

Washington Booker

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is Wednesday, November the 17th. I'm here. The interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson here at the Summit Club in Birmingham, Alabama. I am here today interviewing Washington Booker for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement. Okay, so if you can do a quick little intro, we'll see how you are picking up.

WASHINGTON BOOKER: Okay, my name is Washington Booker, and I'm here in Birmingham also doing this interview on November the 17th, in the year of our Lord 2004. [break in tape]

WA: Okay, so let's start by quickly discussing your early years, where you were born, growing up, and what you remember about education at that time, your educational experience.

WB: I was born in Demopolis, which is a small town in southwest Alabama. We came to Birmingham when I was about five years old, and I first started to school at Lincoln Elementary School, which is about two blocks from Parker High School. I went to Lincoln until I guess I was ten, and we moved across town and moved into the housing project and went to Washington Elementary School, and I went there through the eighth grade. What I remember. Lincoln is close to Parker and Parker was at that time in its heyday, internationally known: its choir, its football team, its band. So that was a big thing. We thought about big children and folks who went down to Parker. I was very, very young, didn't see much.

It was only after I got older and I guess eight, seven, eight years old that I started that I could walk home from school by myself and I would walk up Eighth Avenue and over to Seventh Avenue and up to where we lived. We lived next to the Zanzibar Hotel, which is where the Birmingham Black Barons of the old Negro Ball league were housed. So I grew up running errands for a lot of them, going to the store and buying bread and candy, sodas, the razor blades, whatever they wanted. They'd give me a nickel or a dime if I was really, really lucky. Sometimes they'd put me on the bus and take me out to Rickwood Field and let me sit in the dugout while they played games. I didn't know then that I was sharing history, a rich part of African American history.

Church and school, I guess, were the two major things in my life. Sunday school at church, programs, Easter speeches and Christmas speeches and that kind of thing. School was mostly sit in a row and try to read a book that was mundane at best, "See Sally run. Run Sally. Sally can run." I don't know what they were thinking. I have no idea what made them write books like that. But that was what stands for education. It must've worked. Needless to say it didn't keep my attention for long. Once I went to

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Washington, I think I actually got worse after I was about ten years old. I spent as much time disrupting class as I did actually learning. But the key thing about education for African American kids then was that we went to an all-black school, the colored school, the Negro school if you will. All our teachers were coloreds, Negroes, African Americans. They would often stop teaching reading, writing and arithmetic and begin to teach us to try and give us the skills that we would need to try to survive in a hostile segregated society, what our responsibilities were.

There was a lot of emphasis placed on we had to get a good education so we could help our people. It was almost drilled into us that you've got to do this so you can help all of us. We grew up, we grew up with that. It was reinforced at church because we were taught that if we were right and righteous that we could overcome any obstacle: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace defying the authorities and living to tell about it. Daniel in the lion's den, Samson and on and on. These were the kinds of things that we studied in Sunday school. Little did they know that they were preparing us to go out and face Eugene "Bull" Connor and the fiery furnace of our time but without knowing it. Believe me they wanted us to be, to just survive. I can remember parents beating their children for doing things that seems especially rambunctious or a little too spirited and saying, "I'd rather kill you myself than let the white folks kill you," -- because there was a real chance if you went out into that world with a little too much spirit and a little too much rebellion that you would be just another statistic, another Saturday night killing. So parents really worried about, especially the boys, being disciplined, and they would beat us to try to make us just sit down, be quiet, follow. They teach you need to follow orders and go out into the society and coexist. At the same time they were teaching us if you are right, you can challenge the sun itself and win because God will be on your side. I know they didn't realize what they were doing. But I think it more than anything else it was this combination that prepared us for what we would face later in life. So school and church prepared us more to change human history like we did.

It taught us the reading and write too. I think kids actually learned better, you had a greater percentage of a class even though we had substandard textbooks. We got the textbooks after the white kids finished. One of the working () they would send you from time to time if you got in trouble, they would send you to the office. If you were sitting in the office, they'd let you jump on this truck and go over to Ramsey, go in the basement at Ramsey and get the textbooks that the kid over there had finished with

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two or three years ago. We'd get them and we'd bring them back. They'd issue them out. We'd try to erase names and stuff out of them. Make backs, we'd get cardboard and make backs for the books.

