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(SNP035) Clarence Somers interviewed by Dorothy Noble Smith and Jim Cotter, transcribed by Jeanette Shapiro

Clarence O. Somers

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Interview with Clarence Somers

Interview conducted at the home of Clarence Somers
By Dorothy Noble Smith and Jim Cotter on September 11, 1976

Transcribed by Jeanette Shapiro, March, 2004
Updated by Victoria M. Edwards, November, 2009
and Mary M. Darrough, January 2010

[DS:] Interviewer, Dorothy Noble Smith
[JC:] Interviewer, Jim Cotter
[CS:] Interviewee, Clarence Somers
[BS:] Commentator, Beulah Somers

[Notes regarding transcription technique]
[unintelligible] Unable to understand more than one word
_______ (??) Transcriber’s best guess
— Speaker makes abrupt change in sentence
Refer to the Baylor University Style Guide for consistency in transcription

Total interview length: 00:36:37 min.

[Begin audio file, 00:00:01 min.]

DS: This is Dorothy Smith with Jim Cotter, of the Park, who is talking with
Clarence Somers regarding the Judd Gardens.

JC: Is it Somers?

CS: Yes.

JC: Somers. I have made a map of the Judd Garden area, and have picked out about
thirty-five species of plants, ornamental plants, that apparently were planted by
yourself and other gardeners that worked for Mrs. Judd. I do have, a few things
baffle me, however, I haven’t been able to find a certain species of plant, and I
was hoping maybe you could help me. A few questions I would like to ask you.
First off, did the stone fence that’s all the way around the garden, did that mark
the outer boundary of the garden?

CS: I guess it did.

JC: Uh huh. Was there an area of the garden that was left natural?

CS: Yes.

JC: With hemlocks and so forth?

CS: Yes, quite a bit of it.

JC: Uh, huh. Would that have been at the north end of the—

CS: The north, northwest end.

JC: Northwest end. Okay. What about grapevines? Were there any grapevines
planted?
CS: Yes. There was a stone fence on the west side of the garden. About, well, it was about midway in the garden, that is the land they owned. And there were the rows of grapevines planted there.

JC: I see. I found some old grapevines last week, and they didn’t have a whole lot of life to them. Apparently, the native growth has covered them over, and they apparently, they may come back I don’t know whether there is any green left at all in them. But it looked like grapevines, and I wanted to get your opinion on that, as to whether somebody had planted them.

CS: Yes, there was probably a half a dozen.

JC: Uh huh, I see.

DS: What kind of grapes?

CS: Well, the only one that ever ripened was the Moore’s Early. The rest of them, the Niagara, and the, some other varieties, I forget the name of them, that never did ripen. They’d just sour and green when they’d freeze.

JC: I wonder, I guess that’s the short season, then, is the reason for that.

CS: I think so.

JC: Those were--the ones that I found, were near a crabapple tree. Just to the west of a crabapple tree, am I right in that?

CS: There was a Red Astrachan apple tree in there. Just to the east of these grapevines. And also a French prune. And there was also a Early apple there.

JC: Did that French prune do well in the garden?

CS: That bore practically every year. And also, the Red Astrachan apple.

JC: In that hemlock forest, then on the western side that was left natural, were there some old black oaks in there also that were left?

CS: Yes, some large, a couple large trees in there.

JC: I see a few trees down through that area, as I’ve explored it, that look to be about two hundred years old.

CS: Well, I imagine they are.

JC: What was the house like? Do you recollect much about the house?

CS: Well, the house was up on posts. White oak, white oak trees, you might say. Some of them were maybe sixteen, eighteen inches through. Probably on the lower side, on the north side, they were I would say about ten feet high. And on the east side it had a porch, came around, and all the way over on the north side.

JC: I bet that house would have been nice in this kind of weather, huh? (laughs)

CS: It had a big stone chimney with a fireplace.

JC: Do you remember how many rooms?

