

AU 666

OHP 104

Interviewee:

Dawson, Hendrix

Interviewer:

Holmes, H. T.

Title:

An interview with Hendrix Dawson, December 15, 1975  
/ interviewed by H. T. Holmes

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An Interview with

HENDRIX A. DAWSON

Interviewed by

H. T. Holmes

December 15, 1975

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Mississippi Department of Archives and History  
P. O. Box 571  
Jackson, Mississippi 39205

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HOLMES: This is H. T. Holmes with the Department of Archives and History about to interview Mr. Hendrix Dawson. We are sitting in the board room of the Archives and History building, and the day is December 15, 1975. Now if you will say something we will see if it's recording.

DAWSON: My middle name is Avera, A-V-E-R-A. Hendrix Avera Dawson.

HOLMES: I would like to ask you about your middle name.

DAWSON: Well, the reason I thought it probably wise to put in there, you spoke some time back about biology, I mean biography, and my mother was an Avera. She's from an old family in Green county. The old homestead is still there. It doesn't belong to the family now, but it's rather replete with the history of that particular period. That is the reason I think that would probably inevitably come into this. That was the reason I thought it wise to include my middle name.

HOLMES: A name that you don't run across very often.

DAWSON: Right.

HOLMES: With that spelling, particularly.

DAWSON: That's right. The legend in the family is that the Avery, A-V-E-R-Y, family once had the name A-V-E-R-A. But they became rather important and loaded with money so they changed the spelling. But the Averages, A-V-E-R-A people never did change their spelling.

HOLMES: And it's pronounced Avery?

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DAWSON: Avera.

HOLMES: Avera.

DAWSON: Yes. In fact my son was named Hendrix Avera Dawson Junior, and we called him Avera.

HOLMES: Well, now, we have discussed the format of our interview several times. I think we could start off if you would tell us when and where you were born.

DAWSON: I was born at old Williamsburg in Covington County, Mississippi on February 21, 1896. Now at that time Williamsburg was a much larger town than Collins because Collins, at that time, was not even in existence. That was before the G.& S.I. railroad was built through from Jackson to Hattiesburg. Williamsburg was a pretty good size country town. It was the overnight stop when people were coming from that section of Mississippi going to Jackson. They would camp out there for the night.

HOLMES: Is there anything left there now?

DAWSON: Yes. There was a story just recently in the Clarion-Ledger, in one of their Sunday issues, in which they had some man who still lives there. The town itself, of course, there are just a few houses left there now. Back in the forties, I was working with the Mississippi Forestry Commission, I went down there one day as a result of an inquiry I had from a family there. The old Methodist church there, which my father at one time was pastor, was still standing and I went down there to see these people. They asked me to come by because they were

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dedicating their church, or a new church, I don't remember exactly what it was, but I went by at that time to see them and there were quite a number of people in there at that time. But that was in the forties. The story now is that the town is rather, well, one or two old houses there at the present time. It's about eight miles, approximately eight miles west of Collins and leading into the next county, the road leads into the next county which is Jeff Davis County. Prentiss is the next town in Jefferson Davis County.

HOLMES: So it's really little more than a community now.

DAWSON: That's all, that's all it is now but at that time it was the, well, Dad was a Methodist minister and that was the circuit. He had the churches that he served were at Mount Olive which of course was still there. That was north of Williamsburg. I remember a fascinating incident that happened, oh, in the late forties. At that time I was education director of the Mississippi Forestry Commission. I had been put in charge, during the war, I'd been put in charge of the administrative work for the state nursery which is located east of Mount Olive. I was going down there to see about something and I stopped and picked up my father who had retired and was living on highway 49 just south of Jackson and took him with me. He had never seen, of course, a modern nursery where seedling trees were produced. When we were there looking at the seedling beds of the young pine seedlings coming up, I remember his making this comment: "Well, this is Covington County. I knew everything in Covington County, but I did not know

that I'd ever see pine seedlings growing like that in Covington County." Of course, take that from another angle that at that time Covington County was covered with the most marvelous growth of long-leaf pine you ever saw and it's still very fine in producing that. That old nursery, incidently, was a very, very short distance from the famous overnight stopping place which was west of the, east of the highway known as Hot Coffee.

HOLMES: I have been through Hot Coffee.

DAWSON: You have been through Hot Coffee?

HOLMES: Through it.

