I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders

Oral History Interview with

Owen Lawson

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Interviewee Owen Lawson conducted by Eve L. Ewing on August 8, 2023. This interview is part of the I See My Light Shining: Oral Histories of Our Elders project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that they are reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Transcriptionist: Audio Transcription Center	Session Number: 1
Narrator: Owen Lawson	Location: Chicago, IL
Interviewer: Eve L. Ewing	Date: August 8, 2023

Q: —and get that started. One other thing, before I forget, I'm going to mail you some forms to make sure that I get you paid in a timely fashion.

Lawson: Okay.

Q: What is the best mailing address to send those to you?

Lawson: 5748 South Stoney Island, 60637, apartment—

Q: All right, no—oh, go ahead. Yes?

Lawson: Three nine, 3-9.

Q: Apartment three nine, got it. Got it. Wonderful.

Lawson: This says, "This meeting is being recorded." Should I click "Got It"?

Q: Yes.

Lawson: Okay. All right.

Q: Okay. So we can go ahead and get started. How are you?

Lawson: I'm fine. Good, good, now that I got—I was worried about getting in with this Zoom stuff.

Q: No, you did great, we're here. And it's good to see you. You look good. I want to start by just telling you a little bit about the project, in case you have any questions. This is going to be a totally open-ended interview. We can go wherever the conversation goes.

Lawson: Good.

Q: And if I ask you anything and if you are uncomfortable with it for whatever reason, just let me know, we'll move on past it. And if you have any questions for me, feel free to stop me at any time. And when we're done, we're going to send you a transcript of the interview. So if there's anything that you're, like, oh, I didn't quite mean to say it that way, or, actually, that's incorrect, or, I would prefer that you not include that—just let me know and we'll take it out.

Lawson: Fine.

Q: Any questions?

Lawson: No.

Q: Okay, great. You're a journalist, so you know how this goes. So, well, to start, could you just tell me your full name and your date of birth?

Lawson: Owen Mr. Lawson, III.

Q: Great. And when were you born?

Lawson: I want to skip that one.

Q: What, the birthday?

Lawson: Yes.

Q: Oh, I have to know that for the record, if that's okay.

Lawson: Yes, 8/5/41.

Q: Eight five forty-one, okay, got it. Where were you born?

Lawson: In Chicago.

Q: Yes. I believe you were born on the South Side, but remind me where.

Lawson: Fifty-Sixth and Indiana.

Q: Fifty-Sixth and Indiana. When you think about growing up, what are some of your earliest memories of growing up around Fifty-six and Indiana?

Lawson: Well, you know, let me put it this way. When I went to see the play *Raisin in the Sun*, and I saw—there was a scene where little Travis was sleeping on the couch, it reminded me of my upbringing, because the first nine years of my life, we lived in an apartment that was shared by different family members. And I had to sleep on the couch. So when I saw little Travis, I said, this is my life story, you know. That's—it was a very close-knit family, you know, a lot of friends, like that.

Q: Who all was living in your home? Did you have a lot of siblings?

Lawson: No, I was the—I'm the only child my parents had.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: But my cousin was also—her family was living in the apartment, but she was four years younger than I was.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: Four years younger than me. So, you know, that was—she and I were close, and remained close until both our parents moved out, moved to different locations.

Q: Yes. Yes.

Lawson: Yes.

Q: Was she sort of like a sibling to you?

Lawson: During our early childhood years, during our two years, once our parents moved to different locations, we sort of lost touch.

Q: So when you were a kid, did you mostly play outside a lot? Did you like to read? Did you play with your cousin? What did you like to do?

Lawson: Yes, you know, it was—I had a lot of friends, kids that played with, living there on Fifty-Sixth and Indiana. We would go to there, where there were two shows at that time in the area, one was called *The Michigan*, which was on Michigan, between, obviously, Michigan and Indiana. Then there was another movie theater in the Fifty-Seven Hundred block and of South Prairie. You know, in those days, you just went to the show on the weekend, you didn't even bother to look to see what was on.

Q: You just went and saw whatever it was.

Lawson: Yes. And mostly we didn't even go to see it, we just went to fool around play, run up and down the aisles and stuff like that. It was just sort of like a meeting place for neighborhood kids. So that was the thing.

Q: How much did it cost to see the movie?

Lawson: [*Laughs*] Fifteen cents.

Q: Wow [*Laughs*] Okay. Now, would you pay the fifteen cents, or would you sneak in? Because I saw you laughing.

Lawson: Actually, I—they had an Early Bird price, which was seven cents. So that's why I smiled, when I thought about it, because you tried to get there—if you got there for the first show, for the seven cents, but the regular price was fifteen cents.

Q: Yes. What was your favorite thing to see?

Lawson: Like I said, we didn't—I didn't even know, you know, they would show *Robin Hood* movies, they'd show cowboy movies.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: At that time, I remember they even showed some Black cowboy movies. Yes that were produced by Black producers with Black actors and things, things of that nature. But, you know, Roy Rogers—I haven't thought about this stuff—[*Laughs*] you know, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry. We would go to the show and see *Robin Hood*, and a lot of sword fighting movies, and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, all of that. You know, all of that kind of stuff. So, you know, just regular kids' stuff.

Q: Did they show cartoons in the beginning?

Lawson: Yes, but I don't really—I wasn't really a cartoon person, so, I wouldn't go to the show—they didn't—not like they do today, I mean, when they have these streaming cartoons and all that. That was maybe—maybe they show a cartoon in between the films or something like that. But the cartoons were not the main draw.

