

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

JOHN HORHN

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with John Horhn. The interviewer is D'Andra Orey.

Orey: This is D'Andra Orey, chair of the Political Science Department at Jackson State University. We're conducting an oral interview with Mr. John Horhn, a former senator—current senator and a Mississippi state legislator. This oral history project is about covering Mississippi black state legislators, all of whom are members of the Legislative Black Caucus. Mr. Horhn, can you state, for the record, your first and last name followed by spelling?

Horhn: My name is John Horhn, J-O-H-N, H-O-R-H-N.

Orey: And Mr. Horhn where did you—or where were you born?

Horhn: I was actually born in Goodman, Mississippi, which is about forty miles north of Jackson in Holmes County. And when I was three weeks old, my parents moved us to Jackson for a better life.

Orey: And who are your parents?

Horhn: My mother is Willistene, W-I-L-L-I-S-T-E-N-E, Levy, L-E-V-Y, Horhn, H-O-R-H-N. My dad is Charlie, C-H-A-R-L-I-E, Horhn, H-O-R-H-N.

Orey: And can you tell us just a little bit about your childhood, what was it like; did you grow up in Goodman, Mississippi?

Horhn: No, I grew up in Jackson. My parents would send my brothers and me up to—we called it going up home to Holmes County during the summer and on certain holidays. But I grew up and spent my early life in what's known as Midtown in Jackson up around Roosevelt Street and Sidway in the part of downtown Jackson immediately north of the central business district.

Orey: OK, and tell us what drove you into politics, what was the impetus, I guess, that drove you into politics?

Horhn: Well, you know, we moved around a good bit when I was a kid. I went from Midtown to Georgetown and that's where I spent my early elementary years, the second through the fifth grade there, and then, and when I was in the—going to the sixth grade, my parents moved us to Virden, V-I-R-D-E-N Edition and that's really where I spent my formative years. My mother was domestic and a cook in the public school system, eventually becoming a cafeteria manager at a private school. And my dad started out as a laborer, semi-skilled laborer at Prestone Manufacturing Company. He got involved in worker rights and in the formation of a union in those days when it was pretty dangerous to do such, and he was involved with the AFL-CIO [The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] and eventually became president of Local International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 2262 which was the union that was involved with representing the workers at Prestone Yazoo Manufacturing and several other manufacturing facilities, and he also became a mediator and one who worked with collective bargaining. It was he who got me involved, I guess, and inspired me about politics. As a young man I watched a lot of the activities involved with the formation of that union and knew that another part of that was the working with those same workers and others to get them political empowerment by registering as many of them to vote as possible. And my father got me involved registering some of those folks to vote even when I was at an age where I couldn't vote myself.

Orey: And what was your first elected position to office that you first ran for?

Horhn: Sixth grade class president.

Orey: OK.

Horhn: I was the president of my class at Morrison Elementary School and from there was in elected positions at schools just about every year thereafter from middle school to high school, and then early on in college. I guess maybe in my second year of college, I decided that I was going to give it a break. But fast forward to 1992, I became elected to the Mississippi state senate after having served about twelve years in state government in appointed positions under Governors Winter, Allain, Musgrove and—I mean excuse me, Mabus, and for a very short period of time under Governor Fordice.

Orey: Can you describe for us your experiences as a state legislator? How would you, first of all, describe your governing style? Were you someone who listened to the constituents and then made your decision solely on the constituents, did you assess through, you know, a great deal of research on your own what your constituents needed, or if you could expound on that, please?

