AN ORAL HISTORY

with

WALTER COOK

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Walter Cook and is taking place on June 10, 2010. The interviewer is Clemon Jimerson.

Jemison: I’m Clemon Jimerson, and I’m here on behalf of The University of Southern Mississippi Department of Oral History and Cultural Heritage Oral History Project. We’re here to interview as part of the Biloxi Beach Fiftieth Anniversary Wade-In Project. So we’d like to get started at this particular time. State your name?

Cook: Good morning. My name is Walter Cook.

Jemison: And can you also—where are you from?

Cook: My home is Biloxi. I’m a Biloxi native, born and raised.

Jemison: OK. So you were actually born in Biloxi?

Cook: Absolutely.

Jemison: OK.

Tell about your parents.

Cook: My parents are Norman and Siruircher Cook. My father’s from Columbia, Mississippi, and my mother’s from an area around Marks, Mississippi called Tutwiler. And of course, Marks is over there where Emmett Till was killed. So she was rooted in that kind of atrocity in her young life and made her way to the Coast somewhere around that time. Those were my parents.

Jemison: OK. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Cook: Yes, I had several brothers and sisters. Norman Junior, an older brother Charles, my sister was Bernice Johnson(?). And I had some sisters; I remember sister Angela Burney(?), (inaudible) Burney.

Jemison: OK, OK. What is Charles doing now?

Cook: Charles is a doctor, a specialist type of doctor in Raleigh, North Carolina. He’s a general doctor, but he also has expertise in hypertension and diabetes. And he’s a specialist in those areas, where doctors send their patients to him when they can’t get their blood pressure or sugar down or in good order. So he specializes in that area,
where only three or four doctors in the United States can do some of the stuff he does.

**Jemison:** OK. And what about—I remember Norman?

**Cook:** Well, Norman passed away this past September. He was caught up in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina came and during evacuation he ended up in a little town in Texas. And then my nephew, Clay, lived in Houston and went and got him. And you know, we noticed some things weren’t quite right with him. We found out later that he had been having those ministrokes, several of them. And I think that’s what eventually took him out.

**Jemison:** OK. Well, I’m sorry to hear that. I knew Norman quite well; had a great respect for him.

**Cook:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

**Jemison:** And we all grew up together. Before the wade-in and the movement, what was life like in an African-American community in Biloxi?

**Cook:** Well, I may have to establish that I was only eight years old when this took place. But prior to that, well, of course my family was considered one of the well-to-do families in Biloxi, and we had a very good life. Well, we knew how and why people would be sometimes. And we knew that—one time I was just whistling or something, and my brother said, “Boy, don’t do that!” And then when I found out why, it was because of the incident with Emmett Till or what the story was; he whistled at a white woman or something. And then the danger that that would cause, just walking down the street. And white folks acted like they didn’t see you. If you was on the sidewalk, they expected you to get out of their way. And I’m talking about a little kid seeing stuff like this. And then hearing about how people were being misused if they were caught on the wrong side of town or the wrong part of the city, across Back Bay, so to speak. If you got caught over there after dark, they would try to mistreat you and everything and stuff like that. So it was accepted because of the fear, you know, that it brought about as a child to me. But we knew it was wrong. Like you see these commercials now talking about, “A child knows when things are wrong.” And as a child, I knew it wasn’t right. But when the authority figures, the sheriff, the mayor or whatever was allowing these things to happen, and a lot of the time doing a lot of the atrocities that was going on—so we just tried to avoid those ill wills.

