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Interview with: W. DeHart Ayala

Interviewed by: Harris Mullen

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HM:=Harris Mullen

DH:=W. DeHart Ayala

HM: I'm Harris Mullen and I'm with the USF oral history program and today we have a real fine gentleman with us, DeHart Ayala a prominent Tampa businessman. I'm not going to tell you all about him to begin with I'm going to bring him in a little piece at a time because there's too much to tell you about him. He has an interesting family background. His father came from Key West and his mother came from Eastern South Carolina. DeHart tell us a little bit about your mother's people, I know you had some confederate connections too, I'd like to hear about them.

DA: Well they had a lot of confederate connections. My grandfather, mother's father, served as a courier right at the end of the Civil war in 1864, but prior to that he had four older brothers that served in various regiments.

HM: What were their names?

DA: The family name was Mackay and they came from or lived at Mackay's Point, which is at the head of the Broad River, starting between Hilton Head and Paris Island running to the mainland. Mackay's Point was on the mainland where their plantations were. And the family at that....all the older brothers that signed up in the First South Carolina's Volunteers and the Second South Carolina's Regiments as volunteers, prior to my grandfather actually signing up....he was too young to begin with but when he got to be 16 years old he signed up himself and was a courier.

HM: Well how about Mica Jenkins? I know that part of your family. Tell us a little bit about him.

DH: Well General Mica Jenkins was my grandfather's first cousin. They came from Edisto Island, which is midway between Beaufort and Charleston on the coast.

And Mica and my grandfather came from the same place. They were first cousins, my mother then was first cousin, once removed, to General Mica Jenkins.

HM: Well he was a pretty important general.

DA: I don't know, I'll hold this up for you to see. This is a biography of General Mica Jenkins and he did serve, he served until he was killed, he was on General Longstreet's staff and they had one of those unfortunate friendly fire incidents. He and General Longstreet and a couple of others were returning from a reconnaissance, near mid-day, and were unfortunately fired on by some of their own troops.

HM: It was the Wilderness wasn't it, the Wilderness Campaign?

DA: Yes, it was the Wilderness Campaign. General Longstreet was severely wounded but recovered, General Jenkins was hit by the fire in the head and was killed, so at the age of 29 he was gone.

HM: Aren't you going up there soon for another reunion, tell us about that.

DA: Well, in two weeks, I'm going up to South Carolina to Beaufort, really it's not a family reunion it's a memorial service held out in the country at the site of an old church called the Church of Prince William Parish, that's an Episcopal church, an English church, and it's was burned by Sherman's troops as they went through South Carolina before the end of the war. At the time it was burned, and later, the people there in the country didn't have enough money to restore it, and the walls are still standing, I should say they're thick maybe 24 inches thick, thick walls, the walls are still standing.....

HM: Is that tabby construction?

DA: No, it's brick, beautiful brick tapestry construction. And the walls are still standing and every year there is a memorial service held there sponsored by St. Helenas Episcopal Church of Beaufort. They hold this memorial out in the country, there's a cemetery or graveyard alongside of the church, a lot of my family members are buried there. A memorial service is held out under the big oak tree, as we say, it's a beautiful service, attended every year for two weeks following Easter and there are some 600 to 800 people probably are all some sort of decedents of the originals founders of the church. I go and join with some of my distant relatives, maybe ten, twelve, fifteen, but it's not a family reunion as such at all.

HM: Do you see those people during the year that you?

DA: I see one occasionally, if they come through Tampa they'll call me up.

HM: Do you wear name tags?

DA: No, not for this they don't, we're going to a church service, we don't wear name tags. This is a reg...it's an ordinary Episcopal service.

HM: Do they have prayer books?

DA: No, they're not new prayer books, they're old prayer books.

HM: Well, you were pretty close to the Episcopal church and even named, I think, for one of the early rectories in Tampa. Tell us how that happened.

