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An Interview with

HENDRIX A. DAWSON

Interviewed by

H. T. Holmes
John Alexander

June 3, 1976

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HOLMES: Today is June third, Jefferson Davis's birthday and the seventy-third anniversary of the dedication of the new capitol. I think you'll appreciate that. This is H.T. Holmes along with John Alexander, an oral history intern for the summer and we are about to interview Mr. Hendrix Dawson again. Mr. Dawson we listened to the tape of our previous interview yesterday, as I was telling you, and feel like we've got pretty good coverage of your background and your early childhood. There were two areas though that I wanted to pursue a little bit more in detail. John may have some questions if he wants to ask. You mentioned your father's library and that he was a voracious reader; what do you remember of the contents of your father's library?

DAWSON: Well, my father being, of course, a Methodist minister and having been born in the era immediately following the Civil War. He was born in 1866 and his father came back from the siege of Atlanta and was married shortly after he returned. Dad was the first result of that marriage. In those days they didn't have the educational facilities which we have in the state now, not by any manner of means. But being converted to the ministry and becoming a, you might say, John, an intern minister he was subjected to the educational process which the Methodist Conference had established at that time, and that was a correspondence course which was rather extensive.

HOLMES: Did he get books through the correspondence course?

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DAWSON: He got books through the correspondence course and pamphlets and etcetera and so on. But he acquired books through the years. I, unfortunately some years back I lost practically all of his library. I did save some of the nicest pieces which I still have. In that group was a two-volume set of Monet's History of the Valley of the Mississippi published in 1845, which is a source book for most of your background early history of the states along the Mississippi River. It's rather fascinating reading cause right now I'm amused thinking about it the other day.

HOLMES: Excuse me just a moment. (Tape Interference)

DAWSON: You remember all the talk they had up here in the legislature, recent legislature, 1976, regarding the Tombigbee River and the difficulty of getting money to build bridges across the Tombigbee River, etcetera, etcetera, and all of that hullabaloo in the newspapers at the time. I was reminded of this two-volume set I had and went back and dug it out and read where DeSoto had gone through up in there and had become acquainted the Tombigby, T-O-M-B-I-G-B-Y, Indians and had known them up there and had even had some experiences with them which probably were not of the the very nicest.

HOLMES: No doubt.

DAWSON: Yeah. After leaving where Columbus is now he crossed the Tombigbee River right up there where Columbus is. Then he went over in northeast Mississippi and that's where they had a lot of trouble when he discovered the Mississippi River,

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supposedly, and that's in DeSoto County. That's an example of the types of books I was able to save.

HOLMES: Well, did you read Monette's?

DAWSON: Yes, I read it. I had an amazing experience many, many years later, in fact in 1972 or 1973. I was talking to a good friend of mine, a man in Jackson now deceased, his name was Monette, M-O-N-E-T-T-E. I knew him well. His daughter and my daughter sang together in high school. I remember telling him one day that I'd been reading Monette's History of the Valley of the Mississippi, written by Dr. John W. Monette who was from Natchez, or rather right across the river at Vadalua. Monette spoke up and said, "Yes, that was my grandfather." Now there was a man that you should have gotten a hold of. He was a civil engineer and history was of no interest to him whatsoever. He didn't even have a set of his grandfather's books. In my father's library, also, were a number of early productions written by John Wesley, of course the founder of the Methodist church. I still have those. One of those copies came down through my mother's family, she was an Avera from Green County. Incidentally, back when you do do this thing I wish you'd use my middle name also.

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HOLMES: Avera.

DAWSON: A-V-E-R-A. Because that is an old name in southeastern Mississippi. My grandfather was there, well, I even knew my old grandfather. The old home in which my mother was born is still there, east of the Chickasawhay River.

HOLMES: Yes. We were listening to the tape yesterday and there's

something I wanted to touch on. You were talking about your mother's brothers doing logging and floating logs down the Chickasawhay. It was very interesting---

DAWSON: Chickasawhay.

HOLMES: Chickasawhay. I've got two questions about that, and I think John wanted to talk with you about it also. How did the people know when to float the logs down the river, or was it a year-round operation?