**Jemison:** OK, OK. So how old are you now, Walter?

**Cook:** Fifty-eight. So it’s actually been fifty years long!

**Jemison:** OK, OK. That’s a blessing. What school did you finish here?

**Cook:** Well, I went to all the black—I went to (inaudible). I went to Nichols; I
finished Nichols in 1969.

Jemison: OK. Can you tell me what you know about the wade-in? I know you was pretty young—

Cook: Still saying I was only about eight, but we knew about it was taking place. And as a child, I knew I wasn’t going to be able to go. But I knew some of my friends were going. So when I heard—well we had the radio and TV and stuff of that nature, so we kind of had an idea what was going on, you know, televised or on the radio, telling us a few things that was going on. But as a child—and we heard about the beatings and the people that were hurt during that time. Then later on that night, we could hear the sirens going on all through the night. But to say, “Did I know it was going to be that bad?” Of course not. But as I got older and found out that the sheriff and the police were lining the beach, and then they let the militias of white folks come through the line to beat up on the folks, knowing they had chains and billy clubs and two-by-fours or whatever they wanted. They knew they were going out there to inflict injury on the people. That’s why I have this thing about people of authority abusing the authority. Right? You know, looking the other way, misusing their authority, there’s so many things people do.

Jemison: So a misuse of power.

Cook: A misuse, man! A total misuse. And then instead of people in those positions upholding the law, they did what they wanted to do because nobody else was over them to stop them from doing it. So that’s abusing their position.

Jemison: Were you fearful or scared for your life when this incident occurred on the beach, that night, that evening or (inaudible)?

Cook: Hearing about that night, hearing about what had happened—and my dad was the kind of guy who worked two or three jobs. But this night he was home, which was kind of unusual. I didn’t really pick up on it, but I had heard what was going on, and I was fearful, but he was sitting back in the kitchen, him and Mama and the rest of them talking. But I said, you know, “They back there, but stuff might happen.” So I was so afraid that I was sitting in the living room. I’m going to be the watchman, in case something goes wrong. OK? I kept hearing the sirens and hearing the sirens, and I said, “Something is going on.” We heard on the radio that, “Shots was fired in this neighborhood, and shots was fired over here,” and stuff like that. And people’s houses being shot into. I was going to sit on the porch at first, but then I thought, “No, I’ve got to find a safe place.” So I sat just inside the living room door and just kind of listened. So yes, I was fearful, not only for me but my family also.

Jemison: So what about your parents, did they participate in the wade-in in any way?

Cook: No. No, they didn’t. I say no, and I think my dad was the kind of guy that would support it, but in the background.
Jemison: What type of job did he have during that time?

Cook: My pop—well, he ran the Round Boogie, but he was also a bell captain at the Buena Vista. And then we had some apartments. So we had a pretty good life. He had a pretty good livelihood. But those things—being a bell captain, well, he had to probably be in the background because he didn’t want to do that job.

Jemison: Right. That’s what I was going to ask you.

Cook: Then he was written (inaudible) for participating, and he had rented the Round Boogie from somebody who could have pulled that plug. And then he had those apartments where he had to deal with the city and the city planning commission and all this stuff. We were getting ready to build some more probably. So if they were to give him a hard time, that money would be lost. So I think that was some of the reason he kind of stayed in the background as a supporter. And plus he had young children, and he didn’t want to put them in harm’s way. We were protected, so to speak, being that young.

Jemison: When did you hear about how other people in the community reacted to this incident? Did you ever get feedback on that? I’m trying my best to remember. Did this happen in the summertime?

Cook: No. It was April 24, 1960. And then they did one in 1959, but then on that occasion it was Dr. Mason and a small group of people went on the beach, and they were arrested. But this one, the brutality took place. Well, then (19)63 was the one where they went on the beach, and they actually arrested the participants down by the Biloxi Lighthouse. Well, the next day or week or whatever, when we went to school, we were trying to figure out if any of our classmates were hurt or anybody like that. And that’s when some of the stories came out, but for the life of me I can’t remember. But I do vaguely remember seeing that there were shots fired on either Magnolia Street or (inaudible) Street, and I think that was in one of my classmate’s homes. And I think that’s about as far as I can put it together.

Jemison: What about the neighborhood and the teachers in the community? And the friends and ministers, how did they react?