DA: The church you're referring to is St. Andrews Episcopal in downtown Tampa and the rectory you have reference to is Dr. William Wilson DeHart, for whom I was named. He died at the time I was born and he didn't christen me. He died just before I was born, so actually he could'nt. But he and his wife were close friends of my grandfather and grandmother Makay and so he had just died and I assume that they were....here's this new baby we'll just, and he had no children of his own, you know, we got a new baby we'll name him for Dr. DeHart, so that's it. He is the founding rector of St. Andrews Church the church that was built that you remember too. The church was built in 1904, but it succeeded or rather followed a church which was next door, a frame building, do you remember, you and I don't know about it but there are pictures of it existing on the corner next door to where the Brethren Church is today.

HM: Well you'd been an active member of the church and you're still active cause I see you occasionally when I get there.

DA: I try to go, Harris, regularly as much as I can and like you I served on the vestal for many years, I was Sr. Warden, Jr. Warden, Treasurer all sorts of things like that...

HM: You're a Sr. Emeritus Warden, that means you do it or you don't have to do it.

DA: That means I'm Sr. Warden Emeritus but that was just an opportunity, I guess.

Honorary title means nothing much.

HM: Now just go back a little bit more in your early life. You had a kind of an interesting situation in high school. It seems to me I heard that you went to two high schools, that would have to be Hillsborough and Plant because that all that there was.

DA: I did that, yes. I was born downtown on Jackson Street, 701 Jackson Street.

HM: What's there now?

DA: There are no residential houses left there, no residents.

HM: Is there a building there?

DA: It's a parking lot, as usual. That whole area hasn't been used, well when you were growing up, you remember, the whole area Jackson Street and.....

HM: Yes, just a bunch of.....

DA: Now it's down Marion Street, and Morgan Street all back in through....where the present courthouses are were all residential areas and the churches lining Marion Street were just really neighborhood churches because the people just walked and the people that live down there would walk to church, they didn't have too many methods of transportation and so there was....within walking distance. Well, I was born there but, shortly thereafter the family built a house in Seminole Heights and we moved....they moved, I don't remember the move but they took us all out to Seminole.

HM: What street were they on?

DA: They were on Central Avenue, 5506.

HM: Is that house still standing?

DA: Yes, it's still standing it's a big two-story frame house, lot of porches, very comfortable house. I was really raised there so I went to schools....to other schools in that area, went to Seminole Heights grammar school and then after that I went to Memorial Junior High, which was brand new, just built, and after that I started into Hillsborough High School, all these schools were on Central Avenue, either the north or south of where I lived. But after two years, it was a little over two years in

Hillsborough the family moved from Seminole to Beach Park and I changed to Plant High School.

HM: What street were you on in Beach Park, do you remember?

DA: Yes, Neptune Way.

HM: It wasn't a finger then, it wasn't a finger.

DA: No, not at that time. There were only a few houses out there. The Lemar Rankin family had a big house over there, we had a rather smaller one but the Lemar Rankin house.....

HM: Plant was already up there, Plant was built?

DA: Plant was built, probably, Harris, I think in 1927.

HM: Yes. Well, you know, a lot of people always think of Plant as being newer than Hillsborough but actually it was a little bit older than Hillsborough.

DA: Yes, it's a year or so older than Hillsborough, the present Hillsborough. You know there was a Hillsborough High School prior to the building they're using now which later became Jefferson High for awhile.

HM: For quite a while, yes.

DA: Then they built the new school and called it Jefferson, over on Cypress Street.

HM: Well, do you remember any of those Hillsborough students that you went to school with?

DA: Quite well, Julian Lane, for instance, was in the same class I was and he was later Mayor of the City of Tampa.

HM: He didn't move to Plant?

DA: No, he didn't move to Plant, he played sports and.....

HM: He was a football player.

DA: He was a very good football player, I think all state, and later played for the

University of Florida, as you know, and was captain of the team. Julian and I remained friends all these years and still are. Then of course there are people out there like "Big Bill Williams" who played football at Hillsborough too, and you mentioned others, the O'Neill family who had a furniture store.....

HM: Winston?

DA: Well there was Winston, Johnny, Sara Bess and Jenny, the four of them lived maybe two or three blocks from us, so we were close friends.

HM: Okay, so you go ahead and transfer from Hillsborough to Plant and that's it.

