The Center for Public History Studies

Department of History - University of Houston

Oral History Project

Rev. William A. Lawson

HOW A CHURCH LEADER AT THE SIDE OF MARTIN LUTHER KING BECAME A LEADING FIGURE IN THE CITY OF HOUSTON

The interview was conducted

By

Dorothee Sauter

At Rev. William Lawson's home

On

October 20, 2004

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PREFACE

The Public History Program at the University of Houston under the guise of Professor Dr. Joseph Pratt collects memories about Houston's past captured by people who lived through historic events and processes.

The purpose of my oral history project is to gain insight in the history of the Third Ward's rich past before, during and after the Civil Right Movements. Basis points of interest are the daily life for individuals and for different collective entities in a neighborhood distorted by racism. How was public and private life organized? What were the local patterns of social life? What were the celebrated events and where and how were they celebrated?

Through the understanding of peoples' past, changes in their lives, their sense of community, their hope in their children, and their religious thoughts, I intend to gain a heightened sense of this neighborhood's past.

In a next step the facts of this interview are aimed to assist with the redesign of Houston's Emancipation Park in the Third Ward, a thesis project at the University of Illinois, Department of Landscape Architecture, entitled "Visibility for Houston's Emancipation Park: the Development and Application of a Design Process inspired by Theories of Cultural Landscapes," which I intend to complete in 2005.

CIRCUMSTANCE OT THE INTERVIEW

On my introductory visit I found Mr. and Mrs. Lawson in their newly built home held in light colors providing many rooms, in order to receive many different guests at different times.

At the day of the interview, October 20, 2004, Rev. Lawson was 76 years old. He showed no signs of an older man, in his red shirt he gave the impression to be ready to deal with what ever circumstance the day would bring. There were several phone calls before and after the interview.

For the interview we set up in a more private family room filled with books and memorabilia adjacent to his office where he was occupied to organize the library after his retirement from Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. I recognized quickly that Reverend Lawson in his very organized and thoughtful way, was very well aware of the possible questions of interest I had outlined on the introductory visit. The process of the interview went very well. I left his home with the impression that I just had met an extraordinary personality, competent to deal with all kinds of different people, from a prisoner to the major of the city, or to be himself a speaker at an international conference. I was deeply impressed. He spoke about his life in a much broader view than just about his own work. Rev. Lawson informed me that a book and a video are available at the WALIPP Foundation 5445 Almeda Road, Suite 505, Houston, Texas 77004, phone 713 528 1200.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS:

I
Your upbringing, schools, social environment

How did your family deal with oppression/segregation?

Did your family enlighten thoughts/goals for your lifetime?

Time in college

II
Can you remember important events before the Civil Right Movements?

III
What circumstances made you a leading figure during the Civil Rights Movement?

What were/are important events and movements in Houston?

Thanksgiving/Junetheenth?

What were the changes, or what was every day life after the Civil Rights Movement in the Third Ward regarding the community, Texas Southern University, University of Houston?

What were/are the goals for the Baptist Church on Wheeler Avenue?

What African American festivities do you and your church celebrate through the year?

Begin Tape 1, Side A

Lawson: Well, I was born at a very transitional economic time in the United States.

I was born in 1928. We were just coming out of a period of very high prosperity and you recall that in 1929 the stock market failed. And we went into what was then called the great depression. That made a tremendous difference in the economic welfare and well being of the United States. All the major cities of course were affected by the depression more than the rural areas.

I was born in St. Louis Missouri. I was born to a mother and father who were in the process of trying to determine whether if they should stay in St. Louis where the depression fail or not. My father decided, he was from Mississippi, he could not support a family if he stayed in St. Louis. My mother decided, because her parents lived in St. Louis, she didn't want to leave. So they separated in 1930 and ultimately got divorced about 10 years later. I was brought up in a single family parent home. So I was brought up by extended family in my grand parent's home with my mother and her sister and her sister's children. I had literally five brothers and sisters. It was a loving home. We didn't realize a lot of the economic difficulty we were facing. My mother served as a secretary in an insurance company. And she struggled to keep us alive. We determined that we would never go on what was then called relief now called welfare, but we

wouldn't because my grandfather was a very proud man. And he didn't want us to do that. But it was so difficult for the six children and the two women, that we often found ourselves scrunching for food. This was during the thirties. Then in 1936/37 it was obvious that the German fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, was going to make the war European wide. Then when he established relationships with Italy and with Japan, the axis came into being, and it was very clear that our president, who was at the time Franklin D. Roosevelt, would have to make some decisions about what to do with the war. I am growing up during all this time. Much of my childhood was spent during that period of economic depression and of the clouds of war beginning to storm over Europe.

Sauter: Still in St. Louis?

Lawson: Still in St. Louis. In 1941 the United States was drawn into war. And President Franklin D. Roosevelt, unlike president Hoover felt, that we could not leave, particularly Great Britain, in this thing alone, so we joined the war in 1941. 1 was at that time largely unaware of what was going on. I knew little about the holocaust, little about what people were facing in Germany, little about the Japanese mind set. But I later learned that these were many of the factors that shaped our own American mind set. We learned a great deal from the discipline of the German military, from their precision, and from the dedication of the Japanese military. So our own military has been very much influenced by the kind of military that Germany and Japan had developed.

