An Interview With

EDWIN E. BENOIST

Interviewed by Clinton Bagley

July 24, 1976

Natchez, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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AU 193
OH 1978.01
OHP 005

Interviewee: Benoist, Edwin
Interviewer: Bagley, Clinton

Title: An interview with Edwin Benoist, July 24, 1976 / interviewed by Clinton Bagley

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OH 78-1
28 pp.
1 hour
indexed

BENOIST, EDWIN E.

Edwin E. Benoist was born in Natchez on December 18, 1891, and was educated at Stanton College (Natchez), the Natchez Institute and Tulane School of Medicine. Dr. Benoist's medical career was spent in Natchez as a surgeon. The interview is primarily concerned with Dr. Benoist's early medical experiences as a member of the Army Ambulance Corps during World War I. After the initial orientation period (at Fort Harrison, Indiana; Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia; and Hoboken, New Jersey) was completed, Dr. Benoist was sent to France, where he served as a medical officer until 1919. Following the close of the war, Dr. Benoist served with the United States Public Health Service in Houston Texas, Hot Springs, Arkansas, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, before returning to Natchez in 1923 to open up his surgical practice. Dr. Benoist also discusses his first years as a surgeon in Natchez.

Dr. Benoist was interviewed at his home in Natchez, Mississippi, on July 24, 1976, by Clinton I. Bagley, Historian, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

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Benoist: We* had to spend several months at Fort Benjamin Harrison, and later, at Fort Oglethorpe. I was in the animal ambulance corps.

Bagley: Animal ambulance?

Benoist: Animal ambulance, yes. We had about twenty-five or more horses, and we had about seventy-six mules and twelve ambulances, some wagons. We had to drill those things. After I left the hospital in New York, I didn't give a pill to a patient for eight months; just drilled troops, took care of prisoners, carried a gun, guarded stores, and so on. Down at Oglethorpe our company had to build stables, bridges over the ditches and that sort of thing; get out and drill those ambulances every day. We had a big shipment of mules that came in by train to Chickamauga Park, in the mountains. So, we took our company over there to unload the mules. I asked our boys if they knew anything about handling mules. They said that they knew all about it. Well, the mules had been cooped up in a bunch of cattle cars, and, when the doors were opened, they came tearing out, and these soldiers disappeared just as if we had poured hot water on them, and the mules were all over Chickamauga Park. We had to get the 11th Cavalry to round them up. The horses the government gave us for the ambulance corps were all condemned horses because the cavalry

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*Doctors who had been ordered out of their hospital or practices - EEB (7-5-1978)

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didn't want them. They'd have c's on them which meant "cavalry," but they had a line through c, meaning they had been struck out - they weren't acceptable. The horse that I had didn't have any teeth, and you had to use a curb bit on him, otherwise, he'd run away with you. In fact, he ran away with me and jumped across the ditch and threw me helter-skelter, slipped the saddle and blanket. We had another horse that threw the corporal who was riding him to the ground and tried to paw him with his front feet. So, that's why the cavalry wouldn't keep such horses. Those were the horses we had for the medical corps.

Bagley: Well, you went from Tulane to medical school ---

Benoist: I went from Tulane Medical School - I first went to New York, to New York Lying-In Hospital in New York, Pierpont Morgan's hospital on Stuyvesant Square. I took the course in obstetrics, and from there I went to the Roosevelt Hospital with the full intention of getting a complete surgical residency. I became patriotic and joined the army, you know, rather, put my name in as one of the volunteers.

Bagley: You enlisted as a surgeon or an aide or an orderly?

Benoist: Surgeon

Bagley: Surgeon.

