

VJD

Interviewee: James Robinson

Session #3

Interviewer: Sheila Michaels

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Q: We're with Jim Robinson, a founder of CORE. I think this is the third tape, and we're talking about Chicago and on. Okay.

Robinson: In Chicago, I was very, very active with both the race-relations cell of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the nascent CORE group. Both of them continued for a while, and I was active in both. I was particularly important in the housing issue, because Hugo ~~Victorine~~ and I were the ones who signed the lease for Fellowship House, and solicited other people to join. Jim Farmer was one of one ~~of~~ two black people who moved in initially. Eventually, it was fairly evenly divided.

So that was the housing business. The restaurant business, I was very active in the testing and in that very first sit-in at Jack Spratt. I had a lot to do with the planning and the carrying out of those things. Later on, when we had the 1943 convention, we had a big sit-in at Stoner's, downtown, and I participated in that. But that was really organized by George and Jean Houser. It worked extremely well. It was very well done. The White City Project, which I think I mentioned before, was something I was not active in. I was working, and going to ^{V. of C. classes} Chicago, so I was not available evenings, during the White City development. After they collected a lot of evidence, they took it to court. I don't remember objecting to their taking it to court, although, in hindsight, it really made very little sense, since we had non-violent direct-action to review standing lines, which were used several years later by a

weaker group, and they won. In court, we lost because the courts could be bought.

[Interruption]

As I say, I don't remember, in the CORE meetings, objecting to taking the thing to court, but it didn't make much sense, since we had a technique that didn't need us to go to court, and the standing line should have worked. Several years later, a much weaker CORE group did use a standing line, and changed the policy. But the courts in Chicago could easily be bought. The fact that we had absolute proof that the whites were admitted and the blacks were not admitted, but told there was a club, didn't make any difference to the judge.

Q: They were being bought by the White City people?

Robinson: Probably. Probably.

Q: Just outright, or just that they were [unclear].

Robinson: Well, we think they were bribed. It may just have been that they were prejudiced. I don't really know. You can't tell. Because there was a lot of blatant prejudice in Chicago.

Q: I had just forgotten that this was Chicago, as we always thought of Chicago, and they could easily have been bought by the White City people.

Robinson: Yes, I think they could have. But there was such blatant prejudice, anyhow, in Chicago. It was great that CORE started in Chicago, because it was far easier to challenge

something blatant than it was later on, here in New York, when there was a lot of discrimination, but it was kind of subtle, or not admitted that it was there. In Chicago, people on the elevated train -- if somebody black sat next to them, they'd get up and move. It was just absolutely blatant.

But that was the White City thing. Now I think I also said that I wasn't involved in that because I was busy working nights, and after I worked nights I was on unemployment insurance. That's how I finished my degree, and I was always quite conscious that I had to earn a living. When I was finishing the degree, I wasn't doing a lot with CORE. But that was finished in the summer of '42, so the rest of '42 and '43 -- for two years, I was active in Chicago CORE, because I could do that and work, too, and I was available for negotiations, often, during the daytime, because I worked nights.

Q: And you were negotiating mostly about housing, or about -- ?

Robinson: Mostly about restaurants. The housing -- there was almost no negotiation on the housing. We had just not said anything about it being an inter-racial group when we signed the leases, and the one time they tried to get rid of us, once we'd moved to the second place, at 63rd and Ellis, they couldn't get anybody from the other apartments to come to court and testify. It flopped. We had a lawyer from the NAACP -- Legal Redress Committee, I think -- that somebody got through to from the Urban League. Anyhow, he was good. I think his name was Ulysses Keyes, but I'm not quite sure.

*almost
sure*

So that worked. We didn't go to court at all. I didn't show up for that.

Q: But you weren't working on housing for anybody else. It was a very, very tight market in Chicago, during the war.

Robinson: It was a tight market. We did have a women's Fellowship House, too, that was down in a somewhat better area, a little bit further south, about 66th Street, probably.

Q: You were trying to broaden, in this into -- to get more groups to set up fellowships?

