

**MATHESON HISTORICAL CENTER**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**Interviewee: Dr. Cullen Banks**

**Interviewer: Bob Clayton**

**Transcriber: Ruth C. Marston**

**August 13, 2003**

C: This morning, I think, is August 13, 2003. My name is Bob Clayton, and I have the distinct honor and privilege of interviewing one of the highlights of Gainesville, Florida, and Alachua County – Dr. Cullen Banks. Good morning, Doctor.

B: Good morning, Bob.

C: It's a real pleasure to have you here today. We are in the kitchen of the Matheson Museum, and I can't think of a nicer place for us to be. It's quiet; it's a beautiful day, and we're going to have a good time. Originally, where were you from?

B: Originally from Texas. I was born in Temple, Texas. My folks were living in Waco, and I think there was a special hospital in Temple, where I was born. Tom Hawkins must have been born in that hospital and there is somebody else in this town that likewise was born in that hospital.

C: Was it Roland Richards?

B: Yes, Roland Richards likewise had connections with that hospital. I can't say he was born there, because all those people could not have been born there.

C: How about your parents? Where were they from? Originally from Texas?

B: No. My mother was born in Jacksonville, Florida. She was in Texas because she had a job teaching there. She got a B.S. degree from Edward Waters and Wilberforce in Ohio. My father was born in Waco, Texas, and he received his B.S. from Paul Quinn. Are you acquainted with Paul Quinn?

C: No, I've heard the name but I don't know where it is.

B: Paul Quinn is in Waco. I've never been there, but what I'm telling you is what I learned from my parents. My father obtained his Masters from Columbia, New York. My father was principal of Jones High School in Orlando for 23 years.

C: Basically, that's where you were raised.

B: That's right. My grandmother on my father's side was a teacher in Waco. My grandfather had a B.S. and was the author of a mathematics text. My birth date was August 25, 1924, in Temple, Texas. I lived with my family there and in Lawrenceville, Virginia; Palatka, FL, for 4 years; Orlando, and arrived in Gainesville in 1953 after two years in the Korean War with the rank of Captain in the Medical Corps.

C: Let me ask you this. Why Gainesville?

B: I started out in Palatka. Dr. James “Jimmie” Long was a good family friend, and he put me under his arm. He went to the same school I did – Howard – and when he would come to affairs, he would look me up and slip me a \$100 bill. That got my attention, so I came to Palatka. As you know, Palatka was a dead town – still is a dead town – and I got some advice from people that I trusted and decided to move to Gainesville.

C: Now, you were already a doctor then?

B: I was already a doctor. I graduated from medical school in 1948.

C: What medical school?

B: Howard.

C: Is that in Atlanta?

B: No, it is in Washington, D.C. Another thing about Howard is that it is the only school in the world that is supported by the federal government.

C: I did not know that.

B: Because they received the slaves that came up from the South and took care of them, and they have all those schools and just about everything that’s at the University of Florida.

C: Are they still supported by the government?

B: They are still supported by the government, but they have to go to Capitol Hill and fight, kick and scream at these people to get attention and more money. This is a problem that they have every year.

C: I think precedent is on their side now. Nobody wants to be the one to break the string, I would think.

B: Well, they’re still surviving. They write me every other week for money. I can’t give it to them every other week, but they still write me.

C: Now, when you decided to come to Gainesville, what year was that?

B: That was in 1954 after the Korean War. The thing I remember about the Korean War was this. I was put on a plane in San Francisco to Japan and then ultimately to Korea. Somewhere over the Pacific, while we were on our way, the Armistice was signed. When I arrived in Korea, the only way you could get hurt was to step on a land mine.

C: Well, luck was with you on that.

B: Luck was with me.

C: Yes, that worked out great. So you came to Gainesville. Did you start a practice right away?

B: Immediately. I was in the offices used by Orian Ayer. He was a physician.

C: Was he an African American?

B: Yes. He talked to me and told me what was going on. He and his wife decided that the Gainesville educational system was not up to their standards. They moved to St. Petersburg.

C: I'm a product of the Gainesville educational system, and he was right! See! Now, this was in 1954 when you opened up your practice?

B: Yes, in 1954.

C: Was it a family practice?

B: It was a general practice. I immediately did well. Dr. Ayer's patients stayed with the practice, and I appreciated it. I still see some of the folks I delivered and they wave to me.

