



# The FBI Oral History Project

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## **Interview of Former Special Agent of the FBI William H. Billups (1965 – 1969) Interviewed by Brian R. Hollstein On November 11, 2008**

*Edited for spelling, repetitions, etc. by Sandra Robinette on January 21, 2009. Edited with Mr. Billup's corrections by Sandra Robinette on September 16, 2009.*

Brian R. Hollstein: My name is Brian R. Hollstein. Today's date is the 11th of November, 2008. I'm with William Billups. Say a few words, just your name and a couple of things, just so I can check that the recorder is set up.

William H. Billups: Okay. My name is William Billups. Everybody calls me Bill. I'm a resident of Yonkers, New York. However, I was born in New Rochelle, New York, which is really a special place in my heart (chuckling). And I attended the same high school as did my interviewer (laughing).

Hollstein: Just a couple of things before we get started here. We don't want to have any mention of classified information, of course. And, no informants, please. Any naming or even if they've been. And no sensitive investigative techniques.

The material will be reviewed by the Bureau for classified information only. And they've been very good about sticking to that and we haven't had any difficulty. What we usually do is walk through the person's career, before the Bureau and during the Bureau and maybe a couple of words [about] afterwards, very quickly.

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: And then we'll go back and talk about particular experiences and what have you.

Waitress: Are you ready or do you want a minute? You can stay as long as you like.

Hollstein: Okay, we'll stay as long as we like (laughing).

Billups: (Laughing)

Waitress: I gotta be here till three. So that's three hours.

Hollstein: Three hours. (Chuckling) We'll be giving you a call a little bit later.  
(Laughing)

Billups: (Laughing)

Hollstein: Alright. We'll just sit here. That's good enough.

Billups: (Laughing)

Hollstein: So you were born in New Rochelle ....

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: ... grew up here

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: And I have special knowledge since I lived here all my, most of my childhood, until I went off to college. Whereabouts in town did you live?

Billups: I was born, literally born, at 58 Morris Street, which was the primary ghetto in New Rochelle.

Hollstein: Yes. Over by Lincoln School

Billups: Yes. Right by Lincoln School. I had a twin brother who died four and a half years ago.

Hollstein: Oh.

Billups: And, literally, we were born in the house because, in the '30s, the few black physicians who practiced in New Rochelle, did not have hospital privileges. So, as a result of that, most of the kids - and every member of my family, my four older sisters - were born at home. I mean, with a midwife, who was Mrs. Henrietta Mills, who was my mother's very dearest and best friend.

Hollstein: So you grew up here in town, then, and went to New Rochelle High School?

Billups: Yes, I grew up, like I said, on Morris Street. I attended Lincoln School. In those days, primary school went to the seventh grade, and then from there we went to New Rochelle High School. So it was a five year experience at New Rochelle High School.

- Hollstein: And you played football there, if I remember correctly.
- Billups: Yes. I played football, basketball, and I ran track at New Rochelle High School. Yes.
- Hollstein: That was a powerhouse, I might add, at the time.
- Billups: Yes, it was. And it was a wonderful time to be at New Rochelle High School. I had a lot of fun.
- Hollstein: So after high school, what did you, what happened then?
- Billups: Well, I was, I've always kind of been a failure who somehow succeeded. I attended Brandeis University. I was a quarterback in high school ... and I had no plans to attend college. In fact, the plan was to join the Army upon graduating from New Rochelle High School. However, my football was good enough to attract the attention of a couple of scouts. I went to Brandeis University where I was the first quarterback on the team that played its first intercollegiate varsity football game. Brandeis was founded in 1948.
- Hollstein: Hmmm!
- Billups: Yes. So, we played the University of New Hampshire's varsity in my first year at Brandeis University, and I stunk (laughing).
- Hollstein: But you were a pioneer. Once again a pioneer, right!
- Billups: (Laughing) Yes, pioneer. However, I really was not prepared for college when I went to Brandeis, and I indicated I had not prepared for it. So the academic rigors were very tough for me. However, I always felt that I was out of my element when I realized that I met students who had come from all over the world to attend Brandeis University. So it was very elitist and the youngsters had wonderful backgrounds and had done well academically really. It really bothered me in that it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. I thought that I couldn't do the work and so subsequently kind of gave up.
- Hollstein: Hmm-hmm.
- Billups: While I was invited to return to school, I would have been on academic probation with no scholarship. So that was a pretty defining moment in my life.