Benoist: And the army ordered me out in August - August, 1917. I was sent over to Fort Harrison, Indiana, for further training and work. We* stayed there until the weather got so sharp that we had to

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*Doctors and hospital corpsmen - EBB (7-5-78)

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move down to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia. Down there we were assigned to barracks that some bright officer, who had designed them, had left each roof open from end to end for ventilation, because he didn't want all the soldiers in such a confined area. We damn near froze, you know. We had two little cannonball stoves in each barracks, but we didn't have any coal to use. We had to use wet wood in those coal stoves, and we used to gather up all the newspapers we could so that we could sleep comfortably at night. We'd put the newspapers under our blankets, some on top of them, so we would stay fairly warm, and the snow would come through the roof. We'd find snow all over our beds in the morning. Well, we got out of that after awhile. From there we went over to a horse-drawn ambulance company. We had a battalion with four companies, all horse-drawn, and living was a little bit better there. The commanding officer of our outfit was a doctor from New York City, and he didn't have any intention of abiding by army regulations in any sense of the word. He didn't wear regulation clothing. He said it was too damn cold, so he went out and got a big heavy coat with a fur collar, and that's what he wore. The lieutenant colonel who was in charge of the battalion didn't like that, that was not official costume, and this doctor said, "Well, I don't care, anyhow, I'm going to wear it because I don't want to freeze," and he went down to Chattanooga and got a bunch of paper and lined the whole inside of our

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quarters to keep the wind from blowing through. So, he was a pretty good man. We found out where we could get a little coal, you know, so it was pretty comfortable after awhile. About once a week or two, you could get warm water for a bath. Corpsmen would make up a fire and heat some water, and one could go down and take a shower. In between times you would have to do what you could. We had much mud around that camp. It was cold mud, you know, and we wore boots, and you would step into it, and that cold mud would cling - would get you caught and you couldn't get your boots out of the mud. A boot would go down about a foot - anyhow, one foot deep, at least that - and we had a time getting around the camp. While we were there, the army shipped in a bunch of men - they closed one of the other camps - from some place, one of the Carolinas, and they had to come in and pitch tents on that wet ground. It was bitterly cold, and it was during the influenza epidemic. We had so many pneumonias there we didn't have hospital space. We couldn't do anything for them. We spent all our time going around and picking out the sickest ones and putting them in a hospital when we would find space to put them. We lost a lot of men - died.

Bagley: Had they been overseas?

Benoist: Oh, no, they had not. They were preparing to go overseas. Finally, the springtime came. The command got hold of me one day and asked me if I wanted to carry some men over to France - they didn't ask if I wanted to, they said you're going to do it. They

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gave me about nine copies of orders - I was in charge of about five doctors and 497 enlisted men. We had an old worn out train that had been abandoned by the railroad company, and old cars. We had a baggage car up behind the locomotive where we would cook soup, you know, and then somebody would take a couple of pots and go all the way the whole length of the train. Each man would get a dipper full and that was it. We had all the 497 men and five officers to feed. Well, on the way from Fort Oglethorpe to Hoboken, New Jersey ---

Bagley: Hoboken?

Benoist: Hoboken. That was a port of embarkation. We were right in sight of New York, but the army wouldn't let us out of camp. The command wouldn't let us go over there, so we had to stay, get ready to go to France. So, we could just look across the river and see New York in the distance. Well, we got up to Hoboken, and, as soon as we hit the place, there were so many troop trains coming in that they unloaded us on a platform, and they carried our train off. They assigned us to some barracks and told us to get busy and make up sailing lists. Well, how were we going to make them? Well, you had to type five copies of each sailing list with each man's name down, where he was from, his age, what he could do, and so on. Well, we didn't have any typists in the outfit, and we didn't have any typewriters, so what we had to do was wait until the regular day shift got through with their work, then two of us took over the typewriters at night to make our sailing list. We

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finally got that out. Then I received orders to buy a gun from the ordnance department to travel with troops. So, I had to go buy me a pistol and cartridges. In eight months, I hadn't given anybody any pills or any treatment. Well, from then on, we got on to an old German ship. It was a real nice ship. I think her name must have been something like Crown Prince William II, but they changed her name to Aeolus - A-E-O-L-U-S - and it sounded very poetic. She was a nice ship, but she was an old-time ship, you know, and every time she would wall down and get a high wave, you know, the sea would come up through the pipes and the air ventilation system, you know, and go all out through the commodes. So, you had to be very careful trying to sit on the seat. They had the most marvelous cooking on board. These Germans - the ship had been taken from Germany - left the finest kind of food, and we had a bang-up graduate of Annapolis who was in charge of the ship, and he kept very strict order. We just had it fine until we had a collision out at sea. We were about two nights out, and then the accident happened. One of the ships in the convoy lost a rudder, and our pilot saw it in time to dodge her, but he ran into another ship, and it tore our whole bow out and tore a big hole in his side, and the rest of the convoy went on. We had to go back to Hoboken. Now, like I say, we got on this other ship, the Manchuria, that wasn't ready to go yet, but they put us on there, anyhow, and put our men down in the hold that was full of coal dust, and we nearly suffocated, and we