My mother met a man in 1940. She was now divorced. While she was secretary in an insurance office, this man came in to change his benefits. His wife had died right the year before. He had two children, so he wanted to change his beneficiary. My mother transacted that piece of business for him and he asked if he could see her. So they began to date. About a year later they got married and he became my stepfather. He was a man who lived in Kansas. After he and my mother had married, I now had now a real brother and a sister. Now that they were married he went to take her back to Kansas. So we left St. Louis and we moved to Kansas. That would have been 1940, 1941. So the rest of my upbringing was in Kansas City, Kansas. St. Louis was a metropolitan city. Kansas City, Kansas, was the rural part of greater Kansas Missouri, which was an urban area and was in a different state. My father was a very strong churchman, he was a deacon in his church. So my mother and 1, who had never been very active in church before, began to regularly go to the Baptist church. And professed faith in Christ in the Baptist church. I am twelve years old now, just living in Kansas City, I am trying to give you something of a picture of my own upbringing. During that period, and we are in the middle of war, so many of the men have been taken out of the United States and they were in the armed services. I began to work. Factories and places of industry were having to employ children and women in huge numbers in the forties. And I think of this time during World War II, that was really where the women's movement particularly in industries and in corporate America began. I began to work, and

as I recall, I started at one of the largest industries in Kansas City, that was meat packing. Kansas City was a place that processed a lot of beef and pork. And so I started working in the packing houses in Kansas City. And I was not more then thirteen years old. I than began to become acclimated to the work world. I think that if I became a workaholic that's probably about where it started. I was in school, and then every evening I will have to go to work. And all the summer I will have to go to work. Much of that happened during that period.

I stayed in school and graduated from high school in Kansas City, Kansas, and then went off to college. I went to Nashville Tennessee. It was a school called Tennessee State. During the last year in high school I recognized a call into the ministry. At seventeen l told my pastor at church that I felt a call to the ministry. 1 was licensed by the church to be a minister and went off to college.

At Tennessee State University I became a student leader, a student leader of an odd type. State Universities, you are at the University of Houston and dealt with the University of Illinois, are fairly earthy places. At Tennessee State the kids drank and did all kinds of things but they knew that I was a minister, and so they had a different image of me at Tennessee State. But they accepted me in spite of that. Know Lawson is not going to drink, Lawson is not going to dance, Lawson is not going to womanize, we will find some place for him. And ultimately I became president of the

student government at Tennessee State. That was extremely rare when you think about what a State University is like, and what is the image of preachers. I graduated from Tennessee State and I was president of the student government there. I left Tennessee State to come to theological seminary. I went back to Kansas City, Kansas, to go to the theological seminary.

After I got back to Kansas City, Kansas, I got a letter from a young woman who was a student at Tennessee State. She said to me, that the girls in the dormitory had talked about this young man, who has been the president of the student government. And she said, I would like to meet him. And they said, he has graduated. But she said, I still would like to meet him. So they said, why don't you write him a letter. So she said, I am not that interested in meeting him. So they said, you are scared, you are chicken, that's why you won't write him a letter. So she said, I am not scared, I will write him a letter. So she wrote this letter to me. I had no idea who she was. But when she wrote the letter, I wrote back. So I wrote back to her. After about six or seven exchange letters, I felt myself falling in love with this girl that I had never met. So we met after writing for two and a half years to each other. We only saw each other nine times. And the ninth time was our wedding day. And we never saw each other alone. That is basically how I got my wife.

Sauter: Was she in ministry as well?

Lawson: No, she was a social worker. That's fairly close. We got married in 1954. When we got married she moved to Kansas with me. I had been called to be pastor of a tiny church in South Eastern Kansas, in Pittsburg, Kansas. And she came with me then, to that church. I was in theological seminary, studying for the ministry. So we moved to the student housing at the seminary. And we would travel down, to South Eastern Kansas, to Pittsburg for the weekends. We did that for about one year and a half until I graduated from seminary.

Then we moved to Pittsburg, Kansas. That was my first full time pastorate. 1954, is a very important year for us, because I had been pastor for that church for two years, when she and I got married, but then very shortly after we got married, there was something inside me that simply said, your work is done in Pittsburg. You need to go to leave Pittsburg. And I told the church I am happy here, I had a wife, I had a brand new baby, that was Melanie our daughter, and I am not particularly interested in leaving here, but there is something inside me that said, my work is done. So I told the church I am going to resign, but I don't know where I am going. Still waiting for God to tell me where I am going.

Since I didn't know where to go, my wife, my baby and I left Pittsburg and went back to the church to Kansas City, Kansas, to my home church where I had been baptized. I asked the pastor of the church, is there something I can do here in the church. Yes he said, you can be minister of

Christian education. So 1 took a job as minister of Christian education at the church where I had been baptized. I was still very unhappy. I didn't know what was wrong. I keptfeeling I still wasn 'I where I am supposed to be. I can't explain this to you. But ministers often have inner feelings of this sort. So I told the pastor something is wrong. And at home I got a wife and a baby and I should be perfectly happy, but there is something that still keeps me upset. So she and I were there during the summer of 1955.

Then I got a call from Houston, Texas, from Dallas Texas. The man identified himself as the executive director of the Baptist General Convention Texas, and said that there is a new college that has been developed in Houston and it is growing. He wanted to make sure, that at this new college, there was somebody that could work with Baptist students who had questions. So he asked me about to consider to coming to Houston)Texas. I barely knew where Texas was. Had no idea where Houston was. So I told him I'll come down and look at it.

