

SS268.mp3

This is September 18, 1968, and we are at Reverend Lawson's church, in his office, waiting for him to appear to make tape #3. Joan Beifuss, Bill Thomas, and David Yellin.

(Audio issues--distorted)

Joan Beifuss: (muffled/distorted) you just finished talking about the barbershop episode.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right, okay.

Joan Beifuss: We had you going either into the ministry or into law.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right.

Bill Thomas: I believe you said that we did not get the barbershop story on tape?

Joan Beifuss: No, the first sentences and the tape ran out. Could you tell us about that again?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Okay. This was in the winter of '47, '48. I have forgotten now why we started or how we started, but we knew in Berea, Ohio, there were problems that the town did not have open facilities and all for Negroes, and at (muffled) complaints, particularly from an Ethiopian student. Two of us finally decided, well why don't we start by going down and at least testing each of the barbershops and seeing if they will cut a Negro's hair. We did not have any action as I recall beyond this plan, except that we felt that if we discovered the Negro could not get his hair cut, then we would go to the college administration, and say that this was an area where something had to be done. So, on a given afternoon we went and our tactic was very simple. I would walk in first and take a seat, and then a white fellow walked in behind me, so that we were in that order, and that would give us then the certainty that I was ahead of him. If I were not asked, if I were not motioned to a chair by the barber, and he instead, then he of course would decline and say he was here ahead of me. Well, the first shop we went to were summarily thrown out. This was our introduction to it.

David Yellin: Physically?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Physically, we were physically thrown out. The man would not talk. In fact there were a couple of them -- they would not talk, they just went into a rage, an absolute rage. Well since we were just testing, we brushed ourselves off and went on to the next one. I have forgotten how many there were in town now. I think we must have gone to at least two or three though before we went to the one where the barber did motion me to his chair, and cut my hair. When this happened, what we did was to go back on campus and report to the fellows, particularly freshmen in the dorm. We told the Ethiopian fellow that we could go to this particular shop and his hair

would be cut, and we encouraged students then to go to that particular barbershop. And, incidentally, many did. I don't know how many, but I know that a lot of people did go because there were a number of bull sessions, because it was felt that this barbershop maybe was not the best barbershop in the city. It was on a main street, but (muffled).

David Yellin: Many of them had short hair.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, that was.

David Yellin: And wasn't this the fellow that was an usher at...?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, I think what happened was, and I think what happened was that this guy was an usher at the, what was then the United Church of Christ, or the Congregational Christian Church now, of course the United Church of Christ, and he spoke to me many Sunday mornings when I went in there. So, he recognized me, and I think that he just found it impossible -- he was the owner of the shop. It was a two or three chair shop. I think he just found it impossible to say that this person who he ushered in church on Sunday morning was not one whose hair he would cut. I think this -- it was a simple, moral confrontation for him, and he answered it positively.

Bill Thomas: I don't remember, unless I am forgetting what's on the last tape -- would this represent one of your early protests? (muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, this was one of the first ones, which -- this is one of the first things in which I was engaged personally.

Bill Thomas: Was protest a part of the times there, at that time?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Not really. Now, as I have said earlier, you did have a CORE group in Cleveland, Ohio, which was 20 miles away. You did have an (muffled) College, which was about 20 miles away. You did have some things going on, particularly as I remember on barbershops at Ohio State and Ohio Wesleyan, which were about 145-150 miles away, there were some activities going on as I remember. I don't remember the details of these, but I do know that there were things going on at that time in the state at various places among the students, but it was not a massive thing, and I knew it primarily because I had friends at each of these schools, in each of these particular towns, and we kept in touch with each other.

Joan Beifuss: This is an entirely stupid question, but what was the barber's rationale on the haircutting? Would they say that they were not trained to cut Negroes' hair because Negroes' hair was different?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh no, they just didn't -- they just refused. You know, they wouldn't allow Negroes in the place.

Joan Beifuss: Yeah.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's all. We didn't get into any discussion.

Joan Beifuss: But later on, has that ever been rationale for it? That Negroes' hair is different than white hair?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I don't remember at that time any such conversation, at all.

Bill Thomas: This would have been in your freshman year?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes.

Bill Thomas: You said that, you know, towards the end of our talk last time, you mentioned you were struggling between which way to go, and that you had confronted that -- had been confronted by the question of who am I? How did that happen, and who did you decide you were?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Um, let's see. Of course this is -- I think this question is the chief question that came out of the racial, of the racism on the campus in the effort to break up and intimidate a number of us who were freshman, and who were good friends with each other, both white and black and across also sexual lines. It was an effort to break up the friendships between white girls and myself, primarily; and, to also break up this kind of interracial friendship that was developing as a part of the campus, which was the first time this had happened on that campus. The attitude of the freshman class was the kind of attitude that the campus had never experienced before, and this kind of rejection and hostility I think is what became the kind of external prod for me to seek self-examination, searching, and the inner understanding that could deal with it from a very personal point.

David Yellin: In this search for who you are, was it a personal search, or did you align yourself with the race?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes -- no, it was very human search. When you say align myself with the race -- I was always very deeply committed to changing racism and racial prejudice and discrimination and segregation. That was always (muffled) part of my thinking.

David Yellin: Wonder if there is anything -- I think I even might have asked this last time, but this occurred to me if there is any progression if you would, but certainly change that people first thought of their own identity. Now I think it is kind of such -- the only way I can describe it is, a block affair. And, particularly what happened in Memphis has certainly made Negro notice what happened to one, happened to all. This is a -- was that so in the early time? It was more or less -- oh it was happening to me and I am concerned with it. I don't know.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I don't think, because by this time I was already deeply

committed to change, revolution, getting rid of the monkeys on the backs of myself, people, the Negroes, the poor people.

David Yellin: Well, what do you mean by revolution?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I meant a revolution, radical overturning of the systems that oppress and hurt and cripple people. By my freshman year in college I was already deeply committed to this idea that the systems in America needed drastic overhauling and transformation. That they had their built-in cruelties that -- and doing what they're doing now.

Bill Thomas: I think we had mentioned about the draft card thing. Had that come up at this point yet? We were going to...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes. I was wrestling all during this freshman year with this issue of whether I should be a C.O., or whether I should refuse to cooperate. By this time I was very much persuaded that being committed to a new kind of world and life as I saw this particularly in the life and the teachings of Jesus, that this meant therefore I was not going to go into anyone's army under any circumstances.

Bill Thomas: Now, excuse me, had you already selected the ministry?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I was still wrestling as to how this could be done. I had (muffled).

