

VJD

Interviewee: James Robinson

Session #1

Interviewer: Sheila Michaels

Location:

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Q: This is the first tape with Jim Robinson, one of the founders of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] in 1942 in Chicago, and who was executive secretary of CORE from 1957 to the end of 1960. He's now writing a memoir. I think that's all we need to --

So what led you to FOR [Fellowship of Reconciliation]-- it was FOR, yes?

Robinson: It was FOR and the War Resisters League [WRL], and *The Catholic Worker*.

Q: Okay. You were Catholic -- or are, I guess.

Robinson: Was? Am.

Q: What had been the drive in your life that led you to --

Robinson: Well, I grew up in a small town in western New York, and my father had died when I was three. I was I guess enough of a misfit that I was interested in people who had suffered discrimination. The original interest was in the Indians who had lived in some parts of western New York. Letchworth Park was close to us, and it has several waterfalls in it. The Indians had lived in and around there, so I had that interest when I was a small

child. But there were no Negroes living in Wyoming, New York, the town where I grew up. There were 350-450 people in the village.

Q: How did it get the name, "Wyoming?"

Robinson: It's an Indian name. There's a Wyoming in Pennsylvania and a Wyoming in western New York state, and then there's the state of Wyoming.

Q: It just seems like they'd be from such different languages.

Robinson: But it is Indian. Right.

When I went to the barber in the town next to us -- there was a black man who was a barber, who took his own time about whatever he did. He had a violin. He wasn't well educated but he was very bright, so he carried on interesting conversations. A lot of the businessmen went to him, there, and he had a violin. So sometimes you could get him -- in the middle of your haircut -- to play the violin.

But, other than that, I came first to Fordham [University], and then I transferred to Columbia [University]. I had virtually no contact with Negroes or blacks, and at Columbia itself, at the time I was there, there were no black students in the college. The only blacks I saw around the university were at Teachers College. In the summer session -- I went once to a summer session -- there were then quite a number of blacks at Teachers College, particularly, including Southerners, but I didn't get to know these people. I mean, I met a couple people but I didn't get to know them.

Q: This was very late in the 1930s?

Robinson: This was late in the 1930s. In '35 I went to Fordham, and in '36 I transferred to Columbia.

Q: Okay. And you went to Fordham from Wyoming, New York to --

Robinson: Right.

Q: -- become a -- what?

Robinson: Well, just to go to college. I thought at the time that I would be a doctor. My father had been a doctor. I found out, when I got to Columbia and took chemistry, that I was not going to be a doctor. [Laughs]

Q: I'm surprised you didn't find it out in high school.

Robinson: I was very active in the peace movement at Columbia. It was the Depression, and there were lots of radicals. The student body was not predominately radical, but there were communists and there were various kinds of socialists, and there were pacifists. Some of the socialists were Christian socialists, some of them were Marxian socialists, and there were all kinds of things. We had a peace strike every year, which was run by a peace council. It was just one hour, when people cut classes and went to a rally -- that's all it amounted to -- and they took the Oxford Pledge -- not to fight for king or country, etc. --

Q: -- which started at Oxford with -- What was the basis of the Oxford -- ?

Robinson: The Oxford Pledge was at Oxford University, and I think it went back to the early '30s at some point. Because it said not to fight for king or country, all kinds of radicals took it. Most of them were not committed to non-violence, but the pacifists at Columbia (and some of the people were both socialists and pacifists) were opposing all war. And as [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt was drifting us toward involvement in the European war, we were with the Keep America Out of War people. We were saying, "All this stuff about democracy in Europe -- we certainly don't have it here. We have a tenth of a nation."

But I was convinced of it, absolutely convinced, but I hadn't had real contact with it. So when I graduated and decided to look for work in New York City, I thought, "Well, I'm used to living in a dormitory, so I might as well do the same." I looked up the YMCAs [Young Men's Christian Associations], and here was one in Harlem.

Q: 135th Street, yes.

Robinson: So I said, "Well, this is a nice theory. Let's see if it takes."

So I went up, I had no problem getting a room, and I lived there for two years, in Harlem.

Q: The Y was very, very middle class, wasn't it?

Robinson: Oh, it was predominately middle class, yes. At that time the newer building, on the south side of 135th Street, had the usual kind of Y cafeteria. But it also had a lunch bar, and the black businessmen in the area used to go there for lunch. That's quite a nice place there, to eat. I ate there a few times. Most of the time, since I was working in publishing downtown, I ate downtown. It was cheaper, and I was a vegetarian, anyway, so the automats were perfect. They always had vegetables.

Q: And overcooked, too.

The rooms were pricey for Harlem, weren't they? Because people lived in the rooming houses at that time.

Robinson: Well, they weren't *very* pricey. The first room I had, a single room, was \$4.50 a week, and that included maid service and everything.

Q: Really?

Robinson: They supplied the towels and changed the beds. That was in the new building. I didn't live in the new building at first; I lived across the street, in the Annex, because there was room over there. I can't remember whether it was \$4.00 or \$4.50, but I wasn't there very long when I got to know everybody on that floor, almost immediately. There was one double room, near the elevators, and Oliver Smith -- I don't remember the name of his roommate -- had that, and because it was handy, that's where people used to collect and talk. Because it was Depression, people didn't have money to go out very much, so there were a lot of us sitting around and talking. They were mostly people about my age.

