

William Jefferson Clinton History Project

Interview with

Robert Hanes
Atlanta, Georgia
15 May 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Dowdle

Andrew Dowdle: This May 15, 2004. This is Andrew Dowdle. D-O-W-D-L-E. I'm in Atlanta, Georgia with Robert Hanes. H-A-N-E-S-S. The first question I would like to ask you is when were you born?

Robert Hanes: July 18, 1946.

AD: Where were you born?

RH: I was born in New York City.

AD: And who were your parents?

RH: Barbara Groves and Joseph Hanes.

AD: And what were their occupations?

RH: My mother was a housewife. My dad was an auctioneer. I don't know if anyone told you about the auction houses—well, my dad and my uncle ran one of those auction houses. Mainly he was into jewelry, selling diamonds and diamond rings. He cut stones and set stones.

AD: Which one did he run?

RH: There were several. During the time that I remember, Buckley's was one of them. Let's see—that was so long ago. I'm trying to remember. There were two. There was one that he worked for, and there was one that he and his brother owned, actually owned.

AD: So is that what brought him to Hot Springs?

RH: I think what brought him there was my uncle—and God knows how this happened. My dad and his family—he’s got a huge family of eleven brothers and sisters, and they’re from the tenements in New York. How my uncle Buckey got into Hot Springs I have no idea—no clue [laughter]—but my dad, my mother, and my brother, who had been born—my brother is a year older than I am—were in California, and Uncle Buckey was looking for a job, apparently. He had done all kinds of things. Before he came to Hot Springs I think he was running a bakery, of all things. I don’t think he knew a thing about baking. At least he never did when I was growing up [laughter]. But my uncle—Uncle Buckey—called and said, “Hey, I can get you a job here. Why don’t you come here? It’s a beautiful little town.” So they picked up and moved across the country. They had my brother and me at that point, and then we got to Hot Springs probably in 1947 or 1948. It may have been 1948 because my sister was born in Hot Springs, and she was born in 1948.

AD: So you grew up in Hot Springs then?

RH: Oh, yes, yes. I don’t remember any place else at all.

AD: So in terms of what Hot Springs was like when you were a child, what are the things that kind of stand out?

RH: I think the things that stand out mostly as I was growing up was—I know it was a very typical childhood—very typical—playing outside, all that kind of stuff. We were, I think, the first family on the block to get a TV—first ones to get a color TV, and I think “Bonanza” was the first show that was done in color on Sunday

night. All the kids would come to my house to watch “Bonanza” because it was a color TV. It was really like how you picture the 1950s, and the 1940s. I mean, that’s really what it was like. I realized as I got older—probably in my early teens—that Hot Springs was different than the rest of Arkansas, and it really was very different. It was much more—now I can describe it as such, [but] I couldn’t then because I didn’t know that it was much more cosmopolitan [than the rest of Arkansas]. A lot of different people there: anything from gangsters, gamblers, hookers, and then regular people [laughter] coming in from out of town, leaving the farm to come in to the city. Hot Springs was a resort town—always was—that was its claim to fame. Hot Springs was different. We didn’t really realize until we started a club, you know, a Beta club, or a chorus or whatever. We went out to other towns, and we realized how very different Hot Springs was. I guess one of the main reasons—people talk about this—were the casinos. It was wide open when I was growing up. In fact, I remember my first year—my freshman year at Tulane was the first year to have a statewide vote on gambling. Of course the vote lost because no one was going to vote for Hot Springs. I mean, it passed overwhelmingly in Hot Springs, but was defeated everywhere else. I was really disappointed about that because I was at the age then that I could go to casinos. I couldn’t before. Well, that’s not true. I did [laughter]. Fake IDs and that kind of stuff.

AD: So when did you first meet Bill Clinton?

RH: It would have been my freshman year in high school. We had sixth grade—elementary school was first to sixth, junior high was seventh through ninth, and

then senior [high] was tenth to twelfth. We went to different grade schools. He went to Jones, and I went to Oaklawn. Then we got into the same class. I met him when we went into junior high. So I guess we were—what age would that be? Thirteen, yes somewhere around thirteen or fourteen years old. So I had probably met him earlier, but I don't really remember it. I did once we got into junior high because we were in most of the same classes together.

