

Oral Memoirs
of
James Singleton

An Interview Conducted by

Ashley Wilt

July 22, 2010

Linda McKnight Batman Oral History Project

Historical Society of Central Florida

Museum of Seminole County History

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Interview Histories

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Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with James Singleton is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on July 22, 2010.

Abstract

Oral history of James Singleton, conducted by Ashley Wilt on July 21, 2010. Singleton has served as the Deputy Director of Facilities Fleet and Urban Maintenance for the City of Altamonte Springs, Florida, since January 1976. In the interview, he discusses the history of the Altamonte Springs City Library, the establishment of an Information System (IS) for the city, the library's Mobile Information Center (MIC), the youth area for the library, library patrons, his career with the City of Altamonte Springs, and Project APRICOT (A Prototype Realistic. Innovative Community of Today).

James Singleton

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Ashley Wilt

July 21, 2010

Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Wilt

This is an interview with Mr. James Singleton at the Altamonte Springs [City] Library. This interview is being conducted on July 21, 2010. The interviewer's name is Ashley Wilt and I'm representing the Museum of Seminole County History and the Linda McKnight Batman Oral History Project for the Historical Society of Central Florida.

Mr. Singleton, you are Deputy Director of Facilities Fleet and Urban Maintenance for Altamonte Springs. That's a very responsible position, which shows you have achieved quite a bit in your years with the City of Altamonte Springs. We thought you might be able to tell us some interesting things about the city's library, its growth and development, and about some of the interesting people who have been involved over the years. You probably have some very interesting stories that you can relate.

0:00:46

History of the Altamonte Springs City Library

Singleton

Yes. I do have some interesting stories. When I first came to work here in Altamonte – 1976 of January – the library was run by the Altamonte Springs Civic Club. And Miss Anne Van Allen Klein was the one that donated the first books to this library, and in doing so, it started. We have to reflect back even beyond that. It started in a small house that they had, and they had the books there. Out of that house, they sold newspapers and other goods to earn money to pay the light bill and take care of all the other bills. Well, city employees at that time would help them, because they would carry the newspapers to sell, and then would bring the money back to them. Well, as time progressed, like in the [19]60s – early '60s – then they really picked up what they were doing, and they built the building here. The north end of this building was the part that they built. It was an almost 3,000-square foot building. Well, out of that building, they started to grow and develop a bigger collection. So about '76, when I came, they were still selling newspapers and they had a little gift shop of things that they would sell so they could pay the bills and keep the library going. So it was a very interesting time.

And along with Miss Klein, we have a lady named Sidell Pate, and over time, I came to know Miss Pate very well. As a matter of fact, she would call myself and Bill James her sons, because we looked out for her so very much over the time. Well, as she grew older, we didn't like for her to drive across [Florida State Road]

436. So we had her, she would go to the post office. So we bought a mailbox and put it in her yard so that she wouldn't have to go, for her own safety. Well, she lived near here, just about a block away, so we felt good for her to drive from home to here, because she didn't have to cross any major streets. She was a very delightful person. We loved her very much. So when she passed, she left an endowment to the library for books and so forth, so that we could carry on the traditions here.

But along with that, over the years, the library in 1985 – October of 1985 – was when the library came under my supervision. At that point in time, we had – the library director was Karen Potter. So Karen worked here with me for a number of years, and then she had an opportunity to go to the Maitland [Public] Library, and she became the library director there. But during that period of time, we started to do some things. We wanted to have a network here. So we did.

So the only other place in the city that have a network was up in [Department of] Public Works, and Building and Light Safety. Well, [Division of] Building and Light Safety had a more extensive network than Public Works, because we had a gentleman here by the name of Phil McMann, who was very computer literate at that time. So we – and when I say we – the next library director that came in was Richard Miller. We wanted a network here. So we got with Phil McMann, and laid out what we wanted to do, and the City allowed us to purchase the equipment, and we started a network here. Which allowed us to do, at that time, so automation, because, you have to realize, programming, at that point in time, was not where it is now. So we started out with a network, and we put our collection on, and then we had some things we could do. We could track patrons, and different things like that. So it was a wonderful. It was wonderful time. It was an exciting time, because we were growing.

