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David Seth Walker: All right, this is David Walker and it is 5:30 PM on Friday March 23, 2001. And I am interviewing Mr. Leland Hawes. Mr. Hawes, good afternoon.

Leland Hawes: Good afternoon.

DW: Mr. Hawes, as you know, I am writing a paper for Dr. Gary Mormino, my professor in the history department at the University of South Florida. And my paper is dealing with the aftermath and the effects of the *Brown vs. [Board of Education of] Topeka* school desegregation decision of the [U.S.] Supreme Court. And you agreed to talk with me and share with me some of your observations and thoughts.

LH: That's right.

DW: I need to do the following, since we are not together and I cannot have you sign the printed form. Mr. Hawes, do you give me permission to tape record this interview? And the tape recording will be given to the oral history archives of the University of South Florida. Can I do that?

LH: Yes.

DW: Thank you very much. And you are also, if you are reading the form, you are giving up any claim that you have to a copyright (laughs) or any privacy in the conversation.

LH: However, some of my recollections have been published.

DW: Okay, very good. Let's start and find out a little about you. Mr. Hawes, where are you from originally?

LH: I was born here in Tampa in June of 1929. So I am now seventy-one years old.

DW: Okay. And where—

LH: And I started to work at the *Tampa Tribune* in August of 1952. And I am still there, although in a part-time capacity now.

DW: Okay, and what about your schooling, your education?

LH: Went to public schools in Tampa, although I was actually living in the country about fifteen miles out of town, but managed to go to school at Gorrie Elementary, Wilson Junior High, and Plant High School in Tampa.

DW: You're a Panther.

LH: Right.

DW: Right.

LH: Graduated in 1947. Went to the University of Florida, and because of some tests for veterans at that point, even though I was not a veteran of World War II, I was able to build up some extra credits by going to summer school a semester or two. Finished in the summer of 1950 and went to work immediately for the *Tampa Daily Times*, which was the afternoon newspaper in Tampa at that point.

DW: Mm-hm. And you say you went with the *Tribune* in fifty-two [1952]?

LH: Right.

DW: Okay. What was your first assignment with the *Tribune*? What were you covering?

LH: Basically, I, for a number of years, covered the police beat, and occasional special stories that would take me around the state. Primarily, I would cover the local crime scene and Tampa General Hospital, which then was known as Tampa Municipal Hospital.

DW: Mm-hm.

LH: So it was kind of a varied routine. But I had done the same for the *Times* [and] for the *Tribune* also—at that point. Why, you never quite knew exactly where you might be. They would shift you on assignment fairly often. But basically I was a police reporter

until 1956. Spent a year covering schools, primarily the administration and what was going on in Hillsborough County, and at that time the *Brown vs. Board of Education* was not a local issue, at that point, or at least, I don't recall that the superintendent seemed too concerned about it.

DW: (laughs) Well, let me ask you this. You were then, on May 17, 1954, covering the police beat in Tampa and the hospital?

LH: I believe that was my general assignment. I may have had some other duties on occasion, but that was generally it.

DW: Can you remember your own personal reaction when you found out about the decision? What did you think?

LH: Not really. I would have to say that I was in the—I was conditioned by the conservative mindset that I had grown up in. Although I went through a process of loosening up on a lot of the—I would say I was probably pretty much in a moderately racist mode at that time. But as I saw more of the plight of blacks—my whole thinking liberalized along the way. And I just realized that there had to be a lot more compassion in all directions.

But I remember in 1952 when Eisenhower was elected, the Tampa Police Department at that time had a good many policemen that were either members of the [Ku Klux] Klan, or they were fairly sympathetic to its aims. It was pretty obvious that a good many of the votes that were going from the traditional Democratic side were veering Republican, primarily for racial motives. I think that they were essentially anti-black at that point.

DW: Well, what about the reaction of those you came into contact with? And, as a reporter, I am sure you probably talked to a good many people. What type of words and comments and ideological suggestions did you hear after the decision?

LH: Well, I would have to say I don't have any specific recollections, other than in a general vein that the Supreme Court seemed to be uprooting some of the old standards of that period. And of course, I had gone to school in segregated schools and was just—that seemed to be the standard way. And it seemed to have worked although I was well aware that black schools were not getting separate but equal. There was no equality under that doctrine. I knew that the black schools were definitely inferior.

DW: Yes. Well, did you encounter or hear of any result under racial violence in the Tampa Bay Area or the state, as a result of the *Brown vs. Topeka* decision?

LH: I don't recall anything specific. I do remember an interview I did with the local council for the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People],

who was a man who was a black Cuban. A very intelligent lawyer, whose name was Francisco Rodriguez [Junior]. And he practiced in municipal court, which I covered as a matter—that was part of my routine. And Tampa’s municipal court in that period handled misdemeanors, drunk driving, [and] at that time vagrancy, drunks on the street, and a huge proportion of the defendants were black. And Rodriguez would defend a good many poor folks, who obviously couldn’t pay him much. And he was probably the most articulate person in the courtroom; very intelligent guy, a former Marine from World War II.