Billups: After my first year of Brandeis, which had been a total failure, I decided, after my mother advised that I could not stay home, I had to go to school. In spite of what I had done, she assured me, and told me that I had the wherewithal to make it if I only applied myself. Having heard those words and received marching orders from her, I had no choice.

Hollstein: Uh-huh.

Billups: ... my father had just died ...

Hollstein: Ohh ...

Billups: ... I applied to Morgan State College and went down to Maryland and spent two days where I was tested. As a result of the testing, they felt that I was smart enough and had the wherewithal to attend school, which I did. And I went there on an athletic scholarship where I played football and basketball. And I completed the four year term with some success.

Hollstein: Morgan State is where?

Billups: In Baltimore, Maryland.

Hollstein: In Baltimore.

Billups: While I was there, I was a member of the ROTC Unit. At the conclusion of my third year, I attended the camp at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. I had a very excellent record there and I was awarded the Distinguished Military Award at the, I'm sorry, Fort Meade, Maryland. I graduated as a Distinguished Military Student from Morgan State College; went into the service. I spent two years in the Army and it was a good time for me. I subsequently left the service as a First Lieutenant and did some Reserve time for four or five years and then finally I was discharged from the United States Army.

After that, I went to work for the Youth House in the Bronx, which is a treatment facility for youngsters who have been in trouble and ended up in the court system. The mission of the Youth House is to evaluate these youngsters, psychologically and educationally, in order to help the courts better prepare for what was the best course of action for these kids.

Hollstein: Sure.

Billups: So I stayed there for two years.

Hollstein: Had that been a result of any of your training, your college work?

Billups: Yes. I was a sociology major in college and that sort of fit in with what I had done in college.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: And things worked out well there. But I left after two years. And I ended up in White Plains, New York, where I became the Director of the George Washington Carver Community Center. It was a wonderful, wonderful situation. Four hundred minority youngsters were members of the center and we put together a wonderful tutorial program; and, of course, the athletic and recreational programs. And the kids seemed to flourish. I got involved with them as a go-between with the White Plains High School Principal and Superintendent of Schools, to ensure that these kids were getting a fair shake and everything possible was being done to ensure that they were going to make it. And during the time I was there, I had occasion to visit the Manhattanville College. That ultimately resulted in about forty girls coming down to the Center to tutor our kids. So that was a wonderful program that had ...

Hollstein: Yeah. A great (**unintel**) ... yeah.

Billups: ... great, great results. It was wonderful for the girls who had come from wonderful backgrounds who really had very little experience with minority kids. And the kids, who had had very little experience with women – young women who were motivated and interested in helping others. So the program worked out to be one of the great achievements at the Carver Community Center.

One day in October, Bob Stevenson walked in from the FBI (laughing). And he was inquiring about an associate of mine who had applied for the Bureau.

Hollstein: Uh-huh!

Billups: His name is Clifford Brown, not friend, but someone I have known for ages.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: And Bob interviewed me regarding Clifford Brown's candidacy.

Hollstein: Ah-huh.

Billups: And at the conclusion of the interview, Stevenson said to me, "Billups, you should think about joining the FBI!" (Chuckling) And I smiled and I said, "What are you talking about?" (Laughing) He said, "You'd make a wonderful, wonderful Special Agent." And I said, "But," you know, "I don't qualify because," you know, "I'm neither an accountant nor a lawyer."

Hollstein: Yes.

Billups: But I said, upon reflection, "neither is the guy that we're talking about." So he said, "Listen, you're going to join the FBI." (Laughing) And right away, this was the start of a wonderful relationship.