Along with that, the [Altamonte Area] Chamber of Commerce was here. They built the south end of this building. And they were here for a number of years. And they outgrew the space, so they went to another location in Seminole County for they could operate and have the space that they needed. At that time, the City of Altamonte Springs purchased that end of the building, and just incorporated the whole library together, which gave us all the space we have now. So then we had the opportunity to move and expand, and we continued to build our network, and the programming that we have, which just made things so much easier at that point in time.

0:06:37

Establishment of an Information System (IS)

Singleton

So as we grew, the needs of the city changed. So they started IS [Information System]. And Steve Long was the gentleman that first headed up the IS department. So at that point in time – when I say “the city” – [Altamonte Springs] City Hall – they started IS and they started a network system. Well, everything like at Keller Road, which is where our main treatment plant is, all the information came from there to the library and then it was phoned to the system at City Hall. The other part, the west side of town, came through my

network that was in my office, because I controlled all the west side of town at that point in time.

So then, as they grew, they developed the dome, which houses all the computer equipment here. You know, the mainframes and so forth. And slowly, we moved all the individual network servers and everything was packed into there. So, extensive cabling had to be done, and then as time went on, they started putting in fiber optics. It was so funny, the first fiber optics we had was at City Hall. Between City Hall and the [City] Annex. And we knew how much information it could carry, so Phil McMann and myself – we spent a couple days gathering enough material that we could send, because it would just be a blip, and we wanted to see that blip. And it was new to us too. And we got to see that blip, and it was just wonderful, you know. It was just so exciting for us to see those things. So out of that, IS has grown. It manages the whole city, and a lot of things you don't see. It's like they have a mirror of the dome at West Altamonte for the IS system[sic], so if this system went down, it would be like a blip on your screen, because the one at West Altamonte would pick up and continue. They have redundancy, like where the main cable comes in, they have another area where the main cable comes in. So if the backup were to cut one cable, the system would never go down, and they have the redundancy all over the city for that. So it's set up very nicely so that we would never be at a loss for moving our data throughout the city, back and forth.

0:09:43

Public computers at the library

Singleton

We'll go back to the library. In 1985, you know, it was like a fledgling still, and then with Karen leaving, and Richard coming in, Richard brought – Richard Miller – brought fresh, new ideas and things he wanted to do. Richard, being very computer-literate, was an asset too. So a lot of things we could do, and get things going. So in the beginning, all we had was a few computers for the people that worked here – for staff to use. We had no computers for public use at that time. So we got in touch with Bill [& Melinda] Gates Foundation, and Bill Gates Foundation donated six computers to this library back in the late '80s, around late '88-early '89. And then we were able to set up this kiosk that you see out there, where it had six computers that were donated to us. We got those up and going, and then that was the beginning of having public access to computers, so people could do what they needed to do. So that was – that was very exciting for us here at the library.

So since then, you can see, we've grown. We have about 16-18 out there that we use, and they stay busy. Over time, it got so busy. In the last two or three years, we had to put time limits on them. So, you know, because people would come in and want to stay all day, but in order to try and meet the needs of our customers, we put time limits. So once you start your session, it comes up in the screen, it starts a little clock, it lets you know how much time you've used, how much you have left, so when that time is up, then you leave, and it makes way for someone

else to come in. And so they did use a computer. So all those things have been very exciting.

0:12:04

Mobile Information Center (MIC)

Singleton

Let's go back in time again. We started a Mobile Information Center, which was a bus, and we named that bus "MIC" – M-I-C. And it had a computer with legs on it. It was running. MIC was an acronym for Mobile Information Center. And we set it up, because the library's here on the east side of town, and then the thinking of the city fathers – city managers and so forth – was how could we help our citizens – the older population – so they didn't have to travel so far to come here and get books. So we created that program. And now, you talk about funny. When we – we brought MIC out, we had a little grand opening, and we had Mayor Dudley Bates here, and so we were going to christen it. We had this bottle of champagne. So when it was time to christen it, Mayor Bates swung the bottle of champagne, and it bounced back. So he did it again, and it bounced back. So he really had to lay into it. Finally the bottle broke, and MIC was christened, and ready to go on the road.

