Interview of Dr. Blair Batson by Kate Medley, camera by April Grayson
March 24, 2006 Jackson, Mississippi

Kate Medley: This is Kate Medley interviewing Dr. Blair Batson on March 24 at Dr. Batson's home in Jackson.

April Grayson: March 24, 2006.

KM: Ok, Dr. Batson, first I want to ask you a few questions about where you grew up. You were born in—tell me what year?

Dr. Blair Batson: 1920.

KM: 1920. In Orvisburg?

BB: No, I was born in Hattiesburg. My mother, in those days, wanted to be delivered by a physician, so she went to Hattiesburg about two weeks, 10 days or two weeks before her expected date of confinement, and then went in the hospital. And I was delivered there, and then went back to Orvisburg. There were no facilities nearby, any nearer.

KM: And Orvisburg is just outside of Poplarville?

BB: It was five miles north of Poplarville.

KM: And it's no longer there, is that right?

BB: That's right. It was a sawmill town, completely company town. My father was the manager of the sawmill there, which was owned by the Batson and Hatten Lumber Company, which was partially owned by my grandfather. So everybody there was associated with the mill.

KM: And about how many people lived there?

BB: Well, I think at the time I was born maybe there were seven or eight hundred people there. At one time, it had been larger, I'm told. It was a segregated community. Most of the workers were black—some white, but mostly black.

KM: And you had one brother?

BB: One brother.

KM: John Batson.

BB: John Batson.

KM: And tell me about the education you received in Orvisburg.

BB: I remember very little about it because of my age at that time, but there was a three-room schoolhouse for the white children, and my grandmother was the principal of that three-room schoolhouse. So I started to school there. My grandmother had wanted a kindergarten; there was no law about whether you could or couldn't have a kindergarten then. So she went to the school board and said she wanted to start a kindergarten, and they said, "Well how much is it going to cost," and she said, "nothing because," she said, "there'll only be three or four people, and we'll just put them in with the first, second, and third graders." So I started out in kindergarten when I was four years old, and apparently, as I'm told, she, the teacher, had a class in each corner of the room, and I got—I was not interested, not happy in the kindergarten, and I crawled over into the first grade group, and the teacher let me stay. I don't know whether it was because my grandmother was the principal or if she just thought that was ok. It was a modern-day open classroom (laughing), and I could do the work, so I started my first grade when I was four years old. I was almost five—my birthday is in October. That was my education there until we moved to West Point when I was about eight or nine years old.

KM: And so your first few years of your education were in Orvisburg?

BB: Yes.

KM: And then you moved to West Point for, just kind of a, not for too long?

BB: About two and a half years.

KM: And then you came back.

BB: Then I came back.

KM: And spent how long in Orvisburg?

BB: Well, that was in '32, 1932 to 1935. I still lived in Orvisburg, and the last two years of high school were with the junior college there. The junior college had originally been an agricultural high school, so it had just been added on to those last two years of high school, so when I got out of junior high school in Poplarville, I had to go there if I were going to stay home. The education—at that time that whole area was already poverty stricken because all the big mills had ceased operations, as had the one in Orvisburg. And there was very little money in that junior college district because of that, and they had to put most of their money into having accreditation. The junior college shorted the high school, so the high school graduates were having trouble in college. (06:00) Since both my mother, my father and my maternal grandmother had college degrees, they had high respect for education. They didn't have the money to send me off to private schools, so the arrangement had been made that my grandmother who lived with us and had been the principal of that school, and her son, my Uncle Gene, who was in St. Louis, they all collaborated together, and I went to University High School in Missouri my last two years of high school and lived with my uncle and aunt in a one-bedroom apartment.

KM: It sounded like, as you were telling me last time, that they made quite a few sacrifices to—

BB: Absolutely. My uncle was a bachelor, and my grandmother, of course, had no friends, we had no relatives in the area, so it was a tremendous sacrifice for them to take care of me and do what they did. But education was all-important in our family.

KM: And you were there for your last two years of high school?

BB: Were in University High School, Missouri.

