

Interview of Eugene Simpson

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Dawson

Okay Gene tell me your date of birth and where you were born and tell me something about your family?

Simpson

Well, I was born in Pasadena, California in the summer of 1933, August the thirteenth to be exact. I was raised in Pasadena which was a unique, unique in the sense that it was in the middle of affluence and most of the people, the African Americans in Pasadena worked as domestics of some kind of way, and in doing so Pasadena produced a caliber of African Americans that were somewhat literate, were very literate you might say and conscious of education. I had the opportunity to work with a stepfather that was somewhat unique in the sense that he was literate in three languages, he could speak fluent English, Spanish and Italian, and he was raised in a, mm, mixed household that spoke Spanish. He worked as a youth transporting cattle to Italy on an Italian ship hence he learned to speak Italian. And then he became a businessman and, and in refuse and I would work with him during the summers, during the Easter vacation, etcetera. I was supposed to be in school but my education came after the fact on the first day of school when I was five years old a friend of mine and, and myself we walked into the classroom and our mothers, my mother said well, we'll pick you up at so and so the time. We walked straight through the, the classroom down the stairs and went home and was waiting for my mother when we got there, when she got there. And that is in essence about where my education was. I just wasn't...

Dawson

Gene before, before we move on to education tell me a bit more about your stepfather?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Is this Napoleon?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

Okay but...

Simpson

This is Sullivan.

Dawson

Okay right.

Simpson

Sullivan Marshall.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

And he was a, he gave me a work ethic that...

Dawson

When did he become your stepfather?

Simpson

When I was five.

Dawson

Okay, yes.

Simpson

And he was, he was a very nice gentleman and he was very good to my mother as opposed to what I heard my father. My father I didn't know him until I was grown but he was a, quite a gentleman. He was a, a gambler, he was a singer, he played in the movies. During that time the WPA had a program at the Pasadena Playhouse and he was a part of that with William Holden and Victor Jory and that bunch. One to jump ahead a little bit. well, I had the opportunity to meet several of his contemporaries and this is how I found out about my father Napoleon Simpson. My mother had a bitter, bitter attitude towards him and I'm not sure it was, if it was hate or love, one of those things.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

I don't, I don't really know.

Dawson

So you didn't get to know your father until how old were you?

Simpson

Mm, [Pause] well, my mother had me go and live with him when I was seventeen and I stayed there for two years until I went into the Air Force. But at that time I didn't know him that well we, we, we were not, I was influenced by what I'd heard from my mother and grandmother who despised him because he was who he was when I always had a negative approach towards Napoleon. But once I became in the business, well, anyway we'll get to that. Mm, from the time I was, when I turned nineteen and went into the Air Force, and the Korean War was going on at that time and I had the option of going into the Air Force or going into the Army, being drafted. And at that time when I tested I tested quite high on my IQ test which permitted me to go into the Air Force, because at that time persons of color were not admitted unless they tested in such a way that they could be beneficial or to the Air Force because it technically was supposedly a high end situation. After serving four years in the Air Force in which I became an aircraft mechanic, I served two years in the State, one year in Tampa, Florida in the Fifties which was very segregated. And at one time a sergeant, Sergeant Peoples I never forget, he came up to me one time and said 'boy where are you from?' I said 'California'. And he said 'well, what are you doing here?' I said 'this is where they sent me'. He said 'why don't you go tell the chaplain that you can't tolerate this prejudice and this segregation, you're not used to it and you'd like a transfer'. Well, the next day I did that and two weeks later I was assigned to go to England.

Dawson

Ah, ha.

Simpson

And I spent two years in England in Manston near Ramsgate, Margate that area and had a very good time. And from there I came back to the United States and was, mm, [Pause] on a shoot, well, it was where our airplanes competed against other people. And then from there I was sent to Arizona where Barry Goldwater was a, was a pilot and he requested I worked with, I was a crew chief for his airplane and then he requested me every time he came in to fly, and I thought that was an honor in the sense Barry Goldwater being supposedly very, very bigoted and a, a right wing Conservative person. I found him very charming, very funny and we had a good rapport for about six months.

Dawson

Mm. Tell me, tell me exactly what you were doing at this stage in, in the Air Force?

Simpson

I was a crew chief.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

Which means I was in charge of a particular airplane, maintenance, mm, getting it prepared to fly, etcetera.

Dawson

Yes, yes. And how many people did you work with preparing the aircraft?

Simpson

Just one.

Dawson

Just...

Simpson

Myself.

Dawson

You did it by yourself?

Simpson

By myself, and then in the later years I had an assistant, a young, you know, person that was just coming in. But I made the rank of sergeant which gave me... And the crew chief is not that, [Pause] well, you're responsible for the airplane to fly. You had a post and a pre flight ritual which you went through, etcetera. It was complicated but I thought it was very simple.

Dawson

And you said that when you're in Tampa, mm, you were encouraged to, mm...

Simpson

Request a transfer.

Dawson

A request to transfer and, and that was really beneficial. But what do you think of your time in the Air Force? How do you, how do you kind of assess it in terms of, mm, mm, relations, you know, between blacks and whites particularly?

Simpson

[Pause] That seems like a simple question but it wasn't. But I can say that going back to working with my stepfather, going into the various homes, taking their trash and taking it to the truck and what have you I learned a social skill that carried me all the way through everything I've ever done, because it, as a gentleman, as a person that spoke decent English I was, mm, prepared to do what I came to do.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

And on my eighteenth birthday I went to work for Lockheed Aircraft. Again my work ethic held over and I've found through the years that if you worked hard, [Pause] and intelligently your accomplishments can be un, you know you can do whatever you want, and that was what my stepfather gave me by working on his truck. Not necessarily through conversation because he

didn't talk that much but just to how to handle people, how to go into rich people's homes and yards and be courteous enough to not offend.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

Do you know what I mean? as opposed to...

Dawson

I do.

Simpson

And then English was important. How I developed that I think was as a fourteen, fifteen year old after school I was supposed to be in school but I didn't get along at school very much and I don't know if I told you on my first day of school I walked through.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

And that's the way I was academically most of my life. But as a fourteen, fifteen year old after supposedly going to school I worked in a shoe shop shining shoes with the Shortiganfamily, Armenian, and they taught me how to fix shoes and I learnt the rudiments of the language, I could speak Armenian somewhat and that was, [Laughter] one of the pleasures. Anyway from there at my, on my eighteenth birthday I went to work for Lockheed Aircraft and I worked there until as a nineteen-year-old I went into the Air Force.

Dawson

Okay let's talk about Lockheed in a, in a minute because I think that's going to be very interesting. Mm, can I just take you back to your family and your family origins. Where was your father and mother born? Were they, were they from Pasadena? Had they, had they come from Pasadena?

Simpson

Well, my mother, my mother was born in Minnesota, and there's a story never authenticated but it just was a rumor. My mother, her sister and my grandmother came to California in Nineteen... in the early Twen... late Twenties. I think. My grandfather, Mr. Doston, D-o-s-t-o-n, was a tender as they call it on the railroad in Minnesota. And in those days the caboose was the last part of the train and this was his domain. And he was sleeping on a bench outside of the caboose and a man came by, the rest room was back, in the back of the train, and defecated in his face while he was asleep and laughed about it and said he'd always wanted to do that to a nigger. And my grandfather supposedly went, cleaned his self up, went to the tool box, got a wrench and came back and killed that man. My mother and her sister and my grandmother got on a train that night and left Minneapolis, and to this day I don't know what happened to my grandfather but they didn't talk about it very much.

Dawson

What year was that, leaving and coming out to California?

Simpson

My mother was born in 1911 and I think she was twelve or thirteen at the time so it was in Nineteen... before 1920 from what I can understand.

Dawson

And why to Pasadena? Was there any...?

Simpson

I don't know, I have no idea. Other than Pasadena was known for its, I'll put this in quotes, 'sophistication in the African American community'.

Dawson

There was already a settled African American community in Pasadena?

Simpson

Yes, Yes.

Dawson

By, by the 1920s?

Simpson

Very small but very enlightened, enlightened because you were surrounded by affluence, San Marino, Arcadia, in other words all around Pasadena was white money and most, almost all of the blacks either worked in The Post Office or domestic.

Dawson

And your mother, what did she do?

Simpson

She, she didn't, she never worked. She, my grandmother was a seamstress. My mother worked I think a little bit in domestic, as a domestic but my stepfather, who had his own business, mm, she never had to work.