Bill Thomas: So it was not based on Christian grounds necessarily.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes, it was based on Christian grounds in the sense that it was a decision based upon where is the greatest need, and how can one's life best be applied to this area of seeking change. And, this was the basic commitment that I had made by this time, that it was that this was the chief reason for my saying that I could not go into the Army. (muffled). That this was not consonant with the life and teaching of Jesus, and this was the way I put it back then, and this is the way I put it still. Um, so the key issue was do I follow all the processes and declare myself as a C.O. and take alternate service, or do I try essentially to not cooperate. But this was an issue for my first two years in college, as I remembered now I finally determined that I could not cooperate and sent back my draft cards some time in 1949.

Joan Beifuss: Did you ever struggle with the (muffled) just war?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Not really. I did some reading in this area in college, and of course have done some since as well, but as such this was not really an issue. The key issue for me was that it seemed to me the law of love as Jesus tried to live it, and teach it, and demonstrate it, it permitted a man to lay down his life for another life, but it did not permit him to make the choice that the other man's life should be laid down as a result. That was the essential decision, and just war/unjust war, is a kind of philosophical

discussion that creates different kinds of ethical standards, or criteria for judgment. Criteria incidentally that the church, and the nations have always accepted, have always rejected rather. Because at least my own thinking, you can't possibly accept such criteria when you're in warfare, because warfare itself was a denial of all ethical judgments, and when you get caught in it, they go by the board. (muffled) discussion in '68 almost in some of the denominational national meetings has been, does a student have the right to be an objector to a particular war? Now, that's completely consonant with the historical theological discussion of the just war/unjust war. And yet, (muffled) a man, the denominations have rejected this. I think (muffled).

Bill Thomas: The just or the unjust war.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: They said that students in the case of the Vietnam War could not/should not be recognized as a particular objector to the Vietnam War. And I have listened to the Methodists debate in Dallas, and again and again that debate was, and at the World Council of Churches this summer, the same thing, again and again that debate was that a guy, the conscientious objector, he has to be a conscientious objector to all wars.

Bill Thomas: So, along that same line --

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So it's kind of a complete, ate up, I'm in favor of a man being able to say I don't want, I think this war is unjust, but to me it's funny that the guys who don't take my position are the very ones who reject that guy's right to be able to say that this war is against my conscience. I would fight against Hitler, but I won't go to Vietnam.

Joan Beifuss: Yes.

David Yellin: And, maybe this is even off the track, but this interests me -- did you in making this resolution, discovery, whatever you want to call it, come by it yourself you think and then kind of go to Jesus and find the parallel, or did you...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No.

David Yellin: Through his teaching?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, it was primarily through from about junior high days I started reading carefully for myself the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, and some of the prophets, and it is something that came out of the study, looking at the scriptures.

David Yellin: I see. So it was cumulative and had its effect on you.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, right, and eventually I was pushed then in the direction of feeling that -- I was pushed in the direction of feeling of saying essentially that the life

and ministry, or the prophetic tradition, which was a very important influence then on me, was the kind of life that I wanted to shape for myself in terms of the 20th century.

David Yellin: So you didn't, it's not a question of you quoting scriptures, you heard the scriptures.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, right. Yeah, because of the war issue and, you know, lot's of people take the early part of the Old Testament and justify war through it because of the battles with the Philistines, and what not.

David Yellin: Those were "just" wars.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I mean they probably say this is a justification for war. Of course, they ignore the fact that by the time of the great prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah, there were stringent denunciations of war and violence.

David Yellin: Well then, what happened when you sent your card?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, of course, nothing happened essentially. I resolved the decision not to cooperate for a couple of reasons. Number one because I felt that the free man must maintain his right to determine those laws that are absolutely contrary to the meaning of freedom and justice. And I had read (muffled) and it was very important to me this that this was unimportant -- where you had unimportant situations that didn't matter -- you know, don't break the law just to break the law. Such as traffic laws. But, at certain issues you have certain issues that are very completely germane to the meaning of human life. I felt among these were the segregation laws and conscription. So back then I said, that I would never obey a segregation law, that I would never accept it or obey it when confronted by it, and the conscription laws were similar to the segregation law, in that they were a complete denial of the meaning of freedom; therefore, I did not cooperate with it. The other reason that I felt was also that with the draft act, the state was interfering with religious freedom, or rather was trying to define religion. Because the state said that this -- the state determined whether or not a man was a conscientious objector, whether or not he was sincere. And I maintained this was not the function of the state (muffled).

David Yellin: The separation of state and religion allows the state to separate religion, but not the religion to (muffled) to the state.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right.

Bill Thomas: Was this a bubbling issue on the campuses at that time? I didn't think so.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No. I was an oddball.

Bill Thomas: So, you're the oddball out. Was that sort of a personal demonstration, you know, or a personal?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, it was just, again it was something that I was pushed towards by my own, you know, understanding of what the life and ministry of Jesus meant, what it meant to be engaged in an effort to apply a law of love to life. Gandhi, of course, then as I read Gandhi introduced me to the whole idea of satyagraha, nonviolence. All of this went on in this period -- Thoreau, Tolstoy.

David Yellin: But it's interesting then you say that you decided not to cooperate, that didn't mean that you sat back and weren't going to cooperate, you were aggressively (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I sent my cards back, and I sent anything they sent me back with usually an explanatory letter saying why I was taking this step, and I went in to see them from time to time. Now the issue of the religious (muffled) became very important to me because one of my very best friends in high school grew up with a kind of a motley religious life. He went to various churches. His mother was a Christian Scientist, which he couldn't accept. His father was a Baptist or something, so Chuck went around everywhere to church, never joining a church, very humane guy. And, during his freshman year in college, Chuck made the decision he was a C.O. And it turned out that the local board (muffled) rejected, and I participated with him in that whole appeal process, and he was judged insincere, and part of the reason was because he didn't have all of the traditional trappings. You know, he couldn't say I was a baptizer.

David Yellin: He didn't argue with them with creed.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, you know (muffled) you see. And this made a very deep impression on me in those days, and that was the basic reason for seeing, that was in fact the case that showed me clearly that here the state was defining sincerity and conscience, and it had no business doing it. Yeah, so, my younger brother ran into the same boat also. It wasn't the same as Chuck, but in his case they said he wasn't sincere, even though he is a very devout Christian, had all the trappings.

Bill Thomas: At that time there was no racial connection to this decision I guess, like now, the argument, you know (muffled). But this was strictly a personal thing.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, not for me. Well, personal only in the sense that I was the one doing it, I didn't have any -- I wasn't a part of any movement that I knew of, but not personal in the sense that it was only related to me, I thought this was the way, this was something that more than myself should do. And, the only way in which it was related to race was in the sense that I said that the racial injustice and the whole motif of military conscription were kin to each other in their basic denial of what I understood to be the purpose of life.

David Yellin: I'm kind of interested in the draft board that received your letters, and discussed with you over tea. Do you remember them?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I remember a couple of them. They thought I was yellow and coward. I mean that was their simple dismissal of it.

