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Interview no. 667

Marjorie Lawson

Juan Lawson

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Marjorie and Juan Lawson
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 27, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
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TAPE NO.: _____
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Mrs. Lawson was the first black professor and Dr.
Lawson was the first black Ph.D. at UTEP

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

How they first came to El Paso; how Mrs. Lawson first applied at the English Department, problems involved, and relations with students and faculty; how Dr. Lawson first applied at the Physics Department, problems involved, and relations with faculty and administrators; how Dr. Lawson became Dean of Science in 1975; the Lawsons' experiences and those of their children in El Paso compared to other places; people who have had an influence on their lives.

Length of interview: 40 minutes Length of transcript: 17 pages

Marjorie and Juan Lawson
by Rebecca Craver
February 27, 1984

C: I'd like to start out by asking, what brought the two of you to El Paso?

ML: Dear Fort Bliss brought us to El Paso.

JL: Yeah, I was in the Army and I had an active duty requirement at that time. I was a reserve officer, so I had a two-years' active duty requirement and I had to serve it. So they sent me here because I was air defense artillery. I had no idea really of where El Paso was. Well, I had a general idea by looking at the map, but all I knew about it was cowboy pictures, etc. And we came out here to serve in the military and stayed. And that was 1965 through '67, and then we stayed in El Paso.

C: Marjorie, what were your first impressions of the city?

ML: Well, I liked it very much. I liked it very much, I thought the people whom I met were very open and friendly. Being an Easterner I was really a little overwhelmed by the naturalness and very favorably impressed. I found that I was overdressed everywhere I went.

C: Oh, really? (laughs)

ML: But I soon adapted, and I loved El Paso from the beginning.

C: Which of you was the first to start teaching at UTEP?

ML: I was first while Juan was still in the Army. I was an Army wife with no job for the first time in my adult life, no job to report to; and it just felt marvelous at first and then it felt unnatural. And my only work experience has been college teaching, really. I did a short stint with the government, but mainly I'm a college teacher. And I went to Texas Western and applied, not having any idea what the situation was. Dr. John West, the bravest man I

know, took a chance and hired me, and I didn't fully realize really what daring he was displaying.

C: Are you referring to the fact that you were black?

ML: Yes. The University of Texas system was not integrated at all.

JL: At the faculty level, anyway.

C: Yes, 'cause some black students were there.

ML: Oh, yes.

C: But on the faculty they weren't.

ML: Instructor and above, there were no... But I had no idea that there were no blacks. I just hadn't thought about it, I just needed a job. (laughs) Being in the Army at Fort Bliss I had gotten accustomed to not seeing a lot of black people, so I still didn't fully realize, you know, what a brave man John West was. (laughs)

C: Well, what were the reactions of the students then? I guess they weren't used to seeing a black teacher.

ML: No, they weren't. I never ran into any unpleasantness that I can remember. Now truthfully, I have a way of putting unpleasantness behind me, but I can't remember any unpleasantness because of race. But by the time I came here, I was a veteran in the classroom, so although I'm very shy socially, in the classroom I take charge, and there was never any problem.

C: What did you teach?

ML: English composition and literature.

C: And your office was where?

ML: Oh, I've had an office in just about every spot you can have an office. I believe my first one was Holliday Hall, and now they've turned that into part of a gymnasium, I believe. But I've had

an office in Hudspeth Hall, and well, you name it. The building they tore down behind the Liberal Arts building I shared with Roberta Walker, so I've had several places. My situation was that as soon as I'd get started teaching I'd get pregnant (laughter), so I'd have to leave. That first year I was pregnant with Michael, our 16-year-old, and I left and came back on a half-time basis. Back in the late '60s we were allowed to have a contract on a half-time basis, and I came back half-time and got pregnant again 22 months later after Michael was born, so I stopped again. And of course each time I'd lose my office. (laughter)

C: No wonder your office moved around.

ML: Right. I didn't have any more children, but I had several more offices. (laughter)

C: Now, when did you start out there?

JL: I started a year later, '67. I know a little bit more about the behind the scenes business with my wife because of people I know and because I did serve as an administrator at one time. But when Marjorie was hired, well, initially she was rejected, but nicely. Dr. West indicated to her that he really wanted to do it but he was having a little bit of a problem, and that if he were to take that bold step, he wanted a Ph.D., even though at that time they didn't have all Ph.D.-type faculty. Even now there may be some few M.S. or master's level people.