AD: So what were your first impressions when you first met him?

RH: This is where I might have to do some x-ing [laughter]. Hot Springs was a sort of three to four different classes. Cliques, I guess, really is what they were. I was in a clique that I pretty much grew up with from Oaklawn, and Jones wasn't quite as—fashionable is a stupid word to use for elementary school, but most of my friends were coming up through Oaklawn and so naturally those were the people I hung out with in junior high. So we weren't in the same group, really, and most of our social interactions were classes and get-togethers that involved large groups of people. We didn't really run in the same crowd. In fact, the whole six years of junior high and high school, we were often in the same places at the same time, and we were friends in that sense, but never really good friends in the sense that I would call Billy and say, "Hey, do you want to go hang out Friday night at Cook's?" But we were often at the same parties, often in the same clubs. So that's really how I knew him. My impression of him was, as I look back—he was in a band, and this always sounds terrible, but my first impression of him was that he was a band nerd. And looking back—in fact, I was interviewed when Billy became president, and I remember the guy that wrote the book. I forgot his name,

but I told him that, I said, “Please don’t publish that [laughs], please don’t put that in there.” I mean, people in the band were a different group of people than the people I ran with. Then, of course, there was the hood, you know. They were over here. So he was sort of in the middle, but he really sprawled both the social group and the band group, and, of course, he was very smart, and so that spread him also, because most of us were very—not most of us—our friends were very smart, so again, we were in the same group almost all the time.

AD: So in terms of your impressions, how did they change over the course of high school?

RH: I guess over high school, I got to know Billy—I should say Bill—I got to know him better, and again, we were in a lot of the same classes and stuff, and I respected his intellect very much. We were always in accelerated classes together, involving projects together. We were sort of a special group. We were—back then they did do accelerated classes and all that kind of stuff—it’s not as easy to do now, but we were always in that group in classes. As we grew up, he became more active socially also in high school. I don’t think he was in junior high as much at all, really. I think he was pretty shy, but in high school I think he became more social, more outgoing, and he actually went places and hung out with people he would not have in junior high, I think. So my impression of him changed—it was never negative—but it changed in a more positive direction as we knew more and more about each other.

AD: Did you ever think that he would have a political career?

RH: No. I never did. I've heard—and I consider this revisionist history, when people say, “I knew back then he was going to be president of the United States.” There was no indication that he was going to do that. He did hold office in either junior or senior high, I don't remember. I think he was class president junior year. That was the only campaign I remember. Now I know he went to Boys' State, and, of course, that was a campaign in and of itself. So looking back, obviously that was a political kind of thing, too. But then I left and went to college, and I went home to see family and friends, but again he was not in the same group I was in. So in the summer we would run across each other, but not in terms of getting together. So I was rather shocked when I found out that he was running for governor. It surprised me. It all surprised me, in fact. Not because he was not capable. It was just that I, frankly, never saw that coming. I never thought that was the direction he was going.

AD: So when he decided to run for president, you heard about that. What was your first reaction?

RH: My first reaction was, I think, “He is an unknown,” and I don't remember who I said this to, but I said, “I don't think he can make it this time, but he'll get his name out there, and I bet that next time he could make it.” Of course, he made it the first time. That was very surprising that he did that. And I campaigned for him. He came here to Atlanta several times. The Friends of Bill—I helped him here, but I didn't travel with that group. I was with people who were in that group.

AD: So when did it for the first time dawn on you that there was going to be a relatively good chance that he was going to become president?

RH: I think probably about two months before the election when the polls showed that Bush was plummeting at that point. I started to think, “You know, he may actually pull this off.” Then I started seeing polls where he actually was ahead and likely to win. I remember the night he won my sister was visiting from Hot Springs—I don’t remember what for—and we actually went downtown to Clinton headquarters in Atlanta to watch the election results. It was very exciting. I was really jumping up and down with excitement. It was somebody from Hot Springs that I knew, and he was President of the United States. I never expected that. It never occurred to me that that would happen.

AD: So what do you think in terms of Hot Springs—how do you think that ended up shaping and influencing Bill Clinton, because he’s obviously different from what you would expect of your typical southern politician?

