AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ADRIENNE WOOTEN

*This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Adrienne Wooten and is taking place on July 1, 2009. The interviewer is D'Andra Orey.*

**Orey:** This is D'Andra Orey, chair of the Department of Political Science at Jackson State University. I am conducting an oral history interview with State Representative Adrienne Wooten of Jackson, Mississippi. Mrs. Wooten, would you for the record state and spell your first and last name?

**Wooten:** First name is Adrienne, A-D-R-I-E-N-N-E, last name is Wooten, W-O-O-T-E-N.

**Orey:** And your date of birth?

**Wooten:** March 7, 1974.

**Orey:** Place of birth?

**Wooten:** Riverside, California.

**Orey:** Your spouse's name?

**Wooten:** Dewayne Wooten.

**Orey:** Your major occupation?

**Wooten:** Attorney.

**Orey:** And you're currently employed?

**Wooten:** Self-employed.

**Orey:** Your education starting with your grammar school, schools, if you will?

**Wooten:** Let's see, West Hills Elementary, Oakland Heights Elementary, Carver Middle School, Kay Griffin Junior High, Meridian High School, Alcorn State University, and Ole

Miss School of Law.

**Orey:** Your religious affiliation?

**Wooten:** Baptist.

**Orey:** Any activities or professional organizations that you'd like to mention?

**Wooten:** Goodness.

**Orey:** That's fine.

**Wooten:** I mean you want to hear about my law (inaudible)?

**Orey:** Whatever professional organizations.

**Wooten:** Metro Jackson Black Women Lawyers Association, Magnolia Bar Association, Hinds County Bar Association, Madison County Bar Association—the name has changed for the American Bar Association; it's changed, but that's what it was before the name changed. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated. That's all I can think of, Orey.

**Orey:** OK, and would you tell us just a little bit about where you grew up and a bit about your childhood, if you will?

**Wooten:** I grew up in Meridian, Mississippi. You know, I had a very common childhood. I came from humble beginnings. I was raised by my mother who was married to my father but divorced my father during my—I don't remember the age, but basically I was raised by a single parent. And there was nothing out of the ordinary about my childhood.

**Orey:** And did you participate in any social activities in school?

**Wooten:** Well, I was an outgoing child. I was a member of chorus, I was a member of the band, I was a cheerleader from grade sixth through the ninth, I was a member of the performing choral group—I can't even remember the name of that group. That's all that I can recall. My memory for, after—before law school was so awful now. I mean there seems to not have been any life before law school.

**Orey:** OK, so this interview really is about your experiences in political office, the office that you hold at current.

**Wooten:** OK.

**Orey:** But I do want to ask just a formal question, when were you first elected to

political office?

**Wooten:** This is 2009; 2007.

**Orey:** And what position were you elected to?

**Wooten:** State representative.

**Orey:** What inspired you to run for political office?

**Wooten:** Well, when I'm asked that question, and I'm often asked that question, I tell people someone had to do it. I live in a predominantly African-American district that prior to my securing the position of state representative was occupied by a Caucasian, and that has nothing to do with the abilities of any person to perform the role of a state representative, I think it has more to do with the person and their passion for what they do. I think that the state representatives that have been in office prior to me had probably lost touch with his base. And what I call his base are constituents; the people that come out and elect you and put you in office. I think that it's important to have someone who can relate to the issues that their voters face. Now you may have some people who, for whatever reason, can't relate to what their constituents go through, but yet and still they advocate for what's in the best interests of their constituents. In this particular instance, had the incumbent been advocating for what was within the best interests of the constituents in District 71, no one would've been asked to run against him, no one would've considered running against him, but in this particular instance, he had been in office between twenty-four to twenty-six years. The interests of primarily South Jackson has been basically forgotten. You don't hear anyone, even with me having now been in office, South Jackson is almost a forgotten part of Jackson, it's a forgotten part of Hinds County, so I have to advocate especially hard for some of the things that I think our area needs. So, you know, needless to say, because of what hasn't taken place over a period of time before I took office, it makes my job a little more harder.