But we learned. I can look at my class -- Matthew George who finished at the head of our class has his doctorate degree in biochemistry and his wife has a doctorate degree in biochemistry. They do DNA research for the government. We boast Freeman Hrabowski who is, and we called him Robusky, who is now the president of one of the large, Columbia or Harvard, somewhere up there. But we produced those kind of folks with those old throwaway books. It was more because of the things that they were teaching us. They taught us in the name of what is right and that they didn't sit down and say we're going to produce a generation that's going to go out and break the backs of segregation, that's going to tear down these walls and challenge these authority and run Bull Connor and his tank out of town. It wasn't like that.

They just wanted to teach us to be good God-fearing kids because they still taught us that our real reward would be in heaven. They wanted to teach us that just take whatever they do to you because one day you're going to get yours in heaven and it's going to be your heaven. You'll have milk and honey. I don't even like milk and honey, but you're going to have milk and honey and the streets are going to be gold and pearl and all of that. That's all well and good. So it's the same kind of, it's the same kind of mentality and information that was traditional for teaching African Americans. Just pray and be good and when you die and go to heaven, suffer down here on earth and let them talk about you, kick you in the butt, do whatever they want to do to you, because they did it to Jesus. It's going to be all right because you're going to go to heaven.

But they also taught us to question everything. So we would question. Why come they can have everything here? They get to go to heaven too. But I thought you said God was just. Why come they can have everything down here and go to heaven too. I've got to wait until I go to heaven. I can't have anything down here. Of course that would get you a beating. That would get you a beating. Shut your mouth. Shut your—shut up. You're too bad. That's what they would say. You're too bad. Go sit down. I'll beat you.

WA: So you were at Ullman High School in 1963, in the spring of 1963.

WB: () now.

WA: Will you tell me a little bit about—

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WB: Ah, it was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was, I finished Washington, came to Ullman. I was actually a freshman, and the demonstrations had already started, and we were down where it had been going on. There had been things going on already. We only kind of heard about things at a distance at first. We didn't go down at get involved because one of the lessons that you were taught is that you saw the police, you ran. You went the other way, period. No ifs; no ands; no buts. You could be threatened, police going to get you. That was almost like saying the boogiemer was going to get you. Oh you'd better not go in there. They would use the police to scare children. So in the beginning it was kind of absurd to us as we ran around and went exploring in the woods by the projects and did what twelve and thirteen-year-old boys do, exploring the world. It was inconceivable that people would go down and put themselves in the positions to fall into the hands of the police. We thought that was the dumbest thing.

The first day that we actually went down to observe a demonstration, we kind of hung around in the crowd, watched what happened. It pissed us off—excuse me—as we watched. The first demonstration that I saw was not up at Sixteenth Street. It was all the way down on about Eleventh and Sixth Avenue, which is straight down Sixth Avenue from Sixteenth Street. It was at Saint Joseph's if I'm not mistaken. The demonstrators and the protestors, they came out of the church, and they turned up Sixth Avenue and the police were waiting. The police were everywhere. They were waiting for them. They pounced on them and the crowd starting screaming. Of course we did what we did. We got back in the crowds and started throwing bricks at the police. That was our thing. The police would run into the crowd. For a long time one of the proudest things that I was ever proud of and I talked about it for a long time, that somebody threw a brick and the police ran into the crowd and the guy ran and I was like right here. And as the policeman came running the crowd kind of split, and I just fell in front of him and he fell over me and the guy got away. I guess I talked about that for five years, ten years because that was my, I had helped. I had done something. I'll never forget that. It was right there on that corner. Used to be some little gray shotgun houses that faced each other and ran straight. Now there's a business there and a motel or something, but it's right on Sixth before you get up on the freeway. But that was our contribution at that point.

