



## Augustus Hawkins Oral History Interview, Part 2, July 1, 1992

**Title**

“Augustus Hawkins Oral History Interview, Part 2”

**Date**

July 1, 1992

**Location**

Location Unknown.

**Summary**

In this second recording of Augustus Hawkins, Hawkins talks about banding together with six or eight others at UCLA after recognizing a need for leadership in dealing with the problem of unequal opportunities in the job market. Civic jobs controlled by government officials were not available to black persons at the time. The city administration in Los Angeles was also corrupt. The group decided the best thing to do was choose one of them to run for office. Hawkins was chosen in the group by process of elimination. Hawkins discusses loyalty of black Americans to the Republican Party persisting into the mid-1930s, at which time many began to favor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. With the help of the UCLA group, Hawkins ran for California State Assembly and won by about 1500 votes. He describes the campaign and their focus on health, housing and jobs, outlining legislation he sponsored in the California legislature, such as the Fair Employment Act and opening civic jobs to minorities and women. He also fought for recognition and spots in the leadership in the labor movement.

**Interviewee**

Augustus Hawkins

**Interviewer**

Michael Grice

**Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh29/hawkins2/>

## Transcript

**Michael Grice:** And we're rolling. So I'd like to go back and ask you about your days at UCLA, and particularly that phase where your associates recognized the need for leadership in your community and what that led to. UCLA?

**Augustus Hawkins:** On our graduation from UCLA we began to look at each other about our possibilities for careers. At that time, we really believed the college degree was somehow a real passport and that, you know, life was all settled and job opportunities were available. However, we didn't figure that we would be graduating in the depth of the Great Depression, and I would say that a very, very few of the ones in our group, which as I say was only about six or eight individuals, had any opportunity that I would say would equip any one of us to make a living on our own. We obviously ascribed that condition of the lack of opportunities to the type of leadership that we had; that we had had for a long time a staunch republican who was the only elected official in the state, and one who believed that all that was necessary was to play on the color line, to say that "look at me, I have kept lynchings, I've kept discriminatory signs out of the state, I have, in effect, done things that were positive with respect to at least the recognition of testimony and the courts." Very basic things, but rather simple, elementary things, not nearly the type of achievements that we felt were great. One of the issues involved was whether or not there should be a black college in the state. There was a strong move to bring west to have a—what would be referred to as a Tuskegee of the West to be located in San Juaquin Valley, and this would be a black institution. Well, at that time we were obviously more concerned about integration and we felt that there were this and other basic issues that separated us from the leadership. We had obviously felt that we had achieved certain attainments in the college at the college level and that we should have equal opportunities with all the others. And so we decided that the best thing for us to do would be to challenge the leadership of that day, and one would have to use another story in itself; let me just simply refer to it in this way: the opportunities were if you were a janitor you might be able to get a job in a county building as a janitor, but then you had to go to the republican who had control of the jobs in the janitorial jobs. There were no jobs on transportation, public transportation, because blacks just weren't hired. There were no jobs in the public utility and they also were under the control of the so-called republican machine. So that, in effect, the young people who had different ideas were kept out of the mainstream even though they had qualified from an educational point of view.

So in 19—the first campaign that I can recall, and may I say I had no particular interest in politics up to this time, the first campaign in which we became actively involved as a group of young people was in 1932—[phone rings]. Hello? Hi. No, no, we were taping. It's okay. No, no what is it?... [Tape cut]

[00:05:43]

**MG:** Congressman Hawkins, I'd like to go back and revisit a point. It seems to me that in thinking about your dad's admonition that you're going to have to make it for yourself later on—his prophesy, as it turns out—was an important factor in the way that you approach things. So it's not surprising that you began not only to make it for yourself but also to use that sense of independence to talk about solving community problems. I wonder if you could characterize the circle of associates that you are referring to, how wide a circle it was and what level of community you were thinking of. Was it the entire state of California, was it the rest of the United States, was it the African American community within the Los Angeles area? Who were you, as a group of associates; how wide was that group of associates and who were you hoping to serve primarily?

