

# Title Page & Abstract

An Interview with James R. and Jenny Barrett

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library  
*Historians Speak-Illinois* Oral History project

Interview # HIS-A-L-2020-043

James R. Barrett, Professor of History Emeritus, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, leading U.S. social, cultural, labor and race/ethnicity historian, and Jenny Barrett, co-author of their book on the history of Chicago, were interviewed on the dates listed below as part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Historians Speak - Illinois* Oral History project.

Interview dates & location:

Date: Aug 2, 2020

Location: Telephonic interview with the Barretts at their Champaign, Illinois home

Interview Format: Digital audio

Interviewer: Robert D. Sampson, Ph.D., ALPL volunteer

Transcription by: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited by: \_\_\_\_\_

Transcript  
being processed

Total Pages: \_\_\_\_\_ Total Time: 1:51 / 1.85 hrs

Accessioned into the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Archives on (3/12/2021).

The interview is archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois.

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## Abstract

James R. and Jenny Barrett, *Historians Speak -Illinois,*  
*HIS-A-L-2020-043*

**Biographical Information Overview of Interview:** James R. Barrett was born in June 1950 in Chicago, Illinois and Jenny (Wong) Barret was also born in Chicago in September 1949. James received an undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1972, an MA in social history from the University of Warwick in Coventry, England, and a Ph.D. in history in 1981 from the University of Pittsburgh. In 1984 he began his career teaching U.S. history, social history and African American studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, retiring in 2014. Jenny earned a BS in psychology from the University of Illinois in 1971, an MA in history, also from the U of I, later earning an MA in computer science. She has also earned a Ph.D. in history from the U. of Illinois.

At the time of the interview James and Jenny Barrett were working on a new history of Chicago, one examining the interplay of race, ethnicity, class and culture in the development of the metropolis and how its issues resonated with similar issues at the national level. With James's first major journal article followed by his first book in 1987, *Work and Community in "The Jungle:" Chicago's Packing House Workers, 1884-1922*, he pioneered the "bottom up" approach to American history, examining the lives of everyday, working people and their impact on larger historical trends. This interest continued through four subsequent books, including *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multi-Ethnic City*. Jenny Barrett devoted significant time to social activism during her career in information technology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and is a collaborator on the Chicago project. Jenny Barrett passed away on February 17, 2021.

**Subject Headings/Key Words:** labor history; Chicago history; Our Lady of Angels School Fire of 1958; race relations in Chicago; U.S. Communist Party; socialism in America; Chicago packing house workers; Irish immigration; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

**Note to the Reader:** Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word; and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir; nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

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