AN ORAL HISTORY

with

BOBBY C. HOPE

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Bobby C. Hope and is taking place on April 24, 2010. The interviewer is Elanie Fontas.

Fontas: My name is Elanie Fontas, and I'm here on April 24, 2010, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Biloxi wade-in. I am here with--

Hope: —Bobby C. Hope.

Fontas: Where were you born? And tell me about your parents.

Hope: I was born in Biloxi. And my parents, they lived in Biloxi. My mother taught Head Start in school, and my father retired from the military, Air Force at Keesler, thirty-two years at Keesler [Air Force Base].

Fontas: Before the wade-in and the movement, what was life like for the black community here in Biloxi?

Hope: It was pretty—well, it wasn't really bad, but it was—anywhere you go, they have bad people and good people. But Biloxi always have been kind of like a Catholic town, where people were more mixed because the neighborhood I lived in had white and black living in the same neighborhood, back then, a long time ago. But that racial thing for the beach thing, you know, it just come up. People mostly that wasn't from here that initiated all that, you know.

Fontas: Now, in Texas and Louisiana and other Southern states, they had some lynchings and stuff like that. From what you're telling me, was Biloxi like that? Where they would just hang people for doing the smallest crime, or just because of them being of African-American heritage?

Hope: Well, I don't know. Well, I never witnessed a hanging. But I did witness a man who was hung up on a cross in the middle of Highway 90; he was killed. And he was an old guy, that we always, we was kids, we used to jack him all the time. When you say “jack,” you know, talk to him. His name was Hatchet. We called him Hatchet. And his body was hung up on a cross in the middle of Highway 90. Never been solved or nothing. And I can remember looking at his face. You know? And that brought back a whole lot of stuff. That happened here in this town.

Fontas: I can imagine. Did he do anything, like any crime?
Hope: No. He was like a homeless person. You know? But he wasn’t really homeless because he had a sister who was a schoolteacher. And he owned a couple of lots, and he lived out in that lot up in (inaudible). But he had a house he could go to, but he didn’t want it. He didn’t want to live that kind of life. He was real old. And he wandered all around, picking up bottles and different things. You know? All up and down the beach and different places, and all of a sudden he came up dead, hanging in the middle of the neutral ground.

Fontas: Basically, he liked living outdoors—

Hope: Yeah, he was an outdoor person. He was an old guy, who had a big gray beard, and he was a lot of fun. And he just come up hanging up on a cross like Jesus in the middle of Highway 90.

Fontas: Was that around the time of the Biloxi wade-in, or after?

Hope: I’m trying to think. I think it was after the wade-in. That was after the wade-in. I don’t know if a black or white killed him, but I know it was more like a racial thing the way he was. He wasn’t ever noted to be where he was hanging at, you know. Somebody carried him there and hung him up.

Fontas: Tell me about the wade-in. How did people react? How did your parents, neighbors, teachers, friends, ministers, how did they react towards it?

Hope: Well, far as my parents and all, they didn’t really know I was going. But a couple of friends of mine, they deceased now, but we all got together and went. And James Ferrell Davis(?), Willie C. James(?), all of us we went, and both of them is deceased now, but we went, and everything was going on fine. We was fixing to have a softball game out there by the lighthouse. Next thing, I looked up; they had boats out there in the water. Some blacks had boats too. And next thing I look up, down the beach up coming up Porter Avenue, they had trucks with guys on the backs with chains and crowbars and everything, man. And we wasn’t really nothing but kids at that time. I think I was like thirteen or fourteen, or maybe fifteen. I’ve forgotten exactly; it’s been so long. But they hopping off them trucks, hitting people with chains and everything else, man. See, I got hit myself, up in the head, a dent in my head right there. Blood run down in my face, and I could hardly see. Took my t-shirt and wiped the blood out of my eyes. And we tried to get off the beach up Porter. We couldn’t go that way, so we come down to a street named (inaudible) Avenue now and went up that street with my friends. And they was running after us then with those chains and stuff. And we was trying to get back to town. You know?

Fontas: Your friends that are deceased, now, they just died recently?

Hope: Yeah. James Ferrell Davis, he died a year ago. Willie C. James, he died maybe ten years ago.
Fontas: OK. So it didn’t have anything to do with the wade-in at all?

