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Oral History Project/ Dwight Hilderbrandt

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Caleb Begley

Oral History Report

American History II

November 2, 2015

For my oral history report, I have chosen to interview my grandfather, Dwight Lamar Hilderbrandt, Jr. He is currently 75 years old. He was born in Mobile, Alabama right during the racist times of the 1940's that permeated the South. As such, I will be interviewing him on the feelings he had when some of the biggest civil rights milestones in United States history were passed. We conducted the interview in my dorm room in Talge Hall, and only he and I were present. The interview was 32 minutes and 30 seconds long.

Transcript:

CB: For my oral history report, I have chosen to interview somebody who is, um, who I'm quite close with, and somebody who, um, has led a very interesting life to, to say the least, um, I've chosen to interview my grandfather, uh, Dwight Hilderbrandt, um, Dwight why don't you start off by telling us a little bit about yourself?

DH: Well, I was, uh, born in 1940, in Mobile, Alabama, the heart of Dixie, and, I grew up there 'til I was 16 years of age, came to Collegedale, went to two years of academy at CA, and, uh, finished my degree in Theology at Southern, and then went to seminary for a year and spent nearly forty years in various parts of ministry all over the east and Midwest.

CB: 'K, um, what was, uh, what was your birthtown, what was Mobile like during the 40's, going through the 40's, up into the 50's?

DH: Well, in the early 40's, Mobile was a sleepy little village. Didn't have much population, not much going on there. But, then during World War II, with all of the ship building and everything, it became a center for the building of ships, and the population went from under 50,000 to over 150,000 just overnight because all of these people came in there to work on the ships to get them ready for World War II, and, uh, the city maintained its population and, uh, is a center for shipping. (Laughs) Lots of bananas come into Mobile, at least they did back in those days, and I can remember my dad would go down to the, uh, to the docks, and buy a whole stalk of bananas, green bananas, and, uh, then we'd, he'd bring them home and they would ripen and we'd have bananas. Uh, the city was very southern, steeped in tradition, uh, very much geared to the Spanish and the French influences that took place there in the early days, uh, for instance, New Orleans claims to be famous for the Mardi Gras celebration, but Mobile actually had the Mardi Gras celebration 15 years before New Orleans did...

(We snicker at that)

DH: ...And so, that's the kind of town that Mobile was, at the time when I grew up.

CB: So, it was a shipping, a very, very, in-i-i, once the war started, it was a very, very industrial town, correct?

DH: That's correct.

CB: Um, and, um, a lot of those, um, I, um, am I correctly assuming that a lot of the people who came in to work were women?

DH: There was a lot of the women that worked in the shipyards, building the ships. Uh, you know, they learned how to do welding, they learned how to do all the things that went with, with, uh, ship building, and, some of the men who were either too old to serve

in the military or didn't qualify because of, health or, physical, or whatever, they also worked in the ship, uh, industry there, because, there was thousands of people that were employed in the ship building there during World War II. They provided many of the ships that went into battle.

CB: Um, I'm sure that, uh, being down from Mobile, you said that it was steeped in tradition and one of the traditions that I've found is the telling of stories. I'm sure you heard lots of stories from people of how it was before you were born. Can you tell us, maybe, what some of those stories were?

DH: (Laughs) Well, it's hard for me to remember now, some of those stories that, uh, I learned way back there when I was a kid. But, uh, uh, you know, to give a specific story is hard for me to say. I can tell you one about my personal family though, that went back. My family had been in the Montgomery, Alabama area and then my grandfather and his brother moved to Mobile shortly before World War I, and, uh, an interesting story that came out of that was concerning our name because originally our family name was Hilderbrand (spells it) which is a typical German spelling of our name in the old country and so, during the First World War, my grandfather and his brother were detained upon suspicion of being German spies, and so the two of them thought, rather quickly, to put an R in the middle of our name and a T on the end of it and it was "Hilderbrandt," and they claimed to be Dutch. (Laughs) They had to think rather quickly to get the pressure off of them.

CB: (Chuckles) I can see that. Um, gearing more towards the more specific topic of this interview. Um, what was the attitude towards African-Americans and minorities in Mobile during the time when you were growing up?