**AH:** I would say the young people in my circle were rather limited. It was almost a Los Angeles community group. None of us, that I can recall, had any great idea of becoming outstanding leaders or even statewide. We were simply young people striving to get through college and to go into a profession possibly of some kind. The most outstanding one, as it developed, was of course Ralph Bunche, Dr. Ralph Bunche, and he probably had ideas of going into federal service of a larger nature, because his whole career was built around political science; that was his major topic. He later became dean at the Howard University, and as we now knew, very prominent in the state department. [00:07:54 unintelligible] was an individual, another one of the members; was the son of a rather noted school teacher at that time, and at that time obviously the educational system was very limited and those in the system were outstanding and were highly regarded. A young lady, Edith Kaiser [spelling?], was from a very prominent family, I would say a middle class family, and she, her main interest was in business and she later acquired a great amount of business property. Business is what I refer to, but not in a larger context. So I would say we were simply young people who wanted to do better than our previous

generation, and struck by the fact that we had an opportunity to become involved in the social and largely the civic life of our community. As to the politics of the situation, all of us happened to be, as I recall, democrats, I would assume, and at no time were we identified really as a part of the mainstream, because the community that we came up in was, at that time, still more a republican area. And the leaders, the officials, mostly prominent ministers, the YMCA executives, so on, were republican leaders who were part of a machine that we did not particularly like, because the machine politics of that day in Los Angeles meant that such things as gambling and prostitution, the flow of liquor—because prohibition was prohibition—and everything was under control of the city administration, which was corrupt. And all of this I think molded us to be different, or to be, let us say, in a sense rebels, and we were ready for battle.

[00:10:41]

And that battle, as I say, started in 1932 when we put up a candidate, or supported a candidate, against the elected official, the only one in the state who happened to be from our community. And we put up a candidate against that individual.

**MG:** Do you recall anything in particular about that campaign? And I imagine it's a matter of public record, the candidate that you were against and the candidate that you were for.

**AH:** Well, the principal thing was that we did not win with the candidate that we supported, and we afterwards found out that the candidate that we supported was a ringer, had been put in by the opposition, by the very machine that we was trying—that we were trying to defeat, and that was the time when we then decided that we would wait two years, which would be 1934, and at that time we would run one of our own. In other words, it would have to be one of this small group of individuals. Another individual in the group was Leon Washington, who later became prominent editor of the Los Angeles Sentinel newspaper. He was one of them. And so that in 1934 we were ready to run one of our own, and then by a process of elimination among us, for one reason or another, it became I was selected as the candidate, I would say primarily because I had no outstanding problems or difficulties. I had not been too actively involved as to have made enemies or to have any type of, any stigma that might be attached to my candidacy, and so I decided that I would run.

**MG:** Is it fair to say that the republicanism, I presume that you mean among African Americans, was left over from the Reconstruction days and that you were a part of the change where now we find African Americans largely democratic?

**AH:** The loyalty of the African American to the Republican Party persisted past this time. As a matter of fact, it did not begin to change in Los Angeles until about 1934, 1935, and it was largely a result of the same thing that afflicted my family: a loss of your accumulated property, bank accounts and things of that nature; of lack of a job and whatnot. And so gradually there was those who began turning against the republicans and becoming favorable to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And grudgingly my dad also changed, and somewhat because of my own candidacy. My dad was a staunch republican; I, his son, was running as a democratic candidate, and my mother just indicated to him "here it is you have a son who's running for an office and you can't even vote for him." And he began to see the light and he became a very staunch Roosevelt democrat.

**MG:** That—anything else about that era that you can comment on, particularly about your candidacy, the campaign and your circle of associates and the direction that that went or took, and particularly obstacles?

**AH:** It was pretty obvious to us even from the very beginning that we had a big-hilled climb. We were in a district that, while it was changing, was not changing very fast. That is, a majority of African Americans were still republicans. However, the district was composed largely fifty-fifty: fifty percent white, fifty percent black. And so we decided that our strategy had to be to get as many votes as we could possibly get among blacks, but that the white vote was going to be the one thing that would change the district.