Hollstein: Yes.

Billups: At the conclusion of the interview, Bob said, "Listen, I'm going to be in touch with you." And, to his word, the next week he called and said, "What are you going to do about what we talked about?" I said, "Ohh, I thought you were kidding, really." And he said, "Listen, you call down there" ... and he gave me the name – and I can't think of that name. But anyway, I called and made an appointment to go down to take the test. And about three to four weeks later, I went down to 201 East 69th Street. (laughing)

Hollstein: Right. (Chuckling) Famous address.

Billups: (Laughing) Yes. I took the three exams, as I recall. And I was advised that I had done well on them and that I was a serious candidate. So I called Bob and he said, "See, I told ya you could do this." (Laughing) And this was in October and, sometime after that, I did the physical and then, of course, they did the background investigation.

Having completed all of that, I received a letter in December, a telegram from J. Edgar Hoover, in December 1964.

Hollstein: That was the old days. Right? Telegrams.

Billups: Yes. Advising me that I had been accepted and that I was slated to come to Quantico on March 4th, 1965.

Hollstein: Nineteen sixty-five.

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: A date that will live on in (laughing) ...

Billups: (Laughing) ... in infamy.

Hollstein: That's interesting, though, because, well, you were a pioneer.

Billups: Yeah.

Hollstein: I mean that's one of the reasons why we're talking. But well before the time that people think of these changes ...

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: ... **(unintel)**

Billups: Yes, '65.

Hollstein: Mid '60s.

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: We're back on again, now. What was your feeling? African Americans didn't do these things. And it was at a time when things weren't going awfully well. It was the civil rights era and nobody knew what the end result would be. What was the reaction of your friends and family when you said you were joining the Bureau?

Billups: Word got around Westchester, specifically New Rochelle, that I was going to go to the FBI. There was some concern that I was somehow joining the enemy. And while as a youngster, I listened to the radio show, the *FBI In War and Peace*.

Hollstein: Didn't we all?

Billups: (Laughing) Yes. I never thought that I would be able to join this wonderful organization. So there was some concern on the part of my friends, given the reputation, the negative reputation that black folks had about police and FBI.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: And that I was joining this organization. My own feeling was that I was proud as punch to have been accepted into what was the best and most well-known law enforcement organization in the world. So, there was no trepidation on my part.

Billups: And honestly, I was delighted. I went down to Quantico with a great feeling that I was going to be a member of this world famous organization. Personally, I felt that while the civil rights situation in the United States was horrible, I felt that maybe one of the ways to change, to bring about change, was to be a part of the organization and work within to bring about the much needed change.

Hollstein: New Rochelle, at the time, was, at least from the white people's point of view, was a liberal town.

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: And we were trying hard. I remember kids coming up, well, it was after your time in high school ... I graduated in '57 ... they brought kids up from Alabama and various other places to ...

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: ... to see how an integrated high school would work.

Billups: Worked. Yeah.

Hollstein: And it was an attempt, at least ...

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: I don't ever recall asking an African-American person what they thought of it but it was an attempt. The fact that we had only one high school ...

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: ... was another one. But things broke down after that. In the early '60s ...

Billups: Early '60s. Yes.

Hollstein: ... we weren't doing awfully well in this town.

Billups: Yes. And I was aware of that. And I hark back to the time I was at New Rochelle High School, and how it was not easy. First of all, the north end of town was sort of off limits to us, after dark. More importantly, the educational model in New Rochelle was one that encouraged black youngsters to chase non-Regents courses.

Hollstein: Uh-huh.

Billups: And to specialize in the commercial education program.

Hollstein: Track?

Billups: ... yeah, the commercial track at New Rochelle High School.

Hollstein: Oh, I see.

Billups: So there were differences. There were very few youngsters who took part in the theater group ... Tower Players. Well, when we went to New Rochelle High School in 1946, September of 1946, it was a difficult transition because I come from Lincoln School.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: You know, an all black situation to New Rochelle High School and we were met with some degree of ugliness.

