AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ERIC E. DICKEY

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Eric E. Dickey and is taking place on April 24, 2010. The interviewer is Curtis Austin.

**Austin:** OK. This is an interview for the Biloxi Wade-In Fiftieth Anniversary Oral History Project. The interviewee is Mr. Eric Dickey. The interviewer is Dr. Curtis Austin, and this interview is for the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. The date is April 24, 2010, and we are in Biloxi, Mississippi. So Mr. Dickey, I want to start off by just asking you some simple questions about when and where you were born.

**Dickey:** I was born here in Biloxi, 1966.

**Austin:** OK. What about your parents, are they from here as well?

**Dickey:** Yes. Actually, I’m a product of a single mother, teenage that is. And my parents—my grandparents rather, raised me as an infant. Their names was Reverend and Mrs. A. Mary Louise Dickey, Reverend A.A. and Mary Louise Dickey.

**Austin:** OK. Now, what did they do?

**Dickey:** Well, during this period, a earlier part of time, he was working for Borden’s.

**Austin:** OK, like the milk company? OK.

**Dickey:** That’s correct. And she was, I believe at that time, she was either working at a school as a cafeteria worker. And then when I came on the scene, of course he was pasturing in the community, and she was a housewife.

**Austin:** OK. Nothing wrong with that. Can you tell me about what schools you attended when you were growing up here?

**Dickey:** I attended Beauvoir Elementary, and from there it was one through sixth. And then my seventh through ninth grade was at Nichols Junior High. And of course my high school from tenth through the twelfth was at Biloxi High. So after graduation from high school, I went and attended William Carey College, as my bachelors of science and business administration. I’m also the pastor in this community at First Missionary Baptist Church. And my highest education degree is a masters in biblical studies.
Austin: OK. Now, did you go to—(inaudible) Oh, I thought it was on.

Unidentified Speaker: No, sir.

Austin: Well, we’ll just—

Dickey: Start over? If you want to.

Austin: Pick up right there. We can start over, too.

Dickey: I have no problem.

Austin: OK. Let me know when you’re ready, sir.

Dickey: OK.

Austin: We can never have too much; you know. We can never have too much. It’s the good thing about the digital thing. (Participants speaking simultaneously, inaudible.)

Austin: OK. Just really quickly, when and where were you born?

Dickey: I was born in Biloxi, Mississippi, right here in 1966.

Austin: OK. And tell me about your parents?

Dickey: Well, I was raised by my grandparents, Reverend and Mrs. Dickey. I’m a product of a single mother, teenage. And of course they took me in as an infant.

Austin: OK. And you went to school where?

Dickey: I went to school at—I started my elementary at Beauvoir, junior high at Nichols, and my high school was at Biloxi High. When graduation—high school—went on to college at William Carey college—

Austin: Here or in Hattiesburg?

Dickey: Actually, the Coast campus. And I graduated with a bachelors of science in business administration. And as I stated, I am pastoring here in this area, so I happened to receive a master’s degree in biblical studies.

Austin: OK, very interesting. Now when you went to school here in Biloxi, were your schools integrated or segregated?

Dickey: They were integrated.
Austin: OK. And what was that experience like?

Dickey: Well, not having had the, I guess in this sense, pleasure of going to a, you know, all segregated, I mean segregated school when they became integrated, the knowledge is not there (participants speaking simultaneously, inaudible) to really pick it back off of it. But in my opportunity to go and experience life in a graded school, it was not known, sad to say. It was not known, any of the indifferences like what my aunts—and when I say my aunts, because again, I’m raised by my grandparents, so my aunts were pretty much teenagers at the time that I was going to school. So they were a product of being in a, you know, all segregated school system. And then when I came on the scene, for me, well, it was a little different, so all I can do is go off the experience that they shared with me. But Beauvoir was a unique situation because it was predominantly white. Yeah. And we were bused from the east end of town, passing—I would imagine—four elementary schools in order to travel nine miles to attend this, you know, what I would call at least 75 to 25 percent ratio of white and black. And so this only in the past that we only recognized what was actually going on and being a byproduct of that type of setup. Then when we got to, actually to Nichols Junior High, the trend kind of blended out where it became almost 65 to maybe between 50 and 65 percent ratio of African-Americans versus, of course, whites. And then of course, when you got to the high school, it reversed and went right to the same ratio for when we were in elementary. Almost 75 percent, if not between 60 and 65, 70 percent white students (inaudible).

