

ROBERT PENN WARREN REV. J.M. LAWSON (Memphis) Tape 1 3/17/64

Warren: Shall we start with some vital statistics - just - I have some of those, of course, but just let's sort of rehearse them. Where were you born, Mr. Lawson?

Lawson: Uniontown, Pennsylvania, in 1928.

Warren: You went to school there?

Lawson: No. I was born in the Methodist parsonage, and before we started to school - before I started to school, rather, we moved to Massilon, Ohio, and I did all of my secondary work in Ohio.

Warren: Where did you go to college and seminary?

Lawson: I went to Baldwin-Wallace College - the Methodist college just outside of Cleveland, Ohio; then my seminary work at Oberlin Graduate School of Theology and Vanderbilt Divinity School and Boston University.

Warren: You left Vanderbilt to go to Boston after the difficulty there?

Lawson: Yes, I did.

Warren: I remembered it. Do you mind going into that matter? I mean the Vanderbilt situation, the Nashville situation a little bit?

Lawson: No. This began in Nashville, actually, in the early part of 1959, when the local affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference started the process of the negotiations in the downtown area. We adopted the downtown because we felt that

we wanted to somehow focus the attention of the city on the major problems of segregation, and the need for genuine integration. We felt that downtown was the best place to get this problem focused. Well, then we went on through a process of negotiation and workshops and training of students and adults, testing them in the downtown area - testing some of the places that we'd gone to for negotiation, and then, of course, we began what we called the public phase in February of 1960 - in fact, February 13 was the first major sit-in in the downtown area.

Warren: Were you in that sit-in?

Lawson: No, I was not. I organized it and briefed it and brought the people together, but as I remember I was not - I was out of the city on that first sit-in. Then, for about two weeks we had sit-ins, which were highly successful in a variety of ways - in numbers, in terms of impact, in terms of making the public issue. Of course, it became a public issue. Also, in speaking to negroes, Negro people responded to this almost immediately and instantaneously, but about the 27th of February, in that last week, I know, we found - we discovered that the merchants had gone down to the mayor and the city police and said, "You've got to stop the sit-in". And we, in turn, went to the city police - we had -

Warren: How big an organization, or what is the organization, was this that did this or was it just simply a few who took it upon themselves. Or do you know?

Lawson: It seemed to be the ones who had been involved, as far as we could - were able to find out. It wasn't - it was a loosely knit group, simply people who got together out of mutual concern problem and not any organization as such. Well, we also tried to make overtures to the mayor. We had an independent ministers' group and the mayor refused to see them - and this was a multi-racial group, incidentally. The mayor was unavailable to anyone, both from our - from within the movement, and also then from the independent groups that tried to see him. We did have interviews with the chief of police, who told us very bluntly that if we demonstrated on the following Saturday there would be arrests, and said that he had been instructed by the mayor to find what laws could be used - and this is what he told us. He said that the legal department was searching for laws, and he said that - he told us that the laws would probably be used would either be the trespass one, or breaking the peace, breaching the peace - so we knew this. So we knew as we went into the last weekend-that weekend, rather, and approached demonstrations, that arrests were certain to be the case. Well, that is what happened. I think it was on February 28th then that we had a major sit-in. There were arrests. We had a program designed, expecting either arrests and/or violence, and both occurred, because up to this time, while the police had been very protective - and making certain that

crowds kept moving and people kept moving, so that there was no - you know, not too much harrassment during the demonstrations. On this Saturday very suddenly the police disappeared. We didn't see them. And, of course, then the crowd formed and young, white men formed into hood groups and surrounded the people and into stores and whatnot. We saw both violence and then police came in and proceeded to arrest people.

Warren: Excuse me. Then the police came in, you say?

