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Miss Carrie Elizabeth Robertson
4930 Don Pio Drive
Woodland Hills, California 91364

Dear Granddaughter Carrie:

I was happy to receive your recent letter and your list of "INTERVIEW QUESTIONS" to which you need answers and information about my early teen-age life for use in one of your special school papers.

First of all, my darling Granddaughter Carrie, you have asked me, your Grandfather Fondren, many important questions about himself and his life at his age 11 years. At my present age of almost 78 years, I trust that my memory is adequate and suitable for answering the questions. My answers may not be in the order in which you listed on your "INTERVIEW OUTLINE" which you mailed to me; however, since the said "INTERVIEW" is by means of letter from me, I suggest that you use my letter on the subject as is and as part of your submitted school paper, together with your own writing about the letter-interview. You should ask your teacher for instructions and advice, because she and/or he might wish for you to re-write the letter-interview in your own words for your school paper.

My father, James Espy Fondren, was born May 10, 18771 on his parent's farm, 2 miles west of Kensett, Arkansas, and deceased July 1, 1956. My mother, maiden name Zola Catherine Blevins, was born December 17, 1880, on her parent's farm near Heber Springs, Arkansas, and deceased July 18, 1978.

I was born on December 14, 1904, in my parents home (log-style) located on their-owned farm, 2 miles west of Kensett, Arkansas, and 2 miles east of Searcy, Arkansas, the county seat of White County. My paternal Grandfather, James Thomas Fondren, 1846-1899, came to Arkansas from Union City, Obion County, Tennessee and homesteaded as a pioneer the family 160-acre farm. When I was about 2 years old, we moved from the farm to Kensett, Arkansas, a small town; thus, at my age of 11 years, in 1915 my home town was Kensett, Arkansas.

I have 3 sisters, maiden names: Lorene Hazel Fondren, born Nov. 23, 1899; Merle Ann Fondren, born March 30, 1901; and Sybil Lee Fondren, Born August 4, 1902. I have one brother, Blevins Robbins Fondren, born July 14, 1913. My full name is James Price Fondren, born December 14, 1904, as given above.

My father was a great and wonderful man, in my eyes so to speak; he was a man of many abilities and accomplishments, too numerous for me to describe in this "letter-interview" but some are farmer, liveryman, merchant (wholesale & retail), builder of homes and business buildings, mayor of the town for many terms of office, automobile dealership and garage. My mother was a great and wonderful woman, always helping my father to be successful in business, and always striving for better material things and for a better education and life for her children as compared with what she and my father had when they were young.

The climate in my hometown was quite variable, being cold to below freezing in the winter, mild in the spring, warm to very hot in the summer, and pleasing weather and temperature (60 to 80 degrees F.) in the fall season. Snow, plenty of rain, and some high winds, storms, tornados, dry spells, etc. occurred during the different and respective 4 seasons of the year.

My hometown, Kensett, Arkansas, was a very interesting place during my life while there. At my age of 11 years, (1915), the population was about 2,000; it had 2 railroads, 2 hotels many different businesses of small size, only one school, one huge sawmill (lumber from logs to the finished stage of planning and milling), railroad "round-house" (place for repairing locomotives and rail cars), blacksmith shops, 3 churches, cattle shipping and buying stockyards. Agriculture and the raising of cattle, horses, mules, hogs, and chickens for buying market was an important industry in the area surrounding the town for many miles distant. The town also had a large wood-stave mill where wood staves were made for the wood barrel cooperage industry. All streets in the town and the roads in the country, as of 1915, were unpaved; they were dusty when dry and muddy when wet. The town government consisted of a mayor and town-council; it had one marshal and one very, very small wood-frame "jailhouse".

In the following paragraphs, I will try to answer the many parts of your overall QUESTION: What was school like?; Did you finish any part of school?; What subjects did you study?; How long was school?; How did the school building and its rooms look?; What did you wear?; What did you play?; What kind of sports were there?