And so that was a very delightful program they had, because we were not just the west side of town, but the east side too, and it had handicapped access, so we could bring a handicap person on. They could get in. The bus was designed for that reason, so we could service our patrons. We went to the nursing care facilities, and people would come on. They could check out books. They could actually come on and pick out their own books, check them out. And then we would go back, and they could come back on the bus again, and return their books, and get other books to read. So this was a very successful program. Same thing was done on the east side of town. They have nursing facilities over there – west side – and nursing facilities over there, and we accommodated those people over there also.

Well, as time went on – you know, the recession that we're in – the amount of money – operating funds for everybody – changed. So, we did away with MIC – the bus – because it cost money to operate it, but we didn't do away with the program. We still deliver books to people that are incapacitated throughout the city. So that they can have the books they need to read. So that's one of the things that I really enjoy about working for the city. You see the slogan on the paper – they use pencils that say, "We are people that care about people." And you can really see it. They did away with the bus, but not with the program. So people get what they need to read, we get back and pick the books up, and carry them different books, and it's just a wonderful arrangement, especially for people that are limited in their means of having transportation to go back and forth.

0:15:48

Youth Library Area

Singleton

Another thing here, where we're sitting here today, is the Youth Library Area. At one time, we did not have this. You know, we had youth books, but not a designated area for these ones to come sit, and do things, and have the books

that they really liked to read, and enough of them. So this was one thing that we created. It took a number of years to do so, but slowly and surely we did, and this area is used by young adults. And it's summertime now, so it kind of slows off, but when school starts, they come, they do their homework projects here, they have the ability to do research, and so that worked out real well. I guess the thing that I was most pleased with: when the Chamber of Commerce moved, they gave us the area for the children's library. They gave us an opportunity to develop that area. And having a few kids myself, I really appreciate the area.

I have eight kids, and so as we develop that area – when we finish, you may take a look. It's designed just for kids. The rugs, all them things in there, the decoration is for kids, and make them feel at home. And they don't have to hear anybody say, "Shh!" They can be a kid, enjoy the library, and so that was just a wonderful addition. And I think that area, for checking out books and so forth, it accounts for 40 percent of the books that are checked out of the library. So we have a deep interest in kids.

And in the summertime, we have kid's programs. They do things like – we bring in from the Sanford zoo,¹ they'll bring animals in, and they'll have programs for the kids, maybe the parents, some of the things, and then they have the kids. I've seen 60-70 kids in that area for that program. We've done other programs in – like we bring beekeepers in to help them understand about bees, the things that they do.

And then when school's going on, we bring tutors in to help these young ones with their lessons and so forth, if they have a problem in math. And so some of the schools work with us in that regard. And some of the teachers will come, and volunteer their time, so we can help these kids. Some of those kids have really improved, and I don't know if I should say this or not, but the Chinese restaurant on the corner – China First, I believe it is – their kids that needed help reading. It was a result of the program that we have here that the kids greatly improved in reading.

So one thing leads to another. They have a writing contest here every year for eighth graders. So we give prizes and we also publish the book of all the writings of everyone that entered something in. And so winners – first, second, third – will go to their school, will present their school with a copy of the book, and also, the student that wrote the winning entry will get a copy of the book. Well, they've been very generous at the China First, of helping the library with the prizes and things that they give away. Because that's how they show their appreciation for how much they helped their kids. So it's a lot of good stories that I know about, and probably some that I don't, because even when I'm not here, they continue to do good things like that.

So it's so many good things that come out of this library that even Seminole County has come over and observed our programs – Seminole County Library

¹ Central Florida Zoo and Botanical Gardens.

System²—So I'm very proud of it, and if I had to do it all over again, I would gladly do that.

0:20:43

Library patrons

Wilt That's amazing. Those are great stories. Have you ever experienced any interesting or colorful patrons?