RH: Yes, and I think it was because of the diversity in Hot Springs. We had so many different people from so many different places that moved there. We came there basically from New York. Some of my good friends grew up there, but their families had moved there from other places, in a lot of cases. So I think there was a whole diverse group, and that interaction with that group—and again I say that there was a more sophisticated air about Hot Springs, and there was certainly a lot more discussion and a lot more tolerance for different ideas. I think that was very important to his development and, I think, to mine and anybody that had come out of that atmosphere and got away from there. If you didn’t get away, I think it was

a little bit different. I think if you stayed—I've already said it was a nice place to come from, but I would not ever live there.

AD: It's really interesting talking to a number of people on this project who graduated from that high school about that time. It's just that—and maybe I'm getting an unrepresentative sample—it just seems like that even the people who didn't go on to become president are very bright, intelligent people.

RH: I think we had more than our share, I really do. We also had teachers in the accelerated classes who were very, very dedicated to what they were doing. It was very important to them. They instilled that in us, and when I look back, I remember those teachers. I don't remember X teacher in the seventh grade, I remember teachers by name, and what classes they taught. And I'm sure that Bill does the same thing.

AD: Who were some of the ones that you think about?

RH: Ms. Warnicke was our English teacher in our junior and senior years, and Bill was in that class. Mr. Cole was our calculus and math teacher. Ms. Buck our Latin teacher in junior high. Ms. Lowery was the chorus and music teacher. There were a number of really talented teachers for a school in what a lot of people would consider the sticks. I don't think Hot Springs was. I do think a lot of Arkansas was, but I don't think Hot Springs was. It was just a certain place and certain people. I think that's what nurtured Bill, and I think that's what got Bill, basically—like I said, I think he was quite shy earlier on, and I think all this interaction continued in that way when he went off to school. I think that just kept piling on and piling on. He was always very easy to talk to, but very—you

knew he would listen when you talked to him. He wasn't somebody that was, "Yes, yes, yes," and then went on to something else. And he didn't talk about himself a lot at all, as I recall. He was mostly paying attention to what other people were saying.

AD: So you graduated and went to Tulane in 1964?

RH: Graduated, yes. Graduated in the spring of 1964, and I went to Tulane in the fall of 1964.

AD: After you graduated from Tulane you moved to...

RH: Oh, I didn't graduate from Tulane. I went to Tulane for two years and then I transferred to Arkansas [University of Arkansas, Fayetteville?] and graduated from Arkansas.

AD: When did you move to Atlanta?

RH: Well, I went into the service. That was when the draft was still there. We know all about that. I sort of had a choice, and a lot of people looked down at—my dad was pretty influential, and he could have, in fact, he did get my brother in the National Guard. I decided that I didn't want to take that chance not knowing what was going to happen, so I decided—I actually got a draft notice in my senior year of college. At first I got a deferment to finish, but by then they were going to draft me, and there was no question about it. I chose to go into the [United States] Air Force at that point. So I spent two and a half years in the air force. I went into the air force in June of 1969, and came out in, I guess, November of 1972. Then I went to Houston. My reason for going there was to try to get into graduate school. I don't know why I chose Houston. I have no idea. So I took courses to

get a better grade point average. The thing that happened was I was on a very short list for finalists for their doctoral program. I didn't get it. I was one of the two alternates. Well, the four people that they chose took it, so I didn't have an opportunity. But there was somebody from Hot Springs who was an instructor here at Georgia State University. Pete Smith, Dr. Smith. He called my dad and talked to his dad, and you know how that kind of thing works.

AD: Right.

RH: My dad had talked to his dad. His dad had talked to him. My dad said to call him and talk to him about the program there. They had, from what I heard, a really good program, so I did. I called Dr. Smith, and he was expecting a call. He said, "Well, come on out, and we'll put you in a Master's program, and then we'll look into a doctoral program, in time. This is not going to be an end Master's. It's going to be a doctoral program."

AD: The Doctoral/Master's, but this was going to be transitional?

RH: Right, right. So I picked up and moved here because I got that offer. I came to Atlanta in 1974 or 1975, and I've been here ever since.

AD: This was a program in sociology?

RH: Psychology.

AD: Psychology, okay.

RH: Right. I graduated—my degree from the University of Arkansas was a B.A. with a major in psychology. I came here specifically for psychology.

