

2015

# James Coleman

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## Recommended Citation

Coleman, James, "James Coleman" (2015). *Rural Volunteer Fire Fighters*. Paper 1.  
<http://digitalcommons.longwood.edu/oralhistrvff/1>

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**Interviewers:** Emily Stewart, Brooke O'Malley, Kim Clements, Veronica Racey, Tyler Swafford

**Interviewee:** James Coleman

**Date:** 1 December 2015, Sociology 102

Kim Clements: So uhm, can we just have you state your name again and spell it out for us so we can have it documented correctly?

James Coleman: You want the official name then, alright, James. J-A-M-E-S Coleman, I go by "Jimmy", so everybody in Prospect knows me by "Jimmy".

KC: Okay so let's just go around and state our names for Dr. Pederson.

Veronica Racey: Veronica Racey.

KC: Kimberly Clements.

Brooke O'Malley: Brooke O'Malley.

Emily Stewart: Emily Stewart.

Tyler Swafford: Tyler Swafford.

KC: Okay let's begin. So uhm, I just want to know a little bit about you and like where you're from and everything, so can you tell me if you're from Farmville?

JC: Yes. I grew up in and was born in Farmville, at the hospital, and grew up in Prospect; I've lived here my whole life.

KC: Okay that's interesting. So uhm, like can you tell me like from when you're as a kid to some of the changes you've seen in Farmville?

JC: Oh yes, lots of big changes. Uhm. Cause I grew up in Prospect, on a farm, so uh Prospect itself has changed. A lot of the stores that used to be here when I was growing up, the small family owned stores have gone away. Uhm, as far as Farmville is concerned, uhm, population growth—a lot more people now, uhm, the overall culture of the town, uhm, kind of changed too. It used to be very farm oriented, a lot of farmers, uhm people would talk of if you were in a store somewhere they'd talk about the crops they were having, and at the time tobacco in the summer time, and how the cows were doing, a lot of dairy farms at the time. Currently we're down to only two dairy farmers in the whole county. So all that's dramatically changed. Uhm and actually the industry is kind of declined too, cause when I was really young we had uhm Creddick Terry's Shoe store uhm company was in Farmville that they made shoes there. Uhm some of the people, the older people that uh I've grew up around said they remember making the shoes for the military for World War II and sending them over. We had a uhm, Carbone,

made the carbon brushes for the alternators and starters for GM and Ford. So that was pretty impressive. To have a, see a, car running down the road that the brushes that started that morning in the starter had they were made in Farmville. So that's gone. And uh the college of course, Longwood college has grown a lot, I actually graduated there in 1986.

KC: Oh wow.

JC: With a degree in chemistry, so uhm, that was lots of changes there as far as the streets now that I used to drive down is, where the mall areas now, grass and bushes growing there. So that's change, it's grown, its larger. The number of students there is of course more. Uhm, they've put in new buildings since I was there. Uhm, unfortunately most of the professors that I had are retired or deceased now. But uhm, that's I guess one of the biggest changes, was the growth of the college and the decline in the agricultural community and like some industry has moved out as well. As far as uh businesses and stores, uhm there were some privately owned stores like Baldwin's Department store, uhm it's gone now. The owner of that actually had a farm outside of Prospect, it's 2,640 acres. And a few years ago uh the descendants of that owner gave it uh actually sold it to the state, so now it's the Fellythin?? in uh management area. And I worked over there, just because the manager of that farm uh went to my church. So, I've known probably about known him since since I was born (blank....) , I guess is the proper way to say that one, but I worked over there for about 10 years. During the summertime vegetation and then Christmas breaks. The one cool thing about college, I guess I'd change we got a month off at Christmas

KC: Yeah!

JC: So, uhm that was one of my two favorite times of the year at college, the other one was Summer break. But uhm, since I worked over there that was that was uh pretty memorable to me for the experience that, plus now it's a it's a state park, which is pretty cool. Uhm, but the stores uh of course Baldwin's is out uh Dicky Crawl is a little guy, he's got Green Front so that's massive, everybody in the country, I guess knows about Green Front. Uh there is uh huge expansion in like the Walmart. I remember when everybody was excited for the Walmart was coming to Farmville. It was a small smaller store where tractor supply and Schewels is now and ultimately that grew into a supercenter; where everybody knows where that is. Currently all the restaurants down that street grew up, actually since I finished college. So, now I've been out for awhile now uh about 20 something years, but uhm it is good in a way that we have uhm varieties of things like that. It's kind of saddening to know that the local mom and pop kind of places have been closed down and it was kind of near and dear to me when I was a kid. It was uh my childhood memories, so that's sad.