Q: Not the main attraction.

Lawson: Right. Right.

Q: Was there a particular person that was kind of, like, your best friend or your running budding at that time, or somebody you'd spent a lot of time with?

Lawson: Yes. That's interesting, because I'm trying to think of it—God—his last name was Ewing, like yours.

Q: Oh, wow! That's funny.

Lawson: Right. Yes, he just passed away maybe three years ago.

Q: I'm sorry to hear that.

Lawson: Yes, he was my closest friend. And his nickname was Pooky [*phonetic*], I know that. I know that. I don't remember what his first name was.

Q: Everybody just called him "Pooky" all the time.

Lawson: Pooky, right. He lived in the same block. Now, he was from a large family, he had about six or eight brothers and sisters. But to show you how close we were, or how strongly I felt about him, when I was nine years old, my parents bought some property, and mother told me, we'll be moving. We'll be moving out of the neighborhood, into another house. So my response was—I thought about it, and I said, "Can Pooky come with us?" [*Laughs*]

Q: Aww. That must have broken your heart. What did she say?

Lawson: This part, I may cut out, she said, "You're lucky to be going!"

Q: [*Laughs*] That's funny. That's funny. She was quick on the draw, huh? She was ready with that one.

Lawson: Right. But the reason I asked that question, because I was very serious.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: You know, there was a lot of serious stuff going around, we were shooting these marbles, running up and down in the theater.

Q: Right.

Lawson: Having a jolly good time. I'm glad that you all are making this move, and everything.

Q: Right.

Lawson: I'm not happy about moving, and leaving all this behind.

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: And I was dead serious, you know.

Q: Right.

Lawson: But I wouldn't certainly have stayed there, obviously. That's—but I just—when you asked about my closest friends, that's, you know.

Q: So you were really close.

Lawson: Right. Right.

Q: Did you go to grammar school together as well? Where did you go to school?

Lawson: I went to Carter [Elementary School], on Fifty-Seventh and Michigan.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: I would, you know, I frequently would tell people growing up, I could walk, do my whole family's circuit in fifteen minutes. Like, we lived at Fifty-Sixth and Indiana, my father's mother lived at Fifty-Seventh and Michigan. She lived right across the street—

Q: One block away.

Lawson: —from the school I went to.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: As a matter of fact, when I went to the school, I went to start at kindergarten, the principal, whose name was Miss Faith [*phonetic*], God I'm amazed that I remember that. But she said, "I see your name is Owen Lawson." I said, "Yes." She said, "Your father Owen Lawson?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Well, you've got two strikes against you already."

Q: Oh, no! [*Laughs*] Oh, no.

Lawson: Yes. So that's how long my father's family had roots in that community.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: Plus, and then my mother's mother lived at Fifty-Fourth and what was South Park then, but it's now called—

Q: King Drive.

Lawson: —King Drive. Then my mother's sister lived on Fifty-Seventh and Prairie. I had another aunt that lived at Fifty-Eighth and—at Fifty-Eighth and Prairie. So I said, I could do the whole circuit in ten minutes.

Q: The one on Fifty-Fourth and Park Way was almost far away. That's, like—

Lawson: Right. Right, right. Right. Right.

Q: That's, like, another country, basically, gone four or five more blocks.

Lawson: Right.

Q: Does that mean—were both of your parents also born in Chicago?

Lawson: No. My father was born in Chicago. My mother was born in Memphis.

Q: Yes. That's unusual, so was your father's—was his mother born in Chicago? No.

Lawson: You know, I don't really know.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: I don't remember. I know his—my father's mother's people were from the Southwest. But I don't remember where—now I know my grandfather was born in Chicago.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: Yes, my grandfather was born in Chicago. But I don't know, because my—I don't know the answer to that. Never thought to ask. She was a very proper, prim lady, and you know, as a kid—

Q: Yes. You said, "That's not my business."

Lawson: —it just feel like it [*unclear*], say, "Hey, by the way, where you born?"

Q: Right. That's was grown folks' business. That was grown folks' business.

Lawson: Right.

Q: Did your mother ever talk to you about Memphis and her experiences growing up there?

Lawson: She hated it.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: Long story short.

Q: What did she tell you about it?

Lawson: That she hated it. [*Laughter*] No, seriously, she left Memphis when she was fifteen. She never went back for anything, okay?

Q: Wow.

Lawson: I remember, I think in the 1990s, they elected a Black mayor, and so I said, "Mama, they got a Black mayor in Memphis." She said, "Well, that's very nice." You know. I mean, people died there, they had weddings there, whatever.

Q: Right.

Lawson: She never went back. And she never—whatever caused her to have that much level of hatred, she never shared with me. She took that to the grave when she died.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: But, you know, she would say, "I would rather be a fire plug in Chicago than the mayor of Memphis," you know. So she really had a—you know, she really had a profound hatred.

Q: It sounds like it.

Lawson: For that particular community.

Q: What did your parents do for work?

Lawson: My mother was a factory worker for the early years of my life, and then she was a housewife. My father ran on the railroad, and then he became—I think he did some stint at the Post Office, and then finally he became a policeman.

Q: Yes. So when he was on the railroad, was he gone a lot?

Lawson: That part of his life was before I was knowledgeable, you know?

Q: I see. Got it. Got it Got it.

