

Edited Speech to Text

AR: This is the oral history interview project through the Seymour library and the Cayuga Museum in collaboration with the New York heritage site. This is Alexis Rivers, interviewing Lithgow Osborne on July 30, 2020. So where and when were you born?

LO: I was born in the late 50s in 1959, in Auburn, New York.

AR: Can you tell me a little bit about your family, what your parents did for a living, any siblings, things like that?

LO: My father was the Publisher, well, he was the Editor and eventually the Publisher of the *Citizen Advertiser* in Auburn, New York, and my mother worked for the newspaper. She was also involved in a number of community groups. She was in the Auburn Housing Authority, and she was also on the Democratic Committee in Auburn. And my father eventually sold the newspaper and focused his primary attention on the On Cablevision, which was the local cable system. Cable Vision at that time was a relatively new concept and he was involved in bringing Cablevision to Auburn; into Central New York.

AR: Do you have any siblings?

LO: I have six brothers and sisters. We all grew up in Auburn, and they live in various parts of the country, but primarily the Northeast. I have three sisters and three brothers and they are involved, primarily in education and the law. My younger brother is involved in the cable industry.

AR: Can you recall any family traditions that you had growing up?

LO: Hmm, family traditions, primarily, were focused on family events, such as, you know, dinners with my grandparents who lived on South Street or going out to Owasco (our house out on Owasco Lake) on the weekends or swimming at the Y. But that was probably, you know, we're just doing things as a family. I mean, when you have seven children, it's not really easy to sort of say, "Oh, well, let's go to, you know, Emerson park" or whatnot, because it involved really corralling our herd of feral cats. And my mother's primary preoccupation in my childhood was making the least effort for the maximum effect, because she was busy all the time. So corralling all of us to go and do something in particular was kind of a chore. So there weren't a whole lot of specific family traditions other than doing things with the family.

AR: So with so many children, brothers, sisters, what was your house like growing up?

LO: Oh, well, it was never a dull moment, I can tell you that. There was always a bit of...I don't want to say drama, because that overstates it, but somebody was always mad at somebody else, or somebody was always doing something that somebody else didn't like, and you know, there was never sort of peace and serenity at home. However, what I will say is that you never

lacked for companionship and my siblings and I always did things together in the backyard or in the barn or walking down to Grant's or up to Osborne Park, things like that. So there was...plenty of companionship. And so I learned very early on how to be part of a group, but also to find ways to push myself out of the group to be recognized, because when you're one of seven, you know, you need to find ways to be recognized by your parents other than bad behavior, because that was never a recipe for success in our family.

AR: What was the neighborhood like growing up?

LO: Well, it was Grover Street, so it wasn't far from downtown. So we could walk to, you know, the movies, or when the mall was...you know, the mall across from the city hall, when that was built, we could walk there. Radio Shack was a particular favorite of all of us because, well, I mean, electronics for something that, you know, deeply fascinating to us. Grover street itself was...it's an older neighborhood, so there are a lot of historic homes there, and that just seemed very natural to me there. I don't think there's one newer home there. Most of the homes were built in the, in the 19th century, mid to late 19th century. Our house was built, I think, in 1920s... 1820s as was the house next door, which was lived in by the Waits, and they owned a department store in Auburn. There is...it was always said that Brigham Young worked on our house, and I don't know that there's any real proof of that. I know that he was in the area at the time that the house was built, but no one can verify that. I will say that Captain Muir, who built our house was a...sociable fellow and he would host gatherings and apparently, my ancestor, Martha Coffin Wright was at a party at our house. The house that I grew up in, as a guest of Katherine Moore, and it was there that she overheard somebody describing her and saying, "Oh, there's Martha Wright? She's a very dangerous woman" and presumably, that was because she advocated for women's rights and for the abolition of slavery.

AR: Did your family follow any particular religion growing up? And do you still follow it today?

LO: Yes. We, my mother, was an Episcopalian and she comes from a professional Christian family. There are a number of Episcopal priests and bishops in her family. My father's family were Quaker and Unitarian. I'm not quite sure when he became an Episcopalian per se but I know that we always went to St. Peter's...growing up, and that's the tradition that we grew up in, and I'm still an Episcopalian. I go to church. Not now of course, but when I was allowed to go I, you know, certainly went every Sunday. But I am referred to by others as a cradle Episcopalian because there are a number of Episcopalians who are refugees from other Christian denominations.

AR: What was school like for you growing up? Did you have any sort of hobbies or special interests as a child? Was there anything popular? Not necessarily social media per se, but like, books, toys, games, things all the kids wanted to have?