Dawson

Mm, and your father, Napoleon, when did, was he born in Pasadena or did he move to...?

Simpson

He was born in Carbondale, Illinois and he moved... He was born in 1900 and, mm, I don't know exactly when he migrated to Pasadena but he was a school person, he went to Pasadena City College, he was an athlete so I must say he was a teenager when he moved to Pasadena.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

He became involved with acting through the WPA who had a program for, with the, in conjunction with The Pasadena Playhouse which is very famous. William Holden, Victor Jory, etcetera were part of his contemporaries. And his first movie role was in 1939. Mm, his last one was in the, in the Fifties I think when he went to work as a janitor for the Pasadena school system that had a retirement and etcetera.

Dawson

Okay Gene. Now should we turn and look at your going into Lockheed Burbank? You'd just left the Air Force, is that right?

Simpson

No, I went in before. I spent two years at Lockheed, went into the Air Force.

Dawson

Ah, you were at Lockheed first?

Simpson

First.

Dawson

And then?

Simpson

Then I went into the Air Force.

Dawson

Okay. Give me the dates for when you went into Lockheed?

Simpson

[Pause] I was eighteen. I was born in 1933. So you do the Maths, mm.

Dawson

So that would be, mm...

Simpson

Oh I went in, I, 1951.

Dawson

You, well, you would go into the Air Force in 1953?

Simpson

Yes, I was nineteen.

Dawson

Yes. So you were nineteen then?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

So it was the two years before your going into the Air Force?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

So approximately 1951 to 1953?

Simpson

Three I was at Lockheed.

Dawson

Yes, okay.

Simpson

And that held me in good stead because while I was in the Air Force I maintained my seniority.

Dawson

Tell me about, tell me why you went into Lockheed? Mm, what and what kind of work you did when you were in there?

Simpson

Mm, I was working at Fletcher Aviation at the time just basically doing menial jobs, etcetera and I heard they were hiring at Lockheed so I went and applied and was hired. Mm, [Pause] they put me doing various jobs but I was, my work ethic was such that I did good jobs. And from there I went into the Air Force and when I came back I was made a lead man in the fuel, working with the fuel system on the 104 which was the state of the art airplane at the time.

Dawson

Ah. So you worked in Lockheed before you went into the Air Force and again...?

Simpson

When I came out.

Dawson

When you came out?

Simpson

Mm, mm.

Dawson

So, mm, when you came out in Nineteen... out of the Air Force in 1957 you again worked for Lockheed for how long?

Simpson

Until my thirtieth birthday. So I was twenty [Pause] three so there was an additional seven years and on my thirtieth birthday I quit.

Dawson

Okay. That would be till what? 1963, is that correct? So from 1957 to 1963?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

I went back to college and [Pause] prior to that I, I had signed up for fourteen units and rather than, because I was going to school at night and working in the, I, at during the day and working at Lockheed at night and I just quit rather than withdraw. And unbeknown to me all of those units reverted to 'F'. There was a faculty advisor, Dr Eikenberry, I never will forget him. When I went back to college in 1963 he said 'you can't do this because you have fourteen units of 'F', which was tantamount to having a GPA of negative, of zero. He went to a faculty board and had all of those 'F's put in withdrawn which cleaned up my record. At that time in 1965, mm, I heard from a friend that there was a training program being instituted at the, in the motion picture industry because of the segregation, and the Watts riots

and all of the turmoil that was going on in the Sixties they felt that they had to do something.

Dawson

Who was this person that gave you that very useful bit of information?

Simpson

Well, his name was Bob Clendenning but I don't think that should, I think he was...

Dawson

Was he in the industry?

Simpson

No. Now he came because there was a caveat and to get in you had to be twenty-eight years old. Well, at that time I was thirty-two but there was one of those things that I like to say was, mm, serendipitous you might say because you could use four years of active military service, which made me twenty-eight which made me eligible for the training program.

Dawson

Okay. So you were eligible, mm, you completed your application form and you went for interview?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Tell me about the interview?

Simpson

Well, the interview was unique in the sense because there was the head of the producers was a man named John Zinn, Z-i-n-n. Being somewhat adventurous I walked in his office and, and appealed to him to get into the program not knowing that you just didn't do that, but I did that. So when I went to the interview he had said something that, to someone to, to make me eligible for the program. But here we go. While in the Air Force I was assigned to KP one day and I was in Fort Nix, New Jersey I think it was, Camp, one of those installations because I was going overseas. And I saw on the bulletin board that, mm, they were giving a GED test. Having not graduated from high school to get out of KP for that morning I went and took the test. Forgot about it and when I went to get into the training program in the service - I mean in the motion picture industry - this man who was a head of a, mm, the union, I can't think of his name but I will think of it later.

Dawson

This is Local Seven Twenty-eight?

Simpson

Seven Twenty-eight, yes. He didn't like the idea that I had gone into the producer's office and had talked with him. So he, so he, mm, said 'no', that I... Let me back up a little. I went to John Eikenberry and I said 'I need a high school diploma'. He checked my records and I had some seventy units.

He said 'well, you've got enough to graduate from college but with a 'AA degree', why don't you get that in lieu of your high school diploma'? And I said 'fine'. So I went to the board and I offered them this 'AA' degree and the gentleman in charge, Ben Stevens was his name, was very, very adamant, he says 'no, you have to have a high school or the equivalent'.

Dawson

Okay. And now this guy was Local Seven Twenty-eight?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Yes, okay.

Simpson

Okay. And when I thought about it I remembered that I had taken the GED. I went and called them, the Air Force Educational thing which was in Kansas, they confirmed and sent a telegram that I did have a GED and that in turn put me in a position where I could get in to the program. Mm, it was again serendipitous in the sense that I, if I hadn't taken that GED they wouldn't have let me in.

Dawson

Okay. Mm, and Seven Twenty-Eight didn't want to really let you in did they?

Simpson

Well, this one particular person, Ben Stevens.

Dawson

Ben Stevens.

Simpson

Ben Stevens who was the chief cook and bottle washer and he didn't like the idea that I went around him. And they had, mm, a, a, they were accepting twenty people and they had to adhere to the ten per cent rule, and I was one and Steve Antoine was the other, they took two blacks and we were accepted in.

Dawson

So the training program, the apprentice training program took twenty people?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Yes, but two of whom were African Americans?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

So it wasn't a minority training program?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

It, but you were the two minorities in, in that program?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Because the minority program I don't think comes in until a little bit, a little bit later, 1960s, 1970?

Simpson

1970 they were hiring, mm, more African Americans and women. Mm, but I had been in five years and I don't know. Well, yes, I was a test to see whether or not blacks could assimilate to the, to the culture of the motion picture industry.

Dawson

Can you remember who the other person was, African American who was admitted?

Simpson

Steve Antoine was his name.

Dawson

Steve Antoine?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

What happened to him?

Simpson

Mm, he stayed at MGM. He is now living in New Orleans and we speak at least two or three times a year, we're still friends.

Dawson

Okay. So you were friends with him. You hadn't known him before?

Simpson

No, I didn't.

Dawson

I see.

Simpson

And then the difference being is he stayed at MGM for most of his career where I did location work, etcetera, you know, and went from one place to another and finally settled in Warner Brothers. But I still when there was, mm, Seven Twenty-Eight allowed for you to go with their independents and you could come back.

Dawson

Mm. Do you recall any of the other eighteen or so people who were on the apprentice training program in 1965?

Simpson

No, no, I don't. Mm, because they were dispersed. I did my apprenticeship at Paramount. Warner Brothers had some, MGM had some. In those days

the, mm, the studios were very, they were highly populated and they are now they're all on an independent bases if you know what I mean?

Dawson

Gene tell me something about the kind of training that you got, mm, on that apprentice program?

Simpson

Well, we went in and there was a set curriculum, and it's a misnomer when they call electricians, studio electricians, electricians because their primary concern is working with lights. The electricity comes from a generator and we have to learn how to feed those lights and that's the extent. But there's, we learned how to use, mm, hoist. We learnt how to use the, mm, lighting equipment. We learnt how to rig. We learnt everything that you can imagine about lighting and about the equipment we were taught. So when we finished in a year's time we were quite adept at the equipment, not necessarily how to use it because the only way that can be done is by using it, but we knew how and what. And then from there we went to, mm, other studios and became riggers.

Dawson

Okay. The training was at which studio?