Lawson: Yes, then the police proceeded very early in the day to come to at least two of the stores and arrest people. Well, of course, we were prepared for this and we were also prepared then to have them arrest several hundred people. When they discovered that there was no end to the arrests - that they were simply going in the store arresting, and as soon as they arrested that group, move to another store, then other people have moved in. They stopped arresting after about an hour and a half of this. Well, in any case then, even further mobilization, both of the movement and in terms of its support, we got the representatives of the various denominations to call all their pastors to make major presentations in every negro church that next Sunday morning. They also went further and demanded that the mayor come before them and talk to them. They, of course, also then, began to do such things as to raise money and to get underneath the whole effort. Well, on Monday morning, when the

mayor had been unavailable, they simply sent him a telegram asking him to show up at a meeting. This was - this meeting was held at the First Baptist Church, and over three hundred negro ministers were there.

Warren: That is the church with Mr. Kelly Smith.

Lawson: Kelly Smith, right, is the pastor of that church at the present moment, as well. Well, the meeting had been planned by a special committee. They had asked that about three men would question the mayor as to his policy, both concerning segregation and as to why violence were permitted and as to why arrests occurred. Now, actually, I had been out of the city on that Sunday, as I had a speaking engagement for a mass meeting on the effort going on in Chattanooga. When I returned late that night, I was told, "You are to summarize for the mayor's benefit what this is all about - what we have for our goals and what we are trying to do". So, at the end of this meeting with the mayor then, I was asked to give this summary, which I did. The mayor, as an example, had emphasized the fact that the sit-in was a trespass upon private property. I took the stance in answering this that human rights took precedence over any other kind of right, and I quoted Abraham Lincoln - and then went on to enunciate what seemed to me to be certain Christian principles that were valid here. He had stressed the fact that this was a breaking of the law, and then I went on to

suggest - to say, rather, that where the law was an impeding law - where the law was used simply to oppress people, then it wasn't really a law. It wasn't justice. It wasn't consistent with democratic thought, and certainly was inconsistent with Christian thought; and I used a statement such as this:

"The arrest occurred, not because the law was an effort to preserve the finest values of our society, but in this instance the law was a gimmick to intimidate, harrass, and if possible, halt a legitimate movement of social concern and justice."

Warren: Would you distinguish on that part about the relevance of law between the non-violent obstruction of law and the violent breach of law.

Lawson: Well, ^{oh,} yes, definitely. From the non-violent perspective, when one finds that in order to continue to act in a just, and in the manner of conscience, when he discovers that he's coming up against the law, he does this in a peaceful, creative fashion - ready always to take the consequences of the law. I think he indicates and shows his respect for the law, and there is recognition that we are a society of law. We have to be if we are to be a democratic society.

Warren: Then there's recognition of the fact that society as a society of law is implicit in the whole process, as you see it.

Lawson: Right, exactly. And I think this can be traced, of course, in American history. A favorite illustration of

mine is the fact that we got our first resolution on religious liberty in the State of Virginia out of the civil disobedience of primarily Baptist ministers, who insisted that they had the right to proclaim the Gospel, had the right to organize congregations in a colony where you had an established religion. And, Patrick Henry proposed this first resolution, and it is said that he proposed it after hearing Baptist ministers preach out of the windows of jails where they had been incarcerated for their breaking of the Virginian - of the Virginia law.

Warren: I didn't want to interrupt the narrative, except to get that point clearly - more clearly defined.

Lawson: Right. Of course, the mayor, hearing this whole statement, then immediately said, "This man is calling for a blood bath in the streets of Nashville." I'm positive that he was trying, if possible, to get himself off of the hook politically, because here he was being confronted by men who had supported him in election after election, and he -

Warren: You're talking now about this group of ministers, that -

Lawson: This group of ministers. They had supported him. He was considered a moderate, and he knew that now they were not simply questioning him, but they were in a sense challenging his behavior, his handling of the whole situation in the city. That was of primary, of course, importance to them. Well, of course, the newspapers picked up the mayor's comments, and in particular

the afternoon paper, the Nashville Banner, immediately then proceeded to editorialize on the calling for a blood bath, and this then went on to investigations, although not in any kind of interviewing, interviews with me personally.

Warren: You mean the calling for the blood bath by the mayor, this is interpreted - was interpreted as advocacy in a subtle way of violence?

