

VJD

Interviewee: James Robinson

Session #2

Interviewer: Sheila Michaels

Date: January 20, 1999

[TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO CONT'D FROM SESSION ONE]

Q: All right. This is the 20th of January, and we're continuing -- Well, actually, we're going to go back a little bit to the beginning again, for more on this?

Robinson: Yes. Well, I was born on February 1st, 1918, in Rochester, New York, and my father was a doctor. It was during World War I, and he was in San Antonio, Texas, at the time, because he was a lab worker. Most recent doctors had had lab training, the older doctors had not. So the younger doctors tended to be in the lab, for the Army. But my mother had stayed with her people, up in western New York State, and she remained there. We went to Texas [Interruption] --

When I was eighteen months old we took the train from western New York, all the way to San Antonio. Mother said that she had a very easy trip, because as soon as we got to the train -- it was a Pullman, of course, because, traveling with a child -- As soon as I saw the porter, I put out my hands. She said she can't remember ever having to take me to the dining room. She thinks that the porters, all the way along the line, must have taken care of me.

But we got to Texas, and she had a very good time, for a while, in Texas. Then my father

had a nodule on his neck, and the doctor, the Army doctor, said that it was a fatty tumor. But my father said he did not think so, he thought it was Hodgkin's disease, and he proved to be right. So when he was out of the Army he went to Albany, New York, for him to go to a Hodgkin's specialist. It was not a disease that had been diagnosed too long before. There wasn't a lot known about it. He did have an operation. Then we went to western New York, and stayed in Nunda, New York, with his parents, there. He had a little house across the street from where they were, but it did not get better, so shortly after my third birthday, he died in Buffalo, New York. My mother was with him, and I can remember that day. It's strange, the things that you do remember. Because I was with my Grandmother Robinson in Nunda, and there were a couple of children I was playing with out on the lawn. We climbed a bank by the porch, which she had difficulty maintaining, particularly, so she didn't want us to do that. Then I can remember my mother and grandfather coming back, and I remember my father in the casket, because the casket was in the little house that we rented.

Supportive Afterward, his people -- Grandmother and Grandfather Robinson -- wanted Mother to stay in Nunda and not work. She felt she really couldn't do that; that she should go back to teaching, and she should support herself. So we went back to her people, in Wyoming, New York, another small town, and she got a job teaching there. So my grandparents on both sides were very -- For the Robinsons, for my father's people, I was the first grandchild, anyhow. My father had one sister, but she was younger, and her children didn't appear until several years after I was born. So I was a favorite of theirs, and we also stayed with Grandmother and Grandfather Robinson sometimes in Nunda.

My mother moved from the little house, but she did rent a flat in Nunda, and we used to go

there for weekends. But we lived, actually, with my grandparents in Wyoming, New York.

And Mother went back to teaching and she had a fairly long day, so my Grandmother Gibbons -- her mother -- thought she was the one who brought me up. But it gave me an inside track with both sets of grandparents.

My mother did not believe in sending children to school early, so I was six and a half when I went to school, and I had not learned to read. She didn't believe in pushing anything like that. But we had a remarkably good first-grade teacher, who used phonics, but she made everything interesting. She was a fundamentalist, and she used Bible stories, beautifully illustrated Bible stories, and if we did well enough in our phonics she would read and show these things, and she did other things. She was a wonderful teacher. It was a rural area, so that not all the children were bright, but everybody -- absolutely everybody -- could read by February or March of that year.

So that was a very good start in school. Later on I skipped a grade in school. Being a good student, in addition to kind of looking down my nose at things, and being a Roman Catholic, I was also a good student. My mother was a teacher, so I was a good boy. So there were all kinds of things that made me not quite fit. On the whole, I got along with people, but I was not close to people. I know people today who get along very well with people, and are not close at all. One of my good friends is Wendell Foster, who's on the City Council. He was in CORE, New York CORE and so on. He's someone --

Q: I know a Wendell --

Robinson: -- but before your time. He gets along extremely well with people, but nobody knows him. I don't know him, either. I admire him, but I don't really know what goes on.

