

An Interview With

MR. ALLEN HAMILTON

April 17, 1978

Interviewed by

Daisy Greene

Mississippi

Department of Archives and History  
and the  
Washington County Library System

Oral History Project:  
Greenville and Vivinity

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Interviewee: Allen Hamilton  
Interviewer: Daisy Greene

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

GREENE: April 17, 1978. This is Daisy Greene, interviewing Mr. Allen Hamilton, who operates Loyacono's Shoe Shop in Greenville, Mississippi.

What is your address in Leland, Mr. Hamilton?

HAMILTON: 120 Stone Street.

GREENE: Give me the place and date of your birth.

HAMILTON: Bourbon, Mississippi.

GREENE: And the date of your birth?

HAMILTON: August 13, 1922.

GREENE: Your mother's maiden name.

HAMILTON: Nannie Ester Jenkins.

GREENE: Will you spell that?

HAMILTON: J-E-N-K-I-N-S.

GREENE: And the first name.

HAMILTON: N-A-N-N-I-E E-S-T-E-R.

GREENE: Your father's name?

HAMILTON: Albert Hamilton.

GREENE: What about your schooling, Mr. Hamilton?

HAMILTON: Well, I finished high school in Leland, Mississippi, at the Leland Public School. Professor R. J. Brown was the Principal. Of course, I had Miss Annie Jones. Most of the children called her Miss Annie. She was the first grade teacher. And then there were other teachers, Miss Bernice Roper, now Mrs. Bernice Bell, Mrs. Erma Weathers Nalls, Will Ethel Lofton, Miss Daisy Galloway, Professor Wilson and Professor Dunlap.

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GREENE: What was Wilson's first name?

HAMILTON: Walter.

GREENE: And Dunlap's first name?

HAMILTON: Oh, I've forgotten his first name. And then later, after the passing of Professor Brown, Mr. A. B. Livingston and his wife, Miss Rosalie, and his sister-in-law.

GREENE: Tell me, Mr. Hamilton, more about Professor Brown. What type man was he?

HAMILTON: He was a just, but stern, man, and his interest was education of the children and seeing that they attended school plus get their studies or lessons to be best of the ability of the teachers he had employed; and he believed in perfection.

GREENE: Wasn't there something unusual about his death?

HAMILTON: Well, apparently he had a heart attack. He was going to town and he fell on the railroad, and nobody really knows.

GREENE: Did you know his first name?

HAMILTON: It was R. J. I just knew the initials.

GREENE: What about the condition of the school?

HAMILTON: Well, it was junior high school, and in those days --

GREENE: I mean the building.

HAMILTON: The building was excellent.

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GREENE: What about the furnishings - the desks?

HAMILTON: The desks were good. The only thing short at that time was the library. They just didn't have many books in the library.

GREENE: Indoor bathrooms?

HAMILTON: Outdoor bathrooms. In the section of town where the school was built, they didn't have any water line - sewerage line - and naturally it was outdoor bathrooms.

GREENE: Was there a vocational shop there in the school? Was there anything at that school that motivated you to learn the shoe business with Mr. Loyacono?

HAMILTON: No, not at that time. It was later on. Under the leadership of Mr. Levinston, I had a course that was dedicated to farming, which was the principal thing at that day, in that time. Of course, I learned how to fix tractors, and blacksmithing, and those courses.

GREENE: How did you come to meet Mr. Loyacono?

HAMILTON: Well, after my tour of service in World War II, I was a waiter, and I could see that it was fading out as far as waiters were concerned. However, I was married and had a child, and I knew I had to do something else, and so I decided to become a shoe repairman under Mr. Harry Byrd, who operated his shoe service shop in Leland.

GREENE: Was he white?

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HAMILTON: He was black. Then after I took my training under the GI Bill of Rights, I went down to Anguilla and stayed down there about a couple of months. It didn't work out too well in a small town - Anguilla, Mississippi.

