Interviewee: Heber Ladner
Interviewer: H. T. Holmes

Title: An interview with Heber Ladner, December 17, 1975 / interviewed by H. T. Holmes
This is Hank Holmes, with the Department of Archives and History, and I'm in Heber Ladner's office - the Secretary of State - and we're about to interview him and talk about his life and career in Mississippi politics. Mr. Ladner, I think we might as well start at the beginning - when and where you were born and a little bit about your early childhood.

I was born in Pearl River County, October 4, 1902. I was educated in the public schools of the county. I first attended the Byrd Line Consolidated School....

Byrd Line?

Byrd Line Consolidated School, and they had the tenth grade; and thereafter, I attended Pearl River Agricultural High School, serving as a student there two years. I'm proud of my scholastic record there. I was valedictorian of a class of seventy-one.

Seventy-one?

Seventy-one in the class.

Oh, seventy-one people.

I didn't have the money to go on to college so I worked as a secretary and stenographer for the New Orleans-Great Northern Railroad for a time. I had told the management that I intended to stay with them permanently; but I had a pretty good athletic record at Pearl River Agricultural High School, and Millsaps gave me an athletic scholarship, so I resigned and entered Millsaps College in the fall of 1925. I took pre-med at Millsaps hoping to make a surgeon, but the Great Depression came in 1929, and I had to forego that career; so I entered the classroom, and as a teacher-coach. I spent two years at Tallahatchie Agricultural High School; one year at Magee High School and one year at Inverness. During the time that I served in the House of Representatives, I was superintendent of the school at Isola, the board of trustees giving me permission to get someone to serve in my place while the legislature was in session. You know, in those days, we met biennially.

Was that an unusual circumstance? Now there aren't too many public officials who can hold down two public jobs like that, or are superintendents of schools....
Well, I got a substitute, I didn't draw the salary....

Were there many other people in that situation? It's a rather unique situation....

I doubt that...right. I got a good substitute, and we carried on a very fine school system.

I think it's grand!

I had previously been defeated for representative in 1931. I ran for House of Representatives from Pearl River County, five of us in the race, and at the end of the first primary I lacked about six hundred votes beating all four opponents in the first primary. I made just as hard a campaign in the second primary as I did in the first, but when the votes were counted I was defeated by sixty-two votes.

My word!

...Which was, of course, quite an unusual thing. Of course, the man who defeated me had almost been elected four years prior to that - Leo Seal. Then I ran in '35. In the meantime, I was teaching school at these places I've mentioned and I doubled two opponents in the first primary and was sworn in as a member of the House of Representatives in January, 1936. As a matter of fact, I've held a constitutional office in this state one-fourth of the life-span of the state of Mississippi - forty years come January 14th. I will have served forty years in a constitutional office in the state of Mississippi.

That's quite a distinction!

I'm very proud of my record both legislatively and as an executive officer. It's phenomenal, Hank, how far Mississippi has come since I was a member of the legislature. It's incredible! I can say here this morning that in my judgement no state in the Union has made the progress that Mississippi has made in the last four decades. When I was in the legislature, the total revenue collected from all sources in the state was around twenty million dollars. We didn't have a foot of concrete on the highways in this state - had some blacktop roads in two or three of the Delta counties and here in Hinds County; and I think that that administration - White's first administration - was the most progressive administration in the annals of Mississippi history save Bilbo's first term, 1916-1920. We initiated a thirty-nine hundred mile road-building program criss-crossing Mississippi, we authorized the creation of Rural Electrification Associations throughout the state; we brought five thousand dollar homestead exemption to every homeowner in the state - just to mention a few things. Getting back to Bilbo's first term, I am sure that that was the greatest administration in the annals of
our state. To mention a few of the things that he accomplished - and, by the way, Walter Sillers was a first-term legislator in that administration - Bilbo's first administration established the tubercular sanitorium at Magee, the Mississippi Industrial Training School at Columbia, created the Mississippi State Tax Commission, created the State Highway Commission, passed the first blue sky law in Mississippi; and one of his great accomplishments was to restore and to convert into an office building for the state the Old Capitol. It was his determination that that historic building would not be razed, with the help of a political foe by the name of Alf Stone. The two of them kept that historic building from being razed. He established the South Mississippi Charity Hospital at Laurel, created the State Board of Bar Examiners, created the State Pardon Board, abolished public hanging making the same private. He organized the state Council of Defense. A lot of people are not cognizant of this, but he established an Education Commission in this state. He was dedicated to the proposition that to remove the mental shackles that bound the great rank and file of the people of Mississippi was most important. He added three Supreme Court judges to the Supreme Court, built the deaf school, created the Mississippi Plant Board, and created a Mississippi Illiteracy Commission. He was the first governor in the nation to advocate a sales tax, and even though the legislature prohibited the passage of the law, his successor, Mike Conner, rendered that great service to the people and restored fiscal solvency in the state of Mississippi. Another of his very great contributions - and it was a political issue in the hottest campaign that Mississippi ever had - was the inauguration of the Texas fever tick eradication program. At that time, all the cattle roamed the woods - the piney woods in south Mississippi - and all over the state, for that matter, and as a result of this tick eradication program, Mississippi today is second in cattle production east of the Mississippi River.