Lawson: Right, right.

Q: Well, so you mentioned that it was a really tough move for you when your parents said, hey, we're moving to a different part of—we're moving out of the neighborhood. Where did they move you to?

Lawson: To the West Side.

Q: So far, so that was a big jump.

Lawson: Right. Right, right. Yes. Because I didn't even know where Riverside [*phonetic*] was at that time. I just knew we were moving.

Q: Right.

Lawson: So, you know, that was—well, you know, I really just disliked the West Side, like, every weekend, I would come back South and spend the weekend with my relatives who still remained on the South Side.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: That's—so I still, I had mixed roots because I was—

Q: Right.

Lawson: I spent as much time—I did most of my socializing on the South Side.

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: Even though I lived on the West Side.

Q: Where on the West Side did they move to?

Lawson: Fourteenth and Lawndale.

Q: So you went to high school and everything over there as well?

Lawson: Yes, I went to—I graduated from Crane [High School].

Q: Yes? And how was that? What were you into in high school? What did you like? How was your experience?

Lawson: Well, in my senior year, I was voted the most popular boy in class, so evidently, they—

Q: Well, then!

Lawson: Evidently—I enjoyed it.

Q: You did all right for yourself. [*Laughs*]

Lawson: Right, right. I joined the ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], and I got to be an officer in the ROTC. The Army sent me a letter saying that since I was an officer, I was eligible for the officers' candidate school once I graduated, if that's what I wanted to do.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: But I wasn't really interested in pursuing—that's when I started becoming politically conscious, so understanding what the racial situation was. Going into the United States Army was, like, the last thing—

Q: Right.

Lawson:—you know, last thing on my mind.

Q: Going back to that question of political consciousness, so when Emmett Till was murdered, you would have been about thirteen, twelve or thirteen years old. So do you remember that happening, and what your thoughts were on that at the time?

Lawson: Not really at that time. I knew it was something that the adults were concerned about, and it was a really big deal. But—and if I think—I may have seen the photos in the *Jet* at that time, because like I said, it was a really big, you know, it was a really big deal.

Q: Right.

Lawson: But in point of fact, we're the same age, you know. I just covered—they just had it in my capacity as a journalist with the *Herald*, they had a ice cream social at the Mobley Till Museum, celebrating Emmett Till's birthday, okay, and the fact that they got a ten million dollar addition that they're going to expand from the house, because the museum is the house where he lived before he was murdered. So the photo I gave the *Herald* is a picture of the executive

director pointing to the new structure, because it's adjacent to the house. Like the skeleton is there, they're doing work on it. The title, or the caption was, "New ten million dollar addition to the Mobley Till Museum." But like I said, I was thirteen at the time.

Lawson: Right.

Lawson: I saw the news that bad things happened to Black people when they went down South.

Q: Yes, yes.

Lawson: I went down South to visit my great, great grandmother, who still lived in Memphis, and she lived there to be a hundred years old—

Q: Wow.

Lawson: —in what she called one-room—you know, the house was up on bricks. As a kid, I used to crawl under it. You know, she had a—use the term "bathtub," she would put a tub in the center of the floor and pour water in it, and you know, Saturday night she took a bath.

Q: That was it.

Lawson: Right. You know, she had the ice box where a guy would come by with a big block of ice and, you know, put it in there. She had a wooden stove, a wood burning stove where she

would buy wood, or chop wood, or whatever, and put the wood in the stove and use it to cook. She lived—as I said, she lived in that house—now, I had a conversation with my aunt, because she was going to tell me that, "You've never been South." I said, "Wait a minute, come on now," you know.

Q: Right.

Lawson: So then I thought about it. I said, "Well, wait a minute, how did I get down there?

Q: Right.

Lawson: Because I thought, because I was a child, you know. I was less than ten years old when I went down there.

Q: You were little.

Lawson: Right. So I just started thinking, how did I get down there? The one thing I know, my mother didn't take me.

Q: Right. Right, right. So we can cross that off the list.

Lawson: Right. I can just scratch that out.

Q: Right, right.

Lawson: That wasn't happening. So I called my cousin, who is one of my favorite cousins, he was four years older than I am. So I said, "I guess Bobby must have taken me down there." I called him, I said, "Do you remember going South?" He said, "I ain't never been South." You know, and so I'm saying, "Okay, how did I get down there?"

Q: How did I get there?

Lawson: Right. In those days, they would just put kids—put you on the train with some chicken bag or whatever, and tell the conductor where you were going—[*Laughs*]

Q: Did they put a sign around your neck or something? Maybe they said, you know, your name, and—

Lawson: So to this day, I don't know. All I knew, I went, okay?

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: Of course I can describe in detail what I did while I was down there.

Q: Yes. Right, and you made it back. Somehow you made it back, too.

Lawson: Right. Right, right. Well, fortunately, I don't think they were killing kids as early as nine or ten.

Q: Right, right.

Lawson: Yes, because I went down—that was pre-Emmett Till.

Q: Right.

Lawson: You know, when I went down, so—

Q: When you were growing up in 1956 in Indiana, did a lot of your friends go back South for the summer?

Lawson: Not—no, I don't remember that. I don't remember that being a big issue. You know, at that time, segregation was really not the thing, you know. Even as a small kid, I knew that bad things were happening to Black people who went South, you know.

Q: Right.