And his roommate left, and he said, "Well, why don't you move over here?" So I was in that sort of central room for a while.

Q: Central, in that they drank and smoked and --

Robinson: People smoked cigarettes. I didn't smoke at that time. There were references to "reefers," etc., but I don't remember anybody -- Even when I went to parties, I don't remember it. I can be fairly blind sometimes, but, anyway --

Q: Well, the bathroom door was probably closed.

Robinson: Down the street, further east, Catherine de Hewitt [phonetic] opened a place called Friendship House. She was a Catholic integrationist who came from Canada. So I did some volunteer work there, too. But, at the same time, I was active in the anti-war, anti-conscription stuff, most of which was outside of Harlem.

Q: Did conscription start then?

Robinson: Conscription started -- The first registration was while I was in Harlem, with the result that I registered in Harlem. Union Theological -- George Houser -- had a group of people there who, if they had continued, would have gotten deferments, because they were theological students. They were going to be ministers. But they objected to the draft, and as a group they refused to register. They made a public statement about it. That was going on

Huick

*Balones de Huick was an emigré from the Soviet Union
I think -- ~~probably~~ taken to Canada by her parents.*

probably taken to Canada by her parents.

downtown

Robinson - 1 - 7

at the same time, and I went to pacifist meetings ~~down~~ with them and talked a little bit about pacifism with people I knew in Harlem, too.

(I did not meet ~~the~~
George Houser + the seminary
students then - only
later in
Chicago)

Q: Did you feel there was any disconnect between your uptown and downtown life?

Robinson: No, not really. At the publishing house where I worked, Fran -- I can't remember her last name now -- Anyway, I asked her to go to a dance at the Golden Gate Ballroom in Harlem, with Clifford Van Buren (somebody I knew at the Y) and his girlfriend. She had no hesitation about doing that.

Harlem, in those days, was not really unsafe. It was unsafe, to some extent, for people who were cruising late at night, trying to meet prostitutes, I think -- that kind of thing -- and I moved there when it was hot weather, so the first three or four weeks I used to get approached on the street -- after which the pimps and prostitutes knew I wasn't a customer, and nothing happened.

Anyhow, Fran went to that dance, and we had a very good time, up at the dance hall. I don't think everyone down there at the office felt that way about things, but --

Q: Where were you working in publishing, and how much were you making?

Robinson: I was making -- When I first went to Harlem I was making \$11.00 a week, and at that time I was working for the American Optical Company as a messenger boy, delivering glasses and things like that, from their Bronx office. They were in the South Bronx, at 149th Street. I did that delivery stuff Monday through Friday, then on Saturday

mornings they taught me how to do the report to the main office -- the kind of thing you'd never expect a messenger boy to do now.

Q: A what?

Robinson: A report, a sales report, for them. They gave me the data, and I made out their -- The office manager taught me how to do it, and I did it. But I was only there three or four weeks, then I got this job with Prentice Hall, down at 13th Street. They were at 13th and Fifth Avenue in those days.

Q: It was still Paternoster Row then? I think it used to be called Paternoster Row, down in the lower part of Fifth Avenue.

~~Macmillan~~

sp Macmillan?

Robinson: Maybe McMillen [Publishing] was down south of us, and later on McMillen's building was sold to Forbes, before Forbes moved out of town. I don't mean Forbes. Now wait -- No, I've got that wrong. Prentice Hall moved out of town, and that building we were in was taken over by *Forbes* magazine. Then they moved down to what had been McMillen.

sp,

Q: Okay. So you had a job in publishing that was -- editorial?

Robinson: It was copy-editing and proofreading. When I first went there I got a big raise. Instead of making \$11.00 a week I made \$13.00 a week. That soon went to \$15.00, and then I was there two years, so it went up \$2.00 ~~a week~~ for each of the two years. So by the end of it I was making \$17.00 -- which was not terribly bad in those days, but it was lower than

any of the other publishing places. A little bit lower. Prentice Hall hired people like me who were fresh out of college, because that was the way to get people in cheap. [Laughs]

Anyway, I worked there for two years and I joined the union, which was undercover, and eventually got fired for that. They didn't want to say it was for that reason. They gave out freelance work, so he agreed to give me freelance work, and so I did a little freelance work after I left New York and went to Chicago -- the University of Chicago.

Q: So you left New York to go to Chicago for --

Robinson: -- to get my Master's at the University of Chicago. That was the fall of 1941.

When I got to Chicago I had to work. I expected to take two years to get a Master's. Chicago had the quarterly system, so I could go and take less than a full load. But instead of going three-quarters of the year, I could go four quarters, and work at night. I really wanted to work part-time. The first job I had was a night job, but it didn't go on the full eight hours. It was a temp job, and it was proofreading imprints on Christmas cards. Whew. So it was name after name after name. I took that until near Christmas, and that was the end of that job. I went home for Christmas, and when I came back I got a job, not in Chicago, but in Wilmette, which is an hour and a half -- from the south side of Chicago you take the elevated, then transfer to the North Shore. It took me about an hour and a half each way. The difficulty with it was it was a full-time job.

Q: At night?

Robinson: At night.

Q: The south side of Chicago was black then?