Austin: Now did everybody get along? Were there any issues?

Dickey: For the very most part, there were no—if we knew of it, we didn’t recognize that it was discriminatory from other students or from other teachers. And to me, during that era in my elementary, the white teachers treated me just like, in my view, treated me just like any other child. I never saw any disparities among them, or any such thing. And so I have had a great relationship, even after graduation. I would tend to see many of my teachers, and still they received me open-armed, hugged me; and so, I didn’t recognize if there were any type of discrimination during that time.

Austin: OK. Well, that’s certainly a good thing.

Dickey: Yeah, absolutely.

Austin: Certainly a good thing.

Dickey: Absolutely.

Curtis: So now, when you were growing up, I know you said you didn’t go to the segregated schools, but when you were growing up that, I don’t know, maybe your grandparents or your mom or any other relatives talk about what had happened with the wade-in? Did you hear about this?
Dickey: Well, my mother actually, she was in the wade-in. And I don’t know which one of them particularly, but she was arrested as part of the gesture that happened during that time. And I do remember my grandmother going to, I don’t want to say bail her out, but went and picked her up because my grandmother got into an altercation with the booking officer at the jail to indicate, “I’m not going to bail my daughter out for her having a right to be at a beach where we pay taxes.” And so long end of the story, he told her, “Ma’am, go ahead and take your daughter.” (laughter)

Austin: OK! She wasn’t leaving there without her daughter.

Dickey: She wasn’t leaving there without her daughter, and she wasn’t going to pay.

Austin: It must have been tough growing up in that house!

Dickey: Well, it probably was. My grandmother didn’t play. She’s still living. She’s eighty-seven years old (inaudible).

Austin: Oh, that’s great.

Dickey: And it’s just remarkable, the trends that she’s actually lived through. And just tying in the fact that she lived in an era they didn’t even—they said the only way you’d get a black president, hell would freeze over. (laughter) And to see now, eighty-seven years of age, to witness the first African-American President of the United States, ties into all of this historical right in front of our eyes.

Austin: Right, right. It must be cold in hell! (laughter)

Dickey: That’s why the wind is blowing hard out there. (laughter).

Austin: Well, you must have learned a lot from a woman with that kind of experience, in terms of her instilling things in you. I mean, you went all the way through school to get your degree. Now, you serve in the community.

Dickey: Absolutely.

Austin: She probably had a lot to do with that.

Dickey: She had a lot to do with inward and outward. Because she externally tore me up. (laughter) All that I didn’t get internally, she put it on me externally.

Austin: Right. She wanted to cover all the bases.

Dickey: She wanted to cover all the bases, and she was the strong disciplinarian in the house. And my grandfather, he was about six feet, one inch. Of course he’s deceased, and he was a pastor in a community. You know, when he spoke, I mean the house would shake. He had a deep, bass voice. And when he said something, he meant it.
And just for him to fuss was worse than a whipping, so. (laughter) So I don’t know. I really at times was caught between a rock and a hard place. Did I want his fussing, or do I want her whipping? (laughter).

**Austin:** You don’t know which one is worse (inaudible). (laughter)

**Dickey:** Both of them hurt! (laughter) They both hurt, so. But in all actuality, I felt that their discipline, which is slowly declining in today’s society, made me a better person. It really did. The goals and the objectives that were laid out for me really only enhanced my life. Just to give you a quick scenario, when the City of Biloxi changed its form of government from a mayor/commissioner form of government, where you had the mayor and two commissioners at large, They changed in the early [19]80s to go to the mayor/council form of government, which most cities with a population of 25,000 or more pretty much have adopted. When that first time came about to enact that form of government, our grandfather, one of the first men to run for councilman in the particular ward in which we live in, Ward Two, and as a result of that, he did not win the election. But when I decided to run in [19]93, my first time, he was out there helping me beat those trails, and the grassroots connection he had had long since being a community activist for a long time paved the way for me to get elected. And he saw me elected. I think I served three and a half or four months before he passed. And that was a real joy and a treat in my case because here he didn’t win, but his own seed—

**Austin:** Right. He helped put you in there!

**Dickey:** That’s exactly right. His first church that he started pasturing was First Missionary Baptist Church of Gloster, Mississippi. And the first church I started pasturing was the First Missionary Baptist Church of Biloxi. So we have some similarities there that—

**Austin:** I’m sure you’re just as good at the pulpit as he is.

**Dickey:** Well, I don’t know. (laughter).

**Austin:** So can you talk a little bit about what your perception of race relations are in the community now versus what they were like when you were growing up?