DH: Well, naturally, with it being a traditional southern city, there were some of the common concerns and attitudes toward minorities, and particularly toward African-American minorities that were in general, that had developed over centuries, even. You know, a couple of centuries of history there. However, I must say, this was a minority, I think, among the people, because, as a child, I grew up without those kinds of attitudes and, just to illustrate what I'm talking about, when I was a young child, I had three siblings, and so, Mother had a lot of work to do, and so, she hired a lady, a black lady, to come and help her with, uh, housework and washing and I remember that Roberta was her name and she was just, almost like part of the family and she came there and helped Mother and did her job well, took care of us, and we just were very fond of her. However, at the same time, she recognized some of the traditional attitudes. For example, we would invite her to come and have lunch with us and she wouldn't do so. She said, "no, you give me my plate," and she had a place on the back porch where she sat. We were glad for her to come and sit with us at the dinner table, but she wouldn't do so. She was, that was part of her, part of her, her culture and stuff.

CB: So, she had the mentality that, "oh, because this is, this is just," she had the mentality that this, "this happens to me everywhere else so, why shouldn't it happen here," right?

DH: Yeah, yeah, but she was perfectly welcome to come and sit down with us and eat, and (laughs) we considered it just absolutely normal. I think another, uh, thing that I think about when I grew up, I loved to play baseball in particular and various kinds of athletics, and, um, we had, in the city recreation department of Mobile, we had a very active program of athletics and they, there were playgrounds all over the city and they would organize teams and leagues and so, I played in those leagues. But, it was segregated and,

uh, one of things that I missed was that I missed the opportunity to play baseball with Hank Aaron because Hank Aaron grew up just down the road, not too far from where I grew up, but we couldn't play together in those days. (Chuckles)

CB: Yeah, so you, you grew up just down the street from the greatest baseball player, in my opinion, that ever lived and, and you couldn't play ball with him. Uh, was your team any good?

DH: (Laughs) Oh, yeah! We won city championships several times

CB: All right, um, fast forwarding through, fast forwarding throughout, through, through a few years here, take you up to 1954. In 1954, a Supreme Court case called Brown v. Board of Education happened which desegregated schools

DH: Right

CB: Nationally

DH: Right

CB: What was the, uh, the reaction around your household and in Mobile and, and stuff now that schools were nationally desegregated?

DH: Well, the reaction, in general, was not very favorable and again, as I think about it, it probably was a vocal minority, not the overwhelming majority that was negative about it, because, it's, you know, even though we grew up in that atmosphere of a traditional southern city, um, in the state of Alabama there was a lot of differences and a lot of people didn't see segregation as did, uh, very vocal minorities, you know, such as the KKK and other groups that spoke out against it. Um, let me give you just a little example. At a time when the Civil War took place, and the secession of the South, there was a very strong movement in the state of Alabama to stay with the Union and from what I

understand with the information that I've received on it, that the background was that many people wanted to have a referendum of whether to secede and there was a minority that wanted to do it by representative, and these were the vocal persons who had slaves in the, the agricultural belt of central Alabama, particularly where the, where the plantations were very, very prominent and even in South Alabama where the plantations were very prominent, but, um, there were many who wanted to do it by referendum and, um, there were lots of meetings about it and discussion and finally it did go to uh, uh the concept of being done by representatives of the people and the actual vote for that secession of the state of Alabama was by one person in those representatives and, probably, if it had gone to a referendum, it may well have been defeated. So, you know, we see the strong feelings of some about the desegregation and there were many people who said, "well, we, we will just not have that for our children," uh, in those early, early times of the 50's and 60's, uh, early 60's. But, it was not nearly like it was portrayed through the media, and, and other, other things, because, you know, people there were not nearly the stereotype that has been given concerning, uh, the position of people in Mobile and the state of Alabama, even, concerning desegregation and so forth, in my viewpoint from, from a person living there in that time and just listening to people and, and seeing what was going on.

CB: Did you, um, did you attend a segregated school?

DH: Uh, I did, I attended our church school in Mobile and, at that time, we did not have any, uh, black children who attended our school, yeah.

CB: So, uh, you had the segregated restaurants in town.

