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An Interview with
MRS. BEATRICE HUDDLESTON
December 26, 1976

Interviewed by
Daisy M. Greene

Mississippi
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Interviewee: Beatrice Jackson Huddleston
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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.

This is Daisy Greene interviewing Mrs. Beatrice Huddleston who lives at 487 North Harvey. The date is December 28, 1976. I usually call Mrs. Huddleston Miss Bea, so if I say Miss Bea, transcriber, I mean Mrs. Huddleston.

What's your birthday, Mrs. Huddleston?

HUDDLESTON: January 23, 1900.

GREENE: When were you born... I mean where?

HUDDLESTON: Longwood, Mississippi.

GREENE: What was your maiden name?

HUDDLESTON: Jackson, Beatrice Jackson.

GREENE: And your mother's maiden name?

HUDDLESTON: Betty Clark and then she married Sam Jackson.

GREENE: What about your education?

HUDDLESTON: Well, I first went to school at Silver Lake. They call it Longwood, Mississippi, and from there I went to public school at Winterville under Mr. and Mrs. Connerly. My last school days were at No. 2, when we lived at Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Johnson's.

GREENE: Now you have 4 or 5 boys?

HUDDLESTON: I have four, but I am the mother of six.

GREENE: Where are they now? Give me an idea of what they are doing.

HUDDLESTON: Well, my oldest son, Alva, has made his home in Yazoo City. He's a mortician and manages a funeral home there. My second son, Perry, is a mortician also. My third son, Samuel, died at eleven months old. He choked while eating pecans. The next son, Arthur, is in education. He works at the "White House" and is Assistant Superintendent in Greenville Public Schools. Roy, my fifth son, was a twin and is Band Director at Greenville High School. His twin brother, Ray, was killed in a car accident in 1953, just fourteen days before he finished.

GREENE: That was Alcorn, wasn't it?

HUDDLESTON: Alcorn College. Yes.

GREENE: Your husband was connected with the AFRO, wasn't he?

HUDDLESTON: Yes, he was. He was, in fact, the founder of the Afro-American Sons and Daughters.

GREENE: What's his full name?

HUDDLESTON: Thomas Jefferson Huddleston.

GREENE: What gave him the idea to start the Afro?

HUDDLESTON: Well, I think the idea came from an organization that he worked with, the Woodmen of the World. I'm not sure but I think... he always called it a dream. He had always dreamed that he could do something that would be helpful to our race.

GREENE: What year was this?

HUDDLESTON: 1928.

GREENE: Afro-American Sons & Daughters?

HUDDLESTON: That's what it was called...

Afro-American Sons & Daughters. It went on several years before the hospital was built.

GREENE: It was something like insurance?

HUDDLESTON: It was like insurance at first, and then they set aside the quarters that you paid until enough quarters accumulated to build the hospital. At the time...

GREENE: When did you say this organization started?

HUDDLESTON: 1928.

GREENE: At that time blacks were not admitted to Blue Cross.

HUDDLESTON: Oh, no, no, no. There wasn't any Blue Cross at that time.

GREENE: I remember that many insurances were restricted to blacks.

HUDDLESTON: That's right.

GREENE: Well, just what role did this Afro hospital play in the lives of blacks?

HUDDLESTON: It was an organization and a hospital together. It played a wonderful role helping our black people. The people, patients, went to the hospital... sometimes they hadn't been there over a month; sometimes they just got in and left. We had a wonderful doctor there, Doctor L. T. Miller from Yazoo City, Mississippi. Doctor Fullerlove worked along with him. Then this hospital meant everything to our

people, and having a good doctor meant much more. It saved several homes, people in distress. This organization went out of it's way to save homes that otherwise would have been taken.

GREENE: You mean the houses were mortgaged?

HUDDLESTON: Right.

GREENE: And the Afro saved their homes? Were the premiums within reach of the poor?

HUDDLESTON: Too much so. I think if they had paid more, it would have been better for the organization. Some paid fifty cents for a \$150.00 policy, with hospitalization; Seventy-five cents a month for a \$200.00 policy with hospitalization; a dollar for a \$300.00 policy, with hospitalization. The next was \$500.00 for which members paid only \$1.25 a month. Also, we had, I think, only two \$1,000.00 policies; one of those was Mrs. Lizzie...