I came down to Houston and saw Texas Southern University, this little school that was just eight years old. It was only one permanent building, and a whole lot of military huts that had been taken from the Ellington air force base. That had been done 1947 when Heman Sweatt was trying to go to the University of Texas. I suppose you heard the name Heman Sweatt. The University of Texas turned him down, and the case went all the way to the Supreme Court, finally in 1947 the Supreme Court decreed that the

University of Texas would have to take him. In order to keep from taking him, the state of Texas had created this little school, Texas Southern University. It was then called Texas College for Negros. Once the Supreme Court had said, that the University of Texas will have to take him, there really was no need in keeping Texas Southern University, and at first they sort of abandoned it. But it kept growing anyway. It was an African American school in a large metropolitan area. Houstonians who wanted to go to college had to go to Prairie View. They could not go to school here in Houston. And now you had a State University here, it was a miserable State University. It was just a bunch of little buildings, but it was growing.

When the man from Dallas, his name is W. F. Howard, when he called me, and asked me to come down, he said, we are the Southern Baptist Convention and we want to make sure that these African American students have some kind of ministry. So that's why he was asking me to come down. I came looked at these little buildings and fell in love with Texas Southern University. I called Audrey and said, honey lets pack our bags we will go move to Houston Texas. And that was what brought us here. That was in September 1955.

When we came here, the nation had not only gone through a war and come out of the war, we had gone through a postwar mode and we have begun to build suburbs and cities all over the country including Houston, which with little doubt had taken over little sub communities. So Houston was expanding in a

rapid rate during that period. Freeways were being built at that time and the space program was coming to Houston. I mean this was a boom town.

Sauter: Did Brown versus Board of Education happen in that time? Did that change?

Lawson: It didn't' change much. That was just a Supreme Court decision. Supreme Court decisions don't always change local law. So the schools remained segregated in Houston. When we came here, even though Brown versus Board of Education had passed in 1954, nothing was changed in Houston. It was still a segregated city. There were black schools and white schools, and there were Hispanics and there were Asians and they pretty much went all to the white schools. But black schools were strictly segregated. In December1955 the thing exploded in Montgomery Alabama, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the bus. At that time Audrey and I had just come to Houston. We would have been here for less than three months. And we didn't know much about this. It was just a new story to us, that this woman didn't give up her seat in the bus, she had been jailed. There was a movement of some sort beginning to develop in Montgomery Alabama. in very short order, we understood that this was much more than just one woman being jailed, there was an uprising. People how would have come back from WW II , in 1945146, they came back having been accorded much greater privilege in Europe and in Japan, than they have been accorded here.

Sauter: African Americans?

Lawson: Right, because during WW II they were needed for their skills, and if there was a person who had leadership or who had technical skills, he was given an opportunity in military to utilize those skills. President Harry Truman had made sure, well this was after Roosevelt's death, but Harry Truman

had made sure, that they could have those opportunities in the military. When the war was over they came back to the United States, they came back to the old segregation. Many of these young men, particularly young men, there were not many women in the military at that time, but many of these young men, were determined that they would never again live with this kind of segregation. So there was tremendous social unrest between 1945 and 1955. What 1 was saying, that the Rosa Park situation was not something that happened in a vacuum. There was a whole climate of protest and unrest. And that climate of civil protest was the reason for Sweatt versus Painter, Smith versus A/right, Brown versus Board of Education.

Sauter: So these were not only young people, and not only men, the whole African American society had changed.

Lawson: The whole African American community had changed. If' s an ocean. It was now no longer fully accepting of racial segregation. Now here we are in the midst of all this. I am going through college between 1946 and 1950 and going through seminary between 1950 and 1954. And now then I come to Houston; I am coming to a city where there is an African American State University. There was no such thing like that in Kansas. But here in Houston there is a large African American community and I did not fully understand some of the smoldering anger among African Americans. But I knew that it was there. And when the Rosa Parks situation came up in Montgomery, then it was fairly clear that college students would probably be next. So students in North Carolina, in Oklahoma, in Alabama and other places decided that they weren't going to accept racial segregation either. They began to board busses. So you can probably recall that the earliest manfestation of the Civil Rights Movement, it was protest against segregated busses, interstate bus travel, and so forth and so on and they were jailed.

While all this was happening, and this is the mid fifties now or even late fifties, I am at Texas Southern University, I am the Baptist Student Union director working with college students. The one thing I noticed was that this black college has been set down in the middle of an old Jewish community, the community of Riverside. There were synagogues, and the Jewish community center, and a number of things of that sort were all around Texas Southern University, but there were no black churches. So Jews began to move out. Many of these were conservative Jews, and they can't drive to synagogue; they have to walk to synagogue. If they move from the place were the synagogue was, they have to establish either new synagogues, or they would have to join new synagogues. So the synagogues began to close down. The whole demography of this neighborhood was changing as it moves from Jewish to African American. But Jews always carry their synagogues and temples with them. African Americans do not carry their churches with them. When we moved to the suburbs we just moved to the suburbs. If somebody decides to establish a church then we may join that church, otherwise we will drive thirty miles back to the place where our church has been. It is just a different kind of sociology.