Robinson: No, we didn't push it as much as we ought to have pushed it. It seems to me, all the way along in CORE, we never pushed housing as much as it should have been pushed, because you have to have employment equality in order to have enough money. But if you have people living in separate areas, the human contact isn't enough. Integrated housing really makes an enormous difference. People can see that skin color doesn't have much to do with it. Some people are bastards, whether they're black or white, and some other people are fine.

So anyway, I got by that degree, and I was active in CORE at the '43 founding convention, and the '44 convention in Detroit. That was in June or early July, then I was leaving in September for Talladega.

Q: We missed all the part about the guy from Missouri, who is a member of --

Robinson: Oh, all right. Yes. How I happened to get to Talladega was that Bob Burgess, who had been interested in Fellowship House at the very beginning but doubted that he could live there because of his background in Missouri, had finally moved into Fellowship

House, and it worked very well. He graduated, and got a job as a librarian at Talladega College. It was through him that I got my job down there. He told me when Dean ~~Catur~~ *Cater* ~~phonetic~~ was coming to town, and I guess I wrote to Dean ~~Catur~~, and so we had dinner with him at his hotel. Dean ~~Catur~~ was very light, and not impressed with black history, particularly, and not interested in things that came out of slavery, like the spirituals. He didn't go to race plays when he came to New York -- he went to regular plays -- but he was academically very good. He was a good administrator, and in my opinion should have been made president of Talladega. But, at that time, the private schools were always headed by white people, partly because the boards that controlled them had a mindset like that, and partly because a school had -- it was easier to operate in the South with a white person at the head of it.

Q: Who was on the board?

Robinson: The board was made up of people in the Congregational Christian Church. I think at that time it was just the Congregational Church. Later on it was amalgamated. That went way back to Reconstruction, when they had initially taught blacks to read and write. *They bought* ~~They controlled~~ Swayne Hall, which was the central building on campus, and had been built with a slave in charge of the building. His name was Swayne. It had been built for a Baptist boys' school. Then after the Civil War, ~~it was used for schools and literacy, and~~ it was from this start -- teaching people to read and write -- that, eventually, Talladega College evolved. They had a high school attached to it, which was a practice school for people who were going to teach.

Q: So the members of the board were people from the North? Or the South?

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by slaves

Cater

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Collection

United Church of Christ

Robinson - 3 - 80

Robinson: They were mostly people from the North. The Congregational Church was New England, really. Later on, they became the Congregational Christian Church. It amalgamated with the Evangelical and Reform Church, which was Pennsylvania Dutch and German in origin, but quite similar in many ways. Ethnically, it was different, and there was a fair amount of difficulty when they combined. There was a Cadman Congregational Church in Brooklyn that sued, to try to prevent the merger. But that's a long time ago.

So I got to Talladega. I took the train, and went through that cotton area of southern Illinois. I stayed at a Mills Hotel overnight, in Birmingham. I got my shoes shined by a black man who kept saying "Boss this" and "Boss that," and it embarrassed me. But the train trip across to Talladega, over the hills, where the red dirt would show as the train slashed through -- that was impressive. I got to the campus, I took a taxi with a white driver, and he delivered me to the men's dormitory. A faculty man who lived in the men's dormitory directed me to where I was to live.

Q: You said he thought you looked so young that you must be a student.

Robinson: Yes, that's right.

Incidentally, looking that young -- I looked younger than I was -- I wasn't really very old -- but that was a big advantage on campus. Whenever there were student social functions, they had to be chaperoned, and I was young and looked as if I wouldn't poke around too much. I was constantly a chaperone. I think I went to virtually every party they had.

Q: Well, that must have been a blessing on an insular campus.

Robinson: Oh, yes, it was. It was a blessing, but it was interesting, because there were interesting people, like Miss Montgomery, who taught freshman writing; Martha Gibson, who was the head of the English department; a man who was also in the English department and did all the plays that they did; and Frank Harrison and [Fritz] Pappenheim. It was an interesting group of people. Miss Montgomery played bridge, and in those days I played bridge. So we did that sometimes. But we had a good time, actually, on campus.

But we were isolated. As I said, the Catholic students -- we had only a handful of them -- but they and I went down to the Sunday mass, over the electric light company, and all the people who came to that mass were from the North, anyway. But there was no segregation. There was self-segregation by townspeople who were black, and sat in the back. The priest was not always the same priest. The priest who came for Sunday came from Anniston, Alabama, and these were mission priests in a black parish in Anniston.