**Orey:** Is it accurate to say that the composition of that legislative district changed between the time that he was first elected, and this will be Reeves, right?

**Wooten:** This will be John Reeves.

**Orey:** And at the time in which you actually challenged him for that, successfully challenged him for that seat?

**Wooten:** I think that's an accurate assessment, that the district, when he moved into the district, was primarily upper-middle-class Caucasians, and over the years the demographics shifted.

**Orey:** OK.

**Wooten:** You now have more African Americans living in the district. And you kind of have that—the terminology that I'm looking for are people moving from the inner city moving to the suburbs, and that includes blacks and whites from my district. Primarily when he took office, yes, there was primarily a Caucasian district, *but* over the years you had blacks coming in and fluctuating into the district. So you still have a number of whites that live in District 71, but primarily it consists of African Americans.

**Orey:** Would you say that it was possibly a class issue as related to his neglect, if we will, or lack of responding to the constituency or race or a combination of the both or neither of them, too?

**Wooten:** You know, it's kind of hard to say because I don't know what John's thoughts are or conceptions were about the district.

**Orey:** OK.

**Wooten:** But I can say that it's easy to have that notion when you're looking at what wasn't taking place as far as the district was concerned.

**Orey:** OK.

**Wooten:** And you know, you can't venture to say that he should've been too far removed from the constituents, because he works with African Americans; the type of law that he practices primarily consists of African-American clients, so when you deal with the community as he deals with the community, as I deal with the community, you shouldn't be that far removed from the issues that the community is facing. And I do believe that I'm correct when I say that John's practice probably is made up of more than 50 percent African-American clients. So if you have that percentage of individuals coming into your practice, these people have to tell you about what's going on in their homes and what's going on in their families, so you shouldn't be that far removed. So then the question becomes, do you care? You always meet someone. When I'm up there in the legislature, I advocate for what's within the best interests of my constituents, not what's within the best interests of Adrienne Wooten. I was put there to speak on their behalf, so it's not about what I need. But the good thing is that the issues that my constituents face, I face those same issues, so it's so very easy to relate, it's so very easy to make those decisions for my constituents, because we all have the same issues that we're facing, that we're trying to resolve and deal with. And I can't say whether John had those same issues or not, but, you know, if you look at it and you analyze it, then you would want to venture to say that obviously he didn't, because his actions say that he was so far removed from what his constituents needed for him to be up there advocating for. So I would venture to say that I think it was both class as well as, you know.

**Orey:** OK. So, is there anything specific that moved you, if you will, to run for office?

I mean was there something in particular that was neglected that sort of served as the impetus or was it just a combination or an accumulation?