DAWSON: Through it. Well, I've been through it and I've had hot coffee at Hot Coffee. Incidently that's where this famous actress in Hollywood came from. Stevens. I do not remember her first name. She was from Hot Coffee Mississippi.

HOLMES: That's close to Sullivan's Hollow.

DAWSON: That's right. Down in the edge of Sullivan's Hollow.

HOLMES: Well. How long did you live in Williamsburg?

DAWSON: I was born there in '96, 1896, and my father being a Methodist

minister and at that time the Methodist ministers never did serve more than four years. Frequently they would transfer to another place at the conclusion of maybe one year or two years or three. But Dad was there until, as I can recall, roughly about '99 then he was transfered to Escatawpa, way down on the gulf coast in Jackson County. I can remember a lot of incidents about that cause by that time I was, oh, four or five years old. One rather vivid memory, my Dad

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loved to fish and being at Escatawpa, and old Scranton was a town, it's no longer there, called Scranton, he had gone fishing and he and his buddy that he went fishing with, they got a very huge turtle, so big until they towed it in behind the boat. I remember being there at the edge of the beach when he came in with his turtle and they hauled it ashore and then turned it upside down, cause that was the only way they could handle it, it was so huge and big. A great big sea turtle that had somehow gotten in there in the little old waters.

HOLMES: My my.

DAWSON: So those memories are quite vivid. I can even remember standing in the kitchen one day with my mother looking out the window when we had a severe lightning storm. We both saw a tremendous blast of lightning hit a long-leaf pine tree and just sheer it right down one side of it. I can remember the glare of that as the bark and that part came off of the tree when the lightning struck it. So don't tell me it doesn't hit long-leaf pines, I've heard some people say it didn't but it does.

HOLMES: Speaking of the lightning and living on the coast, from your early memories what do you remember about extremes in the weather. From hurricanes to cold weather.

DAWSON: Well, we weren't there very long. Dad, <sup>being as I said</sup> as I say was a Methodist minister, he went from there to, I believe it was to Lake Mississippi. I know it was at Lake Mississippi, east of Jackson and west of Meridian, where I first went to school. I was

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then five years of age and my Dad sent me into the public schools there. I remember my first grade teacher, her name was McCracken, Miss Mae McCracken, a very lovely person. I had a rather unique experience many, many, many years later. I was invited to speak at an annual banquet in Greenville at the womens' clubs up there. They invited me to bring my wife with me so Mrs. Dawson went with me and we went up there. This must have been in, oh in, possibly in the late forties or the very early fifties. At that time I was, I do not recall whether then I was with the state Game and Fish Commission or whether I was with the state Forestry Commission, but anyway we went to this dinner that evening and seated at the table, at the speaker's table, when I went in was Miss Mae McCracken, who had been my teacher. And by rather odd circumstance, my wife's first grade teacher, years and years ago, of course. She had finally married, she didn't marry for many, many years. She lived in, well, the last time I heard from her she was way up in her nineties and lived in, still lived in Greenville.

HOLMES: I think, before we get into something that I would like to explore in detail, your education, let's talk about your parents and your geneology. You said your mother was an Avera.

DAWSON: Yes. My mother was Celia Avera. Her father was Powell Avera and Powell Avera owned considerable land and they had, the old homestead was on the east bank of the Chickasawhay River. Her oldest brother was William Powell Avera, Bill Avera, who

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had built a store and a cooperage, cooperage is a term that's not very much recognized nowadays but at that time they had considerable holdings of long-leaf pine timber and they would box the timber and get rosin out of it, and this cooperage was where he built his barrels and then stored the rosin from the pine tree, it came from the boxes, into these barrels and he shipped it down the river and overseas.

HOLMES: C-L-O-P?

DAWSON: Resin. R-E-S-I-N.

HOLMES: No. How do you spell cooperage?

DAWSON: C-O-O-P-E-R-A-G-E.

HOLMES: A cooper is a barrel maker?

DAWSON: A cooper is a barrel maker. That's right. He had a big store there.

HOLMES: Now, what year was this? What time period?

DAWSON: That, well. Mother was, ah, her name was Celia Rachel Avera.