Hope: Oh, yeah. They was at the wade-in, but they dead now, but they was with me. We was all together.

Fontas: Did your parents find out that you were there?

Hope: Yeah.

Fontas: How did they react to that?

Hope: Well, they didn’t really get on me or nothing about it. They just said, “You should have told us that you were going, that we would’ve known.” But at the time I went, neither one of them was at home, so. I was going to go anyway, regardless. I just felt that strong about having a part in it because that was a part of my life. I been going on the beach before the wade-in, swimming, and never had a problem. Nobody ever said nothing or did nothing to me. But all of a sudden, this come up, and I’ve been swimming since I was real little. You know? Which I didn’t live too far from the beach, so that was an everyday activity, crabbing, and going down swimming, horsing around in the water. You know?

Fontas: Um-hm. Now, I know that before the wade-in, Dr. Mason had a little get-together to discuss about going to the beach. Were you in that?

Hope: Yeah. There were two get-togethers that I can remember. I remember we had one at McDaniel, who was the mortician of the town. He had a shop there on Division Street in Biloxi. And Dr. Mason had a doctor’s office across the street over there from me, not too far. And we all gathered in front of his house before going; that’s one of them that I was at. And he told us about staying together, staying in line. And if you got any kind of weapon in your pocket, take it out or put it up. Do not take no weapon down there. He said, “This is a nonviolent thing, and no weapons allowed or no alcohol or nothing.” And we was kids, they were grown-ups, but we didn’t have no weapons no way. So all the people who had knives and such, they put them in a basket. And wasn’t no weapon or nothing. So everybody was going the way they was going. Some of us going in cars and trucks. Walking, most of us walked, which we walked and play along the way, and joked. But he was doing like a nonviolent thing. Dr. Mason said, “You don’t need that.” He said, “We don’t need no violence.” And I guess he was—I didn’t know it at the time, but I guess he was doing like Gandhi. You know? He didn’t want nobody to have no trouble or nothing like that. You know? And we just went, just walked on down, and that’s when everything started. After we got ready to play softball, we had all our gloves and balls and making the bases on sand, and all hell broke out. Some of the people that I seen that was on those trucks that I knew, white, that I had been knowing all my life, man! And I couldn’t realize what they were doing because a lot of them parents was raised by black people, kept them [when] they was babies, and then their kids, kept them when they was young! And I couldn’t—it’s kind of hard to understand why all this hatred and all this was
going on at the particular time. And everybody around was raised together. You know?

Fontas: That’s Jim Crow for you.

Hope: That’s people, man.

Fontas: I understand. I printed out a thing on Jim Crow’s laws, and I was reading the laws. And it said that blacks and whites aren’t allowed to vote together. That a black man’s not allowed to introduce a white man, but it can be done the other way around. Black man can’t light a white woman’s cigarette because it would be inappropriate. With those laws, how did that make you feel?

Hope: Made me feel real bad because that’s just the part, that people didn’t understand other people. And I used to go to the water fountain, and they had white on one side and black on the other side, where you go to drink the water at the city courthouse. And one day the white fountain was broke, and a lot of people that wanted water was white. They wouldn’t drink out of the black water fountain because they weren’t black, and they were thirsty! And I was just—I couldn’t understand that. I said, “If I’m thirsty, I want water!” And the same fountain, the water coming out’s the same water. But their fountain was broke, and they wouldn’t even drink no water; they’d go way off somewhere else to get some water. And I just couldn’t understand it man. You know? I couldn’t believe it. You know? But it’s just one of these things that happens in life, I guess. You know?

Fontas: In my high school—they’ve rebuilt it now, but at the old high school they had two separate fountains because it was done in the [19]30s. And a lot of the students now don’t even drink from the white fountain; they drink from the black one because (inaudible).

Hope: Where you from?

Fontas: Oh, Miami, Florida. I grew up in–

Hope: Yeah. Well, my grandfather got a house in Miami. I just come from there.

Fontas: So your grandparents are still alive?

Hope: No. They dead; everybody dead. I got everybody in my—my brother died in [Hurricane] Katrina, my baby brother.

Fontas: I’m sorry to hear that.