[camera paused at 07:50]

BB: You were talking about the early years of Orvisburg. One of the things that I remember was that we had a housekeeper named Frances, who actually lived in our house. She lived up, slept up on the—had her own room in our house, and she was very beloved. And she, one day her former husband showed up in the back and apparently had a gun, and my father went and got his gun and chased him off. In fact, I think she'd been in the back and came in running to get away from him. Fortunately, my father was at home and—because apparently he was going to shoot her, and he chased her off. And of course she was very, very grateful for that. Then after we moved to West Point, she got married and went to live in Bogalusa. And then when I was 14, after I'd come back from West Point, I developed typhoid fever, and she came and nursed me. They called her and said could she come. She came and lived in the room with me for about three years. There was no treatment for typhoid then, and she took care of me. I was very, very sick, very high fever, and we were obviously all very grateful that our relationship with her was such that she was willing to come back. But I think it illustrates one of our close relationships.

KM: Because you were essentially quarantined?

BB: (Nodding) My room was on quarantine. People couldn't come in, and the local doctor put me on a handwashing—for everybody that came in, a handwashing. Of course that all had to be done.

KM: And how old were you?

BB: Fourteen.

KM: I want you to tell me a little bit more about Orvisburg. It seems like last time you had some stories that kind of illustrated the racial dynamics of that town and some of your interactions.

BB: Yeah. Now remember, when I came back from West Point, it was no longer a town.

KM: Because what happened to the mill?

BB: Well, when the mill ceased operation, because the timber supply had run out, then everybody lost their job, including my father, so everybody just "whoosh" (waves his hands) scattered to the four winds. Towns like, areas like that all over Mississippi. So when we came back, there was only one family living there. It was a black family: George Carr and his wife, Ethel, and he had been a foreman in the mill. And father, my father, had been his boss, and they had a good relationship, and we needed somebody to, since we were moving back into the big house, we needed somebody to help take care of the place. So, there was a fairly good small house near where we lived—he had lived about a mile away—which was better than where he was living, so we were able to furnish him with that house, and he ran the—planted big gardens, which we shared with them completely, and had cows and milk, which we shared with them completely. Some, not much cash, but a little bit—they had the milk and the vegetables. 'Course he took care of the grounds and took care of the water well and pump and that sort of thing. So we developed a very close relationship with that family.

Now, some of the stories I can tell you about are that one of George's daughters turned up with some problems in the eye, and it turned out that she had congenital syphilis, and the whole family had, almost the whole family had syphilis. In those days there was no penicillin—you had to get injections, I've forgotten, once or twice a week at the health department. And my parents took them to town every week for, I think, about 18 months, it was a long treatment (they were) doing. But he believed in taking care of the people who were taking care of him and us. And I'll never forget that, and of course later becoming a doctor, it became a great interest.

Another thing that happened was, of course, schools were all segregated then. At that time, we went to Poplarville to school, when we'd come back from West Point, and we'd go on the school bus. But the black children also had a school in Poplarville, and they had their own bus that came and picked them up. And one day, George came in and told my father that the school—this was the first trip of the year in September—and told him that the bus hadn't shown up, and he said, "well, let's see what happens tomorrow." And tomorrow the bus did not show up again, so he called up to find out what was going on. Had a little trouble, but he was a man of some substance in the county, so he worked up through the lines to get the answer. And the answer was that money had gone short, and they had just cancelled it. And he said, "You *will* have a bus out there next Monday, or I'll have you in court." And they knew he would do it because he and my grandfather, particularly my grandfather, had the substance to do that. That always made an impression on me.

KM: This was the bus that was there to bring the black kids to school?

BB: That's right.

KM: Not the white kids?

