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Interview with Kenyon Student, Jamie Smith

Jamie Smith

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10/30/1995

Christina Engler

ANSO 67-68

Assignment 7: Transcription of Interview with Kenyon Student, Jamie Smith '96.

Tuesday, October 24, at 11:15pm-12:30am at Research Room, Davis House. Kenyon College: Gambier, Ohio.

CE: Jamie, where about's are you from in Ohio?

JS: I live, just in Morrow county actually. In the corner that sort of pokes into Knox County at the bottom. We are exactly in between the towns of Centerburg and Sparta.

CE: So, is that sort of, is there a lot of farmland there. How would you describe sort of the terrain?

JS: There used to be a lot more farmland, it's become sort of suburban in a way, actually. A lot more space between the houses, but a lot more houses have sprung up in the past couple of years. When I was younger I always remember it differently and every time I go back I see a new house being built. Most of the farmland is being converted into sort of a residential area. And um, and a lot more things are springing up like small stores, you see like Mom and Pop type operations or whatever. Those drive-thrus that you see all over the place. Things like that, um. So I can definitely see things changing, that's one thing that is really sort of disturbing (Jamie laughs). About the way that the development is going, it makes you wonder where they have moved the cornfields.

CE: So, um...So you just, I mean, obviously there is some frustration there and you are obviously disturbed by it, I mean what do you see, I mean what is it about sort of the farmland that you find disturbing in the sense that they are going, they're moving?

JS: Well, I mean, for one thing on a personal level, it is more quiet. Over by where we live now. And uh, I don't, I am sort of torn in that I don't feel much attachment to the farm community because I wasn't really a part of it. My parents both commute to Columbus and we had a garden once, but my Mom hated weeding it so (Jamie chuckles) so farming never really was a part of my life, I was just surrounded by it. And I guess it is simply that having spent time away from it, going back to it I see the changes as being more dramatic than they probably are. Do you know what I mean?

CE: Because you have been away from it? Because you have been here?

JS: Well, cause I have been here and because I go away in summers and stuff like that so every time I come back I see a change, whereas I think if I were. There are changes that I pointed out to my parents when we were driving around that they hadn't really noticed that much. There has definitely been probably, I would

say, would estimate, that sixty percent of the land which was farmland when I was maybe five or seven years old has now been developed. It, you know, a house, a house sitting on a one acre lot with another house sitting on a one acre lot next to it. So it is still pretty spacious, and to me it's, it's practically like having a skyscraper (Jamie goes into laugh). It looks so different than it did the last time I saw it, but um I don't know I think the changes is detrimental.

Because, um, I mean we are going to run out of space for houses you know? It is inevitable, so. It makes me nervous to see things that close together there, when there used to be such a broad expanse of space.

CE: So do you think that is sort of Columbus growing out?

JS: Oh, definitely. And it has all been recent, it has all been since the construction of the Polaris Project.

CE: Which is?

JS: I don't know exactly what it is (Jamie chuckles). It is a big mall and there is an amphitheater there and it's a new exit off I-71, the road that links Cincinnati, Cleveland and Columbus together, and um. Basically ever since then, things have just been springing up because it is fairly easy to get to Columbus from there.

I mean it takes my parents I think thirty minutes to get to the city limits.

Thirty five minutes from our house. Um, so because of the proximity, no it can take you thirty minutes to get to where you need to go to work in Columbus if you live in the city, so I think that people see moving to what they conceive of as the country, as a more appealing option. Um, unfortunately everybody's doing it and it is not going to be the country for long. A lot of the problems that are cropping up in the school districts now, not just because of overcrowding and the demands on that, but simply like there's been like, a lot of what I would call 'class conflict' type things that are happening because these people are moving, are being moved, moving into a community that has been around for a really long time and you know everybody knows one another. And I don't know there have just been more disciplinary problems and things that you expect from a city school having influence on what is essentially like a rural area. (pause) As I digress... (laughter).

CE: What, so, do you sort of sense a very strong, I guess sense of community within your area? Or is, I mean with the changes has that sort of...