So he I'm sure tested all of the waters, and then a month or so later he called back. And what had happened, he had approached the then dean, Ray Small, who is Dean Emeritus of Liberal Arts. Dean Small was a man of forward thinking in, I believe, race relations, although he didn't have to deal with it too much except

with the students, but he didn't seem to have any problems in that regard. And he took it to the president, then Joe Ray, and Dr. Ray didn't seem to have any problems. But they were all worried about the immediate supervisor, administrative superior. Then Dr. Joe Ray told me what happened (chuckles), and he said that he wanted to do it, but he had a problem because the Board of Regents was filled with racist people with the exception of one or two, and he didn't know what to do. So he called one of his friends. He told me his name down there, but I've forgotten now.

C: Someone in Austin.

JL: Someone in Austin, and asked him how to handle the situation, one of the Board of Regents members who happened to be a little forward on the matter. And he got instructions from the man [who] said, "Hire, but don't send any pictures." (laughter) Dr. Joe Ray would tell you that story today if you asked him. He can tell you that story.

C: So you started then in '6...?

JL: '67. The climate had changed a bit more and I think the U System was beginning to think about it or open up. And since my wife had been hired then they hired me. At that time the College of Liberal Arts had been split. I didn't pay much attention to it until I started looking for a job. But the College of Science had been completed--the structure, the building--and a new dean had been hired, a fellow named Lew Hatch, Dr. Lewis Hatch. He was from Austin, I believe, so his first year was my first year. So, I came looking for a job. He also is a fine man.

He saw me walking around with my uniform on, I was in the military, and he had gotten wind of the matter that I was applying

for a job. There are some details I don't think I should tell, but (chuckles) he saw me coming in and he saw me going down to the Physics office, and then when I came back he was waiting for me. And he asked did the chairman of that time hire me. And I told him no, there was some problem that we were discussing. The problem wasn't with the chairman. The chairman was worried about his superiors, etc., etc. So Dr. Hatch, being brand new, picked up the phone, called the chairman, used a number of choice words, slammed the phone down and told me go back down there. (laughs)

So I went back down there [and] the man hired me, and then I came back. It was Dr. Bolen. But as I say, it wasn't a problem with Dr. Bolen, it was a matter of worrying about what the superiors would say. And when I came back, Dr. Hatch asked did I get the job? I said, "Yes." He said, "Fine, we'll see you on such and such a date." And that's how I was hired--as not the first, but the second. But at least I was the first male. (laughter)

ML: And the first Ph.D.

JL: First male, black Ph.D. As a matter of fact, I think I'm the first male, black Ph.D., [but] I'm not the only male. There have been I think two males since that time. One was a fellow named Smith, but he was appointed maybe once or twice as an instructor; he had been something other than that. Ben Smith, I think. I don't know whether you remember his name. And another fellow was in Political Science some many years later who did have a doctorate, but I've forgotten what his name [was], Harris or something like that, I'm not sure. But at least I was the first black male with a Ph.D., Harris may have been the second black

male with a Ph.D.. But black males out here with Ph.D.s are rather few and far between.

C: Well, what was the reaction of your fellow faculty members to you in those early years?

JL: Well, I can speak for myself. In my case, some of the faculty members of course were from different parts of the country, [and] they were curious. I'm obviously black, but at the time my wife wasn't necessarily obviously black. Her eyes weren't dark and many Mexican Americans are about her complexion and some others of ethnic groups, so they weren't sure.

ML: Well, I've gotten much browner. It's been 17 years of Texas sun.
(laughter)

C: So did they mistake you then for a Mexican American around here, I guess?

ML: Yes; yes, they did.

JL: They did, they mistook her for that and they would ask her what her last name was again or this type of thing.

ML: I got many strange looks when I said, "I don't speak Spanish."
(laughter)

JL: But then they didn't have any problems identifying me, and so they were curious.

C: What sort of things would they ask you?

JL: Well, naturally they wanted to know where I was from. They wanted to know about my first name, it was an anomaly. And of course it is because it has no cultural basis for me to have a Spanish first name. My middle name is German and that has some basis with regard to my background, my mother's people. And Lawson, of course, that's common, they knew that folks would have

that name. But they didn't know what my middle name was, they knew what my first name is. And so they were curious and they would engage me in conversations, and I guess they were really trying to find out if I were real, if I were reasonably intelligent.