DAWSON: No. The Chickasawhay River, in those days, was not, well, one reason I'm reluctant to go into forestry and forestry conservation at this point, nevertheless you have to touch on it. That was in the days before we had extensive logging.

HOLMES: Now, what days? Approximately what time was this?

DAWSON: Well, my memory is that that must have been about 1902 or 1903 or 1904. I was down there at my grandfather's place. The old graveyard was still there, the Avera graveyard was still there, my mother's buried there and there were other steep banks. The Chickasawhay River was a pretty good sized stream, of course larger in the spring of the year. Because of the extensive forestry all around, you didn't have the erosion, even the little creeks. I can remember going down there with my cousins as a boy to the little side creeks and seeing the water and everything as clear as it can be. One reason is that area down there is mostly sandy, it's not an accumulation of clay or anything like that except in some parts of it. That, by the way, is a pretty extensive oil producing area. The land that my grandfather and all owned down there, in fact as a

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notary public here recently I was notarizing some oil well inspectors' reports and several of were this way, Avera number two, Avera number three, oil well number three, of course that land at one time belonged to my grandfather and my mother actually inherited a good bit of that but I haven't found anybody willing to go back and check the records and see if I might not possibly have a holding in that at the present time. One thing that he had which was very, well, at that time and years later then was Clark's Commentary, a rather massive volume, thick, heavy, and conceded by the ministers of most every denomination as being one of the outstanding books ever written commenting on the contents of the Bible. I lost that through a misadventure of my own, and it was quite valuable. Of course the daily newspapers were there. They tell me that I learned to read by using the Times Picayune on the floor in Dad's study. I don't know whether that's true or not. Nevertheless the Times Picayune out of New Orleans was there every morning. In those days we didn't have that many daily newspapers in Mississippi. Another set of books, I do not recall the name of the set, it was some ten or twelve volumes, as I recall, but one of them I remember particularly, and I'll have to use this word because my German is rather faulty, even though I did have a course in that, it's the story or the tale of the NIBELUNGENSLI^{12DE} and I've read it sometimes since then casually, once in a while, but not with the interest I did when I was in my Dad's study there.

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HOLMES:

I assume it was an English translation.

DAWSON: It was an English translation. I did give it the German pronunciation for the word, of course.

ALEXANDER: Well, what did that mean in English?

DAWSON: Now you'll have to stop me.

HOLMES: Song of the Nibelungen, isn't it?

DAWSON: Yeah. Song of the Nibelungen isn't it, yeah. The song of the, oh boy, that's really a stretchback in memory, I'm telling you. I haven't read any of that recently. I do read ancient stuff. Yesterday I was reading Alfred, Lord Tennyson and so forth and so on, that's not so far back. He had magazines, although in my youth we didn't have the volume of magazines that we have now. We had the New Orleans Christian Advocate, which at that time was the publication for the Mississippi conferences and the Louisiana conferences. They combined to produce this publication in New Orleans. Incidentally, it's a matter of no particular interest to anyone but myself and my own family, but I have in my collection of memorabilia a copy of the New Orleans Christian Advocate of 1932. At that time Dad was pastor of one of the churches in Meridian and the leading article in there was written by my father, Reverend William James Dawson, and the leading article was on Luke.

HOLMES: I believe you mentioned that in the other tape.

DAWSON: Did I?

HOLMES: Yes.

DAWSON: Did I mention that?

HOLMES: I think it's interesting to consider the sources from books. The sources of reading material that were available to you, and young people at the time when you were young, particularly

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in Mississippi. Especially to see that those young people grew up to be as educated as you are, to have overcome the obstacles of the rather imperfect educational system in Mississippi. And that was the reason I asked the question.

DAWSON: Well.

HOLMES: Because you've obviously got a good background there.

DAWSON: Yes, I do. There is no question about that. There was never, as I recall, a definite inclination on Dad's part to slant my reading this way or that way. I do remember when I was reaching the age of puberty Dad called me into his study one day and he gave me a little lecture. I don't know if I had this in the other one or not, about cigarette smoking?