So blacks in this area had not established churches. And I was trying to find churches that would be willing to establish satellite churches and daughter churches over this way, so the students of Texas Southern University would have some place to go to church. Most churches said no, we do not want to have a satellite church over there, these are college students and they have no money. They can't support a church. So my pleas for a churchfell on deaf ears. Finally some of the people who are moving into the Riverside community said, look these churches are not going to establish a satellite church over this way, why don't you establish a church. I said no, my wife and baby and I just came to Houston, we came here to work at Texas Southern University, and we did not come to try to start a church. They kept on and finally they prevailed on me to at

least call together a group of people who wanted to see a church, and see if we couldn't a least get some guidance from God into see, how starting a church, and then see if we can find a pastor.

So my wife and I called for these people to join in our house between worship services all the Sunday mornings at ten o clock. We would leave at eleven going to our churches. But during that one hour from ten to eleven, we would pray about God's will to have a church in this Third Ward. While we were in that period of prayer it came to us, that Yes, we did need to start a church. With thirteen people we started this little church in our home.

When the church was born in June of 1962, by this time the civil rights movement was very strong. There were students on the college campus and all over the country who engaged in that protest, and they were willing to go to jail. That protest has also come to Houston. So that the students at Texas Southern University had come to the Baptist Student Union and they had asked for our leadership, as Doctor King had given leader ship in Georgia, and they had asked for my leadership in student protest here. I tried to discourage them, reminding them, that your parents came out of poverty and they sacrificed to get you in college. You surely don't want to go to jail and have them come to pay for all the rest of it. But they were not listening to me, they wanted to protest and lead me a protest starting here around 1959. So Audrey and I were pulled into it. We found out ways to get out kids of jail and ultimately help to paint protest signs and all the rest of it.

Now, the church was not born, in 1959 that was still the Baptist Student Union of Texas Southern University. I was immersed in college students and so we were working with them, when the church was born 1962, that was right dead in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. By this time Dr. Martin Luther King had become something of a national hero, and most people were fairly sided up, on one side or the other, whether they

believed in racial segregation or not. When this church began, it started with a number of protest movements around the church, this is Third Ward and this is all surrounding Texas Southern University. The University of Houston was solidly segregated. You could not get in the University of Houston because, even though Brown versus Board of Education had passed and Sweatt versus the State of Texas, truth was, that this was still a solidly segregated community in 1962. But by 1963 things began to change. The march on Washington was a huge rally that took place in 1963. (Telephone call)

Sauter: We were right at the point were civil right movement started to grow in 1963, and Dr. Martin Luther King, did you meet him?

Lawson: Yes. Well I didn't meet him in 1963, but Martin Luther King became a national hero for us. So there were many of us who did believe that he was somebody who was the moral conscience for the nation. I am a Baptist and he is a Baptist. I was invited to the Baptist World Alliance; this is an international body somewhere overseas. When I got there, I recall that I was invited to speak there, I discovered that I was to speak in place of Dr. Martin Luther King. While that was flatteiy at first, I didn't realize that that was a major insult to him. Now this was 1965. We had spoken in 1963. He got the Nobel peace prize in 1964. And in 1965 I was being asked to speak to the Baptist World Alliance in his place, which meant that Baptists still supported segregation, and they didn't support him. I was saying that you had a polarized nation, and you were either pro segregation or anti segregation. And Whites were very greatly divided, very divided. And there weren't enough Blacks, they were also divided. Because the National Baptist Convention in this country, which is the major African American

Convention, that convention likewise was also divided. Its president was a

friend of J. Edgar Hoover. That may not much mean to you, but J. Edgar Hoover was the head of the FBI and was a very strong person. J. Edgar Hoover believed that Dr. King was a communist. He had convinced Dr. Jackson, president of the United Baptist Convention that King was a communist. And so Jackson refused to allow King to speak in the National Baptist Convention. Well, if white segregationists did not like Dr. King, and if Blacks who were willing to believe G. Edgar Hoover didn't want to let him speak, and therefore he was at that time a persona non grata among Baptists, but not among all African American Baptists. There was still a younger group that did believe, that this was all FBI propaganda and that King was not a communist that King was a strong Christian, and that communism basically was anti God. But the fact is that I was being asked to speak in his place. So at the time when I spoke, one of the things I said was, that the person who really needs to be here the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King…..

Lawson: Because the largest part of Baptist domination was White, and Southern Baptist Convention was the biggest part of the Baptist Denomination, and many black Baptist churches depended on that larger convention financially, they would therefore often surrender to their views and their attitudes. But when you talked about Baptists all over the world, the Baptists in Europe, the Baptists in Asia, they believed that Dr. King was a good man. And therefore, while many American Baptists from the US would have been very greatly divided, the Africans, the Asians and many of the Europeans felt that he was indeed a moral conscience.

I met him at just about that time. Somebody had told him that I had spoken about him. And so he called me and first of all he thanked me for that. And he said there was a little convention that has being born. That was a convention that came out of the National Baptist Convention and would be people that would be supporting of the Civil Rights Movements. And he became sort of a leader of that convention, it was called the Progressive National Baptist Convention. He then invited me to come to Atlanta and work with him. I was very much tempted to do that. This was 1965. But now remember, we had given birth to a new church in 1962. It was only three years old. And there was just no way that I was going to leave this small congregation to go and join Dr. King. Even though right now he was the darling of the media. It would have been a great opportunity to be part of what I knew was a major world movement. So I did tell him that I deeply regretted that 1 couldn't come, but needed to stay here. He was a Baptist minister and understood that. He said that I do understand why you can't come and he said, let us then start a chapter of the Southern Christian legion conference in Houston. And the chapter until ten years ago was at Wheeler Avenue Baptist church. The church therefore was stamped with

civil rights.