Lawson: No, that's not something that I remember—we just had a lot of fun doing when school was out. Because there was a vacant lot in the middle of the block that has since been made into—they put up an official playground. When I was going through, it was just filled with glass

and bottles and stuff, and people just went there, and sort of entertained themselves. But yes, so that's pretty much—I don't have a strong recollection of any of the kids that I know, that I knew, growing up, who would be going South. It was like I said, Pooky was my best friend, and he had six or eight—wasn't all of them going, he had no money to send.

Q: Right, that's a good point. That's a good point. That's expensive.

Lawson: Yes, to send them back.

Q: Now so you said that when you graduated high school, you were really getting a lot of political consciousness, so that would have been—did you graduate in 1958?

Lawson: Nine.

Q: Fifty-nine? Got it. And so what were you—what was on your mind as you were leaving high school? What did you want to do? And what were some of the issues that were important to you?

Lawson: Well, that's it, I sort of became aware of what the racial situation—I mean, what was happening to Black people, because the Muslims, the Nation of Islam, was just breaking onto the scene, okay? Malcolm X [Malcolm Little], Elijah Muhammad [Elijah Robert Poole], you know, that whole thing was beginning to burst. So I was, you know, I was attracted to that, because I—I wouldn't call myself a Muslim, but I just—I couldn't buy the idea of somebody abusing me and me not doing anything about it.

Q: Right.

Lawson: I wasn't from that. I remember the old folks used to say, if you're big enough to pass a lick, you're big enough to take one.

Q: Yes. Yes.

Lawson: So I sort of lived by that ideology, the object. I applied that without regard to race, color, previous condition or servitude, or whatever.

Q: Everything.

Lawson: You know? So I was very much attracted to the Nation of Islam, primarily because I didn't—unlike a lot of Black people, kids then, I didn't have a strong religious background.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: My parents, their position was, church is very important, and you need to go. Okay. They didn't go. [*Laughter*]

Q: But you need to go and get up out of the house on Sunday.

Lawson: Right. Yes. So I never had that, you know, all day in church experience, that wasn't my thing. Then so I didn't have that as a staple in my life. Then I saw the movie, oh, God, I haven't thought about this stuff in—whatever. The movie, *Elmer Gantry*, and *Elmer Gantry* was the—I can't think of the name who was the top—Billy Graham of the 1920s, okay? He had mega churches all around there. So the film was a fictionalized version of this preacher's life. And when you got all of those churches and got all of that stuff together, and he moved into his biggest church, and then he announced he was resigning, so all of the meeting was there, and they ask him, they said, "Well, Reverend [*unclear*], you have all of these millions of followers or something, and now you're resigning. Why?" And he said something, even as an early teenager, that struck me. He said, "When I was a child, I thought as a child, I understood as a child. But now I'm a man, and I put all childish things"—

Q: Put away childish things, yes.

Lawson: —and he walked out the door.

Q: Wow. Wow.

Lawson: And I said, "Well, makes sense to me." You know. So I've always been the type of person where stuff has to make sense to <u>me</u>, okay, I don't care who else it makes sense to. If it doesn't make sense to me, I'm not going to invest a lot of time in it.

Q: Right.

Lawson: You know. But if you want me to be serious about it and invest some time in it, then it has to make sense.

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: So this whole thing of turn your other cheek, and figure, no, I'm not there. I don't want to hear that.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: So that's what I—that was my initial attraction to the Nation of Islam. Then the sit ins began to happen, and I remember, you know, demonstrating at the Woolworths down in Downtown Chicago. They used to have a big Woolworths store right there, I think between Jackson and Van Buren. So when the Civil Rights Movement broke out in the South and they were calling for these [*unclear*] demonstrations all around the country, so I went down and took part in those early demonstrations. So that's sort of—that's—and then once I was in college, you know, I became more—because I wanted to—I wanted to study history. And my whole attitude was, I said, well, I'm going to study history and I'm going to teach it. And if I'm dissatisfied, I'm going to go out and make some.

Q: There you go! There you go.

Lawson: You know, so I never say these things to people, because they think I'm—

Q: No, I'm into it!

Lawson: [*Laughs*] You know. So History was my major. So then I'd be learning about—and I know the Black experience, but the American experience, and the whole—because I got a BA in History, and then I went to Roosevelt University, which has turned out quite a few folks.

Q: Yes, I was going to ask about that. Did you know any of those other famous folks when you were at Roosevelt?

Lawson: No. They were all—I knew they had gone to Roosevelt, but they were just—like Hale [*phonetic*] Washington and them, they were a generation ahead of me.

Q: Got it. Got it.

Lawson: But he had been president of the student council when he was at Roosevelt. Dempsey Travis went to Roosevelt. Gus Savage, who was a hell-raising Congressman, went to Roosevelt. And the school was founded as a protest, because the president of the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] had a college at that time, and they had a quota on Blacks and Jews, so the president was a man named Sterling, and so he walked out of—he left Roosevelt. I mean, he left the YMCA school instead of Roosevelt University. So the school was born out of protest.

Q: I didn't know that.

Lawson: Right. And so, you know, so that's how school started, okay? It was a school that attracted—you know, most other schools had quotas at that time. Since they were born in reaction to a quota, they didn't have any quotas.

Q: Right, right.

Lawson: And so if you could pass the examinations and take the test—

Q: You could go.

Lawson: —you could go. So they had a lot of veterans who had the GI bill, and who went there. But I just transferred and went there from University of Illinois.