KC: Well, S..

JC: Yeah, go ahead.

KC: Oh, [I'm] sorry. You can finish.

JC: No, that's fine. Go ahead.

KC: Well, speaking of childhood memories. Uhm can you just tell me like one of your fondest childhood memories?

JC: Fondest childhood memories? Well I was always a happy little kid. And I grew up on a farm, so I was uhm uh farming with my dad and my uncle. Uhm and my dad took me fishing quite often, so that's memorable. I like to fish with my dad. So I try to take my daughters fishing, so they can have those memories too. Based on all that? So, uhm I wouldn't have one particular favorite memory. I guess just kind of in general, just uh growing up on a farm.

KC: Uhm. Wait so as a child, since you said you graduated with a Chemistry, uhm or uh Chemistry major or Chemistry degree. Can you tell me like as a child, could you, Can you remember what you wanted to uhm when you grew up?

JC: Originally when I was a little kid, I always thought I wanted to be a dairy farmer. So, thankfully I choose not to go down that route. Uhm cause that was my big aspiration at the time, I guess. And then, what actually steered me to be a chemistry major at Longwood was because when I was in high school, uhm I had a really good chemistry teacher, Ms. Emma Batts. She still lives in Farmville and her husband Billy Batts taught in the biology department at Longwood for years and years. But she, uhm, I don't know she talked to me and I guess I just kind of had an interest in it. But I tell people, I like to say a hundred out of a hundred people 99 people hate chemistry and 1 loves it. I think since I've met more people [who don't], but it's more like a thousand and 999 people hate it and 1 loves it. But I was the one I guess that loved it, so uhm that worked worked out well for that.

KC: So since your major is different from volunteer firefighter can you just tell me some of the reasons that uhm made you want to become a volunteer firefighter?

JC: Well my dad was a firefighter um actually he died here on a call. He's one of the ones listed on the latter of remembrance so that was a bad day in my childhood believe it or not. I had just turned 13 two weeks before he died so that was a rough blow but um it was just kind of just a thing in you I don't really know how to describe that. Like uhm, it's just a desire that you have to want to help people and your neighbors but it's not to the level of the military and protecting the country but it's a similar type of feeling that you have locally that you want to protect the community and people around you. And I always liked helping people so the fire department was good for that.

KC: That's a good answer. Uhm can you tell me about your family and how the volunteering has affected them?

JC: Uhm well let's go back a few years on the family like my mom and sister. So when I was, well I was still at Longwood when I joined, so I joined when I was 21. But actually I was at the fire department doing things here like today is the big fundraiser event. So I remember the year after my dad died when I was 14 I got my mom to drive me down here and drop me off. So I'd help move stuff around and get it in the lot uhm since then but when I joined, the roster was limited to 26 people, members, and they already had a full list. So there were two people, myself and Roger Santuary who actually was a police officer long before a while too, my Longwood connection here, uhm but I was I took firefighter classes and certifications and actually Roger and I bought our own turnout gear before we could actually get membership they moved the membership to 40 and that's how we got into the department formally and lengthy I guess. Those days I was really really active so I remember several Christmases we would be getting ready for Christmas dinner and the fire alarm would go off. I would take off and go to the fire, so the family they sacrifice a lot too because for that day for the family they had gotten the meal hot and everything would have to go on hold. Uhm sometimes they're willing to do other things like go somewhere or something and the alarm would go off and I would have to go. After, I didn't get married till I was older like 37 so since my dad had died actually fighting fire I'd always said that if I ever got married I would never go into a house again, a burning building and if I had kids I'm not gonna do that. So uhm I was chief, I went through all the ranks of officers. Captain, assistant chief, chief, I was assistant chief for four and chief capacity for 10. But the year that I was going to get married, the election before that I told them I'm not going to do chief anymore because I'd always said if I ever got married you know I wouldn't go into the buildings and that type of stuff. So, I wouldn't just wanna get married. I'd give her 100% now since I gave the fire department 100%. At the point I had been part of the department for 16 years I guess. So the family now is not really as restrictive to it because I do not do as much now as I did anywhere close as I used to. I still come to here and meetings and occasionally go to a fire I don't ditch it completely. I think because I did so much early on and I saw the impact and I knew the impact from other families suffering and stuff from other firefighters leaving and not being able to do things with their families, I did not want to do that to mine because I had already lost dad. The impact on the current family was not so bad but the impact on my mom and sister early on was more so.