Mrs. Lizzie Gordon carried a \$1,000.00 policy with the Afro-American Sons & Daughters. She was the only one in Greenville. I think there was one in Yazoo City to carry a similar policy.

GREENE: Well, you said some paid fifty cents a month.

HUDDLESTON: Right.

GREENE: Did that entitle them to hospitalization and an operation, if necessary?

HUDDLESTON: Whatever.

GREENE: Delivery of a child?

HUDDLESTON: Whatever.

GREENE: And then when they died, they got how much?

HUDDLESTON: \$150.00.

GREENE: \$150.00 and it was within their reach.

HUDDLESTON: That's right.

GREENE: Do you remember the membership at it's peak?

Do you have any idea?

HUDDLESTON: I'm sorry.

GREENE: How was the money collected? Was it sent to the office?

HUDDLESTON: No, they set up what was called lodges. You know, I would have a lodge... that's what they called it ... then there would be one in Leland.. or over two hundred and fifty. They were numbered; our lodge was number 35 and all through the state of Mississippi. At the different lodges the financial secretary would collect the money and would make two reports, one on the fifteenth and one on the last of the month. She got ten percent of the amount collected.

GREENE: That didn't leave very much for the organization to operate on?

HUDDLESTON: That's right.

GREENE: And you told me about the different types of policies...

HUDDLESTON: That's right.

GREENE: Do you think, now that the hospital is closed, that blacks miss it more now than they would have, had

it closed twenty-five or thirty years ago?

HUDDLESTON: Well... in a way they don't, and in a way they do. Because, it was a feeling of belonging, you know, this is my hospital.

GREENE: I see.

HUDDLESTON: It made them stronger.

GREENE: I remember they used to have showers annually for the hospital...

HUDDLESTON: That's right.

GREENE: ... to furnish the hospital. At one time there was a nursing class at the hospital.

HUDDLESTON: They did. It didn't last too long.

GREENE: Do you have any idea how many nurses graduated from the hospital?

HUDDLESTON: About twenty, maybe, or a little more. It might have been more.

GREENE: Did the community of Yazoo City do anything to prolong the hospital's life?

HUDDLESTON: I don't think it did.

GREENE: Do you remember how many beds the hospital had?

HUDDLESTON: There were quite a few. They had an annex, big annex. There were quite a few beds, but I don't know the exact number.

GREENE: Do you remember the storm? How people went to the hospital and stayed in the halls?

HUDDLESTON: I remember.

GREENE: What has happened to the property?

HUDDLESTON: The property has been sold. Harold Fouche of Yazoo City bought it. It's sad to look at. Weeds are grown all over it.

GREENE: Now, Mrs. Bea, you are the successor of John Straughter, our first black mortician. Are you following in his footsteps?

HUDDLESTON: Yes.

GREENE: And, at one time your husband had a number of funeral homes all over the state. How many did he have?

HUDDLESTON: He had eighteen.

GREENE: Eighteen? In the state?

HUDDLESTON: Yes, in the state. And now, there's Lezington, Rolling Fork, Columbus, Greenwood, Clarksdale, Kosciusko and Batesville.

GREENE: And they are offsprings of what your husband started. But your funeral home is independent. Yours is Bea's Century Funeral Home.

HUDDLESTON: That's right.

GREENE: Tell me, Mrs. Bea, just how do these burial insurances operate?

HUDDLESTON: The Burial Association operates on... it's just a small fee per month. It's a family policy, you know, the head of the family, wife and children, however it is. They pay according to their age, and the highest payment

for a person seventy years old is only \$1.75 a month.

GREENE: A month? Does that include his family?

HUDDLESTON: No, you see they pay according to their age. For a child, say, two months old the fee would be twenty-five cents per month. If the child never gets out of the organization, if he lives to a hundred, he still pays that quarter.

That's different from the first policy. In the first policy, a baby paid ten cents and the amount increased according to age, and went up to fifteen cents, then thirty-five cents which is as high as it would go. If you didn't get out, you just paid that thirty-five cents. But if you got out of the organization and then came back, you paid according to your age. That's the way it goes.