**Wooten:** Well, you know, I think that I looked at the district as a whole and ordinarily when a person goes ahead and makes the decision that they're going to run for a position such as the one that I've run for, you do it because you feel that there's something that's lacking, that's there something that needs to be done. With my particular district, one of the main things that I felt needed to be addressed is economic development, even though state representatives don't ordinarily get involved in economic development. Those are responsibilities left to your supervisors, left to your council members and things of that nature, but certainly if you want to advance and resolve those problems, we all have to work hand in hand, because that's the problem. And it's difficult when you can travel less than ten minutes from your home—I live in South Jackson, when I can travel less than ten minutes from my home and get to Pearl, and I see all of this economic development going on, or I can go down Highway 49 and I see this economic development going on once I arrive in Richland, so, and those are areas that I represent, also. So I see that Rankin County is developing. I see that that's Pearl and that's Richland, but what about Jackson, what about South Jackson? We have land, we have the same opportunities as anyone else, but the problem, in my opinion, comes from the media sensationalizing things that happen in South Jackson that they don't follow up and say, "but the same things have also happened in North Jackson" or "the same things have also happened in West Jackson today, but we're just going to talk about South Jackson." That's the problem that we have is that people feed into negativity, and the media feeds off of negativity. So when you have something like that going on, then people begin to think, and at this point a lot of people that South Jackson is not a safe place to bring your places of business to live; that's not true. The statistics don't support that. Now, true enough, you may have more property crime in South Jackson, but here's the thing, what I truly believe is that there are some folks that are more astute to the fact that, "Well, if my lawnmower was stolen, I'll just go replace it. I'm not going to call the cops for that." Whereas if someone over in South Jackson has had to work two jobs in order to get that lawnmower, then they'll be more pressed to call and make a report. So it all boils down to what's reported, OK, that's what makes your statistics up. It doesn't mean that the same thing isn't going on in a different part of town, it simply looks at what's being reported. And so when you look at that, then you say, "Well, you know the number is higher here in South Jackson than North Jackson or West Jackson, so there's got to be a problem there." No, all parts of Jackson are being affected by all types of crime that South Jackson is facing. The only difference is that you may find someone who's more willing to talk about it on camera; you may find people who are more willing to report it, but it doesn't mean that it's not occurring in other parts of Jackson. And I think that South Jackson is just as safe. I think that our roads are no more bumpier than the roads over in North Jackson or West Jackson. I don't think that there's that much of a difference, but if you don't live there or if you don't take the time to find out what South Jackson's really about, you won't know because of what's being portrayed in the public.

**Orey:** So this was your first term as a politician, as a member of the State Legislature. Can you describe for us, you know, what that experience was like? Was it like what you expected, were you able to go in and, you know, represent your constituents at ease, or was there some sort of difficulty that you didn't expect? Describe for us your first two years in the State Legislature.

**Wooten:** Well, I don't know if I had a preconceived notion about what it would be like. Because I'm an attorney by profession, I started off practicing at Blackmon and Blackmon, so a lot of the members of the legislature I had already met. These were just general, ordinary people that I would come across in my day-to-day workings, because the Blackmons were members of the legislature. So it was nothing sensationalized as some people might think that it is. So when I did make it up to the legislature, there began the learning process, and I'm still—I have a lot to learn, but the politics side is what you have to learn. Politics is politics and by nature, I'm not a politician. So learning the process is what I'm doing now and I think I have been prepared for that by my profession. It's not difficult as far as learning, but what can be difficult is getting the votes that you need in order to advance the things that you need. But understand this now, the votes come based on what party's in control. Right now the Democrats are in control. So, pretty much when it comes to being able to pass things out of our body that our constituents need, that's not as difficult as it has been before I came aboard. But the question remains, will it be as simple as I think it is at this point and time? Not trying to say that it is simple, but what I'm saying is, we have an advantage at this point, the Democrats do, and until that advantage is taken away from us, until the Republicans begin, become the majority in the House of Representatives, then we have things a little easier at this point and time. Now, we do have a Republican government so you have that—the politics at play, but yet and still, I think that we're able to make more strides than we would have been able to make before the Democrats controlled the House. Now, it would be wonderful if we had a Democrat governor, but we don't have a Democratic governor. So, once again, you know, it's politics, but I think that all in all that it balances out, I think all and all when I sit down and I talk to members of the legislature that have been there for, you know, seventeen plus years, it's better now, you know, things are looking up now. Things have progressed. There has been progress made in how things are handled now. There are those who ten years ago couldn't even get in to sit and talk with the speaker that can now knock on the door and get in and meet with the speaker and address issues that are important to them as well as their constituents. So I think that altogether that I came in at a wonderful time and from what I've been told, it was unheard of for newcomers to come in and acquire the positions that I have acquired. So I, you know, I don't have anything other than to say that I think that we're making progress.

**Orey:** Can you speak to those positions that you've acquired?

**Wooten:** I'm vice chair of Elections and Apportionment, Reapportionment, which goes along with all of the redistricting for the congressional, for congressional districts as well as the representative districts; any type of redistricting, I would be vice chair of.