Cook: Was afraid you might say that. I have a friend who was in my classroom named Ruben Brown(?) who lived on Main Street. Ruben and his family, after that incident, left Biloxi, never returned. And then the others who stayed, like Le’Roy Carney, who was my classmate, and several others, friends—well, we just knew that people would do atrocious things whether they were in authority or not. It was a shame that if we paid taxes to be on that beach, why would they have ever thought we couldn’t go on that beach? It was just hatred that presented itself. And people who had the authority to do so did their best to prevent it. The neighborhood—we heard about the people riding through the neighborhood shooting and carrying on. Of
course, we were all fearful of that because they might come down our street anytime. But back in school, back in the umbrella of A.E. Perkins, under the protection of (inaudible) Nichols High School with our black teachers and known people that cared for us, the fear wasn't there. The fear was from the white folks that were doing these things. So it was back to normalcy, just the fact to know that white people would do this kind of thing.

Jemison: Right. Yeah. I participated in the 1960 event where they actually turned violent (inaudible). And Black (inaudible), I think he participated in that. And then he also participated in (19)63, when they got arrested in Leroy(?). After the wade-in, how did you get involved in the movement?

Cook: Still being eight or nine years old, I didn't do too much. I didn't do anything, I don't believe.

Jemison: No. I'm saying, maybe older?

Cook: As I got older, far as joining the NAACP, and I'm working on my last membership. And just being a supporter, in that respect.

Jemison: OK. So you became active in the movement in that regard?

Cook: Right.

Jemison: OK. What other organizations were involved also, other than the NAACP?

Cook: That were involved in the movement? Being that Dr. Mason was part of the— instructor for the Boy Scouts and stuff of that nature, Cub Scouts. Indirectly, as a young boy I did join the Cub Scouts, but I knew he had a strong influence with the Boy Scouts. I helped him on several occasions where he wanted to do a walk around town with the young kids that he had. And he asked me would I walk with him with the Martin Luther King birthday celebration. And I was involved in that from the very beginning. And there when the NAACP did the bell-ringing for the Salvation Army. I helped Mrs. Mason. One day she was out there by herself, and I stayed with her, and we rang the bell and spent some time reminiscing and that thing. But for a long time I was the guy that did the paperwork, the fliers and stuff of that nature, for Martin Luther King's birthday celebration, until we got on our feet and could get a poster to do it.

Jemison: OK. And you've heard of like the COFFO, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference?

Cook: Yes.

Jemison: And I know that was a little bit before your time. But I know you also probably heard about the different churches when the people in the community would
meet at the different churches.

Cook: Yeah, I saw some.

Jemison: And different churches have different rallies and stuff?

Cook: Like I’m a member of New Bethel Baptist Church. And New Bethel was the first church to get involved in the civil rights movement, one of the first. I’m not going to say absolutely. But as far as the NAACP, we were a staunch supporter of the NAACP.

Jemison: OK. How did the wade-in and the movement generally change life in Biloxi?

Cook: For the main purpose, it allowed the people to go to the beach, which was the main focus. Where the town, I could always remember we went to the beach, but we’d always have to get in the car and drive all the way to Pass Christian. And being that little, I figured it was just a ride, and I didn’t know why we couldn’t go. And then as we got older, we realized that the reason we had to go to Pass Christian was because the folks in Biloxi and Gulfport wouldn’t allow blacks on the beach. And then, as I got older I found out. But it helped the people in the sense, as a victory so to speak, over evil Jim Crow or however you want to put it. But every time there’s a victory for black folks, there was always something negative that white folks would do. My point in this is to bring this point across: to (inaudible) the Supreme Court said we were allowed to go on the beach was when they put the rebel flags up on the dividing line. And that struck controversy for a long time. But every time there was a victory for black folks, then white folks would always do something negative. I’m talking about all over the country. And if it wasn’t like here, where they put up the flags, they would hang somebody or do something extremely brutal to somebody. Either hurt somebody or hang them in the tree, right? So every time there was a victory for somebody black, watch out, because they was fixing to do something. But as far as (19)81, I believe, they hung that kid in Alabama.

Jemison: Right, I remember that. And they actually named a street over there after him after that incident; I remember that.

Cook: And his mama won a lawsuit and won everything that the Klan had at that time. So injustice anywhere is prejudicial everywhere. People don’t realize that when you do wrong, God is looking at that. And he may not take care of it then, but sooner or later someone’s going to have to pay for the injustice that is done. And that’s the ugly truth.

