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ORAL INTERVIEW

of

JAMES A. GAY III

Edited by

Elizabeth Nelson Patrick

Transcribed for the project
Black Experience in Southern Nevada
Donated Tapes Collection, James R. Dickinson Library
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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ABSTRACT

JAMES A. GAY III, 1919- .

Mr. Gay, born in Fordyce, Arkansas, came to Las Vegas in 1946. He narrates his experiences in southern Nevada since then.

Mr. Gay reminisces about his education in Arkansas and his training at Worsham School of Mortuary Science in Chicago, Illinois.

He discusses a nine year delay in obtaining a license to practice his profession and attributes the delaying tactics to racial discrimination.

Mr. Gay tells of his work experience as a recreation director for the city and as a director of personnel and communications in the hotel industry prior to his re-employment as a mortician at Palm Mortuary in Las Vegas. He recalls atomic testing at the Nevada Test Site and his participation as an employee on loan from the city.

Active in NAACP and longtime chairman of the annual Freedom Fund Banquet, Mr. Gay tells of the 1970 banquet celebrating the centennial anniversary of the founding of NAACP and of his most recent banquet when he used the theme Think Black to call to the attention of the White community the many achievements of Black people.

Mr. Gay recalls a testimonial dinner given in his honor because of his contributions to the community.

He closes reciting two poems that have inspired him and express his philosophy.

Collector: Joyce M. Wright
[1973]

INTRODUCTION

James A. Gay III was born in Fordyce, Arkansas, but since 1946 has resided in Las Vegas. Until he was able to obtain his license as a mortician, he worked for several years as a recreation director for the city and in the hotel industry. He has been interested in youth activities and the NAACP.

This interview, a class project in Nevada history, was done by Joyce M. Wright in 1973.

Differences in the tape and transcription of the interview occur because the typed version has been edited for easier reading. Repetitions and false starts have been eliminated. In some instances, a word or phrase has been added for clarity or correction and enclosed in brackets. There are omissions in the transcript which occurred when the speaker turned from the microphone, was interrupted, or had a lapse of memory.

Mr. Gay's interview is part of a series of interviews in the Donated Tapes Collection of the James R. Dickinson Library of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The transcription and editing of the interviews have been supported in part by a grant to Dickinson Library administered by the U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare throughout the Nevada State Library; Project Director, Harold H.J. Erickson; Assistant Director, Anna Dean Kepper. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Office of Education and no official endorsement by the U.S. Office of Education should be inferred.

A copy of the transcript will be available at the West Las Vegas Branch of the Clark County Library District and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, New York. A bibliography of Black Experience in Southern Nevada will be distributed statewide.

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Elizabeth Nelson Patrick
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1978

Collector: Would you state your name please.

Gay: My name is James A. Gay III. Address is 1940 Goldhill.

Collector: How old are you, sir?

Gay: I am fifty-four years of age.

Collector: Could you give us your telephone number?

Gay: The telephone number is 648-7768.

Collector: Were you born in southern Nevada?

Gay: I am originally from Arkansas; to be exact, I was born in Fordyce, Arkansas, and I came to Nevada in 1946.

Collector: Why did you come here?

Gay: Well, we came here for a health condition that my wife had. She had a sinus condition and an allergy [and] the doctors had recommended the driest climate that we could find. We were in the undertaking business in Arkansas and my wife had several businesses; she had a barbershop, a beauty parlor, restaurant, and a record shop.

Collector: Where did you receive your liberal education?

Gay: Well, I went through the elementary and high school in Fordyce. At that time it was known as the Dallas County Training School, but the name has been changed to [J.E. Wallace] who was the principal at the time I was in school. It is now called the J.E. Wallace High School and, in fact, he is the first Black in the county to have a school named for him.

Very wonderful man.

Collector: Do you have any further education?

Gay: Yes, I then attended, after graduating from high school, A.M. and N. [Arkansas Mechanical and Normal College] College in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. It has now been changed to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. And then [I went] to Embalmers School, Worsham School of Mortuary Science, in Chicago.