Robinson: Oh. That was the interesting thing about the University of Chicago. The north-south street that made the boundary was Cottage Grove, and the University of Chicago was several blocks east of Cottage Grove. Hyde Park and the Woodlawn areas were all white. South of 63rd Street and west of Cottage Grove tended to be white or mixed, a little bit mixed, but from 63rd Street north, up to the 30s, it was a black ghetto. So we weren't very far, really, from the black ghetto.

Q: Can I ask -- When you moved to Chicago, you were already active in the peace movement. Was there, aside from the Catholic group in Harlem, was there any kind of political activity in Harlem that you were involved in at all?

Robinson: Only peripherally. When I was there, [A. Philip] Randolph's proposition for a march on Washington first came up. A man named Parrish, a young man who was a socialist and lived on Sugar Hill, was one of the ^{young} ~~big~~ leaders for the March on Washington. One of his assistants -- ~~what was her name?~~ Anyhow, she was also a socialist, and I got to know them. I was interested in the March on Washington.

I think the threat of the March on Washington at that time -- and I'm not quite clear on the dates -- but at some point, Randolph got a concession and called off the march. The young people didn't like it. They wanted to press for more. But it was wise that he did it, I think, because Randolph was no organizer. The march probably wouldn't have been that much, if

Lillian Walcott (later married Joseph Quinn of Chicago Youth WAACP, one of the founders of CORE in Chicago)

young or youth leaders

it had come off. He was very good at talking, but his -- the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car train men, or Porters -- there were other people there who did the nuts and bolts that he didn't do.

There was that kind of contact. And there were a few black socialists that I would tend to have some contact with --

Q: Like Miss [Ella J.] Baker and Bayard [T.] Rustin, or people who --

*Ella Baker
I knew later*

Robinson: Bayard Rustin I knew as a pacifist, in the Fellowship for Reconciliation, and he was not at that time actively connected with socialism. He was an ex-communist. I didn't know him well, but he and ^{Jimm Farmer}~~Farber~~ were both at the Fellowship of Reconciliation, but I knew them more after I went to Chicago than I did in New York.

But in the fall of '41, the Fellowship of Reconciliation at the University of Chicago, which included people from --

Q: I know you want to go to Chicago, but I want a little bit more of New York. I was just thinking -- you left New York in '41.

Robinson: Right.

Q: And you were feeling that Roosevelt was getting us into a war --

Robinson: Right.

Q: -- was your feeling. And the feeling was very high against it, I assume --

Robinson: Right.

Q: -- certainly among pacifists, and among socialists, too?

Robinson: Among most socialists. Among the Norman Thomas socialists. There was a big Keep America Out of War committee, and on campus -- I think it was called "The Youth Committee Against War." It had been the "Youth Committee for the Oxford Pledge." It became the "Youth Committee Against War."

Q: The Oxford group had started when? After or before the First World War?

Robinson: Oh, it was after. The Oxford Pledge was something -- there were already both pacifists and communists at Oxford, at the time that first took place. That was a '30s thing, I think. It had come to this country when I was still in high school, when the peace strikes started, about 1933. So there was a lot of activity in New York.

Q: And what was the feeling in Harlem about an impending war? How were people seeing it? As a war against Germany, or a war, probably, against Japan? Or were they thinking about Japan, even?

Robinson: They weren't thinking, particularly, about Japan at that point. Black people were not enthusiastic about war. They were probably not as opposed to it as they were in

Young Communist League members etc.

U.S.

Chicago, because the flavor -- In Chicago, a great many people were, and continued to be, opposed to the war. In New York, there was a big confrontation between the people who were pro-war and the people who were anti-war. America First had rallies, and Keep America Out of War had rallies, and the people on the other side -- the communists on campus were very much in favor of Popular Front. Then they were in favor of collective security, and then Hitler and Stalin signed a pact, and suddenly they were all for -- "The Yanks Are Not Coming" ~~was~~ ^{their} a big slogan. It switched, like this, overnight. Pacifists and socialists were roundly hated by the communists. Well, in Germany they said they spent more time fighting the socialists than they did the Nazis, until it was too late.

So there was all that kind of ferment going on.

Q: Right. And Spain, too.

Robinson: The interesting thing, from my point of view, was that I was a radical pacifist, and I had moved to Harlem for that reason -- not to propagandize, but to find out whether this was really feasible. If people of different races and different ethnic backgrounds are not going to be open -- but people were perfectly open.

[in Harlem]

Q: People on the street.

Robinson: Yes. Yes.

Q: Once it was found out that you were not going to pick up somebody; that you were not there as an exploiter.

sit in
 Robinson: Right. One of the assistants at the Y, he took me aside one day and he said, "You know, you ought to think of working with race. There aren't that many people -- white people -- who are accepted the way you seem to be accepted by everybody." So I had gotten there because of a radical orientation, I really had a very good time. I went to parties. I'd never been to parties where the liquor was illegal before. Nobody had much money, so they would take up a collection, and somebody would go out and get the liquor. Well, sometimes they got the right places, but once we were up -- it was making too much noise, too late at night, I guess, and somebody called the cops. So the cops came up, and the people, before the cops got there, were nervous about whether the guys who had taken the money had gotten the liquor where they should have, or whether it was "King Kong," which would have been bootleg liquor.

the cops
 But the cops were already up there because of the noise, so they gave them a drink, and they said, "Let's keep it a little bit quieter," and left, and the party went on. And it was quieter. So I had a good time.