[Interruption]

So when I was going fishing one day (maybe I said this before) -- My grandfather used to take me fishing, and we went fishing one day. I caught a fish, put it in the pail, and on the way back we met a music teacher, who made some remark about the fish suffering. She was really not the kind of person who -- she was just making conversation. But it occurred to me, and then I could see this kind of thing, that the fish do. So I thought, "I don't think I'm going to do that again." I was nine years old, and decided I wasn't going to go fishing again. I'd always disapproved of hunting, but fishing -- fish, some way or another, were in a different realm from hunting.

So the next day, when we went to ^{me} mass and had breakfast afterward -- I always liked bacon -- I decided if you were not going to kill fish you'd better not eat bacon, so I became a vegetarian when I was nine, and stayed a vegetarian until I was in my early twenties. Then in high school I began to read, in a magazine called the *Literary Digest* -- which really wasn't very literary -- they did early polling of people's opinions, etc. It wasn't done scientifically at all. They began to poll college students who were demonstrating against war, in the early '30s, and I decided, "Well, I agree with that. I don't believe in killing people. I don't believe in killing animals." So by the time --

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

Q: It's the 20th of January -- Jim Robinson -- and we're continuing the conversation.

Robinson: My family was concerned about my being a vegetarian, and my mother talked to the priest about it, and he talked to me about vegetarianism, but I did not want to give it up. That was pretty much the end of it. My mother was not one to force me into doing things.

Q: Were you one to be forced?

Robinson: Probably not, but I did not have to rebel, really. She had had that experience, to some extent, with her people. They had let her get her way with some things that many parents would have objected to. She was a tomboy. She liked to ride horses, and she was uptown one day and some farmer was in there with a young horse. He said, "Well, this is a horse you can't ride," and she said, "Oh, yes, I can." There was no saddle on it or anything else, and she jumped on the horse and rode it down Main Street. It kept kicking its feet up in the back, and her older brother, who was five years older than she, was working in a print shop and saw it. He came home for lunch and said, "Well, Mabel was making a spectacle of herself down Main Street," but she didn't fall off the horse. She said, "I was always surprised that that was the end of the conversation. My mother and father didn't say anything about it." So she was that way with me.

So I continued to be a vegetarian, and after seeing this material in the *Literary Digest* about protesting wars, etc., I decided that was my position. When I came to graduate, there were only ten people in the class, so being valedictorian was not a big deal, but I was the valedictorian. I decided that -- my speech said that what we needed to do was develop the ability to analyze and determine what was right and what was wrong, and to have enough

courage to stick to it. I used as my example Eugene V. Debs, who was head of the Socialist party in World War I, resisted the draft and went to jail. All of that was in that talk. So, you can see, I never did quite fit. Then when it came to going to college, we had already taken a trip that came down through New York and Philadelphia and Washington, in my mother's car. I was frightened of New York, really, but I wanted to come to New York. So I only considered Fordham, really, and came to New York that way. Then at Fordham I began to fit in with people a little bit better. Among other things, I didn't have to behave well all the time, because I was no longer in a school where my mother was teaching, etc. It was interesting for me, also, that it was the first and only time that I had been with a group of people almost all of whom were Catholic. In western New York we were a minority, and after I came to Columbia, Columbia was 20% Catholic, but the social action people, many of them -- most of them were not Catholic. So I was in the Newman Club, but I was also in the ~~Social Action Club~~ *group agitating on social issues.*

recently
Q: And Fordham was pretty pastoral at the time -- maybe not entirely pastoral, but --

Robinson: Fordham was -- One of my classmates is now a Jesuit priest. He's at America. *Father John W. Donohue.*

Century
When I saw him he said, "Well, after all, when you and I went to Fordham they really had a curriculum." It was 19th century, still. *until a* He said, "A few years after us, a Jesuit headed Fordham ~~and~~ decided it was time for it to move into the 20th century." He said people were terribly upset, but he pushed it through. He said, "Of course, ~~he~~ only lasted as president for four years, ~~and~~ the curriculum was changed." *who*

but
But I took Latin and Greek and English, religion, French. It was mostly languages that year.

that Jesuit
America is the Jesuit Weekly of Opinion

Q: And this was in the middle of the Depression, and everybody going to City College was majoring in sitting around in the cafeteria and arguing.

