

Interview of John Batson by Kate Medley, camera by April Grayson

(10 seconds chatter at beginning.)

John Batson: We grew up in Bilbo country, and, as they called it in those days, and Pearl River County was his home, and he had a place he built down below Poplarville. And, you know, it was early on that it was clear that my family didn't vote for Bilbo and didn't—considered him a demagogue. And we were, growing up, it was understood that our family and one other family were the only two families in Pearl River County that voted against him. And so we grew up and went to school with that, with people knowing that, in the area. So it was—that kind of says a lot about my mother and my father and their attitude on racial issues. They were—we were there and Orvisburg was originally a sawmill town, a big sawmill town, and then the sawmill and the lumber cut out, and we left Orvisburg, I don't know, around 1930 and went to West Point, Mississippi, where my father ran the Jitney Jungle grocery store. We stayed there for two, three years, and moved back to Orvisburg. By that time, Orvisburg was not anything but the house that we moved into and the wreck of the mills. That was all that was left, just the scattered scrap iron, which I collected and sold to the Japanese so I could go to the New York 1939 World's Fair (laughs).

**Kate Medley: Y'all left Orvisburg, was it because the mill was closed?**

JB: We left, the mill was closed, and my family had to find something else to do, and we moved back when my grandfather, who owned a lot of land, etc., needed somebody in the family to look after it and asked my father to come back. And so we went back to Orvisburg and lived there. And when we moved back there was one family, one black family left—and that's the term I used—and he had been a supervisor for my father building and maintaining the railroads, the "dummy lines" that you did the logging with, and he and his family were still there, subsistence living, and so we just kind of partnered up with them. They, we had milk cows, and we had gardens, and (unintelligible) (3:23), and they helped. And that was the family that I saw early my mother's and father's empathy for people and all that—the whole family, children and all had syphilis and it was in the early 30's they learned how to deal with that. Mississippi made an aggressive move public health education. And so Mother would take them to town whatever the schedule was—I don't know if it was twice a week or twice a month for a long, long time until they recovered and stuff. So we always had a, had a—we were in an area, like again I call it Bilbo country, but we were raised differently, and I still remember when we moved back to, to Orvisburg, there was still one house that hadn't been torn down, next to us, and Bilbo was out of office or between offices or something, and he got a contractor crew and came out there and bought it. Mother told me, "you know, Bilbo's over next door." And then after a while, I just happened to be out on the front porch, and he came around up through the gate, and I panicked. I ran back, "Mama, Bilbo's coming, Bilbo's coming!" She said, "That's all right. We'll give him a, we'll give him a glass of water. I'm sure that's all he wants." (Laughs) (5:00) So he did, and that evolved through time.

But it was a tough country, and it continued to be through history, if you check the history of Pearl River County. It's not good on racial issues, at all. But we were, we were taught to be very fair and to treat people as individuals. We didn't get involved in what's right socially or—we just deal with all of them as individuals. And we had a great relationship with many of those individuals, and they were very important to our growing up and continuing. It served me in great stead through the years. I would up in the early 50's running a sawmill in Alabama with 500 employees, only four percent white and the rest were black. And my fairness—I'll have to say, it just served me well. It was, they quickly realized what my attitude was and that I was interested in what each one of them could do. And they had no problems. Same things happened to me, years later I went to Hammond, Louisiana, 1970, and found different salaries for different people, and I equalized them all. So that all goes back to Mama and Papa, you know, the way we were raised. And it was not easy, I would say, for them to persevere there in that, in that culture. You know, it was, it was looking back. We didn't think anything about it, that's just the way we were, on the thing. (7:10)