And eventually I remember being assigned to interview him by the *Tribune*’s managing editor at that time. Essentially, it was on the aims of the NAACP and the aftermath of all of this. And he outlined some of the actions that they intended to pursue that year. This is one of those times in my reportorial career when I was really ashamed of what happened. Because I’ll admit I was totally impressed by Francisco Rodriguez, and wrote a story that I felt gave a fair delineation of what he had in mind. And it’s one of those cases where the managing editor was displeased. He had grown up in Atlanta. He was very much a Southern conservative, and this was a period when the newspaper treated blacks pretty poorly in print. And he didn’t like the positive slant on the story. I don’t remember now exactly what he did to—but he forced me to rewrite it. And essentially it was more of a—provocative slant. I guess, you could say, that would have alarmed white readers to some extent. Made it sound as if the NAACP was menacing the old ways.

DW: (laughs)

LH: And I was very unhappy with the result. I remember apologizing to Francisco Rodriguez in the aftermath. Now, I don’t recall the exact year this occurred. It may have been 1955 or 1956, somewhere in that vicinity.

I guess that was one of the definite reactions. I don’t really remember any reader reaction to that. But the managing editor at that point was a man named Virgil M. Newton, Junior. And I should add at that point the *Tribune* was referring to black women in print as—on a second reference it would be “the Jones woman,” rather than “Mrs. Jones.” There were no courtesy titles extended to blacks at that point. It was a pretty sad situation. And I was uncomfortable doing that as a police reporter, too. So I guess all these things were having an effect on me.

DW: Well, I would imagine that—uh—

LH: And Newton was pretty adamantly prejudiced in his own ways. The *Tribune* had no black employees, other than some janitors; maybe a few paper handlers. In our newsroom there were no Jews, and as far as I know—I can recall even only one Catholic. There were no women reporters at that point, other than in the women’s department. So it was pretty much locked in the old Southern tradition of being a white man’s newspaper, so to

speak. In fact, I don't remember if—during that period—seeing any black people's pictures in the *Tribune*. It was—even when Joe Louis had won the world [boxing] championship back in the thirties [1930s], I don't think his picture appeared then.

By contrast, we did have an afternoon paper that had a managing editor who was on the board of the Urban League. And it was not quite as tilted, the way the *Tribune* was at that point. (inaudible) was the afternoon paper managing editor that had hired me when I finished at the University of Florida. He had been a Sunday school teacher of mine at First Presbyterian Church here in Tampa. And he had hired me at as a campus correspondent at the university. So he knew my work while I was still in school.

DW: Well, I'm sure that the determinations of the *Tribune's* managing editor were upsetting to you, as you have voiced. And—

LH: And yet, there was a strange twist to this man. Even though he had his prejudices, he had a sort of an unusual newsman's interest in controversy. So when there were internal struggles within the Ku Klux Klan, he liked to publicize those. And obviously, they weren't the kind of thing that the Klan wanted in print. But he delighted in getting these stories.

There was an office building adjacent to the *Tribune's* in downtown Tampa that had a man named Griffin—I believe his name was William Griffin—who had been identified as a local spokesman for the Klan. And he had made statements about the Brown decision. But somehow, he had gotten into a falling out with other Klansmen. And I know that he came to the *Tribune*, and on occasion would provide tips when things were going on. He was responsible for my getting an assignment in the summer of 1956 that took me to north Florida, northeast Florida, alone on a weekend to attend a Klan meeting.

DW: You had mentioned that you had attended some Klan meetings post Brown. And I was very interested in what you had seen and heard.

LH: Okay. Well, I don't remember the precise date. I'm just guessing August of 1956. And I don't think any of our news folks these days would have sent a guy on an assignment quite like this one. I was sent alone into the woods near Macclenny, Florida. I had driven as far as Starke, Florida, and spent the night at a motel there. And then early on a Sunday morning, I had directions through a back county road in Baker County, which is due west of Duval County. I think it's the next county to Jacksonville. And so I followed directions, and I figured, "Well, I can't be a coward about this thing," even though I was scared as hell.

DW: (laughs)

LH: And so, I noticed that this trail that I was following—I left the hard road and went down this wooded trail. And it led through—oh, a few miles of woods, and I came to an open field that had a fence around it. And at the other end from the entrance to this field was a tin building.

Well, the field was full of cars. It just really stuck out in this remote stretch of woods. And there were two men at the entrance, at the gate. And it was obvious that they were checking identification or see who was arriving from where. So obviously, I had no identification of any sort, other than that I was a newspaper reporter. So I figured—I said, “Well, the only thing I can think to do is to just be open and above about it, and if it blows up, that’s it.”