Collector: Could you give us some of your occupations past and present?

Gay: Well, I've been in the undertaking business all of my life. As a kid I started in the undertaking business; I have, I suppose, a variety of occupations. My major in college was biology and physical education.

Shortly after my arrival here I became a cook at Sill's Drive-Inn, considered the largest drive-in and restaurant in the world, at that time. It was located on the southwest corner of Charleston and Fifth Street. Later, I became recreation director for the city [at] Jefferson Avenue Center, where I remained as recreation director for ten years.

I worked as a assistant physicist up at the Atomic Energy [Commission's site, Nevada Test Site] during the first blast. I was a personnel consultant for the Sands

a number of years. I was in various capacities for the Sands for eighteen years. Before resigning to go to the Union Plaza as assistant hotel manager, I was supervisor of communications for Hughes Nevada Operations; now that included all of the six hotels that Hughes had. I was the communications director. We were responsible for any communications other than telephone and telegraph that would go from one hotel. I had seven people working for me that took care of all the communications in the hotels, from my office to the various hotels, from hotel to hotel, and to the computer center. I worked in purchasing and in personnel; in fact, I was hired at the Sands to work with personnel as a consultant before they opened. At the time I was still with the city and this was actually a part-time [job]. Actually, you could call it a part-time, full-time [job] because I was given a full-time salary to work part-time with the hiring of the personnel. The town was small and the unions were very, very weak at that time. The people with the Sands came in from the east and they didn't know anyone and they needed someone like me to assist with the hiring of the personnel. Just a few days prior to opening the Sands they asked if I would stay on in the same capacity, using the same hours, no punching the clock or anything like that, more or less like an executive. It was supposed to be approximately three months and it went on for eighteen years.

I might mention here that my going to the Union Plaza as assistant hotel manager was not a move for prestige because I feel that I built a prestige up over the years with the various things that I have done with the Sands and other things. It was, I felt, a breakthrough for the Black community because I happened to be the first Black to be put in top management with any hotel in town. I felt that this would tend to open the door and let other hotels see that it could be done without any racial overtones. So I feel that by doing this I did a lot to open the door for other Blacks; there are several [employed now]. Blacks now are assistant hotel managers and have been elevated to other top jobs in hotels. I feel that it was one of the things that I was happy to do, not that it double[d] my salary, which it didn't. Naturally, it was an increase but it was not enough increase to say I did this for prestige because I didn't feel that I needed the prestige.

Collector: I understand that you changed residence. Could you tell me your former address and how long you've lived [there] and why you moved.

Gay: You can't stop progress. After twenty-six years in this residence, they decided that the freeway should go through that area. You can't stop progress, so I was engulfed by the opening of the freeway and we now live at 1940 Goldhill. We've been there just a little over a year.

Collector: How long had you lived on Monroe?

Gay: Not Monroe, on B Street.

Collector: B Street, right.

Gay: The famous 811 No. B Street.

Collector: Uh-huh.

Gay: Yes, I was there for twenty-seven years.

Collector: Wow. Could you tell us some church activities, if it's a part of your life now or has been.

Gay: Church has always been a part of my life. I joined the Baptist Church in Arkansas at twelve years of age and I've been a member of the church ever since. I have been for a number of years a trustee at the Second Baptist Church on Madison and C Street[is].

Collector: Could you tell us some of the important events that have occurred like some of the presidents that came here or of any plane crash that you were involved in.

Gay: Since I've been here, we've had several of the presidents come to town for speaking engagements and other things. President Truman came while he still in office, President Johnson and President Kennedy. I was fortunate enough to be a member of the Democratic Central Committee at each time they were here and had a chance to personally meet each one of them. President Johnson had been to the Sands prior to becoming president, when he was still a senator. I had known him for a number of years before he became president because the president of the Sands was a very dear friend of President Johnson; he was from Texas.