JS: I think in, I think in the older generations I do. But I can see how it breaks down. I mean um, my Grandparents have lived in the Knox County area, they used to live in our house and now they moved to Mount Vernon, uh...they lived in this area since 1946. So, uh, actually I think that it may even have been longer than that. I know that is when they were married and this is where they have been. So, they seem to know everyone and everyone knows them and it seems to be like the older generations seem to be a much tighter knit community. Um, people seem to have more invested in each other. I'm just sort of struck by the, by the fact that every time I speak with my Grandmother, she is like visiting someone who is sick or I know what I mean? or doing some kind of community thing whether she is donating her Mondays to the Salvation Army or you know, like doing

whatever around. And um, my Grandfather used to run a business, now he is a police officer with the sheriff's department. Um, and so they have both been really involved and it seems like there is something there, but my parents um, well it's not that they don't have any friends. But they work in Columbus so, I never met their friends (she chuckles). And uh, you know they don't really know as many people in the area or are as involved. And I mean my sisters and I are all moving away, so I think it is really, things are really breaking down. I don't know.

And also as the community gets larger, I mean you obviously can't know everyone, um. My Grandmother, Mother and I went to the same high school and I think there were about 550 people in it when I graduated, it was very small. But there were maybe 300 when my Mother was there and I think that there were like 27 or 37 people in my Grandmother's graduating class. So you can see how the community has expanded.

And I mean this has been over a period of um, you know like 60, 70 years. But the thing is that as it, as it grows out like that you are obviously not going to be able to maintain the kinds of connections that you can maintain when a community is that small, that's why the older generation, they have more invested in each other because they've shared more of their lives. I don't know.

CE: So do you get the sense that a lot of sort of the younger generations are leaving, whereas I mean, your grandparents are deeply rooted in sort of the Knox County area. Um, I know that you mentioned earlier before we started taping that, you are thinking of sort of going away, leaving Ohio and the area. Is that a trend amongst your friends or?

JS: Um, it is actually difficult for me to answer that question because I was home schooled and I don't really have any friends, from this area anymore. Um, but I think that it's a trend, um. I mean what it really comes down to is an economic issue. If you...people who can get out do, um, people who can't stay.

And um, and those are the people who are working at K-Mart, and at Wallmart, and at Mc Donald's, and at Cooper Glass and at, well er, I don't know if that exists anymore, but Cooper and Wirehauser, I think the other factory is called.

Um, I think that uh, I am don't know if I can answer that, you know what I mean, I don't know if I have the information, but um I think that out of the people that I know. Um, it depends on whether you went to you know, State School, Liberal arts college or Community college where you go and what you do afterwards. Just like everywhere else, you know? Um, I know that I, I myself would never consider living here permanently. It is not that there is anything wrong with living here, it is really beautiful and I am glad I grew up in this area. Because I think that it was a really unique experience, as far as being one of the last remaining, like American small towns. That has no tourism and nothing going on except whatever is happening in the town. And that experience is really isolated, um. But it doesn't really suit my needs or like my arts...goes (Jamie breaks into laughter). I don't really know if I can answer otherwise, you know. I don't know.

CE: Okay, no, no...

JS: I feel like I keep diverting, like I am supposed to be like talking about crop rotation or something (laughter).

CE: No, actually you are providing excellent information, really. Um, right

on track. So, I mean, I know that when you say it has been a beautiful area, so you think part of that is because, I mean, there is a lot of farmland around here?

JS: Right, absolutely.

CE: I mean is that contributing to why you feel it is a beautiful area? And I guess going back to the fact of your frustration, um with the development that is going on.

JS: Yeah, and the thing is that the development I have seen hasn't just claimed farmland. It has claimed a lot of the wooded areas that used to be around and um, I don't know anything about biology, I don't know anything about the ecosystem, but I have seen too many trees chopped down recently. And, and I, it makes me very nervous to see all of this land being cleared for these houses that look like 'cookie-cutters.' You know there is some woods about a mile from my parent's house where they are putting in a golf course. And um, I just think that is catastrophic. And it is going to be really ugly for one thing and uh, I don't know it just makes me worry about what the priorities for the community are when you see things happening like: the strip mall or with the K-mart and Big Bear or the proposal for the outer belt around Mount Vernon. Um, because obviously that is going to take up a lot of space and uh, it is also going to cause development to come out further. I wish that I knew more about um, about the economic situation of farmers in this county. Because it seems to me that it would, it could not possibly have any kind of affect, but an adverse one. On their status. And uh, I think that part, I think that the beauty of the area comes from the subtlety of the variations in it. Like the way, like the small wooded areas next to the big fields, next to you know a couple houses of whatever, something like that.

I think it really, I think that if I come back to Kenyon in twenty years for a reunion and everything's paved, it is going to be terrible (laugh). That's what I am worried about. I mean as a person who uh, grew up in this area.

CE: And you say you wish you knew more, per say, about changes that are going, the outer belt and what not, I mean do you at Kenyon people aren't as informed as to their surroundings? Um, I mean what is your consensus, I mean being from the area, knowing the area, I mean how do you find sort of the Kenyon students reacting to their surroundings? I mean do you think that there is an interest there or that they are actually aware of what is going on. I mean do you find that frustrating being around these parts?