CS: It must have had about I’d say six or seven rooms in it. I did work all through the house but I just don’t remember.
JC: Uh huh, I see.
CS: There were several bedrooms, a kitchen, and then a living room and a bath.
JC: Did the Judds ever take in boarders?
CS: No.
JC: No.
CS: They had guests up there a lot of times.
JC: No paying guests, though?
CS: No.
JC: The--in your last interview, you mentioned a Koster Blue spruce.
CS: Yes.
JC: Was that way up high on the hill on the west side?
CS: Right in below the house, where the house stood.
JC: I see.
CS: See, the house went in, was in here.
JC: Would it be where that “X” is there?
CS: Here would be the entrance.
JC: Okay.
CS: There’s the old Skyline Road--
JC: Uh huh.
CS: And right in here somewhere would be the entrance to the house and the house stood just in, oh, not more than a hundred feet in from the roof. It wasn’t that far, it wasn’t more than twenty feet from the road.
JC: I see.
CS: From this stone fence.
JC: I see.
CS: It run north and south, built against that hill there.
JC: Okay, all right.
CS: I imagine you can see the park, or the old road being there yet.
JC: Yes, you can.
CS: Well the house was just below this road that came in, that they lived in. Then up in here was the stable and garage, and here on this little ridge was the Arrowhead Cabin, and then on down here, further north, couple hundred feet, was the
Christ of the Wind, another cabin they had there.

DS: All the Judds? Were these all Judd homes?

CS: Yes. And they also owned one just across the road here, the Bird Cabin.

JC: They owned the Bird cabin? The Bird’s Nest? I see.

DS: What did they do with those houses?

CS: Well, they’d have guests up there, and entertain them.

JC: Well, that’s very interesting, that sheds a lot of light. I’ve been confused, you know, as I’ve been walking around by myself, trying to find certain things. So the Koster Blue spruce would have been planted with the Colorado Blue spruce?

CS: Yes, right.

JC: Side by side.

CS: Yes. Sort of like these trees here.

JC: You know you can see those two Blue spruce today. They’re just as tall as can be, what about fifty feet, aren’t they, Dorothy?

DS: We tried to figure how tall they were.

JC: About fifty feet high. Most beautiful trees you ever did see.

CS: I remember when they were planted.

JC: Was that about 1910?

CS: Ten or twelve. Somewhere around there.

JC: So they’d be about seventy years old.

CS: Yes, I imagine so. There should be quite a few of those small spruce coming in there. There was a couple dozen growing there when I stopped working there in 1945.

JC: Little seedlings from the big ones?

CS: Yeah. Some of them, they’d be that tall, if people didn’t steal them.

JC: I hope not. (laughs)

CS: I counted a couple dozen there one year. Up sticking around different places where they came up themselves.

DS: Jim, do you mind if I ask a question?

JC: Sure, go ahead.

DS: Did she have one special garden that was just for, like, bulbs?

CS: Well, down this stone fence, she had a space about four feet wide and had tulips planted there. Flops (?) was in the back, those tall flops, and tulips in the front. And then we had “glads” down in there too, different beds of gladiolas and asters and dahlias, marigolds, and zinnias.
DS: Where would roughly that be, according to this map? Would it be in the northern section, or near the house?

JC: Let’s say the “X” is the house.

CS: From here on down, on the west side of this stone fence there was flowers all the way down.

DS: That’s where you discovered the jonquils.

JC: I found a patch of jonquils underneath the burning bush.

CS: Well those jonquils, we had a little garden down there and we had those jonquils in there. And we’d always dig them up after they died down and plant something else in there then, and then plant them back in the fall.

JC: I see.

CS: They really did fine there.

JC: Were there any other patches of jonquils in the garden?

CS: No. Not as I know of. And also, just east of those jonquils, there was hybrid roses. There was quite a few roses. Maybe two dozen or so. Planted.

DS: West of them?

JC: East.

DS: East.

CS: I imagine they died out years ago. They were planted pretty close to trees.

JC: I had found a patch of hybrid roses in with some arborvitae and some beauty bush, kolkwitzia, a mock orange was to the east of them, and I was clearing out some undergrowth there and I found some hybrid roses. They look like they are doing quite well, if they get more sun, they’d probably bloom.

CS: I like ‘em there.

JC: But now this isn’t the same place that you’re talking about. This is a little bit further to the north. The north of the house, the northeast, I should say, of the house.

CS: I can’t understand where that would be. Northeast of the house would put you across the road, or up on the hill.

JC: No, I don’t think I’ve got my directions right.

