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Oral History with Jerome Wilson

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Biography

Dr. Jerome Wilson was born in Meridian, Mississippi in 1942. He attended St. Joseph’s Catholic School in Meridian from kindergarten to secondary school, whereupon he attended Dillard University in New Orleans to earn a BA in Chemistry and Mathematics.

Wilson later earned an MA in Immunology and Biochemistry from Cornell and, in 1983, earned his PhD in Epidemiology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He spent much of his career as a researcher and a research administrator in the pharmaceutical industry, later transitioning to academe when he helped set up the department of epidemiology at Howard University. Over the course of his career Wilson held appointments at the National Cancer Institute’s Division of Cancer Epidemiology and Genetics, the Howard University Cancer Center and the Georgetown University School of Medicine, among others.

In later years Wilson took up historical research. In 2010 he and his co-author, Dr. Ethel Young (also a Meridian native) of Kean University, published *African American Children and Missionary Nuns and Priests in Mississippi: Achievement Against Jim Crow Odds*, a book about their educational experiences at Meridian’s St. Joseph’s Catholic School.

In his youth, Wilson lived within walking distance of Meridian’s “colored library” on 13th Street. This oral history interview, conducted on 19 November 2016, focuses on Wilson’s recollections of that library and his memories of Meridian in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Transcript

**Griffis:** This is Dr. Matthew Griffis of the University of Southern Mississippi interviewing Jerome Wilson on November 19th, 2016. I’m in Hattiesburg Mississippi, in my office at the University; Dr. Wilson is Rockville, Maryland. We are, of course, conducting this interview over the phone. And this is an oral history interview for the Roots of Community Project.
Dr. Wilson will be discussing his recollections of growing up in Meridian, Mississippi, and more specifically, his recollections using the 13th Street library—or, “the black library,” library as some called it—which was a segregated library built with Carnegie funds, opened in 1913 and permanently closed in 1974. So, thanks once again, Dr. Wilson, for donating this interview and participating in the project. For how long did you live in Meridian?

Wilson: Oh, I lived in Meridian for 18 years, until I finished high school and went away to college.

Griffis: So, you were born in Meridian?

Wilson: Yes.

Griffis: Okay. May I ask in what year?

Wilson: Oh, 1942.

Griffis: And so around what year do you begin school?

Wilson: I started kindergarten at St. Joseph’s Catholic School in 1946.

Griffis: And after you finished at St. Joseph’s did you complete anymore of your formal education in Meridian?

Wilson: No, I went to New Orleans, Louisiana, where I completed college at Dillard University.

Griffis: So, you completed elementary, middle, and secondary school in Meridian?

Wilson: Yes.

Griffis: Okay. What do you remember about Meridian at that time, as a place to live?

Wilson: Well, it was staunch segregation—or, sometimes I like to refer to it as “American apartheid.” There were the signs with “colored” and “white” and, of course, you had to ride in the back of the bus. But for the most part, the black community lived separately. But an interesting part … the city had a certain amount of integration with respect to housing. And certain parts of town … One block north could be all white, and around the corner one block east and west could be all black. So, there was a certain amount of basic living together, even though people probably didn’t participate socially. Now clearly, the upper income whites lived in very separate parts from poor whites and, of course, blacks.

It wasn’t a bad place to live. Our parents, I think, did a lot to try to protect us from the negative elements of segregation. They tried to teach us to understand what it was all about and, fundamentally, how to protect yourself. Now, if you go outside of Meridian, ten, twenty, thirty miles, it was a different story.
Griffis: In what way?

Wilson: The black community had a number of cultural events that took place at the Wechsler Junior High School. You had a central business district. So fundamentally, we had all the things contained pretty much in the black community that we needed. So, I'd say, it was not an unpleasant growing up. As a matter of fact, I considered it a lot of fun growing up in the fifties, even though we were under the weight of segregation.