We were part of many of the movements here. We fought school segregation in Houston in 1965, a banner year. Thousands of people marched against the Houston Independent School District. Schools were than desegregated. Several of us marched against segregation of the department stores and the theaters. Many things happened during that mid sixties period, between 1963 and 1969.

Sauter: Starting at your church?

Lawson: Many started at our church.

Sauter: and at Texas Southern University?

Lawson: Texas Southern University not too much. Texas Southern University and the University of Houston were both state institutions and so you get not too much involved in that kind of social actions. But they would privately support what was happening. When students got arrested, they would not put them out of school. Once they came back, they would sort of erase that they were out of school for six days while they were in jail, and they would let them make up what ever the work was. So there was a good deal of private support, but there could not be official support. The University of Houston at the other hand did desegregate, but it remained pretty much an all white institution. Fairly recently, 1 guess in the last ten, fifteen years, the University of Houston has likewise began torecognize its responsibility to its surrounding community. The University of Houston you know right now as a student is considerably different from the University of Houston that we knew when Texas Southern University was born. All that has been happening pretty much an interweaving of the Civil Rights Movements and work as Christians. We believe that as Christians, if there is anybody suffering, that we are supposed to respond to that suffering. So whether it is black people who have been segregated,

or where it is poor people who are having difficulties, we are supposed to respond.

After, the Civil Rights Movement came to an end, somewhat probably after Dr. Martin Luther King's death, King was killed in 1968, and he had just come to Houston and had just spoken for us. At that time, there was a big place downtown, about where the Aquarium is, called Sam Houston Coliseum, which was at that time the big auditorium in Houston. He came, brought Harry Belafonte, brought Aretha Franklin, Andrew Young, brought Jesse Jackson, a number of celebrities, this was in October 1967, We, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, we hosted them. We found ourselves with the Klu Klux Klan coming in. They put smoke bombs inside the air conditioning system and frightened people because they thought the building was on fire. We had to have police protection, and we weren't sure whether or not the police were actually going to protect us, when somebody shoots us. Dr. King, all these celebrities came to the Sam Houston Coliseum and we could not draw a crowd with that many people. If you can imagine people of that stature coming to Houston, you know for anything the place would be full. At that time people simply were very much afraid and still polarized. That was in October 1967. In April 1968 Dr. King was dead.

We also knew at that time, that were had been some change in the way that people thought about civil rights. There was a much more militant, much more angry African American community that said, we are not going to take these kinds of insults, we are not going to jail, not going to let people beat us up. Coming out of what was then called the Nation of Islam, the honorable Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X and at the same time, a guy named Huey Newton in California, formed the Black Panthers movement. Many of these were people who did not believe, that we should accept the indignities segregation, they would fight back. But in

any case that movement was very strong at that time in 1967. I guess probably the honorable Elijah Muhammad and Huey P. Newton and I can't figure the name of a guy, Stokeley Carmichael, he went back to Africa, these three movements sort of converged to disagree with King's non-violent leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, and so the Civil Rights Movement began to change in the mid and late sixties.
The Civil Rights Movement moved toward economic rights rather then simply social rights. It was a good thing to be able to go into any restaurant, but if you couldn't pay for the food there, you haven't gotten very much. So there was a move towards economic rights. When King was killed, as you recall, he was killed because he was advocating for garbage workers who didn't have good salaries, he was fighting for them in Memphis. Now, then the power structure realized that if the Civil Rights Movement moved toward economic rights, it was a major threat to the national economy. So we are convinced that King was not just shot by some lone assassin. We are convinced that he was shot because of a kind of conspiracy. Right in the middle of it was the Federal Bureau of Investigation and J. Edgar Hoover. That's something we are pretty well convinced of. When he died, the movement we were part ofturned violent and turned somewhat sour. Cities were being burned. Washington, Detroit, many of these places. Hopefully you got all this in history some place.

Sauter: And what happened with Houston?

Lawson: Not much in Houston. I think that it didn't happen in Houston because, as I said earlier, Houston was now expanding, Houston was growing. The University of Houston became a state university, was no longer a private university. We began to develop freeways. We started developing suburbs, the space program came here. A. number of things happened in Houston. The one thing we didn't want to do was, to have the kind of social unrest that would affect economic growth. We recognized the vulnerability of the

power structure, of the business power structure, and we would get what is now called the Greater Houston Partnership, what was than called the chamber of commerce, the business leaders. We would get with them and say, you know you really ought to consider opening the department stores, the theatres. Because, if you allow all these marches and all these demonstrations, that says, that companies who would like to move to Houston, would have said, no we do not go to Houston. We got too much social unrest there. So it was on that basis, that much was done in Houston, peacefully. Groups of Blacks and Whites met behind closed doors and worked out ways by which we could desegregate. We could desegregate without the marches and the protests. They'd seen the marches and the protests; they know what that did to a city. Birmingham had major difficulties because of its violent response to protest. On the other hand Atlanta never did. That's what Atlanta and Houston are two of the Southern cities that desegregated relatively peacefully.