It never crossed our mind that we would be out there with them fools turning themselves over because we knew what the police did to people. Memorial Park was one of their favorite places. They

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would take people up behind Memorial Park and beat them up. If they caught you, if you happened to be daydreaming walking down the street and they caught you, they'd make you stick your head in a window, and they'd roll the window up on you and they'd just kind of drive slow and they'd beat you on the head. Just any kind of, it was, I don't know. I don't know. When you think about the fact that they also lynched people and burned their bodies and took parts of their bodies as souvenirs, I guess we were kind of lucky, but when you think about it now, it was barbaric. To say the least it was barbaric. Those are the kinds of things that the police would do. They'd kick your door down, slap your Mama and Dad around. So you feared the police.

There was a world, there was a world out there--we very rarely came in contact with white folks except for the police. White folks stayed over here and they lived over there. Their schools were over there. We stayed over here, and sometimes it was just a railroad track, but it may as well have been the Gulf of Mexico or the Pacific Ocean because you never saw them. We went to our little places and went to our schools. If you wanted to, going downtown where the white folks were and the department stores and that kind of thing, it was like going on a safari because you never knew, you never knew what was going to happen once you got down there. You were keenly conscious of leaving the safety of the community because the mailman was black and those kind of, the insurance man, the laundry, everything because white folks wouldn't do black folks clothes. White folks wouldn't write black folks insurance. Everything. Only before they discovered the power of a dollar. It was, racism was more. It's important in Birmingham history. We would've had the international airport here and Ford Motor Company here. It made sense that you—you make the steel on one side of town. You build the cars from the steel on the other side of town, just a short train trip. Birmingham sits in the heart of the southeast. If you look at a map, it sits in the very heart. The airport to serve the South. All of these kinds of things this city gave up because they required that you have an integrated workforce. So it was the dollar was secondary to segregation. So they didn't want your money. God, that's hard to imagine now. But they didn't even want your money.

So when you left, everything that you needed was in your community and even when you, you could come downtown and go to Fourth Avenue where the black merchants were for certain things like clothes, no you had to go to Newberry's. You had to go to Loveman's to buy your school clothes and your coats and that kind of thing. It was during those safaris that you would really learn firsthand the kinds of

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things that you've only heard stories about. You would hear them call your mother a girl and speak in derogatory terms and not be able to go in that bathroom, have folks walk over you or call you a nigger and all that kind of stuff when you left the safety of the community to go on with the safari. So it was—I got off on a whole different tangent.

Anyway, it was a time that we were being bred to change all of this, but we were also learning about it and living it. The schools were no exception. We knew we had, when we went over to Ramsey and we would see those halls and those classrooms and the desks that they had and we'd come back and we'd see our little wooden desks that we used in the '40s and in the '30s. We knew there was a difference.

WA: So what do you remember about the decision to desegregate the Birmingham Public Schools?

WB: As an event? You must realize that just like the Voter's Rights Act, all these kinds of things were defied. They officially it may have happened on November the 7th, but in reality it's two or three years later, you still for all practical purposes have segregated schools. Until I think we were in the tenth grade, tenth or the eleventh grade and they took about eight students from Ullman and took them over to Ramsey and maybe somebody else went somewhere else. I remember Beatta and Sam and Evelyn, Percy, some folks wouldn't go, like Matthew. Matthew grew up in the projects with me. He wouldn't go. He wouldn't go. That's the guy, he was as smart all of his life, been brilliant all of his life. He wouldn't go. About eight people that I can think of, I can't think of everybody that went.

But so the decision and the law changing was one thing, but you've got to enforce the laws. I mean after public facilities were legally integrated there was still a two or three-year period where I remember going to a Kentucky Fried Chicken out on Seventy-eight and we, this has to be '66, '67 and we had to go to the back or don't eat. So the decision is one thing, but when it practically, when it became an application, when it became a reality is normally a little while later, a long time later depending on where you are. The farther south or the deeper you went to the interior of the state, it may have been in the late '70s. There were still some of these places.