Horhn: Well, you know, I was fortunate in that I had my experience in state government and was able to hit the ground running in ways that a lot of other first-time and first-year legislators are not. Having known state government, having run a couple of agencies—I ran the governor's Office of Federal and State Programs, I ran the state film office where

we worked to bring movies in that we filmed on location, I ran the Division of Tourism for the state of Mississippi, which is involved with the advertising and promotion of historical and cultural venues in Mississippi for tourism purposes. So I understood budgeting, I understood the process by which you had to make a case for the budget you were requesting from the legislature. I understood who some of the players are who are in the legislature. So I had a little bit of an upper hand on some of my greener colleagues who had not served in the state government. I think if you talk about a governing style, the legislature doesn't really govern; the legislature, it legislates and it makes the rules and the executive branch gets involved in the governance. My style is such that, because I have a lot of experience and a lot of varied experiences, I think I have pretty good judgment on most issues. In addition to that, I like hearing what people have to say and I like getting input from constituents about different issues and matters. But probably what I hear from constituents most is when they bring matters to me where they're in need of some sort of assistance from their legislator. A lot of it has to deal with disability, some has to do with their efforts at business development, some has to deal with getting, procuring loans for different business undertakings that they have, and some has to deal with employment issues. I think that that's an area where I excel, as well as handling legislation that particularly has an economic development bent to it. I have spent most of my career as a state senator and I'm in my seventeenth year working on economic development issues because I think that a lot of issues facing our communities, especially in black communities and minority communities, has to deal with money and access to capital and the access to opportunities to control your economic destiny. Not enough legislators, in my opinion, focus on that and I felt that that was a niche because of my background that I could work well in, but also because no one else was doing it, and I think that there was a big need for someone else to do it. So, I got involved with that and it's held me in pretty good stead ever since.

Orey: What would you consider by far, I guess, some of your greatest successes in the state legislature? You know it is often suggested that it's easy to introduce a bill but it's extremely hard to pass a bill, and in some legislatures only about 10 percent, if that, of bills are passed in the entire legislature. So what would you consider some of your greatest successes?

Horhn: Well, you know, as I said, I think I had a—I was born under a good sign, I guess, in that I had early success as a legislator being able to pass legislation and get it moved. My first year in the legislature, I got a two million dollar minority surety bond program established that had never been established before to offer help for black contractors, minority contractors who needed bonding assistance in order to be able to go after government contracts. The other thing that same year that we were able to get accomplished was providing some money for the support of the Delta Blues Museum and getting renovations done for the Delta Blues Museum, which is also in my district but which I thought was important because it spoke to the entire legacy that the entire state as far as musical legacy, the blues in particular, were concerned. We also were able to get monies through a historical cultural properties act for the renovation and revitalization of

the Medgar Evers home where Mr. Evers lived at the point where he was assassinated. We also got money for Freedom House, which was a civil rights enclave in Canton, Mississippi, that was used by early organizers in 19—the early to mid-1960s to help foment the civil rights movement. The Oaks House in Yazoo City was another project that we were able to get approved that first year. And then we did—I was able to get a \$500,000 allocation to Jackson State University [JSU] to enable them to buy their first equipment so that they could go on the air with their television station; they had the license but did not have the equipment to go on the air. And so I was able to get a half a million dollars for them to be able to do so. You know, my next year or, let's see, in the next couple of years, 1995, I was able to get the JSU Metro Parkway approved, which was done in 1995; that was a twenty million dollar project to connect with the better road, or parkway if you will, the space between downtown Jackson and Jackson State University with the idea that ultimately the parkway would go all the way to the airport on the east side and all the way to I-20 on the west side. And that was the bill I cut my political teeth on, because I wound up facing difficulty in my own community about that parkway because people thought I was aiding the gentrification of Jackson State University. And my reasoning was that we have crack houses and dilapidated property and run-down property in that area, much of which is not salvageable, and why not do some things to beautify and create a better entrance into Jackson State University. But I received a rude awakening, and I got my first taste of the adage that Governor Ray Mabus had shared with me when I first decided to run; he gave me three bits of advice: the first is be careful what you ask for because you might get it; the second is revenge is best served up cold, meaning calm down, don't overreact to a situation that you find where you've been put in an adverse position, relax and take your time and eventually your moment will come. The third bit of advice was no good deed goes unpunished. And I thought I was doing something really, really good, and I wound up being pounced upon by some of my colleagues and some people in the community who didn't really understand what the import of what we were doing was. That no deed goes unpunished adage was also realized my first year of being in the legislature where I was able to help a lot of folks, and it seemed the more people I helped, the more people who came to me wanting help, and so people had a lot of monkeys that they had on their backs and they're more than willing to put those monkeys on my back. So, you know, being a problem solver you're able to get things done and you look up and there are more problems facing you. Other legislation that I've been able to get accomplished over the years include the Telecom Center, which we passed that in 1997 to establish a seventeen and a half million dollar project for the development of a telecommunications and teleconferencing center which is now an important part of the new convention center complex, and that was a project that I'm very, very proud of and, in fact, my name is the only name on that legislation. We also in 1999 got six million dollars for the revitalization of the Farish Street Historic District through a loan program and that six million dollars was intended to help create an entertainment district as well as help other businesses in the Farish Street area. You know we've been able to do other amendments and other pieces of legislation but those are some of the highlights. One of the things that I'm really proud of in terms of legislation, also, is the passage of a resolution where the State of Mississippi

