

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2011

Interviewee: Calvin Luper

Interview Date: May 24, 2011

Location: Family home, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 24:04

Comments: Only text in quotation marks is verbatim; all other text is paraphrased, including the interviewer's questions.

John Bishop: Let's be quiet for twenty seconds so we get the sound of the room.

[Pause] Okay, Guha, this is the room tone, because I think with the air conditioning you're going to want to be able to use it as a map for noise reduction. Okay, Joe, we're rolling.

Joe Mosnier: This is Tuesday, the 24th of May, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, with filmmaker, John Bishop, and we are here at the Luper household, um, as part of the Library of Congress and Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, uh, civil rights oral history project entitled the Civil Rights History Project. Um, and we are sitting down this afternoon with Mr. Calvin Luper. Good to be with you, Mr. Luper. Thank you for welcoming us to Oklahoma.

Calvin Luper: It's good for you all to come through the storm, struggle through the storm. I think that was a poem or a song somewhere, "Through the storms we made it."

JM: Yeah.

CL: And that's the part that we shall overcome somehow.

JM: Yeah. Yeah, there's some heavy weather out the window here in Oklahoma this afternoon.

CL: Yeah, we're keeping an eye on that.

JM: We're all keeping our eye on it. Um, Mr. Luper, I want to, um – I want to ask a range of questions, um –

CL: No problem.

JM: – here about, um, about those years in the struggle in Oklahoma City, um, about your mother, about your family. Um, maybe, maybe I'll ask you just to talk a little bit about the Youth Council and what you recall from its early days.

CL: Okay. You made me think of the – I'm warning you. We're not going to play the dozens. I don't do the dozens. I think you can remember back in the days when the people used to stand on the corner and talk about your mother.

JM: Yeah. [Laughs]

CL: Well, they do that with me, but then they go get a newspaper and [laughing] come back and read it. [Laughter]

But those days were great. Marilyn went over some of it, telling you how we went to New York City with the movie "Brother President." And fortunately, in a way, I still have the film from that, but I've run into a problem duplicating it.

JM: You've got film from your trip to New York City?

CL: No, on the presentation of the play, “Brother President.” It’s down at one of our local photo shops here at Pipkins [Pipkin Camera, a local photo shop].

JM: Wow. And they’re trying to do –?

CL: I was trying to duplicate it and put it on CD, DVD, or something.

JM: Yeah. From ’57, ’58.

CL: No, this would be ’58.

JM: ’58, yeah.

CL: Um-hmm.

JM: Tell me about some of the other members of the – besides you and your sister, some of the other members of the Youth Council.

CL: Well, you had a chance to meet my cousin, Betty Germany, that was here.

JM: Very briefly, yeah.

CL: And, uh, it sort of was a family affair there at first, because, uh, where one went, all of us went. There’s another cousin, Richard Brown, who was one of the original sit-inners. And, um, so, we were all there, and it was because Mom said so. And my grandmother said, “Do what Clara said.” And didn’t have to tell me that, but she had told Betty that, because Betty was Betty was saying that, but we, Marilyn and I were happy to be there. Well, we couldn’t miss the meeting, because the meeting was in the house. And, as I mentioned earlier, this dear couch, poor McWilliams [?] [nb: name uncertain, either an upholsterer or local furniture repair business?] has recovered it – I believe that was about in 1980-something he recovered it, because it was a victim of the sit-in movement. [Laughter] It’s been slept on by many and sat on by hundreds. And I’m believing that one of those Molotov cocktails that came through the front

door had kind of scorched one of them. It had a red cover on it. The red upholstery is no longer. That's my one [nb: here follows an uncertain word, at 3:54: regret? event?]

So, it's a lot of little memories. As we – as you were talking with Marilyn, it was a lot of little memories coming back to mind. That bus ride – I think we had talked about that on the phone and I told you how it felt when I got to New York City and had a chance to go to the luncheonette and to get me a sandwich or what I wanted and put my money in there and watch it go around and round and choose my own sandwich, with nobody, “May I help you?” Or, “No, you can't eat here. Get outa here!” And riding the elevator in the Henry Hudson Hotel up and down, up and down, going, walking through the lobby without having to worry about being told to get out of there, because downtown Oklahoma City, the Skirvin [Hotel] and the Huckins [Hotel], that was a no-no unless you worked there. And, of course, being a Luper, they wouldn't – they weren't going to allow me to work in there. That was a hard thing to find. That's one of the things that happened during the sit-ins and afterwards that Marilyn and I both had a hard time with, and that was getting employment. You know how kids will get jobs during the summer? Shoot! [0:05:00] It's [nb: uncertain word here, at 5:01] all right collecting cans. [Laughs] My poor sister.

JM: Yeah. Do you remember that, uh, first night at Katz?