Q: Okay. Which is why they didn't ask for segregation, or encourage it.

Robinson: No. But they ^{had} started by doing it on campus.

the mass for students earlier.

So that was interesting. Now let's see. I haven't told you the Pappenheim story.

Q: No. You were saying that it was an international faculty.

Robinson: Right. Pappenheim -- I thought his story was particularly interesting, because he was a broadcaster for the Social Democrats in Germany, and he was Jewish, and broadcast right up until the time that Hitler took over. He was on the wrong side of the Rhine, and figured he was caught. But he went home that day. His landlady, who had been in the Nazi party for quite a long time, said, "Fritz, you've got to get out." Fritz said, "Well, there's no way I'm going to get out." She said, "Oh, yes there is. They owe me something. I'll go down and I'll get you an exit visa." She got him an exit visa, and he was out almost immediately. He then made the mistake of staying too long in Paris, and they had taken over again, ending up in a camp in the southern part of France -- where, again, he was released by a guard the day the Nazis came to inspect the records. So they couldn't find this Socialist Jewish person, who was supposed to be there, but wasn't.

Q: He was just wandering around.

Robinson: He was wandering around the town. The agreement was that he had to come back, at night, and he did go back at night. Later on, toward the end of the war, when everybody was loaded into the freight cars and didn't know where they were going -- whether they were going to go the other direction and end up in a gas chamber, or where they were going, and they couldn't tell, because they weren't in passenger cars, they were inside. They said they'd go a certain direction then stop, wait a while, and get tied up and then go some other direction. Anyhow, they ended up in the Pyrenees. They got down through Spain to Lisbon, and from Lisbon ^{he} they got to the U.S., and finally to Talladega.

We used to have coffee with students, and one of the seniors who was in extremely good

physical condition came over one night and we talked about -- I talked about being a conscientious objector, and he said, well he was 4-F when he'd been called for his physical examination. He was sure he was passing it with flying colors, but they asked him if he had any particular problem, and he said, well, he wet the bed every night. He said, "I'm sure they didn't believe me, but they knew I could," and he got the 4-F.

In my classes I had a student who had graded tops on the entrance exam, a young man, and a woman who had rated second, and I did very, very well with the young man and didn't do very well as a teacher with the young woman. She was one of the relatively few where I felt -- She always did adequate work, but she didn't do much better at the end than she did at the beginning, whereas some of them were virtually inarticulate when they began speech, and were quite articulate by the time they were finished. So I realized that it's not just technique, it's partly personalities; either they ~~get~~ or they don't ~~get~~.

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I had a young man from Birmingham who was not a great student, but who was very conscientious. He wrote poetry. He was a highly sensitive young man, and he's the one who wanted to learn to swim. I got the key to the pool, and we learned to swim. In the middle of the winter, the woman who was running physical education opened the pool. So by the time she opened the pool, he could swim a little, anyway.

Q: You said that the faculty at that point was mostly women, and so was the student body?

Robinson: The student body was mostly women. The faculty was not mostly women. There were quite a few women, but it was not mostly women. This young man who learned to swim did graduate from Talladega. Then he went back to Birmingham, and he was the one

who was burned up when the house caught fire. I don't know when I heard that or how I heard that. I must have heard it from Miss Montgomery, because I was in touch with her for many years after I left Talladega. Well, right up until the time she died, as a matter of fact.

Q: You said you had almost lost touch with the people in Chicago --

Robinson: Right.

Q: -- because they were, amazingly, not inquiring -- [Interruption]

Robinson: Yes. We kept in touch a lot. I probably got a publication or two, but I didn't -- otherwise, I wasn't very much in touch at all. There was a tendency, when I was young, for things to be all-absorbing, and what had gone before kind of got forgotten, temporarily.

Now let's see. I think that my draft status caught up with me, finally, when Selective Service asked the 135th Street Board for white people. They were in touch with me in January of '45, and I wrote and asked them if they could put it off for two months, so that I could complete most of the work that I was teaching at Talladega, and they did it.