Q: So you started at Urbana, and then decided that you wanted to be back—

Lawson: Oh, no. No, no—

Q: —Circle Campus?

Lawson: No, that was before Circle Campus. They used to—you know where Navy Pier is?

Q: Yes.

Lawson: Okay, well, that used to be the University of Illinois, in Chicago.

Q: I did not know that.

Lawson: Right, okay. So that's where I started. Then I left there and I went to a junior college, and then I went to Roosevelt to finish up, to get a four-year degree. So it was called The Pier.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: And they had a reputation for really being an academically vigorous institution.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: More so than Urbana at that time. But that Circle came out of The Pier, The Pier—it was at Navy Pier. That was the name of the school.

Q: It was literally—that's where it was. Wow.

Lawson: Right. That's where it was.

Q: Wow. Now, as you were starting to get intrigued by the Nation, did you ever get to see Malcolm X speak or see Elijah Muhammad speak?

Lawson: I saw both.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: Yes. As I—see, I'm not talking about this stuff because people think I'm making it up.

Q: No, I'm into it.

Lawson: I mean, I know you don't.

Q: Yes, yes.

Lawson: This is why I don't talk about this stuff.

Q: Right, right.

Lawson: Okay? But once I went to Roosevelt, then I really got radicalized. So I was involved with Chicago Friends of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], you know, I was supporting the Cuban Revolution, the whole anti-apartheid thing, you know, I was signing up for everything, okay? [*Laughter*] You know, so I was doing the whole piece. When Castro had his

revolution, you know, he came to Harlem, he met Malcom X in Harlem, he stayed at the Hotel Theresa. So this kind of stuff just blew me away, you know what I'm saying, you know. Then Nations in Africa were beginning to get—well, at least went "flag independence."

Q: Yes, right. Right.

Lawson: Right. It's—as I tried to explain to my son, I said, we really thought there was going to be a revolution. And it would have been, except the other side started killing people, right? You know. If they had not killed those people, we would have had a revolution.

Q: Right.

Lawson: You know, but they killed Medgar Evers.

Q: Right.

Lawson: They killed the Kennedy [John Fitzgerald and Robert Francis] Brothers. They killed [Martin Luther] King, you know. They killed Fred [Fredrick Allen] Hampton, they killed Malcolm X, you know what I'm saying? Well, see, I didn't know that was a—you know, that that was the card they were going to play.

Q: Right, right.

Lawson: I thought if you'd point it out and say, "Well, this is wrong, we ought not to be doing this," then they would say to—

Q: Right. Then people would say, "Oh okay, sure, I hear you."

Lawson: Right. Right. You know. So that's what happened. So what gets me—and I read *Trumbull Park* when it came out, okay, I don't know when it was, but I read it when it came out. But as I said, I was a real supporter of the Cuban Revolution, because Blacks played a significant part in that revolution. And I remember one of my college students, one of my buddies in college, actually went to Cuba, and he came back and gave us a first-hand report. I have not talked about this with anybody. [*Laughs*]

Q: But it's still all right here, it's in your head.

Lawson: Right. See, so we had a little core group at Roosevelt, and we called the BBB, Bitter, Black and Bolshevik. [*Laughter*]

Q: I love it! I love it.

Lawson: So one of the guys—that it, he literally went to Cuba.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: Came back and told us that Black people, they were in discrimination down there, and Blacks had—you know, I think he said the leader of the Cuban Army was a Black man, a radical Black man. So I'm eating this stuff up, you know what I'm saying?

Q: Right.

Lawson: And what got me, I went to a—there was a Fair Play for Cuba meeting in Hyde Park, and I went to that meeting. A bunch of white thugs stormed me.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: And at that meeting, I met the brother who became my mentor, Sterling Stuckey, who later—at that time he was a teacher at Wendell Phillips High School. And he was at that Fair Play for Cuba meeting, so he and I became acquainted as results to that. Since he was a history teacher and I was studying history to become a history teacher, and we were both Black and radical, so we became friends. And he and a white woman named Bea Young, they were instrumental in setting up this organization called the Amistad Society. The Amistad incident was this slave ship where the Africans, and as Sterling pointed out, the reason he selected that name was because it showed the connections between Africa, the Caribbean and Black Americans in America. So it was through Sterling that, you know, I met John [Oliver] Killens, you know.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: It was through Sterling, because we had the Amistad Society. And we were, like, the most radical academics in Chicago, okay? So—and like I said, Sterling was Sterling, and Bea Young were the principal founders of it. I was, like, number three with it, you know. And so but anyway, Sterling invited Malcom X to come to Chicago and speak. So I met him personally.

Q: Wow. Where did he come speak? Where was that?

Lawson: Now you know, I don't remember. But I remember that how I met him was after he finished talking, Sterling had written a check for his accommodations, and he said—and Malcolm refused to take it, said, "That's all right, the Nation will take care of it." Because at that time, the Nation was—their headquarters was at Fifty-Third—and here in Hyde Park. Fifty-Third and Greenwood, little small building. So the Amistad Society, we would invite Black and white intellectuals to come into the city and talk about the—what we, in those days, called "Negro history." [*Laughs*] You know, and Sterling was teaching at Phillips at that time. And he organized a group called the Student Advocates of Negro History. These were kids who were pushing that—trying to get the public schools to accept—

Q: Right.