They were of some French ancestry because she had a sister younger than she who was known as Eran, E-R-A-N, and she had another sister who was the youngest girl, she was Elizabeth. She carried out the family's ability to live a long time because Aunt Elizabeth, my mother's youngest sister, died in Pensacola about ten years ago and she was 103 at the time. My mother's mother, my grandmother, lived to be ninety some odd before she passed away. So we come by our longevity rather naturally on both sides of the family. The legend in the family, the tradition in the family is that they originally came

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possibly from South Carolina or North Carolina and that they, at one time, were French Huguenot. There's also a tradition in the family that some of the family, the early family, had been in the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in France back in the 1500's, I believe. Now, that, of course, is largely word of mouth, but <sup>FAMILY'S</sup> in those days passed down those bits of information and sometimes the youngsters remembered it and sometimes they didn't. But she was the postmistress of the town of Avera, which was just a very little village. She was the postmistress at the time she and my father were married. My father was sent there as a young minister.

HOLMES: Now this is in Green County?

DAWSON: In Green County. In 1890, I think he moved there in 1892 or 1893, I don't know exactly which, but they were married in January, 1895. And then later they were sent to, Dad was sent to Williamsburg and I was born in Williamsburg just a year later, little over a year later.

HOLMES: When did your grandfather, or was it your grandfather Avera that migrated to Mississippi?

DAWSON: No. There was an Avera before him. I have tried to trace that down but have not been lucky in that respect. I have a cousin who resides at Biloxi who did some inquiry on that and at one time she had contacted a woman of French ancestry who spoke a great deal of French herself who was over here and came down from South Carolina and was checking members of the family looking for information relative to the old Avera family. His wife was a Davis. I have in my own personal

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library now, I have the book on John Wesley, bound in calf, printed in, oh, the early 1800's, and that book has a signature in there signed by, its owner was Seth Davis. It was in my father's library when he passed away. I know that's where it came from, it came from my grandmother's family. She being a Davis and apparently he was some member of the family. There's also a legend in the family that she, through her forebearers was distantly related to Jefferson Davis. That, of course, we have not substantiated. But when she was the postmistress at old Avera they brought out the Columbian Exposition stamp, in 1893, I believe it was, 1892 or 1893, and she saved a lot of them. I collect stamps myself, and somewhere in my multitude and miscellany of junk, if I can ever locate it, I have some of those original Columbian Exposition stamps. However, mother knew nothing about saving stamps, as a matter of fact in those days very few people did save stamps, so her method of saving them was very unique and very practical, she simply threaded a needle and bind them to it, but of course there's a little hole, but there's a whole batch of them on one set of Columbian Exposition stamps.

HOLMES: What kind of education did your mother have?

DAWSON: My mother attended, there in those days, as you will recall, back in those days there was a large number of very small womens' colleges throughout the country. There was one over in Alabama with a name I do not know, but she did go there

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for a brief period of time. I have no knowledge of my own as to just what the name of that institution was. In fact, Mississippi had a lot of those girls' colleges in Mississippi way back at that time and subsequently even more of them.

HOLMES: What about your father's family?

DAWSON: Dad was a Dawson, William James Dawson was his name. His father was born, Dad was born in Wilkinson County Mississippi in 1866 because my grandfather, who had , I think, the most euphonious name I've ever heard. His full name was Dallas Athlone Dawson.

HOLMES: Hm. Athlone.

DAWSON: A-T-H-L-O-N-E. He was in the, he had gone from Amite County, where he was living at the time, to the Civil War, entered the Civil War. I don't have his exact birthdate, but he was a young fellow. He was in any number, oh, a large number of engagements in the Civil War. He was in the Battle of Shiloh and in the Battle of Corinth and in the Battle of Franklin Tennessee and the Battle of Chickamauga and also in the final Battle of Atlanta. In fact, I created some consternation here a few years back. I was in Atlanta on a trip and was invited to a dinner party and because I had no partner and the lady who was the hostess apparently had no partner, I was invited to go into the dinner with her and I did. Simply to make conversation she inquired, "Well, Mr. Dawson how do like Atlanta, what do you think of Atlanta?" Well, I guess I was tired or something or other. I'd just flown over that morning on a plane and I told her, I says, "Well, I don't

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know." I says, "Coming in this morning at the airport the planes were a little bit stacked up and we had to wait just a little bit before we could land. At one point the pilot turned the plane a little bit on the side and says to his passengers on the intercom, "You can get a good view of Atlanta." I looked down at Atlanta and the thought that went through my mind was why in the world did my father, grandfather risk his life defending Atlanta." I was somewhat persona non grata so far as that particular dinner party was concerned.

HOLMES: What about your father's education.