Bill Thomas: Had they had a conversation?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, they didn't bother. They didn't want to engage in conversation with me about it, and on the occasions when we did manage to get into conversation, they made it clear that they thought I had a yellow streak. And there was a black board member incidentally, too. (muffled) and he felt the same way -- nothing racial.

(muffled).

Bill Thomas: Do you know, (muffled) whether there were any whites who did this at that time?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, one of my close friends took this position as well at the school. In his case his father was a very, very well known minister, and in that case the local board rejected it and described him a C.O. status instead.

Bill Thomas: I wondered if there was different treatment.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, sure. This is an illustration (muffled) also the business of (muffled). If you weren't as well known, the board wasn't as interested in it, my board wasn't. He was from another town. He was from another town, which pointed up to me that this whole business, of what the option that a local board does have, if they want to do it, and of course that becomes (muffled). Now, I am trying to remember. There were -- I had many conversations about this with various people on campus, students. There were some who were sympathetic towards the C.O. position, seriously sympathetic I mean, in terms of their own thinking, but as I remember in their cases, they were pre-ministerial students, and so they could opt out. And I made the decision back then, too, that I would never take a ministerial deferment, because here again I thought this was discriminatory that gave preachers a chance out when no one else got a chance out.

(muffled)

David Yellin: (muffled) religion weren't you?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, you know, I could have been deferred probably on that premise if I had asked to be, but in fact I -- as I recall I quite deliberately in filling out the forms did not permit them that escape. As I remember I don't think I put down at all whether I was a pre-ministerial student.

Bill Thomas: I think probably where all this applies, is that this is -- that you had become an activist at this time.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, sure, sure.

Bill Thomas: And, I think if we're maybe -- what we're trying to get at is just what is that moment at which one becomes an activist and is willing to, you know, to actually step out and -- do you remember this as just the fruit of many discussions along, on the war and (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled) you know, I, my own thinking about this is in my own case, in part probably this may have been something that was built-in. I have never -- I don't know a time when I wasn't -- even the memories of a child when I wasn't deeply engaged in something. In elementary school whenever the class had projects of any kind, I was in them. I worked them.

David Yellin: You're trying to tell us you always went to meetings?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah! (muffled laughing) I mention this illustration of the kid saying, "Nigger," this was fight words for me as a kid until I changed my point of view on it.

Joan Beifuss: Well, what you're saying is that it...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, so I can't say that there was a time when I wasn't...

Bill Thomas: Yes, involved.

Joan Beifuss: So, it isn't some great dramatic thing, it was just the natural (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: You know, to me, nothing -- I don't know of anything that has happened, and this is probably, I would say probably the influence of my parents as much as anything. Just simply that life is to be active. It's not to be a spectator in things.

David Yellin: Also, this was somewhat of a foreshadowing -- and I hope maybe we can discuss this later -- that the real understanding is I gather it of the nonviolent movement is not a reluctance to participate, on the contrary, it's...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh, of course. Absolutely.

David Yellin: Few people did.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Very, very few people.

David Yellin: So that if we can discuss this later.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: The popular view of nonviolence is its passivity in the

presence of life, and that is absolutely wrong.

David Yellin: So, that you were in a sense natural.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Nonviolence is active, aggressive engagement in seeking to apply the style of life centered in love to human endeavor and problems.

David Yellin: All right, now can we get back to the narrative?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right. Okay. Well.

Bill Thomas: I think we have you about a sophomore or something.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: (muffled) decision was being made, you know I can't really say how much more we want to talk about in college. I think I became very much aware then during those days of the whole problem of the church, because this was a church-related school, and I began to see some of the real weaknesses and hypocrisies of the church. There was a church-related college where there was, until I came to this campus, a Negro and white boy, or a Negro and white girl were never roommates. And, in fact even after I came it was still an issue, it just so happened that in this particular freshman dorm, the housemother was a good friend of mine, and she always asked everyone who do you want to room with, and without having talked about it, my best friend and I said we wanted to room together. She didn't go to anyone about it, she just, you know, she gave everyone the choice to the best of her abilities, so she put us together. So, that broke the ice, but it didn't break it in other dormitories where you didn't have house mothers who were at least open to the people with whom they lived and worked, so that it was an issue. It became an issue again and again in other dorms where students decided they wanted to room together, they ran up against not only the house mothers, but then the administration interfering with intimidation and harassment in fact. And the administrators across all big church -- they were all big Methodists. (muffled) administration.

Bill Thomas: Was it during "just segregation." Was it during any of these years there that you made the decision to go into the ministry?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes. Somewhere along this line I made the decision that it would definitely be the ministry, but I think before that, out of an equally important decision that I made was that I would, as soon as I finished college I would go to Africa and work for 2 or 3 years. And, in making that decision, a parallel decision was made, and that was also that one day if I could, I would work in the south. I felt this was where the crux of the problem was in the United States, and that this was where I wanted to work.

David Yellin: Had you ever visited the south?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, by this time I had, of course heard from my father; of

course was an avid reader, and had been to Nashville, and Louisville. Up to that time that was the deepest south I had gone as I remember.

David Yellin: Nashville, ah ha. Do you remember the books you read?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, current events and what not.

Bill Thomas: You were still debating?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, still debating, still engaged in debate, speech, drama.

David Yellin: One mundane question...what about your grades in college? Just so that we have a record.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: They were, in my major, which was Sociology, I had an A average, and in my general it was a B+ average. But I wasn't a bookworm, because I had at least -- I did get one D.

(muffled)

Bill Thomas: Do you remember in what?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, I took an Abnormal Psychology course my first quarter of my sophomore year, and it was just a terrible thing. I couldn't stand it, and being on the Dean's List you could have unlimited cuts, so I just didn't go. And, a few of the faculty members when they heard about this they tried to pressure me, so I did decide to go and try to make it up, but the -- and the professor was willing for me to make it up. He would have assigned me a special paper, you know, a special project to make it up. But, the head of the department, because of this interracial that as a freshman, my freshman year, took a shared dislike of me, and the head of the Psychology Department, and so this (muffled) and Dr. Smith said, "No!" So, I wasn't...

Bill Thomas: Were you well known on the campus because of the war thing?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Not (muffled) because I was involved in Student Council, and class president by this time. I guess also because of this freshman class was so vastly different from all the -- you know, from the sophomore, junior, senior classes. It was (muffled) tradition, it broke the pattern. I think we had the smallest number of first-year pledges to the fraternities and sororities that they ever had in the class.

Bill Thomas: Do you recall any other offices in your sophomore, junior, senior year?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, just Student Council, and Chairman, and I think that's the only thing I ever...

David Yellin: Chairman of?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Chairman of a committee for Student Council. I think that's the only thing I ever -- I never ran for office after that.