Holmes: That was a pretty stormy program, wasn't it?

Ladner: Oh, yes, they blew those dip vats up all over the state of Mississippi! I remember when he ran for governor for a second term it was really hot; because running those wild cattle through those dip vats, they would come out with horns broken and sometimes legs broken, which created a lot of enmity among the stockmen of the state. But he pursued it again and, as I say, today we have some of the finest herds of registered cattle in the world. You know, by a man's deeds he is known. Sometimes it takes generations for the historians to fully appreciate a man like Bilbo. He had his faults, we all do; but he lived eternally in the sunshine so far as promoting the welfare of Mississippi. Dr. George Tyndall has just written a book - it was written in 1967 - titled The Emergence of the New South: 1913 to 1945; and in this book he enumerates the contributions that Bilbo made to the state during his first term. Significant that he made this statement in the discussion. He says, "No other
leader of the plebian masses in the teens had either a program or a record equal to his," speaking of Bilbo. Now, that's a North Carolinian speaking, and he enumerates in this six or seven hundred page book, The Emergence of the New South: 1913 to 1945, these facts. Getting back to what I deem to be the second most important administration in this century in the state, as I stated previously, was White's first administration. And each succeeding administration - and by the way, Hank, I have served with ten governors....

Holmes: Quite a record!

Ladner: ...In the legislature, clerk of the House, and I am completing my seventh term as Secretary of State through the trust and confidence of the people of Mississippi. I've already served in this office six years longer than any other Mississippian in the history of our state.

Holmes: The Secretary of State's office, at least in the twentieth century, has been a very stable office. We've only had about three Secretaries of State....

Ladner: Well, you had the Powers family, father and son; and then Walker Wood serve twenty-two years; and I've served, as I said, twenty-eight years thus-far.

Holmes: What is it about the Secretary of State's office that results in such stability?

Ladner: Hank, a lot of people are not cognizant of this, but if you will research the Code, you'll find that more different responsibilities, from an executive standpoint or quasi-judicial, are anchored to this office than any other office in the government other than the governor. All out-of-state corporations are permitted to come in by the authority of the secretary of state, having met all requirements of law; all domestic corporations for profit; the secretary of state is the administrator of the Securities Act. I don't know why they call it securities when you're taking chances in investing in stocks! But that's a tremendous responsibility. We qualify multiplied millions of dollars worth of securities annually. Of course, that's the way you grow, by investing capital, and this is both foreign and domestic corporations. The secretary of state is charged with administering the Uniform Commercial Code which was authorized by the legislature a few years ago. I believe Mississippi was the last state to adopt the Uniform Commercial Code, and I think Louisiana still has not adopted it. We have instituted what I think is one of the finest operations of any state in the Union. We have rotary files and it's so coded that we can locate any one of 250,000 in one of the files in two minutes!

Holmes: My goodness, that's amazing!
It's a very, very fine operation. The secretary of state is a member of numerous boards and commissions. I've been a member of the State Board of Education for twenty-eight years, have served with many superintendents of education; and I'm proud of the fact that we're moving with such great rapidity in that field, both from the standpoint of high schools and colleges, junior and senior. We have one of the finest vocational training operations in the nation, primarily in our junior colleges. That's why we've been able to lift up to higher ground economically the great rank and file of our people. I mentioned earlier in this interview that when I was a member of the legislature our state revenue was twenty million dollars a year. What is it today? Six hundred and forty million dollars a year! More than thirty to one, and we've just started to grow! I recall that in 1960, and I'm proud to say that I haven't missed a prediction yet, at the Neshoba fair I predicted that before the decade ended - that was in 1960 - that we would have personal income aggregating five billion dollars a year. It was two and a quarter billion in '60. We reached it before 1970, and in 1970 at the same Neshoba fair, I prophesied that our personal income in Mississippi would reach ten billion dollars a year before 1980. It's eight and a half billion now. When I was a member of the legislature we had approximately thirty-five thousand people gainfully employed in industrial plants in this state. Today it's in excess of two hundred thousand with take-home pay of more than a billion dollars a year. I know of no state in the Union that has a greater future than we have right here. We've got everything: natural resources, the richest soil in the world, seventeen million acres of verdant timberlands supplying the sawmills and the pulp-mills with vital resources, and an abundant supply of water.