JS: I think that, in a sense, I should have an interest. In what goes on here since a good portion of my family, my immediate family, resides in this area.

And I really don't know what's going on, um I don't know how you can expect someone who is based in Boston, or Los Angeles or you know Missouri to keep up on, to keep up on what what's going on locally. And um, I don't know how it would, how it would necessarily behoove Kenyon students to be involved. I don't know how much influence we have. I mean what's the deal with registering to vote in this county? Could you then vote on local issues if you register here? I'm not sure.

That's the only thing that I think of that would give us any say in whether that road is built around Mount Vernon or not. You know, for example, since that's

something that will definitely affect Kenyon and um, and it's proximity to the city of Mount Vernon. Uh, my impression is that uh, that students really don't know that much about what is going on or about how things work. But it's not simply a matter of isolation, it's a matter of a, of a cultural gap that people don't necessarily seem to want to bridge. Um, I remember when I first came to Kenyon, one of the things that uh, that always happened whenever you know, you walk around, your like where are you from, what do you do? Whenever people asked me where I, where I lived, you know I well said basically, here. Um, the immediate response like ninety percent of the time was oh, do you farm? (Jamie laughs) And uh, it really infuriated me. At the time I was just like that is so condescending and not that farming is a bad thing to do. But just, it seems to be like most people who come to Kenyon originally think that everyone farms because I mean the place for one thing is surrounded by corn and soybeans and wheat and stuff like that. But, but that was just sort of a quirky thing that, that happened at first and uh, yeah now people know that my Mon works at a bank(Jamie laughs loudly).

JS: She can't garden.

CE: Yeah, I completely understand. So I mean, I mean it seems that you don't really, you don't have that much contact with the farming community, being from this area. So what kind of images come to your mind when you think of the family farm or farming in general?

JS: You know, it's weird because even though, even though my parents house is surrounded, or was last time I checked, surrounded on three sides by cornfields. Um, I really , I only knew one family that farmed when I was younger. And um, they lived about a half a mile, a mile away you know. They were pretty close by. Um, I don't know, and I never really received the impression that the kids were that involved in the farm itself. Um, as I understand it now, the man's son is working there and he intends to take over the farm, but that is pretty unusual. Like most of the people that I knew, their parents worked um, in factories or stores or some kind of like small industry, in the area. Um, also the, the part of Morrow county where I grew up, um was really economically depressed and a good portion of the people I knew, I would say probably thirty percent, twenty percent of the people I went to high school with their parents were like barely employed or unemployed, just all the time. Because um (cough), excuse me, I mean obviously there is a lot of industry to support things and with like the mechanization of farming and stuff like that you don't need field hands and you don't need help like that. And there just isn't anything to do, so it, to a certain extent it is a welfare county and um, I think where I lived was, is rather, the third or fourth most poverty stricken county in the state. So uh, so the perspective I have on it is sort of, I don't even know if I have one to offer really because it seems like even though all this stuff was around me, all of the manifestations of farming. You know, I mean I drove through corn to get school and soybeans to get to work(laugh). And so like that, but I mean I never really knew that many people who still farmed. It was sort of seen as a dead thing. Um, or a dying history to a certain extent. And um, that's why all the barns are falling down, that you see. You know, it uh, I don't know how many people are going to continue it or are continuing it, or are thinking it is easier to sell off the

land, so they can be developed at this point. Um...

CE: So what kind of values do you associate with family farming I mean, given your perspective. Now are there any that, sort of the values of family farming like the...that you might have?

JS: I don't know. I mean all that I really know about it is that um, is there's a lot of work and a huge time commitment. And um, I'm sorry, it seems that you have to invest not just um, not just time and energy, but um so much of yourself in making it work and it's really a huge gamble. It seems like a really dangerous venture to me, just as a business proposal, I don't know if I would take someone up on the offer. You know what I mean, you are depending on the elements, then.

I like to be able to hold onto my odds a little bit more. (laugh) You know, so it's risky and I think that um, I think that the people who do it definitely don't get enough respect. I mean, it, I cannot imagine how, how complex the, maintaining um, maintaining all of the aspects of a farm life could be really, it always amazes me that people still do it. I don't know

CE: So, I know that you sense that there are a lot of changes going on with the farm. I mean, how important do you think the farm is, in terms of your community itself? Given the fact that Columbus is moving out and what not. Do you still think it is an intricate part of the community?