Sauter: Probably because of economic possibilities.

Lawson: That's right.

Sauter: What happened to Houston? Did you talk with the major, what was the situation ofthe city leaders?

Lawson: Yes, it's a matter of facts. 1 guess in 1968 there were feelings that the students at Texas Southern University were the center of protest. A number of us went out to the Houston city dump at Sunny Side. At the city dump, there had been some children playing on the dumps right near the city Sunny Side, a large African American community. One of these kids fell off into one of the recess pools out there, going for a baseball. They found the kid, but when they pulled him out, he was drowned. So the people of Sunny Side said, look we had been begging for that dump being removed for a long time, we are going protest. Well, students from the

University of Houston, students from Texas Southern University converged on that city dump and said, we will go out there and protest. Many of them were members of our church and people who lived in the Third Ward, so 1 went out there too. All of us got thrown into jail. Somebody said that there is about a major protest. Students are coming out of the Third Ward tojoin this protest. We have gone to stop them. So the police chief commanding, Herman Short, said, I wasn't at office about the Texas Southern University, we will stop them. Large numbers of officers, in 1968, came out to Texas Southern University. They demanded that all of the students came out of the dormitories. At that time Wheeler run right straight through Texas Southern University, it doesn't now. All these officers lined up their control cars on the streets. And they were demanding that all the students, men and women come out of the dormitories with their hands up, because they were assuming, somebody had told them that you had a large number of protest students coming out of Texas Southern University. The students inside were mostly not in the protest movement. But the word that had gotten to the police department was that they were. So then they came out. At that time Louis Welch was the mayor of Houston. When somebody called Mayor Welch that all these police officers were out here. Mayor Welch called my house. Mrs. Lawson was home and he asked her, where is Rev. Lawson, we need him to come out and talk to these students. Mrs. Lawson said he is in your jail. He was out on the city dump. And so the Mayor said to the jail, they had to take me out of the jail. Before I can get back to the dormitories, one ofthe officers accidentally fired his gun. The other officers didn't know who is shooting and thought students from the dormitories were shooting. So they all opened fire, the whole line of police officers, and they emptied some 1500 rounds of bullets into these two dormitories. Miracle is that the students weren't killed. Then they sent police dogs in the student's dormitories. The students were pulled out, undressed, and dogs attacked them and that sort of things. They were hauled down to jail, close to four

hundred of them. They found out later on that the first shot had been from an officer, accidentally, and then all this stuff did happen. So I guess what I am saying is, that Houston did not have that kind of continuing confrontation. Mayor Welch was a men who simply wasn't a part of the violently segregationists group, he wanted about just keep the order, On the other hand Herman Short, his chief of police, was virtually pro 1an. He supported the men doing what ever was necessary to stop students from protesting. I guess that the important thing is that during the late sixties, we at least did develop a fairly strong relationship with the power structure in Houston. Since Louis Welch, we had contact with everyone of the mayors and with most of the people who are on city Council. When there is some reason to deal with social issues we still try to do it by negotiations as much as possible and not by protest.

I guess the first major social issue beyond civil rights came during the late seventies, around 1978. This was when many other cities were going through a kind of recession. That recession came to Houston around 1981. There were people leaving the major industrial areas, from Michigan and illinois and Kentucky and they were moving to Houston, hoping that said, Houston is a boom town, that there will be jobs here. But Houston was beginning to be affected by the recession likewise. They were no jobs here. We developed a brand new population in Houston, the homeless. We never had any like that before. Houston had never taken federal funds for the indigents and so we did not know what to do with them. There is a Catholic Bishop here, Bishop Joseph Fiorenza, who will be soon celebrate his fiftieth anniversary, and will be retiring. We talked to Joe Fiorenza and said, we need to have some kind of a campaign to raise money for the homeless. So, he and I we pulled together rabbis and people from other churches. We raised funds, roughly eighthundredthousand dollars, to work with the homeless. Out of that came some of the agencies that now work with the homeless, like search. That was likewise something that came out

of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church. So we've been involved, we have been advocates, for either the segregated, or the poor, or the indigent, or the handicapped, or the female. We had been advocates for that for a long time.

How do you get started in something like that? I think it was because of the principles, the values ofmy grandparents, and then later on my mother, my stepfather, and then growing up in that kind of community in which we were taught that Jesus had said to us that we are supposed to love our neighbors us ourselves and you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. So whose values and those principles had come to us. I think if there is anything that can be said about my ministry, about the work of Wheeler Avenue Baptist church, about much that is been done in Houston, it is, that we feel that justice and fairness needs to be accorded to every citizen in life. Not just the white citizens, not just the male citizens, not just the rich citizens, but that every citizen needs to be able to have fairness and justice and equal opportunity. So we've stayed with that all this time.

I recognized about five years ago that I got older. I was some seventy years old then. There needs to be some way by which I can pass on the work of Wheeler Baptist Avenue Church to a younger minister. So we started about five years ago trying to find somebody. We called in Reverend Cosby who is now the pastor at Wheeler Avenue Baptist church, I don't know whether you have heard of him or not, we called him in. He was a very bright young man who was able to identify with people. He became my associate pastor in 1998 and has been there to this time. Last month in August, well in June, when our church became forty-two years old, I announced in church that I was retiring. And it was a process by which the new man is named, we went through the process. The church by that time had already fallen in love with Reverend Cosby, even though he

was going through the voting process, he was kind of shoo.-in. He has become the pastor of Wheeler Baptist Avenue church, and he will be installed this coming Sunday. So that's much fast a trip through, but that's basically what we are doing. Right now I am working with a non profit. It is cafled WALIPP.