Hollstein: Oh really?

Billups: Yeah. Some degree of ugliness, yeah. And I can recall being very, very sensitive about my hair because a couple of the white kids used to say that we had ugly hair. And a lot of that sort of thing went on.

Hollstein: Ohhh?

Billups: But we hung in there and I was elected as President of the 1957 Senior Class, New Rochelle High School.

Hollstein: I was just thinking about it, one of the co-presidents of our Senior Class also was an African-American.

Billups: And Jessie Arnelle, who was President of the SGO.

Hollstein: Right.

Billups: Yeah. So, even in the '50s, small steps were being made to improve the overall situation. With those exceptions in the '60s, things were pretty good at New Rochelle High School. I continue to go to the football games and I see that the kids get along very well at NRHS.

Hollstein: Yes.

Billups: And there was a time when that was not true. I remember going to basketball games where the black kids at New Rochelle High School sat together, as did the white kids. And I saw the same thing on the other side of the court. So there was a real breakdown and the kids were very, very conscious of their race and these were terrible times to be in high school. However, that has all passed. The city moved forward and conditions changed. And, of course, the residential patterns have changed and black people are free to live anywhere they can afford.

Hollstein: Uh-hmm.

Billups: In my experience, there were three ghettos, three black ghettos in New Rochelle. The Morris Street areas, the one in West New Rochelle area, and lower Main Street.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: Yes, three - West New Rochelle, the Morris Street area, and lower Main Street, also called the "Hollow."

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: And there was very little exchange and inter-change during that period. So all of that has changed.

Hollstein: Hopefully for the better and hopefully it'll ...

Billups: Oh, absolutely.

Hollstein: ... it'll stay.

Billups: But I was delighted with my appointment to the Bureau. At 76 years old, I'm still delighted and very proud. I'm still happy and it was one of the best things I have ever done and I will go to my grave thinking that.

Hollstein: So after ... after ... how was training school? What was that like?

Billups: Very interesting. I enjoyed it. And I didn't have any problem with any of the other Agents. I was one of two black guys in a class of sixteen. And never had a problem. And Gene McCarthy was a dear friend and we continue our friendship. There are five or six Agents with whom I'm still in touch. And this is forty-four years ago. So training school was very positive; didn't have any problem. We were back and forth between Washington and Quantico.

Hollstein: Right.

Billups: In those days.

Hollstein: Both segregated cities.

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: At that time.

Billups: Yeah. But we pretty much stayed together and did not have a problem. And all of the guys in my class accepted me, as far as I knew. And there was never an ugly word other than those related to the competition (laughing) ...

Hollstein: (Laughing)

Billups: ... in New Agents ...

Hollstein: Yes.

Billups: ...sixteen, I think it was.

Hollstein: Yeah.

Billups: So, it was a wonderfully positive experience.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: And I enjoyed it. Enjoyed it and it was a lot of fun.

Hollstein: And from training school you went to where?

Billups: Pittsburgh.

Hollstein: Pittsburgh.

Billups: Yes. I went out to Pittsburgh and, of course, I was the only black Agent there. And all of my friends, here in New Rochelle, thought that I was going to have a difficult time. They were surprised and, I think unhappy, when I told them that I went to Pittsburgh; I was the only black guy out there; I was fully accepted – never had a problem with the, probably, 80 Agents between Pittsburgh and West Virginia. And, it was a very positive experience and I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it.

Billups: I was cited for bravery. We were surveilling an area and attempting to track down a couple of bank robbers when I saw a young man who had been stabbed in the Hill district of Pittsburgh. I went to his aid and he told me that he had been stabbed. We called the police and then I ran upstairs in the building where he had been stabbed and I apprehended the man who stabbed him. The 15-year-old subsequently died and I apprehended the man who had stabbed him.

So my experience in Pittsburgh was very positive and I had a lot of fun. And there was a camaraderie that was just wonderful and I was fully accepted.