So I told these guys—I said, “Well, I’m from the *Tampa Tribune*. My boss has sent me here just to cover the meeting.”

And they said, “Wait here.” And in about two minutes—well, I should say that during the period I was waiting there at the gate, I could hear hymn singing going on in this tin building, and it was “The Old Rugged Cross.” I recognized the hymn being sung.

And abruptly the music and the singing ceased, and all these people started pouring out of the building. I was surrounded by—I guess seventy-five or a hundred folks, all men, none wearing hoods. And one man in particular, a stout fellow, started hollering and screaming at me; what right did I think I could come there to invade their private meeting?

And I said—well, I figured the only way to describe it. I said, “Well, I just came here to tell your side of the story,” which, of course, was stretching it a bit. But essentially, that’s—I guess that’s what you could say I was to do, just to tell what happened there.

Well, he started bellowing and carrying on and wanting to know how did I get directions to this meeting.

And I said, “Well I don’t know.” I could truthfully say I did not know who had given the directions to the managing editor, because I had no direct knowledge, even though later on I did ask, ascertain, who did it, passed on the word.

And so after a period there, he suggested that maybe it would be a good idea for them to string me up by one of the pine trees out there, he said, “You get the hell out of here.”

So I turned around, and my car got into a ditch, and for a while I wondered, “Well, am I going to make it out of here?” And some of them pushed the car a little, and I did get out. I went back the same way I had come.

That took me back to a road that was south of the town of Macclenny. And when I got to Macclenny, the roadway to—I had another assignment that was to follow that one, in Jacksonville. At that point I was to do, sort of, a story on the gambling situation in Jacksonville, which at that time was wide open, and a long-time sheriff who was in cahoots with all the gamblers in that area.

So I was headed east towards Jacksonville, had gotten a few miles out of town, when a couple of car loads came alongside my car and forced me off the highway. And by then I was—there's no two ways about it, I was wondering whether I was going to get smeared on the highway there. Well, same sort for questioning, a lot of hostility, seven or eight men wanting to know what I was up to, who sent me, what my name was, why did I think I could get into a private meeting, repetitious stuff. Went on for about thirty minutes. And they kept asking my name.

And finally one of the old timers—he was kind of a grizzled lean guy—asked, “Are you kin by any chance to old Captain Hawes in Georgia?”

And I said, “Yes. If you're talking about Peyton Hawes in Elberton, Georgia, he is my great-uncle, and he raised my father.”

And at that point, the climate changed suddenly. My great-uncle Peyton had been state senator in Elberton, Georgia, in northeast Georgia, back around the turn of the century, and my father, who had been orphaned along with four brothers, had gone to live with various aunts and uncles. And he had spent a period with his uncle Peyton in Elberton, and had even been a page boy in the Georgia—I guess it's the assembly there, rather than the legislature. And so I had visited Uncle Peyton when I was small. And he had been dead a number of years by then.

But eventually, I think I did convince them that I was there just to write about what happened. And by the time it was over, to my amazement, three or four of them gave me their names and asked me to send them a copy of the story as it came out.

So they said “So long,” and I got back in the car and went to Jacksonville.

DW: (laughs)

LH: This was a—by then it was around Sunday noon. And I went to the George Washington Hotel, which was in a fairly—it was the leading hotel in Jacksonville at that time—and wrote a story and sent it back. It was on the front page, what was then called the *Tampa Morning Tribune*. It had a one-column headline on it. And basically I just—as I recall the story, I just said that a *Tampa Tribune* reporter was denied entrance to a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan in the woods south of Macclenny. It was probably—well, I basically told the details essentially as I mentioned to you.

DW: Right. You say you think this is in October of fifty-six [1956]?

LH: I think it was August.

DW: Because I am going to go over to school and pull the papers from that period and see if I can find it; it'd be fun to read.

LH: Well, it would be a Monday morning newspaper. And it will be a one column headline on the right front portion of the page, or the right top portion of the page. It was not the lead story by any means, and there was no illustration with it. And I'm hoping I've got the right year, but I think I have.

DW: Okay.

LH: But subsequent to that, I started getting calls from people who had been involved in that meeting. They didn't identify themselves when they called. But I began to get notices when there were going to be Klan meetings in the area. And I soon learned that the man who had been hollering at me was the brother of the state senator from Baker County. So he obviously had official sanctions, so to speak, for anything he wanted to do.

And I should have mentioned, also, that the school decisions were very much in the conversation. They made it plain that they were giving a lot of bravado type talk, to the effect that they would die before they would see black kids in white schools. That was pretty much the drift of what they were saying.