Hope: He had a massive heart attack. Never had heart problems, worked at the hospital as a technician. But he died during the storm. And my sister died in 2001 from other relation (inaudible). And she was a stewardess for Delta Airline. And
nobody left but my mother and I. And my aunt, I got one aunt in Omaha, Nebraska. And another aunt in (inaudible), California, my daddy’s sister and my mama’s sister. And they still living, and myself, and my mother, immediate family.

Fontas: And was it just you that went to the wade-in, or did other family members like sisters?

Hope: No, just me because—well, I had cousins that went. I had plenty of cousins that went to the wade-in. But they was older. But my brother and sister and all, they was too young at the time to go. You know? And my dad was on T.D.Y. [temporary duty assignment] somewhere in California with the Air Force. And my mother, I don’t know where she was; she had something that day. She came into the schools or something. That’s where she was at, at that particular time. And I’m the only one, the rogue that went, yeah.

Fontas: What is T.D.Y.?

Hope: That’s like a training, the military training that you go on if you in the military. You go to T.D.Y. to another base somewhere, and you go to different type of training, is all it was.

Fontas: OK. How did the wade-in change life in Biloxi?

Hope: It made a drastic change because there were people that had businesses that was at the wade-in that was white. And they got boycotted after the wade-in. Most of them went out of business because all their business was done by black people. And they was down there against black people at the wade-in, so they boycotted their stores and stuff. And they went out of business. And just it made a drastic change. After the wade-in, we did two or three more stores that we went out in front of the stores and boycotted the stores because they wouldn’t hire black cashiers or nothing like that. So we waited. One store was a national food store on Holland Avenue. We got out in front of that and picketed that. And after about a week of that picketing, the owner got with us, and we talked with him. So they decided to hire some black girls to cashiers to work on the food line. So they had seven stalls for people, predominantly in a black neighborhood with black mostly dealing with it. So they hired four blacks to work the registers, and they had three whites. And they had a white manager and everything else, of course, but that changed that around. And we was going to take them to court, another store before that, and we got to court. We had so many blacks in the court, when the judge come through the back of the room to come in the courtroom, he seen all them blacks sitting, everybody (inaudible) standing around the wall. And he said, “Well, it looks like we aren’t going to have court today. We’re going to have to postpone this to a later date.” And he went back out there. And the people took their signs down, and they tried to hire blacks and stuff after that. You know?

Fontas: Do you have any children?
Hope: Yeah, I have two daughters.

Fontas: And have you told them about your story about the wade-in?

Hope: Yep.

Fontas: And how did they react to that?

Hope: They said they couldn’t believe that happened in Biloxi. But they left Biloxi after their mother died, and they went to Florida to live with their grandmother because I was doing construction work, and it’s hard to try to watch two girls and you working construction. And then I didn’t trust (inaudible) people, and my mother stayed so busy with them schools that she ain’t have time and have nobody else. So my mother-in-law husband died, and she was by herself, so I let them stay with her and her daughter until—I go down to see them every other month now, twice a month most of the time. Anyway, they grew up in Florida, one in Fort Pierce and one in Miami. And they eventually moved to Fort Pierce with my mother-in-law, and they graduated school, which was the ultimate thing that my wife wanted. And she said before she died with cancer, lung cancer; she told me, “I can die in peace. I’m not worried about my daughters because I know you’re going to take care of them properly.” And they graduated from University of Miami, and one of them worked for (inaudible) Trucking Company. She’s an auditor for them, and she goes all over the country and Canada and everywhere else and ask them what (inaudible), and see if anybody’s stealing any money. And that’s her job. And my other daughter works for the state of Florida. She does this kid’s—like a social worker. You know? And they got out the college and both of them got little girls. I got one three years old, and I got one three months old.

Fontas: OK. Why do you think it’s important for the young people today to know about the wade-in?