LO: Well, I mean, I went to school at Seward school, and, of course, we walked there, because we were just under the mile marker, so we couldn't get a bus to school. Not that that was really any kind of a hardship for me, particularly because I...and for my siblings, I mean, I think we all

enjoyed, for the most part, the walk to school because we enjoyed the exercise. All of us were very curious, outgoing kids, so the idea of walking from our house on Grover Street over to Seward school, or where... I guess I'm not even sure Seward school still stands, but...we ran into some of the characters who lived in the various houses that you would walk by. There was Aunt Mary's grocery store, which was always good for candy, and, ...you'd see your friends and then walk with them. Sometimes we'd ride our bikes and get in trouble for being daredevils on the playground with our bikes by Mrs. McCargo, who was the principal at Seward.

But I would say that is fairly standard stuff in terms of the games and everything, the only thing I can remember that anybody ever wanted...well, Major Matt Mason was a thing, but that may have been a little bit later. So, you know, this was during the 60s that I went to Seward School, and it was fairly...we never felt unsafe, or we never felt like, "Oh, we shouldn't...go this way or that way." I mean, we didn't walk down Osborne Street, because that was out of our way, and we didn't walk, I can't even remember the name of some of the streets, but...we always kept the same path every time. We didn't mix it up at all. Getting home was always...it was always great to get home, because my parents always had lots and lots of books. We had a library that we filled with books, and you know of course we were allowed to read whatever we wanted. There was never, you know, "Oh, you can't read that" or "Don't read that." We had the Encyclopedia Britannica, which I always liked, and we got magazines...some of which I liked, and some of which I didn't. Because my father and my grandfather worked at the paper, of course, reading the paper every day was considered very important, but only after my mother read it. She would read it, and then we were allowed to read it. So...we all developed the notion that understanding the world around us was extremely important. The greater world, not just Auburn, or Cayuga County, or New York State, but you know the United States and the world.

So that was fun, and I had a collection of toys and books and things that I would play with in my room, you know, either with my brother, my younger sister...my younger brother, my younger sister, were really my close companions as a child, and I was very close to both of them, and I'm still close to both of them. My four older brothers and sisters were...I was not as close to them growing up because we were always separated; the three youngest and the four oldest, because it was a way to organize us into smaller groups in order to...they're more manageable. That just seemed to work better for my mother because she was really the one who carried the burden of managing all of us, so what worked for her worked for all of us.

AR: Did you have any jobs growing up; either chores within the household or a job that, you know, paid the bills type of thing?

LO: Well, yes, we were obviously expected to clean up our rooms, and keep them neat and tidy. And if we couldn't manage that, we were expected to keep the door shut. Again, my mother, you know, it was a battle of attrition. So my mother was...she was not going to stand there and watch you clean up your room. So if you weren't going to clean up your room, then you needed to keep the door closed, which made sense. But I was somewhat of a fastidious little boy, so...my room was always for the most part neat and tidy. We did our own laundry, because there was too much laundry, and my mother just decided at some point that she didn't want to

be responsible for it all. So we all did our own laundry, and we learned how to do our own laundry early on. And then there were, you know, taking out the trash, and emptying wastepaper baskets, clearing the table, filling the dishwasher...things like that...straightening up the sunroom...things like that.

We had all been involved in the Auburn Children's Theatre, which Sue Riford had started, and I think it was in the mid 60s, but I could be wrong about that. But she started the Auburn children's theater, and we spent many Saturdays there and some nights during the week there as well, during rehearsals for shows and whatnot. At one point, she got permission to take over the Merry-Go-Round theater up at Emerson Park, and she turned it into a summer stock. And so every single one of my siblings and I worked at...Auburn Civic Theatre, and we worked there in various jobs. Curiously, none of us ever became performers, but all of us worked backstage, you know, I did costumes and helped build some sets, and ... my older brothers worked on building sets, and my sisters all did various things, I mean, props and stage managing and things like that. And it was fun to work there because while it was not really, by no means profitable, it was fun to have a little bit of spending money.

AR: And you went to college, can you tell me a little bit about that?

LO: Yes... before I went to college, I was sent off to boarding school at the age of 12. I went to boarding school in Connecticut for two years and then I went to another one for two years...also in Connecticut. And I...have dyslexia, so my mother felt that the focus in the smaller classroom would allow me to have a better advantage in terms of my studies and succeeding with my schoolwork. I took a year off between graduating from school and going to college and I worked at Auburn Civic Theater as a costumer and...they had a program, which I ran, I built it and ran it, which was renting out costumes to people who...wanted costumes for one thing or another, because at that point they had quite a costume library and it was in a bit of disarray. So I organized it and began that whole process of renting it as well as doing the costumes for the plays that they did during the year. I went to Sarah Lawrence, which was in Bronxville, and I graduated in 1983. Yes, '83. While I was in (Sarah Lawrence) I studied writing, and history, I also did some theater, but not really a lot. And while I was at Sarah Lawrence, I decided to move into Manhattan, and I lived in New York.

AR: Do you think that Auburn and Cayuga County has changed at all, either for better or worse, since you grew up?