Jake Freidman who was president of the Sands was a very good friend of President Johnson-- at that time Senator Johnson-- and he had been here several times and I knew him quite well.

You mentioned airline crashes. In 1957 there was an airline crash; United Airlines and one of the Nellis Air Force jets crashed. All the embalmers in the area, seven at that time, were requested to come and assist with preparing the bodies for shipping and so forth. Before bodies can be shipped in a case like that, they have to be identified and sent to the nearest of kin. I was very fortunate and very proud of the fact that I was selected of the seven embalmers to work with the identification crew. I felt that there was a couple little remarks made prior to the start of the identification and I guess I just talked just enough that they felt that I should be with the team, so I was. I was very happy to work [with] the identification group and I was cited by the United Airlines president for the work that I did. I'm very proud of that.

Collector: Uh-hmm.

Gay: I have been a Democrat [and] I'm affiliated with the Democratic party. I think this is a re-hash into what we've said, but I am a Democrat and was a member of the Democrat Central Committee for a long, long time.

Collector: How long did it take you to get your embalming license and

where did you have it before?

Gay: Well, I am licensed in three states now, in fact four. I'm licensed in Arkansas, Illinois, Nevada, and Louisiana. Today they require two years of college and two years of apprenticeship to become a licensed mortician. I attended the Worsham School of Mortuary Science in Chicago.

Collector: But I know you told me in a previous time when it wasn't recorded that it took you nine years to get your license for Nevada.

Gay: Oh, yes. Things have changed so much; we hate to re-hash things like that but sometimes it's good that we do. Maybe in this case it will be. I was given the run-around, that's all we can call it, for nine years. The day that I came to Las Vegas I applied at a funeral home and they looked at me like I was crazy.

Collector: Uh-hmm.

Gay: I immediately took my credentials to Carson City to the State Board of Embalmers and I didn't hear anything at all from them so [I] started writing them letters and asking them when the board would meet and eventually I did have a letter from the Secretary who said we will notify you when we will have an examination. Well, this went on and on and on and I realized there weren't a lot of embalmers who came to the state, but there [were] a few who were given the examination without my knowing about it.

This went on for nine years. Eventually, I became connected with Palm Mortuary and the president of Palm Mortuary was on the Board of Directors [State Board of Embalmers] and this is the sole reason why I suppose I ever had a chance to take it. Prior to that, there had not been a Black in the state that had taken any state examination before I took this. So, it worked out and I am licensed; I am still associated with the Palm Mortuary as a mortician. My specialty is restorative art. I suppose you're acquainted with restorative art.

Collector: Right. [laughter] Do you think that there was a reason why you had the run-around?

Gay: Well, at that time, I'd have to say that it was strictly because I was Black. I don't see any other reason. My credentials were in all of this time and they were certainly in order and don't ever think that they didn't check them out.

Collector: Right. This is true.

Gay: It was absolutely because I was Black; I can't figure anything else, any other reason.

Collector: Have you been around, heard about or read about or been involved in any of the important marriages or divorce[s] in Las Vegas?

Gay: Yes, there's one story I tell and people get quite a bang out [of] it. You remember the first marriage that Sammy

Davis had?

Collector: Right.

Gay: Her last name was White; I can't think of her first name, but her last name was White.

Collector: White, right.

Gay: Yes, but anyway, they married at the Sands and, of course, I was there and involved with the public relations and so forth and I always tell the story that I helped dress the bride that night. And [laughter] I was involved in that way. There have been several others over the years that have been very important. I feel that one of the most important weddings and one of the biggest weddings that this city has ever seen was my daughter's wedding.

Collector: Yeah, I heard about it!

Gay: I had been with the Sands fifteen years at the time and the Sands management decided that they wanted to give my daughter, as a showing [of] their appreciation for my service with them, the biggest wedding that they could possibly give. The wedding cost the Sands \$30,000.

Collector: Wow, who'd ever believe it!

Gay: It was the most fabulous wedding I've ever seen, including the President's [daughter's] wedding. The only difference between the President's daughter's wedding and my daughter's wedding [was that] it was on national television and my daughter's wasn't.