C: Those old people that are waving at you.

B: Yes.

C: I have a son who is in Ob Gyn down in Merritt Island, and he has delivered babies of people that he delivered, so he's getting old, too. When you were in high school, did you play any sports? You look fit and that's why I ask. It looks like you are in shape, and I just wonder if you played in sports.

B: In Orlando – in Jones High school – I got an excellent education there. I had some excellent teachers. I had teachers like Mrs. Brayboy, who must have been in her 50's, and she had a demeanor that demanded respect. When she walked into any classroom, my classroom or any classroom, immediately the noise level would just drop to the floor.

C: Prof. Buchholz comes to mind when you talk like that.

B: Yes. She was excellent. I had another teacher that was a male – Richardson – and he was an excellent teacher but he did it differently. He didn't ask for any silence or anything as far as noise in the class, but he would come in and tell a

joke. Everybody would laugh, and when they would get though laughing, he was on the board with pictures and teaching them mathematics. He taught mathematics, and he taught it well. He taught mathematics from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, and then Mrs. Brayboy taught the other grades. He was excellent but in a different way.

C: That was during segregation, was it not?

B: Yes, that was during segregation. You'd better believe it was.

C: They probably got their degrees from Florida A&M?

B: I don't know where they got their degrees. Maybe Brayboy from A&M or probably one of the schools in Atlanta.

C: Morris Brown – where is that, in Tennessee?

B: In Atlanta. Morris Brown is having trouble. There are about six black schools, namely Spelman U, Clarke U, and Morehouse.

C: Eddie McAshan is there.

B: Eddie McAshan is at Georgia Tech. Another fact is that I delivered Eddie McAshan.

C: I thought he was athletic director at one of those other schools now. He played for Georgia Tech.

B: I don't know what he's doing now, but he comes back here every one or two years when they have a class reunion, and I have been at a couple of these and have seen and talked with him.

C: He was a ball player.

B: He was a great ball player. He could throw the ball better than anybody else that I've seen. I was proud of the fact that I knew him.

C: The Gators would have been proud to have him.

B: They sure would have.

C: Now Orlando was bigger than Gainesville and if you remember then, the license tags had numbers on them to designate the county. Orange County was 7 and Alachua County was 11. Being bigger than Gainesville, I assume that you all could get into more devilment than we could.

B: Let me tell you this. When I came here, I went to undergrad school at Wilberforce in Ohio, then the remaining two years of undergrad work at Howard and then med school at Howard. My office, as I told you, was on 6<sup>th</sup> Street.

C: Was it 6<sup>th</sup> Street then?

B: I can't think of the name of it.

C: 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue was Seminary. Was it Pleasant?

B: Pleasant was 3<sup>rd</sup>.

C: It might have been 6<sup>th</sup> Street. Did it run into G.H.S., do you remember? That's where the Ayers Building is now.

B: Now what street are we trying to identify?

C: 6<sup>th</sup> Street.

B: I don't know. When I arrived in town, I was "adopted" by a widow. Her husband was a dentist, Dr. Stafford. Do you remember him?

C: I remember the name, but I didn't know him.

B: She had a beautiful home on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. There was an upstairs apartment, in which her husband practiced dentistry. He died, and Dr. Cosby arrived, took that office and stayed in practice there for a number of years.

C: How many years was that after you came?

B: Probably about a year. Cosby was ahead of me going into the Army, but he was sent to Germany and I was sent to Korea and because of that, I was discharged first and began practice before he did. This widow treated me like a king. She prepared my meals and made my bed and cleaned up my room, etc. She was just wonderful. She's dead now. She had some children that live here. She charged me \$60.00 a month for room and board.

C: Wow! She was a widow and it was also a safety factor for her.

B: Yes. During that time, everything was cheap. I stayed there until I married.

C: How did you meet your wife?

B: That's a story in itself.

C: Well, let's hear it.

B: I went to Tallahassee to Florida A&M where they had a medical conference. This was a yearly affair. This was something like in February. I was at an affair with a good friend of mine, Earl Claiborne, who was from South Carolina. He looked over and said, "There's a girl you ought to marry." About a year later we were married.

C: How about that. You owe that gentleman a debt.