Simpson

Paramount.

Dawson

Okay. And the, and the training lasted how long?

Simpson

One year.

Dawson

It was one year, okay.

Simpson

One year.

Dawson

Was it mainly, was it partly classroom based as well as practical?

Simpson

No, it was practical.

Dawson

All practical?

Simpson

All practical. Now...

Dawson

And who were the people who taught you?

Simpson

Well, there was several. One in particular that I really, mm, I was his name was Doggie Lan . He was a character out of, he was from New York. He rode around on a little, on a girl's bicycle because he figured that nobody would steal a girl's bicycle. And he chomped on a cigar and he wore one of those

New York hats and he was very gruff. And Doggie was a very good rigger. He knew circuitry, he knew cable capacity, he knew all of the things that went with rigging, how to set a rig a set for lighting, etcetera, and I was assigned to his crew. Well, one day he was so gruff and he picked on me. I told him in a very expletive way 'if you don't leave me alone I'll take one of these lamps and break your neck'. He got on this bicycle and walked away. Well, I had only been there a few days and the rest of the crew said 'no, he said he likes you, he wouldn't pick on you unless he liked you'. I in turn came down and apologized and we had a very good rapport after that, and he taught me as much as anybody because he was, the crew that I was assigned to was, for the lack of a better word the crème de la crème, the best available. And from there I learned, and I'm so glad I'm learned from Doggie because it put me in a position to work with the better crews.

Dawson

Now you joined the industry in 1965. Now I don't know how much you knew but two years before in 1963 the NAACP had campaigned very extensively, very hard to increase the number of African Americans both in front of camera and also behind camera. Now they had some success in front of camera. Actors and The Screen Actors' Guild were sympathetic to the demands of the NAACP?

Simpson

And to this day they are very.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

It is...

Dawson

But IATSE and the IATSE locals including Seven Twenty-Eight were hostile or at best very reluctant to admit African Americans. Now I don't know how much of this you knew in 1965?

Simpson

I had no, did not have a clue. I did not have a clue and that worked in my favor simply because I went in and worked as opposed to, [Pause] looking for an extra, an edge, you know.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

And I could outwork most of them because I was, as I said before, ten years older and I had been in the Air Force and I had been in the workplace. Well, most of the young men that worked on my crew were relatives, were sons, nephews, etcetera.

Dawson

And what did they say, you know, okay they're ten years younger than you and so I don't know how much you had in common with them, but what's the kind of things they, they talked about to, to you?

Simpson

They were in awe of me as I look back simply because I could outwork them and I was a hard worker and I was very strong and very athletic and I was articulate. I remember one time, Steve Antoine the guy that went in me, went in with me, we were up high and we just for the, the, the fun of it started discussing Philosophy and talking about Plato and Aristotle and Socrates and, and things that these young men had no knowledge of, and we were having fun with them by showing our intelligence, and in doing so there was some acrimony with the head of the department and he'd start picking on us. And he did it for so long and then I came down off, down from the thing and chased him into his office, [Laughter] and I got a reputation that I had beat him up, which I didn't but the reputation was such that nobody messed with me afterwards.

Dawson

Just quickly, where did you, when were you reading Philosophy? Was this when you'd been in college or you just...?

Simpson

Yes. Well, the two years that prior to going in that I, I had a Philosophy course or what have you.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

And then I was a prolific reader. I've been a reader all my life, and not all my life but I started with Jackie Robertson in 1947 reading the sports page and following him. And from there I remember in the Air Force in the Nineteen... in Fifty-five I guess it was, mm, we used to sit in the barracks and what have you and philosophize. And this sergeant again took me aside and took me to the base library and told me some of the things I should read. And at this time he, my first book of any consequence was Opus 21 by Philip Wylie.

Dawson

Mm, mm.

Simpson

And from there I read him and I read Steinbeck and I read all of the, the, I love fiction but historical fiction, hence my education became important. And then I went back to school for those two years prior to going in to... So that's where my Philosophy came.

Dawson

Okay. Let's leap forward again and let's look at the training program and the, and the people on the, the training program. You say they were, were in awe of you. You were ten years older, you could work harder, you had, mm,

more of a college experience than, than many of they, them did. But did you hear the, the view expressed that, after all these were sons or nephews of people who worked in the industry, did you hear any sentiment to the effect that you really shouldn't be there? You were taking the place of somebody else's relation?

Simpson

Well, one time in particular, in particular Freddie Doyle who has since died of Aids because he was, he was homosexual. I was in the stall in the bathroom and he was blustering that he would not work with niggers or women. And I in turn I was offended but rather than go off and cause a disturbance I went and told Lon Massey who was an Indian but he was in charge of the rigging, of the, our particular crew in, in mid management and he took Freddie and put him somewhere else, but that was the only blatant incident I had because...

Dawson

And that was during the apprentice...?

Simpson

Yes. While I was on the...

Dawson

On the apprentice?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Okay. Mm, and that's the only direct experience that you have of racial antagonism?

Simpson

Overt, yes.

Dawson

Overt, yes.

Simpson

But there was a lot of resentment for the first few months. But prior to that and once I got to where I was working and I, and I caught on and my work ethic was such, well, I gained respect.

Dawson

Yes. But so what other views were expressed then that, not, not overt racism but more subtle during this time?

Simpson

Mm, not much because there was a, [Pause] he's done Nick. [Telephone interruption] My second day in the business they put me on a production called Assault On A Queen starring Frank Sinatra, Tony, I can't think of his name now. And I was man, I was running an arc, which is a very large light that had a negative, positive speed that put on a very blue light, they don't use 'em any more. But at that time, and I was supposed to pan with Sinatra as he got off the boat and came up the gangplank. And as he passed my

light he looked back and saw that I was a person of color and he winked, and it was like being blessed by the Pope. And I don't know if that was, what that was but from then on I got very good assignments and what have you. I worked in the rigging crew with this person Doggie Lan but it was a good experience. Mm, that same day they were shooting out in front of a stage and I had a straw hat on and a straw cowboy hat like. And it was raining and Frank Sinatra's daughter, mm, I can't think of which one, took it off my head, put it on her head until she was finished and came back and put it back on my head and didn't say a word. So it was like I'm one of the person that was accepted, and that is one of the stories that, and I've got a lot of those which...

Dawson

Do you think, mm, coming back to something that we've talked about before, do you think actors were more sympathetic?

Simpson

Very much so.

Dawson

Than many of the people behind camera?

Simpson

Yes, yes. Mm, the actors were, they were just, I don't like the word liberal but they were extremely liberal, and in doing so I, I because I was older and articulate enough to express myself in a way that I didn't walk up English I'd know backwards I got along with them and there was a resentment in the crew because I did. Every production I went on I had a chance to, [Pause] co-lingo with the quote 'stars', you know. And not the big ones, I didn't go to Frank Sinatra and, and buddy with him, you know, but if they showed an interest in me in any way, shape or form I was able to hold my own and communicate in a, in a way that... [Pause] It was, I, it's hard to say but it was a way that I was accepted if that makes sense.

Dawson

Yes, okay. Mm, your training comes to an end?

Simpson

Mm, mm.

Dawson

Tell me about what happened after that?

Simpson

Well, for that first year according to contract I was not laid off. In the business it's seasonal and once you're on a production and once that's finished you're laid off and then you're picked up again through the union. Well, for the first year I was not laid off. Well, in doing so that permitted me to, to learn everything. And then I went to the, mm, various studios. I did some time at MGM, I did some time at, mm, Columbia. Now Columbia was unique in the sense that I was the second black person to work there. Now the first was a name, a guy named Willie and he was, mm, adopted you

might say by Woodie who was head of rigging. And Willie had some [Pause] legal matters that, that he left New York for and there was a warrant out for his arrest and Woodie talked him into going back to New York, straightening it up and promised him a job when he came back. But when Willie went - now this was in the early Seventies - when he went he was judged guilty and thrown in Attica and he was killed in a riot.

Dawson

Oh.

Simpson

And Woodie never, I don't think ever got, never, you know, that was... He really, really, because he liked Willie and, mm...

Dawson

He felt bad about that?

Simpson

Yes. Oh he did. And he, and he retired soon after that. He really felt bad because he felt he, he had talked him into getting killed, yes.

Dawson

Who, what other African Americans were working in the industry in the, in the early days? In the, you know, from 1965 onwards do you recall?