Collector: (laughter)

Gay: [We] had such dignitaries as the mayor [Oran Gragson], the governor [Paul Laxalt], Senator Cannon, and Danny Thomas, the famous comedian. There were several of the [Nevada] Supreme Court justices, Judge Zenoff and Judge Mowbray. We just had loads of dignitaries there. They were around 800 to 900 people there and we had a sit down dinner for that many people, so you can imagine what it cost.

Collector: Wow, that was really something.

Gay: Wedding-wise, I've never seen a more beautiful wedding and not because it was my daughter's wedding. There was people from all over the country for the wedding.

Collector: Could you tell us some of your political aspirations? I know you had some.

Gay: Well, yes, I did for a few years. I'd like to say first that my wife is bitterly against any political aspirations that I may have. But I did run for the office of city commissioner in the two elections back [in the primary election, May 6, 1969]. It's unfortunate I didn't raise the money to really campaign as I should have. I feel that I could have made a much better race of it if I had had the money at the time to put into it. There were several big candidates in the race who had just drained the county and and the city for their campaigns and they were, I suppose, more important than I was. At the time we didn't have a

Black in office. [Mr. Gay came in third in a field of seven candidates in Ward 2. Dr. Alexander Coblentz and Philip M. Mirabelli placed first and second. Dr. Coblentz subsequently was elected Commissioner]. It was one of the first ventures in, too, you know. I'm sure this was why I didn't win the race. I'm proud of the fact that I was the first governmental appointee in the State of Nevada; I was appointed by Governor Grant Sawyer to the Nevada Athletic Commission. I am very proud of that. There have been several since then, however.

Collector: Could you tell us some of your social activities and your interest group[s] and social clubs?

Gay: I am a member of the Omega Phi Psi Fraternity [social fraternity, University of Arkansas]; I have been for a number of years. I'm an Elk and a Thirty-Third Degree Mason. I was one of the originators of the Valley View Golf Club. I have always been a member of NAACP and I have been on the Executive Board for a number of years. I was permanent chairman of the Annual Freedom Fund Banquet for the past ten years; that requires a lot of work.

We've had several very successful banquets; we brought real top speakers in and we feel that we did a fairly good job with this. I've always used a theme. [The year] 1970 was the hundredth anniversary of the origination of the NAACP and I used as a theme that year, One Hundred Years of

Progress. But each year I've used a different theme.

Last year I used as a theme, Think Black. Now there's a reason for this. I didn't mean for Blacks to think Black because we know that we're Black; we know what we can do and we know what we have done. But this was meant to have others Think Black, the Caucasians, the Italians, people who really don't know the Blacks. We wanted them to Think Black, to see what Blacks could do if given the chance.

We know that we've excelled in many fields. In athletics we certainly excelled and [in] music, we've excelled. Anywhere that the Black has been given a chance, they have excelled. Now the Blacks have just began to come into their own in finance and you can see that Chase National Bank, the largest bank in the whole country, has a Black vice president. We think about Dr. Harold [Charles] Drew who discovered the transfusion of blood plasma. Dr. Drew saved hundreds of millions of lives with his discovery of how to handle blood plasma transfusions. [Dr. Charles Drew was the first to utilize plasma in transfusions rather than whole blood. In 1940 he shipped the first plasma to Great Britain to be used to save bombing victims. Cited in Afro-American Encyclopedia, Vol. 3, Educational Publishers, Inc., North Miami, Florida, C. 1974]. [The] sad part about it is that he died in Tennessee because they would not accept him in a White hospital for a transfusion!

[Dr. West died as a result of an auto accident, but this circumstance of his death has not been verified]. These are the kind of things that I wanted to open their eyes to, want them to think [about]. This is what I meant by that theme. I hope that you bought one of the buttons-- maybe you weren't here at the time--we had buttons made up to that effect. Governor [Mike] O'Callaghan bought the first button that [said] Think Black. There were many Whites who did buy the button and I'm sure that they had since learned that to think Black is the thing to do.