**Orey:** OK. And you mentioned, you know, the Speaker of the House.

**Wooten:** Um-hum.

**Orey:** This was a very, very competitive race the first year that you came into office, actually.

**Wooten:** Um-hum.

**Orey:** Can you describe, you know, the tension or the politics or, you know, just your experience in that—historically, it has probably been the most competitive speaker race on record. One, did you see the Legislative Black Caucus having an impact and if so, how? But I'd just like you to speak to your experience with the speaker's race.

**Wooten:** Well, you know, Orey, it's difficult. I know what you're looking for. It's always better if you have a foundation to build upon and by me being a newcomer, I didn't have a standard to compare what happened to something that has happened in the past.

**Orey:** Um-hum.

**Wooten:** What I was told was that this was a historical race, speaker's race. And I did see politics in works as soon as I hit the floor. To vote, we had to vote three—I think we voted three to four times for the temporary speaker, which from my understanding, the temporary speaker would've been the person who would've made the decisions about whether or not the rules could've been changed. And because my election was so—I don't want to say essential, but I was an important vote for the speaker's race. And the speaker's race was leaning, I guess, maybe between one to two votes could've caused it to go the other way and Representative Smith would've been the Speaker of the House. But the temporary speaker would've been able to decide if there was going to be a change to the rules which would've prevented me from voting. And I'm—let's see, it was Mr. Blackmon and it was Rob Johnson, and of course I didn't know the importance of the temporary speaker position, this all was explained to me after the fact, but had—and I'm not saying that Representative Johnson would have gotten into that position and would have changed the rules to prevent me from voting, I can't say that, it didn't happen, and I don't know what would've taken place. So I don't want to say that that's what would've happened but that's what could've happened had Edward Blackmon not won that position, is that anyone else that would've assumed that position had the ability, from my understanding, to make the decision about whether or not I could have voted because my election was being challenged.

**Orey:** OK, can you speak to that, just in terms of, you know, what was the issue at hand?

**Wooten:** Well, John was challenging the election. He didn't want to give his seat up.

**Orey:** John Reeves?

**Wooten:** John Reeves was challenging the election.

**Orey:** The incumbent.

**Wooten:** Right, the incumbent was challenging the election; he didn't want to give his seat up and that was after we had had two elections at that point. I gave him a second election. He—after the first election, he lost that election and he made allegations about improprieties being, taking place at the polls, and things of that nature. I agreed, finally, to go ahead after going into court and the court ruled it in my favor, he appealed to the supreme court, they ruled against me, so I agreed to go ahead and give him a second election. We had another course, a path that we could've taken which would've been federal court, but I decided that I wanted to go ahead and give him that second election, because I had already won that first election and certainly if he didn't believe the numbers the first time, I didn't have a problem with him seeing the numbers the second time. Well, he lost that election just as well, and he made the same type of allegations. Now, my understanding is that had Edward Blackmon not won temporary speaker, then he would've continued that challenge. But after Edward Blackmon won temporary speaker, and they realized that the rules were not going to be changed so that I couldn't vote, then that day he informed, I don't know who he informed there at the Legislature, that he was no longer going to move forward with the challenge.

**Orey:** OK. Mississippi has historically had an infamous history, if you will, of racially polarization or racial polarization. As it relates to the State Legislature, you know, I've heard stories where, you know, Representative Buckley talked about how, you know, some members who were white would set up a tobacco stand where they would actually spit across the members, not spitting on them, and you know that was an inhumane thing to do. Surely that type of, you know, gesture is not practiced today. How would you describe race relations in the State Legislature now or is it an issue to be even discussed?