GREENE: Were you doing shoe work in Anguilla?

HAMILTON: Yes, in Anguilla, I was doing shoe repair. Then I came to Greenville and applied for a job through Mississippi Employment Service. They called me, saying they found an opening in Loyacono's Shoe Shop. That was in October, 1947.

GREENE: How old were you then?

HAMILTON: Twenty-five years old. I've been here ever since.

GREENE: Well, that brings us up to Mr. Loyacono. Will you tell me what you remember about his family background?

HAMILTON: Well, from what he told me of himself, he was born in Italy - on the Island of Sicily in the province to Palermo, and in the town of Palermo.

GREENE: Do you have any idea how to spell that?

HAMILTON: No, I don't. It's on the Island of Sicily. He began making shoes at the age of seven.

GREENE: Under the direction of his father?

HAMILTON: Under his father. His family were shoemakers, and his sons handed it down, and, of course, he

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had another brother, Mr. Frank, who was also a shoemaker. There were others in the family that I hadn't met, and there is his sister, Mrs. Frances Muffuletto, who is still living on Orlando Street here in Greenville.

GREENE: Is she the one whose husband operated Muffuletto's Restaurant?

HAMILTON: It was the Muffuletto Hotel on Washington Avenue. At an early age, Mr. Loyacono came to America, and after a period of time, moved to Greenville after he met his wife's father. He began working for him, and eventually fell in love with his daughter and they got married.

GREENE: Who was his wife's father?

HAMILTON: He was a Corona. Now, I don't know how to spell that.

GREENE: You say that he worked for his wife's father, and he was a shoemaker?

HAMILTON: His wife's father was a shoemaker.

GREENE: Did they occupy this building?

HAMILTON: Not this building, but it was in this area.

GREENE: I see. The shoemaker married the shoemaker's daughter.

HAMILTON: That's right. And he gave him a shop as a wedding present.

GREENE: His father-in-law gave him a shop?

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HAMILTON: He gave it to him as a wedding present.

GREENE: Did he retire?

HAMILTON: No, he had a shop farther down the street, right along in the Goodman area - somewhere down there. And, of course, when he first opened up, it was farther down the street, up by where Ben C. Penn's building is located now. In 1904 or 1905, or something like that, he moved in this area here, which is presently Loyacono's Shoe Shop. Formerly, this was a butcher shop in which Dr. Hirsch and his brothers were apprentice butchers, and it has been in operation ever since, until his death. Then his wife got it; then after the death of his wife, it was willed to the son-in-law, and after the death of his son-in-law, it was willed to me.

GREENE: When did Mr. Loyacono die?

HAMILTON: In 1953.

GREENE: So you didn't buy this. It was willed to you?

HAMILTON: That's right.

GREENE: Tell me about this object. Is this a shoe?

HAMILTON: That is the last for a shoe that is to be made.

GREENE: You mean it is a pattern or a foundation?

HAMILTON: To make the shoe. They have a variety of sizes, and this one, of course, has to be for a baby. Underneath there, you see, the inner-sole is placed, and on top we see pieces of leather formed on there to determine the height of the instep; and, of course, as he made a shoe, the size of

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the child's foot grew, and he increased it by putting a piece of leather on top of it to compensate for the growth of the child's foot. And, of course, naturally, you put the upper on top of it. This is not complete; it is just the beginning.

Then, in World War I, the factories began to make baby shoes and the price of those were much cheaper than the ones he could make by hand. Considering the time plus the material, it was cheaper to buy a pair of shoes than to make one. So he stopped right there, and started buying them. However, his brother continued to make shoes and also to repair them by hand until his death, which was sometime later. I don't remember the date. He was located next to Frank's Cafe on Poplar Street. He did hand work.

GREENE: Shoes that are repaired by hand cost more than those repaired by machine?

HAMILTON: Oh, yes, much more, because more time is consumed.