Sauter: Yes, I heard about WALIPP, what is the leading thought of this organization?

Lawson: Well I didn't found it. What happened was, a number of friends of mine, including Ken Lay, who is now under indictment for the Enron problem, but a number of friends decided to give me a gift This was eight years ago. They knew that I was not interested in houses or cars and things of that sort. So they decided, it seems that he has a passion for advocacy, so let's give him kind of a foundation that could be an advocacy foundation. Unbeknownst of me, they pulled together an event in 1996, would you believe on income tax day. In the United States April fifteenth is the income tax day. On April fifteenth they had this big dinner, big luncheon down at the Hyatt Regency. And at the luncheon they announced the creation of a foundation called the William A. Lawson Institute for Peace and Prosperity, that's what WALIPP stands for. And they said, this is to be given to Reverend William Lawson and he can do what ever he wants to do with it. So that, when he retires from the pastorate, he will still be able to continue his work of advocacy.

Since that time we have done some little things. We have saved an old African American cemetery. We have worked for an African American YWCA. We have done a number of little things of that sort.
Then we also did a number of big things. We created a middle school, an all boys school for sixth, seventh and eight grade boys, to catch boys between elementary and high school because it is during that middle

period, when they are going to do drugs or crime. That's the time when it will probably begin to blossom. So that middle school now operates at Wheeler Avenue Baptist church.

Another thing that we have done is to establish a bill, a 50 unit senior citizens apartment complex, this is an aging neighborhood and there is nothing for seniors in this neighborhood. So we decided to build that. We are now in the process of pulling together community development corporations churches, civic clubs to see if we cannot get the people in the South Central area, Third Ward plus. The Third Ward is right in the middle of the South Central area. See, if we can get the power structure and the people together to guarantee that. As developers move in to the south central area rapidly, that they wouldn't simply drive out all of the under classes, all of the low income people, that there still will be what would be called affordable housing for some of the people who life here. So we've got in with the mayor, we've got in with the city council, we've got in with the county commissioner's court, we've got in with housing and urban development and we've got in with a number of the organizations, churches and community development corporations. We've even gotten with some major developers. They have all agreed that, if we can put together a coalition and can create some way by which you can have affordable housing in the Third Ward. Now the problem is that if you wanted to buy a house in this area, right now, this is the highest priced land in the city. Anything near downtown is extremely high. So if you wanted to buy a house, these houses are 200 000, 300 000 dollars a piece, poor people could not live here. So what we are concerned about, we are glad that we have comfortable homes for us, but we've recognized that there are a lot of people who will be driven out of this neighborhood, if developers are simply allowed to build nothing except expensive homes, town houses and condominiums. That's what WALIPP is working on right now. We got a number of things we are doing.

WALIPP is basically an advocacy agency. I got a call in right now where some man has lost his son. His son has died. And he is in prison and his wife is in prison. There is a group trying to get him out, so he can go to the son's funeral. 1 don't know if that can be done. We contacted the congress woman Sheila Jackson Lee, she was attempted and failed. So the question is whether not we can find somebody else who can help this man to get to his son's funeral. That's a matter; that's a little tiny thing. It's the kind of thing what at least WALLIP tends to do.

Sauter: This boys school, what boys can go to this school, only boys from the Third Ward, or only boys in need, what boys?

Lawson: No it is a public school; it is a charter within the Houston School District. We didn't want to have a private school; there you would have to pay tuition. We wanted to have a school where the tax base could at least allow you to go. Any boy who is in six, seven or eight grade can apply, it is not limited to poor boys, it's not limited to black boys. It is simply a school where the focus is on character building for boys. This is the first all boys school in the state of Texas. We wanted to have an all boy school because we believe, if we look at the population of jails and prisons, there are far more African American and Hispanic boys than there are anything else in those jails. So it's the boys who really need the character building. It is a public school charter. Anybody can come, its limited to 125 boys. It has done extremely well in these two years, now in its third year.

Lawson: What did we left out?

Sauter: Right now I understand you were a leader who embraced the whole city, the hole country; I would like to focus a little bit on the Third Ward. What was needed after the Civil Rights Movement what was needed in the Third

Ward? Can we look closer at what you probably helped to shape there? What were the goals for that part of town?

Lawson: We have been concerned about the Third Ward. We have been concerned about the acceptance in the Third Ward. Our church was established right between two Universities, U of H and TSU. At the time our church was established, TSU was kind of a throw away school. It really was not established to be an excellent University. They established it so that Blacks would not have to go to the University of Texas. But now it was here. Almost every state legislative came up with plans to get rid of Texas Southern University, said this school is not needed anymore. Why are we still paying all this money to have a separate State University, we have now made the University of Houston a State University, why don't we just merge these two schools? We spent a good deal of time talking to the leadership at the University of Houston and a good deal of time with talking to the leadership of the Texas Southern University and a good deal of time talking to state legislators, trying to say to them, that the University of Houston and Texas Southern do not have identical goals. That there needs to be a place where any African American student can go and not simply can go to take classes, but go where he can have leadership, where he can play on the teams, where he can be part of the student government, part of the student journalism, where he can be a part of the total university. Texas Southern University needs to be sustained. We have year after year at least persuaded the state legislator to allow Texas Southern to be budgeted. Then the University of Houston came to the act, because we said to them, it may be of some profit to you, if Texas Southern becomes part of the University of Houston, but think of what this does to a larger African American community. So the University of Houston began to say to the state legislator, we don't want Texas Southern, let Texas Southern stay there. Saying we don't want destroy