CS: I’m wrong, I’m wrong, I was just confused. These roses against that hillside there, a rough place. Nothing but stone. That was all covered with those creeping roses.

JC: I see.

CS: At one time. That’s where the copperhead got Carl Summers.

JC: Is that right?
CS: Yep, it got him. Bit him on the hand or finger, and he thought a barb had hooked him at first and he reached in and was pulling out some more weeds and it bit him the second time on the same hand.

JC: Is that right?

CS: And he’d seen the copperhead at that time.

JC: Did he get sick from that bite or was he alright later on?

CS: Oh yeah, he got over it alright. Mr. Judd was right by and he gave him first aid treatment.

JC: I see.

CS: And they got him to the doctor right away. He had a pretty fat arm for a few days.

JC: I can imagine. I’ve been lucky working in that garden so far, haven’t seen a snake in there. But I think one of these days I’m gonna be surprised, that’s why I’m always careful working around in there.

CS: We killed four rattlers there one day.

JC: Is that right?

CS: That’s when they was building that Skyline Drive. I guess that blasting must have stirred them up, and we killed four there on less than half an acre of land that day.

JC: I don’t know whether I want to work in that garden anymore or not.

(laughter)

JC: I’m just kidding.

CS: Oh Lord, I wish I could get around and get up there with you one day.

JC: Yeah well you know you would recognize some of the trees I’m sure. You would see those big Blue Spruces. And you know the prettiest trees in that garden are those big European beeches.

CS: I’ll bet you.

JC: They are gorgeous.

CS: Yeah they were getting a pretty good size when I worked there.

JC: And then there’s two American beeches right behind them; one to the left and one to the right. They’ve done quite well.

CS: There was quite a few of those high bush cranberries growing there when I worked there.

JC: Were they right in that area? In that, around the beeches?

CS: No, they were on down to the right.

JC: I’ve looked for those cranberries and I’ll be daggone if I could find them. I hope they are still living in there.
CS: They probably died out.
JC: Did they do quite well? At that time?
CS: Yes, they really bore cranberries.
DS: Had she planted a white pine?
CS: How’s that?
DS: Did she plant a white pine? Or has that just come up?
CS: I think that’s natural. Come there natural.
DS: Then that can be taken down because it’s smothering those other trees.
JC: There is a rhododendron in the garden. We found a very large rose-berry rhododendron. And it blooms white in July. And it’s being kind of shaded out by a white pine. We’re thinking about taking one of the branches off so it will do better. It’s up about ten feet, maybe more. Was—do you remember that being planted in the yard?
CS: Yeah I think I helped to plant it.
JC: Is that right? Peonies all around it. They bloom every year, those peonies.
CS: Oh my gosh.
DS: Isn’t that a precious moment? Oh, thank you.
JC: That hits the spot.
BS: [unintelligible]
JC: Thank you very much.
BS: You’re certainly welcome. You hint it on right (??), we’ll have some more.
(laughter)
CS: There was one European mountain ash down in the lower end.
JC: Oak Leaf Mountain Ash or European?
CS: European.
JC: That’s become a huge tree and it’s done quite well in there. And it is beautiful and it’s got a rounded form to it. Do you remember when that was planted?
CS: That was planted before I started working there.
JC: Prior to 1922?
CS: Prior to 1922. Yeah.
DS: That Moss False cypress is a beauty. Do you remember that? The Moss False cypress? Was anything planted around that?
CS: Well, we had flower beds everywhere where there was a little open spot.
DS: Oh.

CS: [unintelligible]

DS: No open spots now.

CS: You’d be surprised to know how many spots we had flowers growing on.

JC: Well you know, it must have been magnificent because I had seen several rock piles all over the garden, you know, and I can visualize in some of the clearings some annual flowers and so forth. We, like I said, we have seen some of perennials. The fox gloves come back every year, and they have seeded themselves. We get some white and pink ones come back in there. And the peonies. Was there any Lily of the Valley planted in the garden you remember?

CS: Yes, there was. It was down--there was a bit of Lily of the Valley down on the north end, like. In the--beyond those grapevines.

JC: Ah ha, I found them.