Singleton Yes. We had a gentleman that used to come over from St. Cloud, and always wanted to watch pornography, he always wanted to pull up pornographic pictures, so one day I told him, I said, "You cannot do that here." And he said, "Well, I have freedom of speech." And I said, "Well, I have these young kids here, and I have all these ladies work here. I will not allow it." He said, "Well, I'll sue you." So I said, "You do that." I said, "The lawyer's at City Hall. I don't handle lawsuits. I maintain this library." So he said, "I'm going to watch what I want." So I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. First of all, I'll open the door with your head, and then I'll skin your nose on the asphalt as I throw you out. You will not observe this in here while these kids are here." He said, "I'll see you in court." I said, "I'll be there." And I told him—I said, "Well, if this is what you like, buy your computer, set it up at home, and you can watch it yourself. Won't bother anyone." But, you know, most—all ladies work here, except one person. So you just couldn't have that. And the kids come and out. I'd always be in the area in which, you know, that's really designated for them, they come with their parents and things like that. So you have to look out for things like that, and I probably was just a little bit off the right path, but that's how I felt about it. But he never came back. And he never sued. So it worked out just fine.

Wilt Have you, over time, seen patrons that came back and enjoyed the child's room, and now they're bring their children? Or they're migrating into the Young Adult room?

Singleton Yes. There are people that come here and bring their kids that were patrons here prior to that. And they've—they watched the progression of growth in the library, so now they come in. And see, what's interesting about us being small, it's more personal when you come here. And sometimes if you come down in the kids' room, they know these kids by name basically, their parents, and so forth. So it does a couple of things. It makes the people feel very welcome here, and it's a warm atmosphere, but also, it creates a very good atmosphere of safety, because, like, if you came in, and you know they don't belong with this kid, because they know basically who the people that come here. And then some of our senior patrons, they come here for the same reason. And I think that that's been the focus of this library, almost from the beginning, our senior patrons, although we cater to all groups of people. It's just really a marvelous arrangement that we have here.

² Correction: Seminole County Public Library (SCPL).

0:24:12

Altamonte Springs Civic Club

Wilt That is great. Now, you were telling me how the library was first established, or first run, by the Civic Club. Do you know if the Civic Club just joined together, and bought the house, and wanted to have this library – have a library? Do you know how this began?

Singleton The house really originally was a gift, and so they started working out of that. And like I said, Miss Klein – she donated her collection, and that actually started the library over 50 years ago. And then that was the beginning of the library. As I said earlier, they would sell newspapers, and they ran a thrift shop, so that they could pay their bills and so forth at that time.

0:00:00

Working with the city and the library

Wilt That's great. When you first came – you said you came in 1976 – did you come to work specifically with the library? To work with the city? How did you get involved personally?

Singleton Well, when I first came to work here, I was in charge of all the heavy equipment and everything that went underground. I worked heavily with the Water Department, and the Wastewater Divisions.³ I worked there from '76 until October '85. They had a – they started a program in Wastewater for reclaimed water. And so it was such a big focus on that that – that Fleet Facilities and Urban Beautification, which was at that time buildings and grounds – there was like – they needed to move those and they started another division. So at that time, I applied for the job of the division manager of those divisions. So they moved that out of Public Works. Those sections were in Public Works, they moved them to Leisure Services. So that they could focus on developing the regional reclaimed water system that we have here. So, when that happened, well, the library was in [Altamonte Springs] Leisure Services. And so that became one of the things that I was assigned to oversee. And that's when Karen Potter and myself[sic] came together, and then we started working together, taking over some of the other things mentioned previously.

0:27:15

Retirement

Wilt Wow. That's really neat. Do you think after your retirement you'll still stay involved with the library?

Singleton Absolutely.

Wilt More on a patron-base?

Singleton No. when I retire, I'd like to come back, volunteer, and I would like to work in the children's room, as I have for many, many times. I sit in on many of the

³ Division of Water, Wastewater, and Reuse.

programs, the readings, and so forth. I'm going to continue to enjoy that. It's been very therapeutic to me. So I will continue to do that. I will also continue to work with the disabled population that Vinnie Coon oversees. I'd like to come in when they have their functions and cook. Help to cook, prepare the meals. My son comes with me. That's something we like to do.

0:28:12

Appreciation for the library

Wilt Are there any stories that you can tell us specifically about the library and yourself that – how the library has helped you? Like you said, the children's room is therapeutic to you.