David Yellin: Did anything happen about the draft at this time?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, by -- I heard nothing from the board, except the letters I wrote to them, to which they did not reply of course, and except visits when I was home, until 1950. And, it just so happened I was at a campground, a camping situation out in Iowa on the day the Korean War began. And, I figured that meant that the draft would be picked up greatly, and then they would take care of their back-business. So, some time in August I received the notice to report -- at some time in August of '50 I received a notice to report to induction, and that I sent back. Then, some time after that I received an induction notice, I returned that.

David Yellin: Excuse me, sent it back with a letter?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, sent it back with a letter to the draft, to the board. The same was true then of the induction notice. So that some time in November, it was the same year incidentally that I had took my first church, a small church about 50 miles away, to which I commuted.

Bill Thomas: In 1950?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, that's right. The summer of 1950, June of 1950. And, so the weekend, therefore, I was at -- this church was about 8 miles away from my home, so I would go home, and then be at the church over the weekend. And, while at home that weekend, I think this was sometime in November, I received a call from the FBI officer, FBI man, with whom I had become acquainted because he had come to talk to me about two or three fellows who had applied for C.O.'s and had used me as a reference in the town. Two or three that I knew very well. So, he had come to talk to me about that, so we had met and we had had long conversations about the C.O. position, about them, and he knew my position and what not, so we talked. So, he called me. He didn't tell me why, but he made it clear that he wanted me to stay over Monday so he could see me, which I did, and of course he came over. He called Monday -- he made an appointment rather for us to get together on Monday, and he had the warrant for my arrest, and on Monday he, therefore, came over to home and explained to me that he did not want, since he knew me, he did not want an agent to come out to Cleveland to the college, who would not know me. He wanted to do it himself. So, which I thought was a fine gesture.

Bill Thomas: If you're going to be arrested, you might as well (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So, we went over to the -- and of course, he wasn't at liberty to tell me that he had my warrant and wanted to serve it, you know, that would have been breaking all regulations. But, so we went before the U.S. Commissioner,

where I was arraigned and paid a bond, a \$1000 bond as I recall, or something like that.

Bill Thomas: Now, was this on charge -- do you remember what charges there were?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Refusing to report for induction. And, when I went back to school, of course it was announced then, and then many people on campus became aware of it. So much so that the administration then said that I could no longer represent the school in speech activities or athletic activities (muffled) that was my senior year, yeah. And, an interesting sideline is that the president of the school who made this announcement, I went and talked to him about it, but I couldn't shake him on it, and several faculty people went in and talked to him about it, and they couldn't shake him -- he is a Methodist minister, who was, at that time a shining young star of the Methodist church, and he is now president of Wesley Seminary in Washington. I just received a letter today, a scribbled note from a long-time friend who (muffled) Old Testament there, who, you know, it was a friendly and personal letter, and at the end he said that he wanted me to know that most of the faculty people at Wesley disagreed with John Knight, the name of the president of B.W., who had written a letter to our church publication, *The Christian Advocate*, taking issue with an article of mine that appeared in March, in which he said that the article was too, which he listed a number of generalizations, and called for Mr. Lawson and the group that I was writing about to show mature Christian responsibility, and something else, and something else, and something else. So, this all came back to where he is still -- he is still not able to face reality, because he is the same guy whose office I sat in (muffled), you know, if these two girls want to room together, you don't have to become a flaming crusader, you can say they're friends and they want to room together and the administration will stay out of it. Let normal procedure take its course, but to say they can't room together because one is black and one is white, that seems to me just, you know, all out of proportion to real life. He never did see that. He never took a position, even though it was happening all the time. And of course, (muffled) fairly influential was that also was that while many of the Negro and white students who came to me with their problems, did not get themselves involved, you know, other than maybe, you know, sports or something else, but in terms in trying to provide leadership and fermentation to the campus. Nonetheless when these things happened, they'd always come to me and ask me to do something about it.

Joan Beifuss: Did you continue to have your church after you were...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes, sure. Oh yeah. I continued.

Joan Beifuss: They didn't take that away from you?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, because in this case I had -- I had a black bishop.

Joan Beifuss: Were you under the Central Jurisdiction?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, because the Central Jurisdiction was still in existence

then, you see? So, I had a black bishop who was, himself, took a C.O. position. He had been a chaplain in World War I, but since that time had taken a strong pacifist position. So, that was (muffled) black bishop who had been very supportive.

Joan Beifuss: I read about Central Jurisdiction.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah.

Joan Beifuss: Were the Methodist (muffled) and in Ohio supportive about both the Central Jurisdiction and the regular church (muffled)?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, but they were controlled entirely by the white.

Bill Thomas: So you were the minister for a church while you were going to college?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, my last year.

Bill Thomas: Is that normal?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh.

Bill Thomas: That's the wrong word.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, there are always small congregations around that a fellow can do, can handle fairly well. And, if a guy is interested in the ministry all he has to do is usually talk with the District Superintendent, and the District Superintendent will see to it he is assigned to one.

Bill Thomas: Did the arraignment, the case, the announcement, that sort of thing -- did it affect your life any other way?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Not actually, other than my trying to talk with people like Bayard Rustin and A.J. Muste, to be able to understand what I was getting into in terms of jail, prison, and trying to read what I could to have some kind of, you know, be prepared in some way for the eventuality of prison.

David Yellin: Did you have an attorney?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes.

David Yellin: A local attorney?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, from Cleveland, who had himself been a C.O. in World War II, and was one of the American Civil Liberties Union lawyers in Cleveland.

David Yellin: Did any group espouse your cause?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, the (muffled) of World Peace did, of the Methodist Church did, and in fact my whole arrest and then later going to jail caused the whole Methodist Church to take a stronger position in support of the conscientious objectors, and gave the Board of World Peace the specific mandate to care for the conscientious objectors of the Methodist Church, so it got a whole -- it aroused a great deal of concern and interest. And the various youth and student organizations put together an appeal on constitutional grounds, and financed it all. That included a lot of people from around the church.

David Yellin: Why did you say you referred, or tried to get information from Bayard Rustin and A.J. Muste? Why?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, because A.J. was then...

David Yellin: This is for the record.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and Bayard was one of the Associate Secretaries. Also Secretary for CORE at that time if I remember.

David Yellin: But they had not been in jail?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, sure. Bayard spent time during World War II in federal prison as a conscientious objector. Now, I am not sure -- I am not sure about A.J. He might have been too old by that time.

(muffled)

David Yellin: Did you ever get in touch with them?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yes. By this time I knew both A.J. and Bayard. Bayard had been in a number of student conferences. I read the Fellowship of Reconciliation and CORE publications constantly. And then A.J. had been on campus at least once to speak in a lecture, invited by our local chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. So, I knew them on a first-name basis, and they were very influential in my thinking and development as a student. Well, anyway then, going back to this, my trial did not come up until April 25, as I recall.