B: Let me tell you. That day after we met, it snowed in Tallahassee, not just the ordinary flake here flake there that melts, but a heavy snow that whitened all of Tallahassee and stayed on for 24 hours. I have been on an airplane and have talked with people, telling them about that, and they could tell me exactly what day it was. There are people here now that, if you tell them that story, they will tell you what day it was.

C: You sure married nicely. She is a nice lady and has the nicest voice on the telephone. You out-married yourself. You know that, don't you?

B: That's right. She knows how to get people to like her. She's a likeable person.

C: I think she is.

B: One thing you don't know is that I'm a licensed pilot.

C: Do you have your own plane, or did you have your own plane?

B: No, I've never had my own plane. I rented a plane at Gainesville Airport. I began taking lessons in December of about 1963 or 64. In May or June I took the examination and almost immediately, a few days later, I took off in a 250 Comanche with my wife and my mother and flew direct to Nassau.

C: You found Nassau?

B: Oh, it was no problem. There are so many islands out there it would be unlikely for you to miss all of them. We had an uneventful trip. About a year later, my best friend who lived in California but now lives in St. Thomas came and stayed with us for a few days with his first wife, and I did the same thing. I flew to Nassau and we stayed there three or four days and they wanted to see South Florida. They wanted to see Fort Lauderdale, Miami, and so forth. I said, "Okay, we'll do it." The morning we were to take off I checked with weather and it was all socked in over all of the eastern seaboard. I said we would have to wait a few days until the weather cleared. She got furious and said, "We planned this trip around going to Miami." I said, "Well, the weather's too bad." She still didn't shut up. I said, "Here are the keys. There's the plane. You go ahead. You have my permission to take off."

C: Do you fly today?

B: No. I never had any trouble, but after I had flown for about fifteen years, I decided that it was time to quit. Nobody coaxed me. My wife never said anything to me. I have a friend who liked to fly. The only way he could get his wife to let him fly was not to have another baby. She encouraged him to quit.

C: Did she have the baby?

B: Yes, and he quit flying.

C: I never flew a plane. I was always leery of private planes. I had some friends that had licenses and flew out of Stengel Field.

B: I've flown into Stengel Field.

C: Clark Butler Field now. I personally didn't. I had no interest in flying. I could walk away from a car crash, but I'd be doggoned if I could walk away from one of those things.

B: There was a doctor by the name of Christofer out in Keystone that got bumped off. I never had any trouble. While I was in training, there was a guy by the name of Graham. He taught me the basics of instrument flying.

C: People who fly love it and they want to talk about it all the time. I used to play golf with a couple of them that flew. I liken them to people that have horses and people that are into photography. Those three things right there are all-consuming. You really get wrapped up in all three of those things.

B: I want to tell you about my post-graduate training. I interned at Homer Phillips Hospital in St. Louis. It no longer exists. I also studied at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. They had more material. It was at Cook County Hospital that I learned how to do vaginal hysterectomies and also abdominal hysterectomies and learned how to do them very well. Boston Lying-in Hospital was another hospital where I spent two weeks getting additional information. Also the College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. I would attend every year. They had a meeting that lasted 1-2 weeks and they drilled in a variety of conditions and surgeries. You had your choice of a variety of subjects.

C: When you came to Gainesville, you were welcomed.

B: No, this was during my early years in Gainesville. I would get one to two weeks off and go to these places and get training.

- I played football and basketball in high school, and, also, played football in college – in Wilberforce. I played end. It was an experience.
- C: I'm not surprised that you were an athlete.
- B: Here's another thing that I want you to know and put into the archives. I sang in my high school choir, also in my college choir, and everybody – not everybody – but I'm frequently asked if I sing. I say, "No," and they say, "Well, you have a wonderful voice." It seems as though everyday I can walk down the halls of the hospital and somebody would ask, "Do you sing?" I would say no, and he would say, "You have a very fine voice." Well, I must have a pretty good voice, but I cannot sing a lick! I can't carry a tune. It's vexing because I would like to.
- C: I try to sing, and I'm like you. I don't have a voice, but that doesn't stop me from singing. I remember seeing you out there at the country club playing golf. You played with Phil Barton, and didn't I see you out there with John Crago, too?
- B: Yes. John has not been too well recently.
- C: I haven't seen John in a while. It's two years since I interviewed him. He's an awfully nice fellow, and incidentally he speaks very highly of you, too. You expect that of John.
- B: I need to call him. We've always gotten along very well. That's one thing about this town. There were some things that happened not to my liking.
- C: You were blazing a trail back then.
- B: Yes. There was one doctor that told me that he was glad I was here because he was tired of taking care of all the black people.
- C: If I list three people, I know I would get one of them.
- B: There weren't but about 15 or 16 doctors here back then.
- C: That's right. I remember when I was on the Board of the country club, and I know that you remember all of the battles that went on back then. I remember one time that it was Earl Powers or someone proposed you for membership and I voted for you. I don't think I was president of the club at the time – when you got in, you'd be amazed at how many people breathed a big sigh of relief. It was a real landmark.
- B: I'm not a member now.
- C: I'm not either. I don't play golf any more, and there are other restaurants in town now.