Hope: Well, a lot of young black kids today, there’s so much hip-hop and music and rap and different other stuff. They lost basic with the struggle of the black man and the black woman in the United States. A lot of them never knew that they had a wade-in. They never knew that they had problems on the beach. But now, these days, it’s like there’s so much to distract them. You know? And they need to know from firsthand from people who experienced these things. You know? And a lot of them I talk to, I tell them, like my kids and all the rest of them, I tell them, I say, “It wasn’t real nice when you was trying to do this and all that.” And I remember my mother and them, they was going to vote, which I wasn’t old enough to vote at that time. They had to pay poll tax; they had to pay to vote. And I was trying to tell my daughters, and all, I say, “It’s a privilege to go vote now, that you don’t have to pay no money or get harassed to vote.” And she said, “Well, yeah, Daddy. Well, I know. I vote.” And I said, “Well, that’s what it’s all about.” And when I first started voting—I been voting so long; I been on jury duty about twenty times since I been old enough to vote. I been in different jury duties, and I think I just went through my last one this past three
months ago.

Fontas: Poll tax. Now, what type of tax is that exactly?

Hope: That's where they charge you; the state, they charge you to vote. You get a penalty. You have to pay money to vote.

Fontas: Now, I wasn't here when they had the first Black Spring Break. But I hear that was not the best one they've had, that they didn't want to have another one back here in town. From the wade-in to Black Spring Break, what are your thoughts on that?

Hope: Well, I believe from the wade-in to Black Spring Break, there's still a lot of old people that had prejudiced reactions within the (inaudible) speaking of. A lot of them feel things like Jefferson Davis is the president of the United States in Mississippi and Biloxi. They still think Jefferson Davis is our president! That's what they believe deep in their heart. And they transacting this to their young grandkids and all that.

But Black Spring Break wouldn't have been no bad reaction happening here on the Coast if the mayor of Biloxi and other dignitaries in Biloxi would have seen that they had Port-o-lets on [Highway] 90 for the kids and stuff. And if you come down, there's like young college students anywhere you go in the nation. They going to drink some beer and do stuff like that. There's going to be some wild ones and some good ones.

And once you drink that beer and stuff, you going have to urinate because it's got to go somewhere! So they didn't have nowhere to go, they went behind peoples trees in yards and on bushes! But all they had to do in the city was put Port-o-lets, in which they said they wasn't putting nothing out for no blacks on no beach. And all this could have been avoided and all this. And then all the people talking about, "They defecating and urinating in the yard and doing all this." A lot of it was just drummed up, and a lot of it was true. But the majority of it was just drummed up.

But the people (inaudible) on the beach. Look like after Black Spring Break, when [Hurricane] Katrina come through there and took all the houses and all the yards and everything? Said, "Now, if you want to defecate and urinate now, you can go out there." Ain't nobody going to say nothing! So what was the point of view that you didn't want—all you got to do is tell the city to put Port-o-lets out there like you supposed to. And mark off the beach, mark off where your parking area and everything? They was taking kids' cars that wasn't really parked wrong or nothing like that. They were taking them, impound them, then charge twice times the money for impounding, five hundred, thousand dollars, and all this kind of raggedy stuff because a lot of kids come up North and (inaudible) places, they had nice cars, expensive. And they was taking the cars and stuff like that. They just prejudiced on law enforcement. I'm not saying that we don't have nice law enforcement. We just got bad officers in the law and good officers in the law. A lot of them that they brought in here for spring break, they live in towns like Poplarville, Mississippi, Pearl, Mississippi, all these racial cities that hangings and killings and murders of black people done happened. They got them to come law enforce the kids here on the beach. Now that's like telling them, "Y'all bring your gas cans down here." You
know what I’m saying? That’s the way I looked at it because I couldn’t see it no other way. Most of them kids, they were college students. They weren’t off the street; they wasn’t no bangers or nothing. They was going to college. And [The University of] Southern Mississippi and all them was down here. But they made it seem like everybody was selling drugs and (inaudible). All blacks don’t sell drugs! They want to go in the trunk of your car, get your groceries out, look in your eggs and all that, talking about, “You got some crack.” What they were focusing on, they should have been focusing on liquid meth because crack ain’t nothing like meth. (Inaudible)

Fontas: No. When you mentioned about the urinating in people’s yards, everybody does that. Well, mainly the gentlemen because it’s easier for them to go to the bathroom than the ladies. Anybody when drunk.

Hope: At least they was trying to hide and get behind the hedges and bushes and trees. But that could have been avoided if they had brought Port-o-lets in. Like when they had our Cruisin’ the Coast, and they had motorcycle rides and all that stuff, they put Port-o-lets around. Why they couldn’t do it for the kids?