Then they would appoint me to committees. I was on too many committees because they wanted to have a black on a committee. Sometimes as an assistant professor they put me on committees with full professors. You know, I really didn't belong there because I didn't have the experience, but they put me there anyway.

C: So you were a token?

JL: A token, right, in many ways--although they were being nice. And I gained some experiences that way of course, that was great. But I didn't really have much to contribute, I had much to learn as far as those committees were concerned. And they would give me assignments, and oftentimes without really meaning to or knowing that they were doing this, they would express a little surprise if I could do a job well. But, of course, they weren't intending to be mean or insensitive, it was just their first reaction sometimes they couldn't control, and they seemingly were surprised if I did certain things well. And I knew it was out of not having the exposure at that particular time, although it was getting a little late, but still they had not had that exposure. And as time went on, then I was generally accepted, and I guess they saw me as an individual without regard to my complexion.

During those early years I did make some lasting, good friendships with several faculty members who outranked me. Ken Beasley I can think of as one very sensitive man with regard to racial issues. He's from Kansas originally, I believe, although he

worked in Pennsylvania and various places. He came to the university in about '67 or '68, somewhere in there, as chairman of the Political Science Department. He and I met one time when we were serving on a presidential committee, and so he sort of took me under his wing so to speak--not in a condescending fashion, but he seemingly just liked me for some reason or another. When he became dean of the Graduate School, he brought me with him and made me the assistant dean, and then still they had me always associating with all of these high-ranking people up there. He would take me to the graduate faculty meetings and he would give me various assignments to do, etc. I enjoyed the job with him, and then, of course, that gave me an opportunity to meet all of the other administrators.

But then I recognized that I needed to do a little bit more academically so that I could be legitimate in whatever I was doing. And I did discuss that matter with him because I knew about a number of minorities sometimes getting into various positions by virtue of tokenism or whatever you want to call it in the university systems across the country, but not really being able to...well, not really pursuing those things which they should if they wished to be academicians. They'll make you an officer of this, officer of that and always have you out front.

So I discussed the matter with Dr. Beasley and I went back to my department with the understanding that I'd go back and do my work, publish a number of papers, etc., which I did, and become more academically qualified for my promotions. Dr. Hatch was behind this, too. Both of those men were very influential in my academic career here at UT El Paso--Ken Beasley and Lewis Hatch.

Lewis Hatch was always on me as an individual even though he was dean and that should have been a chairman's job, but he took personal interest in me. Ken Beasley did. And Dr. Hatch would always encourage me to publish this and publish that and do my work. I'd get too hung up on various things here and there across the campus, and Dr. Beasley was watching although he really wanted me to follow him within the administration, although he realized what I wanted to do.

So in time I had enough stuff behind me to be promoted up the line until I was full professor. And almost immediately, a year later, after I was full professor, Dr. Beasley had been made Academic Vice President, so then he was informing his superior, president, about me and things of this nature. And somehow he fixed it so that I would apply for the dean's job--Dean of Science. Even if I weren't in his office, still I'd be working with him since he would be my immediate superior. And for some reason or other I did apply, and they decided they didn't want an outside candidate and I was a local candidate, and my name appeared on the list. Once my name appeared on the list, that was it, the job was already mine. I don't know whether the search committee knew that, but once my name was on the final list, that was it.

C: So how many years were you Dean of Science?

JL: Four and half.

C: From when to when?

JL: From '75, fall, I took over as Dean Ad Interim. They still, they used that terminology, Dr. Templeton at that time. They still were testing the waters in a sense, because I would imagine I was the first black administrator of an academic unit rather than

being an assistant or something of this nature, in the UT system. So they were still testing the waters so they wouldn't call me.... they made that name up at the time, they chose it. They wouldn't call me Acting Dean, see? They said, "Well, we've got to use something more fancy than this." So they said Dean Ad Interim. And they watched and they wanted to see what the faculty of Science would think of it, how they would react, even though the faculty seemed to be very enlightened and open. Because during those years before I was promoted to full professor, I was on committees with various faculty members and I made a number of friends, and all of the Science people had begun to accept me just as an individual and race didn't play any part. So I had some binding friendships there. But the president and the V.P. didn't in particular know what my relationship was with the faculty altogether.

So they tested me for about three or four months, and after they found out that the faculty would work with me and accept me as a supervisor, then they finally changed my designation to dean. That was in February or March I think of the following year, '76.