GREENE: But do many people prefer their shoes to be repaired by hand?

HAMILTON: Well, not necessarily today. However, a great number of boots are made by custom order by hand.

GREENE: What's the advantage of a shoe being repaired by hand?

HAMILTON: Well, you get your foot measurement when a boot or shoe is made to conform to the foot. There is no need for any discomfort whatsoever. You've got your size, and

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you put it on, and it feels just like it is made for you, which it is. It fits your instep, plus the bone structure of your feet, and you just put it on and it feels like an old shoe, yet it is a new shoe.

GREENE: But you can't give care to all those details with a machine?

HAMILTON: With a machine, no.

GREENE: How long did you say you worked with Mr. Loyacono?

HAMILTON: With Mr. Loyacono? I worked six years before he passed. During that time, I --

GREENE: Just six years?

HAMILTON: Six years. I came in 1947. He died in 1953. I had been in his shop a long time, but he passed in 1953, and I came in 1947. Of course, during that period of time, I learned a lot from him. The things I learned how to do, I learned the "whys" and the "why nots".

GREENE: Where did you take this course?

HAMILTON: At the Service Shoe Shop in Leland, under the GI Bill of Rights Training.

GREENE: This black fellow taught you what he knew, and Mr. Loyacono supplemented that.

HAMILTON: Yes, he put the finishing edges on the house. And, of course, you continue to learn as you go.

GREENE: Do you remember anything about his declining years? Did he run full speed?

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HAMILTON: Well, he didn't work full speed. He took care of the front and took in jobs and delivered jobs, and checked our workmanship - mine and his son-in-law's. If it wasn't right, we had to do it over.

GREENE: Who was his son-in-law?

HAMILTON: D. V. Signa, his son-in-law. He married his oldest daughter.

GREENE: Is he living now - Mr. Signa?

HAMILTON: Mr. Signa passed away in 1977.

GREENE: In which area of your work do you get most profit, Mr. Hamilton?

HAMILTON: From re-soles and heels I get more profit.

GREENE: Why?

HAMILTON: Well, there's not much mark-up on the polish and dyes because it moves too slow. You get the profit on the soles and heels because of the volume.

GREENE: I mean, repairing the sole of the shoe. Is that heel repair more profitable than fixing the sole?

HAMILTON: The profit, in proportion to the cost, is about the same, but you get a bigger turn-over with soles and heels than you do with the polish and dyes.

GREENE: These are what you call accessories?

HAMILTON: That's right.

GREENE: When you inherited the business, was there a decline in your customers because you were black?

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HAMILTON: No decline.

GREENE: Did the Civil Rights movement affect your business? Did white customers stop coming because of this agitation?

HAMILTON: No, they did not. Of course, in anything you may have one or two, but there was no great change, not enough to even affect it.

GREENE: Now, you live in Leland, and I imagine you keep your place open until five. What about your meals?

HAMILTON: Oh, I eat lunch at local cafes, and eat breakfast and dinner at home.

GREENE: Have you always been able to get accommodations in restaurants? You are in a white area.

HAMILTON: Well, no. As we know, the system of solving this just wasn't available then. When I first started here, I began eating with a man - on Washington Avenue - Bob Taylor's place; and, of course, after he closed up, I went to his wife's place on Walnut Street, where they had the restaurants for both white and colored.

GREENE: White on one side of the street, black on the other.

HAMILTON: Yes, white on one side, black on the other, in the area across from the old Greenville Steam Laundry, or right next to McMillan's Welding at that time. Then when they moved from Walnut Street to Nelson Street, I still continued to

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eat with them on Nelson Street until after her death and his death. Of course, the cafe closed up, and I started eating on Central Street with Mr. M. C. Redice.

GREENE: Spell it.