Q: Was this your second year at Talladega, or --

Robinson: My first year. So they did it, and then one thing that I did at Talladega that was interesting -- I did chapel service, where I talked about Gandhi and conscientious objection -- that kind of thing. When I left Talladega, I think I left by bus, and I went through

Knoxville, then from Knoxville over to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, which is in the Smoky Mountains. That was an alternative service camp that was administered by the American Friends Service Committee.

Q: Oh, really. I didn't realize that private people could administer alternative service. Okay.

Robinson: Yes. Initially, I think they were all privately administered. The work project was government administered, and you were sent there at the orders of Selective Service. If you wanted to transfer from one to the other, you had to go through Selective Service.

Q: So those were the ones that were in the Southwest, or fairly isolated -- Colorado or --

Robinson: Well, Colorado -- when I got to Colorado, that was a government camp.

Q: That was a government camp. Okay.

Robinson: But a lot of the assignees, particularly in Friends' camps but to some extent in the camps of the Brethren --

Q: The Brethren -- ?

Robinson: The Church of the Brethren -- and to a far less extent in the camps that were administered by the Mennonites -- objected to the church being involved with Selective Service. Actually, it had been viewed by people who pushed the Selective Service provisions,

the conscientious-objector provisions in the Selective Service law, this idea of joint sponsorship that was supposed to make life a lot easier for the objectors than it had been in World War I -- and it really did. But it was a confusion, at the same time.

But the Gatlinburg Camp was an old CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp, about a mile outside of town. There were Philadelphia Quakers, who were very sophisticated, and there were North Carolina Quakers, who were not sophisticated at all, and whose Quaker meetings very often had ministers, which was not something the Quakers had had. I remember, almost as soon as I went there, some of the less religious, main-line Quakers said, "If you happen to sit with any of those ultra-Christian Quakers from North Carolina, the first thing you do is pour yourself a glass of milk and drink it, then pour yourself another one, and drink it all up, or you won't get anything." [Laughter] It wasn't really, literally true, but they had a tendency to just pile into the food. It was sort of a family-style table, anyway.

So the camp had different kinds of people in it, and it had some objectors who felt that you must pretty well toe the line and do whatever the director, who was appointed by the Friends, wanted done. There were others who thought they should do more to object to Selective Service. Pietro di Donato, who was a novelist and wrote *Christ in Concrete*, which is an interesting novel -- he had been there at Gatlinburg before I had, and he really got fed up with people who were being very conscientious all the time. So one night, about 3:00 in the morning, he got up. He had a flashlight and some red cellophane, I think, over the flashlight, and stuck it under his pajama top, and ran up and down all the dormitories, saying, "Help me, help me! My inner light is going out." [Laughter]

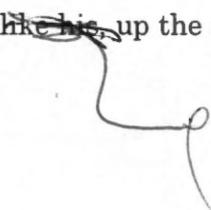
So anyhow, it was an interesting place to be, but I really felt I didn't belong, and I felt that the Friends shouldn't be spending money on me. If I'm going to do work for the government, the government ought to spend, so I applied to be transferred to Mancos, Colorado. But while I was at Gatlinburg, I was on crews that were sent to the Smokies to clear the trails. During the war, they weren't using other people to clear the trails. The trees fall and block everything, so there was quite a lot of that. The Smokies are just warm enough that they're full of snakes.

Q: Dangerous ones? Or just irritating ones?

Robinson: No, they have a lot of rattlesnakes, and some copperheads. Now the people who lived in the mountains were not afraid of the rattlesnakes, because the rattlesnakes made a noise. They said the only thing that was dangerous about the rattlesnakes was that you had to make sure you didn't get to an area that was rocky, like this. If there was a snake here, and you were too close, and the snake couldn't get out -- I had one rattle at me once, when I was going out to the swimming place, to swim. I just calmly talked and talked, and backed away and backed away, and he left, which was all right.

Q: You convinced him, reasoned with him--

Robinson: But the copperheads were really dangerous, because they just lie there, and when you get close enough -- It's hard to see them, then they bite. But I never saw any of those. But there were lots and lots of blacksnakes, which are not particularly poisonous to humans. I remember we were going up a trail, ~~like this~~ up the side of a mountain -- it was



sunny -- and there was an old tree that stuck out, like this. It was dead. I happened to look out at the end of that branch, in the sun, and it was crawling with blacksnakes, just full.