At my age 11 years, 1915, most of the people in the town and its school district out in the country had very little money to spend on a school building and pay teacher's salaries. We did not have the fine and wonderful school buildings and the good and wonderful teachers as you have today.

We had only one rather large 2-story wood-frame school building, at the time of 1915; it had 4 classrooms downstairs, 2 classrooms upstairs, and one large meeting and study room upstairs. One long hallway was on each floor-level with wood stairways between floors. Two class-grades were held in one room sometimes. The classes were only from the first to the 10th grade. Those who could afford the cost had to go elsewhere to schools in the county to complete their high school education thru the 12th grade. At the time, our school had only 5 teachers for entire number of grades or classes.

Yes, I did finish the 5th grade, as well as most of my classmates; however, some only finished the 8th grade because it was not required by law to go further in attending school, at the time. I cannot recall exactly what subjects we studied in the 5th grade, but it must have been English (reading, writing, & spelling), Arithmetic, elementary American and Arkansas History, some elementary Science and Biology. We would have "Spelling-Bees" each week. A school term was 9 months. The school rooms were large, with high double-sash windows, with typical school-desks in size for 2 children to each desk, and large and long "blackboards" for writing with white chalk were on the front wall. Each room contained one or more large cast-iron, wood-burning, heating stove for use during cold winter days. The school did not have indoor lights nor water plumbing; water use was at an outside water-well; and, toilets were outside the school building at small structures known as "privies", "outhouses", or "toilet-houses".

The boys wore either overalls with shirt, knee-pants with stockings, coats, sweaters, or etc.; the girls wore dresses, blouses, sometimes "bloomers" and stockings, coats, skirts, sweaters, etc. On real cold days, both girls and boys wore "long-handle" cotton underwear because of 2 reasons, one the extreme cold weather outside, the other poor heating of the school rooms.

We had 30-minute recesses outside from the classroom, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Boys played marbles, "deer and fox" running and catching game, baseball, basketball, running and jumping races, "leap-frog" where you line up in row and then all alternate by first kneeling and others leap over and then kneel down and then continue from the rear ones leaping over those kneeling in order. Girls played less strenuous outdoor games such as "hop-scotch", hide-and-seek, girl basketball.

My answers to your questions about conveniences, transportation, entertainment, leisure time, vacations, and books are in this paragraph. At my age of 11 years, 1915, we had no electric lights, appliances, or motors; we used oil lamps and wax candles for lights and wood or coal burning stoves and fireplaces for heating and cooking. We had no indoor water plumbing of sinks, baths, etc.; instead, we had stoneware wash bowls and water pitchers in each room at home, hot water was heated on stoves for use in cooking, bathing, washing, etc.; water was obtained from an outside water-well; toilets were in "outhouses" or "privies" separated some distance from the home. We had no cars or automobiles; instead we walked, rode a horse or pony with saddle, or rode in a wagon, buggy, or surreys which were drawn by one or more horses or mules. Entertainment was mainly by singing or by playing musical instruments. Most homes contained either a piano or organ. Sometimes we were able to attend "traveling tent shows", either plays or vaudeville or ministerials. The books which I read at home, at that time, were about adventure and "Western" cowboy life, some authored by Zane Grey or Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Love to you and all there,

Your Grandpa, James Price Fondren

P.S. #1 My dear Carrie, this was quite a task for me to tell you about myself because usually I am more interested in other people's sayings and doings. I always want you to be proud of your Fondren and Robertson Heritage.

I completed and finished my schooling as follows: Kensett, Arkansas, Junior High School, 10th grade, 1921. Searcy High School, Searcy, Arkansas, 12th grade, 1924. University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas, graduated in 1930 with degree of Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering (B.S. in C.E.).

P.S. #2 I suggest that you write your paternal Grandfather Robertson and request that he give and send to you a "letter-interview" with him on the same subject questions which you asked me. I know that his answers will be very interesting, also.