**Notes Toward an Obituary**

**James W. Loewen**

**1/1/2020**

Born Decatur, IL, 2/6/1942, son of Dr. David F. Loewen and Winifred Gore Loewen. Father was a TB doctor, ran the Macon County Tuberculosis Sanatorium, a public institution. Mother was a middle-school librarian and teacher.

Attended Douglas MacArthur HS in Decatur, then Carleton College in Northfield, MN, where he majored in sociology. However, he did not think it competent to major in sociology only having lived in the Midwest. Fellow students majoring in French were taking their junior year abroad in France. Majors in political science were enrolling in the Washington Semester at American University. So he took part of his junior year “abroad” in Mississippi, January through March, 1963. During this time he lived in a dorm at Mississippi State University and audited courses there. MSU was then the largest segregated all white institution of higher learning outside of South Africa, which is why he went there. It did have Chinese American students, however, from the Mississippi Delta.

During that term he spent three days as a student at Tuskegee Institute, where he was the only white student on campus and probably the first white student in the twentieth century. He also spent three days as a student at Tougaloo College in MS. He enjoyed all three Southern colleges but felt a particular kinship with Tougaloo, where students actually bought and read books not assigned them in courses, a rarity at MSU.

He graduated “with distinction” from Carleton and enrolled in the Ph.D. program in sociology at Harvard, 1964-68. Like other graduate students, he taught a crucial course, “Proseminar in Sociology,” required of all majors, and was surprised to get no preparation on how to teach, test, or lead discussion. So he sparked the creation of such a course. **His doctoral dissertation, “The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White,” became a published book (still in print) and was later made into a movie, “Mississippi Triangle,” that opened the Asian American Film Festival in 1983.**

Then he taught, 1968-75, at Tougaloo College, advancing from Asst. Prof. to Assoc. Prof. with tenure and chairing the Department of Sociology and then the larger Social Science Division. Twice he won the “Distinguished Teacher Award” at Tougaloo.

During this time, astonished at the misconceptions about U.S. and Mississippi history believed by first-year Tougaloo students, products of Mississippi’s segregated public schools, he discovered that the only textbook available for the required ninth grade course in “Mississippi History” was permeated by white supremacist bias and misinformation. Eventually he recruited a major co-author and co-editor, Dr. Charles Sallis, from nearby Millsaps College, got a grant from the Southern Education Foundation, hired Tougaloo and Millsaps students (and two Tougaloo professors), and they wrote a new history of the state for that course. Eventually published by Pantheon Books in 1974, ***Mississippi: Conflict and Change* won the prestigious Lillian Smith Award of the Southern Regional Council for best nonfiction book on the South. Nevertheless, Mississippi rejected it** for use in the state by a five to two vote of its Textbook Committee. There were five whites and two blacks on that committee, and voting went on racial lines.

This led to the lawsuit ***Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed, et al*., in Federal District Court. In 1980, Judge Orma Smith decided for plaintiffs in a 1st and 14th Amendment case that the American Library Association describes as one of the fundamental court decisions giving all Americans freedom to read.** The book was ordered adopted for the six-year period 1980-86. Unfortunately two new books also came out at this time, as well as the original white supremacist book, and only about 26 districts of more than 150 adopted *Conflict and Change*. In recent years, however, historians have recognized *Conflict and Change* as the best history textbook ever produced for Mississippi and a pioneering work in state history generally; see, inter alia, “The Three R’s – Reading, ‘Riting, and Race: The Evolution of Race in Mississippi History Textbooks,” the cover article of the *Journal of Mississippi History*, Spring, 2010. In 2017, historian Charles W. Eagles at Ole Miss told the story of the project, book, and lawsuit in *Civil Rights, Culture Wars: The Fight over a Mississippi Textbook*, published by the University of North Carolina Press.

Loewen was also active in efforts to cause political change in Mississippi. In 1971 he was the lead poll-watcher for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party for Madison County. On election day in November, he was arrested near the Flora, Mississippi, polling station, originally for driving 40 in a 20 zone, but when the highway proved to be posted for 40 MPH, he was charged with driving 60 and thrown into the Flora jail, which conveniently adjoined the polling place. There he served two hours, before a civil rights lawyer intervened to get him out on bail.

The next year, realizing that “assistance” by white poll workers caused black voters to vote for white candidates against their will, he persuaded the Madison County chapter of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to run just three candidates, for the five county election commissioner positions. With the help of a photographer from Tougaloo College, he prepared a sample ballot that looked like the front of the voting machine, so black voters would feel confident of their choices. Nevertheless, black candidates still lost, although narrowly.

During his time in Mississippi he also taught the methods and statistics course in sociology at neighboring Millsaps College, in trade for their faculty teaching at Tougaloo. This furthered the initiatives begun by famed sociologist Ernst Borinski at Tougaloo to break down Mississippi’s racial segregation.

In 1975, unhappy because Tougaloo’s administration had embraced ROTC during the Vietnam War despite the protests of most students and faculty members, he resigned from Tougaloo and accepted employment in sociology at the University of Vermont. In later years he boasted ruefully of teaching “at the blackest and the whitest” schools in America.

Stunning and unwarranted differences in SAT scores between his students at Harvard and at Tougaloo prompted him to study bias and incompetence on “standardized tests.” This resulted in his being selected as **lead panelist before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in 1989, resulting in *The Validity of Testing in Education and Employment*, a publication of the Commission in 1993. Loewen claims to have persuaded Nancy Cole of the Educational Testing Service, purveyor of the SAT, later to discard “Aptitude” from the name of the exam. However, the result might be termed a “distinction without a difference,” because most people still think “SAT” is short for “Scholastic Aptitude Test,” although it is not.** Loewen also published articles and gave talks on test bias.