And I get this kind of a feeling, anyway.

queasy

Q: Most people do.

Robinson: There was a lean-to, way up high on the mountain, and I remember ~~I kind of~~ ^{some} ~~went up there to sleep. Some~~ of the married objectors took their wives and went up there one Saturday, to stay overnight. It was really beautiful, where they did their cooking and everything. When they were finished, the bears came around. Eventually, they realized they had to hoist the food up near the ceiling of the lean-to. Lean-tos, you know, are like this, and the bears thought they were ~~unclear~~ ^{afraid}, so they ran up the back of the lean-to and slid down. And it went on for hours. The women got hysterical, and the fellows got a little frightened, too. Anyhow, they said nobody stopped to eat anything in the morning, when the bears went away; they packed up and came down the mountain as fast as they could.

There was one dance while I was there, and the people who came to the dance were people who worked in the Tennessee Valley Authority, and their staff was integrated, because it was a --

Q: --government?

Robinson: Well, it was run by somebody who was liberal. Most government things were really segregated. It was only a liberal who would send women employees off to dance with conscientious objectors, in the first place. So that happened. Then the other big experience I

*Some mistake - I
never went up there
to sleep.*

*a "lean-to" is open at
the front*

had there was going to the movies, walking into town and going to the movies. It was beautiful twilight, but while I was in the movies it rather changed. I came out, and a storm was threatening and I barely got to the edge of town when it got darker and darker, the lightning flickered. I'd wait for the lightning to flicker, then run along the edge of the road. If I saw any cars, I'd get right off to the edge. I thought, "Now how am I going to find the entrance to the park?" It came down like this and across a bridge, that had no railings. That was under the trees, and I thought -- Anyway, I found the road, and I got as far as the bridge. The stream wasn't very far down, but there wasn't a lot of water in it. There were big rocks in it. So I thought, "I'm not going to walk off the edge of that bridge," and I got down on all fours and went across that way. It was such a dramatic storm, I was so glad to get in, it didn't matter.

So when I transferred, I went from Knoxville to Kansas City, and changed trains in Kansas City. It was afternoon and terribly hot. The sun was beating down, and I remember the train I came in on -- I was out this way, I had to get off and I had books in the suitcase, and it was heavy. You had to go way back here -- here was the terminal, and the train that I wanted was way at the other end, this way. I thought I would die getting there. Then, of course, it wasn't cold when you got in, at first, but it was a Grade B sleeper that they gave us, and it was pretty when we left; it was getting to be twilight when we left. You get out on the Great Plains, and the grasses are almost like waves of water. It was pretty, and it moved very fast. Let's see, did I go there? I think I got off in Pueblo and not Denver. It seems strange that that train would have gone --

Anyhow, I had a long layover, several hours, in Pueblo, before the train, the Rio Grande train (which doesn't operate anymore) -- It was a narrow-gauge train that went up over the

divide, and was wonderful. Finally, I got to Durango, Colorado, and I think they must have picked me up from there. I don't remember.

Q: Was the Grade B sleeper the kind that the sides pulled down and made a bed, or -- what happened?

Robinson: You mean the sleeper?

Q: Yes.

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Robinson: We had sheets and everything. It wasn't like a *couchette*, a European *couchette*. And I don't remember precisely what it was. I did sleep all right -- but I tend to sleep every chance, anyway.

So I finally got to Mancos, and it was completely different. It was in the Rockies, so it wasn't full of trees. It was 8,000 [feet] elevation, and it was dry and very stimulating. When you got up in the morning you felt fine. They had tennis courts, and [unclear] -- that's great. And you know that stimulating climate. By the time you'd worked -- I was too tired to play tennis. I just couldn't play it.

But Mancos had people of different stripes, too. There was a large contingent of people who were radicals. We had a Civilian Public Service union there that I joined.

Q: What was the Civilian Public Service union?