Griffis: What you mentioned about the residential planning being such that blacks were sort of … They had their own blocks. The whites had their own blocks, but there was, on another level, a kind of mixing; you could go one block up and find yourself in a white neighborhood, and one block east it would be something different. Looking through the city directories, I’m trying to get a feel for the geography of the business community. Do you recall there being a mixture of black-owned and/or managed businesses or stores with the whites? Or was there a separate area in town for that?

Wilson: Well, the downtown— the central business district—I’d say the southwest part of 5th Street was where most of the black businesses were concentrated. For instance, you had Bill’s Café; you had E. F. Young’s Hotel; the barbershop; beauty school; and you had the one theater, the Star Theatre, was there. You had black-owned shoe repair, watch repair, taxis stands. So, you had at least… There were two black florists: one at 25th Avenue and 5th Street, and the other one on 25th between 5th and 6th. And beautiful, fully functioning pharmacies. And one of them even had a soda fountain that would remind you of what was seen on “Happy Days.” So, the businesses thrived; there were barbershops and, of course, there were black-owned funeral homes. Now, out in the black community, you had stores, small—what people call bodegas—in the black communities. Some were owned by blacks. However, there were a number of these kinds of stores owned by whites, who didn’t live in the community but ran the business in the community.

But if I look at the state of Mississippi and my growing up, Meridian was rather progressive with respect to how the black community dealt with segregation. At that time, there was a public high school, T.J. Harris. But there were two private high schools for African-Americans: there was St. Joseph’s High School, the school that I attended and was graduated from; and the Baptist seminary was a high school there. So, we had a lot of cultural events that came through Meridian. For instance, the child prodigy, Philippa Schuyler, came to Meridian to do a concert. Well, that would be rather unheard of in a number of other smaller places in Mississippi.

Griffis: Around what age did you begin using the library on 13th Street?

Wilson: Oh, around 9.
**Griffis:** Do you recall your first trip to it? Or some of your earliest visits to the library?

**Wilson:** Yeah, I guess the earliest visit … At St. Joseph’s School, of course, we had a school library that I used. But at the time when I was about 9, in the fourth grade, I didn’t have encyclopedias at home so I think my only trips were there really to use the encyclopedias. But having learned how to use the library at St. Joseph’s as a part of my education, I basically knew my way around the library. And of course that’s where Ms. Mathis comes in— Katherine Mathis, who was the librarian. And of course, she was a big help and taught me the full Dewey Decimal System such that I could use the library even more efficiently.

**Griffis:** About how close did you live to the library? Were you able to walk there?

**Wilson:** Yes, at that point—at 9 years old—yes, let’s see… It was two and a half blocks from where I lived.

**Griffis:** Did you ever go with friends? Or with a parent? Or on your own?

**Wilson:** It was mainly on my own. Occasionally, with friends. I enjoyed reading, and I was also very curious. So, I would go to the library to not just do things for my school work, but I was curious about the slaves and how that all came about. So, there were books in the library with pictures of the slave ships, showing how the bodies were stacked in these ships. And of course, initially, at 9 years old, I didn’t fully understand. And it was Ms. Mathis who helped expand and give me a better understanding. And that just … I took off from there, to read more about it. In fact, I learned more about African American history—or at least, back then, “Negro history”—in that library.

**Griffis:** Ms. Mathis sounds like she had a really important role in that library. It sounds to me like you remember her being almost like an educator…

**Wilson:** Oh, she was! I mean, she sat behind the desk, of course, and made sure that you checked books in and out properly. But she would come down from that desk to do some teaching and educating. She was very giving of her time.

**Griffis:** What else do you recall about the library’s books and collection? Was it a large collection, would you say, for that library? What other kinds of subjects did they have? Were you—I guess my question really is—were you satisfied with the collections that were there?

**Wilson:** Oh, yes. The collection was pretty extensive for a small library. And of course, my view as a young child—I thought it was quite extensive. It had all kinds of topics that, you know, libraries would have. There was non-fiction; there were fiction books as well. And, of course, reference materials.