HOLMES: No.

DAWSON: He says, "Son, I see that some of your friends that you run around with, play ball with are smoking cigarettes. I see them slipping off behind the barn. Now, I don't think tobacco is good for you but there's one thing I don't like about it and that's the decision on the part of some of your friends to hide and not be open about it. We have an account down there at Mr. Evans' grocery store and if you want to smoke cigarettes you go down there and get your tobacco and your cigarettes and however you want them and just have it charged to me and if you want to smoke just come on home, just don't hide it. That's the thing I don't want about it." Well, I never smoked until I was twenty years old and in Europe. I guess it was a result of that.

HOLMES: Putting the burden on you then.

DAWSON: I didn't have any lectures on it or anything normal, that was all that was said about it. If my friends brought it up, of course I smoked crossvine. Did you ever smoke crossvine? Boy, it'll burn your tongue up.

HOLMES: I'm not familiar with that.

DAWSON: Yeah? It's a marvelous thing. Rabbit tobacco? Did you ever smoke rabbit tobacco?

HOLMES: No, I chewed rabbit tobacco.

DAWSON: I never chewed it but I did smoke it. No question about that. I had the Youth's Companion, which in those days was a youth magazine and I started delivering the Jackson Daily News and The Saturday Evening Post.

HOLMES: In which town was this?

DAWSON: This was about 1910. Well, I read The Saturday Evening Post. Also I had The Ladies Home Journal, too. I had quite a number of subscribers to that.

HOLMES: That's very interesting.

DAWSON: Most of my money that I made though as a boy was buying and selling sacks.

HOLMES: Croker sacks?

DAWSON: Feed sacks, corn sacks. Because in those days you used horses, mules and oxen and they had a lot of them in a town like Morton, Mississippi where we were living at that time with sawmills and everything like that. I sold sacks, I'd buy sacks for five cents apiece and sell them to a sack company in New Orleans for ten and fifteen and twenty cents apiece, and I didn't have to pay income tax on it.

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HOLMES: We got off the track a while ago on the Chickasawhay. We were talking about floating the logs down.

DAWSON: Well, I cannot say how they knew about the shipments and all that. I'm summarizing all this from my knowledge of my mother's brother, Uncle Bill Avera, who built a big store on the west bank of the Chickasawhay River across the river from the old Avera home. He must have been in contact with buyers from foreign nations.

HOLMES: Was there steamboat traffic on the river?

DAWSON: No, no steamboat traffic on the river. Now, he put the first steamboat on that river and it ran up as far as the headwaters of where Buckatunna Creek came into the Chickasawhay River and it was submerged there in some kind of storm or something, I don't know what, or probably running into some logs or something like that. That's the story I've gathered from knowing and working with people in that area years afterwards, when I was working for the United States Forest Service.

HOLMES: When they floated them down the river---

DAWSON: They were not logs. They were timbers.

HOLMES: They were hewn.

DAWSON: They were hewn, squared.

HOLMES: And they were joined together.

DAWSON: Joined together with wooden pegs.

HOLMES: When they got them down to the coast---

DAWSON: To Scranton. That's the old town.

HOLMES: How would they load them on the boat, do you know?

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DAWSON: They floated them out into the bay and most of them went to Great Britain and the British ships loaded them with their cranes. Of course there they would break the pegs loose on them and load them up that way.

HOLMES: Then how would the men who had floated them down get back home, train?

DAWSON: Sometime they'd take a rowboat with them and row back up the river. Sometimes they would walk back up like they used to come back up from New Orleans on the Mississippi River and the Natchez Trace. There's a story in World War Two relative to the damage caused by the bombing of London by Hitler's air force. Strange to say that many of the old docks in London were made of heart pine and they were not easily damaged.

HOLMES: Good old Mississippi wood there.

DAWSON: There is a theory was published back during the war that they came from ^{South} Mississippi because there were other ports along south Mississippi. You had an interview with Mr. Weston whose family was in the lumber business there and they did that over in the western part of south Mississippi in Hancock County.