KC: I like how you...

JC: Make any sense at all? [laughing]

KC: Yes it did. I like how you were able to balance it the two and so that you family did not have to through anything you went through.

JC: Right, well we got hit pretty hard when dad died, that was real hard. So I didn't want to do that to my family. If I could help it, I mean I could get killed in a car wreck but when you go into a burning building your risk of going to die has increased a lot. Cause i've had ceilings fall on my head, I've two-thirds fallen through a floor before into the basement burning down the fire was in the basement and there was a hole in the floor. I was crawling around in the dark and feeling along and you just have to get back up you

never know. But I stopped all of that when I got married and I did so I kept my promise so far. [laughing]

KC: So um I know you like went over how long you've been chief and how long you've been chief for ten years and all that, but can you tell me how long you've been in the department all together?

JC: Uhh 31 years now.

KC: Can you tell me one of your proudest moments in the department and explain that experience?

JC: Proudest moment? Let's see... Some of the fires that we have aren't accident you know that right? We had an arsonist going around near the time that I was chief that was setting some fires. And um I had to work with the arson investigator from the state police, Serglo, but um without giving any specifics we were able to finally determine who was doing it and was able to stop the progression of the rest of the fires. And actually apprehending to get some payback for the damages and um they was able to make the guys' life that did it okay. Uhm it turned out that was very successful for both sides so I think that was really good. That might not make entire sense because I can't give too many specifics. So um I'll think of another better one but that was personally my favorite because it worked out so well. One of the biggest highlights of a firefighter for the chief um was the Longwood fire. Ya'll heard about that at all?

KC: Oh yes.

JC: Um we had been over to, our fire department, Farmville's, and others had been over to Buckingham to Shepherds to Dr. Leroces, he's an eye doctor in Farmville. They were remodeling a huge huge house for him and they had just about completed it and they were putting varnish and stuff on everything and they left the rags in the bucket and they warn you on the labels that you put them together in a metal bucket because they can self ignite and they did self ignite and burn the house. So we'd been over that and finished up. I was coming back down 15 towards 460 back to Prospect and the alarm went off for the Longwood fire. So we flew off down there, well a lot of the main fire trucks had already made it back to Prospect. So anyways, when I got there the Farmville truck was already there, the ladder truck and they had air packs on that getting ready to go inside. There was one guy, TJ Estis who is getting an airpack, he was from Farmville. And I said I'll get one and go in with you so I ran to the other side to get an airpack well when I got to the front of the truck I didn't see TJ so he must have already gone in. Wrong. But anyway I tore off in there all the way up the steps and kicked in the door. It was so hot in there that we had of course helmets that have stickers on them that say firefighter, chief, captain, or whatever it might be but anyway it was so hot that it blistered the stickers on my helmet, burned the back of my neck even with nomex. But anyway I didn't know that Tj wasn't there yet so I was looking around through there and finally somebody... well didn't have a hose well I had a hose but no water had gotten to it yet. So finally water had gotten to it so I hit a few rooms and then some other folks came up there. I didn't know TJ still down there at the bottom he couldn't get his air

right, it was defective. So I was up there by myself fighting that you know. Thankfully we had a lot of structural damage but not casualties. So that was kind of a highlight, it was a big fire. That was the year after I graduated so when I came out all the students (underclassmen) at the time knew me, so that was cool, running up saying "Thank you, thank you" so that was kind of a neat highlight. Bad experience for the college because of the damagers for the college but that was one of the most exciting fires.

KC: Sounds exciting. Um I don't know what kind of response I'm going to get from you on this one, so I'm going to brace myself.

JC: [laughing] Okay.

KC: Can you tell me of a time you wish you could have done something different or things would have turned out differently?

JC: Yes, that was a time on February the 14th, 1986.

KC: Valentine's Day!

JC: And the way I remember that is a lady died in the house. Ken Perkins, he was a professor of sociology. Have you guys heard of him?

KC: I think I've heard of him.