Singleton Yeah. Well, the library itself – I mean, I like to read too. But it's helped me to understand the workings, and when I went to school, when you went in the library, everything was tight-lipped, you know. But just to see now – I mean, you don't come in dancing and singing, but you can talk. And they see everything loosen up some. But the thing I've enjoyed, as Mr. [John] Batman was telling you about, the little history room, some of the buildings. Well, the [Altamonte Springs City] Commission has supported some of the things we have here, like the domes that protect the little buildings. In times past, they have authorized money to the Historical Society [of Central Florida] so they can buy the domes that protect the buildings and things like that.

I've had such great support and the things that we've done here in the library, from the city fathers, because they recognize the need for the arts and the cultural things that are here at this location. And so this has been very rewarding to me. And so I can go in and say, "Well, I need a new set of reference books." And they could very well say, "Well, what's wrong with the old ones?" But they don't say that. They see the need and they help keep up. They've helped us keep pace with what's going on in technology and so forth. So those are some of the things that overwhelm you sometimes.

Wilt Are there any stories that you would like to convey to the people of the library? Maybe about its building, or maybe the contents in the library? Even the city itself?

Singleton Yeah. I would just like to say that people should really appreciate this library. For several reasons. It's local. And it has easy access. And I know they have a – right up the street, they have a [Seminole] County [Public] Library branch,⁴ just on the other side of [U.S. Route] 17-92. But the city still maintains this library, because it benefits the local residents. And when you see – if you could just go out sometime, which I have done many times, to these individuals and they get the books, because they like to read, and they get the books, and you know, it's not a lot of hassle for them. You come back and pick them up and carry new books. They really appreciate that. It just gives you a warm feeling all inside.

⁴ Jean Rhein Central Branch.

And so I've been working here, I'm in my 35th year. And the city has always been so progressive. I appreciate that as much as anything – how they are progressive, and that they also would give you empowerment to do things. I mean, within reason. And so we can make changes, like to change the layout of the library so we have a better traffic flow, and things like that. We didn't have to get a congressional approval of that. Those are things that we can do. Like painting, and so forth. We can change the color schemes, because, you know, they need to be changed. And they've always allowed those things.

And I would imagine, as time goes on, they will still do that, because I think this is the most progressive city in all of Seminole County. As a matter of fact, I know it is. I've been very proud to work here. I'm pretty sure when I leave, I'll probably get up one morning and come to work before I realize I'm not coming to work. But I appreciate those things. And then, they just work with us, hand-in-hand. He called over here one day, and asked about some information that he wanted. Well, when he got over here, they had it all laid out for him. So they're good at things like that, and so that's what they do. They disseminate information, and if you need something, they will get it for you. Myself and Bill James – we're working with the Winwood Group, which is the neighbors next door here. They were working with the school over there, [Seminole-]Rosenwald [School]. You familiar with Rosenwald schools?

Wilt Yes.

Singleton Well, they wanted some space in there, because they're closing the school down at the end of this year. And they're moving all those students to another location. So there's a need over there for some of the things, for seniors, and other youth programming things like that. So we help them in that regard, and we also help them appreciate that the kids and adults in that area are coming to the library.

And if you notice when you first came in, the computer section was full. Well, that was a computer class that they teach before the library actually opens to the public. So we made that available, most specifically, to the seniors, because there's so many things they could do at home on their computer rather than trying to get a ride to Social Security [Administration Office] or wherever they need to go. They could do it at home on a computer.

And we also made arrangements with some of the people in the neighborhood that were computer-literate – had computers. They'll work with those individuals so they can come to their home, do their paperwork and stuff right there, without having to secure a ride to go to Sanford and things like that. So the library, you know – we reach out. Not just to the city proper, but we'll help our neighbors too, also. So those are just some of the things that the city does and allow us to do, because they are futuristic in their thinking.

0:35:25

Project APRICOT (A Prototype Realistic. Innovative Community of Today)

Wilt Wow. That is just great. Now, you were talking about the admiration you have for the city and its progression, and the way it adapts to progress. Have you seen any city changes that – like you were just explaining? But progress that you haven't seen in other cities or in other areas of Central Florida?