Hollstein: Was it the usual cars and fugitives? That type of thing for the first year?

Billups: Yes. Bank robbery was a big thing in Pittsburgh in those days. I think Pittsburgh was the bank robbery capital of the world because they had experimented with satellite branches.

Hollstein: Those were the CCTV cameras in or the, you know, they were film cameras at the time.

Billups: But they were, the banking industry, they had banks all over Pittsburgh. Then they were, it was that idea that, you know, the more branches the merrier. So banking institutions were popping up everywhere in Pittsburgh. Banks were easy targets. So bank robberies were the big thing in Pittsburgh in 1965.

Hollstein: And that's always been the traditional action ...

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: ... anyway (**unintel**) the bank robbers, robberies, were always exciting.

Billups: Yes. And I had a lot of help.

Hollstein: You were all alone as an African-American?

Billups: Yes. But that did not make a difference and I did not experience anything but goodwill.

Hollstein: You were single at the time?

Billups: No, I was married.

Hollstein: You were married?

Billups: Married. My family was here.

Hollstein: Because it was just a year.

Billups: Yes. I was there less than a year.

Hollstein: Yes. A lot of people did that.

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: And left the family at home, or where they came from. After Pittsburgh then, where did you head?

Billups: In December of 1965, I was transferred to New York

Hollstein: Uh-huh.

Billups: So I came back at the end of December 1965 and I reported to duty on January 2<sup>nd</sup> to 201 69th Street.

Hollstein: (Laughing)

Billups: I was assigned to 43, Squad 43.

Hollstein: Well known. And what were you working on at that time?

Billups: We were working on Internal Security. The focus was on the black groups.

Hollstein: Was that a difficult thing to ...

Billups: Yes, it was.

Hollstein: ... get in over your head. But some of these characters were really bad guys.

Billups: Yeee-s. Some of them were. **(Unintel)**

Hollstein: I'm thinking like Black Panthers and that crowd.

Billups: Yes. That was sort of an ancillary concern. The Panthers were handled by another squad. But, there was some crossover there.

Hollstein: Yes.

Billups: But most of it, I thought, was unfair and that we targeted people who were in search of democracy. And the climate in those days was one that was unfair and anyone that took exception to what was going on in the United States found themselves being accused of being Communist.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: So, there was some of that. Most of the black groups, now they were looking for democracy. They were looking for what America promised everyone else - *democracy*. And some of our activity was insensitive to the real objective: democracy for all.

Hollstein: Uh-huh.

Billups: I had to do it. I think the thing that was most difficult was trying to recruit young, black college students to attend meetings with some of these groups and I really balked at it because I felt that once these kids attended these meetings, they could end up on their side. But, more importantly, it would affect their ability to get jobs in the future. I refused to do it and there was some touch and go there. And I thought that I was going to get fired. However things worked out and I remained in the good graces of the Bureau.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: Because I felt that I was not good enough to, I guess. But more importantly, that these kids wanted democracy. They wanted freedom. And so to target them and to taint them for the rest of their lives was not fair and I wasn't going to. So after some travail the decision was made that some others should do that.

Hollstein: It's a big office. There were a thousand of us there.

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: Surely there must be somebody that ...

Billups: Sure. Yes.

Hollstein: ... you know, in some other place that ...

Billups: Right.

Hollstein: Yeah.

Billups: So, as a result of that, you know, it didn't hurt me at all and I had a wonderful relationship with the Assistant Director and his senior staff, who were really fine people. Most of the senior management felt pretty much the same way that I did. So I was on solid ground and there was a lot of support.

Hollstein: Uh-huh.

Billups: For the position I had taken.

Hollstein: Well, by this time, New York Office had quite a few African-Americans.

Billups: No. There were just three of us – Jim Young, Aubrey Lewis, and myself. Aubrey Lewis was the first guy to join the Bureau. Oh, I forgot Harold Carr. He and Jim. But Aubrey was there along with the three of us ...

Hollstein: So, not that big a crowd, then, at all.

Billups: Three.