(laughter)

JC: I found them last week down there. But you know, it’s so shady I’ll bet they don’t bloom much now. There’s so many trees overhanging them. And this is what I thought was Lily of the Valley but I wanted to check with you to make sure that that’s what it was. Were any Eastern Red cedars, like we have all over the valley, you know, were any of those planted in the garden?

CS: They never would do any good up there. They look like they would freeze out or something would happen to them. As far as I know, there wasn’t a one a-growing there.

JC: But there were tries?

CS: Yes. Another thing the dogwood wouldn’t do any good there.

JC: Is that right? The Chinese dogwood?

CS: No, the State dogwood.

JC: State Dogwood. I see. I’ve seen several of the Alternate Leaf dogwoods in the garden.

CS: Yes.

JC: They’re native up there. Were they planted in that garden?

CS: No, I think they just grew on their own. But we planted the native, the White dogwood there at different times, and they’d freeze out.

JC: I guess it’s just a little too high up there.

CS: I think it is, and just a little too cold for them, or something.

JC: They do quite well here in the valley, and then on up to about two thousand feet and then they seem to not do as well. Do you remember the Hinoki False cypress? H-I-N-O-K-I? Do you remember that name?

CS: No, I don’t believe I do.
JC: I can’t seem to find that, exactly where it is. And I have seen some references to it. Do you have any pictures of the garden or any of the Judd house?

CS: No, sir, I don’t have a one. I doubt if Carl Summers does either.

JC: What type of grass was planted in the clearings? Do you–

CS: Mostly Bluegrass.

JC: It looks like Bluegrass. You can still see some of that grass. It does very well. Of course, we don’t mow it, but it comes in real well in some of those clearings there. We were trying to find out, we have cleared out a new little area there that we were going to show people the garden. And I wanted to know what kind was there before and hopefully we can put the same kind in. Bluegrass does quite well in that soil, doesn’t it?

CS: Yes, it does. And there was another grass that grew there, I always called it bluestem, I don’t know whether that’s the right name for it or not. But that grew in the shade where other grass wouldn’t grow.

JC: I see. I wonder if it’s a type of red fescue. That seems to do quite well in the shade.

CS: I don’t know. It could be.

JC: But it’s a blue stem? It has a blue shade to it?

CS: Yeah.

JC: You mentioned the dogwoods. Was there a Chinese dogwood planted in the garden?

CS: Seemed to me there was.

JC: I have not been able to identify that particular dogwood tree, although I have seen a little one, a little dogwood that has come up near the rhododendron. Now it looks fairly young, it looks like it has been up within the past ten or twelve years. Apparently it’s an offspring, you know, from one of the old seeds.

CS: Could be.


CS: Yes. There was a patch up there. I’ve got some growing in back of the house here from up there.1 (laughs)

JC: Is that right?

JC: Well I’ll be. The only reason why I recognize it, I have a little bit--a patch of it at home, right around my pond, you know. And otherwise I wouldn’t have known what in the world it was. It’s growing underneath a birch tree, and it’s so shady in there I bet it doesn’t bloom every year.

CS: Well it never did bloom too well up there.

JC: Is that right?

CS: It needs a lot of water.

JC: It has to have a real moist soil in the spring.
CS: I think so. It’s never bloomed any good here.

JC: Is that right? Dorothy, do you have some—

DS: Yes, I was wondering where did she mainly get her plants and trees from?

CS: Well, the flower seeds she generally got from Drear’s (??). And--

DS: And the trees--her knowledge of trees was tremendous wasn’t it?

CS: Yes. And we would grow the plants ourselves. Grow them down here, and carry them up the mountain. Some of the plants grew up there, but most of them we grew down here, and we’d take them up there on the mountain.

DS: But the trees--now, like where did she get those Colorado Blue spruce from?

CS: I don’t know, from some nursery. They were planted there before I started working out there.

DS: Well the magnolia trees, do you know where those came from?

CS: No, I do not.

DS: I don’t see how she knew what would survive there and what wouldn’t survive. Apparently it was trial and error, or did she know?

CS: I wouldn’t know.

DS: Has he seen the list of the things that you’ve got? Maybe he could remember some more from it.

JC: Now the Boston fir, I assume they were transplanted.

CS: They were.

JC: I have identified about six Boston firs, most of them doing right well. Do you remember a Golden Glow flower?