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would have to let our men come out and get on the deck at night-time so they could breathe good air.

Bagley: When you had that collision, did you really think you had hit a sub, or ---

Benoist: We didn't know what had happened, we just - there was a terrific jar, you know, and noise, a kind of crashing noise, and we thought a sub had hit us. When you get on those ships, the first thing you have to do is to have a driil, you know, what they call a fire drill or emergency drill. So, the first thing we all did was to dive for our life preservers and put them on. I had to go down to the next floor to get my life preserver, I got that, put it on and came out. Our men were all lined up ready to take the life boats. We found out that our boat was not going to sink, so then we cooled down a little bit. So, we finally got to France.

Bagley: Well, what was the mutiny bit you mentioned earlier on the Manchuria?

Benoist: Oh, well, that was - while we were on the Manchuria - we pulled out of Hoboken - the army didn't have anything organized and the place where the food was cooked for the soldiers - you see, we had 497 men of our own and then there were probably 1500 others. I don't know how many men we had on that ship, just a tremendous amount of men. It was loaded, packed, and they had this soup kitchen down at one end of the boat, and all these men were hungry. The command would line them up, and, by the time our men would get down to the end of the boat, all the food would be gone. So, our men didn't get any food for thirty-six hours. They told us

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officers to put on guns and hold these men down. Fortunately, it didn't go to the point of tearing the ship up, but we had to go to the commanding officer and make him get out some special rations to feed our men. We never did get food but about once or twice a day all the way to France because things were not organized at all. You see, the first boat had been fine, and we got real fine food. But this second one, no. You would get a scrap of this and a scrap of that if you could. And, of course, when we got out in the middle of the ocean, the damn cargo shifted to one side, and we hung at about forty-five degrees all day long, and we had to send men down to the hold to carry the stuff piece by piece to the other side of the ship.

Bagley: Did you have to treat seasickness?

Benoist: Well, I didn't, because I had been through that once before, and the way you don't have seasickness is you just don't eat a lot of food before you get on the boat. That's the way you do that, and you be sure you don't have a lot of food hanging around your stomach and intestines. If you don't have anything there you don't vomit. Of course, you do get seasick sometimes just by rocking around, but not like you do if you are full of food. If you want to get real seasick, go to one of these restaurants and eat a lot of food and a lot of dessert and a lot of rich stuff with grease on it and twice as much as you need and go aboard the boat and get out on the sea and ---. Well, we pulled into Saint Nazaire, which was a tidewater port, and it was in April, and it

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didn't get dark in France until real late, it's much further north than Hoboken. And the port authorities wouldn't let our boat in until the tide came in, so we would have enough water to float into port. When you get into the port you go into a canal which locks the high water in so your boat will still float. As we went in along the coast, there were just hundreds and hundreds of French women dressed in black waving handkerchiefs to us. They were glad to see the Americans coming, you know. They had lost their fathers or brothers or their fiancés or that sort of thing. There were some beautiful flowers growing, and much green at that time of the year. We came in just before the sun set, and it was a very beautiful sight to see the golden sunshine on the shore, with the green and all those flowers and those women all in black waving to us. Well, we got into Saint Nazaire. We had to march to the camp, and it had evidently been raining there for days and days, and the barracks all leaked, and, fortunately, the rain had stopped about the time we arrived. We arrived on a Saturday afternoon, and we didn't have any food for the troops, and the next day was Sunday, and they told us the quartermaster was closed on Sunday, so we didn't know what to do. Finally, we put enough pressure on the quartermaster to send a couple of employees around - they had a lot of beans in cans, and they would take a hand axe and knock open the top of a can, and each man could file by, and they would spill some beans into his mess kit, and that's what they had to eat until they could get something