CPSU
Robinson: CPS^U was the CPS union, which is assignees. Most of us were pro-labor anyway, so we had our own little union, but you couldn't do very much with it, at least theoretically

Wehrly

Robinson - 3 - 91

you couldn't do very much with it. But Herb Brayerly [phonetic] was head of it, and he was a very even-tempered person. His views were radical, but he was not one to stir up a lot of fur. There were Church of Christ people there, ^{in the camp} and they were fundamentalist and very conscientious, and they were not radicals. We had one person named Faith Some, who was a Father Divine follower.

Q: His name was Faith?

Robinson: I suppose it was a Father Divine name. Faith, and Some was s-o-m-e-s.

Q: So it was an integrated unit.

Kulakoff

Robinson: Oh, yes.

Q: The Army wasn't integrated.

Squillacote

Robinson: No. But the Civilian Public Service camps were not integrated in the South. Gatlinburg was not. But the Northern ones were. Two people were on my work crew some of the time. One was Spolikoti [phonetic], and the other was Kulakoff [phonetic]. Spolikoti was Catholic, and he and three others and myself, we used to have a little prayer group after dinner. But ~~Spolikoti~~ had very distinct ideas about what it meant to be a Catholic, and he didn't approve -- They often had to wait for me for a few minutes, because I spent too much time at dinner, talking to Dakon, who had been a member of the International Workers of the World, had bummed around a lot, and told very interesting -- and sometimes quite improper -- stories.

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The other thing that ~~Spolikoti~~ really objected to was that we had a truck that took us to church, and I went down with ~~some of them~~ *someone who belonged* to the Church of Christ. They were having an earlier service. I don't know which way it was. Anyhow, I took him to a Catholic ~~mass~~, then

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I went to his service, and ~~Spolikoti~~ said, "You're not supposed to be going to other people's churches." But in many ways he was very amusing, and Kulakoff was Russian, and they had a regular routine, arguing about this, that and the other thing, which always ended up with ~~Spolikoti~~ condemning Kulakoff to go to the salt mines. [Laughter]

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Squillacote

So there was a lot of amusing stuff there. There was a fellow named Hansen, who worked on the newspaper with ~~Brayerly~~, and I worked on that paper, too.

Wehrly

Q: You had a newspaper?

Robinson: We had a newspaper. It was called --

Q: You had a union, and you had a newspaper --

Robinson: Our newspaper was *CPSGI*-- government issue.

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Robinson: -- make things work for columns when you didn't have computers, or anything of that sort. You typed up a dummy, and watched the margin. If you realized you were going to have too many things, you put slashes in, to fill out the line. So that when you typed it on

the stencil, you knew how many extra spaces you had to get, to make the thing come out even. So typing a stencil was a real chore, and I used to do some of that.

We had an assignee who had the ability to do cartoons, and he used to do cartoons and cut them into the stencil. So the newspaper was anti-Selective Service and generally anti-government. We used to mail it to the War-Resisters' League in New York, and people who were interested, across the country, we'd mail some to. So it got around quite a bit, and didn't make us any more popular with the camp management. The man who ran the camp was from the Bureau of Reclamation, and he and his assistant never could get it into their minds what conscientious objectors were like. They were always a little afraid of us. Nobody was going to be *violent*, after all. Also, we had too many people who left them out of their intellectual depth. There was a tradition, at lunchtime, for someone getting up, rapping his glass, everybody would be quiet, and he'd read from something. I remember something about the flag -- "that piece of bunting," etc. -- and the camp director and his family were there and they'd hear all this stuff, and they really thought we were pretty dangerous.

Q: But there wasn't anything they did to censor?

Robinson: Well, they didn't try to censor that. And the newspaper they had nothing to do with; they didn't pay for it, we did it, so that was that. To some extent, they wanted to live and let live. But they were upset that once in a while something would come up that they couldn't get away with, and a thing that caused a lot of trouble -- one crew that was made up mostly of members of the Church of Christ -- they were fundamentalists, they were conscientious people -- and they were taken out one day when it was snowing, and the foreman told them what they were to do, then he got in the truck and left. Well, it was the

afternoon. They did everything they were told to do, and they hung around for half an hour, he didn't come, and they walked into camp, and the foreman gave them a "refusal to work," which would go on your record and take three days off your furlough.

