

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Leo Branton, Jr.

PERSON

Branton, Leo, Jr., 1922-2013

Alternative Names: Leo Branton, Jr.; Leo Branton

Life Dates: February 17, 1922-April 19, 2013

Place of Birth: Pine Bluff, Arkansas, USA

Residence: Los Angeles, CA

Occupations: Entertainment Lawyer; Litigator

Biographical Note

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.

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