And the succeeding months—I would guess in the following year—I remember going to one near Lakeland, a rally that did have crosses burning. And the main thing that sticks out in my mind was that Alfred Eisenstaedt—E-i-s-e-n-s-t-a-e-d-t—who was a well known *Life* magazine photographer, a relatively short man who worked there for years and years. And who—I think he lived into his nineties, and didn't die until recently. He was there. And there were a few—might have been a reporter or two from *Life* magazine, as well. And in the course of the diatribes from the platform—and these were hooded people—they specifically made mention of the Jew who was in their midst, who was the photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt, who was a German Jew who had fled Germany prior to World War II.

I don't have any particular recollections that I may have gone to one or two others. But it's been so far back now that everything is kind of merged in my memory.

DW: Mm-hm. There was only one recorded real experience of violence in Florida. And that was up in St. Augustine, where there was one death recorded. But we have—

LH: Now did that—was that tied in with the visit of Martin Luther King?

DW: Yes, sir, it was.

LH: I see.

DW: And it was tied in with Martin Luther King's visit and the celebration—I believe five hundredth anniversary of the city, or four hundredth or whatever. I don't have my figures here but it was obviously in 19—I think about fifty-nine [1959] or sixty [1960]. So it was probably the—I would imagine the four hundredth anniversary, going back to the 1500s when the city was founded. But they had a number of—Martin Luther King and other black dignitaries—come in. And they were of course denied rooms and denied everything else. And they had a big park rally, and that enflamed some of the old timers, and there was a bit of violence there. It did claim one life. I've talked with people in other areas of the—

LH: Well, Polk County seemed to be a center of the opposition in central Florida.

DW: Mm-hm.

LH: And that's where several of these Klan rallies were held. Sumter County seemed to be another area, and I know that the *Tribune* had covered some Klan rallies earlier before the Brown decision. We later learned that our Sumter County correspondent, who was an old tiny weekly newspaper man—and the practice in those days was to hire a local to send in a report to the *Tribune*, even though it might be a day or two late.

DW: Mm-hm.

LH: And we later learned that he was part and partial to the local Klan.

DW: (laughs) That's wonderful. Let me ask you a question. From all of your meetings with and dealing with people and reviewing the times and personality of Florida, how do you see racism in this state and this country? Is it an immortal evil, or do you think it will ultimately die?

LH: Well, I certainly think it has modified considerably over the years. My mother, who lived to be ninety-three and didn't die until 1997, changed completely in her views; she was a native of this area, too. It was just part of the conditioning of that period to look upon blacks as an inferior type that you didn't associate with socially.

DW: Oh, yes.

LH: As a kid, when I was growing up in the country, we played with black kids. And I remember one time—we lived alongside a lake and we ran home to change into our bathing suits and we said, “Well, we’ll get Willie May and Otis to come down and swim with us.” But the folks said “No! No, no, no. We don’t do that.” So that was kind of a comeuppance that was unexpected at that time. This would have been back in the thirties [1930s].

But over the years, I think things have gradually modified, particularly as blacks have become better educated, and as whites have become better educated and discovered that there are no inherent problems.

I remember my mother, before she died, had a visit from a woman who had been the family cook back in the early thirties [1930s], a woman named Elizabeth Harris. And earlier, it would have just been unheard of for my mother to have entertained a black woman in her living room. But this happened probably sometime in the late eighties [1980s] or early nineties [1990s]. And she had no problem with it.

So even though—that may seem a small concession in the long run, but it was indicative of her changing viewpoints. And I know my sister—and I still have friends who are very much at the far right end of the spectrum as far as racism is concerned, I’m sorry to say. But over the years, I’ve had more friends in the news profession than I’ve had who are old schoolmates, and I just feel more comfortable around people who seem saner to me.

DW: Mr. Hawes, thank you ever so much for your time and your comments, especially your recollections regarding the Klan meeting. I cannot wait to include that in the relatively brief paper I am writing. I told—

LH: Well, if I happen to run across it, or if I can locate the dates, I’ll do what I can to let you know, so that your search won’t be quite so tedious.

DW: Well, I’ll start with August of fifty-six [1956]. And you tell me it’s on the front page and those papers are on microfilm, and you can go through them really pretty quick.

LH: Well—

DW: So I’ll be able to find it with no problem at all, if that’s the right year.

LH: Well, if I haven’t misled you on the year.

DW: But I can check it out otherwise.

LH: Okay. Well, I hope this will be useful to you in some way.

DW: It is going to be useful, because it's firsthand experience in Florida after the fact, and a reaction by fellow Floridians—though misguided, sincere none the less. And it will be a valid point of consideration. I appreciate your help.

LH: Okay.

DW: Thank you much.

LH: Okay.

DW: And goodbye now.

LH: Goodnight.

end of interview