Robinson: Politics, right. Well, this is not off the tape, really, but did you see *Arguing the World*, the film?

Q: No.

Robinson: It was very interesting. It was about people like Howe, who was --

Q: Irving Howe?

Robinson: Irving Howe, and several others from the Trotskyite cubicle up there -- the anti-Communist left, some of whom are now prominent neo-conservatives. But it was a very interesting thing. I saw it down at Film Forum.

Q: [Unclear]

Robinson: Anyway, that gets me back to New York and Fordham. So I think I've done the business of Fordham to Columbia.

Q: Well, you didn't really say why you decided to change to Columbia.

Robinson: I really decided to change because, while I was and am Catholic, I wanted to feel as if I were a part of my own generation. There were demonstrations going on about peace and other things, on other campuses, but not at Fordham. At Fordham, if you lived in the dormitory, you had study periods from 7:00 on at night, Sunday through Thursday. Friday and Saturday you could be out. Not very late. When I went to the opera I had to get permission to be out late, etc. It has its advantages, because you have a lot of rules to break, and it's fun breaking rules. They're not serious rules, but if you have no rules, then if you're going to kick up your heels, you have to do something that's kind of dangerous for you.

Q: Probably the rules were a little less observed in a men's schools than in a women's school. Was Fordham co-ed at the time?

Robinson: No, sadly the college was a men's school. The students were very amusing about some things. They used to say, "Oh, I think this meal is particularly heavy on the saltpeter." [laughter] That kind of thing. It was a very amusing place, in a way.

Did I tell you about the French Club dinner there?

Q: No.

Robinson: See, most of my classes were taught by Jesuits, but the French department was - I think all the people in it were lay teachers. They had sponsored a dinner down in the fifties -- I think it was probably 52nd Street -- and most of the students who went were day students. But I was in the French class, and I wanted to do it. I'm surprised that I did it,

because it cost a fair amount of money in those days -- \$3.00 or \$4.00 -- which was a lot of money. It would be like \$40.00 today. But I did decide to go, and it was a good meal. They had cocktails beforehand, then they had a different kind of wine with every course. I always did drink a little at home, but I never had that much to drink.

But one of the fellows kept whispering to one of the waiters. Anyhow, he found out about a prostitute who was very close by, so he led us all over to that entry-way. I knew I wasn't going to do anything like that, but I was hanging around anyway. Anyway, he went up, he came back down, and he said, "She wants us to come up one at a time," and, of course, all of us went home. [laughs] So there were lots of things that were really fun about it. I did go to the Bronx County courthouse on Sundays, for the WPA [Works Progress Administration] symphony concerts there. That's where I got to hear a lot of -- oh, that Finnish composer --

Q: *Finlandia*.

Robinson: *Finlandia*, yes. He had three or four symphonies in there.

Q: Sibelius?

Robinson: Sibelius. Sibelius. He was very popular at that stuff. Later on, I went downtown to some Sibelius concerts.

Q: Well, he was accessible. He was the first composer that I was fond of, starting out.

Robinson: I'm still fond of him. The third and fourth symphonies, you can almost see the sea pounding on the rocks. That's great.

So I went to that, and I went to the Museum of Modern Art when it was just in a townhouse -- where it is now located -- with one of the Italian students who was on the same floor. I'd never seen anything Impressionist before. I'd been to the Metropolitan Museum, but I'd never seen anything like this. It was a show of French Impressionists, and not a very big show. It was accessible that way. When the museums get bigger, it really is more difficult because you have to just decide, "I'm going to see this today and not that." After a while, you glaze over.