When I went to work, went to work at the traffic engineering department in 1970, I think right after I got out of the Marine Corps, and I never thought about it. Every day at lunch we would get our lunch and go in the locker room, in the bathroom, and all the white folks would get their lunch and go in

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the kitchen in the building. So I'm thinking and one day I'm sitting there and you just, you're doing something. You're not really—and it hit me. Let's see. Why are all the white folks going ... and somebody says that's just the way. We just eat in here. So of course the next day I showed up at work with a chicken pot pie, and when lunchtime came and here's black folk going for the bathroom, us white folks going for the kitchen. I guess they must've thought I thought I was white, black as I was, because I was in the kitchen with them, and of course it didn't go over well. I sat in there and they all rolled their eyes, and they really didn't know what to say. They rolled their eyes and (). Of course later that evening the boss called me and gave me the lecture about starting trouble and the way things are and that we all work together and there isn't any discrimination but, and yeah. The next day I ate in the kitchen again. So then they turned me over to this overseer who had the reputation of "I know how to handle these people." He took me out on this crew, and we went to the corner, I'll never forget, right on the corner by Phillips High School, the corner of Twenty-third and Eighth. We were going to take some lines up out of the street and repaint the lines and that kind of thing, and he told me something like get your ass off the truck and get the damned and I can't tell you what I told him. () but we kind of went back and forth, kind of disrespecting each other, using all of the profanity we had command of, and I don't know what he thought. But I guess he thought that might have been sufficient. Of course they fired me. I understand that. I had the power, so I try to look at it and I understand what they were holding on to. Some of this was--

It's like the guy who bombed Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Some of these people had no status in the white community, and they only somebody that they could try and look down on was somebody of another color. Hell, if you take the niggers away, that means I've got to stand at the bottom of the social scale. So we've got, I can look down on—yeah, I may be poor and I may have, I don't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw at them, but I'm white. So they were trying to hold onto their white privilege. It's just, it's easier to try and understand things than to be completely emotional and react to it. As I search for a reason in the madness, it may be something that's very primitive, the same thing that made this tribe attack that tribe over roots that grew in the valley between their caves. It's as old as that.

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WA: So you were telling me about, to go back to Ullman about your sophomore or junior year there when about eight students were moved to Ramsey from Ullman. So why did those students move? Did you think about moving?

WB: No, I was not a candidate. No, no, no. They weren't going to send me over there to represent the black folks at a white folk's school. These kids were handpicked. They had to have grades and come from the right kind of families and have the right attitude and right reputation. All of these, these were handpicked kids. Nobody might have gone over there and started any trouble. They would've assassinated me rather than send me over. They'd have kidnapped me and held me captive if I had talked about ... no, no, no. They sent, remember now these are the first black students to go, plus these kids endured some things that I—they spat in the water when these kids were trying to drink water and stole their books and wrote things and said things to them. They caught hell. I'm not going to take nothing from them. I know they caught hell. I would've fought. Isn't any doubt in my military mind. I would've been over there scrapping every day. They'd have been saying here comes () better get ready. Here he comes. I would've come in the door like that because that's who I am. But these kids had to endure a lot and they still managed to get and I imagine they still carry scars. You know they do. But they manage to hang in there. Because they had to fight students. They had to fight racist teachers who wanted to flunk them, who didn't want to get—they had to take grades that they knew they had better grades because it was an experiment like the Tuskegee experiment. See we told y'all they couldn't compete. They need to be at their school. So they carried a big burden on their back. They faced a lot. I admire them. I think they deserve admiration.

WA: So what happened in the few years after that in terms of desegregating Ramsey? Were more Ullman students moved over? Eventually Ullman was closed, right and all the students were moved to Ramsey.

WB: '72. Half of them went to Ramsey. Some of them went to Westfield. Some of them actually went to Parker because students from Ullman came from Titusville, Ludsman's Village, I think First Avenue and North Titusville was the cut off point. Some of those students went eventually like some of the students went to Parker. Some of the students from the other side of Sixth Avenue went up to Ramsey and so on and so forth. But that was, I left in late '68. I joined the Marine Corps. Through our

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last years it was still something very far away for those of us who stayed in the black schools. We began to enjoy certain privileges. We could go in the front, () rather than going around to the side. So we saw some, you saw some of the barriers slowly begin to fall away. But it really took until the early '70s before you actually started to see the benefits and real integration. Not as a matter of fact if you look at real meaningful jobs, above labor and low level management, you have to come all the way up until the late '70s before you actually start to see. Of course the books, the laws on the books said one thing, but in reality you don't start to really see until the mid to late '70s. We're still struggling. The Panther Party, we're still working on a breakfast for kids program. There was a lot of stuff still going on.