BB: Not the white kids, just the black kids. Then there was another story. Ethel, George's wife, had a son named Otis, I think from a previous marriage—and, again, this is in the mid-'30s—showed up one day and lived with them. I suspect he was in some sort of trouble. He was a young adult, and he showed up, and Ethel was getting a little infirm—she'd been our cook and housekeeper—so he started taking over some of those duties, which he did very, very well and very efficiently. Then one weekend, he didn't—he'd gone to town, somebody had come and gotten him, and he didn't come back. And so they waited, and finally he showed up, after quite a long time. And, as the story goes—I didn't see him at that time—as the story goes, he had been beaten from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. He was just one massive bruise. And he said what'd happened was he'd been in Poplarville. He was over in what was called the Quarters, which is where the black people lived, and they'd been over there playing cards or dice—I'm not sure what—and the sheriff's department had raided them and had taken Otis off and tried to make him confess to some burglaries, which Otis said he hadn't done. And they had beaten him up—I mean, it didn't break his skin, I mean, they knew what they were doing—and had just beat him all the way up and down and more. And I don't remember whether I saw this or it's been told in the family so long that I think I saw it, but anyhow, my father, who was of a very mild-mannered manner most all of the time—I never heard him and my mother in an argument, ever—I'm sure they argued, but not in front of us. He went into what we called our gun room, where we kept shotguns and rifles, and he came out with a pistol and started out of the house, and my mother was chasing him, saying, "Claude, you can't do that!" My father's name was Claude. And he paid her no mind. Well, that was unlike my father. He ran and got in his car, with her screaming at him, and then he showed back up, not too much later, and what'd happened was that he'd gotten about half way to town, because he was obviously on the way to kill the sheriff, and he apparently snapped back in and realized he couldn't do that on his own, and came back. It's what I call temporary insanity, I mean he really had lost it, but fortunately he gained it back. But that made a great impression on me, that my father felt that strongly. My parents always had great respect for the people who worked with them and for them, and that included all the blacks. And I can illustrate that one way.

(19:30) There was a black man named Sim Poole, who was a *big* man. Today you'd think he'd be a college linebacker or tackle or something. And he was very regal looking. I always imagined that I could put a turban on him and he could pass as a chief in Africa—I mean, he had that kind of presence and looks. He was quite a guy, and he had taken care of people in my Uncle Hollis's (Ottis's?) family as a caretaker in their older age many years and had gotten to be very close friends with a second cous—my Uncle Hollis's daughter, Dorothy, my second cousin, and she and Poole became very close friends. And, anyhow, when I came back to Mississippi in '55, not long after that Poole died. And there wasn't anybody in the family close by to, my cousin Dorothy had passed on, and there was nobody in the immediate family but me around, so I made arrangements to go to the funeral and went to the funeral and was greeted there with great respect. And it was a very interesting funeral, the outpouring of love from all the witnesses at that time, but to make a long story short, after it was over with, we went

outside and there was somebody, a black lady, came up to me and said, “I want you to meet my father, because he worked in the mill at Orvisburg.” I went over, and he was a very elderly gentleman, I think he was probably in his early 90’s, but still moving around real well. A little hard of hearing, like I am. And [she] introduced me to him, and his face just lit up, and he said, “You’re Mr. Claude’s son? Which one are you?” And I said, “I’m Blair.” “You can’t be. “Yes, I am.” And he said, “Oh, your daddy was something else again.” But I think it showed you the great respect that the people had for my father, because he had great respect for them. And that was very impressive to me, and I think he, that was one thing—of course I think that both my mother and father, as I said before, had great respect for the people who worked with them, even though it was a patriarchal society.

KM: And remind me your dad’s position at the mill. He was a supervisor?

BB: He was the manager of the mill.

KM: Ok.

BB: He ran the mill. (23:00)

KM: With maybe how many people under him?

BB: I don’t know. Two or three hundred? It was a pretty big mill.

KM: It was the lifeblood of the town.

BB: That’s all there was there. Anything else there was a subsidiary: the commissary, the rooming house. The mill owned all of those things. It was a traditional mill town.

KM: So, stop me if there are any other stories that you want to interject with. But when you came back from St. Louis, you were about how old?

BB: Oh, let’s see. Came back from St. Louis, that means I was, that was 1937. I was 16. I graduated from high school when I was 16.

KM: And then you went—

BB: To Vanderbilt University and went there as an undergraduate for four years and then went to medical school at Vanderbilt. You want me to continue on?