GREENE: What's the advantage of belonging to a burial... What group of people especially does the burial association help?

HUDDLESTON: It helps the family help themselves. In fact, the Burial Association started to stop the people, especially rural folks, from tearing down cotton houses and making boxes to bury the dead. They lined them with cloth.

GREENE: Lined them with what?

HUDDLESTON: With black cloth.

GREENE: I didn't know that.

HUDDLESTON: Well, that happened. That's been going on especially in the rural. Somebody would die and they didn't

have any lumber, so they would just tear off the cotton house, you know, and make a square box and line it with black cloth. They would have the burial that day because they didn't embalm. But, the Burial Association broke that up, and it was for the poor people. After other people saw how nice it was, everybody was getting insurance.

GREENE: Now, suppose at the death of a member the family is not satisfied with what the Burial Association offered?

HUDDLESTON: If a person isn't satisfied, as most times they aren't, out of respect or whatever you call it, but they know they have something. They know that they've got to have a funeral... you know what I mean. The burial association is going to pick up the body, they will embalm it, and put it in a casket and bury it. That's complete, but if a person wants a better funeral, and knows they've got \$135.00 or \$150.00, or sometimes \$300.00... you know they've got that much. The policy is like cash money. They add to whatever the burial gives and get whatever they want.

GREENE: You were telling me about supplementing the burial...

HUDDLESTON: That's right. And that could go up to as high as you want.

GREENE: At least you've got something to work on.

HUDDLESTON: You're protected.

GREENE: Sure.

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HUDDLESTON: The burial association here is a different thing altogether. The branch at Greenville started with Ray, Roy and my Uncle Willie. We were the first members. then mama joined, then all the rest. We had to do so much, had to get so many members before we could have a Funeral Home here in Greenville. We were just about a year soliciting members. People around here joined with us. This Funeral Home opened September 26, 1936.

GREENE: Your dream came true. Where did it start?

HUDDLESTON: Right here. This is the house. Originally, it was a three room house.

GREENE: Well, you were the inspiration of a Burial Association in Greenville.

HUDDLESTON: Right.

GREENE: How many members do you have now?

HUDDLESTON: Just so many, we are doing quite well...

GREENE: Now, you have been one of the high officials of Elks? What was your title?

HUDDLESTON: For one thing, I was Financial Secretary of the Daughter Elks here in Greenville for twenty-three years, and now I am a District Deputy of the Elks, and I'm President of the past state President of the State of Mississippi. I'm also Advisor to the State President of the Daughter Elks.

GREENE: Well, what's this plaque with the gavel for?

HUDDLESTON: I was honored in Jackson, Mississippi. They gave me a box of gifts and loads of things and around

\$250.00 in cash. They gave me an Elk collar, made of money.

GREENE: A what?

HUDDLESTON: An Elk collar... Well, this was made out of fives, tens and twenty dollar bills - a small collar.

GREENE: When was that?

HUDDLESTON: That's been three years ago.

GREENE: Another happy moment in your life.

HUDDLESTON: I was too happy. It really got me --- it did something to me. For two weeks or more it looked as if I was lost --- it did something to me. The money collar was made in my son's florist next door, but I knew nothing about it. They told me how they'd laugh and hide it when I came in.

GREENE: And the money was woven into the collar?

HUDDLESTON: Right.

GREENE: It must have been a pretty affair. Did you have pictures?

HUDDLESTON: It was beautiful. We had pictures.

GREENE: Miss Bea, what role do the Daughter Elks

HUDDLESTON: Well, the Daughter Elks just have a small death benefit. They help educate children with scholarships.

It's an organization that helps distressed brothers and daughters.

GREENE: How do you mean they take care of the children?

HUDDLESTON: You know, by donations and sponsoring oratorical contests.

GREENE: I have been to their oratorical contests. Were they sponsored jointly by the Daughter Elks and the Brother Elks?

HUDDLESTON: Yes.

GREENE: I see.

