

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leo Branton, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Branton, Leo, Jr., 1922-2013
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr.,
Dates:	July 27, 2001
Bulk Dates:	2001
Physical Description:	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:56:52).
Abstract:	Entertainment lawyer and litigator Leo Branton, Jr. (1922 - 2013) established a private legal practice when no integrated or African American law firms existed and represented prominent African Americans including Nat King Cole, Dorothy Dandridge and civil rights activist Angela Davis. Branton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 27, 2001, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2001_004
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Entertainment lawyer and litigator Leo Branton, Jr., was born on February 17, 1922 in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Branton was the eldest of Leo Branton, Sr. and Pauline Wiley's five children. The importance of education was stressed in the Branton household, as his mother was a graduate of the Tuskegee Institute and all five children received college degrees. After Branton graduated from Tennessee State University in 1942, he enrolled in the Army, serving in a segregated Army unit for almost three years during World War II. Upon completion of his service, Branton enrolled in Northwestern University Law School, receiving his J.D. degree in 1948.

Following graduation from law school, Branton moved to California. There were no integrated or African American law firms at the time that he established his own private practice. In 1950, he worked with the NAACP on the trial of an African American veteran charged in the double murder of a white couple in Riverside County, California. His work on this case and his subsequent challenge to the jury system in Riverside County led to the first black person serving on a jury in Riverside County.

Branton was well known both as a litigator and as an entertainment attorney. His first clients in the entertainment industry were Nat King Cole and Dorothy Dandridge. Branton represented Nat King Cole from 1958 until his death in 1965. He also represented other entertainers, including the Platters, Inger Stevens, and Dalton Trumbo.

Another important part of Branton's diverse career was his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Branton made several trips to the South during the 1960's, lending his legal skills and know how. He defended thirteen members of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party against an unlawful attack by the Los Angeles Police Department. His most celebrated case, however, was the successful defense and acquittal of celebrated Civil Rights activist Angela Davis. Angela Davis' case lasted several months and in 1972, Davis was acquitted of all charges against her.

Branton practiced law for a total of 52 years. For his work, he received awards from the City of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Tribune, the California State Senate, and the NAACP Legal Education and Defense Fund.

Branton passed away on April 19, 2013 at age 91.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Leo Branton, Jr. was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on July 27, 2001, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Entertainment lawyer and litigator Leo Branton, Jr. (1922 - 2013) established a private legal practice when no integrated or African American law firms existed and represented prominent African Americans including Nat King Cole, Dorothy Dandridge and civil rights activist Angela Davis.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Branton, Leo, Jr., 1922-2013

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Branton, Leo, Jr., 1922-2013--Interviews

African American lawyers--California--Interviews.

Civil Rights lawyers--California--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Entertainment Lawyer

Litigator

HistoryMakers® Category:

LawMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., July 27, 2001. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_001, TRT: 0:30:36 ?

Attorney Leo Branton, Jr. remembers growing up in Pine Bluff, Arkansas during the 1920s and 1930s where his family were at the top of the town's well-educated African American elite. His family's social status did not shield them from exposure to racism and discrimination, and he recalls that even as a child he was greatly angered by whites' disrespect for blacks. Branton also discusses his father's and mother's backgrounds and his mixed Native American, Caucasian and African American heritage.

Childhood and youth--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African American families--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Racism--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Race identity.

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_002, TRT: 0:29:21 ?

Attorney Leo Branton, Jr. describes his youth in Pine Bluff, Arkansas up to his dramatic departure at age eighteen. His father had a successful taxicab business and his mother's family, the Wileys, had for years been at the top of the African American socioeconomic strata in Pine Bluff, so Branton's family fared better than most during the Great Depression. Branton talks about the schools he attended and his youthful career aspirations. He also recalls examples of his angry and sometimes defiant reactions to ingrained practices of Southern "racial etiquette" such as disparity in forms of address--blacks being required to call all whites "Mr." or "Mrs." but whites addressing blacks by their first names or by "Aunt", "Uncle", etc. He recounts in detail an incident during his college years, in which a white man struck Branton, who then hit back and was charged with assault. His family's (relatively) respected status and cordial relationship with local authorities allowed him to remain free on bond throughout his trials and appeals, and the charges were eventually vacated. Branton's experiences with the legal system stirred in him an interest in law as a profession.