KM: Yeah, well, I want you to continue on ‘til—let’s see, from there you went to—

BB: I interned at Vanderbilt. Then I went to Johns Hopkins and I was an assistant resident. And then the war, World War II, was just over, but I still had to go in the Army. So I went in the Army for two years and went to Germany, came back, finished up my residency at Vanderbilt, for a couple of years, taught there for two or three years, then

went back to Hopkins at the School of Public Health and Hygiene, with a joint appointment in the medical school, stayed there for three years, until I came back here. But a very important thing happened when I was at Johns Hopkins the last time. I was teaching in the School of Public Health and Hygiene, with a little time in the medical school. In the School of Public Health and Hygiene, there was a project, a long-term project going on in child healthcare. As a part of that, we took some families, in which we furnished the primary pediatric care. That's one of the things I did, help work in that study, as well as do some teaching and go back to school myself. I took a Master of Public Health over two years. But during this time I had a panel of patients, all of whom were black, all of whom were in the work force. We didn't have any welfare patients, we had ones just one step above welfare. So I got to be friends with quite a number of people whose children I was taking care of, and one day I remember, just, I don't know, "woolgathering" or something, I realized that any new patient that came in—and these were blacks—that I always called the mother by the first name, which was the pattern out of the segregated South. And I thought, that's not right. And so I started treating them like I did everybody else. If it was somebody I didn't know, it was "Miss," or "Mrs.," or "Mr.," or whatever. If I knew them real well, I reverted back to first names. But that was a real change, getting out of my segregated pattern. And I had to do it consciously, but after a while it came naturally. So you can "change the spots."

KM: I want to ask you about, a lot of the stories from Orvisburg have to do with somebody had typhoid or somebody had syphilis or—

BB: What?

KM: Was there a time that you remember thinking that you wanted to go into a medical profession? Is there any instance or something that happened—you getting sick or anyone that kind of catapulted you in that direction of training?

BB: No. I had always been interested in science, and in college, my second year particularly, as I got into organic chemistry and some of those things, I realized that I didn't want to spend my life in the lab. And I was at Vanderbilt where there were a lot of pre-med students, and so I started thinking about it and looking around and thought, well, what I need to do is go into applied science. And of course I had all these people in my—I'm named for my great-great-uncle Ben Blair, who was a doctor in Ohio. And you know I had these little things around, and having had typhoid fever, Dr. Calvert, who'd taken care of me—a good old country doctor who was really good. But anyhow, I decided that's what I would do, but it wasn't something that came suddenly, I just decided that was what I was going to do. And even after I made my decision, when I got accepted to medical school, I still asked myself, "is this really what you want to do?" And that was the end of that, from then on it's just been up the scale.

I have a story about St. Louis. University was also an all-white school, so I had no experience with blacks there. But I did have one eye-opener experience. There was—I was—it was not long after I started up there in the 10th grade—11th grade—and there was another fellow who had just started, was a stocky fellow with a German name, and

somehow we got into talk one day and, you know, found out where, about each other. He'd come from South St. Louis, which was where a lot of German immigrants had come to, and he found out I was from the Deep South. And all of sudden he started spewing out this anti-Jewish hatred. I mean, it was virulent. And I was just shocked, you know, I was just—I didn't know what to do. And anyhow then after that I went on and I got to thinking about that conversation and about how shocked I was, and I thought, you know, you come out of a society where there's a lot of these things going on, like Otis being beaten and some of that, so I didn't—I wasn't unaware of that, that a lot of the people, the people that I was with didn't hate blacks, but there were people around who did. And I thought, maybe I'm not as, shouldn't be, as shocked as I should be. And that gave me another perspective on that. If I was so shocked at that, I had to continue to be shocked that things like that were happening, not close my eyes and just let them go by, which I did part of the time.

KM: Were the racial dynamics in St. Louis different—I mean did—

BB: Well, there weren't any blacks around, where we were, University, it was a well-to-do suburb. The blacks had not invaded—they did later on, they did, not then. It was a big Jewish community—I would say about a third of the people at the high school were Jewish, which was a new experience for me, and got along well. My, I was put up to be president of the student council my senior year by the faculty—they chose the candidates—and my campaign manager was a rabbi's son. So I got along well with them. Didn't win, but almost did.

Do you need anymore about Aaron Shirley?

KM: Yes, I'm about to bring you back to Mississippi. (33:20) So when you came back to Mississippi, it was what year?