I think it's wonderful that you've been able to preside over the upward change of that, too.

Well, I've been a part of it and there hasn't been much compensation in public office for most of the time that I've served. I recall having worked with your father while he was a member of the legislature. He was truly a great person, and we lament his passing. But this state is on the road to a very great future if all of our future governors and future legislatures will dedicate themselves to a sound fiscal policy. That's what it's all about. That's why these blue-chip industries are coming here. We do not believe in deficit financing in the current operation of government. That's the reason our bonds are selling at a very fine premium. I was in New York a few weeks ago signing a bond issue that was around six percent when most of the issues in the signature company were running nine, nine and a half, and ten percent. We've been in somewhat of a recession, or depression, but it looks like that we're beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel; and once this recession is over I see a tremendous upsurge in the future development of our state, agriculturally as well as industrially.
Holmes: Do you see the state hanging on to the conservative fiscal policy?

Ladner: I see no evidence to the contrary, because I've just been informed that the Budget Commission has cut back practically all of the appropriation requests which shows that this administration will be sound.

Holmes: I'd like to ask you: With a lifelong career in politics, what got you interested in entering politics in the first place?

Ladner: Well, I was teaching school for about a hundred dollars a month and you know, that's tough. I got in politics not to get a job but to do what I could to lift up to higher ground our people. When I served in the legislature they paid me the staggering sum of seven hundred fifty dollars every two years!

Holmes: You couldn't quite live off of that with those "months long" sessions, could you?

Ladner: Well, we had five-month sessions. Both regular sessions were around five months, so we just had to supplement ourselves. I mean, seven hundred fifty dollars for five months was practically nothing.

Holmes: You had no expense allowance?

Ladner: None at all. We got one round trip when the legislature convened and when we went back home after the sine die. There's been a lot of change since then. When I was Clerk of the House of Representatives, we had seven or eight on the payroll. I read all the amendments, read all the bills, called all the rolls, and it took twenty minutes to call the roll in the House. We had one hundred and forty members. You had to always call it twice because a big percentage of them would wait for that second roll call.

Holmes: I can see why you needed five-month sessions....

Ladner: Right, right!

Holmes: Well, you had your masters degree at the time you ran for the legislature, didn't you?

Ladner: Well, I got my masters at Duke University in history and government. As I say, I started out to make a surgeon, but I had to switch my deal when the Depression came, so I determined to get in the classroom. I got my Bachelor of Science degree at Millsaps and my Master of Arts degree at Duke.

Holmes: Wasn't it rather unusual at that time to have a masters degree person in the state legislature?
Ladner: Right. Well, Hank, I don't know that this will ever happen again as it never happened before...speaking about my legislative experience...I came to the legislature in January, 1936, was sworn in, and I had a candidate for speaker - Shine Morgan - and Mr. Stancil was representative from Sunflower and Governor White was sponsoring him and Tom Bailey was also a candidate. We had thirty-eight individuals that stuck together. They didn't organize the first day, they didn't organize the second day. Mr. Stancil sent for me and said, "We can't organize the House. Governor White with all of his power as a new governor, with all of his colonels, with most of the banks and all of his industrial power wasn't able to change one of those men on two roll calls." I said, "No, Horace, the men you refer to are men of spine, not spineless men." He said, "Well, we've got to organize. What do you want out of the committee assignments?" I said, "Well, I think I'm the best qualified man in the House to be chairman of the Education Committee, a standing committee." "Well," he said, "I believe your background will justify that statement." So he said he'd appoint me as chairman of that committee. And then he also appointed me as a member of the rules committee.

Holmes: Pretty good for a first termer!

Ladner: Never happened before, and I predict it will never happen again. We had a very, very fine administration. Most all the folks that were allied with me, we just teamed up and, as I say, I think we had the next best administration in this century.

Holmes: When you ran for representative, both the time that you were defeated and the next time, did you have a platform as such?