**Griffis:** Did you ever read any of the fiction books—the novels?
Wilson: Yes, some of them. But I’ve always been more drawn to non-fiction and biographies. Of course, the biography of Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, and some of these African American heroes—I checked out those books out from the library.

Griffis: I’ve often wondered whether or not those white-only libraries had strong collections when it came to things like African American history. I’ve always wanted to look at their catalogs, but a lot of those records don’t survive, unfortunately.

Wilson: Well, I’m not sure about that. Because, I guess if we sort of fast-forward, by the time I was in the tenth grade, I did a term paper on the history of mathematics. And one of references I needed was not the colored library, nor did we have it in the library at St. Joseph’s.

So, I took it upon myself to go to the white branch downtown and I sort of just slipped in through the side door, went into the stacks—and as I said earlier, I knew how to use the Dewey Decimal System—so I went into the stacks and I found the book that I needed. And it was Mathematics for the Million by Hogben. And of course, in the meantime, some person saw me there—and realize, this is now 1958—and recognized that I was what they would say “colored”—or they might have used a different term—in the library. And so the librarian, who was Mrs. Jeannie Broach, she came quickly and grabbed me by the arm and took me into her office. And she asked me, what was I doing? So, I told her what I wanted and I explained why I was there, and I showed her the book. And of course, she admonished me that I was not to come back to the library—that if I needed anything, I was supposed to go to Katherine. And of course, she addressed Ms. Mathis as “Katherine,” not by “Ms. Mathis.” She said, “So, anytime you need something, you ask Katherine and she’ll get it for you.” And of course I left the library and went about my way.

Now, when I went back to the library—the colored branch—of course, Ms. Mathis admonished me and said that I knew I should not be going there and that if I need something to let her know. And I’m sure at that point she had gotten a call from Ms. Broach downtown, that I had been there. And of course, I didn’t go in any real sense that “I’m going to integrate the library”—I went there because I figured that library contained what I needed, so I went in there and got it. It wasn’t that I went to sit down and socialize with people there, because I had no interest in that. I understood the system; my parents had taught me very well. And so, I understood the system I lived in.

Griffis: Was that your first and only time in the “white library” downtown?

Wilson: Yes.

Griffis: Can you recall what it looked like?
Wilson: Oh yes, of course it was much larger than our library. Of course, I didn’t get a chance to explore and browse. But it was much bigger. It had the usual stacks—the look of our library. Except it was about ... I’d say it was twice, maybe three times as large as our library.

Griffis: Now, the 13th Street library—I’ve often wondered—of course, the building’s no longer there... When one walked up the steps and walked through the front door—which, I’m assuming was the main entrance—what was it like on the inside of that library?

Wilson: Oh, when you walked in the front door, you met this large desk that sat very high. And Ms. Mathis was a short lady; I never looked behind there but I’m sure she needed some kind of little stool to get up onto the chair because, as you walked in, that desk sat in the middle as you walked in. And as you walked in, to the left, were mainly I would say non-fiction kind of books and references. And to the right was I’d say more fiction and other kinds of reading materials.

Griffis: Was there anything downstairs?

Wilson: There was also a downstairs. But I never went down there, so I can’t be sure about what was down there.

Griffis: Did you attend any of the library’s programs? Can you remember there being any organized programs at that library? For instance, a Saturday morning story time, or clubs and organizations, anything like that?

Wilson: No. If they had such things, I didn’t attend.

Griffis: What can you recall about some of the library’s other users?

Wilson: Oh, yes. There were young people, my age and younger. And then there were a few adults, not a lot. And of course, there were older teenagers. At the time, let’s say when I was 9 or 10—I think, at least from my vantage point—I think the library was very well used.

Griffis: When did you stop using the library?

Wilson: Oh, I guess I didn’t stop using the library until, I guess, I finished high school and I left Meridian.