HUDDLESTON: Then at national conventions, you see, the children that participated in the oratorical contests here are always considered. The state winner always gets a scholarship. Winners from Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi compete. If a child wins in Mississippi, if one wins in Arkansas, if one wins in Louisiana, they have a contest among themselves, you know. The winner from that contest goes to national convention where he or she will compete for the national scholarship. You see what I mean?

GREENE: Yes, the winner receives \$1,000.00. That's the national contest.

HUDDLESTON: Right, right.

GREENE: If he wins on the local level, how much is the scholarship?

HUDDLESTON: \$500.00.

GREENE: You played an important role in our community politics too, Miss Bea?

HUDDLESTON: Well, not as much as I would like to, but I have ... what part I've played I've liked it.

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GREENE: Didn't you run for a seat on the Greenville City Council?

HUDDLESTON: I did, I did. I enjoyed it.

GREENE: Now, coming back to the Elks... judging from what you say, the Elks is as much a social outlet for blacks as it is for financial security.

HUDDLESTON: Oh, yes, it is.

GREENE: What happened to the parades they used to have?

HUDDLESTON: They still have parades. If there is ever a state association here, there'll be a parade. The parades, not even at the National level, are not what they used to be, but they still have parades.

GREENE: How do you account for that?

HUDDLESTON: People getting older... arthritis. But we had a wonderful parade in Miami, Florida this year. I mean it rained and rained so until water filled the street, but they carried on just the same. It was beautiful.

GREENE: Do you know anything about the fire in which many elderly people were burned?

HUDDLESTON: Where, Jackson?

GREENE: Here. Some kind lady was keeping old people in her home.

HUDDLESTON: Oh, yes. Over here... wasn't it in the paper? I don't know her name...

GREENE: If you can't think of her name, did you

know any of the patients who were burned?

HUDDLESTON: I buried some.

GREENE: You buried some of them?

HUDDLESTON: Carrie Weaver! She was just buried not too long ago.

GREENE: Do you have any idea how the fire started?

HUDDLESTON: I don't. Carrie Weaver - she and her husband ran the home. And I'll tell you who else helped there... He was Ike Daniel, but they called him Sockey Bill.

GREENE: He assisted them.

HUDDLESTON: Right.

GREENE: It's quite different for aged people now. It's better since they receive Medicare.

HUDDLESTON: Right.

GREENE: How long have you been in business, Miss Bea?

HUDDLESTON: Since about 1929 for the Afro, and September 1932 with the burial association and funeral home.

GREENE: Tell me what you consider outstanding changes for the improvement of blacks.

HUDDLESTON: Business is better and churches are better and schools are better...

GREENE: Now, you said schools are better, the church facilities were better. Can you think of another one?

HUDDLESTON: Well, voting, the right to vote. I remember about voting. I paid poll tax... well, when I

first owned property I paid poll tax. Somebody asked me, "Why do you pay poll tax? You can't vote." I said, "Well, I just pay so when the time comes to vote, I'll be ready." I just spoke out. Well, Mr. Garrett did the same thing.

GREENE: You knew Mr. C. H. Garrett?

HUDDLESTON: Way back and sure enough, when things did open and we could vote, you had to wait two years, but I didn't have to wait because I had paid all along. And it does mean a lot.

GREENE: When you went to register, what did you have to do in order to vote?

HUDDLESTON: When I went to register, I didn't have to do anything but just sign my name. That's all.

GREENE: Some people had to read a passage and write an interpretation ...

HUDDLESTON: Well, that's all I had to do, just sign my name.

GREENE: John Straughter was the first black mortician in Greenville, Miss Bea how many do you have now?

HUDDLESTON: Five.

(Turned tape)

GREENE: You said there were five black morticians in town. Who are they, Miss Bea?

HUDDLESTON: Watson's Funeral Home, Edwards and Evans Funeral Home, Brown & Marion Funeral Home, Stephenson-Dillon Funeral Home, and Bea's Century Funeral Home.

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GREENE: How many are headed by women?

HUDDLESTON: Three.

GREENE: That's Mrs. Dorothy Edwards, Mrs. Ruby
Stephenson and you.

(This concludes the tape of
Mrs. Beatrice Huddleston)
(Transcribed by Vivian Broom)

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