Bill Thomas: And this was 1951?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: 1951, right, 1951. And, I was then sentenced to 3 years in prison.

Bill Thomas: Was it a long trial? Cut and dry? Or what?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It was pretty cut and dry. We didn't really have a defense. We tried to challenge it on constitutional grounds. The judge rejected this of course. The Board of Missions and the Methodist Church asked the judge to suspend any sentence, and to let me go to Africa as a missionary, because by this time I had been accepted by the board to go to Africa as soon as I graduated in June. He rejected all this of course.

Bill Thomas: I think this is sort of important here because in the white papers there is a statement that says...right, okay...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Right, there is an idea that I went to India as a, let's see, to get with the Gandhian movement, and to study nonviolent.

Bill Thomas: Well, I think there is an implication there that is really sort of bad. I think it states, you know, the statement is something like, "Reverend Lawson was paroled to go overseas as a missionary," something like that. But the implication is that, you know, something was worked, rather the scene was maybe (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: The Board of Missions, and a number of bishops of the church, because of also I was very active in the church of course, not just simply a student pastor, but I was also -- I had one time had been Chairman of the National Conference of the Methodist Youth Fellowship, which in the Methodist process was the -- meant, therefore, that I was a spokesman for the young people of the church. This was all black and white, the presidents of every annual conference, of which there is over 100, at that time got together once a year, and they had their own officers, and I was chairman of that group, I was secretary and then chairman. And then the Methodist Students and Young people, MYF, a local church organization and campus organization, were united at one time into the National Conference of Methodist Youth, and I was Vice Chairman of that group, at this time in fact. So, that the church made overtures to the court, and the court said that it was precisely because I was so active in the church that he was going to sentence me.

(muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Because he had to establish a precedence to show young men that...

Bill Thomas: Oh, you're a test case then. Do you remember his name?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I have forgotten his name.

(muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: The Cleveland district, the northern district I think at that time in Ohio.

David Yellin: Ok, so then you were sentenced.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: So I was sentenced to jail, and of course went immediately from the court room to the jail.

David Yellin: Which jail?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: The city jail, Cleveland city jail, and then later was transported from there to Mill Point, West Virginia, which was called an honor penal institution of the federal system. It was in the hills of West Virginia, and surrounded by jungle through which no one had ever escaped. So (muffled).

Bill Thomas: So, were there other C.O.'s there?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: When I got there, no. There were Jehovah's Witnesses there. There were moonshiners from Tennessee, North Carolina, and Kentucky, and then of course there were many of the usual people as well. But, gradually, about before I left there there were probably, I think there were about 5 C.O.'s there, all non-resisters of one kind or another.

Bill Thomas: Could you tell us a little bit about...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Life? The -- of course the most important thing I guess about prison is that the effort is made to get every man to follow a routine that makes life as simple as possible for the prison. It is not, of course, a creative routine. It's bells and bed counts, and some kind of job. Many times the job being of little value to the man's mind or life, and of course not an earning job, although in this particular -- in penal institutions by this time there were earning jobs for people who needed them. And, in this case it was the lumbar camp. They did cut lumber. I think there was a sawmill. I am not sure about this, because it was away from the campsite, from the grounds itself. The food was pretty bad. Why, I don't know at that time. It was supposed to be much better, but for some reason it wasn't that year, that summer. I was given a job as clerk in the garage. Of course, being a lumbar camp, there were a lot of trucks and vehicles, so they had a full-time garage. But, I worked with the warden with the idea that as soon as the librarian position opened up, I would be given the librarian job, because this camp -- because of C.O.'s during World War II, American Friends Service Committee and some others had a very fine library, and this is a little known story. That, because of the conscientious objectors over the years in these prisons, in almost all of the federal prisons by that time they had established good libraries, and in many instances, educational schools -- I mean schools where guys could get their high school diplomas and what not. This was too small for any school as I remember. It did have a very fine library. Now, one of the things that I had learned, and tried to prepare to go to prison was that it was most important that you impose your own life upon the prison routine. You, in a sense had to accept the routine itself. When meals were served, you either eat or don't eat, but that you could put upon this your own scheme of things, and so this meant, therefore, that I tried to get up much before the waking hour, and at this particular camp, the best thing

about it was that even though you were supposed to stay in the dorm until the breakfast hour, the doors were not locked, so I would get up earlier than the bell and go over to the library and read there, and started my day that way. And, eventually then, as the other C.O.'s came in, they all joined me in this, and we started a kind of a study, disciplined routine together across the prison routine. And that made it -- that made the summer very stimulating, a provocative one because we met early morning, and generally again in the evening.

David Yellin: How early in the morning?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I have forgotten now, it was before -- I have forgotten what time that bell rang. Um, I think it must have been about 5 in the morning. It was usually dark when we'd get up. So, it must have been -- I am not sure when the sun came up in those days, but. So, that was a very good summer in fact. Of course, the chief problem with prison, besides that routine that you have to try to conquer if you want to maintain your own sanity, is the fact that you're pulled away from your family, normal -- your own normal decision making (muffled). So, I think this more than anything else I would say makes it an alien (muffled) community rather than a rehabilitative community.

David Yellin: What about the attitude of all the prisoners and the officials, guards, about...

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: All right. With the guards at this particular place, they did not carry guns incidentally here, or sticks as I remember. And, they were a, as I can recall, they were a fairly reasonable and friendly group. I don't remember any bad egg in that group. I know that a couple of the officers in charge and I talked at length any number of occasions. One was had a Norwegian background I remember. He and I got into a number of very serious conversations, and good conversations, humorous as well. This was supposed to be an enlightened place (muffled) at that time. Supposed to be the model, so I just suspect that you had a different kind of man there generally. The -- perhaps the most interesting thing about this was that this was '51, yes it was '51 and Truman had issued an executive order that all federal institutions were to desegregate, and this place was not desegregated, so the C.O.'s and I, we talked about this, and we decided that something ought to be done. So, we started first by going and talking to the administration and asking for a meeting of inmates on this matter following this executive order, to which they agreed. So, the parole officer -- that's right, the parole officer of the place, and one of the lieutenants of the guard met with those men who were interested. Now this was a very interesting meeting and discussion, the reason being that the place was overcrowded at this time that summer. And, not only was it overcrowded, but there were a group of people who had been transported there from the Lewisburg institution in Pennsylvania, who were very angry with the food, with the lack of recreational opportunities. We did have a recreational field, but the place was too small to have a good recreational program, so they were angry about that.