ML: Then you had published any number of papers, scientific papers.

JL: Yeah, but I had done that before. I was already full professor before they even appointed me as a dean ad interim.

ML: But I mean so that they could respect him as [an] academician.

C: And a scholar.

JL: That doesn't mean I was a great, great scholar or anything of this nature. There were plenty of fellows around there who were much better scholars than I am, but at least I was respectable, I was a senior member of the graduate faculty and this type of thing. But I ranked, as far as they were concerned, well with all of the

applicants for the position. And I did have a little administrative experience: assistant dean to the graduate school and I was a graduate advisor for a while in the Physics Department, and a number of things of that nature, and plus I had worked on many, many committees with people.

C: How did you ever get interested in physics originally?

JL: Oh, because it was easy.

C: Because it was easy! (laughter)

JL: (laughs) Because I liked that. I liked math and physics, things like that, because I didn't have to write all these long reports and do all this extensive reading with all of these volumes of words, you know. I preferred dealing with the symbols, and things in the abstract, and things that were easily reproducible and verifiable rather than things dealing with opinions and things which were less exact. I wanted things as exact as possible.

C: Gosh, you sound like my husband. And I bet you see more of the grey area, don't you, like me. See, I'm married to a scientist and sometimes we argue because I see things more as a humanist and he wants it right or wrong.

JL: That's correct. (laughs)

C: Haven't you had that trouble, Mrs. Lawson?

ML: Yes. He used to accuse me of not being willing to answer him directly. (laughter)

C: Exactly! I think you and I have a lot in common.

JL: Now, I'm sure Marjorie's experiences with the faculty were different from mine.

ML: Oh, very different, because our personalities are so very different. I'm shy and retiring--well, except in the classroom, but I mean

outside, socially. So any number of people decided to take me under their wings, not in condescension and not really so much because of race, although that was part of it, as because of my personality. I think whatever color I were, I wouldn't have been very pushy, I wouldn't have been abrasive either, and I certainly wouldn't have forced my way into anywhere. And so this caused a lot of people to kind of take me by the hand and lead me into this and that and the other.

I didn't lead an active social life with the University people after school hours, partly because I'm just not a very social creature. It's all I can do to manage to get dinner and, you know, do things for my immediate family. So I don't have a lot of time to party and socialize, and that really didn't have anything to do with race either because I don't socialize a lot with black people either. It's just a matter of my individual personality. But I found the teachers to go out of their way to be helpful and to be friendly, or else to leave me completely alone, just ignore me. But nobody took the time to be rude or crude, you know. Either I was ignored or I was welcomed with open arms.

C: I wonder what your experiences would have been in other parts of the country? What made your experience here in El Paso unique?

JL: I think that El Paso is a good place because of the bicultural and possibly multicultural atmosphere, so newcomers are somewhat forced to be reasonable with regard to intercultural and interracial relationships. I think that was a big factor in the way we were accepted here. If we had been in other places...which I had initially wanted to do, I wanted to go elsewhere, not because I was so informed about anything but because I was used to being

- ML: And they didn't understand when they were being insulted quite often. (Laughter)
- JL: They didn't know, they didn't understand. (Laughs)
- ML: And I nearly had conniptions one time when Mike, who I guess was in kindergarten, came to teach Edie a new song he'd learned: "Fight, fight, nigger and a white!" He had no idea what a nigger was. (Laughter) He liked the beat! And even now, my daughter comes home with a question sometimes, "What is a..." And then she'll use a racially derogatory term, because all of these things are new to her. Now that she's become older and more sophisticated, she has a better idea, but she still slips up, you know. Things that Easterners just take for granted she has not been taught, they have not been taught, and so they have to be told by us that they've been insulted.
- C: That really is something.
- JL: I think they're understanding through my explanations, but still their experiences are far different from mine. I've explained to both of them similar to the way my dad explained it to me, but not with the harshness and the reality present all the time, that they must achieve, they must put forth effort to always prove themselves. Now, they don't feel that pressure the way I felt it and sometimes I have to reinforce those statements. A few incidents have occurred to let them know that maybe there is some truth to what Dad is saying. So we are fortunate in that both of them are pretty good students. My daughter makes A's and B's practically... well, all the time. I don't think I can remember a C on her report card. My son makes mostly A's and B's. I think he made two or three C's one time, I got on him about it and eliminated that.

back in the East area. I wanted to go back to D.C. or Virginia, Ohio someplace. My mother is in Ohio and no one could beat Ohio state, or anyplace where I was used to being. Things would have been much different, I think. I would have had to probably be more vocal. Who knows, I may have been a little more militant-minded. People do different things under different stimuli, where that wasn't necessary here.