HAMILTON: R-E-D-I-C-E. Shortly after that, Mr. Signa got sick, and, of course, Brock's Snack Bar had opened up across the street. The civil rights movement had affected eating facilities in the area, and you could have gone, but I just hadn't gone. But, to give me more time, since working by myself, I'd eat at Brock's Snack Bar, and have more time to rest during the lunch hour.

GREENE: Your food would have to be brought out from Brock's?

HAMILTON: No, you'd go in and eat. After Brock's Snack Bar closed up, then I began eating at Jim's Cafe. Of course, in the meantime, I'd go to the Downtowner and other places.

GREENE: Everything had been ironed out by then.

HAMILTON: Yes, by that time.

GREENE: Are you a registered voter, Mr. Hamilton?

HAMILTON: Yes, I am.

GREENE: Did you experience difficulty when you went to register?

HAMILTON: No difficulty whatsoever.

GREENE: What about serving on a jury?

HAMILTON: I've been called once. I actually did not serve, but I was called for two days to be selected, and I wasn't selected. Actually, I didn't serve. I was just called to serve.

GREENE: I should have asked you how the 1927 Flood affected your parents.

HAMILTON: Well, I know that my father had a job with Leland Oil Works, and, of course, the water didn't get to Leland Oil Works because it was in the high area; and he was on his way to work, of course, and he had to go for a couple of days because he was persuaded to go work on the levee - to put sacks on the levee for a couple of days. After the levee broke, he came on back home, and we had to move from one section of town to the other. There was no problem then. We were away from the water and there were a lot of crawfish!

GREENE: It was fun to you, wasn't it?

HAMILTON: That's right.

GREENE: You say you have ten children?

HAMILTON: I fathered ten. My oldest son, Allen Hamilton, Jr., was accidentally drowned in 1950. My father had two children. My older sister died, and that just left me. After my oldest son was drowned, we were hoping for boys to keep the name going. We finally got two boys, and the last was a girl. Of course, now I have eight grandchildren.

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GREENE: How did you manage to educate the children - that big family? Did your wife work?

HAMILTON: No, she didn't work until the youngest one was going to school at six years old. She worked seven years before she passed away. This was ten years ago. Well, my wife was so capable. She knew how to sew and cook. We didn't have to buy everything ready-made. She would catch the sales of various types of materials that were good. She could make dresses, coats, and what-have-you. Of course, we had to do without a lot - the parents did - so that the children could have it. We had plenty of help from the neighbors, and we are believers in the Almighty, who gave us a helping hand. Sometimes we didn't see where we would make it, but Providence would step in and see us through, and, with that, we were able to go again.

The children got everything they needed - encyclopedias and all that. That meant that we couldn't go to dances and be out eating or boating or taking vacations, but we survived. Of course, some things were cheaper and much better than they are now. There's an old expression, "You grin and bear it."

GREENE: I see. Are the children all grown now?

HAMILTON: All the children are grown now. Two are in California and two are in Chicago, one in Bloomington, Indiana, and the rest are in Leland.

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GREENE: Are any of them interested in repairing shoes?

HAMILTON: No, unfortunately. I think the reason was because I lived in Leland. The shop was here, and they didn't have a chance to come in and learn anything about shoe repairing. Then, of course, the way of life changed so greatly during the time they were coming up - the Civil Rights Movement and the priorities of life change. That had an effect on the outcome of what one would do.

I had cars intermittently between those times, and even so nobody at the house knew how to drive but me, and they weren't old enough to drive, so we couldn't leave here to go home and get them and come back. I would spend an hour on transportation.

GREENE: This statue is interesting.

HAMILTON: That's a statue of Saint Joseph that was given to Mr. Signa by the Nuns at Sacred Heart School when Sacred Heart closed. Of course, this shop has always done work for the priests and the nuns free. As a gesture of their gratefulness for what the shop has meant to them, they gave a statue of Saint Joseph to him, and, of course, they gave me a picture of Jesus Christ, which is at home now. I still do free work for the priests and the nuns, as was started by Mr. Loyacono years ago.