Bill Thomas: Things had been better at Lewisburg?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, Lewisburg was better for them you see, the food was better, and they had more to do. The movies were better, and the recreational facilities. So, they were quite angry. So, it was crowded. Now, the blessings of segregation under this system was that there were only about 40 Negro inmates, and they had one building to themselves. So, each one had his own dormitory type place with double bunks. So, everyone had his own double bunk. We had lots of air. There were only about 35 or 40 of us. And, the other two dorms were jam-packed. They had over 100. They had to move beds from prior dorms, and every bed was occupied. So, there were some guys, there were some white guys besides the C.O.'s who came to this meeting to say that I want to move into the Negro dorm. You know, I am willing to move up there, let's integrate that way. And they, you know, some of them were up there anyway talking all the time, but it was also selfish, because they (muffled). Well, there was supposed to be another meeting the next week. So, (muffled) the administration agreed just that we were going to talk about it. So, we had one meeting, and then the following Sunday there was some excitement. And got rumor there was a bunch of the hillbillies who were out to get me. And, in fact, I had to go over to the garage that afternoon with some, which was isolated from, of course it was away from the dorms and the main part of the camp. I was getting some books as I recall, the records of the place. And, I heard a great trampling of feet, and a group of Negro guys came charging over there, yelling for me, and I came out, and they were very exasperated because they said that the rumor was that some of the hillbillies were on their way to get me, and they urged me to close the garage up, and then come on back where they could keep an eye on me.

Bill Thomas: Why was that now?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, apparently there were a couple things. One was -- well I am not sure of all the reasons, but one part was they said I was stirring up trouble on this integration business.

David Yellin: Were you the chairman of that meeting?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, an administrative person was. The C.O.'s didn't have any chairman of such. We sort of -- we... Also, in the camp recreation that did go on, the softball and all, I tended to dominate, and I think this was another issue that at least came up in the talk in the dorm. And, what else? These are the two main things I think. The attitude was not just against me, but it was also against the "conscie's." Because as I said, the "conscie's" are not like us, and they are unpatriotic, and they are (muffled). So, in any case, and then after lunch that day, after dinner that day, no it was after lunch -- there was a very vicious fight down in the white dorms. And some guys unmercifully beat up a fellow. A couple of us ran down and tried to break it up, and I could see then much of the tension that was there at that time. Also, there was a still in the camp.

Bill Thomas: The moonshiners.

(muffled)

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: They were having a good time. So, I remember at this point, so later on that afternoon, getting these reports and what not, I went to the lieutenant, who happened to be this, the chief man on duty that day, who happened to be this Norwegian fellow, and said to him -- it was that evening after supper that I went to him and I said, you need to keep your eyes open because there could be some real trouble. I told him about this incident, which he hadn't seen, and see which they broke up before anyone came down from the administration building. And, about the drinking and about the threats that were going out, and I told him that Negro fellows were arming themselves. They were because here again they were responding to the rumor that hillbillies were planning to come up and raid the dorm. Well, he laughed it off, but about 7:30 or 8:00 that evening -- he laughed it off and said that everything was under control. About 7:30 or 8:00 that night three of the other conscientious objectors who were in these other two dorms were pounced on and thrown out of the dorms by a group of the whites. And, were threatened and so when that happened then the guards all came out and put them in the infirmary for the night, and then kept watch during the night and all. That next morning early I was put over in the infirmary, too. That was Monday. And, that afternoon we were all driven from there to Ashville, Kentucky. We were transferred to Ashville, Kentucky, which was a place with a wall and what not. We were close (muffled).

David Yellin: It wasn't an honor.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, we were transferred out and then we were transferred out as being troublemakers. And, we found this out because of course, they said -- they told us there it was for our safety because some of these whites were stirred up. But, the report when we got to Ashville was that, "you guys were troublemakers trying to ruin the prison."

David Yellin: Now were the 4, that's all the "conscie's" that there were?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, there were 5 of us. There were 5 of us.

David Yellin: And all 5 went and (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I think that's right. Let's see, Ken Champney, Tim (muffled), Dwayne Metzger -- Don Metzger and Dwayne, (muffled). There were only 5 of us there, but. So we were transferred to this correctional institution. Of course the first few days there we were in isolation, which they do to all prisoners who came in there for orientation they called it. This orientation meant that we were then interviewed by the warden, the assistant warden rather, by the parole officer. We were talked to by the officers, by the guards. This was more, this was much more prison. You had some dorms here, but you also had maximum and minimum cell houses. The second or third day we were there the assistant warden called us all in together, the 5 of us. And he was a real psychotic. Because at the top of his lungs, instead of, you know, talking quietly, sat behind the desk -- he sat over here. He screeched at us about the fact that he heard

we were troublemakers from Mill Point. He wanted us to know that he ran Ashville, and that they had a hole to take care of smart guys, and, you know, he let us know he was the boss, "I am the boss. I run it. If you've got any problems you come to me. If you don't, you'll find yourself in the hole." And he said, "You're going to have to do what we tell you to do," and what not, what not, what not. So, of course we just grinned at him. We told him that we were conscientious objectors. We were not there because we had done anything wrong, that we were going to maintain our own sense of manhood and integrity. That we were not questioning his authority or anything like that, but that he did need to know he was not dealing with so-called criminals who were in there and had to be punished, because we didn't feel that way about ourselves. Well then he called us in separately one by one. And, he gave us the same routine. When I went into him, he did the same thing, and said that, "I know you're the ring leader." And, apparently this was the report because I was then assigned to a close custody cell house, and this was, of course, a cell house where the murderers were, and the professional criminals were. The people who were risky were all in this cell house. Of course, that's what I learned after I was moved in there. We each had our own cell, and this cell of course was locked up. It was not in the main building. There were four of these in the place, so it was a real prison. Then he said to me, after he had quieted down, he said, "Now you have to work. Where would you like to work?" So, I said instantly the library. And he hit the ceiling again, he said he (muffled). I smiled and I said, you tell me that you want to get along. I said, well you know good and well that I was 2 months from graduating from college. You know good and well that I was a local preacher in the Methodist church, I was pasturing a congregation. You know good and well that this is where I am going. So I said, now you decide whether you think I will be better sweeping the floor some place, or in the library, or teaching. Well he said it couldn't be done -- there was no opening. I said, well that's where I want to work, I said. And, you know, I said I decided at Mill Point that I wasn't going to take any nonsensical job in the prison again. That, I want a place where I can spend some time reading and thinking and doing some writing. Well, he repeated again in a loud voice that he couldn't do it, but then I was assigned to the library. So, he was again, he was putting on an act. Well, I think (muffled) was in prison for 13 months, because in '52 they started paroling people. And, the interesting thing, is that the C.O.'s -- we didn't have a chance to do the meeting we did because we were all separated. I was put in this close custody cell house, and three of the other fellows were put into a dormitory out in the yard, and one other was put into a minimum custody cell house. So, and these doors were all locked after the evening yard period, the evening recreational library period. These doors were all locked, so we couldn't have the -- we didn't, we couldn't have -- there were no times to meet, except in the yard we would walk together and visit that way, or in the library. We would get together for a visit, or we would sit together at movies or something. But, or church services, because they did have church services here, but other than that we couldn't do the kind of thing that we did before. But, we had concluded that probably (muffled) no paroles were going to be granted to conscientious objectors at all during the war, during the Korean War. And, the American Friends Service Committee and the Central Committee of Conscientious Objectors had sent in, they send a regular staff person around to various prisoners, prisons rather to visit with the C.O.'s who were on their list. So, we had had a couple such visits, and they had said that paroles were not being granted, so I actually

started not to bother to apply. But then, I went ahead and to my surprise, the parole came through. To my surprise and great delight it came through.