DA: I had to transfer to Plant.

HM: Let's take up from Plant, you must have known some people there.

DA: I knew at least three or four.

HM: Let's discuss some of those people, who were they?

DA: At Plant?

HM: Yes.

DA: Well, at one time I knew, Marjorie Moore, Chung and then later Cochran and Aggie McMichael I knew from being at Pass-a-Grill Beach during the summers when they were also there, and Mac Jackson, Harry Root.....

HM: Yes, Harry, you play golf a lot with Harry.

DA: Not then, I didn't play golf then.

HM: Harry was playing though.

DA: Harry was winning titles at.....

HM: Who was on that golf team, do you remember?

DA: The players, the golf team as I remember was Harry Root, Mayor Gramsey.....let's see, Wesley Belestia and Jolly Bailey. I know I'm leaving out one or two but that's about....

HM: You said they won the State Championship?

DA: They were state champions, at least, maybe more than once.

HM: The football team was undefeated that year.

DA: In 1931 the football team was undefeated. They were tied once by Miami but ended up undefeated. They managed for the first time to beat Hillsborough High School.

HM: Was '31 was the first time?

DA: 1931 was the first time they'd ever managed to do anything but lose to Hillsborough.

HM: People don't realize it but you were sort of a Depression child, did you know that?

DA: Well I survived it if that's what you mean. I was 16-years-old in 1930, if we say that's when it started, '29 or '30.....

HM: That's about right, yes.

DA: I was 16-years-old then and I went through it.... I knew and heard about the banks closing and I know my father had lost some money in one of the Citizens Bank closings. Maybe not a whole lot but whatever it was it was a whole lot to him.

HM: Well this time I'll maybe tax you a little bit but do remember how people entertained themselves during the Depression? They stayed home with.....

DA: Well, in my case, I can remember my case....in high school if I had a date I probably had a quarter in my pocket and we usually didn't have a car so I'd have to borrow the car from my parents and hope I had the money to put a gallon or two of gasoline in it. My date and I would end up at the Colonade Drive-In restaurant around with most all the other kids from Plant High School at the time. Or if I had a serious date I'd have to maybe go to a movie that cost 25 cents a piece to get in.

HM: What movies were around then, do you know?

DA: We had the Tampa Theater, the Florida Theater, the Grand.....

HM: There was a Franklin Theater there wasn't there, across the street?

DA: There was the Franklin and before that it was the Boleta, do you remember that? It was named for the Boleta. It was my favorite when I was real small.

HM: Now was that the cowboy movie place?

DA: Yes, that was the cowboy.....that was the serial, we had the Saturday morning serial.....

HM: 10 cents, yes.

DA:Tarzan and what else...

HM: Yes, yes, the serial.

DA: It was straight across the creek from the Tampa Theater.

HM: Well then the Strand was prominent and going then, wasn't it?

DA: Strand and the Grant.....

HM: Victory.

DA: The Victory, yes the Victory was a block away from, where the Tampa Theater was.

HM: You said this class had a manual but the one after it had no manual.

DA: Since you mentioned depression, that's what happened. The following year, this class annual that you're holding is 1932, the 1933 class didn't have an annual because of the Depression.....

HM: The Depression.

DA:The Depression and they didn't have enough money, or didn't think they had enough money to actually pay for producing an annual. That one you're holding cost \$5.....I don't know how I got the \$5 but it was \$5 for every student

that bought one. I probably worked at the grocery store two or three Saturdays to make \$5 so I could buy one.

HM: You mentioned Bobby Harrison, she was on the staff here.

DA: Bobby Harrison was the editor of the Plant Newspaper, _____ Plant and she was also editor of the annual you're holding there. She was very energetic and knew how to get people to do things and could do them herself.

HM: Here's the king and queen of Pantherilla, Charles Fleming and Elmoreen McDuffy.

DA: Elmoreen McDuffy, yes. I'm sure you knew them a nice lookin' family.

HM: Is that Chicken McDuffy's sister?

DA: No, no.....well, I don't know, maybe so, I didn't know him, you might be right, but I didn't know him.