CS: Yes, I do.

JC: They are beautiful. They come back every year.

CS: Mr. Pollock had so many of them growing up around--

JC: Around Massanutten?

CS: Up, close to where the stables used to be, around, he had a big garden there, a vegetable garden. He had a row of those Golden Glow all the way around that thing. And people complained about it, with hay fever.

JC: Is that right? It gives you hay fever? Well I’ll be, I didn’t know that.

(laughter)

CS: They got to cutting them off sometimes then, before they’d bloom, you know.

JC: I see.

DS: It’s very difficult now to find the things that were in there.
BS: I imagine so, as long as it’s been.

DS: So many briers, and you know, everything has just taken over.

BS: There isn’t any of the buildings there anymore is there?

DS: [indicates “no”]

JC: I saw, in my travels through the garden there, two pieces of wood, that looked like maybe they were part of a container, a box, or maybe a little, manure, something that would hold manure or something like this. They had slits on the end of them, and they were down near the Japanese iris, to the north of them. But I don’t know whether they had been brought in since, or whether that was—

CS: That must have been, I don’t remember anything like that.

DS: Did she have a compost?

CS: Yes. They kept two horses up there for some years and we had a stone manure pit that everything went in this pit.

BS: I’ve heard him saw that they used a lot of sheep manure up there too.

DS: That’s good to know.

CS: We used that on the garden then.

JC: That soil must have been rich already and then when you put that manure in there I’ll bet those flowers went arise (??).

CS: Well that soil was pretty, pretty poor (??).

JC: Oh was it?

CS: When I started there they hauled up plenty of manure from down here and they used fertilizer on it. Leaf mold. We’d clean up the leaves and we had a big place there that we dumped leaves for years and they’d rot down. We had a lot of extra dahlia bulbs there one year, and I took them out, stuck them around in this pile of leaf mold. And some of the finest dahlias we had grew there.

JC: Is that right?

(laughter)

JC: Well, you know that soil looks real rich now.

CS: Well, I imagine it is in pretty good shape.

JC: Well, isn’t that something? Now those dahlia bulbs, they’ll freeze in the winter, won’t they?

CS: Yes, they will. We always had to take them up, bring them down.

DS: How many roughly? Have you any idea how many dahlias there were?

CS: Oh, probably had two or three hundred in a field (??), all total.

DS: And gladiolas?
CS: Oh, we planted about a bushel of the bulbs.

DS: Oh, beautiful.

CS: And the same way with the tulips and things like that. Tulips were always planted in the fall.

JC: Do you remember any of the tulips being left in the ground?

CS: Well, I didn’t work there the last few years.

JC: I see.

CS: And I just don’t know what was left there. I worked there ‘til ’45 I believe. The army got after me told me I had to get on a better job. (laughs) I was there farming and working up there too, I raised another place.

JC: I see.

CS: Farmed my land here, and my wife’s father’s place, and then a farm over here at the Valleyburg [or Valleyburgh, or Valley Burg]. Prince owned it. I never did go back up there to work after that.

JC: I see. Was there a weigela, I think I pronounced that right, a weigela bush?

DS: Weigela?

JC: Weigela, is that right? Weigela bush?

CS: It seems to me that I remember that, but I just don’t know the location.

JC: Would it have been near the foxgloves?

CS: I just believe it was. There was one rubber plant tree up there, just north of the house. Had a little tool building down there, it was right against the tool building. And also a bunch of those tall hydrangeas were planted right in there.

JC: The blue ones or the white variety?

CS: Well, they were white when they’d bloom, and then they’d turn bluish, after they got a little older.

JC: I see. And that would be just north of the house?

CS: Yes, that’s right. That trail there like, that went on down over the ridge there, like.

JC: Yes.

CS: And there was just north of the house, there was a road that went up to this other house, or cottage, “Christ in the Wind,” that overlooked the Kettle Canyon there. That had a open spot around in there that we’d have marigolds planted all the way around. The groundhogs got so bad on them.

JC: Oh, is that right?