Q: Were there black cops in Harlem at that time?

Robinson: There were a few, not a lot. I don't think any of the ones who came up that time were black. Black cops had a bad reputation in Harlem, for sort of outdoing the whites. And, of course, at that time, black cops were only in ghetto areas. They didn't put them anywhere else.

Q: They didn't direct traffic downtown or anything.

Robinson: No, I don't think so. But New York was very different from Chicago, because there were lots of things -- there were lots of places where blacks could go and eat. There were places where they couldn't, and there were nightclubs where -- the Cotton Club, originally, when it was uptown, was just for white customers. I don't know, later on, downtown, what happened with the Cotton Club, but Barney Josephson's Café Society, downtown, ~~I think~~ that was open. At least, I was only there once or twice, and once when I was there Paul Robeson came in. So I think that --

But some places were and some places weren't, but there was a lot less -- the prejudice wasn't blatant, the way it was in Chicago. Chicago made a good place for CORE to start, because it was blatant, and yet it was a state with a civil rights law. It wasn't enforced.

Q: When did they pass a civil rights law?

Robinson: I think it had been quite some time before we were there.

Q: It wasn't Reconstruction or anything?

Robinson: No, I don't think it was Reconstruction. It was later than that, and it was ignored. Southern Illinois, you know, is *south*.

Q: St. Louis, where I'm from, is good compared to southern -- was good -- compared to southern Illinois.

definitely it was open

Robinson: Many places in Chicago discriminated, and during the war there was lots of war industry there, and people were coming straight up from the South, both blacks and whites.

Q: Well, this was certainly a movement that had begun during the '30s, when people were being closed down, apparently -- tenant farms and things. They went on to Chicago.

Robinson: Now is there anything more about New York, or should I -- ?

Q: I'm following you to Chicago now. [Laughs]

Robinson: I went to a meeting at the -- an organizing meeting for that year, for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, at the university --

Q: And this was '41?

Robinson: -- in the fall of '41, and there must have been seventy-five people there. They came from the Divinity School, they came from Chicago Theological Seminary from Meadville, which was the Unitarian seminary, and from the graduate school -- which I was in -- from the college. There were quite a few from the college. But there was a good-size group, and the ministers who had been at Union, and who had been sent to jail for refusing to register -- they had been at Danbury -- they were paroled, to continue their education at Chicago Theological Seminary. So they got there at the same time I did.

*to
Chicago*

So at that original meeting, Bernice Fisher was there. She'd come from Rochester, New York, and she was, I think, studying religious education. And Homer [A.] Jack, who was at

Meadville, had come from Rochester, too. But Bernice was there at that meeting, and I think Homer was. Anyhow, they said that they had decided that the Fellowship was going to work on a number of different problems, and they wanted to have "cell groups" around the problems. Well, one of the problems was race, and Bernice Fisher was going to have that cell group, or that's what I thought.

Q: Was she black or white?

Robinson: White. So it was directly out of that cell group that CORE developed.

But we had this big organizing meeting, probably in November, and then on December 7th the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor.

Q: Wait a second. Let me go back. You had the organizing meeting what -- ?

Robinson: The Fellowship for Reconciliation organizing meeting, which set up these cell groups.

Q: Okay. The Fellowship of Reconciliation was already a well-established group, yes?

Robinson: Yes.

Q: Okay.

Robinson: The Fellowship for Reconciliation had started at the time of World War I, in England, and it's an international organization. But it was unusually big for a pacifist organization, at the University of Chicago. There were more pacifists on campus than there were communists.

Q: Really?

Robinson: I think there were. At least we seemed to dominate things around there. At Columbia, it was not that way. But at Chicago, it was. That may have been partly because the war came along. If you have something to fight, as the pacifists did, that would galvanize the people.

Q: Had communists begun to lose credibility because of the Hitler-Stalin pact?

Robinson: Well, they lost credibility outside. Many of them stuck with all those shifts, for quite a long time, partly because it gave them a sense of power. It was a tightly organized, disciplined group. There was no dissent, so if they decided to do thus and so, all the people pushed in the same way. A group of forty could overcome a group of eighty, a liberal group, because they all stuck together, and the liberals were all over the map. So there was a feeling -- and some of that idea was copied, to some extent, with these cell groups. The cell groups didn't -- people, of course, had to be opposed to all war, and they had to believe in non-violent, direct action, etc.; otherwise, they were pretty much free to think, "Yes, we should do this," or "We shouldn't do that." But, the fact was that, because we were organized about something very specific, on which we were pretty much in agreement, it

had a multiplier effect, as far as our power was concerned. Because we were a very small group. But I think the lesson of the communist discipline hadn't been totally lost on us.

Now, earlier pacifists were less that way, I think. Many of the pacifists in the '20s and early '30s were liberal, theologically liberal Protestants who had the theory that people were basically good, and if you treated everybody well, then everything was going to be fine. Well, the Christians, in the group at the University of Chicago -- most of them were Protestants, but they were neo-orthodox Protestants. Like Catholics, they believed that people are bent toward evil. They have the capacity for good, but they're bent toward evil, and you have to deal with that.

So discipline was a more acceptable kind of thing, and there was a lot of religious background to a good deal of this. Of course, later on, in the Civil Rights in the South, it was the black churches that did it.