Jemison: So you were also aware that the people that own the properties, the homes on the beach during that time, they felt the beach, the piece of property in front of their home, belonged to them.
Cook: Yeah, yeah. And that’s why they came up with these laws keeping us off the beach. But at the same time, our money helped build that beach, the taxpayer’s money.

Jemison: Absolutely. Why do you think it is important for young people today to know about the wade-in?

Cook: Because it’s always important to know your past. Because the future—if you don’t know your past you can make the same mistakes again. Something of that nature. But history, as ugly as it is, it’s part of Biloxi’s history. And if you don’t know about it, you might think it’s new. And that battle hadn’t been fought before. But if you know about it, you can say, “Hey, you can’t hold that against me on that because we already been to the Supreme Court on this. We have a right to be here.” And you can stand up for your rights when you know about stuff of this nature or just your history. It’s just better to know than not know and be ignorant to it.

Jemison: So you knew about the hearing with the United States vs. Harrison County, and the desegregation of the beach. I was actually asked to testify—

Cook: Really?

Jemison: Yeah, they actually subpoenaed me. I was a freshman at Jackson State. They subpoenaed me and brought me back home.

Cook: So the hearing was here?

Jemison: Yeah. It was over there at the post office on Main Street, down where the federal court was at that time.

Cook: Right. And that was in (19)63?

Jemison: Actually, that would’ve been (19)65, when the court hearing was going on because I left and went to school in (19)64, Jackson State in (19)64 to (19)65. So they came about the latter part of the second semester.

Cook: Um-hm. It’s that ongoing struggle to right a wrong.

Jemison: Right, right. Well, it’s truly been a true blessing to interview you today. Do you have anything else that you might want to add?

Cook: I probably had something else in mind, but I just—I always had that problem with people misusing authority. And we struggle with that in high school, college, even in the work force, in churches. Different people, different personalities, the president doing what he want to do instead of what’s right. And we talking about in the sheriff department, in the police department, in the federal government, people doing—the government doing things that they shouldn’t do, but have the only
generality in doing what thus say the Lord or the law. And you try to hide behind some laws, just like folks pick part of the Bible and use it readily instead of using the whole Bible. But we have superintendents doing stuff on their own agenda for what they want to do, rather than doing what’s best for the community or what’s right. And that was just another example of how people do stuff when they in authority.

Supervisor, that’s what I was trying to say earlier. Board of Supervisors at Supreme Court said the beach was public to all people. They put up those flags on the Biloxi line. The supervisors did this on the Biloxi-Gulfport line. And this was like their retaliation to the fact that the Supreme Court said you can’t stop them from going down there. Somebody on that board or the board members decided to put that flag, and then they flew the flag above the American flag, which you never do that. You know, all kind of stuff like that. And then when they were told they was wrong for doing that, they still do it. So people just—they’re evil. Evil has the ugliest face.

**Jemison:** What happened? Are those flags still down there?

**Cook:** [Hurricane] Katrina took the flags down (laughter). We had a child who said the Lord told him to go them flags and stay there. And I can’t remember his name for the life of me, but he stayed there several months. OK? And they said he would stay until they took the flags down; I’m talking twenty-four/seven, staying on the beach. His name might come to me, but he stayed until we had one hurricane. OK? And they took the flags down temporarily, but they took the flags down. And when they came back—well, he didn’t come back. He went on to Alcorn State University where he went to school and finished his school because he was in school. I believe he was home for the summer when it started.

**Jemison:** Right, I remember that.

**Cook:** Later on, Katrina came. Since the supervisor put them back up, the Lord took them down. And when he fix it, he fix it right. He took the whole thing down. (laughter) (Inaudible)

**Jemison:** Well, Mr. Cook, I sincerely appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule.

**Cook:** Still a pleasure. I come here. I think the youth and the children of the future will benefit from this interview because we need to know what our past is. I enjoyed it, and I hope something I say will help somebody somewhere along the way.

**Jemison:** OK. Thank you sir.

(end of interview)