David Yellin: Do you remember much (muffled), or do you try to put it out of your mind?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No, I remember quite a bit of it. I, prison actually was very, very influential on me. For one thing I did a tremendous amount of reading. I didn't get anything out of General Psych, or Abnormal Psych, but I did (muffled) Freud and Lenke, and (muffled) and some others. They had a very good collection of psych books. And, at Ashville (muffled), and I really decided to examine psychology seriously for the first time. It was -- so it was a great learning experience. I had a persistent dialogue with the first black Muslim that I knew, a fellow by the name of Jim Cox from Detroit, from the Detroit mosque who was there -- he was in for 5 years. And, Jim tried to convert me, and I tried to convert him.

Bill Thomas: And, what was he there for?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Refusing to be inducted into the draft. Black Muslims then took the position that (muffled). And of course, you know, this is again really discrimination. The local draft board would not challenge the Methodist Church's listing of me as a minister and give me deferment, but it says that the black Muslims (muffled) and be deferred. And of course they all take that position, that they are all ministers, and this is true for them. So, that was my first encounter, an encounter which I persistently look back to. I had my -- it was not an easy life again. I was threatened by homosexuals in this close custody cell house because we had men who had been in prison more than they had been out of prison. This was a traumatic experience in terms of facing a whole range of fears that developed.

David Yellin: You were in your own cell.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah, everyone was in their own cell. They threatened, you know, and stuff like this, but nothing ever happened. I became very good -- I suppose the most influential thing that happened in that 8 months was the fact that I became very, very persuaded of the inability of a person to say that a man is bad, because you -- these guys, in this close custody cell, these guys were in there for murder, manslaughter, mugging, and a guy that I came to trust explicitly was a fellow probably at that time 40 years of age, hard-nosed, very respected throughout the prison as being a real tough, you know, genuine crook, criminal. He was a mugger from Washington, and we had kind of -- when I say tough guy, I mean really tough. He was hard as nails and rough. And, we had a number of real encounters because his thesis was that his profession was as honorable as my intended one.

David Yellin: What was his scripture?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: He didn't have a scripture, but (muffled) to this whole

business of crime, you know, but I found a number of friends in this place, a number of men who I knew full well were real men. Now, and if I had ever up to that time prejudices that a person should be counted down and out, that eliminated it. And, since that time for sure, if never before that time, since that time I absolutely refuse to count out people and say that they're so corrupt that, you know -- because these guys were supposed to be that way. And, I found them still genuinely human, with the same fears and doubts, and problems that other people had. And, I also found the circumstances under which many of them became what they were. And, under the same circumstances anyone would sort of become the same I'm sure.

David Yellin: Was it what we all think? I mean, at the core of it, was it poverty, or?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: A lot of it was poverty. This guy from Washington, Liberty -- from Washington, told me of a persistent effort he had when much younger to find work, and never being able to find work that would enable him to live halfway decently.

David Yellin: Did they make any attempt as a whole to understand your position, or did they?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: We talked. We had -- I had many conversations about it. There was of course ambivalence. On the one hand there was a sense of respect, and also a sense that, you know, this is not sham religion that we see so much of. That was very, very clear because they brought their problems to me. They trusted me with confidential stuff all the time. They brought tasks to me to do for them, in terms of the prison operation, their families and what not. And, on the other hand there was a good, humorous picking at me. One of their favorite, a couple of their favorite things they would say to me was that, you know you're a nut because if you'd have talked to me I could have told you how to stay out of the Army and not pull any time for it. And, then, (muffled). The called me Jim. Yeah, they called me my first name.

David Yellin: But, did any of them try to understand what you were doing?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, we had -- I had long and serious conversations on it, which they tried to listen and talk back, and argue.

David Yellin: But in the end, essentially you were a nut for bucking the system headlong, as you did?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: For some of them, not for all of them by any means.

David Yellin: (muffled). So I guess (muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Remember this is kind of a different kind of world for them. Their image of religion was all very different. Religion that was unconcerned and what not, so that...

David Yellin: Did you ever get in any fights? Or any near fights?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I got into near fights at Mill Point over a homo who kept pestering me, and I wanted to take him out in the field and fight him, but we never got to that point. He just kept (muffled) and pestering. Every moment in the dorm he would be down there, wherever I was. If I was playing cards, or if I was on the bed reading, or if I was talking he was always there, picking, picking. So, but, and then at one point under the threats in the close custody cell house I stayed up several nights under -- saying I was going to use the steel chair as a weapon if I needed to. It never got that far, so. But that's all. So, there was a very definite respect in the guards. There were some guards who were in Ashville who were definitely psychotic, who didn't need to be there at all. I saw them, you know, this just screech at a man for a simple thing that he didn't have a button on his shirt buttoned. But, at least one of these guys who was in the close custody cell house never once spoke to me that way, and he did tell me a couple times to button my button, but he didn't -- he didn't do it the same way that I watched him do other people. There were -- there was a parole officer who was very, very sympathetic and open, with whom I talked on a number of occasions. He happened to be a local preacher of the Methodist Church. He was a very humane man. In fact, I think he was the only man in the administration (muffled) that the inmates seemed to universally respect and like. I helped organize some special programs in the prison. We got a committee together in the prison, and we put on a Christmas program as an illustration, a talent show, and what not. And, I will never forget that the people that the invitations -- they wanted to invite certain people, and the one prison administration man they wanted to invite was this parole office and Lieutenant Blaine. Lieutenant Blaine was a very fine man. I edited the prison paper there. It wasn't a real paper, it was a little mimeograph journal, actually is what it was. What various articles that the prisoners had written; poetry, sports, short stories, what not.

David Yellin: How often?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: This was what, about once a month. When I first went there I helped with it, and then the editor left, and I edited it. And so this meant that, and this was done in the education office. This meant, therefore, after the ground recreational period, which usually ended I think what 7:00, 7:30 something, when that ended, then the editor and whoever else helped with it would go back to the education office and would work up there alone, and then almost always afterwards then we would come down to the kitchen where they would prepare a snack for us, because this was, it went to everyone in the prison and what not, and it was mailed to all the other federal prisons as well. And often Lieutenant Blaine would come up. He was a good reader. He would come up to the library almost every day, at least once, and so he and I often visited and talked. He would come up many times when I was working on the journal and we would visit. Then we would go down to the officers' dining room and have our evening snack together at 10:00 or 11:00.