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better. They really had no food until the following Monday except beans, but, of course, we were glad to get the beans. So, that was that. Then after we had got to Saint Nazaire, the command tried to use our men on fixing roads, because the roads were all bad on account of the rains. They wanted our men to go out to distribute gravel on the roads, and we told them that our men were hospital men and were not laborers, but they dragged them off anyhow. Each man had but one uniform. Our men would come back filthy with all that grime. So, we had us a nice little time for awhile. In order to keep us from traveling, the command quarantined us and said there was an outbreak of measles and that we couldn't be moved. Besides that, they didn't have any troop trains to move us. So, they kept us in that place for pretty near a month. We finally found out that there was going to be some troop trains coming in empty, so we spotted one of them, and we loaded our men on this troop train as it was pulling out, and we went from there to Blois, which was a distributing station. They had told our men that they would be kept there for some more training before they were sent to the front. But we hadn't been there one hour before they started coming around and checking our men off five and six at a time, giving them cans of corned beef and a little bread and orders to go, each group to its assignment. They sent some of them to the front right away.

Bagley: Now, these were soldiers, not the medics?

Benoist: They were hospital men, but the command was still sending them

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up to the front. The Germans were coming through that day, and they all got hysterical. So, they told us to give away all equipment that we didn't need for traveling. So, I had a bedroll and a lot of clothing, and I just threw it away. They told us to get rid of all of that because we were going to move. So, we got rid of it, I haven't seen it since.

Bagley: What was your rank then?

Benoist: Oh, I was lieutenant, first lieutenant, but, on account of my time I had had in the army, they made me in charge of our group. I had one doctor who was almost sixty years old, and I outranked him. I outranked everybody in the outfit there on account of the time I had been in, so they made me in charge of the outfit. I didn't know a damn thing about the military. I was supposed to be practicing medicine. We didn't practice any medicine, and, finally, I got orders assigning me to the surgeons' office in Tours, France. So, I prepared to leave. We had a "boy" there who was running a camp hospital at Blois, and he didn't want me to go because he wanted me to be assigned to him, not because of my ability, but because he needed a doctor to run the damn hospital he had there. All he wanted to do was to learn how to do surgery. He was not a surgeon, but he wanted to learn how to do it. So, he was doing surgery, and he wanted me to take over the medical side. He tried to send military police down to stop me from getting on the train, but I was able to elude him, and I got on the train and went down to Tours, and I didn't have any more

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trouble after that.

Bagley: You never made it to the front?

Benoist: All the shooting was over by the time I got up there. I went to the front all right. I went all through the trenches and dugouts and all that, but I didn't get shot at.

Bagley: Still carrying your camera?

Benoist: Yes, I took some pictures up there.

Bagley: Did you ever think about home while you were there?

Benoist: Oh, yes, I missed my father and mother and brothers and sister, but there wasn't much one could do about it.

Bagley: Did you ever meet anybody from Adams County?

Benoist: Oh, yes, I ran across a bunch of boys. They had a boy in the commissary at Tours who was selling supplies - groceries and things like that - to all military personnel. His father had been in the grocery business on Franklin Street - Will Druetta. He died, I think, this past year. Joe Dixon came through, and a boy whose father used to be in charge of the - I think it was one of the Louisiana prisons. Anyhow, his name was West, and his father and partner had a store down at Norwood, Louisiana, Bridges and West. Mr. West had two sons. One was an engineer, and this other boy - I don't know whether he studied law or what he did - but he came through there, and I spent a day with him. We had a boy from Natchez named Morris Scharff who was a graduate of MIT, an engineer - a real fine fellow, a very brilliant boy - homesick as the devil. I made him spend a day with me, took

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him out and bought him something to eat. He was real tickled to see me. There were one or two others that I remember - a boy named Lem Kowitz, whose father was a brilliant Polish Jew. He used to run a newspaper here in Natchez, an afternoon paper, the editor. His sister was a pianist, very brilliant, a regular concert pianist; and this boy left the army while in France and said he was never coming back to the United States. That's the last I ever saw of him.