GREENE: That was a beautiful tribute to him. On what occasion was this picture made?

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HAMILTON: That was the centennial of Greenville. His shop being one of the oldest establishments in Greenville, they wanted to give a write-up about him, and they had a picture of him and the history of the shop. They asked him about the changes - what he had seen come and go in Greenville, and about the flood, and all that. That's what that picture is for.

GREENE: I hope you can interest one of your grandchildren in this business so Mr. Loyacono's name can go on.

HAMILTON: Well, I would hope so, too, but one can never tell, because jobs are different these days. They pull the children away from home. My son is a supervisor, but he is in Bloomington, Indiana.

GREENE: Supervisor in what field?

HAMILTON: At a General Motors Plant. They make transmissions. My other son has a Civil Service job in Los Angeles, California, and my daughter works at a Civil Service job out there in the Post Office. She has a husband. One daughter teaches in the Leland School. My daughter in Chicago, Donna Rose, is at Sears Roebuck, I think it is now. Another daughter in Chicago is a housewife

GREENE: So this cash register and all the machinery is the same that Mr. Loyacono used?

HAMILTON: Well, the cash register and, of course, the machinery have been changed since he passed, but more has been added since he passed. All the other material,

tools and things are just about the same. We think it is as up-to-date as any other shop.

GREENE: Did you know Joe Bivins who operated a shoe shop on the East End of Washington Avenue?

HAMILTON: Yes, I do know him.

GREENE: I mean his father.

HAMILTON: I didn't know his father, but I understand his father used to work in here years ago. Also, Mr. Roosevelt Hudson used to work here years ago. He has a shop on Nelson Street.

GREENE: Hudson, Bivins, and you. Are you the only three blacks who work with shoes in town?

HAMILTON: No, there's a shop in the Mainstream Mall. The young man who owns the shop is also from Leland. He is the nephew to the man who taught me - Mr. Byrd. His mother was Mr. Byrd's sister, and his father bought it out from the brother-in-law, and he passed away and his son is still running it. And there is another shop on Nelson Street also. The exact location I don't know, but I know it is there. That's just about the size of it.

GREENE: You have all of the work you can do!

HAMILTON: My only problem is help.

GREENE: They're not reliable?

HAMILTON: Not reliable. You can't get any help. By the time you train one to where he becomes beneficial, he decides to do something else.

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GREENE: With less work and more pay?

HAMILTON: Yes, that's right. Nowadays everybody wants a computer - computer technology - radio technician, or some job with a title where you don't have to work. But this is still work. And, of course, plumbers, carpenters, brick masonry and cleaners, it's hard to get anybody who wants to learn that. They seem to think the hours are too long, the work is too hard, and the pay is not enough. I understand mechanics are hard to find now.

GREENE: Well, with your shortage of help, what are your hours, since you do most of it yourself?

HAMILTON: It's like an old expression from the plantation - from "can" to "can't". That is to say, I open in the morning at eight and close at five-thirty and go home and relax for a while, then come back and work until ten-thirty or eleven every night.

GREENE: You come back at night?

HAMILTON: At night.

GREENE: To keep your work under control?

HAMILTON: Yes. Well, I close on Mondays - each Monday - to try to catch up, because the overlay is so great I couldn't open on a Monday and still go to work. So I close on Monday to do the work and not be bothered, and not answer the telephone or have to wait on the front. I can get more done. Some of the promises - I don't fulfill them all - but some of them.

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GREENE: You can't get someone to take care of the front for you?

HAMILTON: Well, they tell me what they want to be paid. I cannot pay the price that they want to start off with - \$3.40 or \$3.50 an hour - and after they've learned, they want a raise. The profit in a shoe shop is not as great as that in a dry goods store, and you can't pay that much, because you'd just be working for materials and your employee.

GREENE: I know that with the minimum wage it is harder on you now than it was years ago.