Q: You had the organizing cells at the FOR -- the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Robinson: Right.

Q: Bernice Fisher, you said?

Robinson: Bernice Fisher, right.

Q: So her cell was going to concentrate on race relations --

Robinson: Right.

Q: -- so you joined that one. Did you join any others, at the same time?

Robinson: No. Later on, ^{when} ~~after~~ CORE, I ^{joined CORE too, and} ~~got organized,~~ I worked on the restaurant stuff, too.

Q: Restaurant?

Robinson: Discrimination in restaurants. There was a lot of discrimination in restaurants.

Q: What was FOR's cell going to take on? What was that cell ^{on race} ~~that a racial cell~~ going to take on?

Robinson: Well, it did take on restaurants.

Q: Yes. But what was its purpose when it formed?

Robinson: Well, when it was formed, it was formed to try to find ways that we could apply non-violent, direct action to overcome the color line. We used a book by Krishnalal [J.] Shridharani -- it was his doctoral thesis at Columbia, published as a book -- and it was a sociological taking apart of the Gandhi movement, explaining it in steps, etc. [Mohandas K.] Gandhi did not particularly like the book, because it was not -- he hadn't thought of it as "You do this, then you do this." But for us, in a completely different kind of culture, it was very, very useful. After you had established that there was discrimination, you approached the people who were responsible for it, and tried to negotiate. You had to be patient. We

"War Without Violence"

wrote letters and we made telephone calls and so on. Then when you got nowhere, you did some sort of ultimatum, in the restaurant situation.

The problem, of course, with the Fellowship of Reconciliation on campus was that it was almost all white. The inter-racial cell group was mixed from the beginning. There was one ~~moment~~ I think a theological student and black -- who was in it, but Bernice had contacts with Dr. and Lillian Falls; he was a black Catholic doctor who had some connection with both Friendship House and the *Catholic Worker*, and connections with things like the Urban League, etc. But Joseph Gwynn ^{OK.} ~~phonetic~~, who was a pacifist, was black and the head of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] youth group, on the South Side, and he came into this race-relations cell. Quinn

So the race-relations cell was predominately white, but it was integrated almost from the very beginning. Dr. Falls and his wife talked to us about housing segregation. His wife was head of a welfare office in a black ghetto, and she talked to us about welfare, too. The first big ghetto housing project had been built, the Ida Wells Housing Project, which was not high-rise, and she said, "People always have problems, you know. In the old tenements, the women were so busy protecting their children from the rats. That's what I always used to hear at the welfare office -- in addition to their financial needs. But when they get moved into Ida Wells, where there are no rats, then what you hear is about the troubles they're having with their husbands. The level of discomfort seems to remain more or less constant."

But they drove us around the whole ghetto and pointed out the kind of housing that was there. Some of it is still in Chicago.

[END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE; BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

Robinson: The typical house, apartment house, was about three stories high. There was a basement, in which the coal-fire furnace was located, then there was a central stairway, and an apartment on each side. So there would be six apartments. Now, some of them, particularly in the ghetto area, were then cut up, so there were more apartments on a floor. These were brick buildings, but the back porch things were wood, and there were staircases that went down. So it must have been ideal for crime.

So they took us around, and they talked about the absolute lines where -- Cottage Grove was "it." That side of Cottage Grove was black, and this side of Cottage Grove was white, and contact was kept to a minimum.

Q: What about the stores? Were there stores on Cottage Grove?

Robinson: Oh, yes. There were some. Two or three blocks to the west was South Park Avenue, and that was a big shopping -- it had lots of things on it -- nightclubs, there was a roller rink. That was sort of the main stem for the ghetto. There was a settlement house, and eventually that's where CORE used to meet, at that settlement house.

Q: But Cottage Grove was a residential street, so there was no mixing.

Robinson: Yes.

Tilman and Arthur Falk
(They) said that the racially restrictive covenants were a tool for segregation, and they were

also a tool for profiteering; that what went on -- that the ghetto was three or four blocks away, and there was pressure on the people who owned houses to sign covenants not to rent or sell to any non-Caucasian. And those covenants, at that time, were enforceable in courts.

Q: Oh, they were? Okay.

Robinson: They ran with the deed, so if somebody did it, and sold it and you bought it, you still had this covenant governing your house. But they said when the pressure in the ghetto is too great, the places immediately contiguous, or within a block or so, real estate people buy up places, and they rent, in several different cases, quite quickly, to blacks -- sometimes deliberately to unruly blacks, so that --

Q: Oh. Okay.

Robinson: -- so the property values go right down, and the real estate company could grab a lot more property. Because the blacks can't buy ^{freely} very well, and it cost them more money to get the same house. So it was a racket. Most of the people who were involved in it weren't in the racket. The white people lost, the black people lost, but there were people who profited, in the middle.

So we thought we ought to work something up to attack that kind of thing, and that's where Fellowship House came from. Hugo ^{Victoreon} ~~Victorine~~ [phonetic] and I, and, I think, Russell Smith, went to the real estate office, student rental stuff, at the University of Chicago, and Edgar Lee Masters' House -- which was then owned by his divorced wife -- was for rent.

freely

freely

Russell '34

*one
"2"*

Q: The writer of *Spoon River Anthology* -- the poet.