JC: And anyway he is administration at Longwood now well he lives here. Well he and I suited up and when I first got up there the chief at the time said "get an airpack and get in there quick." So that's all he said well then I got suited up and airpack and grabbed the hose off the truck and got to the front door and it turns out Ken got up there to go in with me. He said "we've gotta find the women, we've gotta find the woman." I said, "What." And so we kicked the door in, I have big shoes I always have to kick the door in. So we went in and went off to the left and it turns out it was the bedroom. But we went in there and of course there were people outside shooting water in from the sides, however they could get water to the fire because it was a huge blaze. We were crawling around and crawling around and he just kept saying, "we've gotta find the woman, we've gotta find the woman" and of course everything is kind of muffled because you got the roaring of the fire, and the airpack, and [breathe] sounds like Darth Vader breathing you know. So we went over and when you search you hold somebody's back of someone's heel. One person goes in the front with the hose and the other stays in the back holding onto their heel cause it's pitch black in there and you really can't see anything, you just kinda feel. Sometimes you see an orange glow but for the most part, if it's really smoky, you don't see anything. So anyway he was tagging along behind me and I reached up and felt something real squishy in the in the bed and I was like "oh, gosh that's her." You know? But what it was was insulation in the ceiling had fallen down. That's what that was, but it turns out we found the lady in the back kitchen, dead. So I always wondered would it made a difference if we would have come in through the back kitchen door

instead of the front. But intense intuitively when you pull up to a burning house you just go through the front door that's where the fire is.

KC: Mhm.

JC: So I always wish we could have had been a better outcome. But she left the bedroom, was in her gown, I guess she was trying to get out and she just collapsed in the back kitchen floor. So, it may not have made a difference but that was always a concern I wondered.

KC: Uhm. So like I know like uhm your father had like ah significant impact on you for volunteering or in getting into the fire department, uhm but can you tell me like like what you get out of it? Like I know you, it must make you must feel like a hero because you are saving people but can you just go into more detail like that?

JC: Um I never feel like a hero, you know? I always try to do my best, just doing my job. Uhm. But I enjoy the satisfaction of being able to help people. So if you have a somebodies brush pile, burning leaves and it gets out of control and it's going to the house and then we can put that out, then we save that house. Quite often [if] the house is already on fire, you can put it out but there's still lots of damage, like from from the fire the water and stuff, so you you can still save some things and yeah you do at times save some things. Uhm. But I I you know I really enjoy that aspect of it. And it's uh, it's kind of uh.. Oh well I guess, when you're young it's more so now then there..now, when you're like your age now, you feel more invincible, and you realize when you get to some point in life you say ah I'm not that quite invincible as I thought I was. Heck I'm not invincible at all. You know? There's a challenge that's you just kinda, the fire you gotta have a fight between the fire and yourself and you then and you determine you're going to win, you're going to put the fire out. So, It's kind of a battle, a little internal battle between yourself and the fire. To a certain degree, I mean I'm not psychotic or anything, but it's it's comp competition, it's it's strong competition. You know? It's more than just trying to beat the other team in basketball. You're really trying to get the fire out and uhm save whatever they would've gotten. So I've always enjoyed that aspect of it. And there are too cases uh you know when people are uh they're always thankful for for what you can do do for them. Even the ones that you know, most of their house was destroyed you may have saved something that might have been you know, their family bible that went back for a hundred years. There is always something that you know that that that's good that comes out of it. You may think on their side they that that there was a loss, that they lost most of their house. But the individual may have lost a lot, but they usually find something that they're really glad they kept. So it's it's still good. I guess that's all.

KC: Yeah, you did. So could you uhm just go into detail about how the department has changed since like you've first were became a part of it?

JC: Yes um equipment wise we have improved a lot. Cause we had a couple old old trucks and some had holes in the tanks and they would leak on the floor. The fire house consisted of this room and brick wall so we had trucks in here and we had one truck back

there where is now the kitchen. So not too many years after I joined the department we made this edition behind us so that improved a lot for size. And then the county, I remember going to the board of supervisors meetings and asking for money and explaining how much insurance cost, how much fuel cost, how much equipment cost, radios. Cause we used to have, used to just have a box they called plectron that would go off to alarm us when there was a fire that just stayed on your dresser. Well then we got mobile pagers which was a step off, it was kind of like a cell phone. Some places it worked and some places it didn't but it was a step up. Then they changed frequencies of the radio so we got ultra high frequencies so that's much better for communication as far as communication was concerned. We got hand held radios that actually had a alarm and a communication device on it. So technology on that end has improved dramatically. And uhm equipment has improved just the firefighting type of equipment. Protective clothing has improved, we used to have this donald duck looking hat, it was plastic that was it. And then there were better polymers with better nomex lining to keep us from getting burned and hoods and all that equipment dramatically improved. As far as filling airpaks if you went into a fire tonight during the middle of the night and used up all the airpaks someone tomorrow would have to take it to Concord to fill the tanks. Now we've got uhm, the county has a truck dedicated to just filling air tanks, called a cascade system. And those orange bottles over there actually we can do our own selves here. But at a big fire, if I say the Longwood fire...the first one back in 87, but any big fire they just call the air utility truck and they bring that and fill the tanks up on site. So we've gone from running out and having to go the next day to a business two counties away to running out of air on the tanks and having it filled in 15 minutes so that's a big improvement. Uhm, that's significant changes in those areas right there. In firefighting, uhm they've changed kind of the model of it, the way you attack things used to be "surround and ground" was the slogan, you know you just, somebody just pull up there to a fire and just start throwing everything they could at it. Well then you, you know, it was determined and going to all these classes that you know sometimes its better not just to hit it all in the window you can put a positive ventilation fan at the back door and that just puts this huge amount of air in there, kinda makes a pressure relation inside of the house. So you can keep, by doing that, you're forcing the fire in the direction you want it to, so if that room over there was on fire, you can come over here to a door and pressurize the room, it's trying to get out that a way, so it's keeping the smoke that a way, the heat that a way, so you're protecting valuables. So that's got to improve. Some technique and equipment. It's a long, lot of words to say that I guess. The advantages...