AD: So how frequently have you gone back to Hot Springs and the area since you graduated from the University of Arkansas?

RH: I go back usually twice a year. I go on Thanksgiving because it's a command performance. My mother is there, so we have to go. Then I usually go once in the summer. We usually have some kind of family reunion, or something like that. I'll also go on other occasions. For example, I went this year for my mother's eightieth birthday in March. So I go there for special occasions. I generally am there at least twice a year. But that's just about it. I have a very large family, so even when I'm there, almost my whole time, it's with the family. I'm one of six, so, like I said, Thanksgiving is command performance, so we all have to go. We don't have a choice. Right now, it's twenty-six people, so we don't really get out and see other people. There's just no time to do that. I see some of my really close friends that still live there, but I don't get out and see many other people when I get there.

AD: You have mentioned that you had run into Bill Clinton in summers. For example, when you were going to Tulane, he was coming back. Have you had much interaction with him since then?

RH: No. Not really at all. No. In fact, I have not had any interaction—there were several times when—like, I think our tenth reunion was actually at the governor's mansion, and I didn't go. And I don't know why. I just didn't go [laughter]. Now there was a reunion, it must have been our twentieth, that I went [to], and Bill was there, and he was governor at that point. But it was not at the mansion, it was in Hot Springs. We talked then. There were several other occasions where I would run into him before he was president, and we would chat. After he became president, the only time I had any interaction with him was at the—actually at our

thirtieth and thirty-fifth class reunions. They were both held at the White House.

I went to both of those, and I also went to the inauguration.

AD: Looking back, is there anything that has really surprised you about his presidency—besides the fact that he was president in the first place?

RH: Well, yes, that surprised me. I think he did a really good job. I think he made some mistakes early on. I think everyone knows that. And then, of course, later on, he made a major mistake [laughs], but I think it will go down as a successful presidency, even given the Monica Lewinsky thing. I agree with a lot of people who say that that had nothing to do with whether he could be president or not. These days they scrutinize absolutely everything you do, and everybody knows what John Kennedy was doing now, but they never would have mentioned it then. I was disappointed. I'll be frank about that. I was disappointed. He was jeopardized by something so very unimportant as that, but in another way I still understand that you still have to have some kind of—I mean, that must be an extremely stressful job, and you've got to have some kind of outlet. Unfortunately, his became a little bit more public than it should have.

AD: In Hot Springs, when you look back, in terms of high school, are there any things that stood out about him in terms of academic strengths or characteristics?

RH: Yes. Academic, mainly. The main thing I remember—we were both National Merit Finalists, I think there were five of us that year. Bill was one and I was one. Also, literally in every class I was in, Bill was in. They were all advanced classes. There was a lot of back and forth between him and me for grades. Who would make the higher grade on this test? Who would make the higher grade on that

test? So I think his intellectual ability was very apparent to everybody. The other characteristic really was shyness, which is strange given that he's not at all shy [laughs]. He hasn't been in years, but back then he was. I can't think of any other...

AD: Were there any subjects that he was better at in terms of—thinking back, was there any subject where he was constantly winning the competition?

RH: He may have done better in math than I did. Now that's a may, I'm not sure about that, but he may have. Everything else, I think, we were neck and neck. I don't think there was much difference.

AD: You said that you were both competitive.

RH: We were competitive in that area, yes. Definitely.

AD: Is there anything you would like to add or any stories, anything that we really haven't covered?

RH: I can't think of anything specifically. I'm trying to remember back. I'll probably remember some things tomorrow [laughter] and think, "Ah! I should have told him about that!" I don't remember specifically, and like I said, I've got a pretty bad memory—way back then.

AD: Yes, and it has been forty years.

RH: Yes, it has. It's hard to remember. I'm looking forward to our fortieth reunion, which, as I understand, is going to coincide with the opening of the [William J. Clinton Presidential] Library [and Museum]. I definitely plan to go to that.

AD: Well, I look forward to hopefully seeing you at the opening sometime in Little Rock.

RH: Yes. I certainly plan to be there, hopefully.

AD: Well, I would like to thank you for your time.

RH: Certainly.

[End of Interview]

[Edited by Rebecca Willhite 092106]