essentially apologized to the survivors and family of Clyde Kennard, who was a gentleman who attended, or attempted to attend, to enroll at The University of Southern Mississippi, and for his efforts he was railroaded and sent to prison. And his name had been cleared years ago by informal means but never formally. And he was convicted of conspiring to steal chicken feed and in possession of illegal alcohol, all of which was false, but they used those charges, trumped up though they were, to convict him and send him to prison where he was worked to death. And it was only after a lot of famous people, Dr. Martin Luther King, the likes of Harry Belafonte, other famous actors who prevailed upon the State of Mississippi that he was finally released, but it was about two months before he died. And a couple of years ago, we were able to finally get his name cleared and that was a big important moment for me. I also was involved with—if you look at the legislature, a lot of my colleagues, especially African Americans, have not quite figured out how to use the power of their position to help people in ways that are nonlegislative, that don't involve passing a bill, that because you're Senator X or Representative Y, you can open doors for people and get things happening for people. In the late—in late 1999 and throughout the early part of the twenty-first century, I served under lieutenant governor Amy Tuck and she and I did not really sit horses that well. I bet the wrong horse, really, so to speak, and it was very plain that other folks had also backed the wrong horse and wound up being rewarded, and most of them did not look like me. But I was one who accepted my punishment gladly in a lot of ways because I did not want to be perceived as being a supporter of hers because I didn't think that she meant my constituents much good. So I was relegated to the back bench in the process of the legislature and wound up having a lot of free time on my hands. And lo and behold, that served to be a silver lining because Nissan came along, and the state wound up spending about 363 million dollars to attract Nissan in a major automotive manufacturing effort, and that endeavor was going to create a lot of jobs, create a lot of opportunities for people to do business both with the State of Mississippi and with Nissan itself, and I made it my business to get to know the people of Nissan and with the one mission in mind of insuring that there were African-American business people and other small businesses who were at the table to be able to do business with Nissan, to do business with the State as it prepared the dirt and the pad and the land for the construction of their major facilities of over one million square feet under one roof; one of the largest manufacturing facilities in the country, in the world, really. And the state had never engaged black contractors and black engineers and black architects on any work that was being done by the State of Mississippi; and we were able to, by force and dint of our will, and the spotlight that was on the project, to get black folks in position where they were able to do business with the State of Mississippi. We also had a tracking program that tracked that involvement, and I'm really proud of the accomplishments that we made there. We also were able to have direct relationships with Nissan for helping them to identify blacks who would become tier one suppliers and tier one service providers with that project, and we started out with six and today we have four tier-one, well, two tier-one suppliers and two major service providers inside the Nissan plant, itself. Those people create hundreds of jobs and they're able to create and take wealth back into their communities. A similar project I initiated had to deal with the gaming industry. I would

see, as we visited gaming concerns, that a lot of people who were there spending their money were African American, were women, and yet when you looked at who the casinos were doing business with, it wasn't African Americans and it wasn't women. So I began an initiative to get the casino industry's attention on the matter by holding hearings and engaging dialogues with them about the need to use a better business practice of inclusion of black-owned companies, women-owned companies, and other small businesses, and we were able to make some tremendous gains for about two and a half years in that effort before this little lady named [Hurricane] Katrina came along and forestalled that effort, and we have not been able to get that back on track yet. Those are just some examples of how, you know, I'm not passing any legislation here but I'm a legislator who has—is able to gain access to people and to companies that you typically are not able to gain access to, black folks, not in general, and to take that ability and turn it into a positive that accrues back to the benefit of my community.