So they were upset about it, and these were people who usually had relatively little to do with the CPS union. Anyhow, we organized a meeting, and a few people came over and told what had happened. I went over and got the camp director to come over, and he had to listen to them. They took the refusals to work off the record for them, but that really put us in with some of the conscientious Church of Christ people. The assignees who worked in the office sent in the records to Selective Service and did all that kind of thing. The bookkeeper did everything else. It was done by assignees, working for the camp director. Anyway, after this CPS union success, the next thing we knew five people who had been in camp quite a while, and were considered radicals by management, suddenly got involuntary transfers to a camp in Lapine, Oregon, and we did a special issue of *CPSGI*, something about each of them and why we thought they had been moved. By this time we had had V-J Day -- the war was over. A number of us had gone up on Mt. Sterling, on that two-day holiday, but the war was over, and I think the camp director thought he was losing control of what was going on around there. Harper LeCompte [phonetic], who was in CORE later on, and had been in jail before he went to CPS, and Rick Lowenberg -- Rick used to get himself assigned to stand outside the dining hall, saying that he was a slave, and Harper did various things with this.

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Anyhow, all of a sudden, one day, marshals came to camp and they picked up Lowenberg -- Did they pick up just Lowenberg that first day? I'm not sure. Anyhow, within a day or two, they had taken Harper and Lowenberg and me, and arrested us. They arrested us for

[Refusal to work]

a violation of the Selective Service. It was a felony under the draft law. They carted us to Durango. We spent the night in the jail in Durango, and I think it was just Harper and me that night. I think Lowenberg was taken the day before. Anyhow, I remember it was a small jail, and the wife of the jailer did the cooking and the food was all right. It wasn't bad. Then the next day we were in the Narrow Gauge Railway, and went over the divide during an eclipse. It was absolutely beautiful. We came down, had to change trains then, and we got to Denver. When we got to Denver we were taken into the district attorney's offices. We were hungry. We didn't get anything. But all the people who had been run in for violating the Office of Price Administration, they took money from them and sent out for food. They were very well treated; the objectors were not well treated at all.

So we were there a few hours, then we were released, I guess on the recognizance of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] attorney. What we were charged with was refusal to work. We found out we were charged with refusal to work, and we hadn't refused to work. If you were going to object to the system, that was one thing you knew you couldn't do. So that word got back to the camp, and the people who worked in the office said, "Well, that's not true. We sent in the records. That's not true." They got copies of the records and smuggled them to the people who took them off camp and got them Xeroxed --

Q: Did they have Xeroxes then?

Robinson: Got them copied, someway, then they drove back -- so they were in the office.

The trials were not together. I think Lowenberg's was first. At any rate, the foreman, in Lowenberg's case, was presented with a slip which showed that Lowenberg refused to work

on such and such a day, and he said, "Oh, yes, that's my signature, etc., etc." When it got to cross-examination, our attorney gave him a copy of the slip for the same day and asked him if that was his signature, and he said, oh, yes, it was. He said, "Well, this one doesn't say they refused to work." But at that stage, I had been at Mancos for a good number of months. I knew a lot of people at Mancos, and the district attorney decided that it might be the better part of valor to drop my case, providing I wasn't going to be around and to have anything to say on the trials of the other people. So he approached the man from civil liberties, and civil liberties said he had enough to handle that I should take the deal. So they sent me right down to Mancos, and as soon as I got there, I had to transfer to Big Flats, New York.

Q: Big Flats, New York?

Robinson: Big Flats, New York.

In the meantime, the other two were convicted and sent to prison. Their cases were appealed, and they were reversed on appeal, so they were out of prison while I was still in conscientious objector camp. But I wasn't at Big Flats really very long. It was the winter-time, and it was a place where they were supposed to be working on a nursery for plants, etc., but in the winter there wasn't really very much to do of that sort, and we did various other things. We also had a lot of cold, windy, snowy weather, days when whatever they had for us to do couldn't be done. So we spent a number of days just in camp. There was a black fellow from Denver. I guess he was in charge of getting people up or something. Anyhow, he'd come through the dormitory saying, "Well, it's a snow day. Go back to sleep."

Q: Where was Big Flats?