HOLMES: They were doing extensive lumbering at this time.

DAWSON: There was a great deal of international traffic in those days cause I do remember hearing my mother, who, by the way, was the postmistress at old Avera. I call it old Avera because years later they moved the town to another place and just moved the name up there. I can remember seeing those timbers as a boy and begging my mother to let me go down

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the river. They had a tent on this raft of timbers.

ALEXANDER: I was interested in the actual logging operation. You mentioned a tool called an adz, and I'd be interested to learn more about how they did their logging around, I guess around 19---

DAWSON: Well, for these particular timbers they cut the large, long-leaf pine. They knew how to throw a tree to do as little damage to the rest of the tree as possible. You never know when that kind of experience is going to come in. My daughter had built a new home out here on Walnut Drive here in Jackson some several years ago. I drove out there one afternoon and she had a negro man there. She had a lot of trees in the back-yard and she had a negro man there from up in Madison County. I walked around there and he was assuring her that he knew exactly how to throw that tree she wanted cut down and she saw me coming and she said, "Wait a minute, let me talk to my Dad." I asked her what it was and she told me and I says, "Where were you going to cut this? and he says, "Right here." I says, "You cut it right there you'll put that right in the roof of that house." And I had to explain to him the way to cut the tree so that it could be thrown the way that he wanted to throw it. These people, they lived in the woods and they did that all the time.

HOLMES: Now this operation that your mother's family was involved in was small compared to something like the Weston?

DAWSON: Oh yes.

HOLMES: This was more like the family industry?

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DAWSON: That's right, just a family industry although they owned a tremendous amount of land. Uncle Bill had a cooperage on the west side of the river right next to the place where he built his big store. In the some several thousand acres that they owned they were extracting the _____ from the pine trees. He had a cooperage there and they were building these barrels.

HOLMES: When did that buisness cease to---

DAWSON: Uncle Bill died of uremic poisoning long before my mother did. The other boys in the family sometime later, about the time I went off to war they had sold the estate. I remember my mother giving her papers and all that in which she signed her part away to the people who were buying it from her. And, of course back at that time there were a number of children in the family but her part in the thing, as I recall, was somewhere between seven and eight thousand dollars which even at that time was a pretty good evaluation of the whole thing.

HOLMES: Well, I think we need to press on now and pick up where we left off on the last interview. We had gotten you to Millsaps and World War I was about to happen concurrent with your stay at Millsaps.

DAWSON: Well, one rather interesting episode happened just before I went to war which was in 1917. Dad had been transfered to ~~Do~~lton, Mississippi then as pastor of the Methodist church there.

HOLMES: And you had entered Millsaps in 1916?

DAWSON: Yes. I went home and mother was talking to me and she said, "Son, Mrs. Katie Gaddis wants to see you." I says, "Okay."

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So I went down to see Mrs. Katie. Well, Mrs. Katie was the wife of Mr. John Gaddis who was the biggest land owner there, a well known family here in Hinds County. He had a brother who was president of the old First National Bank here. Mrs. Katie said they had ordered an automobile and it was to arrive in Jackson sometime soon and she wanted me to come to Jackson with Mr. Sands, I believe. They were Dodge dealers at the time and their showroom was a burnt-out building where the present Mississippi Bank and Trust Company building is located. Part of it was still there and they had their showroom and their offices there. They got a room for me over here on North Street in a boarding house and then they picked me up and would give me driving lessons and I learned to drive. Then the train came in with this Dodge touring car and we got it down and off the depot and I drove it here a couple of days and they adjusted it and everything and then I drove it back to Bolton. I drove for Mrs. Katie and her friends that summer.

HOLMES: This was 1916?

DAWSON: That was 1916.

HOLMES: The Banker's Trust building, are you speaking of the---

DAWSON: Mississippi Bank and Trust Company.

HOLMES: Which building is that?

DAWSON: That's just immediately west of the---

HOLMES: Lamar Life?

DAWSON: No, that's east of Lamar Life and west of McRae's.

ALEXANDER: Did you get a full year of college in before you went overseas?

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