**Dickey:** I would have to say that race relationship, by and for large in our area, in some aspect has enhanced or improved. There’s still a long ways to go. And the reason why I say that there’s still a long ways to go, because prior to me coming here we just had a rally, a strategic meeting discussing the school board’s decision to close several schools in our area. One in particular was Nichols School, that one was fought through the federal court system and turned to desegregation laws through Dr. Gilbert R. Mason Sr. And as a result of that, we’re now still finding ourselves still fighting for the same situation. School board is closing a national-ranked elementary school, a star school. The principal just happened to be African-American. She’s a candidate
for her PhD, and the students there, by ratio, have high academic markings or ratings. There are consultants from just about different parts of educational pursuit that are coming to that particular school questioning, “How do you do this? How do you do that? How did you get the students to do that?” And for the school board to look and say, “Oh, we’re just going to close the school,” sends a bad, negative taste in the mouth. Now the school board makeup is of course five members. Four out of the five are, of course, Caucasian, white, and only one African-American. And so when they took their vote on this past Tuesday, the vote came down to four-to-one. So that lets you know very quickly that we have to do something. Also, the other school is Beauvoir Elementary. It just so happens that these are two schools that I attended.

Austin: The two schools you went to.

Dickey: They are closing that particular school. Now, the ratio is a little balanced there between African-Americans and, of course, those Caucasians or white. I would say 50:50 give or take, plus five/ten point minus. And it is the second school that ranks. (laughter)

Austin: Why do they want to close the good schools?

Dickey: On top of that, the principal so happened to be an African-American with a PhD. And so what we’re trying to say—those questions hit at us, “Why does everything have to be so racial?” Well, it doesn’t have to be racial, but I mean, Ray Charles can see—(laughter).

Austin: —that they not closing the other schools. (laughter).

Dickey: Absolutely. Those are the kind of things that we are still fighting. As I’ve shared with my congregation several times, your neighborhoods are safe when they have the schools and the church (inaudible). When a school and a church leads the community, you have nothing but a ghetto.

Austin: (Inaudible) looking for trouble.

Dickey: Nothing to embrace the community, nothing to make it feel good. Now back during the days of the, I would say [19]50s, [19]60s, early [19]70s, you could have a night club right up to a church, right next door to it. As the parakeet said, “Well, it’s the same crowd.” (laughter). And when your businesses moved out, and your schools moved out, and your churches moved out of the community, you had nothing economically; you had nothing socially, and you definitely had nothing spiritually to reconnect the neighborhood.

Austin: So that explains some of the things we see today.

Dickey: Exactly. As the strong-arm, now in our community, East End, Ward Two, we are seeing an influx of Latinos, Mexicans, moving into our area. The Vietnamese
population has been on the rise from mid-seventies to early 2000, I would say. And of course, with [Hurricane] Katrina occurring, that sort of kind of put a varied stake into our composite make-up in the east end of town. Many of them had to relocate to different areas and things of that nature. And so we’re just focusing now on redeveloping, rebuilding, revitalizing our communities to make them strong. And there has to be a sense of unity. We don’t always agree, but we shouldn’t all fall out. And there has to be some unified efforts to keep us together. Like I stated earlier, we have a situation where the past may have been painful, but it is history. And as a result of that being history, we must take the opportunity to learn from our past. And that’s why I say some things in some areas have improved, while others have not.

**Austin:** So what would you say then are the things that do work well, in terms of race relations? In terms of the political development of the community; what are some of the success stories, mainly?

**Dickey:** Well, one of the success stories, and I have to go back and tie in the educational aspect because when we were fighting back in the late [19]90s for Nichols to remain open, and I use that as an example. The City was trying to—and I say the city school board was trying to pass a bond issue so that they could improve the schools and as well as build new schools. And so as a result of our fighting, as a result of us sitting at the bargain table, even though it had to go through the federal courts, we were successful in maintaining Nichols. Now, what that did was brought us all together and said, “All right, we want to be a part of this bond issue. This is no longer a black-and-white issue. This is about education for our children.” And as a result of that, it caused us all to be on the same playing field as it relates to providing the rallying support to pass this bond issue. And it passed overwhelmingly because of our unified effort. And that’s all we as African-Americans—you know, this mess goes far and abroad. That’s all we’ve ever asked for, the opportunity to play on the same playing field, given the same opportunity to be at the game when the game is supposed to start, not when we get there, and it’s already halftime. (laughter).