Lawson: Yes. Not only that, also, they accepted the mayor's point of view as an opportunity then to say that J. M. Lawson was an outside agitator, sympathetic with the Communist design - well this was the kind of lie that began to appear, both editorially and in newspaper articles.

Warren: What line on the matter of the blood bath, did the Banner take?

Lawson: They gave it a headline space, as I recall, in the afternoon paper, quoting the words of the mayor, and then went down in the main article to describe what the mayor had said, leaving out most of what I had said in the statement that was to be an answer to the mayor. Then, of course, as I said, editorial - they supported the mayor editorially. They said the mayor was quite right - that the sit-in campaign, particularly as described by ^{this} supposed Methodist minister - I think was the phrase they often used, certainly did mean violence and did mean a blood

bath, and naturally did break up, they said, the whole structure of law and order and showed a gross disrespect for law and order and for democratic processes.

Warren: What about the relations with Vanderbilt Theological school?

Lawson: Well, right. Then, of course, immediately, as this went on, particularly in the afternoon, the chancellor, I understand, of Vanderbilt began to receive many phone calls from primarily prominent alumni, and also, I understand, from the mayor and from some other people down town, concerning my presence at the school, asking him, I gather, how Vanderbilt permitted me to be there. And, in fact, by Tuesday, the Banner editorials were saying that I had been using Vanderbilt University as a nefarious base of operation, from which I was trying to subvert - of course, at this time I was a part time employer, employee, rather, as a Southern staff secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, working in the field of non-violence and reconciliation throughout the South. I had been moving in and out of some of the tension places like Birmingham and Little Rock, Arkansas, was going through a year of crisis, '57 to '59, and was going in there almost once a month, in fact, during this period - I mean rather prior to that period of '57, '58. Well, in other words, the chancellor then began to receive all kinds of pressure questioning my responsibility, integrity as a student and whatnot, and my motives for

being at Vanderbilt. These pressures, then, were reflected in the Dean - in fact, as I recall, the Dean was ordered Monday night to get a statement from me - the Dean of the Divinity School was ordered to get a statement from me on Tuesday denying what the mayor had said about me - and denying that I was all of these things. So, when I first reached the campus on Tuesday, Dr. Nelson asked to see me and I went immediately and this is what he said, and then later on the publicity director of the University came in to help form this statement. My position here was that the damage had already been done, and no statement on my part would counteract what the Banner was saying, or would counteract many images that people had received from these scare headlines, because I have had a personal philosophy for a number of years that you listen only to criticism that is obviously valid, or that has real merit and weight and at least is motivated out of genuine concern - but that public criticism that obviously is more an effort to delay action, or to delay a confrontation, is not the kind of criticism that can really be answered. And so, in any case, I cooperated and we spent, in fact, the entire morning and afternoon with the publicity director and with Dr. Nelson, trying to work out such a statement. We did get a statement written, and we issued it. And that, of course, was insufficient. Tuesday night, as I recall, the - Dr. Nelson informed me that the Chancellor wanted me to withdraw from the school.

I insisted that I must have some time to think about this. No, that's not right. Not Tuesday night. Yes, Tuesday night he did call me and tell me that the next morning that the Chancellor felt we needed to have another statement. So, on Wednesday morning we got together again and I wrote still another statement. Wednesday night Dr. Nelson called and came by my home and said that the Chancellor was asking me to withdraw, or to be expelled. I took the position that I needed to have some time to think about it and that I did not feel as though I wanted to withdraw. Now, actually, on Tuesday morning, I had said - I had said to Dean Nelson that if it seems that the University is being harmed by my presence, I will withdraw, I'll voluntarily withdraw. But, as that day went on and the next day it became very clear that it wasn't a question of embarrassment of the University - it was rather a question of simply the questioning of my motives and of my integrity. It was saying - well, these press reports obviously have some merit, and you're not responsible and, therefore, you ought to withdraw because of this. So, by Wednesday night late, I had definitely decided that I would not withdraw. In fact, I recall telling Dean Nelson that within twenty-four hours after I were - would either withdraw, or were expelled from Vanderbilt I would be arrested on some other charge in the city. So, Thursday morning the Chancellor called a meeting of the Divinity School faculty and students, at which time he publicly announced that

I had been expelled from the University. This was about 10:00 a. m.