Lawson: —the role the Blacks played in America and in the African history. And to give an indication of the academic orientation of our group, three of the kids, who were Phillips students

and members of the student advocates, when they graduated from high school, we invited them to come into the adult group. And those three kids went on, each one of them, to get PhDs.

Q: Wow. Wow. So they were serious. They were getting some serious mentorship from you.

Lawson: Right. Well, we were serious.

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: So Sterling invited John Killens here, because we invited a whole slew of folks, you know, Lerone Bennet [Jr.], whatever.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: But I remember he invited Killens here, John Killens published his book, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*, which was about his experiences in World War II in the Pacific. And he talks about how the biggest fight they had, while he was in the military, was the fight between white American soldiers and Black American. And they were doing pitched battles with tanks, machine guns, the whole—

Q: The whole nine.

Lawson: The whole nine yards. So he quoted from—the title of the book was, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*. And he said he took that line from Harriet Tubman, who had served as a soldier in the Second World War. And at some point, she talks about something that happened, "And then we heard the thunder," you know.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: That's why—

Q: That's a good title.

Lawson: Right, right. And so that's how I met him.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: So I went to New York and—you know. Well, you know, it was a little circle. I was in the circle, whatever. So I met John. Floyd [Bixler] McKissick was head of an organization called CORE at that time, and, you know, I met him. Because I had been in Mississippi, because Amsey [*phonetic*] Moore had invited Sterling to come down and teach Black History at the freedom schools—

Q: In Mississippi?

Lawson: —in Mississippi for the summer. And Sterling was only able to stay for, like, a month, so he told Amsey, he said, "Well, I'm going to recommend Owen come down and take my place."

Q: Wow. So you went and taught in the Mississippi Freedom summer?

Lawson: No, the year after that.

Q: Okay.

Lawson: Yes, I was there in 1966.

Q: Got it.

Lawson: Right. Okay. That's right after I got out of school. And I remember, I took a plane to Memphis, and then I had to get a bus to go to—God, I forget—Cleveland, because that's where I was going to be staying—

Q: Yes, Cleveland, Mississippi?

Lawson: Right. And as I was riding on the bus, I fell asleep.

Q: Uh-oh.

Lawson: And the bus went over a railroad tie, and it jarred me. And I looked out the window, and there was a little white sign on a stick in the crossing, and said, "You are now entering the State of Mississippi." And I said to myself, "Owen, what the hell are you doing?" [*Laughter*]

Q: Oh, no!

Lawson: Because it was just two summers ago when they killed those three—

Q: Yes. Turner—yes.

Lawson: Yes, [*unclear*].

Q: Yes.

Lawson: And so I said, "This doesn't really [*crosstalk*]."

Q: This don't add up.

Lawson: Right.

Q: You know what, maybe it was divine intervention that caused you to wake up, and just in time to see—you said, "Send me a sign," and the universe sent you a sign. [*Laughter*] It wasn't the sign you wanted to see.

Lawson: Right. So literally, the day I got there, the very day I got there, the sheriff beat a Black man to death in a filling station, okay? So this part of the story, you might want to black out, because I said—

Q: Well, whatever you feel comfortable with.

Lawson: I said, "They're not going to bring that show to me."

Q: Right.

Lawson: So I took immediate steps to make sure that whatever went down, I wasn't going down like that.

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: Okay? You know. And so that's—I could have been a member of Niggers for Defense.

Q: I hear you. I pick up what you sent down. I'm picking up what you're putting down. But did the FBI, or anybody like that, ever harass you, or try to get you or surveil you because you were engaged in really leftist politics, with Cuba, and—?

Lawson: Not to my knowledge. I knew people—well, see, I had friends who went and asked to see their files, or something. I never did.

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: Maybe they did, but I said, I'm going to do what I've got to do.

Q: Right.

Lawson: If you all want to surveil me, or do whatever, you know, I'm going to, you know—

Q: So you were going to do you.

Lawson: —do what I have to do. But so I don't know. But I know people who were in my circle who went and filed the Freedom of Information Act, and found out that they, in fact, had—I just never did that.

Lawson: Right.

Lawson: So I can't say. But there were few people in the Black community who were to the left of me.

Q: Right. I feel like we can feel confident that there's something out there.

Lawson: Right. I'm saying I'm sure there are.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: But that was it. But like I say, I was just doing what made sense to me.

Q: Yes. What was your experience like, teaching in Mississippi?

Lawson: Well—God, get somebody who's going to tell you the truth. Because being in Mississippi, first thing I had adjusted to, I mean, the last time I was South, I was with my grandmother, when I was a kid.

Q: Right, you were a child, right.

Lawson: So now I'm an adult.

Q: Right.

Lawson: I've got to get used to seeing these white boys driving around in trucks, with Winchesters hanging over their heads. Okay? And so that took a while for me to adjust to. So I was working with young people, we were teaching them Black History, so on and so forth. So we have a Freedom School set up in a building just outside of Cleveland, so the word came down that the [Ku Klux] Klan was going to attack the building. So, you know, I'm in my early twenties, or whatever, right? So we had a meeting, they said, well—and see, this is why I never talk to this stuff, because most people wouldn't believe it. They think I'm just making it up, you know? They said, "Look, we've got work to do, the Klan's going to come and try to do something with the building, so we need some people to volunteer to go out and stay out there overnight, to see that nothing happens." So, you know, I'm in Chicago, talking about how we should fight, and so on, so I said, "Hey, I'll go."