JS: Well, I think that, I think that you had to go, I think you have to judge, weigh those things by what people invest their money in. Because that's how you can always tell where someone, where someone's sympathy lies. You know it's like where your treasure is, there your heart shall be also. And uh, it seems to me that, that the esteem in which the farmer is held. I don't know if there is a way to measure it, but simply from what I have seen it looks like it is being eaten away at a little bit at a time, just like the acres here and the acres there that are being sold. I drove home last weekend and I went by so many, by several signs that were like you know, four one-acre lots for sale or three one-acre lots for sale. I just, I didn't, I didn't add them up or anything like that. But it seemed to me that there was just a lot turning over really fast. And that people are almost seeing land as a cash crop now. And um, it really, it really disturbs me. Because I was trying to imagine what it would look like once everything had been built together. Linked together like that. Um, I don't know...

CE: How is your family, like your grandparents and your parents, how are they feeling about it? I know your parents commute to Columbus and they may have a different perspective.

JS: Yeah, it makes my Mom a nervous wreck(chuckle). She doesn't like having neighbors, she doesn't want you know(laugh). I feel as if I am going to make them sound like really unfriendly people, but I mean really she is like, I mean this is the reason I drive is to get away from all these people when I come home.

And um, they have. I think that my parents own about forty-five acres probably and my grandparents own um, fifteen to twenty acres adjacent to ours. Um, plus other stuff around. But like, I think that what they will probably do, we've been approached quite a bit lately about selling what we do have. And um, my

parents have pretty steadfastly refused. And I think that if they did decide to sell it they would probably sell everything and get out and go someplace really remote. I don't know where, Canada(laugh). But I mean, you see what I am saying, they are really um, I think that they are pretty threatened by the way things are cropping up around them and the way you can't really control it. And the fact that the area is unzoned so you never know what is coming in. You know you could get like an igloo, (laugh) you know you could get, I don't know, a fourteen story housing project. You know, you really never know what people are going to do with the land they are buying. So it is sort of. . .

I am wondering what the impact will be on the area. My Father said he has seen a lot of deer in the road which is usually a, a bad sign. That means that things are getting built up and the habitat that the deer were occupying is no longer available to them. Um, he's seen a lot of them travelling in little bands and normally, normally they are in the woods. You don't see them. You know, but I mean, I feel like I am living in the cherry orchard(laugh). Because you can hear the trees falling all day, you know. I mean it is, it is not that melodramatic, but it is just seeing the way things are changing is really, really disturbing to me. And I don't know if I want the house. You know when I get it, like I don't think I want it(laugh). Because I don't know if it will be the place that I want to return to. You know, having seen it change this much.

CE: How are your grandparents feeling? There is definitely some change going on in this area too and I mean, how are your grandparents?

JS: Well, they have lived in Mount Vernon now for about fifteen years, I think.

And um, I honestly don't know. I haven't talked with them about it in great detail. I would guess that, I have heard my grandmother, I heard my grandmother expressing concern about the fact that when she drives out know, everything looks completely different. And she remembers when we were the only house in the road.

So um, so I think that it is really remarkable for them to see things changing the way that they are. But I don't know if it has really affected them that much personally. Um, you know we never used to lock our doors. And I think we started doing it around my senior year in high school because people were moving in around.

And so that is one thing that has changed, yeah. I mean I am not saying don't lock your doors, I personally think that's stupid(laugh). But just as an example of how things are changing you know I don't go across the street without doing it. And it is a street not a road. You know, they are going to pave it next year. And that's really interesting to me because, everything has been gravel the whole time, you know. And it is hell to drive on in the winter and icy and scary and whatever. You know, my mother has been complaining for years that the road wasn't paved(laugh) and now it is and I am like, now well, you've got eight more people, eight more families living on it, you know. So, uh so it is sort of weird to think about. When you get what you wish for(laugh).

CE: How, I mean, do you do you go to the county fairs and a lot of the stuff that goes on in terms of the farm, agricultural and harvest time and what not? When you were younger?

JS: Not really, much I mean because my parents um, because my parents are based in Columbus most of what we did revolved around that. And that is sort of what

I am wondering if that's what will happen to the community as a whole. Um, it seems like a lot more people are moving out to the area like where my parents live from Columbus are still, you know, going into the city of Columbus to get the things they need. Because it is just as convenient, I mean it takes just as long to get to Mount Vernon and shop locally in stores owned by local people.

As it does to go to Columbus where there is just a lot more to offer you know.