Collector: Right. This is true. Could you tell us any of your family recreational activities [such as] gambling, horseback riding, TV, whatever.

Gay: I'm not [a gambler]; my wife is not. The kids are all-- the younger son is nineteen, the others are adults. I can't say that they don't gamble. Three of them have been married and so I don't know what they did. But prior to their leaving home we were a very close-knitted family; we did [a] lot of things together. We watched TV. We'd go picnicking. We would go swimming and hike, you know, things like this that a normal family would do. We still watch TV together, the ones that are there [at home] and we go places together, to movies, the Strip hotel shows, out to dinner occasionally. I'm an ardent golf player; I could never get my sons interested in golf but they played

other sports. They wanted to do their own thing.

Collector: Since you did work out at the [Nevada] Test Site, could you tell us some of the experience when you saw the first

Gay: I was on loan from the city to work with the physicists up at the Test Site for forty-five days. Now this forty-five days included the first shot and two weeks past the first shot. I worked with Dr. [Charles] Degroust who was the top physicist. The first explosion was something that you just can't imagine. We saw it from the dark glasses down below the surface. We were below the surface and we saw it from there. I have never worked in such secrecy and I suppose the most interesting forty-five days I've ever witnessed. In fact, I was asked to go to Eniwetok with them; I had to turn that down because of my family and my job with the city. I had to go back because of the status that I was to the city, but we were not allowed to discuss anything with anyone; we were sworn in. We went into the tunnel before the daylight and we didn't come out until after [dark]; it was quite lucrative because of the long hours we worked.

Collector: Could you tell us about some of the changes that you've noticed in the economical condition of southern Nevada from the past to the present?

Gay: Yes, coming to Las Vegas in 1946, I found it to be a very

small city with less than 14,000; the pavement actually ended on Bonanza. There was no such thing as pavement in West Las Vegas; there had been a little hard pan on B Street where I lived. This was old Las Vegas. I was the first Black to buy into this area. All of my neighbors around were White. When I moved in, they eventually began to move out and, eventually, they all moved out. There was actually no Strip at all; the only two hotels on the Strip were the El Rancho and the Frontier. After coming to Las Vegas, they built the Flamingo next, then the Sands, and they kept building. The Desert Inn they built from there. There was no such [thing] as the high rises; everything was two-story at the most. And the living conditions in West Las Vegas was deplorable. We were fortunate to get the houses we did because these people were desperate to leave town and they needed money. We were just fortunate enough to buy this place. I've seen Las Vegas grow by leaps and bounds and I'm very proud of the fact that I played a part in integration of Las Vegas. I feel I am in some way responsible for the housing that went in West Las Vegas. I've seen the economy rise to unbelievable heights. At the time that I came to Las Vegas and many years after, the only jobs that Blacks could even think of obtaining would be maids or porters. This was just it until ten years ago. Ten to twelve years ago there was no

such thing; there were only a few specialists like myself as a recreation director. At the time that I came in, there was only one Black school teacher [Mabel Hoggard]. I just noticed in this week's Voice that there [are] 275 Black teachers and nine principals. I have seen the town grow into what it has and I never shall forget a slogan, prophecy, that Bishop C.C. Cox [of the Church of God in Christ] . . .

Collector: Yes, he's my pastor.

Gay: And I never shall forget that [prophecy] and they still have that in the church, that this desert shall blossom as a rose (said in unison by Gay and Collector). And it certainly has. When I came here, I didn't think you [could] grow grass and [now] the town is absolutely green and in my yard I have roses and just anything that they grow in any other city in any other state.

Collector: Right.

Gay: The prophecy certainly has been fulfilled.

Collector: This is true.

Gay: He [Bishop C.C. Cox] was a wonderful man; I shall always remember him, a very dear friend.

END OF TAPE I, SIDE I.