**KM: Were your parents from Orvisburg, or what was the—how did your parents—**

JB: My father grew up in South Mississippi. The next-door town is Hillsdale, another nonexistent, between Lumberton and Poplarville. Hillsdale, he grew up there. And then he, my grandfather had a second grade education but was a very successful businessman, and he wanted all of his children to have some education. And so my father went to Cumberland Law School in Lebanon, Tennessee, to study law, and met my mother there. She was a Tennessee gal and so forth, raised in Lebanon, Tennessee, and brought her back home to Mississippi. And they married just before World War II (sic), and he got that famous flu, the 1918 flu, and she didn't see him for six weeks. They were isolated from everybody, and he survived and went on. They were in Montgomery. He was an OCS in training camp there, but anyhow, then he came home to run the sawmill and commissary and so forth for his father in Orvisburg. And then when that cut out, that's when he went to West Point, and we went back and then we lived there. And so she was from Lebanon. (9:00) Her father was a Baptist minister from an old liberal Baptist trait. He came up out of the Louisville seminary, which at that time was so-called liberal side of the Baptists. And her mother was raised as a Presbyterian, and she went back there, but Mother was quite a—she was intellectually very bright and very much of a avant-garde in what was going on and doing and trying new things and accepting them. But again back to the—so we lived, my memories of course, I don't remember the sawmill days. I was born in '24, and that was the height, it was over with in '28-'29. But I do remember going back when we lived in the country. And at that time, the mill, the mill system and the mill villages had pretty well collapsed, and people had either moved—an amazing number of people moved to the West Coast following the timber, but those that didn't tried to subsist on the sandy soil of the piney woods down there, and it was tough.

**KM: Yeah, I kind of want you to take me back there, because Orvisburg is no longer, but describe to me, if we're driving into town, the area you grew up in.**

JB: Well, see my memory is only of a nice home on top of a hill, with the Southern Railway coming right by, cutting through the same hill. In other words, it wasn't but maybe 200 feet from my front door to the railroad tracks. And I always love to tell people the biggest curve in the Southern Railway was right there. It came out from Poplarville and it made a huge curve right there where the mill site was. So my memory is of this flat area down the hill, which was where the sawmill *was* and where I took the old Model T, and I couldn't drive it on the road, but I could take it down there and collect scrap iron, buy and sell it and stuff like that. And then also I had, we had fun once in a while, the passenger train came through from New Orleans, heading up the country, oh, twice a day—it came, I've forgotten, morning and night, say, 11:00 in the morning, 11:00 at night heading north and other time—but those trains in those days would stop for a flag, and we would, we would go down where the old station used to be in Orvisburg, and it was two miles up to my grandfather's at Hillsdale, and here comes the passenger train flying around the curve, and we'd stand there and start to flag it down. But what we really wanted to see was to see the engineer throw it into reverse, stop and reverse, and the wheels would start spinning backwards on the locomotive. (Sounds of train braking) And it would finally stop down there, and we'd get on the last car, go two miles, and then do the same thing coming back. (Laughs) You know, it was just a game that we had. We didn't do it often, we didn't make them, we did it once in a while.

(13:00) And so, I would, I grew up, I'd go squirrel hunting when I came home from school, and we had—I had to walk about 3/10 of a mile up to the main road. The old highway used to come by the house, and then it moved over one, and the paved road came in and moved further over. But so I went on the school bus everyday to school, walk out to the school bus.

### **KM: School in Poplarville?**

JB: And I went to Poplarville to school. Previously, there had been a small school in Orvisburg until it cut out, and my grandmother came down—my grandfather on my father's side understood that my [maternal] grandmother was a teacher and said "Why don't you come down? We need somebody." So she came down and ran the school in Orvisburg—I think it was a three-room schoolhouse—for a good many years. And it has been one of the great experiences of my life to bump into people who, who went to school to her, because apparently she had a tremendous affect on, I mean she was a wonderful teacher and everything. So she taught there and then when, by the time we got back there, the school was gone and the schoolhouse became our barn. It's where we had the milk cows, and just beyond them was George Carr and his family, the black family that was still there hanging on when we got back. So that's what—I had a pony, we raised cattle, ran cattle in the piney woods and they just lived off the, lived off the land. And that was, been interesting to find out that that was part of the Batson culture of people. Came out of the Carolinas, came out of Virginia—actually, the family came from Barbados to Virginia in maybe 1720 or something, and then you can trace, they tended to follow the piney woods. As the family got larger, some would move on and move to the Carolinas and moved across and came to South Mississippi and all. (15:15)

And they knew how to exist in the piney woods, by raising sheep for wool and cattle and stuff—they just knew how to do it, they didn't talk much about money.