**Austin:** Right, exactly, you already start (inaudible). (laughter)

**Dickey:** You had already start! And so these are kinds of things that we really rally and try to support. And that was one unique thing that I saw that we were working close together. The other that I recognized when I was on the city council was the City’s effort to provide a museum. And the museum, which is not far from this location, just east of us, was the O’Keefe-Ohr Museum.

**Austin:** Oh, I’ve heard of that!

**Dickey:** You’ve heard of that? And that was to stimulate the interest of the actual makeup of Biloxi, the African-American heritage’ all that was a part of it. The immigrants that came from Yugoslavia and all those areas of Europe was a part of this makeup. And so you had a cross section of connection that could easily be retained in the historical pages at this museum. In addition to this area, long before gaming ever
came to the scene, our biggest industry was our natural resources, which was our
beaches, [and] which was the shrimping. Many of our people work those factories,
canning factories that remain today. You can find many of our people are still there
working in these businesses, along where you’re sitting (inaudible). The singles were
in some part seafood canning process plants. And our people, again, were there
spending hard time cleaning and prepping those shrimps for packaging and for
exporting.

**Austin:** Oysters, and—

**Dickey:** Oysters, shucking the oysters and what have you. And so we have as
African-Americans have contributed to a lot of the success of what has made Biloxi
what Biloxi is. And when we talk about the beach being, quote-unquote “off limits”
during those times, it was a case that is—I am going to say it like this: it was
degrading deprivation. But one thing, for the most part, it not only brought us together
during that period of time, but it solidified our efforts. And as a result of, they—it’s
not about when we go on the beach, or can we go on the beach, but, it’s more that
when we go on the beach, it’s an opportunity for us to enjoy the type of quality of life
for any and all Americans.

**Austin:** That’s right. That’s right. I’m glad they made that sacrifice.

**Dickey:** Absolutely.

**Austin:** And so it would be safe to say that you think the impact of the wade-in and
other activities like that have been good?

**Dickey:** That’s correct; that’s correct. If the impact alone has made nothing more than
a positive impact—when we discover like last weekend we’ve had the spring breakers
come down. We wanted them. And especially when I was on the council, we wanted
them to—this is not a one-race beach; this is not one man’s beach, but it’s all our
beach. You’ll feel comfortable to enjoy as I used to give my welcome speech, the
“sugarcoated beach.” Feel free to come and scoop it up and do whatever you desire,
and enjoy your time here on our Mississippi Gulf Coast beaches.

**Austin:** That’s very good. Well, this has been a very useful—getting a little bit more
modern view of what comes after, and so I really do appreciate it. We’re coming to
the end of the interview here, but I wonder if there’s anything I maybe haven’t asked
you that you think might be useful to people who come back and study (inaudible).

**Dickey:** Well, the thing of it is, I think it’s very important that everyone knows the
history so you can appreciate where we are in modern times. The thing of it is, when
we look at the contributions, the blood, the sweats, the beatings that took place based
upon those historical moments of the wade-in, it only turns into what we as modern
persons can actually walk on the beach and feel the ambiance, feel the breeze of peace
and tranquility as we walk along it. And many of the people that walk that beach have
no earthly idea what price was paid in order to gain accessibility to this beach. And having known the history, I'll be honest with you; I don't even go to the beach, but when I ride along it I can't help but to thank God for those persons that sacrificed that I may have the opportunity—

**Austin:** —if you decided to go.

**Dickey:** If I decided to go on that beach, I know I have that particular right.

**Austin:** OK. Well, thank you, Reverend. I certainly do appreciate it. This ends our interview. Again it’s for the Biloxi Wade-In Fiftieth Anniversary Oral History Project with Reverend Eric Dickey and the interviewer is Dr. Curtis Austin. And the date is April 24, 2010. And we do appreciate your time.

**Dickey:** Thank you, sir. And it’s a pleasure.

(end of interview)