and there. You see, that's the reason why that, that they kinda put a feather in my cap. You know what I mean? See, I'd been just like a, you know, just like a hobo hit town, you see, because I was new to them and they was new to me, see. And like that, and I hadn't been around, hadn't been made acquainted and like that, you know, with ah . . . You see good, good people, why, they, well, just like bad people they'll flock together and so that's the way, that's the way it is. That's the way I would answer that. That's the way I would answer that. See, otherwise, if I hadn't had no people here, see, I'd been just, just a Jones that hits the town, just hit town.

Tyler: Some of the other people that we have talked to.

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: Some of the other people that we have talked to, they mentioned about, you know, the restaurants here in town and about the movie theaters back in the '20s and '30s and they talked about, you know, the prejudice that was here. Can you tell us about a little bit about that?

Combs: Prejudices?

Tyler: Yes.

Combs: Did you say prejudices? Well, ah, listen, that's, you know, pretty much is all around but you got along much better here than they would back there, well, say for instance, I'll just take Missouri, than they would back there in Missouri. Far as that you got along, you could go a little farther. You could go a little further. See, just like, just like, now you take 'course, if I could live, but I'll say this, if I could reach up there to a few years way ahead it's going to be quite a, quite a change because these young people they changing, they changing right along. They changing right along. 'Course you're hear 'em where they're doing this and all that down South, but they coming in. They coming in. Yeah, it'll all be broke down, it'll all be broke down, and you'll be walking down the street with

these girls just the same as you do here with your wife here. This your wife ain't it?

Tyler: No, sir.

Combs: Oh well, you don't, well, you be walking down the street, in under the arms, and like that, just the same as you would . . .

[End Side A.]

Harold Combs Interview

Start Side B

Tyler: We were talking about Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy and about how the people reacted in Champaign-Urbana after the killings.

Combs: Well you see, now, I'm speaking about, you know, it's, it's, it ain't all the people, you know, in Champaign-Urbana that I'm speaking, because, you know, just like you've got different ideas and different thoughts and like that, and where you'll talk to me and her about it, well the rest of them out here wouldn't know, wouldn't know what, you know what I mean? And like that, and so I won't say most of the people, but that was just part of the people that I could hear, and like that, what they said and like that, and what they didn't say, see. That's from just part of them. Now, I don't know how the the rest of them felt, or anything at all about it, see.

Tyler: What did you hear some of the people say?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: What did you hear people say?

Combs: Well, they said that they was just well, they said it was, you know, it was just really, just really awful, the way that they was doing down there, see. Had to stop should be put to it but, and that's as far as they got, see. No, they didn't like it. No, they didn't like it, no, no.

Tyler: So the people here were?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: The people here were for Martin Luther King and for John F. Kennedy?

Combs: Sure. Sure, yeah.

Tyler: Even the white community?

Combs: Now, see, I don't know nothing about that, I don't know nothing about that, now, as I say, see.

Tyler: Could you tell us a little bit more about, did you visit any churches here? Or did you join any churches?

Combs: Do I go to church?

Tyler: Yes.

Combs: Yeah, in fact, I go, I go to church every Sunday.

Tyler: What church?

Combs: And then tomorrow, tomorrow, I'll go, I'll go to church, if nothing happens. I'll go to church tomorrow. I'll go across town over there.

Tyler: What's the name of the church, sir?

Combs: Let's see, the name. I go every Tuesday, over there. Um.

Roundtree: Is it in Champaign?

Combs: No, it's in Urbana over here. Yea, out over there in Urbana. Great big church, great big church They have a pretty good get-together over there, pretty nice, pretty nice.

Tyler: Is it Salem Baptist?

Combs: Huh? Yeah, it's a Baptist church, it is.

Tyler: Is it Salem Baptist? Is Salem the name of it?

Combs: No, it ain't Salem.

Tyler: Mount Olive?

Combs: No, it ain't Mount Olive. Let's see, the preacher's name over there is, they call him Jack.

Roundtree: Jack?

Combs: Yea, that's for short. I don't know what it's for short, but I think that's his name, I think. Jack. He's very, very, very, very nice fella, him and his wife.

Roundtree: Do you know what street it's on?

Combs: Huh?

Roundtree: Do you know what street it is on? That the church is on? You know about where it is, what it's next to?

Combs: Let's see, one, two, three. It's between three and four blocks from here, right down Main Street there. Right down Main Street there, let's see, you cross

a single track down there, you cross, and it ain't too far from that point, turn to your left. It's a great big brick church.

Tyler: Are you talking about over there by Lincoln Square? By Lincoln Square mall?

Combs: You know where Lincoln Square is, further over in Urbana than this church is, see.

Tyler: Oh, Canaan.

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: Canaan. You talking about Canaan Baptist Church? Over there by the IGA, Springfield IGA, and by the liquor store?

Combs: No, uh, uh, no, this ain't by no liquor store. No, uh, uh, no. I tell you it's right down the street here. That's Main Street and you turn and you go just about half a block after you turn to the church. After you turn off of Main Street, you go just about half a block down there to it.

Roundtree: I can't think of it.

Tyler: Well what do they be doing at church on Tuesdays?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: What do they do on Tuesdays at church?

Combs: Well, they have a, just a, just a get-together and they preach and then the university they have people to come over there to sing and play, and entertaining and first one thing or another. It's very and then they have a tremendous dinner there, tremendous dinner.

Roundtree: Is that the only church you've been a member of?

Combs: Huh?

Roundtree: What other churches have you gone to? What other churches?

Combs: Well, for a while, I was going over there in Champaign, to that little church right off of, right off of Poplar Street, the Pilgrim Street Baptist Church.

Tyler: Pilgrim?

Combs: You know where I'm talking about?

Tyler: Yes. Pilgrim Baptist Church?

Combs: Well, yeah, I was going over there for a while and like that. And one or two of the members used to come out here and pick me up, you know, and take me in there, see. Well, I just, I just went to one of these boy's funerals over there, well, in fact, he stayed, he stayed up there with me, right here at this place here. He roomed up there with me. He was one of my roomers, and he died, he died right back there, right back, across over there, across over there. And he's been dead, let's see, just a little over a week. He died the fifth and they buried him here this Friday, just past.

Roundtree: Is it Samuel Haines?

Combs: He died the fifth, you understand me now, he died the fifth of this month, see. He died the fifth of this month. And uh he'd eat, he'd eat dinner with me right out there. He ate every meal with me right out there, the boy did. He slept with me every night. And, you know, different beds in the room, you know, different beds, you know.

Tyler: Was his name Samuel?

Combs: Huh?

Tyler: Was this Samuel Haines?

Combs: Say what?

Tyler: What was this man's name?

Combs: Jess Cook and they're gonna have his concern in here. Let's see what's today? This is Monday, isn't it?

Tyler: Yes.

Combs: Friday, they're going to have his concern in here. Friday, what do you call it? Ceremony? You know what I'm talking about?

Tyler and Roundtree: Memorial.

Combs: Memorial, that's what I'm trying to say, yeah, gonna have it right in here Friday. Right in here. Preacher announced it. Yesterday was Sunday, now, and he announced it right over the altar there to the, to the congregation that was in here, in which, in which, that's the second time I've heard it. I heard it back there

at the cemetery, see. They announced it out at the cemetery there. And then they announced it here.

Tyler: Okay, well, that's all the questions that we have for you now. And we thank you for talking to us and allowing us to interview you.