But I can remember my grandfather talking about taking the wool with his oxen once a year and going to Pass Christian. It was quite a trip, about 50 or 60 miles, you know, and you'd go 8 or 10 miles a day down into—his store used to be on top of the—I don't know what the storm [Hurricane Katrina] did to it—but there was a trading post, I saw it a few years ago, they went down and got supplies and went back up, and then, then he started a business there around Hillsdale and supplied the people who were building the railroads, coming through. He was very fortunate, he married a woman that had a thousand dollar dowry that allowed him to get in business. (Laughs) So it evolved from there.

**KM: Well, I want to ask you about Mr. Morse, Josh Morse, who—**

**AG: Hold on just a sec—thank you—it's the hands.(Referring to noise Mr. Batson's hands made on the microphone.)**

**KM: Now Mr. Morse grew up in Poplarville?**

JB: He grew up in Poplarville, and his mother was from Forest, Mississippi, just incidences I remember. His father was out of the Morse family that's still present on the Gulf Coast, and they, they've stayed in the legal area. I think that, if I'm not mistaken one of my, I think one of my daughters that went to Tulane knew a Morse at Tulane School, when you know they still—so he was up there and practiced law and then went into partnership with Mr. Parker, who was our attorney in Poplarville. And so that was, and so Josh was there, and he—after the war, I had a good friend there named Inmon Rawls, and Inmon dated this young lady, and after the war, Josh married her. Inmon had been my best friend and stuff. And she grew up in, Mrs. Morse grew up in Savannah, a little community just south of Poplarville, just past Bilbo's house. You know, that was a fun thing and then we used—the only paved road was from Poplarville down to about a quarter of a mile past Bilbo's house, then it went back to gravel like everything else. (Laughs) So we used to drive down there when we got in that area. And so Josh grew up in the same general climate of this community, this area that was—you know, it's a hard rock, you know, “those people down there in New Orleans, you know, the Pope is a devil!” (Laughs) That was the religious attitude in the hard core Protestant area there, you know. Right interesting to see all that. And some of that was so pronounced that, that actually Mother, who was the daughter of a Baptist minister and a mother who was active, they were active in the church, Presbyterian church, because her father died when she was forty—when he was 42, so my grandmother on Mother's side raised all her children—but we didn't go to the, there wasn't an active Presbyterian church in Poplarville, so we just didn't go to church because she felt there was too—just “too too” on the thing. (20:00) So it again shows her, you know, she was much too liberal for—if that's the fair word, I don't know that it is, for the time and place. So she just wouldn't expose us to it. And that was her choice. So I joined Episcopal Church when I was, oh I must have been 30 years old before I was even—she didn't even baptize us. (Laughs) I had to be baptized.

**KM: Sounds like she kind of had her own way of teaching y'all religion.**

JB: That's right.

**KM: Sounds like a free spirit.**

JB: That's it! You know, you don't realize it until you look back and see that she was really, she was so, she was so *tolerant* of people's attitude and so nonjudgmental. She just, she wouldn't judge people, in the sense of eliminating them from conversation. And my father had some of that, in his sense, in that my grandfather was in the hospital in New Orleans, and Bilbo would up in the hospital dying from throat cancer. And my father would always go see Bilbo when he went to see his father. They would talk about how they fought with each other through the years and stuff. And my father was really sad about it because there wasn't anybody going to see Bilbo, so he made an extra effort to go. And you know, that's the type of thing that we grew up with.

**KM: And tell us about your, you said your mother was close friends with Josh's mother.**

JB: What now?

**KM: You said your mother was close friends with Josh's mother.**

JB: Right, right.

**KM: Do you have a memory of them together?**

JB: I just, what I, what my memory is, say, of walking in, instead of going home on the school bus, I might walk up to the Morse house because Mother would be there playing bridge. My memory of them together is a bridge table and, you know, that sort of thing. We weren't—they were very close, but we weren't, we didn't do things as families together, it wasn't that sort of thing. It was just these two people were very, very close, and I think they must have shared, you know, their talking as friends, involvement and so and things together, it's—a lovely lady, a lovely lady.