(tape noise)

Collector: Could you tell me the mayor and the governor who was in the governing capacity in the state of Nevada at that time?

Gay: When I came to Las Vegas and the state of Nevada, the mayor was Ernie Cragin, the late Ernie Cragin, who became to be a very dear friend of mine. I was put on the committee at that time by him that no Blacks had been on before [the Veteran's Coordinating Committee]. We became to be very, very good friends down through the years. Even today on various holidays and Christmas time I always send his widow flowers or a gift; we were that close.

Governor Vail Pittman, the late governor Vail Pittman, was governor at the time.

Collector: And could you tell me some of the social changes in southern Nevada and your little talk show that you had.

Gay: Yes, I'd like to mention that while still recreation director at the Jefferson Avenue Center [it is now the Doolittle Center] I originated a teenage radio show. There was no television in those days, so we had a radio show known as Westside Junior Junction. It was a Saturday morning show that was a thirty minutes show and we used all teenagers, if they sang or played or [had] dramatic [talent]. It was sponsored by local citizens, local businesses, and this went on for a number of years. After leaving the recreation center, the program died.

We also presented a religious service on Sunday morning. We'd have a different church each week and they would bring their choirs and perform. The minister would have a prayer but the rest of the program would be spiritual singing and

so forth.

We produced many social events at the recreation center for the teenagers. We produced the first Black bathing beauty contest in the state, it was known as Miss Bronze Las Vegas. Marjorie [Tidwell Durdant] was our first Nevada Miss Bronze. We produced that for the whole ten years I was there, the annual Miss Bronze contest [the contest is no longer held].

Socially there have been many changes coming to Las Vegas at the time; we did have the Elks and the Masonic for Blacks and since the school system has brought in so many Black teachers, the sororities and fraternities have built up. There are many Blacks who are members of integrated social clubs and social affairs throughout the city. I feel that, socially, Blacks have grown to a great height in this community. I really think that they've done quite well. Years ago they didn't have meeting places for us for social functions. The only place that they had to meet was at the recreation center [Jefferson Avenue Center] and we could not use too much of the kids' time because the recreation center [was] for the kids. Blacks just didn't have a social hall to meet in. Now they have better homes; they meet in their homes for social affairs and things like that where at that time there were no nice homes. In fact, when I came to Las Vegas, thirty per cent of the Black population was living in tents and huts.

Collector: Could you explain, or do you have a idea of why Blacks just got in West Las Vegas?

Gay: Well, they were there when I came. It was one of those situations that happened throughout America that they decide [when] the first Blacks migrated to Nevada. They moved to the west side of town. They just tend to move in the direction where the others are. I feel that was the only way it really got started; it could have been in Paradise Valley but it just happened that the first ones moved to west Las Vegas. I feel that nothing was forced on them because one of the finest residential areas at the time was Bonanza Village [area north of Washington Avenue and east of Highland Drive] which joined West Las Vegas. The real top people lived there; however, since then Rancho Circle and other very exclusive residential sections have been built. Prior to that, Bonanza Village was the number one residential area for Caucasians, but it joined the Westside and you had to go the same direction to get there. So I don't feel that it was a forced issue, but the first Blacks that came to town just moved into that area because it was probably in the desert and they started over there because the property was probably cheaper and it was better for them.

Collector: All right. And last, but not least, I'd like for you to tell us about your testimonial dinner and your booking agency.

Gay:

I have been associated with and very good friends of many real top entertainers. Lionel Hampton is very dear friend of mine, Duke Ellington, Sammy Davis, and people like this. I talked with Lionel Hampton when he was here last and he mentioned that there was no Black promotional group in town, a booking agency. I thought and thought about it and then someone came by and kind of interested me in it. I knew that it was a lucrative field. But you have to build yourself up. This kind of business is not built over night. Even though you have a lot of friends in the business, they are tied down [under contract]. When they can break loose from it, they will probably come in your direction if you can offer them the same thing that their agents have in the past. Black entertainers have [had] White agents who have been able to do more for them and they had to stay with them. I decided to come with this type of business.