David Yellin: So you didn't really feel too sorry for yourself?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: There wasn't time to do that. Of course, the other thing that should be said is that you didn't -- I suppose I didn't feel this way because I thought I was doing the right thing. I wasn't disobeying for being, for the reason of being cantankerous, but I hadn't done anything wrong because I was trying to be a responsible follower of what I felt to be the meaning of love in the world.

Bill Thomas: Did it strike you strange at that time that the conscientious objector in this country is, is a criminal, is looked upon as a criminal?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes. I felt this to be, you know where we had a totally inadequate conscience in the country. Of course, we still do.

Bill Thomas: Yeah, it looks like there would be some other, you know, you could see that thing but not in prison.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: You would think that the country preaching the ideals that we preach, and putting this, you know, church and all. You would think that we would be able to easily find another way. Because the image is still that a conscientious objector is a draft dodger, and of course that's, it has nothing to do with (muffled). That's the attitude that he's dodging the draft. We don't. We face it, and we take whatever comes when we refuse to follow it. We don't run from it. We don't hide. I know many conscientious objectors ran off to Canada, you know, gone into hiding in a big city. He lets his draft board know where he is. Once the draft board knows his position. I counsel C.O.'s.

David Yellin: You're more of a draft dropout.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Hmm?

David Yellin: Than a draft dodger.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, we just don't go along with it. We don't accept it as being a just or meaningful way of life for ourselves, or for others.

David Yellin: Well then, after the 13 months, there you are?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, then I got out of course. I went back to Ohio. That summer is kind of a blank. I don't know quite what went on. I suppose I went to a lot of church meetings, camps and what not, youth camps. I suspect (muffled).

Bill Thomas: So the missionary thing was still in the mill, I guess.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, it was still in the offering if I wanted to, and I still wanted to.

David Yellin: How about finishing college?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I don't think, but first of course, oh yeah (muffled). Well, in prison I had written the Board of Missions and said that when I, you know, when I get out I still plan to go overseas to work if they had something available, and that I, you know, would hold to Africa. So, they had written saying that they were sending a group to India, and that I had a good friend in Nagpur, India. And, when he had heard of my interest in going overseas, in fact I had two or three friends in India at that time, they suggested to the Indian Student Christian Movement of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon that I was thinking of coming, and got, and suggested that because of my activities in the United States, that the SCM try to get a hold of me as a staff person. So, the SCM did this. And then, one of my friends knowing that a college in India, in Nagpur, was interested in getting a person in the area of physical education and coaching, put my name in, and that principal wrote, and I eventually decided that's what I wanted to do. So, the Board of Missions wrote back saying that if I still wanted to go. So that summer, that is correct -- I was in Connecticut with about 60 or 70 other people just out of college who were on their way to Asia, Africa, Latin America, for an orientation study period; language and what not. That's right. Then in September I went back to BW for that winter/fall quarter and finished, and then did some traveling for the Methodist Student Movement in the country while waiting for my visa to come from India. And I left for India then in April of '53.

David Yellin: You stayed in India for how long?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: For 3 years. I was paroled to an officer, a federal parole officer in Cleveland, and I was not paroled incidentally to go to India. It is clearly the case. I was paroled as a matter of routine. My parole plan was to go back to school, and that was what they accepted. But, after of course being out, and the board and all still having, because I was still on the roll of the board as being accepted to go overseas to work, so I talked to the parole officer about this and he in turn wrote to Washington, and Washington said they thought that there was nothing against it. And, the parole officer himself was in favor of it. So, when I finished school this was all arranged, and I then, when April came I left.

David Yellin: Now what do you do about parole in that case?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Well, in that case I think it was primarily a matter of routine. I think that, of course my parole officer knowing full well that I was who I was, knew full well that I wasn't going to be -- that thing is kind of a routine, all those forms. You know, you're not supposed to drink and carouse and stay out late at night. (muffled) how much money you spend each month, and where you're working.

(muffled).

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Um, that's technically the way you do it, but actual fact what -- you're given a monthly form and you send that form in in actual fact, and all that

he did was he gave me a supply of forms for 2 years, and I sent them in around (muffled). That system is a very superficial system because I steadily get men out of prison, and state prison here, and I know that form is, again, it is still the same. How much money did you spend, and what time are getting in at night, and where do you work, and where are you living? And you know, it's not really a...

David Yellin: Now you've answered the, a couple of those charges.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Oh yeah. And, in India I was, my travel expenses and salary came from the Methodist Board of Missions.

David Yellin: And you were a coach, however?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That's right. I was a coach, and then I also was a minister of the Student Christian Movement in Nagpur University.

David Yellin: What did you coach?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: I coached football, and basketball, and track and field.

David Yellin: Our football, or their football?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Their football, soccer. And, tennis.

Joan Beifuss: Is this is a missions school?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: It was a Church of Scotland founded school/college, Church of Scotland. Of course, by that time, of course the mission field was far ahead of the church at home in terms of cross-denominational lines work and cooperation, so I was simply (muffled). I was part of the Methodist cooperation with the...

Joan Beifuss: What of that Church of South India?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: That was '47 as I recall.

Joan Beifuss: That was already in then?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yes, South India. This was not north India, it was middle India, but the Church of South India really was on the southern part of India that didn't come up past, as I recall (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: Could you speak any Hindu?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Hindi (muffled). Of course where I was though, we were more complex than that, and since leaving there it has divided up now into two states, a bilingual state. They are (muffled) two languages in the college, in fact three actually;

English, Marathi, and of course the national language is Hindi.

David Yellin: Well, where are we on that, Bill? We are past the hour?

Bill Thomas: Yes.

David Yellin: Well, should we show mercy and (muffled).

Joan Beifuss: Did you try to speak, though, in Hindi? Or Marathi?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: In Hindi.

David Yellin: Hindi. What's that in relation to Hindustani? It's not the same thing is it?

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: No.

David Yellin: I once started to take Hindustani lessons. (muffled). It was rough.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah. It's a Sanskrit language.

David Yellin: I had a few helpers from Madras, and we had tea twice a day. They, I guess they understood a little English, which was the usual. They understood English and we didn't understand a word (muffled). But we did everything by sign language.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, right. Madras would also be another language yet, (muffled), or something else, what is it? Of course there are so many.

David Yellin: But they had hot tea, that's what I remember. In that hot Indian sun and hot tea.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Yeah, that's right.

David Yellin: Hot and sweet, but it was good.

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr.: Some very good tea.

Bill Thomas: Yeah, I think having gotten you to India, that's progress.

(muffled)

END OF RECORDING