DH: Mm-hmm

CB: Desegregated. What were, when you were driving, like, like, when you were-I'm assuming your family owned a vehicle.

DH: (Laughs) Uh, part of the time.

CB: Um, uh, when you were driving or walking or whatever you were doing past restaurants that said white and colored or when you were driving past water fountains that said white and colored, what did you think growing up in the atmosphere of, "we've just never had this in our household," and then you get out there and you were like, "whoa! This is happening?"

DH: Well, you know, I knew that it was happening and it was just part of the culture at that time. (Chuckles) I never agreed with it, um, but I just recognized that it was part of the culture at that particular time.

CB: Ok, well, um, fast forwarding a little bit longer into the next year, 1955. The Rosa Parks case, um, how did you, how did you hear about that and, and, and, and what did you think about it? Did you think that Rosa Parks was this brave, staunch person that you wanted to race out and support her or were you more indifferent?

DH: Well, the only way that we would hear about it, at that time, was through the newspaper, uh, I'm trying to remember if we had a TV at that (Chuckles) time. We may have, uh, had a TV and we would have seen it on television or on the radio news, and, uh, my reaction at that time was, "well, that, that ought to take place! There's no need for segregation on buses," or whatever. That was my personal reaction to it, and, I know, again, many people used that to inflame people about integration and so forth but, uh, I don't see that it was, personally, as I was seeing things at that time, that it was nearly what it was made out to be among the, among the people and their attitudes toward it.

CB: You said that you, grew up, grew up down the street from Henry Aaron and, um, and, uh, at that point in time, 1940's, 1947, Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier. As, as a young baseball player, when you heard about that, did that just, did that just, did that make you like, you know, "well this, well this is an awesome thing, maybe now our leagues can be integrated and we can go play with the African-American children?"

Dwight: You know, I didn't, I didn't say that it was an awesome thing, or, or, whatever like that, it just, to me it was just, "hey, that's good, that's the way it ought to be." And, uh, interesting thing with that is that, uh, when I was a kid there, '47, '48, '49, '50, that time period, the old Brooklyn Dodgers, the old Brooklyn Dodgers would stop in Mobile on their way back to New York from spring training in Florida and play one or two games before they headed back to Brooklyn, before the season started. So, I had the privilege of seeing all of those famous baseball players from that time like Jackie Robinson, and Roy Campanella, and Don Newcombe, and Pee Wee Reese, and Carl Erskine, and Gil Hodges, (laughs) and, and on down the line, all of these guys play, and we didn't think anything about it. There would be, there would be some people at the stadium at the time who would hoot about Jackie Robinson or Roy Campanella, but, it was such a minority, it was such a minority that would do that kind of hooting to give them a bad time, and, uh, you know, I thought it was a real privilege to be able to see those guys, Stan Musial and Enos Slaughter on the Cardinals because that was usually the ones that they were playing, uh, back there, and an interesting thing was that we got to go into those baseball games for ten cents. (Laughs).

CB: Well, that's certainly cheaper than ballgames are today

DH: (Still chuckling) Oh, yeah!

CB: 1963, you graduated from Southern, right?

DH: Right.

CB: The next year was the signing of the Civil Rights Act

DH: Right.

CB: Of 1964, well, first off, let me just go back to 1963 for a minute, did you listen to, um, or did you and people on campus listen to Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a dream," speech?

DH: We did not, necessarily, at the time it was being done gather round and listen to it, but we all heard portions of it, or, or most of it at a later time, but we were in school and working hard to try and get through school (chuckles), and so, we didn't actually hear it when it was being given.

CB: So, this did not have as big of an impact on campus here as it did, say, in Montgomery, Alabama or Atlanta, or any of those cities.

DH: No, I don't think so. Because, you know, we were so focused on trying to get an education and trying to get through school, that, that was the focus we had, and, remember, we couldn't have radios (laughs) in the dorm at that time, and, uh, we were somewhat isolated here from, from things going on but we did hear through the newspaper, through things like that.

CB: So, uh, at this point in time, there was a, um, a battle for, um, how the African-Americans, with the Civil Rights movement, should progress between Martin Luther King Jr., and another man by the name of Malcolm X, who had, who was a member of the Nation of Islam.

DH: Right.