Bagley: He deserted?

Benoist: No, he didn't desert. They discharged him, but he said he wasn't coming back to the states. He didn't care about seeing his family or anything.

Bagley: Well, in 1917 the stalemate was over by that time, wasn't it?

Benoist: Yes, the Germans made an advance, and they got down as far as the Marne River at Meaux and they were stopped there by Marshal Joseph Joffre - J-O-F-F-R-E. We got there before that time, and the Germans were coming through, and the command told us to pick up pitchforks or anything we could use because the Germans were coming through. That's when we gave away all our extras. We slept on some old rough pine planks. Well, what they would do is to take planks and make four platforms for four men to sleep on - lower berth and upper berth - and we slept on that until we were a little bit better off. So, the reason I mentioned that, you asked me what happened before - my attitude - you can readily understand that things were getting improved

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a little bit, and you thought more of the improvement than actually existed, you understand.

Bagley: Where were you when the war closed?

Benoist: I was stationed in Tours, France. That was the head of the services of supplies, what they called SOS. You see, I was not classed as a combatant. I didn't carry a gun with a bayonet. The only reason I carried a gun was not to defend myself against the Germans, but against our own troops, you understand. When I got back to Natchez, I still had that old gun, and I sold it cheap to get rid of it.

Bagley: Were you in a victory celebration when the armistice was signed?

Benoist: The only thing I can remember about that is seeing the American troops come down the main avenue of Tours and the band was playing the "Stars and Stripes Forever," and, of course, it sounded real well at that time. But the reason I was there at Tours, I had been assigned there.

(End of Side One)

I knew how to manage things. One doctor had his family cable that his grandmother or uncle or first cousin was having terrible illness, and he was needed in the United States right away, so they let him leave, since the war was ended. He had been treating the French civilians, French and Belgians who worked for the United States, and German prisoners. We had a bunch of German prisoners there, too. So the command latched on to me and assigned me in his place. I had everything except something to

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work with. I had an ambulance kit that had aspirin, Dover's powders, cathartic pills and tincture of iodine, and that's all one had to treat the sick. I had to treat those French civilians and the German prisoners, and I had a suite of offices, an assistant. I had a chauffeur with a sedan, and I had to make afternoon calls. I used to treat patients down in the old French quarter, the old medieval quarter of Tours, where the streets are just about five or six feet wide, and the houses are built so that they almost come together as they get up high. There is a slit where the sky can be seen, you know. The ceilings in those houses are just barely high enough to walk in - about six feet from floor to ceiling. There was a very high rate of tuberculosis, and I had to go see those sick people and with nothing to work with, no hospital facilities, "no nothing." I want to tell you I really felt sorry for those people, because I wasn't able to do anything I wanted to do for them, and I could feel sorry for them but that didn't help them very much. I wanted to get out of that job as soon as I could, but I couldn't, "they" had me stuck.

Bagley: You were more or less a welfare worker for the U.S. government looking after French civilians?

Benoist: I really didn't know. The war had ended, and, after this major who had been assigned to this work was transferred, they put me on his job. I wasn't a welfare worker ---

Bagley: I said somewhat ---

Benoist: You see, some of these people were working for the United States

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government. They were French and Belgians that were driven out of Belgium, and they were living there in this town, and the United States government furnished them with free medical care, such as it was, and I became the free medical care, including the treatment of German prisoners. My treatment of those people, I think, must have been very down the grade, because I had nothing to work with - no hospital facilities, no nothing, no way of running laboratory tests, nothing at all. Patients would come in, and I would ask them what's the matter, and they talked in French. This old lady came in and I said, "What?" I tried to talk to them in French, and she said, "Mal dans mer rennes," and that means, "I have got pain in my kidneys." All right, what do you give her - give her aspirin. She could have done that for herself. It was pitiful, and that went on and on. Finally, I was able to get out of that job.

Bagley: So, then you still worked with the government?

Benoist: Well, yes. I was discharged from the army in October, 1919.

Bagley: Did you meet any of the German prisoners?