Hollstein: Yeah.

Billups: The three of us.

Hollstein: There we are. We're back on again, now.

Billups: After a couple of years I was transferred to the Hijacking Squad. And I really loved that. Bob Sweeney ...

Hollstein: Right.

Billups: ... was the Supervisor. And that, of course, was exciting. And we were really chasing the bad guys (chuckling).

Hollstein: Yeah. Yeah.

Billups: Yes. So I stayed there until July 1969. It was a sad day when I decided that I had to move on because of our children. And it always, I've always thought that I missed something; and that my career was truncated by that concern.

Hollstein: Yes.

Billups: But it was a very, very special time in my life. And I'm very proud of every moment that I spent and I've told people, with whom I've discussed this, that the men in the Bureau were some of the finest people I'd ever met. As a group, they were very decent and concerned about democracy and that it should apply to everyone.

I recall when Martin Luther King was killed probably around a 150 guys stopped by my desk to offer condolences because they felt it was wrong. They also felt that some of the treatment he received from the Bureau was not appropriate, but there was an overall feeling that in America, democracy was for everyone. And that we had not fulfilled that obligation.

Hollstein: Uh-huh.

Billups: So they were the most decent people

Hollstein: There were a lot of the, getting into a debate, but the perfectibility of democracy was such and we all hoped that things (**unintel**) ...

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: Where we're not doing too well, we'll do better.

Billups: Sure.

Hollstein: Would you recommend to a young person, coming ... coming up today, that ... to consider the Bureau?

Billups: Absolutely. Whenever I see and talk with young people, that's probably the second thing that I tell them and I have become a preacher (laughing). I feel deeply that this is the kind of career that the kids should consider. I indicate that there's nothing that I would not do to assist them in pursuing a career with the Bureau. It's a pretty hard sell for a lot of African-American young men because, again, they have this feeling about law enforcement, in general; that it's not a good, that it's not a good career because of the terrible past experiences with law enforcement.

Hollstein: Times have changed though, too, in terms of there are a lot more opportunities ...

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: ... for young African-Americans now ...

Billups: Oh absolutely. Yes. Yes.

Hollstein: ... that never were there.

Billups: Never were there.

Hollstein: The military was ...

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: ... was a good place ...

Billups: Pretty much, yes.

Hollstein: But now, there's ...

Billups: Yes.

Hollstein: Which is nice.

Billups: Yes. That's the way it should be.

Hollstein: Sure.

Billups: That's the way it should be. But I never miss an opportunity to tell kids about my experience and to suggest that they at least consider it.

Hollstein: Uhm-hmm.

Billups: So I will continue to do that. Yes.

Hollstein: So you spent the rest of your career, then, at Exxon?

Billups: Yes. I was there for twenty-five years. The first eight years I was in New York City at the headquarters and I was part of a five-man group that was responsible for overseeing the worldwide security. It was a wonderful job. I went to places I'd never dreamed of. And it was a lot fun and I worked with wonderful people who treated me with dignity and respect. In fact, my boss, one of the nicest men I've ever met, treated me like a younger brother. (Laughing)

Hollstein: A brother. (Laughing)

Billups: So I was, indeed, fortunate. And I met my wife there, my second wife. And we've been married now for almost thirty-five years. I was assigned to Exxon Research and Engineering Company in Jersey. I had a wonderful assignment. In addition to security and safety, I picked up the Worker's Compensation. So I learned a new set of skills and I was there for fifteen years. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

I've been a very fortunate man. As I said, I'm a failure but have somehow been successful. And people have treated me better than I should have been treated. (Laughing)

Hollstein: (Laughing)

Billups: So life has been wonderful. I have no regrets.

And I want to thank especially: John Kearney, Jim Cusack, Jack Westoff, Bob Sweeney, John Dunleavy, Al Chestone, Gene McCarthy, Ed McGoey, Aubrey Lewis, Jim Young, Dan Lucking, Dan Blake, John Burke, Jerry Sea, Everette Huff, to name a few.

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