Orey: OK. On a few occasions you mentioned race, and in Mississippi racial polarization is a real issue. How do you see or how have you seen an issue of race play out in the state legislature? Is race or does race, to quote Cornell West, “Does race matter?”?

Horhn: Race matters; there's absolutely no question about that. Race matters more than political party affiliation matters, because you run into situations where people support a bill or don't support a bill on the basis of who's sponsoring it, on the basis of who the perception is that it will benefit, and oftentimes it's all about race. As I mentioned, I've gotten some good legislation approved for my community and for the Jackson area in general, and other places around the state that service minority constituencies. It hasn't been easy, but, and I'm one of the few folks who's been successful in doing those kinds of things, but that's rare. Generally, you have people who have great ideas about doing things meaningful for constituencies that often don't have a voice otherwise who themselves find that they don't have a voice in the legislature because they're black and because they serve poor people. I believe that if we can ever solve this race issue in Mississippi, we can solve whatever other problems exist, but race is at the heart of practically everything we do and every decision that we reach. And there's a strong presentiment on the part of a lot of white legislators and white leaders in general in this state, whether they're in government or business or what have you. It's a presumption of the right to rule. They, I think, are trained at an early age that they are in charge, that they have a, if not divine right to rule, certainly a presumptive right to rule, and so everything that they do in general is geared towards that assumption and that belief, and so it informs a lot of their actions and a lot of what they tend to do in the way of policy, in the way of where the money goes, in the way of who gets the money when it gets where it's going, and it's all about the preservation of a certain way of life. We saw dramatic changes during the civil rights movement where that way of life was threatened in terms of where people could be educated, what public facilities they could use, and so on and so forth. Well, all that is gone, but there still is the whole economic piece that's there and it doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Blacks have poor access to opportunities to do business with

the State, poor opportunities to do business with the private sector, and the economic might of the State that we generate through taxes and through other revenue that comes in goes back to fuel the disability of that other community and inhibits our ability to stabilize our community because we don't get those resources coming into our community.

Orey: Given that right to rule sort of privilege, approach, or mentality, how have African Americans been able to deal with alliances or coalesce with other groups, whether it be white women Republican, white women Democrat, any other groups? Have African Americans been able to build coalitions in the state legislature?

Horhn: Well, you know, you probably built coalitions a lot better when there were fewer African Americans in the legislature, because the more African Americans that were elected in the legislature meant that they were being elected from super black majority districts, while at the same time more and more whites were being elected from super white majority districts, and you saw the rise of the Republican party. And so there grew out of that effort more polarization of activity and relationships between blacks and whites. It hasn't gotten better; it's gotten worse in a lot of ways, especially in the State Senate in that the ideology of the Republicans seems to be the most stringent aspect of "us versus them" where that whole presumption of the right to rule is really evident amongst those particular party affiliates, in my opinion. And so I think that we have not done as good a job of forming coalitions to be able to get things done for our community. Whites are much better able to coalesce with us on things they want; we have a hard time coalescing with them on things we want. And probably the House of Representatives represents a better model for coalition building amongst white and black Democrats because they've got a strong speaker system and their committee system is such that they are generally able to do more. But where those efforts are pretty much forestalled is when they hit the Senate. The Senate tends to be a lot more conservative, a lot more ideology driven from a partisan standpoint and from a racial standpoint.

Orey: OK, now this is the last question I'd like to pose or the last item I'd like to present to you. I'd like for you to comment on former governor Fordice's attempt to stack, I guess, the College Board, if you will, with three members that would have made the College Board less diverse.

Horhn: It's four members.