CL: They all kind of run together. I can remember, uh, many a time walking – waiting on the car to get parked, and then walking across Main Street, and going in there through the doorway there at Main and Broadway, was the main doorway, and that's the one we were using. Our picket line, pickets, would be on the Main Street side, because Main runs east and west, and Broadway was north and south, and there were – let me bring it on home to you. Today where the Ford Theater is was formerly the home of the Katz drug store. And every time I see a game,

be it on TV or in person, or pass through there, I think about the many a morning, many an evening, and many an hour we spent on that location, “Thunderized” [laughs] before they even had that team there.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

CL: So, it has a double special meaning to me. Marilyn mentioned about never trying – never being able to try on a hat, not that I, not that I wanted to that much anyway. And the shoes, the way Big Mama used to have to do it, but I think she left out the part about how Big Mama would – the buses would change there in front of John A. Brown’s [Department Store], and my grandmother stayed out in Carbondale Edition, which was a mostly black edition off N.E. 10th and Martin Luther King now. But back then the bus ran there, and she’d ride the bus down there and then change over to catch it – transfer over to whichever one it was that went to Nichols Hills and ride that. And that’s early in the morning and in the evening.

JM: Excuse me. You’re describing the route your grandmother took on her way to work?

CL: My grandmother took on her way to work. Of course, she reversed it coming back home. I can say “home,” because 1236 Windemere [Drive] was her address. And all of those people – Betty, Richard, and I – it was home to us, too, because she was a willing babysitter.

JM: Your mother had a busy schedule.

CL: Yeah, she did, especially keeping up with us and our friends. When I say “keeping up with us,” I mean outside of the city, because she knew where we were – I had mentioned to you, too, about the, uh, self-discipline that we had within the city and in the Youth Council. And there was an organization called the Commanders, and, uh their job was to not only keep

outsiders from messing with them, but to keep insiders from – keep us from messing up on the inside by doing things that we knew we shouldn't be doing.

And Mama also emphasized on bringing a schoolbook with you, one of your books with you, while you'd be sitting in. And we'd be sitting, even at Katz and even at Bishop's Restaurant when we could get in there, because at Bishop's Restaurant, they were really slick. They wouldn't – they'd fixed the door in a way – they had the doors locked, and you couldn't open the door. So, we would stand – part of us would be outside. Those that got there late would still be outside. But those of us that had been there on time and had been able to get in – and we used all kinds of means to get in there, but once we got in there, we didn't just sit there looking at the glass of water and the silverware, but we used that time to do some kind of studying. Not that we remembered much. Not that *I* remembered much. I don't know how the others did, but I believe during that time I was taking my first year of Spanish, and that's about all I was doing was taking that book with me. [Laughter]

Because I kept my eye out, looking around for my sister and my mother and, of course, my sister's friends were like my little sisters. And, even though everybody was doing it, I still felt the additional responsibility, in a way, for what was mine. And Marilyn – that's when we started calling her "Bay-Bay," and to this day she still will answer to the name "Bay-Bay," [laughing] because she's everybody's baby.

JM: Tell me, if you would, about, um, what someone who was watching a lot of those sit-ins as an observer – what they would have seen in your mother, the way she – can you describe some of the difficult situations she confronted and how she reacted?

CL: Uh, I'm trying to think of some. I mean, there are so many. I think the biggest ones are when she would initially meet the restaurant owners and how, instead of standing back and

shying down and looking – you know, oftentimes [0:10:00] we had the habit of not looking a person in the eye when we talked to them. We were kind of like doing the “Negro shuffle.” And no such thing existed with Mom, I don’t care who she was talking with – the governor, the mayor, the police chief – she’d look you straight in the face and go from there.

JM: Yeah.

CL: And she would practice, in a way. Marilyn probably didn’t hear, because my mom would always – she knew about what she was going to say, in a way, depending on where she was going. The reason I know that, I worked with her on the Clara Luper Radio Show for thirty-some years every Saturday morning again. And we’d drive – go out to the radio station, which was on S.E. 44th and Bryant, and that’s quite a ways. And she’d kind of run over what we were going to – whatever we – whatever we might want to talk about during that hour of radio.

And as I was thinking about this interview, I was thinking of saying, “Sort of like Amos and Andy, Mama would throw it out there, and I’d have to bat it back.” Or either I’d come up with the joke and she’d react to it. Or I could say things that she couldn’t, just didn’t sound right. We still have hundreds of tapes of the radio shows.

JM: Hmm.

CL: So.

JM: What did –?

CL: It’s always been a shared experience with Mom. It’s been a challenge just trying to keep up with her. She would lose me. She would lose me with that Congressional Records, because I learned to love to read, too, about history. I was a history major but I just got distracted by thinking too much. I’m in school at O.U., but I’m thinking about what’s happening

at home with my Mom and sister. So, uh, to make an excuse – one excuse, that’s one excuse – my grades suffered.