Griffis: And that would have been, I’m guessing—


Griffis: The early 1960s, then. Okay. And you left to go to college in New Orleans then?
Wilson: Yes.

Griffis: Did you ever return to Meridian to visit friends and family?

Wilson: Oh, yes. After my freshman year of college, I always had a summer job. I worked as a short order cook because that was probably one of the best paying jobs at the time, especially for a teenager. So, I always had a summer job.

Griffis: Did you ever go back to the library in those summertimes, or on any visits home?

Wilson: I only went back once, I think, just to say hello to Ms. Mathis and to express to her the values that she had helped me develop at that library.

Griffis: I was actually saving that question for the very end, but I'll ask you now, although it may be difficult to verbalize them. What would you say those values are? Of what benefit was having that library, for you?

Wilson: Well, I think the benefit was that it had … Well, the library we had at St. Joseph’s, both in what we called the grammar school and the high school library was pretty extensive for a small school. But the colored branch had some additional things that we didn’t have at St. Joseph’s. So, I think, as I’ve said earlier, she certainly—Ms. Mathis—certainly, helped me get a better understanding of the Dewey Decimal System. I mean, I learned it already at St. Joseph’s … We were taught at St. Joseph’s by an order of nuns whose foundations went back to Germany. So, a number of the nuns were actually German, although there were some Americans. So they were very not only strict with respect to our behavior and conduct, but also with respect to our work. So, we had been taught how to use the library as early as the third, fourth grade. And so, some of the things that I appreciated from Ms. Mathis was how to research certain topics more efficiently or going beyond just looking up what was in the encyclopedia.

Griffis: Certainly, the memory of having to go to the white library—and then Mrs. Broach taking you aside and admonishing you for going there—is a memory that stands out. Are there any other particularly memorable instances that you can recall related to your using the 13th Street library?

Wilson: Not really. I guess the other uses were pretty routine and straightforward. I think, as I said earlier, I didn’t have … My parents couldn’t afford encyclopedias or lots of books, so I didn’t have books at home. So I spent a lot of time there reading. And often, especially when I lived within two blocks, I stayed there until the library closed. And it closed at 8pm, and I was there when Ms. Mathis locked up at night. But other than that, it was pretty routine.
Griffis: Was the library open on weekends as well? Sundays, specifically?

Wilson: No, it wasn’t open on Sunday. But it was open on Saturday.

Griffis: What other places in Meridian can you say, or would you recall, being community meeting places for the black community?

Wilson: Well, just across the street from the library was the St. Paul’s Methodist Church. I was a member of the Boy Scout troop, which was troop 431. The church also had a basketball court, so it was a place where … Because in that immediate community, there wasn’t necessarily a public playground within, I would say, three or four blocks. There was Wechsler Junior High School that had a playground, but it was a playground associated with the school. But this basketball court at St. Paul’s served as a community playground for, you know, boys. And, of course, St. Paul’s also had a Vacation Bible School that was open to the community. So I would say that’s one. At that time I didn’t live in the housing projects, but the housing projects generally had a recreation center where kids could go and play games; in fact, ping pong was very popular. So, there were things like that.

Griffis: Did you find yourself going downtown much?

Wilson: Oh yes, you went downtown very often for haircuts; the barbershop was there. And you went there to either pay bills or… Your parents sent you to town to pay bills, or to make small purchases.

Griffis: Do you remember seeing anyone at the library that you knew from school, or you knew from church, or you knew from elsewhere?

Wilson: Oh, absolutely. Well, the community of people who—at that time, I went to St. Paul’s Church and I also went to Vacation Bible School there. So I recognized the boys from my Boy Scout troop. And many of them went to the public schools; most of them didn’t go to St. Joseph’s. But I knew them from the community; I also knew them from playing basketball. So yes, you recognized people from different communities. And for me, I lived in several different communities; it was never just one community. So I recognized lots of people from those experiences. I also went to the public school one year when I was in the eighth grade. So that led me to recognize other people.