Robinson: Right. So the three of us signed the lease for six months, and we, of course, were all white. We didn't say anything about it being interracial, but we did say there was room there for eight or ten of us, and it would be an ideal living arrangement. Actually, there was a little apartment on the top floor that a white couple had, in that building. I don't think we even knew that at the time we rented it. But they "forged in" and they were on our side!

[Laughs]

Q: Oh. Okay.

Robinson: Anyhow, we moved in, and Jim [James L.] Farmer was important in that, not because he did very much, but because we were kind of short of blacks. Joseph Gwynn lived at home, but gradually it became ^{interracial} I guess, by the time we moved, at the end of the six months, we were at least half black --

Q: Oh, really.

Robinson: -- by the time we got down to the South Side. By that time, of course, we had more and more contacts. We were no longer isolated at the university campus.

Q: You had more and more contacts in the black community -- through whom?

Robinson: Well, through CORE.

Q: Wait a second. You were a founder of CORE.

Robinson: I was a founder of CORE, right.

Q: You had already founded CORE -- at the Fellowship House?

Robinson: The Fellowship House came before CORE, and CORE -- Still, it was a project of the race-relations cell.

Q: You decided to call yourselves Congress of Racial Equality, too?

Robinson: We talked about different names. Finally, something about "committee" and "racial equality," so it was the "Committee on Racial Equality." Bernice Fisher said, "Well, that's not right, because the races are already equal; it's just that --" Committee of Racial Equality." Also, we had that CORE acronym in mind. I don't know whose idea the acronym was, really, but this had come about because of a project at White City Roller Rink, which was at 63rd Street and Cottage Grove. That was a project I was not involved in. I worked nights and a lot of our ^{interracial} tests were at night, during the week --

Q: What came about? CORE came about, because -- ?

Robinson: CORE came about because of it. It was reported to the race-relations cell that this roller rink, which was across the street from the end of the black ghetto, but on the black-ghetto side of Cottage Grove, and had been -- I guess it went way back to the 1893

Check this - acronym was proposed by a Japanese-American man - Bob Chino

Exposition, in Chicago. Anyhow, it was called White City. The name had nothing to do with race.

They had a roller rink, and we were told that blacks were not permitted to go there, so we sent test groups down there. Sure enough, the whites got in, the blacks were told it was a club. So a lot of students at the University of Chicago wanted to be involved in it. By that time we were in the War, and many of these students were not pacifists. So the idea evolved of a disciplined, non-violent group, which was limited to race and didn't have anything to do with the War, but which would include pacifists and non-pacifists. So that was how --

Q: -- and the dynamic was that you got a critical number of black people involved in it, and then it became -- it kind of went off from -- it became its own entity?

Robinson: It became its own entity, right.

Now for a good many months after the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality was operating, the FOR race-relations cell was operating, too, and I went to both, because I felt that -- I was very much in favor of the limited platform that CORE had, but I was also very much in favor of opposing the War, as much as possible.

Q: What happened with Fellowship House? You had a six-month lease.

Robinson: We had a six-month lease and that was not going to be renewed. She wanted us to move out, and we weren't going to move out. But we only had the six-month lease, and we were sure she wasn't going to renew it.

Victorine

Poague

McKeet Poague

So Victorine and I went to the McKeon-Po [phonetic] Real Estate Company, on 63rd Street, south of Chicago -- Hugo Victorine. Hugo was from Syracuse University. He had come to the University of Chicago, and he was in the Fellowship House. But he and I went to the real estate company and rented an apartment just south of 63rd Street, on Ellis Avenue. It was one of these railroad apartments. It was the first floor. It went up a few steps and in, and there was a bedroom and, probably -- I don't know what it was supposed to be. We used it as a bedroom. Then there was another bedroom, and then there was a bathroom, and the back -- There was a big kitchen, and there was one of these wood back porches, etc. And again of course they just assumed that the students were all white. And when we got in they realized we weren't all white, and they tried to evict us.

Q: Were you aiming for a wider -- You were aiming for -- How well did you want this known, and --

Robinson: Well, there was some publicity. Publicity was almost completely restricted to the black press, *The Chicago Defender*, etc., but we stressed to people who were moving in that this is a demonstration, and we're living in a glass house, and we've got to be model citizens. So when McKeon-Po tried to put us out of that -- it was one of these "apartment-apartment," six all together -- when they tried to put us out they needed witnesses to come to court, and nobody ^{came} ~~went~~. Nobody in that building was really friendly to us -- not the way the couple had been up at the other place -- but we hadn't disturbed them. So ^{McKeet Poague} ~~they~~ lost the case.

Q: What kind of a neighborhood was it?

[from other apartments]

McKeet Poague

[All over]

Robinson: It was a lower-middle-class neighborhood. When you got further south, it got better. But that first block south of 63rd Street -- 63rd -- the elevated trains came down and they turned and went by White City and went across 63rd and turned in at Jackson Park. So 63rd was under the elevated tracks. It was stores and cafeterias and drugstores and that kind of thing. And we were half a block, less than half a block, because there was a tavern right on 63rd, and there was an alleyway behind those stores. Then this building that I was in -- I had a window that was only up from the alleyway as high as this room, maybe, from the alleyway.

There's a funny story about that. There was a telephone pole down there, and late at night people would come out from the tavern, and they would go down that alleyway and pee behind the post.