CS: We carried a bunch of marigolds up there and planted them out one day and put the sprinkler on. Next morning we got back and they was eat! I didn’t know what it was and I took some steel traps up there without plants one evening and I put three steel traps around there. There was a Japanese cook who worked up there, and I
told him about it. So the next morning I went back and he said, “Caught your groundhog.” I asked well what’d you do with it? He said “I got me a piece of pipe and I bumped him on the head!” (laughs)

JC: Is that right? It got up that close to him before that groundhog moved out of the way?

(laughter)

CS: Yes sir, he said “I bumped him on the head.” That stopped it.

(laughter)

DS: One groundhog did it all?

JC: They’ll just about eat everything, they are a nuisance.

BS: They are very numerous around here.

JC: Yes, I remember every year my garden down in Shenandoah be eaten up, when we lived down that way. Now we live out west of town, but we don’t have a problem with them

BS: I have a brother-in-law down the road that, he goes and kills groundhogs late every evening. He’s killed, he was in here a couple weeks ago, said he killed around thirty.

(whistle)

JC: Is that right?

BS: He likes to pull them out after they’re buried and eat them.

JC: Is that right?

BS: He likes them.

JC: You mentioned a rubber plant tree. I can’t- I don’t know quite what that is, I don’t know whether or not I—

CS: It’s just a shrub, like. It never did grow much.

JC: It had large leaves on it, or?

CS: Well, not so large. It was pretty near dead when I stopped working there. I expect that has passed on.

JC: I see, maybe because the winter is too cold for it?

CS: I imagine, and it was shaded too much too.

JC: I see.

CS: All those trees would grow out and they’d take up the flower beds.
DS: How many clematis or clematis did you plant?

CS: I don’t know. I just have no idea.

DS: Lots of them?

CS: Quite a few.

JC: I’ve seen what looks like a wild form of a clematis or a clematis, I’m not sure whether I pronounce it right. And they’re just, they’re all over the yard.

CS: Sure enough?

JC: Sure enough, they’re everywhere. It’s this type--

DS: They’re strangling everything.

BS: What kind of a blossom do they have?

JC: Little old icky blossom in the spring, little white blossom, not the real showy ones, you know? You’ve seen these purple ones that are real pretty. These have little small blossoms in the spring.

CS: I got one growing up here the yard.

JC: It’s a wild, isn’t it a wild?

BS: And it spreads roots, just comes up anywhere.

CS: One there at the house, the cultivated type, the big blue blossom. But, I don’t know, it looked like it never did grow right and it finally died.

JC: Is that right?

CS: Yes. Used to be a tremendous oak tree, stood right on the lower side of the house. The house was built right up against it. And then come a storm and broke it down one winter, broke it off right to the ground.

JC: Did it hit the house? It went the other way?

CS: No, it was leaning from the house, it was leaning pretty heavy, and I guess the ice got on it, broke it down. One winter the snow broke that porch down, to the house. And Mrs. Judd came up there and she said, “Well, I’m gonna have some guests up here next week and this porch is down.” She said, “How long will it take to get it back?” I said, “If I can get the material, the porch will be back before next week.” I got a couple to help, and ordered the material, in two days time we had the porch built.

(whistle)

JC: Is that right? Well.

CS: The second day I painted it. (laughs)

JC: I’ll be.

CS: Another fellow had given her an estimate, on it said it would take six weeks.

JC: Is that right?
(laughter)

CS: Sold her on the job.

JC: Sounds like it. [BS and DS speaking in the background]. Now, you made that mistake and went all the way around the east and the north side.

CS: The east, yes. Come in on the east side, and went on around to the north side.

JC: Oh, thank you very much [being poured a drink].

DS: Mrs. Somers makes the best lemonade!

JC: That’s right. Oh that hit the spot.

DS: Doesn’t it? That really quenches your thirst. You should have some, fella.

CS: The lemonade just [unintelligible]. And I told her, she couldn’t have suited me any better.

(laughter)

JC: That’s right, in this kind of weather. You, I see you’ve got some beautiful peonies out here. Did I mention that the peonies keep coming back up there in the garden? They bloom, most of them are white. A couple of them are pink. But they’ve done quite well. Another tree that is very beautiful in the garden is called a Nootka cedar. And I believe it’s a cultivar of— [audio disappears midsentence]

[End audio file, 00:36:37 min.]

End of Interview

1 Mr. Somers references “the house here”. This may indicate that the interview is being conducted at his home at the time.

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