CB: And, um, how, what were some of the, some of the reactions from people when they heard that there was this, there was this one African-American who was doing a peaceful approach to the Civil Rights movement and he was getting a ton of followers and there was another African-American guy who was doing a very violent approach to Civil Rights reform and getting a ton of followers. How, how, like, were people upset about this? Were they jumpy and agitated about it?

DH: Well, I think it would be a mixed review, because I know there were some people and I, I, heard people say, in a very, very condemning ways, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, but I realized also that, uh, these people that were gonna say that were going to say it no matter what was happening. No matter which way people tried to do it, whether it was through a peaceful means that Martin Luther King Jr., or violent means through Malcolm X that they were going to say that, simply because of their mindset, and yet, still, to me, that was a great minority, but they were loud (laughs). But, overall, I think that Martin Luther King Jr. gained the respect of a lot of people because he said, you know, that we have to be responsible, we have to do our part in this and we must do it peacefully, and through the means that God has given us, through working with our country and with our people to accomplish the Civil Rights. Whereas, with Malcolm X, he was viewed, very clearly, as a thug (Chuckles), and that he was only out there to cause violence and, and retribution and whatever else, so, people understood the difference between them and respected the difference.

CB: Um, to kind of start to kind of bring the interview to a close here, what, um, what, what few words could you think of to describe, to describe the Civil Rights movement,

kind of as a whole, in America in the 19, in the America you grew up in, and in the America that was the 40's, 50's, and early 60's?

DH: Well, let me see how I can think of how I would describe it. I think I'd describe it again as a mixed bag. Because I think, very clearly, that there were people in the Civil Rights movement that wanted to do this for the benefit of their people. Martin Luther King Jr., I think, very clearly, wanted to do all that he could to build up his people. There were others who jumped on that bandwagon because they could do something to promote themselves and to do something for themselves. I think Malcolm X is probably the epitome of that, that group. And, to me, and as I understand it and see in our culture, that that did not help the cause of it, but actually hindered the cause of Civil Rights, because reactions that that would take and, uh, so, I-I think that there was, as, as we see in all of our things, even going on today, that the voices that were heard were the voices from the extremes and the ones that were not heard were the common sense people that said, "we need to do this for the whole of our country." You know, and Martin Luther King, I believe, had that concept of being able to, to talk with people, to do things that would be for the good of his community, the black community, as well as the nation as a whole. But, there were other voices that were heard out on each extreme that, neither of them did any good for the cause of Civil Rights and actually distorted the picture of Civil Rights and, and caused more problems than they were trying, trying to correct in their way. So, to me, it was, uh, it was somewhat of a mixed bag, and, thankfully, common sense and good judgment intervened and, I think, out of the Civil Rights movement, came real progress in our country, and, we know that, at times, that progress seems to falter, but, I think, coming out of that, our country was stronger and better and, um, we need to

recognize those Civil Rights of people and, I think that, overall, in, in my city where I grew up, it's far different today than it was, in some of those early days when I grew up.

CB: By, uh, what exactly would you, um, what exactly do you mean by "progress?"

DH: What, what I mean by progress is people of, of any culture or any race being able to get an education, being able to get a job, take care of themselves, take care of their family, and to be a part of society without having to, uh, without having to, to hear the kinds of things that were heard in some of those early days about the black folks and, the, uh, the threats that came and all this kinds of stuff, but, uh, you know, one of the things that, I think, very clearly, no matter who we are, whether we're black or white or Asian or whatever, Hispanic, personal responsibility is foremost and the basis for all of our society and, I think that's something that needs to be continued to work on in our society is the, the understanding of personal responsibility and what each of us does for our culture by assuming our personal responsibility for ourselves and not depending on other people for who we are, what we are, or our needs, and to take advantage of every opportunity that we can of education, of training, of, uh, whatever it is in society that we want to accomplish and, um, we can't just relegate that personal responsibility to somebody else. To me, that's very, very important that, that no matter what cause it is or what society, that it goes back to basic, personal responsibility for each of us as citizens, as members of our society, our community.

CB: Well, thank you for, uh, for doing this, I'm sure that, that this will be a, uh, very interesting when it goes up on the library website. Thank you very much.