Q: You have to have some object to pee against, I guess.

Robinson: Supposedly there was a toilet in there-- Anyhow, it was routine. I used to sleep with my window open. I'd never paid any attention until one night I was awakened, and there were two women, and one woman was saying, "Go ahead, go ahead, just squat." She was very hesitant. I got out of bed, and after I could hear the water running I stuck my head out and said, "What's going on out here?" It was a really nasty thing to do, but very funny.

Q: I'm kind of surprised it was so public. I just remember when you were stuck someplace, women used to kind of squat between cars, so you were protected and one woman would keep a look out.

Robinson: But it was late at night and the alley was dark, fairly dark.

When I left Chicago -- We lived there quite a little while. When I left Chicago, it was still going.

Q: Okay. Was there a wider purpose other than the one demonstration? I'm still interested -- were the people in the neighborhood from the South? Were they working-class southerners? Were they Irish? Were they Jewish? What?

*the interracial
Fellowship House
on
Ellis
ave.*

Robinson: They were Irish -- they were mixed, Irish and other. This block, at 63rd Street, when we lived at the Masters' it was a nicer neighborhood. But this was a lower-middle-class neighborhood. It wasn't like further east, at the university campus -- Hyde Park had a lot of Jewish people. There was not any noticeable number of Jewish people south of 63rd, at least in that first block or two. We did then start a Fellowship House for women further south, at 65th Street, or something, on Kimbark or something. I think it was on Kimbark. But I was there, and knew the people, to help get people involved. I don't know anything about how that was run.

Q: Did people in the neighborhood see it as -- I'm sorry to interrupt you. That's interesting -- as the wedge that was going to flip the neighborhood over or something?

Robinson: I don't know. We never had, as far as I know, any kind of confrontation. We did have a very young black man who stayed temporarily one summer, and the cops picked him up and brought him down to the house and checked out whether he really lived there.

"What was he doing, wandering around this neighborhood, at this time?" And he was probably seventeen or eighteen. He was young. But they didn't do anything to him, they just didn't believe him -- I think -- and they didn't see why he was around there. Right at the university it was all right, because there were a few black students.

Q: There was a woman's Fellowship House. Then what you wanted to do was get each other used to communal living? Or what was the -- ?

Robinson: The real purpose was to live interracial, in spite of the restrictive covenants, and to get along with the neighbors. I think the women's house did very well with that, incidentally. They were in a more upper -- It was middle-middle-income, it wasn't like the apartment house we were in. Their house was a nicer house, in a nicer neighborhood. I don't think there was much of any real negative feeling.

Now, of course, we weren't in typical Chicago, either. It was still within the penumbra of the university. The university real-estate office, of course, didn't like us.

Q: Really?

Robinson: No. And there were people in the administration who certainly didn't like these pacifists running around, opposing a war we were already in, and running down to court to

demonstrate in favor of people who were being sentenced, etc. Our telephone lines were tapped, and --

Q: Okay. Go ahead. Tell me about that.

Robinson: Well, we knew that the pacifist angle -- There was a lot of listening-in on telephone lines. We used to pick up the phone at Fellowship House, and if it was somebody new, we would say, "Now these telephone lines, for sure, are tapped. Go ahead and say whatever you want to say, because we're not doing anything illegal anyway."

But Georgia Lloyd, who was a big liberal *and* a pacifist -- the Lloyds had Standard Oil *money* somewhere, a generation or two before, that kind of money -- and she was in the Chicago Civil Liberties, etc. She said, "It didn't take long for my telephone wire. I'm sure it's tapped, too, because of calls from people."

Q: Which people?

Robinson: Calls from people who were in things like the Fellowship House and so on. Of course, I was a conscientious objector. As it happened, my hearing on conscientious-objector status, was the Wednesday after Pearl Harbor. My board was here in New York, but the hearing was at the local board in Chicago. When I arrived and sat down, I didn't get any chance to talk at all. The head of the board said, "You're a Roman Catholic. You can't conceivably be a conscientious objector." He said, "And you don't need to go and get a letter from Robert Maynard Hutchins," who was the president of the University of Chicago. "He'd write a letter for anybody. We know that." [Laughs]

Q: Wait a minute. They couldn't disqualify you on that, could they?

Robinson: Anyhow. So, finally, I tried to get to the two kinds of bases that the Catholics had for conscientious objector, and they said I was interrupting. So I never did get a chance to talk. Sure enough, I got a classification for 1A to go to the Army, and I just took the card and went down to the draft board -- just a clerk was there then -- and said I wanted to file an appeal. I can't even remember whether I had papers to fill out for the appeal, but what I do know is that they certainly never sent the papers in, because I got a certification as a conscientious objector, almost by return mail. So I think they had just decided they were going to intimidate me --

Q: Okay.

Robinson: -- and that's as far as it went. But there were others who -- There were people who didn't register. There was a fellow from Baltimore -- and I'm not even sure of his name now -- but he was Jewish, and I think he refused to register. His hearing came up at federal court in Chicago, and I remember a number of us went. He was so calm and collected and sure of himself. He said, no, he didn't need a lawyer. He just made a statement. He knew he was going to -- The judge was really very much impressed. I can't remember. He had to be sentenced to something like a year, I guess, in the federal penitentiary. He said, "You seem to have a number of friends here. Before I send you off, you can go outside and talk to them."