Beginning in Mississippi in 1971 and continuing until 2001, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, ACLU, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, the NAACP, U.S. Department of Justice, and other agencies, municipalities, and private attorneys engaged Loewen as **expert witness in a variety of civil rights, voting rights, and other cases**. According to historian Peyton McCrary of the Department of Justice, Loewen was the first expert witness ever to testify based on regression, and the first to use ecological regression in voting rights cases.

Between 1976 and 1978 Loewen taught sociology at the University of Vermont and continued serving as expert witness in various cases. In 1978 he took a two-year leave from “UVM” to become Director of Research at the Center for National Policy Review, located in Washington, D.C., at the Catholic University of America School of Law. An extensive workshop he gave to D.O.J. attorneys led to the eventual publication of *Social Science in the Courtroom*. He resumed teaching at UVM in 1980 and continued as expert witness in cases ranging from Alaska to El Centro, CA, to FL to Boston. His testimony was the first expert statistical testimony ever allowed by U.S. Federal District Court Judge Harold Cox, notoriously racist appointee of JFK’s, but that turned out to be a response to a personal predicament of Judge Cox, not to Loewen’s persuasiveness.

His exhibits and/or testimony were determinative in the redistricting of state legislatures in Mississippi (1978-79), South Carolina (1979-84 and 1991), Tennessee (1993), and Virginia (1990, 2001), as well as the aldermanic districts in Chicago (1985). Among his other important cases:

-- 1971, testified regarding racial bloc voting and party representation by race in Mississippi for the ACLU in *National Democratic Party v. Riddell*. His testimony established that Loyalist supporters (Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party) were supporters of the national Democratic ticket, so they should be allowed to use the term “Democratic Party.” Case won.

-- 1973, testified regarding racial bloc voting, etc., in Mississippi in *Stewart v. Waller*.  This case successfully challenged at‑large election voting in middle-sized cities, a practice that made the election of black city councilors almost impossible owing to white bloc voting.

-- 1974, testified regarding racial bloc voting, etc., in Hinds County, Mississippi in *Kirksey et al. v. Hinds County Board of Supervisors*. This case eventually led to single‑member districts for the five members of this governing board; African Americans were able to elect two members, for the first time in this century.

-- 1974-79, testified regarding racial bloc voting, etc., in *Connor v. Waller,* *Connor v. Finch*, and *Mississippi v. U. S.* This case desegregated the Mississippi Senate and helped increase the number of blacks in the House from 1 to 13.

In 1990-91, a Smithsonian fellowship led to ***Lies My Teacher Told Me*.** This book, a critique of how U.S. history is taught in high school, has led its category (historiography) at Amazon since publication. It is **the best-selling book by a living sociologist** and is still in print; in July, 2019, for example, it was the best-selling book at Powell’s Books in Portland, OR.

In 2009, Teachers College Press published the “antidote” to *Lies My Teacher Told Me* in the form of *Teaching What Really Happened*. Loewen also published more than 50 articles on how we get history wrong in our educational system and the need to get it right and gave hundreds of talks and workshops on the subject.

In 1999 he wrote ***Lies Across America*, which became the best-selling book in public history in the new millennium.** It treats monuments, historical markers, and museums that get history wrong, from Plymouth Rock to the invention of the airplane. **It was the first book to call for the removal of Confederate monuments** from positions of honor and suggested they be put in parks that tell of the “Nadir of Race Relations,” 1890-1940, when most of them went up. New Orleans Mayor Landrieu cited *Lies Across America* as an inspiration for his removal of four monuments from public view in that city. Loewen was also author and co-editor of *“The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader.”* Loewen also published more than 25 articles on how our public history gets the past wrong and gave more than 70 talks and workshops on the subject. His article "Five Myths About Why the South Seceded," was the most viewed article at the *Washington Post* website in 2011. “Why Do People Believe Myths About the Confederacy? Because Our Textbooks and Monuments Are Wrong,” also in the *Post*, sparked the eventual removal of the Confederate monument from the Rockville (MD) courthouse in 2015.

In 2005, his pioneering book ***Sundown Towns* was published. Loewen expected to find about 10 purposefully all-white towns in IL and maybe 50 across the U.S. Instead, he found 506 in IL alone, leading to an entire field** of study now entered by other researchers. He also published at least two dozen articles and gave more than 100 workshops and talks on sundown towns. His work helped spark several communities to renounce their white supremacist pasts, including Goshen, IN, and La Crosse, WI.

His honors include:

-- 1975, Lillian Smith Award for Best Southern Nonfiction;

-- 1978, the first annual Spivack Award of the ASA, shared with Ernst Borinski;

-- 1981, Fulbright Fellowship to Australia;

-- 1990-91, Senior Postdoctoral Fellow, Smithsonian Institution;

-- 1996, American Book Award;

-- 1996, Oliver Cromwell Cox Award for Distinguished Anti-Racist Scholarship;

-- 2002-present, Distinguished Lecturer, Organization of American Historians;

-- 2009, **honorary degree from Tougaloo College**;

-- 2012, **Cox/Johnson/Frazier Award (he became the first white person ever to win this award, named for three prominent black sociologists);**

-- 2012, “Spirit of America” Award, National Council for the Social Studies.

He leaves his wife, Susan Robertson Loewen, a retired international educator; son, Nicholas Loewen, a teacher at Washington (DC) International School; daughter, Lucy Loewen McMurrer, of Amherst, MA, project manager at a consulting firm; and four grandchildren. Fathering was his happiest role.

He also leaves this slogan, which guided his professional work all his life:

"Telling the truth about the past helps cause justice in the present. Achieving justice in the present helps us tell the truth about the past."

But perhaps better known is: “Those who don’t remember the past are condemned to repeat the eleventh grade.”