HAMILTON: Well, the prices are so arranged that you can take care of the minimum wage, provided a person would produce.

GREENE: What about the materials you use to repair shoes? Are they very expensive, and where do you get them?

HAMILTON: It really has gone up. The same amount of material that I was buying in 1977 - in January - which would run approximately \$500.00 a month, now runs \$700.00 a month. It has just gone up that much. I get it from Memphis, the Southern Leather Company, with which Mr. Loyacono did business since it began. I still do business with them, and they give me the same courtesies and service they gave Mr. Loyacono and Mr. Signa.

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GREENE: Has your place ever been burglarized?

HAMILTON: No, thank God, it has not. Not ever.

GREENE: Now, what would be here a burglar could use? Of course, he could take the shoes, but I mean barring the shoes.

HAMILTON: Well, as I say, he wouldn't have an outlet if he took the machinery for shoe repairing. Of course, he could take the material for shoes if somebody would buy it. However, an alert shoe repairman wouldn't buy material from somebody off the street, because he'd know it was "hot".

GREENE: I see you have a piece of Samsonite Luggage here. Do you repair that, too?

HAMILTON: Well, the zipper on that had to be put on the right track. But anything other than that, I don't do in repairing luggage. If there is something to sew, I can sew it, but going all out for leather repair, I do not.

GREENE: I heard a shoeman - a man who knows how to handle shoes - say that he didn't like synthetic soles at all. He didn't like to work on them. I didn't ask him why.

HAMILTON: Well, for synthetic soles you have to have a special cement, which takes time. Of course, nowadays, as it was yesterday, most people think that shoe repairing is just a snap of the finger, which it is not. Synthetic material is harder to fix - takes longer - and you have to be much more

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careful with that than you would with leather. Of course, you have to charge in accordance with the time you use. You can't guarantee the work because the factory itself doesn't guarantee it. So, if a person wants it guaranteed, you cannot do it.

GREENE: Does the synthetic sole last longer than the leather sole?

HAMILTON: Much longer, if it stays together.

GREENE: Oh, if it stays together.

HAMILTON: It is soft. You can't tack it. It has to be cemented. There is a variety of shoe that can't be sewn, you see. Sometimes the thread will cut across the synthetic material and cause it to break. Most customers can't understand that, and they think you are trying to shy away from a job or don't want to do it, or they take a personal vendetta and think, "Well, you don't want to do this for ME! Or something like that, you know, "You can do it, but you just don't want to do it for me." But that is the main cause.

GREENE: Are many shoes made with soles that are real leather?

HAMILTON: Expensive shoes are. However, most shoes are expensive now, but I mean the ones that cost fifty or sixty dollars; and the twenty-five or thirty --

GREENE: Are you looking forward to retirement? Are you making plans for it?

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HAMILTON: I'm making plans for it. I have a little more time yet, age-wise, unless something goes wrong with my health. Of course, I hope that doesn't happen, but, as it looks now, I don't see any replacement when I leave, unless there is some change. When you think about the political and economic conditions of the world, some people think we are going to have a recession, and I might have more help than I need!

GREENE: Well, you are here until ten at nights. Do you work Saturdays for long hours?

HAMILTON: No, not on Saturdays.

GREENE: When do you close on Saturday?

HAMILTON: At five-thirty. I have to recuperate, and get ready to go to church on Sunday.

GREENE: Does your church take much of your time?

HAMILTON: Yes, it does. I am Secretary and Assistant Superintendent, and teach Bible Class, and other areas where I do work for the church - fit in when I'm needed.

GREENE: Do you see much change, race-wise, in Leland?

HAMILTON: Well, there has always been a saying, even when I was young, "As Greenville goes, so goes Leland." So I would say it is just about the same.

GREENE: For the better.

HAMILTON: For the better.

(End of Interview)

(Transcribed by Alice C. Nagel)

FINAL  
7/24/78  
A. C. Nagel

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