BB: 1955.

KM: Ok. And you'd been at Johns Hopkins and you'd been at Vanderbilt, you'd been away for a while. What was your read on the state of healthcare in Mississippi at the time? Was it—

BB: It was a lot to be desired. Not as wide spread or as available as it was in those areas.

KM: To anyone or mainly in the rural areas or for black people or?

BB: Well, it was across the board in a way, but of course it was much more evident for anybody who was poor, white or black, or wherever they lived, city or country. And there were just certain things that weren't available, to do any kind of specialized care. A lot of people went to Memphis, New Orleans, Birmingham. So it was across the board but the general level was down. And it's been a long, hard road pulling it up. But we're much better than we were.

KM: So when you came here, there wasn't a school—I mean, there wasn't a Pediatrics department?

BB: No, there was a two-year medical school up until 1955, just the first two years, the pre-clinical sciences. Then you had to go somewhere else to finish medical school, University of Tennessee, Tulane being the most popular ones. But some went to Vanderbilt, some went to Harvard, so forth. So the legislature decided they wanted a medical school because they knew, they got information that if you have a medical school, more people are going to settle nearby than not. So they built a hospital here in Jackson and established the four-year medical school. So, I started the department of Pediatrics.

KM: And when was that?

BB: 1955.

KM: And that was with your wife?

BB: My first wife, yes. Margaret Batson.

KM: So tell me about when Dr. Shirley—tell about what the department of Pediatrics was like prior to Dr. Shirley coming, leading up to that. (36:30)

BB: Well, we were responsible not only for students but for training interns and residents. In those days, we had rotating interns. They'd spend two months here, two months here, two months there, whereas today most internships are just in one area—family medicine, surgery, pediatrics, what have you. I think when Dr.—and we had—so we had to recruit new residents, which was very difficult for a new school in the poorest state in the nation, and with no reputation whatsoever. And so we had to build from scratch, and when Dr. Shirley came on board, I think we had four fulltime faculty members, including myself. And one year we were short of residents. We were changing—residencies and interns change on July 1st, to accommodate the schools' graduations. So I was short a resident, and I got a call, or a letter—I've forgotten which—from Dr. Shirley, applying. And I replied to it, and he came for an interview, and I got information about him. He was at that time in general practice in Vicksburg, and, as you probably know, from interviewing him. He came, I liked him, got information, got him to have doctors in Vicksburg send me recommendations, both white and black, which he did, and they were good, and he certainly qualified. I accepted him. And I had not been given any instructions otherwise, even though we had never had any black professional people except at the nursing, actual nursing level. So I just went ahead and did what I would've done for anybody that walked in. But I did decide I'd better tell the dean, because it was a first. And I did, and he was, seemed to be quite pleased about it, said "fine," and that's all I ever heard about it as far as official part of the university is concerned.

KM: As he remembers it, he started that day. He started to work.

BB: I know we got him to work as soon as we could get him to work—I've forgotten now, but I wouldn't be surprised. (Laughs)

KM: And did you anticipate that there would be any difficulty because he was black?

BB: Oh yes, I anticipated there might be some friction. After all, I knew everybody there was from Mississippi and they'd grown up in small towns and cities, and just on average you're going to have some people who are not going to be happy about it. And, so the first night he was on call—well, what I did, I told him first, was I said to him, I said, "Do you know that is you come in here with a chip on your shoulder what's going to happen to it?" He said, "Yes, sir, it's going to get *kicked* off." Not knocked off, *kicked* off. Because he'd been an act—already been an activist in racial affairs. And he lived up to that, he did not ever have a chip on his shoulder that I know of.

The first night he was on call, I got a hold of the resident, Dr. Love, who was from a small town in the Delta, to come by and speak to me the next morning, just tell me in general—I didn't give him any instructions, just tell me how it went. He came back, and he came back and said, "Dr. Batson, we don't have any problem." And we never did have any trouble.