Robinson: It's up near Elmira. Some of the assignees actually worked at the Catholic Hospital in Elmira. Back in those days, they used to wash the walls in the hospital. I'm sure they never bother with anything like that, now. Hospitals are no longer very clean.

So I wasn't there very long. I applied to come to a life-raft ration experiment at Metropolitan Hospital, which was then on Welfare Island (Roosevelt Island, now), and under their rules and regulations, when it was administered by the Friends Service Committee -- that wouldn't have happened if my draft board was in New York.

Theoretically, with Selective Service, you couldn't go back to where you came from, you had to be somewhere else. But by this time the war was over, and it all went through like that. I ended up on Welfare Island and met a young Quaker who had been at Gatlinburg, whom I had met there, and who had felt very adventurous -- he had volunteered to be a smoke jumper out ^{work} ~~in~~ -- He was the brash type, you know, who would do something like that.

Anyhow, he was a volunteer for this experiment, and he told me about smoke jumping. He said, "They tell you exactly what to do. The first time I jumped out I wasn't frightened in the slightest. The more times I did it, the more scared I got. Once we had a fire, it was sort of at the top of a canyon, and no matter how I pulled and dumped air, I couldn't land at the top of the canyon. I finally landed in the bottom of the canyon, with all this heavy gear, and had to climb back up. Anyhow, when I got to the end of that assignment, I was so glad to be out of there."

Q: Did he volunteer to live on rations?

Robinson: Yes. Life raft rations. And we were fortunate. It was the third or fourth run of it, and they had gotten over the period where they tried people out on 600 calories. We were, I think, on 1,200 calories, which wasn't so bad. They gave us a standardized diet, which was 10-in-1 army rations, for ten days. They took blood out of the arm every day, and they took urine, and they stuck your fingers. Then we would go for ten days on the diet, and the diet was a formula, which was egg-white, flour and a little yeast, and no salt. They baked this stuff into biscuits, and you got a jar about this size. That's what you got for the day. You broke it up into three things. Then you got four glasses, little glasses, of salt water -- because they had discovered on the first experiment that people got some liver damage when they didn't have any salt. They got liver damage.

We used to play bridge, and the first four or five days on this diet, the bridge was still pretty good. By the ninth and tenth day, you couldn't remember what was trump. It was funny what it did to you. Then you went back on the standardized diet afterward. But we lived in hospital pajamas and robes, and I don't know whether they provided slippers or we had slippers, but you could wander anywhere you wanted to wander on Welfare Island. We used to walk all the way down to the bridge, maybe, but you were obviously hospital stuff. It was amusing.

Q: Who was in the hospital then? Were there people still in the hospital?

Robinson: Oh, yes. There were people in the hospital. We were at the end of a ward. It was a big, open ward, and we had -- I can remember one day when a family came over to visit, and the nurse in charge was so upset because the person had died, and they had not been notified. Something had happened, and they got over there to find out that who they had

jar - I think it was a paper bag not a jar

come to visit was dead. We had an Irish nurse who was very amusing, and liked to tease the conscientious objectors in one way or another. One of them decided one day that she was going to really get teased, and he got a big syringe. I don't know where he got the dye, but he dyed the ~~bread and~~ water and filled up the syringe -- I can't remember her name -- Anyhow, she went she got up, in her white uniform, he said, "I'm going to catch you," and he chased her up and down the thing, and she thought she was getting squirted with blood - and, of course, she wasn't. But she was fun.

After we were off the experiment, we lived there for a little while. Then we had to eat in the employee cafeteria. The 10-in-1 rations were quite good. We did our heating and washing the dishes and the whole thing, we did that ourselves, and it was good. You got a can that was ham and eggs all mixed up together, but it was very good-tasting, and there were lots and lots of calories in it. When you got to the employee dining room, the food was awful, just awful. In order to have a boiled egg, you'd take three or four, and the ones that hadn't been cooked at all, you'd just discard. The food waste was awful. But you kept going until you found one that was cooked.

Q: Okay. I thought maybe they were cheating on the food.

Robinson: It was just terrible. That's when I -- By that time we could go off the island, and wear our own clothes, and that's when I first went to New York CORE.

That's probably enough for today.

[END OF SESSION]

Hank