00:15:38]

And so, we played it in such a way that we, as far as the democratic loyalties were concerned, that all we had to do was to get a certain amount of support among the labor groups, which meant in the white community, because blacks were still not strongly favorable or represented in the labor movement. And so we went out to play up the labor vote, which meant that in that way we assumed that we would get large support in the white section of the district. However, as it turned out, we—the white vote was ten to one for the Roosevelt ticket, and as a result of that we were able to get a good sprinkling

of votes among the blacks, but without that white difference, the white vote in the district, we couldn't have made it. And we ended up winning by about fifteen hundred votes. Now, the unfortunate thing of the opposition—to the opposition—was that if the opposition had only filed on both tickets, which was possible in California at that time—in other words that they had filed on the democratic ticket as well as republican ticket—it's possible that they could have been elected in the primary, and we would not have been able to do it. But all of the money was against us, the organizational leadership of the district was against us. I recall that maybe we had two or three ministers who allowed us to speak in the African American community, as far as the churches were concerned, but mostly other ministers, almost without exception, campaigned against us, did not allow us into their churches, and we had to stand on the outside and pass out literature. But the conditions at the time, however, favored us in that we were able to campaign among the unemployed, the welfare recipients and those who were the victims of the Hoover Depression, and that's where we made our speeches. We largely used, instead of using churches, we used schools, and we would have rallies in the schools and we would raffle off maybe a basket of groceries or something that was very attractive at that time, and hold a lot of rallies in the schoolhouses.

**MG:** When you think about your movement now into those first days as an elected official, then either your reflections now about those early days and what it felt like when you first went in compared to later, or just the routine of your work, can you comment?

**AH:** The ordinary assumption of political leadership at that time was that an individual, a minority official, only had to protect against civil rights. That is, if you watched out and made sure that there's nothing done to tamper with civil rights that would make things worse, that that was a principle thing that you had to do, and that had been the mainstay of the republican platform, actually. I think our feeling was something more than just that had to be done, that the issue of health and housing and jobs, these issues, these bread and butter issues were closer to the people than merely protecting against negative trends in civil rights, that that was expected of you and that wasn't any great accomplishment. That seemed to lay the groundwork, I think, for a platform for things that we wanted to establish, and that's how we started out and that's the way we continued.

[00:20:55]

**MG:** I can see that in focusing on health, housing and jobs, you had then a basis for an agenda as you went into the California assembly. So now we'll sort of jump ahead and, with all due respect to those years in the California assembly, let's just try to look at that as one era and see if during the course of that there were significant points for you, prior to going into the U.S. House of Representatives.

**AH:** Well I think the things I sponsored identify that period of service more than anything else. I introduced the first fair employment practices bill in the California legislature, and we used other, the model in other states to do that and we began, at that point, to not only fighting for a state fair employment practice act but also to open up job opportunities in the various fields that had been closed to minorities. The transportation system, for example; streetcars, we had no single black operating a streetcar at that time, which was principle mode of transportation. The utilities were just as closed; we had maybe two or three people in the telephone company, who worked for the telephone company, and one of the first attempts was made to get a supervisor in the telephone company, a black supervisor to open up that opportunity. We had no judges of any kind, not a black judge in the state and not a black highway patrolman. And so in terms of the spirit of a fair employment practice act, we fought to get recognition in these fields as well. Gradually we got the first black judge named, and the same was true in the post office. While there were some blacks who had entered the postal service, there wasn't a black woman. We fought until we got women, black women, admitted into the postal service. We, through the democratic administration which we supported on the federal level, we got the first supervisors, office managers and so on in the postal service. And so this was primarily the things that we as a group—and I say "we" because that little group still persisted and was added to—we were able through different union affiliations to break down the discrimination and to get recognition in the labor movement. All of this.

**MG:** We're going to take another break. Why don't you turn that air conditioner on for me, Gene?

[end of interview 00:24:28]