**KM: And I want to ask you about when your brother became the head of pediatrics here at the hospital and admitted the first black resident. Do you remember—were you aware of that at the time? Did you have some sense of the—**

JB: No, it was not an issue. He didn't even mention it. And I wasn't aware of it until—I don't reckon I was aware of it until 2000, when we had the Humanitarian Award and the issue came on and I heard them talk about the story and so forth. My brother, brother Blair, when I mentioned it, he did it because—he was, you know, he said, "The man's qualified," and it just wasn't an issue with him. (24:00) He needed help, and it was a man who was qualified, and that goes back to how he was raised, you know. And, but he

did say that, said he'll never forget the dean's look when he walked in and told the dean that he had hired him. He said the dean said nothing but said the eyes said, "I'm glad you didn't ask me." (Laughs) Because it would've become an issue if it would've gone up higher, but he had the authority, and nobody—everybody was afraid about doing anything about canceling it. So it was done. But he didn't, he did it for the right reasons. It wasn't tokenism. He hired a good man.

**KM: Were you living in Mississippi in the 60s?**

JB: Let's see where I—I lived in, I moved to, I was in South Alabama. In the '50's and '60's I was in the other side of Meridian over there. This company where I had 500 employees and only 35-40 white and the rest were black was in the so-called Black Belt of Alabama, which was originally named Black Belt for the soil, but since it was the great—and we had, the county was 75 percent black, you know, that whole thing, so we were in that culture, and my raising just allowed me to—and treatment of them fair, I was comfortable. And the, so that, and we did have, we had a, we were in a—where I lived there it was a company town, and we had a little one room schoolhouse, where she taught the first six grades, one lady.

**KM: Kind of like where you grew up.**

JB: Huh? Yeah, yeah, that's right.

**KM: Do you have a—do you remember when the Meredith—what's it called—the Meredith Crisis? Do you remember the integration of Ole Miss?**

JB: Well, yes. And of course, let's see, and what was happening in my area, we had, here we were, we're just the other side of—all my older children were born in Meridian. Came over to Riley's clinic and so forth. And so we were on the edge of this, but we had a situation in our county where they started a, tried to renew the White Citizen's Councils in the area. (27:00) So we had a, we all, group of (unintelligible) said we don't want that in our community. So we got a group in Livingston, which was the county seat, to go and get the charter and put the charter in a vault in the bank and lock it up. And they asked, I never will forget, they asked me to be on the group that would go get the charter, so I called my—I thought it was a real problem, I didn't, 'cause I had all these black employees, and so I called my friend, the Episcopal priest, in Meridian, and we talked, and talked, and talked about it, and he said, "John, just stay out of it. Tell them you can't do it because you don't want *any* implication, to shatter it with your people." And so that's what we did in there, we just put in there, and locked it up, and said, we're going to, you know, move on. And, but, you know, in the '60's, well, you know, they didn't integrate the schools in many areas until way up into late '60's, and that was, and so that's, that's another issue. I think that my generation failed to maintain the standards in public schools, and it has hurt our children, both black and white. And, by not maintaining those standards, that we allowed it to do it, it's been a—to me that's a sad note and we've got to do something about it. [unintelligible]

**KM: (29:00) Well, I want to ask you if there are any other stories that, that you have, that you want to add, be it about Josh Morse, or about where you grew up, or your brother.**

JB: Well, I'm sure they'll be some come back up, and I'll think about it and I'll wish I'd told you, but the—growing up in that area was, you know, you look—my brother and I and Josh, we were blessed in having parents that just raised us to just treat everybody as an individual, and that was—we were just blessed, that's all. And, but, there were—you know, I'll think about stories about Bilbo. I remember seeing him with his red things [grabs his shirt like suspenders] at a speech, popping them, you know, and ranting and raving. But that's, and then I can remember my—I wouldn't be surprised in the Bilbo stories if my father didn't vote for him in his last runoff because being that he was attacked so bitterly from outside the state. But he never told me he did (laughs) and I wouldn't know. But they, but the politics of the area is, is interesting, to see it evolve. But I think we've done a—the, we've done a pretty good, pretty good job, and I'm impressed by Morgan Freeman's comments and statements that we need to stop using and defining race as an excuse for different things, and I never will forget, here recently he said, “when are you going to have a”—you know, we have a—what do you call it?—a week, a month in the year, and African-American month—and he said, “when are you going to have a white one?” And that impresses me. Fits in with my mother, and my father, and what they said and what they thought. Treat people as individuals.