Singleton Yes. I have. We were talking about the reclaimed water system. It's called Project APRICOT [A Prototype Realistic. Innovative Community of Today]. That's the name of it. It started off Project APRICOT, and so, at the time, when the city started Project APRICOT, Don Newnan was here. He was the project works director. The only other place in Central Florida area was St. Petersburg. They were doing on a limited basis, recapturing some of the water that was coming out of the septic tank systems and processing it and so forth. But this was the first city to do a complete system city-wide of reclaimed water in the state of Florida.

And so, when it first started, you know, they hired a young lady named Allison Marcue, and she had the job of selling wastewater, so to speak. But it's not really wastewater when it's all cleaned up. You know, there's some affluent, and it's all cleaned up. And I've seen – if you go out to the plant where water comes out, they have this pool. And the bottom of it, it has this apricot logo. And you look down in, it's clear. It's just as clear as glass. And I've seen, people can actually drink the water. I mean, it's that clean when it goes out. And I remember DEP [Department of Environmental Protection] fined us one time, because the water we were putting in the river, was cleaner than the water in the river. I never really understood that, but they fought it, and they wouldn't rescind the fine, but they did reduce it. So you would think, we're putting a better quality of water in, then they were taking out, everything was there. So as a result of that, you know, we have – our system is contained now. We don't really pump any in. We use it for our citizens to get them a way to water, and maintain their plants and yards, and it costs less. So we don't put anything into the streams in that regard. So it's just a lot of innovation. A lot of innovative things the city has done.

0:38:37

Managing Fleet Facilities and Urban Beautification

Wilt Wow. That is just amazing. Well, I would like to know if there's anything that you would like to discuss or touch on that we haven't – that I haven't asked you – that we haven't gone over. Is there anything special to you that you'd like to convey?

Singleton Yes. I would. Like I said, I've managed Fleet Facilities and Urban Beautification. And you drive down through our city, and you know, in the medians, you see beautiful plants and everything. It's sad to say, we have people that come through here that don't live here, and although we trash the main areas daily, because we want everything to look all nice. And even when we have holidays, like September 6th will be Labor Day – it's a long weekend. Well, somewhere during between that Friday and that Monday, we'll come down 436, the main

areas, and we will trash. We'll pick up all the trash, so the place will look good, just as though we were working here. So I appreciate things like that.

And even, we had a hard winter. And things froze like you wouldn't believe. And people would actually call City Hall and told Mr. Pendleton how good things look. And we would laugh, because they didn't look that good to us. When I say us – Urban. It just looked better, in our opinion. But if you looked around, everything here looked better than everything around us.

But we were still working, because we wanted – we have a set level, a standard that we like – that we were trying to achieve. And I think we're about there now, but we continue to work. And we're allowed to do that. And I appreciate that. If you would look at Fleet Maintenance, you look at our vehicles, we have one of the cleanest fleets that's here. And sometimes, if you have a moment, if you could come out to Fleet Maintenance, I'd just like to you to look at the facility. You don't see a dirty place. You don't see junk or anything like that. The building is always clean. Every day, it's cleaned before they go home. So a lot of times people will come and say, "Do you actually work here?" Well, just because you work on a car or a truck, it doesn't have to be a filthy, greasy place.

And so we try to maintain that so if, like if any other commissioners like Mr. [Jon] Batman or anyone came out, they're not worried about getting their clothes dirty or anything, because the shop's not dirty. That's a mainstay for us. But if you look at the vehicles going up and down the road, they're nice and clean, they're all well-maintained, and so forth. We sent our vehicles to the auction. If you ever have a chance to go, our vehicles sell for a higher price than any other government or municipality around here. Because they're clean, everything works when they go over there, and they always run. So that's how we're able to recoup monies to go back into the general fund, and so we take a great pride in that. And then the facilities, well, you can just tell here. Even in the children's room, you might think – well, you should see fingerprints on the wall and things like that. We don't see that, because we maintain the facilities in a way that we will always want it to reflect the highest quality in the City of Altamonte Springs.

0:42:47

Closing remarks

Wilt That is amazing. And I thank you so much for your time. I greatly appreciate everything we talked about. Would you like to give me and Mr. Batman a tour of your museum, of the hall of history, or the children's room?

Singleton I'd be delighted to do so.

Wilt That'd be wonderful. Thank you so much for your time. I greatly appreciate it.

Singleton You're welcome.

End of Interview