HM: So you're saying the most popular guy was Charles Fleming?

DA: Well.....I already knew them.

HM: You knew Judy.

DA: I knew Judy, she's still around today. Charles Flemming's gone.....(HM interrupts, can not hear rest of response) _____.

HM: Didn't you have a reunion recently?

DA:I saw them, they're still here and very active.

HM: Thumb through there a little bit and pick out a few people and tell us something about them.

DA: Well I'd be glad to, Harris. You asked me a while ago about this king and queen of Pantherilla and that's Charlie Fleming and I knew him quite well, and Elmoreen McDuffy, that's the king and queen. Charlie is no longer with us, I'm sorry to say. He was very popular and played football and played many of the other sports at Plant, he made at least three or four letters each year. This is another one of Charlie Flemming and Judy Farrier here.....

HM: Who is Judy Drake now, isn't she?

DA: Judy Drake, she was the member of a very prominent family here. Her father was a doctor and she has two brothers that are doctors here.... And over here on the next page, this is Emma Marie Lyons and William K. Zwatski. Bill Zwatzki was the son of a prominent Tampa attorney and he was a prominent attorney himself in St. Petersburg. Emma Lyons, Marie Lyons as she called herself too, was the daughter of the family who owned the property where Hillsborough High School is located today, they had a large house there on Central Avenue in the midst of an orange grove. The school board bought the property from them, took the house....moved the house westward three blocks. It's still there today. And then built Hillsborough in the midst of.....

HM: Big chunk of land, yes.

DA: Yes they had to clear it out because they cleared out the trees and they built a school. But that was her family homesite.

HM: Keep going, I'm sure there's more..

DA: Yes, there's a few more here, let's see who else we have that I remember real well. Well, best looking it was Alice Dean Mabry and it was her uncle that Dale Mabry Highway here in Tampa here is named for. He was a dirigible commander and was killed in a crash....I think the dirigible crashed somewhere in the jungle _____ Ohio. And later, because the family still lived in Tampa, I suppose, and too Dale Mabry was originally built, the highway was supposed to connect MacDill and Drew Highway, it ended, up the north end was at Tampa Bay Boulevard it didn't extend to where it does today, and that stretch of road was named after the Tampan who had lost his live in the dirigible crash, which was navy, it was a navy dirigible, and that was.....I think he was Lt. Commander Dale Mabry. She was part of that family. And then over here is Mary Flemming and Donald McMullen and Mary Flemming is still with us, she lives at Canterbury and McMullen is gone. He was quite a musician and had his own high school band, he played saxophone, like the president today. Called him by the nickname of "Bird" McMullen. Let's see, Katheryn Davis and Douglas Hance, both were athletic. Doug Hance was certainly athletic and I guess she was.....I don't remember just what all she did but he was certainly athletic. Then there's Margaret Starbuck and Ed Carter. Ed later became a prominent Tampa doctor. His father was a doctor and he later became a doctor. He's no longer with us either, and I don't think she is.

And then, let me see who's on this next page. This is Ruth Wallace and Jack Moore. Ruth Wallace is the sister of one of the best friends I ever had, her younger brother was Arthur Wallace, a very prominent doctor, obstetrician, he's a very very good one, and a wonderful fella and he's no longer with us, but she still is, she lives near _____. And we had one reunion, not real recently, it was 1982, our 50th, and it's now 15 years, almost.

HM: And who showed up, what kind of percentage did you get?

DA: Well, at the time we were missing a few it seems like, there's a list of them in the brochure they handed everybody as we had the meetings and there were some missing and there was a list of those missing then. But during the last 15 years I think another 50% of those have gone. All of us in that class today would be 81, 82, 83 years old, at least. So, we're really on the way out.

HM: Well, you went into the building business. You were building houses in the middle of the Depression.

DA: I started construction, building a few houses you would say at the....right at the end of the Depression when things were maybe turning just a little bit.....

HM: Yes, I guess in the 40s.....

DA:around 1940.....and I started with, I think 7 or 8 houses over in a subdivision just to the south and west of us here.