I'm going to tell you a story, you may want to delete this. (41:41) I did get one complaint during the time he was there. It came from a father of a patient. At that time we had just one ward, Seven West, there were black and white patients on the ward. Anywhere from one to a room, two to a room, four to a room. Just one wing of the hospital and one floor. And the head nurse came to me and said this fellow wanted to make a complaint, so I went around to talk with him, and it was a black father, big, big powerful man from the Delta. I asked what the problem was, and he says, "I want a white doctor for my child." I said, "why?" I don't think I ever got a good answer from him. He was mad, and I couldn't get out of him that there was anything that he did, it was just the color that mattered to him. I sat down and gently told him, I said, "Look, I have white residents and black residents—black resident—and they take patients in turn. It doesn't make any different what the color is, white resident-black patient, black resident-white patient, doesn't make any difference. That's the only way I can run this place." Well, he wasn't happy about that, but he accepted it. I think if he had had some place else to go, he would've gone. But I think what happened was that he was from a community in the Delta where there must have been a black doctor who was below par, as compared to the white doctors, would be my guess, and so he naturally put that together, and he wanted the best for his child. I mean, I don't think it was, you know, I don't think it was racial the other way. You may want to delete that one. (44:09)

KM: Other than that, though, I was struck by talking to you previously and talking to Dr. Shirley yesterday that there seemed to be very little reaction from coworkers, patients, supervisors.

BB: That's right. Well, I'm glad he confirmed that, then, because that's all the information I got. He certainly didn't have a chip on his shoulder.

KM: Were you aware at the time he did have quite an extensive history being active in the Civil Rights Movement and active for equality? Were you aware of that?

BB: I was aware of some of it. We didn't talk about that. It didn't have anything to do with the job. Except that I told him, "Don't come in with a chip on your shoulder," which means come in and be a resident, learn to be a good resident. The rest of it is off, off work time.

KM: Who was the dean of the medical school?

BB: Dr. Pan—Dr.—when he came on it wasn't Pankratz. Oh, the second guy (thinking)—shoo!

KM: Was it Marston?

BB: Marston, yeah, Dr. Marston. Bob Marston.

(tape paused)

KM: Curious if you have other stories to tell. Or if April [Grayson, on camera] has questions.

April Grayson: I guess my main question would be along the line of how we asked Dr. Shirley yesterday about how did the integration at Oxford affect his thinking about this and those kinds of issues.

KM: April was curious about the integration of Ole Miss a few years prior to Dr. Shirley's coming to your department and James Meredith at Ole Miss—

BB: Yeah.

KM: —did that influence, if that was kind of in the back of your mind. That and all the upheaval of that.

BB: Well, I'm sure it did. I just, I felt that Governor Barnett had handled it extremely poorly and was not sympathetic. I had friends who marched on Ole Miss, which I thought was awful.

KM: You weren't worried that they were going to come march on—

BB: What?

KM: You weren't worried that they were going to come march on your medical center?

BB: No, because we're so separate. And there weren't people applying to medical school, or nursing school, that I knew of. I mean, people really look at them as almost two separate institutions because we're so far apart. (Laughs) No, that never occurred to me.

About got what you want?

KM: When your brother first contacted us about this, he was pointing out that your mother and Mr. Morse's—

BB: Mrs. Morse, yeah. Eva Morse.

KM: —were close friends. And we talked about this a little bit last time, but you remember her quite well.

BB: Yeah.

KM: Are there any stories that—

BB: Don't have any stories, no.

KM: —or recollections. She was at your house quite a bit, wasn't she?

BB: Umm, not too much. More Mother going to Poplarville, that I remember. John would remember more of that because, being a little younger than I was, he had more time for the years that you can remember in the area.

KM: Do you remember Mr. Morse very well?

BB: Yeah. I remember him, he was a "judgely" man, looked like a judge.

KM: What do you mean?

BB: I don't know, solemn, round face, but with a nice smile on his face. Funny how you develop prejudices.

KM: Ok, are you talking about Josh Morse or his father?

BB: His father.

KM: Ok. And do you remember Josh?

BB: Oh yeah, I remember him.

KM: He was a couple of years younger than you?

BB: Yes. It was he and John that got to be friends. My friend was another guy that got to be a lawyer in Pearl River County.

KM: Ok, we'll ask John more questions about Josh Morse.

BB: Yeah. You got everything? (50:40)

END INTERVIEW.