But it was – as I got older, I just said, “Well, isn’t any need in me worrying about this. I have something else to do.” My dad was an electrician, so I went to trade school and tightened up my knowledge in that so that I could get a license and did electrical work for years, a couple of years, before my dad died, and we worked together. That was fun. So, I’ve been fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I’ve had the chance to work with both my parents in difficult and different situations.

JM: Did you as a young man in, say, the mid to late ’60s, did your perspectives about race relations, about social change, did they pretty much maintain a consistent trajectory and path, or did you ever have occasion to reconsider the whole question of nonviolence, the whole question of –?

CL: Certainly, especially when I got proficient with weaponry. After my little time in the service, you know, I – it was tempting to associate with the Panthers. But then I looked, and they didn’t have enough depth. [It was], “What’s next?” And no one knew, except that, “We’re Black Power. We’re going to take care of that. What you going to do with your fist? And that man over there has a gun, and you’ve got a fist?”

Whereas with nonviolence, you can deal with a person’s heart. You’re dealing with their heart *and* their mind. With violence, you have to have one blow, and that’s it. And then blood, and somebody’s got to know how to heal you, to fix you up, so somewhere down the line you’ve got to be knowledgeable on medicine and where to hit a person to, if you’re really going to try to fight, because everybody else back then was learning the judo and stuff. So, you can run around and be nonviolent if you want, but there’s always somebody tougher than you. But, now there

may be somebody smarter, but I don't mind that as much as getting in a challenging situation and getting beaten up. I'd much rather you get a higher grade than I do than to get my tail kicked to prove a point.

JM: Yeah. Did you ever, um [pause] – did you ever think that the, um, that the price paid by the family in these different ways – the time away from your mother, all of her involvement, the risks and worries of violence – did it seem too much for your family to pay sometimes?

CL: Not during it. But the last twenty years it's crossed my mind several times. It's, "Why did Mom do this? Why did we do that every Saturday?" Now, on Saturday mornings still, I'm up – the radio show would start at nine, so I still find myself getting up and being ready to go somewhere by nine. We'd start the sit-ins on Saturday mornings. We'd be at the church, starting about nine o'clock, say. That's about the time we started, because that's the time the businesses would open [0:15:00]. And we'd have to be there, we'd be there. Have to go by – I'm thinking of Calvary Baptist Church, where often we would meet before we went downtown. And what it was, [phone rings] was an opportunity to review the – where we were going and – [phone rings]

JM: Excuse me just one second, Mr. Luper. I'm sorry. The phone's ringing.

CL: Okay. All right. I thought I heard Marilyn.

JM: We'll just pause for one second. Sorry about that. OK. We're just having a few little interruptions so we're taking a little break here.

[Multiple simultaneous conversations for a few seconds]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: OK, we're back on.

CL: Calvary Baptist Church?

JM: Just one moment, please. I'm sorry.

CL: No problem.

[Muffled background conversation]

JM: Okay, we're back on.

JB: You're on.

CL: Okay, we were at Calvary Baptist Church. And I'm thinking at that time, as I'm remembering, it was Reverend Curry, M.A. Curry, Reverend Morris Curry, who was the pastor. And Calvary was relatively close to downtown, and we could walk from Calvary to the, to Katz or to Bishop's or to John A. Brown's [Department Store]. And that's why, where you see a lot of the pictures of the kids on the sidewalk, that would be us going down there.

JM: Who stands out in your memory as, um, among the group most important to your mother as her allies and supporters and friends, people you think really mattered to her as key allies in that effort?

CL: I think everyone did. I know that Reverend [J. B.] Bratton, who was our minister at Fifth Street Baptist Church, anytime he would call, Mom would stop whatever she was doing, and she would do that for anybody and talk with them. Uh, then there was, uh, Reverend Alexander, who was an A.M.E. minister at, uh, Kelham Avenue A.M.E. Church, 13th and Kelham.

Then there was Dr. Charles N. Atkins, who was a brilliant man. He and Mom would have some, uh, intense debates, seriously I think just sitting on this here couch here, you know, about what – you know, whatever, particularly on what kind of strategy should we use. He was a heck of a strategist, because it always seemed to work. He was originally from the Bahamas until he moved to Oklahoma City. He ended up – not ended up, but he was married to our

current, uh – a young lady who went on to become our state representative – Hannah Atkins was his wife. And they had – their son, Ed, and I were real tight.