Orey: Four members. Were you part of that process or were you part of the state legislature then?

Horhn: I was a member of the Senate at that time and was not a member of the Universities and Colleges Committee which was involved with the consent of those nominations. The Senate has one power that the House of Representatives does not have, and that is the power to advise and consent on nominations to boards, councils, and

commissions. And in this particular case, Governor Fordice appointed four white males; four middle-aged, rich white males to the College Board which would have reduced the level of diversity, which is already pretty low, on the College Board down to where we would've only had I believe one member out of a twelve-member body. And he felt that they were the most qualified people that he could find, which many people found insulting, that they all were people who looked like him and were cut from basically the same cloth as he. So there was a standoff that occurred with the College Board where the—I mean with the Universities and Colleges Committee, which by the way was headed by a black man, Senator Hillman Frazier, and there was a lot of pressure put on Senator Frazier and members of that committee to deal with the confirmation of those gentlemen. The long and short of it is that we did have a victory there, a small victory of turning those nominations back and getting the governor to then appoint a more diverse board that included blacks and women. Another similar situation, and not quite in the same way but similar, a committee chairman, the power of committee chairman generally is sacrosanct in the legislature. Once a measure comes to a committee chairman, a nomination or a piece of legislation, whatever, it becomes the property of that committee chairman and generally whatever that chairman wants to do is what goes down. Well, there was attempt to hijack that process when these four college board nominations came up before Universities and Colleges and a lot of us felt that the reason they went as far as they did was because that committee was headed by a black man. A couple of years after that, the governor, once again Governor Fordice, wanted to appoint a gentleman to the Workers Comp[ensation] Commission who did not represent the interests of workers, did not represent the interests of Democrats, didn't represent the interests of black folks, and the chairman of that committee that the nomination went to happened to be yours truly. And it was the Economic Development, Tourism, and Parks Committee, and I refused to confirm this particular gentleman, and we had a big battle over it and we almost dissolved into a committee of the whole to try to pull the nomination from my committee, which had that effort been successful would've turned the committee system on its ear in that if somebody who didn't like what a committee chairman was doing, all he had to do was circumvent that committee chairman and basically render him powerless by dissolving into a committee of whole, which means that every member of the Senate would become a member of a special committee and then that committee could then poll out a piece of legislation or a nomination in this case, and dispose of the matter without the benefit of that committee chairman's involvement, input, or participation. And a special session of the legislature was convened by the governor, all right, because he's the only one who can call a special session for the sole purpose of forcing me to do what he wanted me to do, or taking away my authority and getting it done without my consent. And so fortunately the Senate, by a few votes, failed to dissolve into a committee of a whole and I think what happened is a lot of members began to think that, "Well, if I were in John's shoes, would I want this to happen to me?" And I think that the institution and the power of the institution prevailed versus what some individuals may have wanted to do on a personal note.

Orey: OK, Senator Horhn, that concludes my questions and items that I'd had for you.

Do you have any final comments you'd like to add?

Horhn: Well, I really believe that this state will only begin to show parity and show some sort of major change when we start looking at where the money's going, not only the money in terms of how we'll fund the education at the higher education level, how we've funded some of the poor school districts in the state. The formula is really, in my opinion, set up to where the schools that need the least amount of help often get the most help and the ones that need the critical resources are not given the benefit of access to those critical resources or revenues. But the other thing is who this state does business with. There are countless white-owned businesses that have made their fortunes, that have become wealthy, that have used that wealth to fuel a retention of the balance of power economically in the state between blacks and whites using taxpayer dollars. And until we put our foot down as a state to say, "This is not fair," in many ways it's taxation without economic representation, because a lot of our businesses, based on how the rules are set up, cannot compete with the companies that have been in power and had these advantages for so long. There's no way that we can ever catch up unless remedies are put in place to give us an opportunity to not—we'll never catch up, but to give us an opportunity to at least get on the playing field.

Orey: That concludes my interview with Senator John Horhn. And this interview was conducted at the office of Senator John Horhn.

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PAGE

PAGE 9