Simpson

Well, yes. From 1970 until maybe Eighty there was so, there were quite a few. There were, mm, in, in sound there were Willie Burton and Marvin Lewis which have won two Oscars. There was Cordell Boyd who was head of the union at Warner Brothers. There, there was numerous ones that are now retired, but the, the thing that made it bad is they never replaced them. It's just like it was in 1965 right now.

Dawson

So the industry in a sense has gone backwards after making some progress?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

In terms of, of integration it has now gone backwards to 1965 again?

Simpson

Yes. But there's a reason for that. One is the work is seasonal and most of the people that are in it are either [Pause] not responsible or have learnt through uncles and brothers and what have you that it is seasonal and you have to save your money and you can only work three or four months at a time then you're off for a month or a month and a half. Not too many people can do that unless they're single and don't have children. One of the things that permitted me to do that is one, I was a very good worker and two I didn't have the responsibility and I could live off of what I saved and, mm, unemployment. So that's what held me into it.

Dawson

So now you're not talking about the 1980s here and the rise of independent productions are you and short term contracts, is this what you're talking about?

Simpson

Yes, that's what I'm moving on to, yes.

Dawson

Right, okay. Because the interesting part about the 1970s seems to be, mm, almost permanent, that you were permanent employment wasn't it?

Simpson

And, and, and no but yes. In my particular case because my reputation was such that I could go to independent productions, and I did. I, I, I worked on, [Pause] oh things like Last Picture Show which was an independent production. Close Encounter of the Third Kind, which was a Spielberg extravaganza, and this type of thing. So I was able to do that and work from one person, one production to another.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

And I did this during the Eighties.

Dawson

The, mm, just to finish off. Mm, on contemporaries, contemporary African Americans who were in the industry when you joined, mm, does the name Wendell Franklin spring to mind at all?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Did, and did you have any...?

Simpson

Yes. Wendell Franklin was, mm, he's now deceased so I could say whatever. He was effeminate and he was the assistant, second assistant director on The Bill Cosby Show in 1968 or Sixty-nine. And I knew Wendell well but he, mm, he was a character but he was assistant director. And he, I don't know, I, it's a fact that one, we all went to Las Vegas to see Bill Cosby's opening and while we were there Wendell got drunk and, and, and, and made a mess of things. I, I don't want to say exactly what he did but he was, he was a character.

Dawson

What's the kind of things Wendell told you about his experiences in the industry because he was, mm, mm, what was he a second assistant director?

Simpson

Yes, second assistant director, yes.

Dawson

Director at that stage. But he'd come up the hard way hadn't he, he'd, he'd worked in the parking lot, he'd, it was a struggle for him?

Simpson

I really don't know his history but I do know that, mm, Cosby gave him a, Cosby's show gave him an opportunity to be a second assistant director. Now what he did prior to that I have no idea.

Dawson

Ah, okay.

Simpson

But Wendell was a character.

Dawson

But you, but you had not much contact, or he didn't talk much about, you know, his, his...

Simpson

Well, not his past, no. I knew he'd been around a while because he was not a spring chicken, he was, he was older. But I, he was, he was a good second assistant. Cosby liked him but, mm, other than that I don't know that much about him.

Dawson

So he was respected. He, was he also respected by the, the rest of the crew as well?

Simpson

Yes, because he was humorous and, mm, he was, mm, you know, he was, he was gay but he didn't offend anybody, this type of thing. And in the Sixties that's, that's going, Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine.

Dawson

So even amongst the more macho elements within, you know, the, on the crew...?

Simpson

Yes, he was a character.

Dawson

He was still okay, yes, okay.

Simpson

He was accepted. And then there was, mm, there was several. What was his name? Mm, [Pause] I don't know. The first assistant director on that, on the show, on The Cosby Show. And then we had, mm, it was a very integrated crew. It was, what was the name of the...? Anyway from Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine, mm, it was quite a few African Americans and women on the crew and then...

Dawson

So even as early as Sixty-eight, Sixty-nine because the training programs, the minority training programs don't kick in until 1970 you're saying that there's progress being made or was this just particularly on the 'The Cosby Show'?

Simpson

On The Cosby Show.

Dawson

Because Bill Cosby made an effort to have an integrated crew?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

And what would the, that integrated crew look like, what it would be in terms of how many African Americans or, or women or what?

Simpson

Well, let's see. There were, there was, there was Conrad who was the, mm... [Pause] I can't, anyway there was a hairdresser, there was myself. There was an assistant and then there was Wendell Franklin and, mm, [Pause] there were about ten African Americans on his crew.

Dawson

Out of how many? Out of, what would be the size of the crew?

Simpson

Maybe forty.

Dawson

Ah, okay. And how many women?

Simpson

[Pause] African American women there was a wardrobe person, there was a hairdresser, mm, and there was a make-up person.

Dawson

Do you remember any of their names?

Simpson

Yes, Bernadine Anderson and then, [Pause] Sercee, I can't think of her name, she was a hairdresser. Bernadine was make-up, and then the, the wardrobe person what was her name? Oh I can't think of it right now that was almost forty years ago, but, mm, yes, it was a fun crew.

Dawson

Do you know how they had got into the industry? I mean obviously in your case coming through the apprentice program in 1965, what, how did these, had these women got into the industry, can you recall?

Simpson

Yes. Well, now one came up through, mm, television and, and did stage work, mm. [Pause]

Dawson

This was the hairdresser?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

Mm, the well, anyway, Washington, that was her name. Mm, she just had an interest, I don't know exactly what she did but they, they were in like industries but not in the IA, this type of thing.

Dawson

They weren't in the make-up and...?

Simpson

No, not until till then, till Bernadine Anderson was, mm, she did an apprenticeship in that and had studied under somebody in that, during that time. Mm, [Pause] yes his, his, Conrad, who was in, mm, oh what was it? The property, he was the prop master, mm, he worked under Luskin. Yes, okay. But it was, it was a mixed crew, they came up and they wanted to, and some came off the street but it was a very mixed crew.

Dawson

Mm, and the hairdressers and make-up artists, did they look after both black actors and white actors?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

No, there was no...?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

And the...?

Simpson

Cosby wouldn't have that.

Dawson

And so the stars, and none of the stars insisted on having their own particular hairdresser or make-up artist with them, they looked after everyone, all the actors?

Simpson

Yes, yes.

Dawson

Okay. Right, tell me a bit more about what progress are you making in, in the industry at the moment, at the moment? You started out as doing what?

Simpson

As electrician.

Dawson

Okay, as electrician. You later on become best boy and then gaffer?

Simpson

Well, I was best boy on The Cosby Show.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

And, mm, that was done because the gaffer came from Columbia, and I didn't notice until after the fact he was very, very prejudiced, he did not like the idea that I was there but I was protected by Cosby and he couldn't fire me, it was one of those things. And I saw him, the bullets and, Carl Bowles was his name, he's now dead but, mm...

Dawson

So did, how, did you know this that he was hostile towards you or did you...?

Simpson

No, not at the time.

Dawson

You only learnt this later?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Okay. Anyway you were saying he was gaffer?

Simpson

Yes, and I was the best boy. And, mm, we had an all white crew but, mm, that was because there wasn't that many African Americans qualified to do that. And I learned how to do that on the fly, I had never been best boy before and none of those, the gaffer Carl Bowles etcetera was not very helpful so I had to learn. In the second year I, I was a lot better because I did learn.

Dawson

So even though Carl Bowles wasn't particularly helpful to you, you didn't put two and two together?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

And think 'why's he not being helpful and helping me out in doing this job'?

Simpson

Mm, no it didn't because I was too busy trying to do everything. You know Joyce said 'zeal without prudence is so much folly', and I was not prudent at all, I just was going gung-ho setting lamps doing this, that and the other. The second year I learned from what have you and I was able to lay back and let the crew do what they were supposed to do.

Dawson

Tell me, tell me what, exactly what does the best boy do, what's their role?

Simpson

He's in charge of men and equipment. The best boy is in charge of the truck, if we have a truck, all the lamps, all the cable and the, and the crew itself.

Dawson

Did, mm, and these were mostly white guys?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Who you were in charge of. Was there any problems in, in this?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

None at all?

Simpson

None, no.

Dawson

Why do you think that is? [

Simpson

Pause] Because I'm six one and at the time I weighed about a hundred and eighty-five, ninety pounds. I was athletic and I just, I didn't take any stuff and I didn't give any stuff, I was able to hold my own for the lack of a better word.