**Wooten:** Race is always an issue to be discussed. The bottom line is that historically African Americans have been Democrats; Caucasians have been Republicans. And whether you want to look at it like that, that's the way that it has been and it hasn't changed. So when I arrived at the House as a representative, no one blatantly made any type of discriminatory comments towards me or any type of racially motivated comments towards me. And as a matter of fact, they were quite cordial; very accepting, very warm. But the rubber meets the road when the bills come to the floor and you have to vote on them; that's when you see the bipartisanship at its best, because what the Democrats—and the Democrats normally advocate for the little man, for what's within the best interests of the poor, the sickly, the elderly—we advocate for those things. So when a bill comes to the floor that may reflect or may address issues that can—a bill that can resolve

certain issues that low, socioeconomic communities are facing, then you get a chance to see politics at its best. The beauty of what's going on now is that the Democrats control the House. So it's difficult for the Republicans to advance their interest, but they're very organized; they already have their plans laid out. When we come in to vote, the board lights up one way for the Republican; you don't see a Republican voting with the Democrats on something that they feel strongly about, that the principles of the Republican Party would not support. They are not going to support it; there's no question about it. Now, you know, I can't say that I have been infringed upon because of my race, but you know it when you bring issues before the body that may address a particular race of people. And you have those from the Republican Party coming up and speaking against it, and you have those from the Democratic Party coming up and speaking for it. And I'm one of the youngest members of the House of Representatives, but I'm not without knowledge. I was, I don't want to say trained, but the word's escaping me, it's on the tip of my tongue—I'd been mentored by some very intelligent people. The Blackmons are very learned people, as well as being members of the legislature. So when I take the podium to address the issues that my community is facing, I don't go without a foundation. And with every speech that I have given at that podium, no matter what I think of before I get there, it always falls along race relations, it always talks about the history that Mississippi has faced because a number of the members in that body have at some point and time been on one side of the track, whether it be that they have been the person that's been giving or whether it has been that they have been one of the persons that have received. So when I get up and I talk about it, you know, I don't shy away from the fact that these issues are how they are because we are so bipartisan, because we are so racially divided. Even with Voter ID, there were those who wanted to advance the argument that it's not about race; certainly it's about race. Everything is about race. Every vote we take is about race. It all boils down to race, because African Americans are primarily Democrats and Caucasians are primarily Republicans; and Republicans are going to vote for what they feel is within the best interests of their communities; Democrats are going to vote for what they feel is within the best interests of their communities. And we all know what communities we're talking about when we say Democrats and Republicans. So anyone who wants to say that race is not a divisive factor that's still at play in politics in Mississippi is absurd.

**Orey:** Now, it is the case that there are white Democrats in the State Legislature. Do they oftentimes support Republicans when it comes down to issues that are perceived to be racially polarized?

**Wooten:** We—you can get a roll call, which means that you can pull the vote to see how people are voting and if your question is that there have been some white Democrats that have voted against what I consider to be issues that low, socioeconomic communities face—that would include African Americans, that would include the elderly, less-to-do children—certainly, and they're the same ones over and over and over again. Now, I understand that some people run under the guise of a Democrat, when essentially their principles and their moral support Republican, but in order for them to acquire that

position, they have to carry the title Democrat, but once they get there, then they can let it all hang out. And when it comes to issues that there has to be a firm decision made because either you're going to be for one community or against one community, do you think that they're going to go against their own community? No. So you see that in the votes.

**Orey:** So we talk about the issue of race when we, I guess, discuss at least one marginalized groups, group, but you are also a female. And I guess in regards to or within the context of intersectionality, there's also this notion of race and gender, and you're actually facing what some would say are double disadvantages, you know, being an African American and being a woman, but being the combination of the two as it relates to your racial identity. How have women been treated in your opinion in the State Legislature?

**Wooten:** You know, Orey, it's kind of difficult to say, because I'm more of an assertive and I'm a very aggressive person; that's my personality. And by profession I'm an attorney. So I know how to be diplomatic. I know how to deal with the politics. The women that have been in the legislature, I can't speak for them. We all have different personalities. I've been told that it was unheard of for a newcomer to address the body. It was unheard of for—and from what I can tell, I'm probably one of maybe two or three women that will actually go to the podium to speak. I can't give you an accurate count of how many women there are in the House at this point and time, but I can't say that I have been, that I've received any, you know, maltreatment because of my gender. If anything, I would like to think that I'm respected because I am a female, but I think I'm more respected because of how I address the issues that face my community and the fact that I will not allow my newness, my being a novice to this, to impact what I'm there to do. I think that brings more respect. When I go and approach my male counterparts and ask them for their support on certain issues and talk with them about why I need their support, they're more willing to talk with me and say, "Adrienne, I can support you on this, but I can't support you on that, and here's why." We have those type of conversations. So, you know, I think I've been blessed in that respect that I can't, I just can't say that I've been impacted by gender in a negative way.