At our school it didn't really, we knew they were over there and most days they left Ramsey if they got out early and they came straight to us. They came to all our basketball games. They went over there for classes, but they did everything that we did. They came to our class reunions now. They are, some of them, they made some friends over there. But for the most part everything else they came back to Ullman for. We started to see some changes, but the change was slow. It was very, very slow. You look around now and you see Annetta is chief of police and fire and the () and all of that. All of that really started to, those kinds of things didn't even start to become possible until the end of the '70s and into the '80s.

WA: So after high school (). Okay. Okay.

WB: Go ahead.

WA: So after high school you joined the Marines and then you came back to Birmingham by about 1970.

WB: Yeah.

WA: Right?

WB: Right.

WA: So tell me about, we were talking a little bit about what was happening in Birmingham. What kind of changes did you see in terms of desegregation and integration?

WB: I mean you could go in the front door of all of the restaurants, which was real significant. They had clerks at the department stores that were African Americans. We had a few African American police officers who really caught—that's another whole thing of research. These early public servants

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could not sometimes, I remember Frank. Frank () was one of the first and Robert was one of the first. They would stop white folks and they would tell them you can't arrest me. You'd better get and they would have to call for back up. I mean, or be out there wrestling and fighting because there were white folks who refused to acknowledge they had the authority of the police. So these folks caught hell. I remember () Moss who they put in the black community and instead of giving him a squad car they gave him a paddy wagon and they patrolled in the paddy wagon. They became notorious. They were as bad as the white boys were. Well, no, not quite. They had a little more compassion, but nobody, the white folks didn't respect them. Why should we have to respect them? So it was one of those kind of things. Those guys really went through hell. But that was one of the things you noticed. We had a couple of black police officers and you were proud of them mostly. But the stores and things that you could go in and that kind—so there was some things to look at. But police brutality was still rampant. It was just out of hand. It was almost like these gains that you people have made don't mean that you can get out of your place.

So one of the things that drove me into the Panther Party is that we began to challenge that kind of thing, began to patrol the police. When they came into the community, we'd get right behind them. If they stopped somebody, we'd get out. You have certain rights and he has to respect those rights. We taught people they had a right to defend themselves against injustice whether it was official, by the state, or whether it was some burglar or some robber that you have certain constitutional rights and the right not to be mistreated, not to be abused. If you were, you had a right to fight back, which is like, they were like woah. Who the hell are these people? We have never--see you have to realize that before that time one police officer could walk in a night club with eighty black people in there and make them all get up against the wall. Ain't it -- its mind-boggling but that's the truth. That's the way it as. That's the kind of fear. Then all of a sudden you've got some new Negroes who say, you've got a gun. We've got a gun. You could die just like me and that's a fact. They were like, () these boys. Where the hell they come from? Well, we just got back from Vietnam and we risked our lives for, we don't even know why we were over there risking our lives, so we figured if we've got to risk our lives for nothing, we could risk our lives for something. So you need to get out of our community or start shooting. They were like, it was like they didn't know what to do because they had never faced black men with guns and willingness to use them. It

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was just, it was—so eventually they—are you ready? What time is your—what time is this? [break in tape]

WA: The first thing—

WB: Well, maybe we'll have to reschedule something or--. The first thing was that the city police was totally not ready. So the sheriff and the FBI eventually and you should go to the archives if you want to learn more about this period because all the old police records, surveillance records and that kind of thing are at the archives at the library. After a certain period they send them to the archives. They were totally not ready. Never in the history of this state had they in the city had they had to deal with militant African Americans. Martin Luther King was one thing. The civil rights movement was one thing. But this is another whole kind of animal so they were totally not ready. The sheriff's department and eventually—well, maybe we need to stop. They're going to start setting up.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by L. Altizer, December 15, 2004