B: I resigned probably a year ago.

C: I hope they thrive and prosper.

B: Yes.

C: In your time here in Gainesville, you've seen it change a lot. With that little advance sheet I gave you, I'm sure you've been thinking about it. In your mind, what were the biggest changes in Gainesville that you can recall since you've been here.

B: One, of course, is the integration of schools, eating establishments, all businesses, and everything else.

C: That obviously has affected every facet of everyone's life. I think it's been proven to be a godsend, to tell you the truth, and kept this country going. I've asked other people this and for your information it's amazing how many answers you get. A couple of them said, "I-75."

B: Well, there's no question that it was a big thing.

C: Some people said the growth of the University, all of that. They come up with all kinds of different answers, but I think yours is probably all-inclusive. It covers the waterfront. Is there anything else you can think of that you'd like to tell us about?

B: You asked of any experiences while I was growing up. When I built my house, Dave Reaves was the architect. I had a pool in the very beginning. I needed to watch it because it was my responsibility. I would go there to watch practically every night. I went out there one night. The police were there and arrested four or five males.

C: In your pool, and they were skinny dipping?

B: Yes. About twenty years later one of them came up to me, called me aside and confessed that he was one of the ones swimming in my pool.

C: His conscience got the best of him.

B: Yes. Do you want to know who it was?

C: Yes.

B: Perry Foote.

C: Oh, was it Perry Foote?

B: Yes. Perry and I were good friends before and we are still good friends.

C: Oh sure. That's the kind of thing you'd have done or I'd have done. Not anything malicious about it. Well, the guy that used to sneak into the University pool was Bill Harlan. Do you know Bill? He ended up being the swimming coach at the University.

B: I know of him.

C: When he was growing up here in Gainesville, he used to sneak into the University pool, never thinking that he would ever be the swimming coach there.

B: You asked about the most important people that I know of among the physicians of this town. Dr. Maxey Dell would take care of anybody. When I talked with Maxey, he was always formal, and I likewise was formal with him. About 15 years before he retired, he'd say, "Cullen, this is Maxey." He did that about three or four times. I said, "You know? This man wants you to call him Maxey." I started calling him Maxey, and that was what he wanted.

There was a Dr. J.A. Parker, who was black, who was here before I got here. He was still practicing some, and then Dr. Floyd likewise was here in the 70's or 80's and was still practicing medicine.

C: Were there three black doctors when you came here?

B: There were two. Cosby was a dentist. Parker and Floyd were physicians, but they were older and they had no privileges at either of the hospitals.

C: Doctor, tell me about your family.

B: Sure. My wife is LaKay Beasley Banks. She has a B.A. and B.S., double majors in Psychology and Education, from Florida A&M University.

Our oldest son is Barry Wardsworth Banks, who graduated from South Carolina State University with a degree in Business Administration.

Garry Geovani Banks has a B.S. from Davidson College in Charlotte, North Carolina, and M.D. from the University of Florida. He did his residency in Internal Medicine at Orange Memorial Hospital in Orlando, Florida. He has been in a 4-position group practice in Niceville, Florida, since 1990.

Colleen Banks received her B.S. degree in Mathematics from St. Augustine College and her Masters degree in Mathematics from Old Dominion U. At present, she is teaching Mathematics in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

- C: Well, I'll tell you this. It has certainly been a very pleasant experience for me, and I hope it hasn't been too hurtful for you.
- B: No, it's been fun.
- C: I want to thank you again very much for taking the time. This is going to be a valuable piece of archivity – is there such a word? Anyway, we thank you very, very kindly. Again, from the Matheson Historical Museum, you have our undying thanks. Thank you, doctor.