LO: Well, I mean, all of us like to think of our childhood as being perfect, and wonderful and marvelous. I certainly felt very safe and protected. You know, the problems of unemployment, or diminishing population, or lack of opportunities, or any kind of racial tensions were not really at the forefront of my thinking at the time. There were a number of older buildings that were torn down, and what exists now as Auburn was... when I was growing up, it was significantly

different. There were a lot more historic buildings in downtown Auburn, and a number of them, sadly, were torn down in the opportunities that presented themselves via urban renewal. The mayor at the time was very keen on getting that money from the federal government in order to infuse a certain amount of cash and prosperity and bring money to Auburn to help it grow, presumably, but also to modernize and to compete with other towns of the like (same) size. I don't know that it was entirely successful as a program because we lost a lot of would be considered the spirit and the historic feeling of Auburn, but at the time, it seemed like a good idea. It's why we have the loop that goes around Auburn today and why the Arterial goes through the northern part of town. Decisions were made for a very specific reason. I mean, I obviously was not at the table, but my perspective is purely hindsight. So, yes, I would say that Auburn has changed tremendously, but, you know, with every change comes opportunity, and I see Auburn now embracing those opportunities.

While Auburn does not have nearly the wealth that it used to have, because there used to be a number of very wealthy people in Auburn, there are local people who are committed to real substantial change, and to me, that is inspiring. It's a wonderful, wonderful thing to see the Gay Pride event that happened last summer...last summer was fantastic. Because I think that there are young people who grew up in Auburn who didn't necessarily see themselves. When they went out into Auburn, they perhaps... they felt like they were alone, and that there was nobody like them and LGBTQ kids who maybe might have thought that they did not fit in, that they didn't belong there.

As a gay man who grew up in Auburn, I myself never felt disempowered, disenfranchised, because my last name is Osborne. There's a statue of my great-grandfather in front of the police station, there's a street named after my ancestor, the Osborne harvesting works employed half the town at one point, City Hall was a gift of my family members'; so I never felt disenfranchised ever. I always felt like Auburn was my hometown, it is my hometown, it's where I'm from. But not every LGBTQ kid has that feeling or that sense of belonging. I also come from an extraordinary family that would never have ever said, "You aren't worthy" or "You shouldn't be that way" or "You need to change yourself" or "I don't love you, because you are who you are." I never ever got that ever, and I know that that's not the reality for a lot of young people.

To me, that's part of the reason why it's so important to have things like the Q Center and to have Gay Pride events or just Pride events where people can come together, allies and members of the community, together to say, "We want something better, we see a vision of something greater, we can change what happens here." With the history that is so prevalent in Auburn...Auburn is an amazing place because so much history has happened there. I mean, William Seward, Harriet Tubman, my great grandfather's work in prison reform began in Auburn...the list goes on. But it's important that we need to embrace the past but we also need to look to the future. We need to offer the possibility of change and restoration and growth because it's the only way that we'll survive as a community, as a town. If you leave it fallow, if you leave it unnurtured and untended to it will die. I don't believe that Auburn will die but I think that there are great possibilities there.

We are Central New York, we are located in the very center of New York State, and our offering is so beautiful. You drive around Cayuga County and you visit the lake and you go to Skaneateles or you go to Moravia, or Ithaca, or Union Springs, or go North to Sodus...Weedsport, there are so many beautiful places to go to that you just can't believe that it's all within driving distance of Auburn.

AR: You mentioned the significant things, such as William Seward and Harriet Tubman, and civil rights, things like that. But do you think that there's anything missing from the published histories of Cayuga County?

LO: One of the curious things that I discovered: there was a case of a black fella named William Freeman, in Auburn, and William Freeman was the first case where his lawyer, William Seward, and my ancestor, David Wright, argued that William Freeman was not guilty by reason of insanity, or mental defect, and he was charged with murder. Now, I don't think anybody doubted that William Freeman had, in fact, murdered the people that he had murdered but the point was that they were arguing that he wasn't responsible because he had been beaten so many times as a child, and when he was incarcerated for other lesser crimes in Auburn prison, he was beaten. Which later proved to be accurate, when they did an autopsy on him. They proved that he was of a diminished capacity, that he did not fully understand what he was doing at the time. Now, what's significant there: the idea of diminished capacity, where a...person of diminished mental faculties is not fully responsible, and should not be punished with the ultimate punishment, but should be incarcerated in a manner of speaking, but to a place...that looks after the fact that they cannot care for themselves, that they're not really fully responsible.