KC: So uhm, can you just walk us through like, when the bell goes off and like how like you guys react when you guys go out and everything to the call?

JC: Mokay so everybody as soon as the bell goes off their adrenal glands get a big pump of adrenaline and everybody is jacked up right now. So then you have to calm yourself down but umm so steps you would you know. Pick a time when it happens, say supper time so people at home, the bell goes off, you drop what you're doing your get in your truck or your car. You either go to the firehouse to get a truck depending on where it is the the the surrounding people kinda know but if if they're in route, say the product hit

the fire is west of here and somebody lives east and they gotta go past the firehouse and particularly they gonna go here to get a truck. Local people close to Prospect will come here to get a truck or trucks plural if ya need it and then head to wherever the fire is and then sometimes if it's a if it's a structure fire we uh made um standard operating procedures, I guess we did some of those actually when I was chief with a chiefs meeting but but the dispatch office in Farmville has that S.O.P. list and if it's a structure fire which is a house automatically two companies are um dispatched um then you can coordinate with your marking route and coordinate with whoever else is coming. Other trucks, whoever gets there first on the scene now that we got the orbital radios we'll call in and kinda give an assessment of the situation, and kinda spot the trucks when they come in and then uhm just go from there based on the needs of the firemen. For a wreck we'd do the same thing you know somebody would come in and get a truck and then or trucks, safety devices, mark off the roads so..

KC: So uhm can you tell us about the harvest festival and so like what goes on here at this fundraiser? We know it's your really big one.

Jimmy Coleman: Yeah, so that's the main fundraiser for the year so we still have our bake sale in the morning and then we have the auction and barbecue dinner and that's just all Boston Butts and they were up late last night working on those. It's all fresh and real good. We've had some changes to that too over the years, we've changed the time that we've had it and we've changed, we used to have a uh huge yard sale with yard sale items and that got to be so big that um it was kind of out of control so we kind of discontinued doing the yard sale component and now we just rent out little spots if an individual wants to have you know their own personal little yard sale. Um and the auction is moved from six o'clock until one o'clock. But tt's, it's really easy now on the firemen and it used to close to midnight when we were finishing up the auction then we had to do the drawing of the raffle tickets because that's a component too and we always try to, well we always actually did it even if we had to cut something short we would still do that, we always had the raffle drawing still on the Saturday side of the night, you know we never went into Sunday though. Um but that would put us, you know we have to count the money and put that away and it would be two-thirty, three o'clock getting home after you've been there all day. Now we can be all done, firehouse swept, trucks back in and everything by nine, ten o'clock. So it makes it a whole lot easier on the firemen so I'm actually kind of glad we changed that. (Laughing) Being up at two o'clock now is not as much fun as it was when, you all probably still enjoy that I guess.

Kim Clements: Ok, well um thank you so much for like answering our questions and letting us get to know you and letting us just get to document your stories so that a hundred years from now everyone can like know you and know your stories.

Jimmy Coleman: Oh yeah good, well that's it?

Kim Clements: Yes sir, we just have a personal question um could you just show us the firetrucks?

Jimmy Coleman: Could I show you one?

Kim Clements: Yeah

Jimmy Coleman: Yeah, they're down at the Baptist Church. You all drove up here I guess didn't you? You drove? Well do you mind taking them down to the, it's, are you all going back down to that way anyway?

Kim Clements: I think so

Jimmy Coleman: Yeah, I would be happy to.