**Orey:** OK. What would you say have been some of the greatest challenges that you've faced in the State Legislature, if any?

**Wooten:** The learning, the learning process. You don't just come into politics and learn all about politics in a year or two. And because my district, it's so far behind, in my opinion, I need to learn as fast as I can to catch up with those who already have what I'm trying to get. And so it would have to be, it would have to be learning the political ins and outs at this point.

**Orey:** And what have been some of your greatest successes thus far, if any?

**Wooten:** Certainly the positions, the positions that I've been appointed to. And this year I got my first bill passed. After my first year, I learned more about the process and knew what I needed to do in order to get that bill advanced, realized that the Senate also has a vote on my bill and was able to get a bill passed out, so I was proud about that. And I'm told that, for the most part that, that's something's that unheard of, for you to come in your first term and actually get a bill passed out. So, you know, and the relationships and the awareness that I've acquired about the process. The relationships that I've forged with my male and female counterparts, I think that that's something to be proud of, because if you don't have that foundation, then you won't be able to get anything done for your district, and I think it's a good thing.

**Orey:** Have you witnessed any coalition building in the State Legislature, whether it be along the races, whether it be along the lines of party, on the lines of gender?

**Wooten:** Well, sure. I mean I can't say witness any coalition building; the coalitions were already there. Your coalitions are bipartisan coalitions. You don't—if you're asking has there been any bonding between my white female counterparts, you know we all realize that this is a male-dominated profession. Well, not a male-dominated profession, but it's a male-dominated body and you know that coming in, and so I would imagine that we're all prepared to deal with what we have to deal with in order to get the things that we need done for our districts done. But as far as coalitions being formed, you know, Orey, I can't say that there have been any new coalitions that have been formed, I can say that I think that the Black Caucus—you asked me about the Black Caucus being a force that had to be reckoned with in the speaker's race; yes, it was. It was and I think that these last couple of years that the Black Caucus has had to be a force that has had to be respected because our numbers keep increasing and with the numbers increasing—and primarily African Americans are Democrats. So that means that with the adding on of another African American, we have another Democrat coming aboard. So at this point and time, I think that there are others who have had to sit up and kind of put together their plan considering what our position will be. And I don't think that that's something that has happened often in the past.

**Orey:** Well, that concludes the questions that I have for you, but would you like to provide any extra commentary as related to your first two years in the legislature, you know, I mean any other experiences that you'd like to go on record with. This is your oral history and it will go down as the history of Representative Adrienne Wooten.

**Wooten:** I don't think that I have much to add. I think that you can tell from my responses what my thoughts are on politics in Mississippi. I think that we have progress, but I do believe that we have a long way to go. You still don't have as many females in the legislature as males. You don't have as many black members in the legislature as Caucasians. We don't have any Asians, I know, in the House of Representatives. I don't believe we have any over in the Senate. Latinos; I don't see anyone representing them, you know, in the House or the Senate. So I think that we have a ways to go, but we are

making progress. There are other parts of the United States who would say that we're digressing, that we're stagnant, but from my standpoint, we may not be moving or advancing as quickly as we would like to, but we are making progress. And I would hate to see that progress be derailed at this point and time, but I can tell you that you always have factions that are going to be fighting to be superior to another faction. And in this particular arena, it's Republicans against Democrats, and so you'll always have that struggle going on with one or the other trying to maintain or trying to acquire the control so that they can move and push their agenda, and that's just politics, so.

**Orey:** Thanks a lot.

**Wooten:** OK, Orey.

(end of interview)