DAWSON: Dad was a, well, I'm his son and obviously I think he was a tremendous personality. He had very little education. I can remember a number of vivid things. Of course, in those days there weren't many schools in there just after the Civil War that a person could go to and the Mississippi public school system then was not much, if anything.

HOLMES: When was he born?

DAWSON: 1866. He died just three years ago. He lived to be 86 years of age. He was telling me once about the Friday afternoon debates they used to have in the school he went to. He remembered that the information had just come out that somebody had found a method to talk over a wire. The minister in the community took one side of the debate and the principal of the school took the other side of the debate. He debated that that was entirely possible, that electric energy had been finally discovered and understood a little something

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about it. But the minister said that was not quite true, and said it would be utterly impossible. The only way that the voice could be transmitted through a wire would be if that wire were hollow and would take a tremendous volume of a voice to get it through there. Incidentally, he won the debate. But that was about the time that the telephone, just before the telephone was coming into existence. My father also had a tendency to stutter which was quite arduous for him because he decided at an early age that he was going to be a minister. I remember his meeting, when I was quite young, meeting a lady who had taught him in school. Now, whether it was high school or not I do not know. But she spoke to him and he talked to her clearly and distinctly and did not stutter and she says, "Why Willie, how did you get over your stuttering?" And I remember his reply. He said "well, I slowed down a little bit in my talking and if I knew a word was coming up I couldn't handle, I'd find another word that I could handle." And he became a very fluent speaker.

HOLMES: That's pretty good therapy.

DAWSON: Good therapy. Matter of fact, it's almost modern, you know that, it's almost modern therapy. In those days they had correspondence courses for the young ministers when they went in. He took all the correspondence courses they had. He built up, he was a voracious reader, omnivorous and voracious, too. He built up a library, extensive library. That was where I received my introduction to the good things to read, the literature. I remember the old typewriter we had when I was

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about twelve years old. It was known as a Blickensberfer, B-L-I-C-K-E-N-S-B-E-F-E-R. I just wish I had that now because it would really be a collector's item. Now, if he were writing a sermon on that, he would use, the type was wound, like a ball, and very similar to your latest I.B.M. machine that has interchangeable balls. But he had interchangeable type that he could use there. If he wanted to emphasize something he would stop and take the ball off and put on a ball that wrote that part he wanted to emphasize, wrote it in script.

HOLMES: Do you remember your grandfather?

DAWSON: Yes, I do. He died when I was quite young, but I'll tell you how I remember him. That would call for an illustration of an episode at that time. My mother and I had gone down to the old place to spend a little period of time.

HOLMES: Which place? in Green County?

DAWSON: In Green County, yes. The old place across the, the homestead was across the river from where the store was. The store was on the west side of the Chickasawhay River and the old home was on the east side. The family burial lot is still there. The old family home is still there. It doesn't belong to the family. It now belongs to a wealthy, I understand a wealthy oil man who bought a lot of land down there. But it's built out of heart long-leaf pine and, of course, there's nothing much more substantial than that. But I remember being in the kitchen and some of my mother's brothers coming in. They were big strapping fellows and they wanted to take me

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out to the woods with them. Well, okay, I went to the woods with them and they had cut a lot of long-leaf pine. Some of those logs were thirty and forty feet long. They would use an adz, A-D-Z, which is a kind of instrument that isn't used nowadays, but they would use that and they would trim these logs into square pieces. Well, now, some of those square logs were twelve-by-twelves and once in a while there'd be some that were fourteen-by-fourteen, which meant that they were rather tremendous. They had a rather huge double-wheel, huge wheel that stood up almost as high as a man, the axle. They had a particular kind of a chain and they would run that wheel over this log, then lift it to where they could get the chain around it. Then with their oxen they would haul it to the edge of the river. They had a sluice there. The sluice was just mostly the back of the river, had been wet down, and then slide it down into the river. They pinned them together down in the river and made wharves out of them, they'd use wooden pins and pin them together. And they'd put the tent on the river, on the wharf, and they'd stock it with provisions and they'd use poles.

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HOLMES: Is that W-H-A-E-F, wharf?

DAWSON: No. Raft, I tried to say, didn't I? They would then get on that thing and float it down the Chickasawhay River down to the Pascagoula and into the gulf. There it was taken aboard British vessels and shipped to England. They asked my mother if I could go with them, and, of course, I wanted to go, I was possibly ten or maybe twelve, no, about eight or maybe ten,

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