Dawson

Hold your own?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

What's, what does that mean?

Simpson

Well, I was not intimidated by anybody and I wasn't afraid of anything. Again this is where my Air Force service and the training program came in. I knew what I was supposed to do, etcetera and I was not. It wasn't, mm, I wasn't intimidated, that's just it's simple.

Dawson

What kind of intimidation could be going on that you had to be firm about?

Simpson

Mm, somebody knowing a couple of times it happened when I was a best boy when I first started, not knowing what the protocol was and they would take advantage of that. In doing so that was a very good learning experience and that happened quite a bit. They were going to, not they but several would come in and want to show me up, and they did but in doing so I learnt from that experience.

Dawson

Now they, was this, did this have a kind of, mm, racial theme to it or, or was it...?

Simpson

I, I would have to say yes, but I don't know if that was, if there was a racial as much as there was a macho, a combination of both. But I got along well with most of the crew and those that tried to do this I got rid of them so the, the crew was very harmonious towards the middle of the shoot and, and on.

Dawson

Do you, do you mix much with people outside, in the late 1960s, early 1970s now, do you mix much with people outside of work?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

Not at all?

Simpson

Not at all, no. I lived in Pasadena and I came and primarily I worked in Burbank. Universal, [Pause] Warner Brothers. I never worked in Disney because Walt Disney had a thing in his will that no black would ever work on his lot. Now that has changed but when I was coming that was the truth, I never worked at Disney.

Dawson

So when, so Disney had a reputation in the Sixties?

Simpson

Of being very, of being a bigot, yes.

Dawson

Of, well, Disney certainly but, but there was no African Americans at all working at Disney?

Simpson

Well, later on there were but not in the electricians, electrical department that I know of. I know there was a lady that worked for some twenty odd years in wardrobe but, mm, and...

Dawson

Oh do you know when she started roughly?

Simpson

No, I don't.

Dawson

But she was there or you heard about her?

Simpson

Well, I knew that after the fact because I've talked with her since.

Dawson

Oh okay.

Simpson

And she said that she was, you know, at Disney and what have you. And there was Bernadine Anderson who was the make-up person, she worked over there but she was a very statuesque, tall, beautiful woman and very good at what she did so that was why she was able to do what she did. And I think she was the first African American to go into make-up, and that was in, mm, the late Sixties.

Dawson

Late Sixties, ah. I thought African Americans in make-up had occurred much, much, much earlier?

Simpson

No, to my knowledge.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

No, I don't, I can't think of any of them other than...

Dawson

Especially African, if African American actors might often bring their hairdressers and make-up artists in with them.

Simpson

Hair yes but not make-up.

Dawson

Is that right, okay, just hair?

Simpson

To my knowledge, yes.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

In the late Sixties, but in the Seventies that was different.

Dawson

So she, so she was the first in make-up?

Simpson

To my knowledge, yes.

Dawson

Yes, okay. Mm, okay back, getting back to who you socialized with. You didn't socialize with anyone on the, in, at work whether they were African American or white or whatever you didn't? As soon as work finished...?

Simpson

I went, I went home.

Dawson

You didn't go for a beer or something?

Simpson

No, no.

Dawson

So who were you mixing with? You were mixing with a different crowd that had nothing to do with the movie business?

Simpson

In the Pasadena area I was raised with a group of young men all accomplished in various different fields but we were friends for years. We started in, in, in elementary school literally and came up, and there were, you know, Delano and Tootie and Ronnie and we had a club called The Social. It was, before we went in the service we had a club and we called them The Crusaders but once we came old enough we figured out what a Crusader was and that was not in, in our, that was not what we did, the

Crusaders of the, of the Crusades. So when we reformed after the service we were called The Social Lads, and this is we gave dances and this, that and the other. And we raised hell actually until they start getting married and what have you and then we kind of disbanded.

Dawson

Oh. Mm, okay. What year did you become best boy?

Simpson

Mm, 1968 on The Cosby Show.

Dawson

Sixty-eight, but you don't stay best boy do you?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

You, do you, you kind of go back?

Simpson

Go back and forth, yes.

Dawson

Right. And then eventually you become gaffer, when was that?

Simpson

No, I never did.

Dawson

You never got to gaffer?

Simpson

No. Well, I did and as a replacement for a day or so but never assigned because...

Dawson

Just on a brief period?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Oh I see.

Simpson

Now that, now that is, gaffer in order to be a gaffer you have to be [Pause] working with the cameraman. He's the one that assigns the gaffer and if he doesn't trust you he's not going to, you know. Best boy is another thing, it's physical work. But a gaffer has to know lights, measure lights, etcetera and it's not as easy as it might seem but the cameraman, the, mm, director of photography, who he likes to be called, is the one that uses his own gaffer and usually they stay with him for quite a while. Best boy is usually appointed by the studio or sometimes by the gaffer but usually by the department head of the studio.

Dawson

Okay. If you had become gaffer, I don't know if you wanted to but that, would that be a step up in the world?

Simpson

Yes, oh yes.

Dawson

And you wanted to become a gaffer?

Simpson

Mm, not, the best boy as far as work is concerned is the best job possible. Gaffer has to stay on the set and be in the hip pocket of the photographer, of cinematographer twenty, the whole time. Well, best boy I can go and sit on the truck and do this or that or the other, I don't have to, as long as the floor operation runs smoothly I don't have a problem.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

If there comes a problem with the, with the cable or lighting or the generator or something like that then, then I have to go fix it.

Dawson

So, mm, you never aspired really to be gaffer, you didn't?

Simpson

I didn't hunt, seek it.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

Go out and seek it, no.

Dawson

Would it have been difficult for you to make that transition if you'd wanted to, bearing in mind the things you've just said?

Simpson

From the physical standpoint or social standpoint?

Dawson

Mm, both.

Simpson

No, not, not from a physical standpoint because as a best boy I knew what had to be done, but socially, mm, I had to have a cameraman anoint me, you might say, and that was difficult.

Dawson

Difficult because most of the, well, I think almost all of the camera operators would be white?

Simpson

Yes. Camera, well, cinematography not the outmen...

Dawson

And oh DPs?

Simpson

But the DP, yes.

Dawson

The DPs were, were all white?

Simpson

Directors were all white, yes.

Dawson

And you weren't closely connected with any DPs?

Simpson

With any of them, no.

Dawson

Nor did you choose to or what?

Simpson

Well, no, not, not. You know I was friendly with them in the sense that I worked with them but I didn't literally kiss their butts to get to position because most of them had their own gaffers.

Dawson

Yes, yes. You never came across any African American DPs or camera operators in late Sixties, early Seventies?

Simpson

Yes. One Joe Wilcox who just recently passed and he was the first one. But Joe was not a nice person. Mm, who else? There was, mm...

Dawson

Now that's interesting. You say he's not a nice person, I've had different opinions. Tell me, anyway tell me about Joe?

Simpson

[Pause]. Well, I worked on The Last Picture Show when Joe came down as an assistant camera person, that was I think his first job. And then on several of Ivan Dixon's pictures, mm, he made Joe a camera operator and then from then Joe became a, a cinematographer. But Joe never reached out to my knowledge he always had a white gaffer and this, that and the other. And he was, if I have a, mm, I like to say if I could buy a person for what he's worth and sell him for what he thinks he's worth I would have a capital gains problem. Joe was full of his, himself, and I don't know what brought that on because Joe as a person was a nice guy and, you know, I knew Joe quite well but from a working standpoint he was more important than he was, if that makes any sense.

Dawson

Why, how do you think then given your assessment of him, how do you think he, mm, made his way in the industry as the first African American camera operator? How did he do that if he hadn't got...?

Simpson

First of all he was a camera person in the Navy and he did, mm, [Pause] biographies and this type of thing. Secondly he worked as an assistant in the, in the house, if I'm not mistaken, in the camera house and from there he came out and worked as an assistant camera person. On Trouble Man I think it was with Ivan Dixon he became a camera operator and he did that

for quite a while and then he moved up to camera cinematographer, now how in between he did that I don't know.

Dawson

But you're saying, your judgment of his abilities are that he greatly exaggerated them?

Simpson

Mm, I'm thinking in terms of, he was, he was not bad but he wasn't the, the one that, mm, well, he became more important than he was put it that way. I remember somebody asked him to do something, a small documentary, and he wanted a truck and he wanted his own gaffer and he wanted his own key grip and the budget didn't warrant that but he wouldn't do it unless he had that type of thing. Joe just died here a few months ago.