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: and so I told Amsey Moore, who is a real hero of this thing, because he's the guy who invited Bob Moses down, but he stayed in the background. And he gave me some advice that I've lived to until this interview, okay? Because he was a World War II veteran, and he'd been involved in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and, I mean, I couldn't imagine living in the South in those times.

Q: Right.

Lawson: It was difficult for me to imagine living when I was there, and there was a movement going on.

Q: Right.

Lawson: But he had been there after he got out of the Army, and whatever. And one day, I just asked him. I said, "Amsey, how did you stay alive?" You know, and he said, "I stayed from in front of those cameras."

Q: Yes. Yes.

Lawson: Okay, and I took that advise. From that moment to when I'm talking to you, that's been my policy. Just remain, as much as you can, in the background.

Q: Well, the irony of that is that most of the time when I see you, you're behind the camera, so you're the guy with the camera. [*Laughs*]

Lawson: Right. Exactly. Exactly, you know. So anyway, long story short, so I told Amsey, I said, "Look, if you give me a Winchester, I will go after you." So me and a guy named Joe, I've forgotten Joe's name, we went out there. I had a Winchester, Joe had a shotgun. We're down there crawling around on the floor, because we didn't know [*laughs*] what was going to happen. We didn't want to go and be standing up, walking around.

Q: Right. In the window, in the light, right.

Lawson: Right. And I told Amsey, I said, "Amsey, if something happens, I'm going to get on the phone, I'm going to call you all, and if you don't come, I'm going to feel awfully bad." [*Laughs*]

Q: Yes.

Lawson: Right. Fortunately, nothing happened. But something else that you'd be interested in, I met Fannie Lou Hamer while I was down there.

Q: Wow!

Lawson: Because she lived in Ruleville, Mississippi, right, which is—I don't remember geography, but it was pretty close to Cleveland. So I knew who she was. So I went to visit her and, you know, in her little house that was much similar to what my great grandmother had lived in. And they had kicked her off the plantation because she was involved in voter registration, right?

Q: Yes?

Lawson: When I was there, she told me, "They shut my phone off, I don't have phone service." So, you know, I'm a teacher from Chicago, I had money, so I gave her money to pay her phone bill.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: You know, so that was, you know. Then she talked about her experiences in the—in Mississippi, and whatever. And the last story I will tell you, well, I'll just tell two. All the time I was in Mississippi, I had a .32 automatic in my back pocket, okay, wherever I went. You know, they may jump me, but somebody else is gonna pay a heavy price, okay?

Q: Right. Right, right.

Lawson: So that was my thing. So I was staying with a guy, his first name was Owen, just like mine.

Q: Oh, wow.

Lawson: Owen Brooks, he was from Boston. And he was connected with the [*unclear*]. He's still there, he never left, okay? So we were sharing this apartment. There was a young white boy, and I want to think he was the guy who later became Senator of New York, but I'm not sure. But anyway, he was going around helping register Black voters. So he came to where we was staying to see Owen. So he come to see me, he come to see Owen. And he said, "Listen, there's a rumor going around that the Klan is after me," after him, the white boy, okay?

Q: Oh.

Lawson: Right. And he said, “I’ve got to go to Greenville tomorrow night,” and he’s talking to Owen, he said, “And I’d like for you to go with me.”

Q: Yes.

Lawson: So Owen said, “Yes, I’ll go with you.” Then Owen comes to me and says, “You heard what”—I had forgotten the guy’s name—”what he said, would you go with us?” And I said, “Owen, understand what you’re asking me to do.”

Q: Right.

Lawson: “Understand what you’re asking me to do. You’re asking me to drive across the State of Mississippi at night with a white boy the Klan is after.” I said, “That’s what you’re asking me to do.”

Q: Right.

Lawson: Okay? I said, “Now you know me, and you know I carry a gun, okay”—

Q: Right.

Lawson: —I say, “So if I go, I’m going to take my gun.” And I said, “I’m not talking to no white folks on no highway at night, I’m not talking. Anybody stops us, I’m shooting.”

Q: It is, yes.

Lawson: “Sheriff, whoever. I got no conversation for no white men at night on no highway in Mississippi.”

Q: No.

Lawson: I said, “If that’s a problem for you all, I will stay here. I don’t have to go.”

Q: Right.

Lawson: “If that offends you all, because you all are nonviolent, right? If that’s fine,” I says, because, “We’re not stopping and chatting, talk to nobody, convince nobody. I’m not going to. They just dug three people out of the river down there.”

Q: Right. Right.

Lawson: Okay? So that’s what happened. So he said, “Yes, okay, well, come on, man, we’ll go.”

Q: [*Laughs*] He said, "Oh, no problem." He said, "Come along." He was probably a little bit relieved, to be honest, to have you there.

Lawson: You know. So fortunately, nothing happening, but I just told them.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: "We're not talking, we're not discussing anything. Anybody gets in front of this car and stops us is going down.

Q: That's it. Wow.

Lawson: You know, so whatever. So that's it.

Q: Wow.

Lawson: Somebody—I was talking to somebody the other night, and he said, "Well, you ought to write a book." I said, "The reason I don't is," I said, "because nobody would believe this stuff, because I don't believe it, and I did it!" [*Laughter*]

Q: Well, this is a little bit less—this is not the same as writing a book, but it will be public, and everybody will be able to hear it. And I believe it. And I feel—so, you know, when you started talking about Fannie Lou Hamer, I went silent, because that was, to me a very emotional, very

beautiful story that, you know, you made sure that her basic needs were provided for. And somebody who gave so much to us, you gave something back. So that was very moving. But I'm so excited that I got to talk to you. This is so cool. And I don't want to take up too much more of your time, but is there anything I did not ask you about that you feel like, I cannot let her off the line before I mention this thing?