Warren: May I interrupt? In the matter of being arrested was an arrest that you put yourself in a position to accept, not one that you predicted would happen to you because of your, just because of your general relationships.

Lawson: Yes, right. No.

Warren: Well, what kind of arrest are you talking about?

Lawson: Yes, right, well, you see -

Warren: One that you seek, or one that would come to you?

Lawson: My thesis was that leaving me as a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, would further embarrass the city if I were arrested as a student of the Divinity School, and that simply by getting me kicked out of the School or away from the School, with no attachment, then they would feel as though the arrest would be easier.

Warren: Yes, as you would be picked up - you'd be sought out for arrest.

Lawson: Right. I would be sought out for arrest.

Warren: Not that you would go and seek to be arrested.

Lawson: Not that I would be demonstrating, or anything like that, but that I would be sought out for a specific arrest.

Warren: I see, yes.

Lawson: So, I was expelled Thursday afternoon. We were having

mass meetings every night, and then workshops every day, and of course, many planning sessions going on trying to keep the movement as creative as possible, but we learned Friday morning that the warrant for my arrest had been issued. We were then in the process of a major evaluating session at First Baptist Church, when we learned of this news, and, of course, about 2:00, I think in the afternoon, or so, the several, or four, rather, captains of the police department, came to arrest me, plus a number of other police officers, men. So, I was arrested that Friday afternoon on a charge of conspiring to disrupt business - that was the charge. So that in a sense was the background of the Vanderbilt - story -

Warren: Now a lot of the faculty supported your position, didn't they?

Lawson: Right. Then, the Divinity School faculty said, even in that week to me, that if anything happened to you, it would be happening to us. They took the attack, after my expulsion, that they would try to negotiate with the administration for my return to the campus, and this went on for over a month. Finally they felt they would get nowhere with the University, with the Chancellor - and he was the key man. So, they then had their Admissions Committee re-consider my application for admission. I filled out new application blanks and all. They did this on the basis of a remark by the Chancellor in one of their sessions

that he thought if I were to return to the campus, it would be through the regular channel of being admitted, or re-admitted. They decided that they would take this channel, and I cooperated with them. So that in the early part of April, they had accepted me as a student and they took this fact to the Chancellor, laid my file on the Chancellor's desk and that Lawson has been re-admitted. He requested additional time to consider it, and incidentally, I should say that this was not in April. It was in late May - sometime around Commencement time. They felt he was delaying in order to get through Commencement, and it turned out this was the case. Shortly after commencement, the day after the commencement, he received the Committee again and said that "I could not let Lawson be a student at the University." Well, immediately then, the Divinity School faculty, almost to a man, resigned. Their negotiations then were taken over by the Med School people and Law School and quite a number of the men in the Physical Sciences - in fact, a number of physicists and biologists had been quite active all through here, both in terms of their own positions and with the Divinity School and with the faculty/administration.

Warren: That is, you felt you had the sympathy of the University faculty in general?

Lawson: Oh, yes, right. Because I understand now -

Warren: That's sometimes questioned, you see.

Lawson: Yes, right.

Warren: Tendentially, there.

Lawson: Yes, exactly. And, in fact, one of the things that has not been said about this is that after the Divinity School faculty had resigned, then the other faculty people took up negotiations and they did it in this way. And, I was told this by men in the faculty - that they then went to the Chancellor's office and said, "We have here the resignation of a hundred and sixty members of your faculty, throughout the University. This includes almost the entirety of the Med School, as one example. There are others," they said, "who are in the process of writing their letters." They said, "You must settle the Lawson matter. You cannot have him expelled in this manner." Now, it is my contention that it was only at this point that the Chancellor decided that he had to do something to re-consider the issues that had been made back in early March. Well, by this time I had only left the city because I did not want to postpone my B.D. beyond August, and so I went on to Boston University. They had made a very fine offer to me in terms of receiving my full credits and in terms of not making any further residential or academic requirements upon me, other than that I would complete one semester, and they would accept the program that I had done at Oberlin and Vanderbilt - which they did. So, my wife and I then left the city and went on to start at Boston U.