HM: Like what streets?

DA: Well _____ Street were the first ones I actually built, in the 4200 block. I bought those lots, the lots were left over from the Florida real estate boom, all the streets were paved.....

HM: The plumbing.....was the sewer in?

DA: Sewers, paving, curbs, water lines, everything was there and the lots were the finest I could afford. They were like \$200 to \$250.

HM: \$250?

DA: Somethin' like that.

HM: Two hundred and fifty dollars.....

DA: For a lot with all utilities installed. But those were left over from the real estate boom.

HM: Well, what would be the total cost of the house?

DA: Total cost, I had a little slight profit come in. The selling price of those houses was \$3,000 a piece, including the lots, of course.

HM: What can you build today for \$3,000?

DA: I don't know, every time I try to do something around here it costs me more than that to even get them into the front yard. I spend that much on trees around here.

HM: Was it hard for those people to find loans for their homes?

DA: Not really, we had one of the government programs at the time, the Federal Housing Administration and they required 10% down, that is the perspective buyers had to pay \$300 down and assume a mortgage of \$2,700 which was repayable at about \$24 a month.

HM: Do you play on the golf course any more, your old high school friends?

DA: No, right in the midst of all those old fellows, Harry Root and Mayor Gramsey and.....

HM: Do you have a regular foursome with them?

DA: I play with them frequently. I also play with the others too, I play a lot these days with Al Lopez who you know is the ex-baseball player and a member of the Hall of Fame, a Hall of Famer.

HM: Don't have many of those.

DA: Wonderful fella! He's a great athlete and well up in years, he's 88 years old and on the golf course he can shoot his age.

HM: You can shoot your age can't you?

DA: Occasionally, I still do.

HM: I wish I could shoot an 82.

DA: It's hard to do, hard to do. It used to be easy now it's hard.

HM: How often do you play?

DA: I play at least twice a week, if all goes well.

HM: Well, you're in great shape, do you take any exercise?

DA: Well, I do that and then I walk and then there's a _____ a gym which I used for awhile and now _____ you know they closed it, so I visit Harry Smith's gym every once in awhile.

HM: DeHart you have a son-in-law that lives in my old house. He's had a rather interesting career, can you tell us a little something about him.

DA: Well, I can, I can start by telling you that he's the son of Maynard Ramsey _____ the golf player. His name is Maynard but his nickname is Mike, Mike Ramsey married my daughter who's portrait you see over there, when she was a little girl. I can tell you he started Plant High School as a.....well I won't say a star athlete, but he played sports there.....(interrupted)

HM: Isn't he something in _____?

DA: He is, he went to undergraduate school in Atlanta to Emory then moved from there to graduate school at Duke, where he took a medical degree, and then a Ph.D. in Medical Engineering. That may not be the exact term, but a Ph.D. in medical device engineering. He's an inventor, he does not practice medicine, but he does invent medical equipment. One of his better ones is used throughout the country in all the hospitals during operations. It's a monitor to be used while patients are under anesthesia.

HM: Blood pressure?

DA: It monitors the blood pressure, heart rate, temperature and respiration.

HM: Now who's this young lady back here?

DA: That young lady is my wife Jeanne who's maiden name was Johnston.

HM: Tell us a little bit about her family.

DA: Well her mother.....(interrupted)

HM: I know they are from the Dade City area.

DA: Well her mother's side was from the D.C. Lee family of Lake Thonotasassa. Mr. Lee, her grandfather was a prominent citrus grower around Lake Thonotasassa, and her mother was one of his children. Her grandmother was an Edwards and they were the same family that started Pasco Packing Company, they always _____ the Lees and the Edwards. Jean's father was Fred Johnston and he was general sales manager for the Florida Citrus Exchange, it was a grove owner to a grower. So their family were all in the citrus business.

HM: Well, Fred and I are old friends, we went to school together.

DA: Frederick.

HM: Frederick, yes, Fred's son.

DA: Yes, Jean's brother.

HM: Who painted that, do you know, Cassidy, was that?

DA: Asa Cassidy, who was doing some real good work in Tampa back in those days.