Griffis: And so when you say that you “lived in different communities”, you mean to say you and your family moved around a bit?

Wilson: Yes.

Griffis: But throughout all of that, you continued to use the 13th Street library?
Wilson: Absolutely, even when I lived across town. Now, St. Joseph’s was on the east side of town—I’d say a good ten to twelve blocks from the 13th Street library. The 13th Street library was at 13th, between 27th and 28th streets. And at one point later on I moved to 20th Avenue, between 16th Street and 17th Street. So it was a nice, full walk. But I still came back to the library. And even went I lived within two blocks of the library, of course St. Joseph’s School was at 18th Avenue between 19th and 20th streets. And of course I walked to St. Joseph’s School. So, I had a pretty good view of the neighborhoods in Meridian.

Griffis: I’d like to thank you once again, Dr. Wilson for your time and your participation in this project. Your contribution is invaluable. Thank you so much again.

Wilson: You’re welcome.

The following exchanged occurred after Dr. Wilson and I had formally concluded the interview. We continued to discuss Meridian at the time he lived there, and Dr. Wilson began to recall more stories. With his permission, I began recording again (MG).

Griffis: ... Dr. Wilson, do you mind if I just hit record again for just two minutes? And, if you don’t mind, going back to that comment you made about the perception of the nuns and the white perception of [African Americans at the time]?

Wilson: Well, you weren’t respected, really, as a full human being. Now, that doesn’t mean that that was true of every white person. But in general, that was the case. And of course, they didn’t like the fact that these white nuns were teaching black children. And of course, these nuns not only had schools in Meridian, but they had schools in Jackson, Vicksburg, and Greenville, Mississippi, and Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. So, they were spread throughout the state, so to speak. And of course, I think, the habits they wore and the fact that many of them had heavy German accents I think gave a certain amount of intimidation to the local whites.

But as I was saying, at this workshop when they asked us if the school was integrated, and we said “No, it was an all-black school”—the only form of integration was that the nuns were white. Although we didn’t necessarily think of them so much as white. We saw them as holy; we saw them as “Sister” because they treated you with respect and respected your humanity. Whereas white people in Mississippi did not afford you that kind of respect and didn’t respect your humanity. They [the nuns] traveled on the city buses with us; they went to the back of the bus with us. They didn’t sit in the front. And of course this was very disturbing to the bus driver and any other whites who were riding the bus.

And—it is not directly related, but it is—when Emmett Till was so brutally murdered in 1955, I had passed through a white neighborhood on my way home and there were National Geographic magazines on the trash, along
with *Life* magazine. So I stopped and I started to pick some of them up. So, the white woman at the house came out. And so I dropped them because I was thinking she didn’t want me to have them. But she asked me to come back and told me that I was welcome to take as many as those magazines as I wanted. And she was curious about how I was interested in *National Geographic* magazine. And of course, I enjoyed geography, one of the subjects that I liked in school. And of course it had these beautiful pictures. The thing is she offered me a job, would I be interested in working for her to rake leaves and things like that. And I told her that I would have to ask my mother. And of course, my mother quickly said “No.” And she brought this *Jet* magazine picture of Emmett Till having been brutally murdered, supposedly for whistling at a white woman. And at that time, he was, like, fourteen and I think I was thirteen at the time. Twelve or thirteen. And she showed me the picture and said, “This is why you cannot work at any white folk’s houses.” She said, “If you really want to work, you can work in the restaurant with me.” And she asked the people who owned the restaurant to give me a job, so that next summer I worked as a dishwasher in the restaurant where my mother worked was a cook. And of course the people there marveled at my behavior, that they said to my mother: “He is so commendable.” And I would say to myself: “How else do you expect me to behave with my mother looking at me?” [laughs]. Even if I was inclined to misbehave, I certainly didn’t dare do it front of my mother.