And second of all, William Freeman was the grandson, I believe, of an African-American who accompanied John Hardenberg, who was the founder of Auburn. John Hardenberg, brought William Freeman's grandfather, I think it's his grandfather, brought him with him to Auburn and essentially said to him, "Well, this is where I'm going to build my mill. And so I'm going to go back to" wherever he came from. He left Freeman there, Freeman built the mill and cleared the land and essentially cleared the spot in order to create the opportunity for Hardenberg. So when you go back and look at it, in fact, Auburn was built on the backs of an African-American and so I think that's something that we need to start really diving deeper into and recognizing that African-Americans have a real place in the history of Auburn because it is through the labor, particularly of Freeman and I'm sure others, and you know once we start diving deep that their contribution, whether enslaved or not, I could not say because I honestly don't know what the status of Freeman was when he accompanied Hardenberg just...I'm not going to say whether I know or not because I don't, but the fact remains that it was African-American labor that helped set Auburn on its path and that should be acknowledged. And we should be really looking to acknowledge that, and to I don't know that celebrating, you know, any kind of I mean, if it's slavery, I don't know that we can celebrate it, but we can at least acknowledge it. And right now, I sound a little confused but that's because I don't know all the facts, but I do know that Hardenberg was accompanied by an African-American who was, I believe, the grandfather of William Freeman. I believe that there are still Freemans in Auburn today. So that needs to be recognized.

AR: Obviously, we're all living through the pandemic, currently. Yes. And we can talk about that as well. But were there any other significant world events that you've lived through? And how did they change your life?

LO: World events? Well, I remember Watergate very clearly, and that was a huge shift. Before that I remember the assassination, vaguely, of President Kennedy and, of course, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. My family was always very clear, growing up, there were always rifles in our house because my father was a hunter, as was my grandfather. They also did a lot of target shooting, but the guns were always locked up and there was always a huge respect for the firearms. There was not any kind of cavalier attitude about guns. And after the events of the Kennedy assassinations, and Martin Luther King's assassination they, both of my parents (my father less because he was the editor of the paper, so having a public opinion about anything was naturally anathema to him) but my mother, on the other hand, had very strong opinions about guns and she hated them. She hated having them in the house. She believed in the Second Amendment, however, she thought that there was a huge responsibility on gun ownership and how you handled a weapon and we weren't really even allowed to have toy guns as children, and when we did, we weren't allowed to point them to one another because that was considered, you know, just not the thing to do because it reflected the greater events of the time, the idea being if you could point a toy gun at somebody, you could also point a real gun at them as well. It's sort of modeling behavior that you want to see.

Of course I remember the lunar landing. I was not in Auburn, I was out West, but we watched on television, I remember that quite clearly. And of course, Watergate was a huge issue at the time. The paper covered it extensively. And we talked about that event around the the dining room table, and we watched on television. I watched the Vietnam War on television. Surprisingly, both my grandfather and my father were very, very keen on making sure that it was made clear to us just how terrible this war was, and what a disaster it was. I think that Nixon's resignation...that was huge. That the President would resign because he had broken the law was remarkable.

After that, I think, you know, the various other national events...there was an energy crisis, of course, but I was away at school, so those things impacted me very little. Although I did get the paper sent to me, my mother made sure that the paper was mailed to us when we were away. In my mailbox, a couple of days later would be the paper, so I could keep up with what was going on in Auburn. I would say that the next big national crisis that I remember was the the hostages being taken in Iran, and the ultimate resolution of that. My family knew one of the people who was taken hostage, so we were quite concerned about him. And then, of course, the election of Reagan, which did not seem like such a great idea, because although he had been governor of California, it seemed counterintuitive at the time. I think there was a lot of concern at the time that he was not really going to be an effective president for all Americans, just the ones who voted for him. And then that did prove to be true. Unfortunately he was president when the AIDS crisis hit, and there is a failure of leadership on the part of the administration in handling that crisis, and untold numbers of people died as a result of the inability of the federal government to express even concern, or put any kind of effort behind

looking for a cure or even understanding the pathology of the disease and really demonizing people who had AIDS, or who became HIV positive, primarily, of course, it was a Gay Men's disease. So very easy to push that off and say, "Well, it's just gay men are getting it, who cares?" That was very scary to me, but at the same time, I am my mother and father's son. So rather than just be terrorized, I started learning as much as I could about HIV and AIDS and worked for one of the first organizations that helped raise funds to pay for studies. It's called amFAR, American Foundation for AIDS Research, and I was the very first person to do a fundraiser at the college level, to raise money for amFAR.

So I became active, rather than being pushed into the closet or further into the closet, I was never really in the closet, so I did what I knew that I could do, which was learn what the disease was and then promote education and look for reasonable health and safety standards to prevent the spread of it. A lot of people were not interested in it, but I have to say that I, along with many, many, many others, I was but a small cog in a very large machine that helped bring about some understanding and some real progress, but I'm glad that when I was asked when it was presented to me, I stepped up. Because certainly I was afraid, but I was not going to be daunted as it were.

AR: Thank you again for being part of the project.

LO: Thank you and good luck with the rest of the project.