Dawson

Ah, ah. Have you got any, mm, obituaries by the way? That could be useful.

Simpson

No, I don't.

Dawson

Oh.

Simpson

No, no but Joe Wilcox you could find at I'm sure on the, he was the first.

Dawson

I'll look, I'll look out for him. Going on location, let's change the subject, when was the first time you went off shooting somewhere else outside of the studio?

Simpson

Mm, that was, mm, [Pause] 1968 and, mm, [Pause] The, The Learning Tree with Gordon Parks, that was the first one.

Dawson

And where was this?

Simpson

Fort Scott, Kansas.

Dawson

Okay. What was your experience living with guys who you didn't normally socialize with but now on location, mm, you're sharing a hotel, you're sharing, you know, sort of your downtime?

Simpson

Well, in this particular case, and it was ironic in a sense because it was done in a negative social way but it was to my advantage monetarily. We were, our crew, the electric crew stayed in Nevada, Kansas, mm, Missouri and they would not let a, me a black person live there because Missouri was...

Dawson

In the hotel, yes.

Simpson

In The, in the motel, hotel, whatever it was so I had to stay in town. But they were going an hour to and from and that was two hours a day that I was on the clock. They tried to dock me and I said 'no, the crew, it's not my fault I'm not living out there'. So I was showered and everything and, mm, yes, and in, in the sense that it was to my advantage.

Dawson

Okay. So you weren't, at least not on this location shoot, you didn't stay with the rest of the crew?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

You stayed with the actors. Was, was that right?

Simpson

Well, the actors and the rest of the, only the grips and electricians were the only ones because they had the largest crew.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

Make-up and wardrobe there's only one or two people in, on that crew and they stayed in town.

Dawson

Did this, the fact that, mm, there was segregation here blatant practiced like this did that shock you?

Simpson

No, not in the sense that I knew that Missouri was, was segregated and I liked [1:20:00] the idea of staying in Fort Scott with the rest of the crew, with Gordon and the rest of them, and we had fun. And we went in to Fort Scott, Kansas and the rumor had it that, mm, the blacks are coming to town and they're doing to disrupt the state, I mean, you know, this, that and the other. And the first shoot of that day was on a river bank and there were literally townspeople on the other side of the bank with rifles, literally. And when they, when we left Fort Scott, Kansas, mm, they gave us a party and it was supposed to be outside but it started raining and they took it inside and they had, mm, a roasted pig and gave Gordon the key to the city and it was just a very good ending.

Dawson

So why do you think the change in attitude?

Simpson

Because they found that we were sociable people. There were no problems. They, the black people did not screw all the white women, etcetera, etcetera. You know, I mean the myth of blacks.

Dawson

Well, had they met many African Americans?

Simpson

No, no. They just...

Dawson

This is an all white town?

Simpson

No, there were a few blacks but they stayed in their place. It wasn't segregated as it was in Missouri but it still was what it was.

Dawson

Tell me what was your impression of Gordon Parks?

Simpson

[Pause] I don't know if I tell you the story or not but I have a, a finger, a hand carved finger, and Gordon would mess with me every chance he got because I, I had a moustache and he had a moustache and his son was there in Fort Scott but they thought I was his son and they suggested in the newspaper that one of us should have to shave our moustache so that they could tell us apart. And he looked at me and said 'when are you going to shave'? [Laughter] And another thing was when I first, I was staying at the hotel where he was and he came down and he smoked a pipe and the first day he was fumbling for a match and I smoked at the time and I handed the match. The second day he came down and did the same thing, I handed him a match. The third day he came down and did the same thing he said 'well, where's my match'? I said 'screw you I know where, I know you now'. So hence it came about, mm, mm, as a good, a, you know, we were good.

Dawson

Friends?

Simpson

Not friends but very sociable.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

And he liked the way I worked. He said, made a comment one time we were working at night and I was doing this and I was running across and I was doing and he said 'you look like a black panther', and that was high praise from, from somebody like Gordon Parks. Mm, I gave a, I was a Boy Scout and we had a co-leader and I, and I was chairing a committee that we gave a dinner for this old man, and in, in, in as far as what he did for the community because most of us in, had been in the Boy Scouts, and Gordon was the keynote speaker and he came out and we had to pay him fifteen hundred dollars but I think, you know, it was worth it bearing in mind that...

Dawson

And what year was this?

Simpson

[Pause] 1979, Seventy-eight, something like that.

Dawson

Now what, this was an integrated crew working, mm, with Gordon Parks, yes?

Simpson

Mm, mm.

Dawson

What did the crew think of, the rest of the crew think of Gordon Parks? How did they, how did they get on with him?

Simpson

In awe as a renaissance man because his reputation preceded him. But I found it very, very stimulating because it was the first, like I said, the first location. But in doing so I had almost an unprecedented, unprecedented I think I should say, mm, experience because Bernie Guthrie was the cinematographer and he had won an Oscar for, black and white for From Here To Eternity and he'd won one, at that time they gave one for both black and white and color and he won one, one for Bonnie and Clyde and Gordon had the eye of a cinematographer and as a still photographer and I pumped them for not in an intrusive way but I was able to talk to them about lighting, and I learnt so much during that time because I was the only person of color on the electrical crew. I wasn't the best boy but I was the crew and I was such that I set most of the lights and this type of thing, and when something happened, mm, they would tell me and pull me aside and they taught me a tremendous amount of, mm, cinematographer certain things. Do you want to turn this off? Mm, the, like I said Bernie Guthrie and Gordon were the ultimate as far as photographers and cinematographers and I had a chance to, to learn so much from them that I took on to other things. And that crew it was integrated but it was a very, it was a handpicked crew because people wanted the best results. How I got that is that I was at CBS at the time working on My Three Sons and, and that group of people, of thing. And I went into the office and asked the, I heard that they were doing a show with Rupert Cross and Steve McQueen in and I went, asked if I could get on that and he laughed and said 'no, they're going to Mississippi you couldn't do that'. But they told me of the Gordon Parks picture being, getting the crew together and [Pause] at Warner Brothers. And I went over there and walked in and asked and I was accepted and I went. So that's how I got to Fort Scott.

Dawson

Okay. Mm, other location shoots that you did that would be interesting?

Simpson

Yes. After that I did Last Picture Show with, with Peter Bogdanovich. I did Close Encounter of The Third Kind with Steven Spielberg's first big picture. I did, mm, a Sam Peckinpah thing, I can't think of, of the picture now right after he did, mm, mm, The Wild Horse, oh Wild Bunch. And then he did the one after that, I can't think of it now. But Lucien Ballard was the cinematographer and he was another that taught me quite a bit about... He

was a full blooded Indian and we were in the Valley of Fire in Nevada and it was raining for about a week, week and a half and during this time he went, he took me down into the where the, mm, Indians had hieroglyphics you might say and he taught me how the, showed me how the light changed with the sun and how the texture of the rock changed in color. And then from then I did, oh...

Dawson

Just, just.

Simpson

Oh wait a minute on The Last Picture Show it was, mm, the, mm, mm, oh shoot, Bob Surtees who had won Oscars. So I've had my really apprenticeship you might say of some very good teachers.

Dawson

Yes. On shoots like this, mm, it sounds like you build up relationships with people that you wouldn't otherwise do if you were working in the studio?

Simpson

Yes, to some degree, to some degree. Working, after the Eighties I did work in the studio on Police Story, Police Woman and television because it's, location is, is, is a hard job to, to speak. You understand what I mean?

Dawson

I do. It's probably at a certain stage in your life you do it?

Simpson

Yes, that I would prefer working on television.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

Because it usually ran six, seven, eight months at a time and it's steady and it's not that hard and I did work on [Pause] quite a few television programs.

Dawson

So in the Seventies you did location work?

Simpson

Yes, location work, yes.

Dawson

But by the Eighties you're deciding to get out of that?

Simpson

No in, by the Nineties.

Dawson

By the Nineties?

Simpson

Well, in the mid Eighties because I retired in Ninety-three and I'd had, because I had had a tremendous automobile accident and I tore my left ankle up and it was better that I retired.

Dawson

So you retired at sixty, the age, aged sixty?

Simpson

Aged sixty, yes.

Dawson

Aged sixty. But you would have, but for the accident you would have liked to have continued would you?