Q: My God.

Robinson: I felt he was so solid, but he wasn't very solid. He went to jail, they paroled him to CPS [Civilian Public Service]-something up in the Michigan area, and I don't know what -- he was so calm on the outside, but something wasn't -- he was very upset inside, I guess, because he went down to the freight yards, where they switched the trains, and let one run over him. I never met people who were with him late then, but --

Q: What was CPS? You never met people who were with him -- ?

Robinson: I never met people who were with him up in that CPS ~~year~~. But I was astonished, because I would have thought that he was sure of himself, sure of his position and sure of himself. But something wasn't --

One of the things that was interesting to me about being a conscientious objector was that it was so hard for some people, and not so hard, at all, for others. I don't think it was very hard for George Houser and most of those ministers. They went to prison for it. And it wasn't very hard for me. But some of the people who were in camp with me had a very hard time with it, because --

Q: You went to a camp?

Robinson: Yes. They had civilian public service camps --

Q: That was CPS.

Robinson: -- for objectors. I stayed in Chicago. I was in Chicago. I went there in '41. I was there in '42, for the formation of Chicago CORE, and in '43, the first convention was in Chicago. That was national. And the National Federation of the Committees of Racial Equality -- I think it was the first year. It changed to Congress the next year, or sometime during that year. So in '44 the convention was in Detroit. I went to that convention, and shortly after, in the fall, I went to teach in Talladega, in Alabama, a black college in Alabama.

Q: And that was your CPS work?

[Talladega]

Robinson: No. I was drafted from there. _____

Oh. The interesting thing -- I got this conscientious objector classification either at the very end of 1941 or the very beginning of 1942, and that went back to my board at 135th Street. But I didn't get called for anything until 1945. You see, I've benefited a lot by discrimination, because everything was segregated. So the selective service didn't ask 135th Street board for anything but Negroes, year in and year out, and all of a sudden, they discovered that there might be two or three white people in that board. [Laughs] So I didn't raise any questions. I just knew I wasn't being ordered anywhere. I didn't want to go.

So in the fall of '44, I went to Talladega to teach, and the draft notice came for January of '45, I guess. I wrote to the board at 135th Street, and asked them if they could put it off for, I think it was, two months, because if they could do that, I could complete most of what I would have to teach at Talladega before I left. I was teaching three sections of Freshman

speech, two times a week. The other communications teacher was teaching three times a week ~~and~~ writing, and we were also teaching remedial reading.

So they gave me a deferment, ^{Miss Montgomery} ~~she~~ took them two times a week and I took them three times a week, so I got almost everything done before I had to leave. Talladega gave me a military leave; I could come back.

Then, when I was drafted -- When I went to Talladega I was really out of CORE, you understand, no CORE action at Talladega. One of the students -- we went down to a lunch counter, but we didn't really do anything. Interestingly enough, there were five or six Catholic students at Talladega College, and the Catholic mission church at Anniston, for black Catholics, a few years before had come to Talladega and asked to have a mass for these students -- which I think they had on campus, actually. But with the war, there were people coming down from the North who were Catholic, so the service was moved to the auditorium, above the electric light company downtown. M
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Q: This was still the mission church?

Robinson: It was still these white priests for a black church at Anniston who came over and did it, but the people who went downtown were mostly white. The students -- I used to walk with the students. We always sat in the front, or next-to-the-front row, and there was never any question about it. But there were a few black Catholics who lived in town, and they always sat in the back. That was the pattern; that's what they did. The fact was that most of the white people who were coming were not southerners anyway, so ^{the blacks} ~~they~~ could have sat anywhere.

Q: Was there another Catholic church in town?

Robinson: I don't think there was. No, there wasn't.

Q: So there was the mission church, which was for Negroes, basically.

Robinson: There was Anniston. The mission church was in Anniston. In Anniston, I think there was a white church and a black church. But they came from Anniston to Talladega, on Sundays, for this Sunday ~~Mass~~ ^M. There was just the one ~~mass~~ ^M. So that was interesting.

cap M

Q: Well, it's interesting that -- Of course, you know, but you forget, that the Army was still so segregated that they would call for black soldiers, for whatever black soldiers were doing at the time.

Robinson: One of my good friends from the Harlem Y -- James Oliver -- who later got a Ph.D. and taught for years at ~~Cheyey~~ ^{Cheney}, Pennsylvania -- he came from Ocala, Florida. He went back to Ocala to teach, I think in '41. Anyhow, he was teaching there and nervous about the draft, when the Tuskegee Air Flying School was first proposed. He said he resigned from teaching and came back to Harlem to scrounge his way, anyway he could, up here in the North, because the only way to get into the flying school was to, first, be a black college graduate, and secondly, to be from somewhere north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Cheney

Q: So everybody in the South would send up a colored person to such a prestigious --

James Olier

Robinson - 1 - 37

Robinson: I guess that was the idea. Who was it? The head of the Army was saying, "We'd like to find out if these niggers can fly," something like that. That was the whole -- Anyhow, he came up here and he did get in. He did ^got to Tuskegee. He was an English-major type. He never did any flying. He ended up in the office, of course, right away.

But, anyhow, that's how my going to CPS occurred so late.

Q: Which was yes, in '45.

Robinson: Watch your time. We'll do some more later.

[END OF SESSION]