Childhood and youth--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African American parents.

Race relations--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African Americans--Education--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African Americans--Socioeconomic status.

Assult and battery.

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_003, TRT: 0:30:53 ?

Attorney Leo Branton, Jr. describes his service in the U.S. Army during World War Two in which he served in Italy as part of a segregated unit; he comments on his experiences with discrimination and maximum quotas for African Americans in othe Army's officer training and foreign language training programs. Branton goes on to talk about his time at Northwestern University School of Law and his early legal practice in California, including a trial in which his challenge and proof of Riverside County's de facto exclusion of blacks from juries resulted in the selection of the County's first black juror.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Discrimination--Armed Forces--United States.

Northwestern University (Evanston, Ill.).

African American lawyers--California.

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_004, TRT: 0:29:53 ?

Leo Branton recalls his participation in several famous trials during the 1950s, including many defending suspected members of the Communist Party such as the famous 'Yates v. United States' in the U.S. Supreme Court. Branton also discusses his work at the first integrated law firm in California, Margolis, McTernan, and Branton. Branton also comments on the effects of McCarthyism.

African American lawyers--California.

Anti-communist movements--United States--History--20th century.

Communist trials.

Integration--Law offices.

Diversity in the workplace--Law firms--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_005, TRT: 0:30:04 ?

Attorney Leo Branton, Jr. discusses his legal work in the entertainment industry and how he became established as an expert libel litigator. He talks about his representation of African American actors and musicians, focusing in particular on Dorothy Dandridge and Nat King Cole.

African American lawyers--California.

Dandridge, Dorothy, 1922-1965.

Cole, Nat King, 1919-1965

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_006, TRT: 0:30:42 ?

Attorney Leo Branton talks about his legal work in entertainment and civil rights. He discusses his work for African American entertainers, especially Nat King Cole, whom he represented in the 1950s and 1960s. He also recalls legal and other relationships with the Platters and Harry Belafonte, as well as actor/producer Ike Jones and his Swedish actress wife, Inger Stevens. Mr. Branton then tells about some of his work for civil rights. He recounts an interesting story about working with his brother, civil rights attorney Wiley Branton, on an early 1960s trial in their hometown of Pine Bluff, Arkansas; "the Branton boys" were treated as returning heroes by the local black population who attended the trial in large numbers. By an odd quirk of fate, the judge had been the racist prosecutor at Leo Branton's own trial for assault at age eighteen for hitting a white store clerk after the man had first struck him. Branton looks back at that 1939 incident and the subsequent boycott of the store, and he mentions the noticeable changes in race relations in Pine Bluff since that time, even a change in the attitude of the former prosecutor.

Civil rights lawyers--United States.

Cole, Nat King, 1919-1965.

Belafonte, Harry, 1927-

Jones, Ike.

Branton, Wiley Austin, 1923-1988.

Trials--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Race relations--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_007, TRT: 0:30:38 ?

Attorney Leo Branton, Jr. recalls his civil rights legal work for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and his experiences with protesters who had been severely beaten by authorities in Danville, Virginia's "Bloody

Monday" in 1963. He describes his involvement as lead defense attorney in Angela Davis's trial as well as other high profile cases. He also reflects on his family's and his own strong identification as African American despite having skin color and features that would have allowed them to pass for white; at the same time, he points to certain situations in the South in which his light coloring allowed him access to places off-limits to those with darker skin. Branton emphasizes his compassion not only for black people but also for oppressed people of any race and, as an example, expresses his support for the improvements he believes Cubans have enjoyed since the revolution.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (U.S.)

Davis, Angela Y. (Angela Yvonne), 1944-

African American families--Race identity.

Passing (Identity).

Video Oral History Interview with Leo Branton, Jr., Section A2001_004_001_008, TRT: 0:24:45 ?

Attorney Leo Branton, Jr. gives his opinions on the state of the black community today, in areas such as media representation and business, and his hopes for the future. These comments are followed by a series of photographs--and one courtroom sketch--showing Branton, his family members and colleagues.

Photographs.

African American communities.