Ladner: Oh, yes, right! Free schoolbooks, homestead exemption; and as chairman of the committee on education, I tried and tried again - I introduced a free textbook bill and always lacked one vote of getting it out of committee, so one of the men who had been so adverse to it agreed to let me report it when we had a four-page calendar and there was no chance of passing; but I moved to suspend the rules in order to get consideration, and failed.

(End of Side One)

I was a delegate to the MEA convention from Humphreys County, and as I said, I was also a member of the legislature and chairman of the education committee. I introduced a resolution in the MEA delegate assembly and made a plea for free textbooks.

Holmes: Was this during the time of the legislative session or afterwards?

Ladner: I don't recall, but I think it was in between, you see. We met biennially then, I think, at this session; and I made an ardent plea for the working tools of the masses of our people. Some of
them would come to school and it would take them three weeks to get their books. Books were high. I got approval by twenty-one votes, and the Mississippi Education Association then submitted it to the legislature for their approval. Had I not been successful in that, we may not even have free textbooks now; but the teachers joined with us in it. But it was a hot debate!

Holmes: No doubt.

Ladner: It was a hot debate!

Holmes: Did you, as a first-time chairman of a very important committee, find opposition from some of the veteran lawmakers at your being appointed chairman and....

Ladner: No, no. It was all over when...it was a new day, you see. Most of us, we had a tremendous turnover in that deal, and we had, as I say, complete cooperation from all of them.

Holmes: Did you stay at the Edwards Hotel?

Ladner: I stayed at the Royal Hotel, which was owned by my friend, W. T. Reece, who later became United States Marshal - was appointed by Senator Bilbo.

Holmes: You were representative from Pearl River County, but were teaching in Humphreys - were superintendent in Humphreys County. That strikes me as an unusual situation.

Ladner: Right, right. Well, I married a girl from Inverness, Daisy Bowles. I taught with her at Inverness. Before I became superintendent of the Isola school I had a very, very serious illness - at the time I was at Inverness. I developed tumors of the larynx. Very few people know this. I was speechless three years....

Holmes: My word!

Ladner: ...And I had two laryngeal operations. The first time I was operated on was in New Orleans at the Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Hospital. About a year after that the tumor came back and I then went to Mayo Clinic and they assured me that it was not malignant. So I returned to New Orleans and was operated on the second time. And then another year passed. In the meantime, I went on to Duke. Even if I couldn't talk I could do my research and write my thesis. I wrote as my thesis for a masters degree "The Life of James K. Vardaman in Mississippi Politics." I had some wonderful experiences in that research. While I was at Duke University I went to Washington to interview several members of the "Willful Twelve" who, along with Vardaman, voted against the declaration of war with Germany - George W. Norris, Borah, and others.
Holmes: I think it interesting that - the thought just occurred to me - you know, you mentioned Governor Vardaman, that you wrote your thesis on him, and he owned a newspaper at Winona, Mississippi and then you ran against Walker Wood, who was also owner of another paper in Winona.

Ladner: Right! Yes, right, I hadn't thought of that!

Holmes: You seem to "take on" people from that town!

Ladner: Well, I was affiliated with that faction at that time - we had pretty strong factions in the state.

Holmes: Would you delineate a little more on these factions at the time?

Ladner: Well, it was Vardaman, anti-Vardaman from about 1900 up until Bilbo came on the scene; then it was Bilbo, anti-Bilbo.

Holmes: ...Up until after his death.

Ladner: Right, right!

Holmes: Well, I think it's something to be said of the man that people even today either highly dislike him or highly praise him. There's still very little middle ground there.

Ladner: Right. It's unusual, though, to see an outstanding historian like Dr. Tyndall make the statement, "In all the Confederate states, Bilbo was tops." There was never any doubt as a student of government and history that his first term stands out above all of them, but his second term was unsuccessful.

Holmes: Speaking of Vardaman's vote against entry into World War I, how do you personally interpret the Mississippi reaction to that vote?

Ladner: Well, Mississippi has always been very patriotic, all the people; and he got an awful lot of derogatory mail. Senator Norris told me that he held him in the highest esteem, and he was one of the leaders of that "Willful Twelve." Vardaman believed that as long as you have so many nations with common borders and with different religious beliefs as you've got in Europe, you'll always have wars. He was prophetic in a way about it.

Holmes: When you decided to make your first race for secretary of state, were you....

Ladner: I was Clerk of the House at that time.