Fontas: Now, the media always emphasizes on the bad things and the police officers, they always show the worst part, especially when it comes to the African-American society. They’ll show the worst part when it comes to, like, Black Spring Break. They’ll say, “Oh, it’s going to be bad,” and stuff like that. Now, I understand that when they went and did the permit for Black Spring Break this time, that they didn’t go through the right channels because if they did, then they wouldn’t have meshed in with the whole crayfish festival because they would’ve been able to do it before the crayfish festival or after the crayfish festival because having that, and then also having the crayfish festival traffic was pretty hectic. But I understand that. I tried avoiding [Highway] 90 because I didn’t want to deal with traffic, but I understand that they only had two lanes for either—one going one way, one going the other. And then the other two were just for emergency vehicles. And that they did bring people from northern Mississippi down for control.

Hope: Backup control, we’ll call it.

Fontas: And as for before, when you mentioned earlier about the older, white people, how they felt when the Black Spring Break came into town, a lot of it does have to do with how they were brought up, as well. And sometimes you can’t change the way that they’re set, unfortunately.

Hope: Then another thing, see, another problem with Black Spring Break was it was Black Spring Break instead of just Spring Break. Just the initial word Black Spring Break put another demeanor on Spring Break (inaudible) a lot of older whites. Why they can’t just say Spring Break? Why the blacks got to have a particular Spring Break? But black people in general, it’s so different when they gather and whites gather. I guess that’s from a cultural background. See, when blacks gather, they hugging and doing everything else. When whites—they don’t be hugging each other
when they meet each other and stuff. Black people, they shake hands and hug and all
that. That’s just a part of reality, the part of what blacks do. But a lot of whites can’t
seem to understand that. You know? Then another thing, a lot of blacks brought a lot
of whites to the spring break with them. A lot of black guys got white girlfriends in
South Mississippi and all over. And it’s that racial thing as far as race, it’s kind of
(inaudible) off. And a lot of whites, they don’t like that; they say that’s not appropriate
in the South. But they can’t understand how their grandfathers and all that raped black
women and got black kids, which are light-complexion kids, which they don’t say
nothing about that. But they can say it like a black guy go with a white girl, he doing
something wrong. But they can’t—the families now, it’s so racially impounded, you
can’t tell (inaudible) nothing, young kids these days. You can’t do that; you can’t stop
that.

Fontas: Yeah, the South is just stuck in (inaudible) they’re getting better!

Hope: Well, I was back in when it was really bad. And I’m back now when it’s better
than it was.

Fontas: Is there anything else you can think of with the wade-in that you want to
mention that we didn’t go over?

Hope: Yeah. Well, I’ll say one thing about the wade-in, they had a lot of older, black
people that was at the wade-in that nobody didn’t know about. You know? That they
was there because when they was coming up, they was telling different things
about—some of they friends got lynched or some of they relatives or cousins or
something like that, or their aunts got grandmamas that got raped (inaudible) and all
that. And your heart feels heavy about that, but there’s nothing you can do about that.
You don’t hold no grudge to that, but not a person with good sense because that’s just
happening in—that was in the past. You can’t live in the past; you got to go forward.
You know? And that’s just the way—well, the way it then was to me, and that’s a lot
better now. It’s not 100 percent; I can say it’s maybe 84 [percent]. But it’s getting
higher and higher, and more of the older people die out, the better the young kids are
going to do. But that’s just one of them things that happened. You know?

Fontas: This interview is pretty much done; I got what I needed.

Hope: I’m glad you have.

Fontas: Thank you for coming today and sharing your stories with us.

Hope: Well, I’m glad you was here, that somebody can listen. And maybe the
politicians and the people in law enforcement can listen and do more with the black
community than arresting folks. Maybe they need to get out and talk to and interview
people to see how they can make it better for the black community to understand the
law, studying the law, trying to enforce their ideas and realities on black people
because that’s not going to work, man! Because you know, like whites, they like to go
to Pizza Hut or something like that. Blacks like to go to Church’s Fried Chicken or places like that. You know? That’s just a difference in the mold of the races. And you just can’t change that over a period of time. Only thing you can do is just let people try to balance the equation as far as life. You know?

Fontas: I agree.

Hope: OK.

(end of interview)