There have been several outstanding events in my life and I'd like to mention a few along with the testimonial. Well, maybe I should mention the testimonial first; the testimonial was held in '71. There were a group of citizens, Black and White, [who] felt that I deserved a little recognition for what I had done. I had two charity organizations that I would [like] to have the money given to and they were the Seventh Step Foundation--I'm sure you know

that's the organization to rehabilitate prisoners when they come out of various prisons, especially Nevada prisons--and my first love, my University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Alumni Club that we have here in town. We send a Las Vegas youth to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff each year on a scholarship with the funds. This was, I suppose, one of the high lights of my life. There were friends from all over these United States, classmates, former teachers, presidents of college that I attended, doctors, lawyers, just you name it, from all walks of life that came to the testimonial dinner for me. And it was really hard to hold back the tears. The mayor [Oran Gragson] was in attendance. We had hundreds of telegrams from senators and people from all walks of life. They couldn't be here but they wished us the best. I would have to say the highlight of the whole thing was friends who came up. You see the plaques on the wall, one from the mayor, one from the county commissioners, and personal plaques for the way they felt about me and what I had done in the community and other communities as well. There were many of the real top Blacks who were there that had come to town when the living conditions were real bad and I [had] made arrangements for them, like Mayor Hatcher, a very dear friend of mine from Gary, Indiana, and people like that. I happen to be the first Black to receive the Arkansas Travelers Award which means

that you have left the state but you have done things in the state to show that you still have an interest. You have achieved outside of the state, this is what this is given for. Last but not least, another outstanding event in my life was receiving an honorary doctorate degree from my alma mater, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. And the citation given by the president of United Airlines and I could name many, many more but we don't have the time to go through all this.

Collector: Could you tell us some of the distinguished guests you had at your testimonial.

Gay: Yes, the president of my alma mater, President Lawrence A. Davis, the mayor, Sammy Davis, Jr.

Collector: County Commissioners?

Gay: County Commissioner Aaron Williams [first Black commissioner] was on the program and, of course, all of my family.

Collector: Was the governor there?

Gay: The governor sent a telegram; he couldn't make it but he's a very dear friend of mine and he sent a telegram. Both the senators, Bible and Cannon, sent telegrams and there were telegrams from all over. They wanted to be there but they just couldn't make it.

Collector: This was unusual because this done for the first Black.

Gay: That's right.

Collector: Could you tell us how you got to be in the Traveler's club

of Arkansas? What was the qualification?

Gay: The Arkansas Travelers . You have to be well known in the state and this has to be presented to the legislature by two or more legislators and they have to give their reasons. Four of the legislators [from Arkansas] came to Nevada and I gave 'em a very warm welcome. They were all given a key to the city because of my influence with the mayor and the city officials. They were given the royal treatment at the hotels. They felt that others had told them what I had done and the things that I've done back in the state since I left like supporting the different charitable organizations in the state of Arkansas and my donations and things that I've done at the college. They put this all together and this is how it is done (garbled).

Collector: The governor had to OK it?

Gay: The governor has to sign it as you've seen.

Collector: Right.

Gay: Yeah, I was the first and only Black to receive one.

Collector: All right, thank you very much, Mr. Gay.

Gay: You're quite welcome. It was a pleasure.

Mr. Gay asked to conclude his interview with the following inspirational poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay, "To An Autograph":

Life is but a leaf of paper, white
Whereon each of us may write
A word or two, and then comes night.
Greatly began, though thou has time
Not failure, low aim is crime.

Mr. Gay says he is proud to have lived long enough to see one of the poems written by the famous Black poet, Langston Hughes, "I, Too, Sing America", become a reality.

I, too, sing America.
I'm the darker brother
They send me to eat in the kitchen when company comes
But I laugh and eat well and grow strong
For tomorrow I will sit at the table when company comes
And nobody will dare say to me "eat in the kitchen" then
Besides, they will see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed.

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