Holmes: Were you running as a candidate against Walker Wood or for the office?
Ladner: I was running for the office, determined to dedicate my life to public service. I could have, in my judgement, been elected to higher office several times, but I have never been able financially to burn the bridges; and for that reason I never aspired to higher office.

Holmes: What was your platform when you ran against Mr. Wood?

Ladner: Well, I just wanted the opportunity to carry on a wider expanse of my efforts in helping my native state.

Holmes: Did you disapprove of the way he handled his office?

Ladner: Well, I promoted my own merits more than anything else. We had one rough debate when he questioned my patriotism. We never did come in close contact again when we concluded with that joint debate. It was at Holly Springs. He didn't know that I had volunteered for service in World War II and that I had been rejected because of the physical condition I told you about earlier in the interview, tumors of the larynx. I passed the examination here on state level, but they turned me down in the district office.

Holmes: That's something, too, you've witnessed a change in - the style of politics and campaigning.

Ladner: Right, right! Well, back when I first made statewide campaigns we would be given a few minutes on each of the...gubernatorial candidates' platforms to get our names before the people. We didn't have the media that you have today - television - and it was a matter of beating the bushes, so to speak....

Holmes: Getting out there and getting the vote!

Ladner: Absolutely! Getting acquainted with them.

Holmes: Well, too, at that time - correct me if I'm wrong - a candidate had to have a platform of some sort, where today it's more a personality race....

Ladner: Right, right! It's changed a great deal, a great deal.

Holmes: I kind of think that the old-time style is pretty good sometimes. It's certainly more exciting and colorful!

Ladner: Right, right! It was very interesting.

Holmes: Could you describe a typical campaign in...I don't believe you've ever had any really serious opposition since you've been secretary of state....
Ladner: No, I was re-nominated six out of seven times after I finally made the grade. Mr. Wood defeated me twice, and I was elected my third trip. Then I went six out of seven times without opposition in the primary.

Holmes: Could you tell me how it was in one of the statewide campaigns, just the way you went about campaigning and canvassing the state?

Ladner: Well, I worked all the cross-roads stores, handed out cards - I handed out a quarter of a million cards in 1939!

Holmes: My goodness!

Ladner: And Mrs. Ladner and I worked very hard; and I knew in the initial campaign when the first sixteen rural boxes had reported. I heard it on the air on the way back to Jackson - I still vote in Pearl River County. There's a special act that permits all state-wide officials to retain their home precincts unless they choose to move. I knew when those first sixteen boxes came in that I was defeated because that's where the election is - in these thousand rural precincts in the state of Mississippi. We have two thousand one hundred precincts today. A thousand of them are rural precincts, and every governor I've served with - the last ten - carried those thousand rural precincts heavily.

Holmes: It seems to me that that's about to change.

Ladner: Well, they thought so, the press told me this time that it would change but I told them not yet.

Holmes: In another four years?

Ladner: I wouldn't think so. In another twenty years. It depends on how big, how urban we become. I hope that the trend will not continue to accelerate.

Holmes: I do too.

Ladner: Highly urbanization is all you've got to do to compound your troubles four-fold. Just travel around a little bit and you'll see. We need to have a balanced economy of agriculture and industry. We tried several generations with King Cotton, but now we are getting some of the finer things of life with a balanced economy. That's what we need.

Holmes: When you were campaigning, did you have a statewide organization of supporters....

Ladner: No, not for my state office. Not even the candidates for governor
had any statewide organization to speak of. It was a matter of oratory in those days. A man that didn't have a good campaign stored up in him...there's no substitute for properly presented campaign issues through oratory in the early days, but that's diminishing now, you know.

Holmes: That's right.

Ladner: It's visible; but you had to sell yourself with your words back then; and, of course, first of all you've got to have honor and integrity because without that you need not pay your qualifying fee.

Holmes: It came through easier then when a person was of honor and integrity than it does now....

Ladner: I don't know - the same thing prevails now, I think. I think that's the key. Honor and integrity in office. It's a public trust, an office is, and it should be held that way.

Holmes: Well, I don't want to run out of tape, here, and I've got a whole lot of questions I want to ask you; so I wonder if we could make another session some time, and we can keep these short and neither one of us will get tired. How about that?

Ladner: All right, that's fine. We want to keep it in line, though. We don't want to duplicate statements.

Holmes: Well, what we'll do is we'll have this typed up before our next one so we can both review it. How about that?

Ladner: Right! That's fine. Thank you for coming.

Holmes: Thank you.

(End of Side Two)

(Transcribed by Mary H. Mingee)