Benoist: Oh, yes. I treated a bunch of them.

Bagley: Did you speak German?

Benoist: Not so you could recognize it. I had one year of German in school, but it was like a vaccination that didn't take.

Bagley: So, then you came back to Natchez after 1919 and started a practice?

Benoist: Yes, well, I had to make a living, so I - let's see, what did

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I do? Oh, yes, I transferred to the United States Public Health Service, and was sent to Texas. I took care of ex-soldiers, men who had been wounded or had been ill, and I had that for - oh, I went from Houston, Texas, to Hot Springs, Arkansas, to Tulsa, Oklahoma. They transferred me around, you know. When I got out to Tulsa, our government has a clinic there, and I was the head of the clinic and we had an internist, a specialist in tuberculosis, a neuro-psychiatrist, a surgeon, a chest internist for diseases of the lungs. We had a dentist and a complete dental outfit, a complete x-ray outfit and a complete drug store.

Bagley: At that time did you think it was the "It" - the most up-to-date place that you could think of?

Benoist: No, it was not. All the government was doing, they were just - what do you call that when you fight back when your ---? The government had all these ex-soldiers that were sick or damaged in the war, wounded or gassed, and they didn't know what to do with them, so we had to treat them, hospitalize them and do surgery. Some of them had become unsound mentally, and we had to send them to the mental hospital. We had a bunch of them who had tuberculosis. There was a real fine tubercular hospital down at Sulphur, Oklahoma, a real modern place. We sent a bunch of them there. The surgical cases, like men who had developed hernias where they could claim that the government had something to do with it, we would take care of that right in Tulsa and, of course, a lot of men were trying to get compensation from the government. We

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would have to check them from one end to the other to evaluate how ill they really were, you understand. It was a matter of money with them, you understand. Of course, as you can expect, the government had the most elaborate series of papers, printed on blue sheets, and, not only that, when I finally got out of government service, I still had men coming down here from Washington about particular soldiers, and I had to go before a court reporter and answer a lot of questions, and that went on several years.

Bagley: So, then you came back to Natchez about late 1919?

Benoist: I didn't get back to Natchez to practice until about 1923, I think it was. The government closed our office in Tulsa and consolidated with one in Oklahoma City, and I took that as an opportunity to get out. I was tired of it, so I came on back to Natchez and went out to Charity Hospital and stayed there for a year and did some surgery for $75.00 a month and board and lodging. Of course, that was a charity hospital.

Bagley: I need to ask you a personal question. When were you born?

Benoist: Oh, I was born December 18, 1891.

Bagley: 1891? And you went through the Natchez school system? You went to Stanton College?

Benoist: Well, when I was five years old, I went to kindergarten at the old Stanton College. They used to take males there until - about the first five years, I think - and I had kindergarten, first year, second year, third year, fourth year, fifth year. I went

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to the Natchez Institute - it was a public school - in the sixth grade, and I stayed in the public schools until 1909. There were about eleven of us who finished the senior class.

Bagley: But you didn't go to Jefferson College?

Benoist: No, I had an older brother who went to Jefferson, but I didn't go there. My older brother went both to Jefferson and C.H.A. - Chamberlain Hunt - in Port Gobson. There was a very fine fellow up at Chamberlain Hunt by the name of Stuart Landry who was a very brilliant student. He got the gold medal for scholastic achievement and, later, became rather prominent in New Orleans. He wrote some books and, also, had a publishing business. For awhile, he was in the advertising business. He had a real good thing going, but the 1929 crash put him out of business.

Bagley: Well, you came back to Natchez - let me back up on your education - then you went to Tulane, or when did you go to New York, and why? What did you study in New York?

Benoist: I finished my medical course at Tulane in 1916. I got my bachelor of science degree in 1915 and my medical degree in 1916, and I had an internship at the New Orleans Charity Hospital which I did not use. I gave it to one of the other boys, and I went to the New York Lying-In Hospital to take an obstetric course. I did finish there and transferred to Roosevelt Hospital in the surgical division, and I would have been there quite awhile but I got ordered into military service.

Bagley: Well, didn't you tell me you majored in business and marketing?