What was necessary for me here, though, was to prove [myself]. Most black people find this to be the case, is that you always have to prove yourself. Now, everybody has to prove himself; but as I perceive it, a black person has to make sure that he proves his capabilities in certain areas. And that was a personal goal I had in mind all during that time, because of my daddy's influence. "Always prove, son, that you are as good as or better than." And so I would not allow myself to get caught up in those things which I knew weren't really important for whatever goals I was trying to achieve. My daddy made that clear to me as I was growing up. Lew Hatch, he reinforced it. (Laughter) And of course Dr. Beasley was also there.

C: So you're saying you feel a little extra pressure.

[PAUSE]

JL: Here I've had little difficulty with my children in that in the earlier years they didn't really understand that they were black, going to the schools that they had been going to, and they didn't realize that there was any difference or that there should be. Then when some very few people would insult them racially or do something that they could find no reason for doing that, they would come home and they just couldn't understand that.

He likes to play basketball, but I impressed upon him, "That's fine, but make sure you have something in your head. But we are fortunate in that both of them are reasonably smart children. You know, you can't determine what your children will do or be except through your teaching them and training them, but just as in athletic ability, some are more gifted than others. But we've been blessed in that both seem to be reasonably well academically gifted.

They are learning to cope with the situation. They know more about their racial and ethnic background. We have visited from time to time relatives back east and we've let them go back to stay maybe a couple of weeks in the summer, things of this nature, so that they can be more exposed to different attitudes. Although all of the attitudes seem to have been changing to the better, we see a little fluctuation, backward motion, depending upon who's in office and politics, etc. But on an average we think things are moving better, have moved forward, as far as we're concerned, since we first became working adults.

C: Well, Marjorie, where did you grow up?

ML: In North Carolina, Greensboro. But then I graduated from high school early and went to Howard University in Washington, D.C., and really finished growing up there. I was just a teenager, a young teenager when I was a freshman in college and so forth, and I grew up, really, at Howard. But not in the Washington, D.C. that we know but in the shelter of a University and the dormitory and so forth. I took my Master's immediately after my undergraduate degree, and so by that time I had sort of matured and I had become just about a fixture at Howard. I actually started teaching English my senior year, they were so hard-pressed for grammar teachers--you

know, composition. I was called an undergraduate assistant, and I got a chance to teach and grade papers and so forth--for no money. Then when I started working on my Master's I became a graduate assistant and I got a chance to do the same thing for very little money, and then when I got my Master's I got a chance to do the same thing as an instructor for very little more money. So I just really grew up [at] Howard.

C: Well, Juan has mentioned his father as a real force in his life. Who in your life, your young life, made you want to move forward?

ML: Well, I don't think any one particular person. You'd have to know my whole extended family, because my mother's family is very close. She has three sisters and two brothers. My grandmother separated from my grandfather and moved into the city from the hill country of North Carolina, and so the family learned to work together as a very closely-knit, unusually closely-knit unit. And the grandchildren--that is, my cousins and I--were sort of everybody's children. And so my mother was a strong influence; my grandmother, a very dominant personality; my aunts.

And then on my father's side, my parents were divorced when I was four or five, yet my mother remained close to the rest of the family, my daddy's family. He had 11 sisters and brothers and they were [an] unusually closely-knit family, too, to the extent that they were a farm family. The older ones, except for the oldest son who remained on the farm, but the others went to college while the younger ones farmed. Then when the older ones got out, each took a younger child and sibling and saw that he or she got through college. And so I think that's very unusual. But it just never occurred to me from either side of the family

not to go to college. It was either go to college, get an education and become a professional, or go to work in somebody's kitchen.

And I can't even work my own kitchen, so I would starve to death!

(Laughter)

But, I guess if I had to pick any one, most dominant personality in my young life, it would be my grandmother.

C: On your mother's side.

ML: Yes.

C: This is fascinating. I could go on all night, but I don't want to keep you all from your dinner. It's been a real pleasure, and thank you for having me in your home.

JL: Thank you.

ML: Thank you for coming.