Simpson

Mm, [Pause] to be honest not really because it's hard, it's a young man's job and, mm, I was best boy most of the time after that and I didn't have to work that hard but I didn't, I was at a point where it's hard work, it's a young man's job if that makes any sense.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

So I had the opportunity to retire at age sixty so I did.

Dawson

Yes, yes. Can we briefly change the subject and look at, mm, IATSE, IATSE Local Seven Twenty-eight. We haven't mentioned it except once when you were getting into the industry back in 1965. Were you like CB, mm, active in the union?

Simpson

No, no. I paid my dues and what have you and I didn't attend that many meetings, but, mm...

Dawson

Where was the meetings, where would the local meetings...?

Simpson

At the Union Hall.

Dawson

And where was that in relation to Pasadena where you were living?

Simpson

In Burbank.

Dawson

Ah.

Simpson

In Burbank and not, just over. Mm, no I was not politically involved with that, I just [Pause] no.

Dawson

You didn't have an attitude that 'hey they tried to keep me out, mm, I'm not going to have anything to do with Seven Twenty-eight'?

Simpson

Not, no, not, not really. I knew that there was a bias but I didn't want to confirm it because I didn't necessarily have to, you know, if that makes any sense.

Dawson

No you didn't, you didn't have to go to meetings at all.

Simpson

No.

Dawson

Did you know CB at this, at this time?

Simpson

Yes, he was at Warner Brothers.

Dawson

Okay.

Simpson

Do you know CB?

Dawson

Yes, I've interviewed him.

Simpson

Okay, yes.

Dawson

So, and in fact I think it was he who mentioned your name.

Simpson

Okay.

Dawson

In fact that's how I know you.

Simpson

Okay.

Dawson

Through CB. But CB's active in the union isn't he and he's...?

Simpson

Mm, yes, he was the union steward at Warner Brothers which gave him seniority so he stayed most of his time at Warner Brothers.

Dawson

But CB wasn't talking to you about what was going on in the union much, or you didn't take, pay much attention to it?

Simpson

No. We were, we were friends and he's, he's a quiet sort, I want to say strange but not necessarily. Mm, he's independent and I talk, I haven't talked to him in a year or so but we do talk. And I found some stuff when I was looking for things for you, things that he had sent me. He will rather write a letter than make a phone call. [Laughter]

Dawson

Yes, I've found that as well actually.

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

I'm trying, I'm trying to get through to him at, at the moment, at the moment. Mm, [Pause] one of the things that you mentioned to me before we started the interview was your view, your impression that The John Birch

Society was active in the studios and that some of the heads of department were members of The John Birch Society?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

What evidence, what evidence do you have for that assertion?

Simpson

Attitudes, only the attitudes. At Warner Brothers Bill Harcourt who worked for me on The Cosby Show was elevated to the head of the department and nobody knew why or how, but was I think because he was a member of this, this, this John Birch Society.

Dawson

It's almost like he was a Freemason but this was John Birch Society?

Simpson

Yes, John Birch. This was unspoken but if you went into his office he was a very staunch fan of John Wayne's, and John Wayne was... Well, a story, I did The Shootist with John Wayne and there was a situation where I had a light cue that had to go. A light cue is, there was a key that when he turned on a light seven or eight lights go on and I missed it by a millisecond and he said 'I thought all you niggers had rhythm', and...

Dawson

This is John Wayne?

Simpson

Yes. And I had to think very fast and I said 'well, I just missed that one'. To go off on him would be like attacking God, you know what I mean?

Dawson

Mm, mm. It might be dangerous. Now what film was this and what year?

Simpson

The Shootist.

Dawson

'The Shootist'. Ah, well, we can find out the, the year for that one.

Simpson

The year. I think it was in the Seventies, mid Seventies, so I did...

Dawson

And there was, did, you, mm, you have any other dealings with John Wayne?

Simpson

Well, that was his last picture, he died after that. But I did the, briefly the Vietnam picture that he did. I can't think of the name of it. And then I did...

Dawson

'Green Beret'.

Simpson

Yes. And then there was another one which I did, mm, briefly. [Pause] What was it? Anyway, but The Shootist I did the whole thing and, mm, it was, it

was an experience. He, mm, we were in, mm, mm, in Nevada. Mm, [Pause] the capital of Nevada, I can't think of it. Anyway.

Dawson

Reno?

Simpson

No. It was, mm, Carson City. And I used to wear a Greek fisherman's hat and he called me 'Swede' because he doesn't remember names. And, mm, I responded so. I'd done a cameo on Green Beret, another one so he knew my face because I'd been around him and then I knew. Then I did...

Dawson

You say cameo?

Simpson

Mm, a day here and a day there, you know, not, not, not one, but The Shootist I went all the way from day one till the ending. And, mm, that's when he called me a nigger and... But it just came out and I didn't take offence to it because that's John Wayne, if that makes any sense.

Dawson

So what's your, what was your assessment of John Wayne at the time? You didn't take offence but, but what did you think of that incident?

Simpson

Well, after that he, I had lunch with him in his trailer one time. He told me that Ronald Reagan was going, want, you know, Ronald Reagan was going to be President because they had trained him to do what he did. John Wayne in having lunch with him and talking and what have you was quite adamant, at the time he was a devout Republican and he told me in essence, this was in Nineteen,...the latter part of the Seventies, and I don't know when Ronald Reagan became President but they, he told me that they were going to train and develop a President in the Republican image and, and Ronald Reagan was that person. And I knew that before he, they actually did it, and that was, mm, he was...

Dawson

But, but you got on, you seem to have got on despite that racial slur reasonably well?

Simpson

Yes, I did. And his, [Pause] John Wayne's, the way I looked at him was if you didn't work hard you weren't on his crew, and he was a devout one that, the work ethic was important to him and I worked hard and was quite adept at doing whatever so I didn't have any problems with him.

Dawson

Yes, yes.

Simpson

Laziness was one thing he, he hated.

Dawson

Just to finish off the discussion about John Birch Society. It's, I'm getting the impression there's, there's no hard evidence, there's no, it's, this is what you thought at the time but...

Simpson

But after the fact.

Dawson

Ah.

Simpson

I didn't at the time but in reading and, and seeing they were quite prevalent in the studio, John Birch was very prevalent in the studio, and mid management was, not upper management to my knowledge but it was mid management.

Dawson

Okay. What, where did you read, read about John Birch Society in the studios, can you remember?

Simpson

No.

Dawson

Okay. Now one other thing that we've mentioned, we've talked about, is your correspondence with the NAACP in the early, early 1970s.

Simpson

In the Seventies, yes.

Dawson

Can you tell us a little bit more about why you wrote to the NAACP and what was the nature of the correspondence backwards and forwards?

Simpson

Well, during that time there was a big push, push to integrate the motion picture industry, you touched on it. But the point that I found appalling was that it was all in front of the camera, and they did that successfully, but behind the camera was still just as exclusively white as ever and it still is. Because those according, like CB, etcetera have retired and they're, they didn't, it hasn't been, they haven't been replaced. Now the reason for that is, [Pause] most persons of color [Pause] nine to five, vacation two weeks a year, etcetera, but the motion picture industry is not like that. Unless you're raised with this work ethic where you can work for four or five months and then laid off for two or three months it's, it's hard to do, and most blacks that get into the business cannot do that. And it's, it's one of those things that, it's a fact. Whereas if you are raised with it. Your father's in it, your uncle's in it, your brother's in it, you understand this.

Dawson

So many African Americans coming into the industry for the first time are shocked by the level of, of work that's, that's required?

Simpson

Yes. That you're laid off and what have you. I could do it because I didn't have a wife and family, but I had to get used to it and then seeking out jobs. And reputation is such once you've become established your work ethic is more important than your color. Do you understand what I mean?

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

And it's, mm, it's...

Dawson

Now with the correspondence with the NAACP what response did you get to, to this letter?

Simpson

I didn't.

Dawson

There was no reply?

Simpson

No reply. And then I wrote the union, the head of the union. And I did and I waited and waited and finally I called them and then they did reply and they said that's it's up to the local to do that, it's not a, a, it's not the, mm, [Pause] responsibility of the head of the IA.

Dawson

Now Gene your writing an auto-biography, 'Nigger In Hollywood', tell us why you've selected that as a working title?