**KM: Have you been back down to Orvisburg? (31:45)**

JB: It's been, it's been quite a while since I was there, and I should take my children back and go back and see what it's like. The last time—the house we lived in burned down, 1952 or 1953. I've been back several times since then. [unintelligible phrase] But I need to go back and see and the—there's none of the family live down there, scattered all over the, all over the world. And truthfully. But the Batsons came to Mississippi in about 1800, just following the piney woods across and followed that Indian trail across Alabama and came across the Tombigbee and came on down, and they were, they were stopped in there below and around Hattiesburg and below Hattiesburg, and then they moved down into Stone County when it became, North Florida became part of the United States, when that happened. And then they moved into Stone County and spread out from there. [unintelligible] And the, my great-grandfather was killed on the peninsula in the War Between the States, and so my grandfather was raised by kinfolks, and they just—they pretty well used him as a laborer, farming, so he just ran away when he was about 14, left and went down and ran logs down the Wolf River to the—all the sawmills in the real early days were on the coast. And then so they took the logs down, highwater, took them down.

**KM: So, the sawmill industry has a long history in your family.**

JB: Oh yeah, oh yeah, goes all the way back. It does indeed.

**KM: Well, I think we have—**

JB: Alright, good deal. (33:55)

**April Grayson (on camera): I was going to ask, just for the record—and if you can answer Kate and avoid looking at me—could you tell us a little bit, like pretending—assuming that the person watching this doesn't know who Bilbo is, could you just explain what Bilbo represented, at that time in Mississippi?**

JB: Well, you know, Bilbo was a—you know, he wanted to send all the Africans back to Africa. He was a, you know, a real racist, in the word. And fortunately he, Bilbo could get himself elected, but he couldn't, he couldn't get other people elected, he couldn't build a—he didn't have the power like Huey Long had at the same time in Louisiana where Huey Long could really—Huey Long really got control and he was on the verge of getting control of Mississippi and the general South when he was assassinated. But Bilbo was, could elect himself, and he did it on a very racist platform. And it was, and you know, it was, and that was, and that—as I said, in Pearl River County, there were two families that voted against him. I mean, that was the perception, and, but, and it was not—I have nothing but child—my memories are all way back but they're nothing but just negative, negative, negative, you know, from that time and place on him. But we were, that was almost not socially acceptable, you know, in the—it was that extreme. And you know Poplarville doesn't have a good reputation on that. You might be interested in checking. It seems to me in the '60's that there was a, happened to be a jail door left open and, and a prisoner in the jail was taken out and, and thrown in the Pearl River or something, is my—I'm not specific, I don't have the details. But it was, you know, that was the type of neighborhood and it came out of that same, same culture. So it's a, (37:00) the change in, in, in Mississippi is wonderful to behold, and it's true in the whole South. And what's happening in the South today is that we now have a third culture in the South, in the Hispanic group, in large numbers, and I tell people, I say, it's ceased being a, a two-culture, as it were, there's a third culture. Not—and it's something to perceive, and that's where I get back to Morgan Freeman's comment that, you know, we have successfully integrated vast array of people into this country, and it's, it takes time, it's not anything that happens quickly. I moved to Hammond, Louisiana, and found down there where the Italians had come in, after the turn of the century—well, they were still be discriminated against, if you will, in Hammond, Louisiana. But now they're third, third-generation—you know, they're third and fourth generation doctors, lawyers, you know, just they're there and part of it and—this happens. And so we got the same, same issues to, to face and time—my mother, again, said the solution is education, and that's really a strong point for her always, and I think she's right, and, that education is truly a key for, and we must not give up on that, getting people—history of the world, understand the total workings that, that—with that, then we can have good relations. You know the, and remember everybody's an individual. That's, I think that's the strongest message that—the thing is not, it's not what ethnic group or [unintelligible], it's what you are as an individual. And some of that makes me think of the, of the, of the Tibetan Buddhist religion, you know, they're not—they say their religion is spread by the individual, they're, not by the organization or the deal. *You* are the ones that have the mission to do, and it makes me think that if we could, and if we could all focus on more

of that than being so obsessed with organization and so forth, that we'd be more successful. And I think that really was my mother's mission.

**AG: Great, thank you.**

END INTERVIEW. (40:30)