And um, Americans being like what they are and loving freedom and choice and all these alternatives and everything, I mean we are just naturally more inclined to, to shop there than, than to go someplace else or do whatever just as an activity like, you know the movies are more recent(laugh). And stuff like that and you know you can see more theater or you can go listen to other music, or music(laugh).

Which you can't always do around here, I don't know, um we were never really much involved with the area. I just sort of realized now as I am speaking about that's it's probably because of the commute and the fact that they went there all the time, Columbus became more accessible in a way to my parents than it was to my grandparents. Because they were uh, my grandfather's company was is Mount Vernon. And uh, so I think that may be one of the things that has happened to the community on a whole--is that people live there, but they do things elsewhere.

I really a interested in hearing about how it changes.

CE: Yeah, yeah it will be definitely interesting. Um, would you ever consider living on a farm?

JS: No.

CE: Why?

JS: Um, (long pause) I don't, I don't know, I think that the only way that um, that I can see it is...It's not really, it's not simply a matter of it not being the lifestyle I want to live. Um, it, I think that the energy that it requires would rob me of the energy I need to channel in other directions to stay sane.

Simply on a purely personal level. Also, I go crazy (laugh) when I am isolated like that, so I really need like more people around. I just don't know if I could really sustain myself in that kind of environment. Um, at the same time, I completely think, you know, that we have horses and stuff and I love going out to my parents house and kicking around the barn and stuff like that. So it really, it isn't a lifestyle that I would choose for myself. I don't think that I would want to living in an area that remote. And those are things that it requires you know um, At the same time I think that it's something that needs to be preserved, that needs to be a top priority politically because as I understand it, many of the proposed budget cuts are threatening to the eh, to a lot of the administrative acts were passed by Reagan in the eighties, that protect farmers. And uh, help subsidize their lifestyles. I don't really have a clear understanding of it.

But um, but I do know that those things are being threatened by a lot, a lot of the proposed cuts and I think that it is absolutely essential that, that we make it as easy as possible economically for people to continue to farming. Because um, we need to be, we need to be more self-sufficient as a nation. And um, we need to um, we need to foster that life and make it more appealing. Because I can't imagine trying to be like, `okay son, here is this business--you are going to go into debt, you are going to work really hard and be miserable, it is going

to rain all of the time sometimes, it's going to be dry all the time other times and doesn't that sound like a ball?' (laugh)

You know, so um so that's sort of like where I stand on the whole farm as a lifestyle for myself, I certainly wouldn't choose it, but um, as a voter I, (pause) I certainly will do as much as I can. That is the only way that I can act. And since someone else grows my food for me, I am at least not going to make it difficult for them to continue doing so. You know, and I think that's a perspective having grown up in this area that I have as a result of growing up in this area and seeing so much agricultural activity going on around me. That I wouldn't have had if I had lived, uh elsewhere, maybe in Columbus you know.

CE: So is there anything that you think that out project might be able to do to serve the community better in terms of the farm? Like what things do you think that we might be able to do in terms of... or that you would like to see us do?

JS: Yeah, I really don't know that much about the project itself, I understand that there was a videotape? or not a video tape...

CE: An audio tape.

JS: Okay, an audio tape that was distributed and a book or a booklet, last time.

I think that those things are great, I just don't know how accessible they were made to the community as a whole? Were there, I mean, these are questions that I actually have for you. Were they like distributed beside the Kenyon bookstore?

CE: Yeah, I believe they were. Um, I don't know exactly to what extent, but um I know that they were trying to get them out into the school systems.

JS: Yeah, definitely.

CE: And what not, make them more accessible.

JS: That's what I was going to say. Is that the school systems, the public libraries, um what's that place on uh, not Coschocton Road, I can't remember it now, I'm mumbling...um but anyway the Farm Bureau where ever that is based. The brown building, I can see it in my head (laugh). But um, places like that. I don't know is there, if there's a way to um,

(TAPE ENDS-SIDE ONE)

JS: Make it free to the public somehow. Um, I mean those are really the only suggestions I have. I don't know what you could really change like, like economically or um, politically for the people who farm in this area. You know...

CE: Do you think that the farm is something that we need to preserve?

JS: Absolutely, yeah, yeah...I mean I don't even know how that can be a question (laugh). You know I mean, it really, it seems to me absolutely. It is

like saying well do you think that we need air? (laugh) You know, and I am not making fun of you for asking me that I just think that it is something like, it is above agenda do you know what I mean?

CE: Okay, well that's it....

JS: Okay.

CE: Thank you very much.

JS: Sure.

CE: I really enjoyed talking with you.

JS: It was a pleasure.

CE: Um, I'll, I'll shut this off.