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Benoist: When I was in academic school, I took a business course.

Bagley: Where?

Benoist: Eastman Business College, Poughkeepsie, New York. That's a six months' course if you finish it in six months, but you could stay for two years if you want to, but you get tired of fooling around, so you'd finish it in six months. So, I got a certificate for that.

Bagley: Well, when you came back to Natchez and you were working at Charity Hospital, conditions were not good here then, were they?

Benoist: Well, commercially you mean? The town was very dull. Natchez was a poor town, and the population of Adams County was 13,000, 7,000 Negroes and 6,000 whites.

Bagley: When?

Benoist: All through the 1920s. It was 1923 when I came back. Of course, it began to increase after that, not because I arrived back, but it just did, and I took a year out at Charity Hospital. I just wanted to - I had been in the army and lost a lot of contact with regular practice, so I spent a year out at Charity Hospital so I could familiarize myself with surgery a little bit better. Well, then, of course, after that, I made a number of trips to places such as the Mayo Clinic, clinics in Chicago, and went back to New York, visited Presbyterian hospital - they don't call it that. It's a big hospital up there on the northwest corner of Manhattan Island.

Bagley: Bellevue?

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Benoist: No, no, not Bellevue. I got a chance to do some observing and study at Mount Sinai. And, of course, I went around and visited Roosevelt, my old hospital.

Bagley: Then you really were getting started here when the Depression came, kind of getting yourself on your feet?

Benoist: Yes, and we didn't make any money. I did a lot - most of the pay practice, you might call it, was in the hands of the older doctors, which is what usually happens. In other words, doctors have to make a living in order to keep going, you understand, so the tendency is to weed out people who can't pay, don't you understand, because, by force of necessity it happened that way, and, when I opened up a practice, I had a whale of a big practice, but nobody paying, so my gross for the year, for two or three years, was about $6,000 or $7,000, so I had to sponge on my father and mother and live with them so I would have a place to sleep and eat, you understand. Then I began to acquire a practice that paid a little better after that. But it was pretty rough for awhile.

Bagley: During the deep, dark days of the Depression - you were married by then ---

Benoist: Oh, I got married about 1926 or '27.

Bagley: Did you have people come in that you fed? Was your kitchen always open? Weren't there some people that, maybe, didn't have anything to eat during the Depression?

Benoist: Oh, that sort of thing.

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Bagley: Did you run a sort of kitchen at times?

Benoist: You mean at our house? Well, we never turned anybody down. My mother was that way. Even before the days of the Depression, my mother was very soft, I guess you call it. Some people knew that and came around for a handout. She was very charitable about that sort of thing, and my wife was too, really. We didn't have any routine customers, but we tried to help out people when we could, of course. Adams County had some pretty good farm land and raised a lot of hogs and cattle and so on, and some people hunt and fish around here. We didn't have too many people starving around here, of course, there were always those complaining about not being able to pay the medical bill, you know. There were a lot of them, but we had the cotton mills going in those days. When I first opened up practice was run on a basis of the cotton mill operation where each employee paid ten cents a week for medical care, which amounted to about forty cents or fifty cents a month, and that was all pooled, and the doctor was supposed to take care of everything with the exception of obstetrics - you got ten dollars extra for that. Dr. Lamkin, one of the older doctors, had that practice. He became ill, and asked me to take it off his hands, so I ran it for about a year. They fired me one Sunday, anyhow. The were working those poor devils down there - running until about nine or ten at night, and sometimes they would have an accident, and they would want the doctor to be on call. Well, that was round the clock. So,

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I got tired of staying around the phone all the time, so I went over to Lake St. John one afternoon, and I got back and was told I was fired, and I said, "Thank you," but you couldn't make more than about $75.00 a month out of that. They had an epidemic, and I made twenty calls one night after seven o'clock and got paid $75.00 a month just the same. Things were pretty rough then, of course. Everybody thinks the doctors were wealthy, but things were pretty rough.

Bagley: This is the end of an interview with Dr. Edwin Benoist at his home on the lower Woodville Road in Natchez, on Saturday evening, July 24, 1976.

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EDWIN E. BENOIST

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