Simpson

Well, the word 'nigger', as I said with John Wayne, was commonplace at that time. It was used like 'niggerzene' was graphite. A big, a gobo which was made for shadows etcetera was called a 'big nigger', a 'little nigger'. Nigger was used...

Dawson

And people would use this on the set?

Simpson

Yes, yes.

Dawson

Anyone would use it?

Simpson

Yes. Prior to my coming on nigger was an accepted word about anything that was black. It was not, it was not offensive but it was commonplace and they used it when I came in exclusively until they, till I changed the vernacular of the times it was just something that, that was accepted. Niggerzene and, and gobo's 'big nigger' and 'little nigger' and things like that.

Dawson

So you're, to get back to your, title of your autobiography, you're using 'nigger' in the context of how it was used in 1960s?

Simpson

Yes, yes.

Dawson

Mm, what do you think is going to be the overall theme of your autobiography, or there maybe one, more than one theme?

Simpson

Mm, I, I'm hoping that I can tell the story of my experiences as a first time person. There have been from 1970 to 1980 there were, there was quite a few African Americans in the business but since then they've all retired, and I don't know but two or three that are still in the business, and they haven't been replaced so I would like to if possible awaken the fact that, that blacks are not in Hollywood and I want to point out why the, mm, [Pause] affluent black actors aren't, don't. You know there are very few that don't do that. There are some, he's, Ivan Dixon is one, he's now dead but he made a point that all of his pictures had a, mm, an integrated crew. I can't think of anybody else that has done that and I've been retired since 1993. And I don't know really what's happening but from what I understand with my conversations with CB and others, mm, there's, there's not that many African Americans in the business.

Dawson

So what do you, how do you see yourself then as part of a very privileged generation that gained access to Hollywood and others were not allowed or did not follow?

Simpson

Well, some followed but not all.

Dawson

Mm, but do you see yourself as relatively privileged?

Simpson

No. As a pioneer, yes, circumstances, serendipitous in the sense that [Pause] I was there at the right place at the right time.

Dawson

But you were a pioneer but others, and this is your point, didn't follow?

Simpson

Because of the circumstances. It's very difficult for [Pause] those with, that are married or with a family to make a thousand dollars a week for about ten weeks and then make nothing but unemployment, because when that money is coming in you're spending it and you're working, you understand?

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

And it's awfully hard for those that are not [Pause] accustomed to this type of thing. They can't, they can't, they can't hang it for the lack of, in the vernacular and it's very difficult, that business is not easy.

Dawson

Mm, mm. Do you think you'll finish this autobiography [Pause] if I keep putting pressure on you?

Simpson

Possibly. Mm, to write it is one thing, to dictate it to someone is another thing but I think possibly this might work as a catalyst.

Dawson

Yes. Now Gene there's just one final area I want to talk about at least today and that's after you left the industry and moving here to Nashville you, mm, started teaching at The Watkins Film School.

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Can you remember the year you started and tell me a little bit about the kind of courses you taught?

Simpson

Well, I was, I bought this house in 2001 and I think I taught over there for one semester 2002. Mm, I was working and I told a joke, a chauvinistic joke, and there was one lady in my class who complained and it was my demise. But the joke was in part 'what does a hundred women have in common'? And the answer is 'they just wouldn't listen'. And the head of the film department took offence to that and I was not hired for the next semester. It didn't bother me except for the fact that I liked teaching and I had a group of kids that said I taught them more in that one semester than they had learned the whole time they were in the school.

Dawson

Okay. So this is 2002, and what was the course you were teaching?

Simpson

Cinematography and the elements, lighting and grip work. Just the things that relate to cinematography.

Dawson

Practical or mainly practical?

Simpson

Yes, yes, we had practical. We had, we shot our own little vignette and this type of thing, yes.

Dawson

Oh. So they were making, mm, videos?

Simpson

Yes, and then we used film too.

Dawson

Oh film as well?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Oh okay. Mm, so what kind of experience do you think you taught those students?

Simpson

[Pause] I like to think that I contributed things that you can't get out of a book. You know there are certain things, there's an old cliché that said you can learn half of this business in two weeks and it will take you the rest of your life to learn the other half. And going on that premise if you teach a, a student that, that what, what it, you can't teach lighting, you have to see lighting. You can't teach grip work because it has to relate to lighting. You can't teach property. All of these things go in and they're what is it? The, the, the sum is, is as great as the whole or whatever that is, and that's what makes a movie. You could teach, mm, young film students that it's the teamwork, and that's what I've tried to give to these...

Dawson

But this was a classroom?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

Mm, so you can't, this is not practical on the job training is it, so what is it that...?

Simpson

Well, there is part, yes, there was. We had film and we did shoot some things. And the simplest thing, but lighting and how to take a thing and you see that shadow and you do this and you do that. You have to know what lighting is.

Dawson

Yes, yes.

Simpson

And so you can only teach it by using a light and this is what we did. And then we went outside and shot in the park and shot little vignettes and we had fun doing it.

Dawson

Yes. Did the students ask you about your experiences working in the industry?

Simpson

Yes.

Dawson

What kind of questions did they want to know?

Simpson

Well, like what was John Wayne like and who was, you know, how was Sidney Poitier and how did you get along with Cosby. All these little things, they were interested more in the...

Dawson

Personalities?

Simpson

Personalities.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

As opposed to the practical side.

Dawson

Okay. Well, how did you get on with Cosby?

Simpson

Fine I guess, mm. [Pause]

Dawson

What was your assessment of him?

Simpson

[Pause] Well, that was a long time ago. And Cosby was, he was, he was very good to the crew. He took us, well, we had to pay our way but he opened up in Vegas at The Stardust I think. We had to pay our way in our own hotel but he made arrangements for us to go to the show and this type of thing. He, mm, and then the next night Sinatra opened and we all came in and sat there and what have you. He would always have food come in and he would, if we worked late on Friday he would have pizza for us and stuff like that. Very good to the crew.

Dawson

Yes.

Simpson

Very good. And this is where Wendell Franklin worked.

Dawson

And, mm, somebody we haven't mentioned up to now Sidney Poitier. What about Sidney Poitier? When, when did you work with him and what was your impression of him?

Simpson

Well, I did [Pause] two pictures, maybe three. Brother John, the sequel to Call Mr. Tibbs in San Francisco. And another and, mm, I can't repeat necessarily for recording but, mm, he was doing Organization Man in San Francisco and I was doing, mm, Dirty Harry. And I came across, we were in the same area and I came and I went in his, his, his, his, mm, trailer or his motor home or whatever it was and he said 'hi Gene', he said 'why aren't you with us'? And I said because I called and I wrote and I what have you and you, and you didn't answer so I assumed that you're chicken shit so and so'. And after I said it I thought about it and I was, I was, I didn't like what I said because I, he'd figured. He was not a black man per se, he was black in color but culturally he was English. And I could say what I said to a street person, somebody that was black and what have you and just laugh it off. But with him I think he took offence, I know he took offence to it, and, but

other than that I got along. I think I did three pictures with him and I got along fine with him.

Dawson

Did, you think he was too aloof or what?

Simpson

He was English. And that's not, you being English there is a culture that is not American. Do you follow me?

Dawson

Mm, mm.

Simpson

And it's hard to, to, you know, although he's black in color culturally he was an Englishman and there are certain things that you don't, like an Englishman you don't refer to something being 'bloody' because it has a different connotation altogether in America than it does in England.

Dawson

Mm.

Simpson

And, mm, I know I offended him and I haven't worked with him since. I saw him at a, when Ivan Dixon's son died he was at the funeral and I sit, sat next to him and he was cordial but, and I wrote him a note of apology that I didn't, you know, I because I didn't, I didn't mean to be insulting I just was trying to be cute and it didn't work and I haven't worked with him since.

Dawson

Mm. Do you feel that sometimes looking back on your career you've been outspoken sometimes when perhaps it was best not?

Simpson

Yes, but usually I was able to get away with it. I remember I was working with a picture with Sam Peckinpah and, mm, I made a noise and he had been, he had fired seventy some people prior to this and he whirled around and I said 'give me my effing ticket', and he laughed and he didn't bother the electricians after that at all. So yes, I was outspoken but I could get away with it.

Dawson

But, but it's, sometimes you could be outspoken and other times it's just banter. It's just backwards and forwards?

Simpson

Yes, yes.

Dawson

It's jokes?

Simpson

Yes, yes, and but this is what Porty A did not...

Dawson

Appreciate?

Simpson

Appreciate, yes.

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