Warren: What is the consequence then at Vanderbilt? The issue is closed by default, is that it?

Lawson: No. The Chancellor then issued a statement. Now, I'll try to remember it, as he issued it. In this statement he ^{number 1:} said that the resignation of Dean Nelson would be accepted as of August 31st and he was relieved of any further responsibility in the University immediately. Number 2: that Lawson could return to the University under the following conditions: - he would not have to re-enroll. He could either transfer his credits from Boston University and receive a degree from Vanderbilt, or he could return to the campus and consult with the professors he had when he was dismissed, and make arrangements to finish his work with them. Either one of these courses to be completed by September 15th. Then, his final word was, the Lawson matter is now closed. I declined the offer, primarily because I felt that in dismissing Dean Nelson, he was simply substituting one scapegoat for another. Number 2: - you -

Warren: You couldn't profit by Dean Nelson's -

Lawson: Yes, right. I could not profit by Dean Nelson's being summarily dismissed and relieved of further responsibility and duty. Then, I further felt and, of course, continue to feel that where people actively identify themselves with the whole effort for change, for equal opportunity and justice and whatnot, then we in the movement are responsible for identifying ourselves

with them. In other words, a term that I have used in many of our workshops is that we are liable for one another - that we have a fundamental responsibility for surrounding one another with concern and affection, with understanding and with creative support.

Warren: Let me take the topic on - that's suggested by what you say about the Vanderbilt faculty. How significant do you think this support you found from the faculty is in general. How would you project that to other places in the South - to what degree?

Lawson: Well, I suspect that probably in your University, such as Vanderbilt, and your colleges -

Warren: You mean non-State supported -

Lawson: Right. Non-State supported universities and colleges - you would find a - probably remarkably high per cent - a high percentage of faculty people who in a sense recognize the problem for what it is, and have a position - a personal position - that is tantamount to support in varying ways and degrees. You will find, I think, probably a high percentage at other institutions - other State institutions, although I think it would be less in percentage than at the privately supported, or independently supported -

Warren: Among the faculty people of the non-State institutions, like Duke or Vanderbilt, would you find a significant difference

the Southern born and the most others, possibly - from other parts of the country?

Lawson: No, on the contrary. One of the men that the ire of the University was turned towards most vehemently was a Southern-born faculty man in the Divinity School, Everett Tillson, Virginia-born and Southern-educated, and in fact, one of the best scholars that Vanderbilt has produced. I mean, he did his seminary work and plus his PH.D. work at Vanderbilt.

Warren: Yes, I know who he is.

Lawson: One of the best students.

Warren: The pressure that you felt was from the community itself, and what levels of the community?

Lawson: The pressures on the University were from primarily I would think, I think primarily your business people and your wealthy alumni people, because - for, just as an example of this, the alumnus organization of the seminary of the Divinity School voted support for me personally, and criticized the administration for this kind of irresponsible action toward a legitimate student at the University. So, I think that most of the opposition, in fact, the chancellor admitted privately and in a conversation with the Divinity School negotiation committee that if he had known in April, what - if he had known, rather, in March, when I was expelled, what he knew in April, nothing would have ever happened to me. In other words, he took the phone calls he

received as being the major perspective, both of the city
and of people to the sit-in campaign.

Warren: Well, do you think it was representative of slice
of the city?

Lawson: No.

Warren: You think the city would not have taken this line?

Lawson: That's right. I do not, and because, in fact, when
the mayor did finally appoint a bi-racial committee, that bi-racial
committee admitted that their mail - their presentations from
varying organizations and from a whole variety of organizations
in the city was overwhelmingly in favor of the city de-segregating.

Warren: This is the mail from Nashville, Tennessee?

Lawson: Yes, this is the mail in Nashville, Tennessee. Yes.

Warren: This is the end of Tape 1 with Reverend J. M. Lawson,
of Memphis, Tennessee. continue on Tape 2