Texas Southern University. So right now for the last five years or so it has not even come up in the state……

Sauter: We were at the point were we found that Texas Southern University found his right to be there and what I understand has different goals. Again, if you can look at the community in the Third Ward, I understood before the Civil Rights Movement there wei many organizations working towards equal rights and voting, but after the Civil Rights Movement, what happened to these organizations, did they still meet, did they still fight for equal rights?

Lawson: You may remember that I said to you, that after the original Civil Rights Movements, we said, we fought for the right for the people to sit same place on the bus, or to sit some place in a restaurant. It became very clear that African Americans were mostly a poverty community and there really need to be economic opportunities. That's what I said earlier. In very much the same way that's what's happening now. So in the Third Ward, we are missing the Third Ward, we are actually not limited geographically to the South Central part of Houston. Our concern is, if there can be opportunities for African Americans, for women for Hispanics, for handicapped, for underdogs everywhere. So we have fought for the right of people to have economic opportunity.

We built this big stadium here. One of the reasons that these big stadiums were built was, because we negotiated with the owners of teams, Drayton Mc Clam, Les Alexander, and Bob Mc Nair. We said to them, we would be willing to help you to get a stadium here in Houston, if you would be willing at least allow the Blacks to work in the stadium, to contract, to play on the teams. Our concern was not just to have a stadium here were people could go and watch a football game, but to have something, since its going to deal with millions of dollars, to at least allow Blacks and Hispanics to be part of that. So in each one of these cases, the city was

pretty well determined to build the Astrodome anyway, but after the Astrodome, the only way to get a stadium was, to pass a bond. Passing the bond meant people to vote for it. Many of the voters in Houston have not wanting to spend the kind of money that has to be spent for a stadium. When, they first tried to build the arena for basketball, it was voted down. At that time, it was Les Alexander who was the owner of the Rockets, that's our Basketball team; Les Alexander came to us and asked, would you help us. getting out of votes to pass the next bond? We said yes, we will, if you guarantee there will be some economic benefit to the under classes. All three of these stadiums have been built, largely with a heavy black vote. So now instead of marching and protesting and carrying signs, we simply try to make sure that there is economic opportunity.

One of the things that WALIPP did when the city wanted to have light rail coming through the Main Street, they couldn't get the groups together, the county, the city, and the greater Houston Partnership. So Malcolm Gillis, the outgoing president at Rice University, was a friend of ours. We asked him, Malcolm, can we convene a meeting at Rice University that brings together these different entities, that they can talk about what it meant to have light rail? He did allow us to use Rice University; we personally pulled them all together, the mayor, the county judge, and the people from the Greater Houston Partnership and from Metro. All came together at Rice, at a meeting called by WALIPP. They did at least see the value of having light rail. Metro made a good presentation. And light rail was going to be of economic benefit to the city. So this was not just fighting for economic benefit for the African Americans, this was fighting for the economic benefit for the city. But if it came down Main Street, that was inner city Houston, as over in places like Seattle, where it is in the outer areas. But light rail now has been part of the economic growth of Houston. So in many ways, what we been have doing, has been not so much just a fight for African Americans, what the old Civil Rights Movements was,

but to recognize that real segregation is an economic segregation. The have versus the have not. If we fight for the have not, that includes Blacks that includes Hispanics, to some extent that includes women, but that includes a much larger group of people.

What happens in the Third Ward is largely a matter of trying to establish economic development. 1 don't know how well you know the Third Ward, but there is now an HEB store. That HEB store was put there by groups that we have pulled together. This has become the highest income HEB store in the city. It's crowded all the time. So the complaint, it isn't cleaned up is, it's impossible to clean it up, it's very, very busy. We have said that there needs to be a good drugstore, we had a hard time to get drugstores to come. Now a huge new corporation called CVS has taken over all the Eckerd stores and they are building one right on the corner of Scott and Old Spanish Trail. These are the campaigns that we are doing. This aids to the economic strength of the city.

What we have been able to do is to say, don't just look at poor black people living in the Third Ward, recognize that you have some major institutions that are going to keep this area here all the time. There is the University of Houston, the Texas Southern University, and the Texas Medical Center. All of these are in the same area. What you do for this area is going to make things better for the whole city. That's why I haven't talked specifically for the Third Ward.

There is a triangle. There are three major thorough fares, I 45, which goes from Dallas to Galveston, Main Street, which likewise runs more less North East to South West and Old Spanish Trail, which cuts across the South part of the Third Ward. When that triangle is considered, you look at the Texas Medical Center, Rice University, the University of Houston, Texas Southern University that means, that if you can have economic

development for that triangle, the Third Ward is inside there. When you can have economic development for that area, then it's possible for the better being for the entire city. So when, I think of the work we do, I don't generally limit it to the Third Ward for that reason. I try to look at it globally, see what is good for Houston ought to be good for the people of the inner city as well as the people of suburban Houston.

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