HM: This was done before you were married, right?

DA: Yes, that was probably in 19....I want to say 1938 or '39, because we were married in 1940 so it had to be shortly before that.

HM: Well, DeHart you've had an interesting life, I wish we had more time we could probably knock off a few more books.

DA: Well, since you can get a close up, we were talking awhile ago about General Mika Jenkins, this is a biography and done by a grandson of his who lives at, let's see, he lives in Spartanburg, South Carolina now. And he put this book together,

just recently published. Beautiful pictures.....(interrupted).....beautifully done.

HM: I want to go to Edisto, I was trying to get tickets.

DA: This is the Jenkins family house called Brickhouse at Edisto Island and the reason that they named it Brickhouse, which seems like it doesn't amount to anything.....there weren't any bricks available. They had to bring these bricks in on a ship. This house dates from the late 1600s and it's survived after the Civil War but burned inadvertently in 1927.

HM: Oh, this is before it burned then.

DA: Yes. Of course there were flankers, it was much bigger at one time. The flankers either burned or were taken off of it. It had a third story also like your old house. I don't know if this house existed then but it's not quite as large as yours was, but it's a fairly large house. I've seen it many times. The walls are still standing.

HM: Lookin' right out on the water?

DA: Yes, I know the water, let me see if I can tell you, yes, the water's this side. No, I've seen it many times, the Jenkins family descendants still own the property and still have summer cottages all around this one.....that you don't see in this picture. And they're there every weekend during the summers. They fish and they've got, still, they've got some agriculture going on there.

HM: What are some of your early memories of Tampa, did you ride the streetcar much when you were a kid?

DA: Oh yes, that was our main means of transportation. We could ride from Seminole Heights, where I lived, to downtown for 5 cents, a nickel.

HM: You had to get a transfer?

DA: We could get a transfer from there and go to Ybor City on the Ybor City Line or West Tampa on the West Tampa Line, no further charge, or you could transfer to Fort Tampa, and we went.....on the Fort Tampa Line you went on out to.....(interrupted)

HM: All the way out.

DA: Well, but where you crossed Howard at the Bayshore they charged you another nickel. From there you could go on to Fort Tampa, so you could ride from Sulphur Springs to Fort Tampa for 10 cents. A matter of 15 miles.

HM: At least, yes. Did you ever do that? Did you ever go fishing'?

DA: Yes, we did that.

HM: Did you go swimming in Sulphur Springs.....?

DA: Many many times, many times, it was beautiful blue.....it's still there but the water is not sufficiently pure anymore for people to swim in. I was gonna tell you one story about being out there as a kid. When I was about 12 years old, some of us around there heard about the Gandy Bridge, it had just been built, say 1926, we were then 12 or 13 years old. So, two friends and I got on our bicycles, each brought a sandwich and we got on our bicycles and rode from the other side of Hillsborough Avenue or Central Avenue down towards town then out, what was then Grand Central and then Memorial Highway until we got to Westshore, from Westshore we rode southward to Gandy Bridge, then we rode across the bridge to the far side. We were tuckered out so we sat around there and we got cold drinks somewhere to go with our sandwiches. Then we started.....we were a long way from home by then, close to 20 miles, I guess. So we turned around and we then had to ride back. Well coming back we were three tired boys, we finally got home just about dusk, we'd came all the way back through Sunset Park and Beach Park and down around the edge of town and then back out to Seminole Heights.

HM: How do you think you could do that on a bicycle today? You wouldn't live long.

DA: I don't think you'd get to Buffalo Avenue before you'd be killed by the cars. But this was in 1926 and there wasn't that much traffic so we did it.

HM: Well DeHart, I think our time's up and I want to thank you very much for allowing us to come into your home here and talk to you about Tampa and all that you were involved in.

DA: Well thank you Mr. Mullen

HM: We'll have to have another chat, it seems like we've just hit the surface but.....

DA: You know more history here than I do. You're a journalist and historian.

HM: This is all documented now and it'll be a hundred years from now someone will be looking at this saying, I wonder who those guys are that are talking about Tampa.