But Dr. Charles Atkins helped Mom with many a speech and with many a way of helping get kids' attention to help to, uh, get that nonviolent thing down right. Even though outside of Oklahoma City, Martin Luther and everybody was doing their thing – there in North Carolina, too – but, uh, you know, every group, you have to speak to them a little differently. And Dr. Atkins was brilliant with that. And they were close all the way up until he – even while he was sick, they were still close. And then, his death affected this whole community. We all missed him. He brought many a baby into this world. Helped those of us with other illnesses – asthma, arthritis – I think he ran arthritis off the East Side. [Laughter]

JM: Was there –?

CL: There was another –

JM: Oh, I'm sorry.

CL: A little later, there was Attorney Porter, E. Melvin Porter. We had met him, I think, coming back from New York, coming back from presenting the play. I remember when we came through Nashville and, uh, as an inspiration, we were stopping through, uh, a college there – I forgot which one. But somehow or other, Porter saw the Oklahoma banner that we had on the bus, and he's from Okmulgee, [Oklahoma], so he made a dash to the bus and got on the bus and got to telling everybody about how he was at Vanderbilt Law School and, when he got out, he was going to come to Oklahoma City and he was going to open up a law firm here. And, sure enough, he did. He ended up being state senator. And his sons are working – they had – continued the law firm. As of today, it's on N.W. 23rd and Hudson or something now – Melvin Jr. and Joel.

JM: I think your mom claimed a little bit of credit in her book for, um, encouraging him to come back to Oklahoma.

CL: Right.

JM: Yeah. I think she really influenced him.

CL: Right. I don't know – yeah. I know she did, because he was often by the house. [0:20:00] or we would often go by there. He was brilliant. He knew his law. Well, I think what it was: He knew his way through the law book. If he didn't know it, he knew where to go get it. And that seemed to be the key to it, to the law. But Porter was good and he was eloquent. And didn't too many lawyers here in the city like to come up against him, particularly after he got to be a state senator. He was dynamite on the floor. We all, every one, loved to hear him present an issue or defend an issue. But those are two good ones.

And there was another. Sam Cornelius, who was a – they might still – even though he's dead, they still might try to fire him [laughs]. But he was the director of the East Side YMCA. And that's also where we used to have our Monday night meetings before we had the Freedom Center going. If they weren't at the house, we'd be at the Y, and Sam Cornelius made that possible. Jeopardized his job, and he had a beautiful wife, I think, and three kids. No, I don't think his wife was beautiful; she *was* beautiful. Three kids – I'm trying to count the kids.

JM: Let me ask you, did your mom maintain a – did you know, uh, Ada Lois Sipuel?

CL: Ada. Yes, I did.

JM: Can you tell me kind of–?

CL: Ada Lois Sipuel-Fisher?

JM: Yeah.

CL: Yes, I did. Yes, she did. They would, uh, come by. She would come by. I know Bruce, her son, now real well. And her daughter, uh, Charlene, was a good friend of mine and a classmate of mine. We graduated from Douglass High School together, Charlene and I. And where they stayed out in Garden Oaks, I had a good friend who stayed near them on Overbrook Drive, and we often would be out there in the street as she would pass by. I could call her a second mom because I couldn't mess up out their way either. She wouldn't necessarily discipline me, but "Ma Bell" would help her tell my mother about it, and everybody knew about – [laughs]

JM: You know, you – yeah. [Laughs] You reminded me that –

CL: [Laughing] the "Board of Education."

JM: [Laughs] Can you explain for the tape what that joke, the "Board of Education," means?

CL: The "Board of Education" was Mom's way of disciplining. That was before child abuse. Because if there was child abuse back then, who knows? There might not have been any sit-ins. [Laughs] But the "Board of Education" got broken in real good during the sit-in movement.

JM: That was her switch, to –?

CL: No. It was no switch. It was a board. One of the teachers there at Dunjee School had made a board out of – I don't know what kind of wood it was. I know who made it, too: Alexander Jones, who Mom used to – they used to commute to Dunjee School together. He taught, uh, mechanical arts – no, that wasn't it. He taught woodworking and carpentry, and Mom would teach history. He also stayed in the, uh, 1500 block of N.E. Park, and his car was

running, where Mom was – we were in the 1800 block on Park, and the car wasn't running. So, he'd come by and down the hill, pick Mom up, and then they'd ride out to Dunjee together.

JM: Did you ever, um – did you also ever know, um – he would have been, uh, older than your mother by a stretch, but did you ever know, um, Professor McLaurin?

CL: McLaurin?

JM: No? He was in that group that helped desegregate the University.

CL: Yeah.

JM: But he was older at the time.

CL: He – yeah, he was older.

JM: Much older.

CL: I'm trying to think of – one of his relatives was there quite a bit.

JM: Yeah.

CL: I can see him now. I believe he was on the board of the YMCA.

JM: Oh, yeah? Joe, can we pause for a minute?

JB: Yeah. [It's twenty to five].

JM: Okay.

[Recording ends at 24:04]

END OF INTERVIEW