Lawson: That's it, honey. I haven't discussed these things in decades, you know, so—and as you can see, some of it I'm even reluctant to talk about now. But, you know, I think that—because I was talking to a young lady the other night, and she was saying, well, you know, you have some of these experiences. I said, "Well, each generation has to figure it out for themselves."

Q: Yes. Yes.

Lawson: So, you know, all I can say is, because I hate people talking about what they did in the 1960s, that's why I don't do that.

Q: Right.

Lawson: Oh, I've got to tell you one other thing, it's really in Chicago, okay?

Q: Yes.

Lawson: The summer I was in Mississippi was the same summer Dr. King came to Chicago.

Q: Oh, wow, to North Lawndale.

Lawson: [*Crosstalk*], right, okay. So he got hit with a brick when he was going through—

Q: Marquette Park?

Lawson: —Marquette Gate, because in those days, you didn't cross Halsted Street unless you were looking for a good ass-whipping, okay? Now I could tell you—and I told you, I lived on the West Side, right?

Q: Yes.

Lawson: I was dating a girl who lived at Fifty-Sixth—Fifty-Eighth and Michigan. One night in August, I decided, I'm going to walk from the South Side to the West Side.

Q: No. No, no.

Q: Lawson: [*Laughs*] You know, and so naturally, when I got across Halsted, it was about 2:00 in the morning.

Q: No.

Lawson: And a group of five or ten white boys chased me. You know, and I said to myself, you all are running for fun, I'm running for my life, okay?

Q: Okay, I'm going to win.

Lawson: Right. There's no way I lose this race, right? You know. [*Laughter*]

Q: Wow.

Lawson: So but anyway, so that summer, King had a nonviolent march, right?

Q: Yes.

Lawson: So then another one of the folks said, "We're going to have a march into Cicero, and it's not going to be nonviolent." I said, "Okay, this is my kind of march!"

Q: You said, "Sign me up," right.

Lawson: So literally, the day after I got back from Mississippi, I go and get in this march to Cicero, and they got policemen on the roof with rifles—

Q: Of course.

Lawson: —and so on and so forth, right, because in those days, Cicero was like No Man's Land to Black folks, okay? Cicero—and I told you that when I met—when we were talking at the exhibit.

Q: Yes.

Lawson: You know, that that's one of my earliest memories from childhood. Every summer there was some kind of confrontation with Black people moving into the white spaces.

Q: Right.

Lawson: Now that hasn't happened in the last ten, fifteen years. I don't know whether the white communities just gave up.

Q: Yes. [*Laughs*]

Lawson: For one thing, they know now they don't have legal support.

Q: Right. Right. It was legal then, so—

Lawson: Right. You understand what I'm saying?

Q: Right.

Lawson: And the Civil Rights laws weren't being as vigorously enforced.

Q: Right.

Lawson: So even if it was illegal, you had to survive, you know, in order to do it.

Q: Right.

Lawson: So that's basically, you know, the Chicago—

Q: Oh, and you are a gem, and I'm so grateful that I got to talk with you, and that I get to be a community member with you. I feel very proud to know you, I think you're so cool. And I'm also really grateful to our friend, Mark, for helping us out. So like I said, I'm going to actually, as soon as we get off this call, I'll put these forms for you in the mail.

Lawson: Okay.

Q: And I'll put it with a stamped envelope, so you just sign them and send them back to me.

Lawson: Thank you.

Q: And we'll get you paid as quickly as possible. And I'm so grateful to you.

Lawson: And I'm very grateful to you for extending me the invitation to give me a chance to rethink about this. Last thing I will say, in terms of my career as a photographer, because in addition to my journalistic work, what my real motive is, I'm documenting the African experience worldwide. Okay? So I've got all kinds of images. I've said—and I'm going to tell you this, because then I'll have to—I'm going to get a book of my photographs published before the end of the year. And if I don't—

Q: Well, now you said it.

Lawson: Right. [*Laughs*]

Q: Now, see, you're going to rue the day—you'll regret telling me that, because I will hassle you about it. You know, I was a CPS [Chicago Public Schools] teacher, so I'm really good at hassling people about saying, if you said you're going to do it, you say you're going to do it. And with DKs, there's all this money you can get to publish things and put things out there, so it's on. Now, when you say end of the year, do you mean end of 2023? Or 2024?

Lawson: You know, let's say by August of 2024.

Q: Okay. This is a pact. This is a pact. [*Laughter*] Okay? So I'm going to hold you to it.

Lawson: Because I didn't realize as I said it, time is flying so fast.

Q: It surely is. It surely is, every time.

Lawson: Now wait a minute, there's only three more months.

Q: See, I was thinking about the school year, because I always think in academic—so I was, like, okay, the academic year, you know? But you have one year from today—

Lawson: There you go. Okay.

Q: —we're going to make it, we'll call it even. Thank you, Owen, and please thank Mark again for me as well.

Lawson: Okay, and thank you so much.

Q: Okay, you have a great day. I'll see you around.

Lawson: Take care.

Q: Bye-bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]