So, anyway, I did a lot of things that first year. I went to *Porgy and Bess* that first year, and that was an absolute revelation to me, of course, because I had had very little contact at all with anything black, and it's a very human story. It was beautifully done. I think it's best done, really, as a musical and not as an opera. I've seen it both ways, several times, and that was done as a musical. It moves faster that way. It was so well acted.

So there were a lot of cultural things that happened that year, but I felt that it was too hide-bound for me; that I needed to be more exposed to what was going on. So one Saturday morning the admissions office was open at Columbia -- well, a lot of offices were open on Saturday morning --

Q: Yes. My father used to work Saturday mornings, I know.

~~the Jesuit who taught me English and Latin at Fordham~~

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Robinson: Right. So I was going to go to *The Children's Hour* in the afternoon, and I went to the Columbia admissions office in the morning, and talked to a Mr. Ireland, who said that my credits from Fordham, most of them, could be credited at Columbia. But then I went over to see Father Ford, who was the advisor to Catholic students, and I said that Mr. Martin -- who was my English teacher ^{at Fordham} ~~up there~~. Mr. Martin was the Jesuit scholastic -- he was very concerned about my going to a secular school. Father Ford said, "I wouldn't worry about it," and encouraged me to come. So that's what I did.

Now, here again, my mother let me do it, you see. Lots of students would have had a good deal of trouble. "When you make up your mind about one thing, stick with it." But she didn't. She let me --

Q: Was it more expensive?

Robinson: No. It was no more expensive. It probably was a little bit cheaper, because the tuition was higher, I think, but the living expenses were smaller. In those days you could live in the dormitory at Columbia without having a meal plan. So I did not regularly eat in the dormitories. They had a cashier in the cafeteria at John Jay, and when you wanted to go there you went there, and you paid for it.

Q: John Jay was --

Robinson: It was a dormitory.

Q: Oh. Okay. Sorry. I was thinking of John Jay College, which did not come along until much, much later.

Robinson: Right. No, this John Jay dormitory is still there. It was comparatively new when I was there. It was fifteen stories high when I was there. It was higher than the others. I didn't live in it, but it had a cafeteria and it had The Lion's Den underneath it -- a beer place.

So it did not cost more, and I was very abstemious with what I bought, and I was still a vegetarian, so if I walked to 103rd Street, to the automat, it was cheap there. It was a nickel a vegetable. And if you felt that you really wanted to economize, instead of four you bought three and put ketchup on the fourth spot -- because you didn't have to pay for the ketchup. So it did save money.

Now it was a much more intense atmosphere and less friendly atmosphere, on the whole. It was not as easy to meet people. I met people slowly at first, I think, and then I got involved in the peace movement. Of course, I met a lot of people that way. But when I first went there I lived in a law-school dorm, because I applied too late and there was no space, so I was moved over to the other section. I knew John LaDucca [phonetic], who was a law student, and was not a successful law student. He came from Notre Dame. He was a very interesting person, and very literary. He was the one who introduced me to Thomas Wolfe. But law was not his cup of tea. He really worked at it, and at the end of the first semester, they suggested he do something else. So by that time I was in the other dormitory.

Q: Law was a graduate school then?

Robinson: Oh, graduate. Yes. It was graduate. He had graduated from Notre Dame, and I'm sure he was a good student. But you have to have a certain kind of mind to deal with law. It doesn't really make very much sense. You go back to precedents and so on; it's not logical, and it doesn't more than vaguely approximate justice. Then I became involved in the peace movement there.

Maybe I should jump on to Chicago at this point?

Q: I'm fine with this. We've got lots of tape.

I was wondering, really -- You hadn't been involved in the peace movement in Fordham?

Robinson: No.

Q: Okay. So the peace movement was on campus. What drew you to it? Or was it just that it made sense?

Robinson: Going back to Fordham, the one thing that I did there -- I don't know how I knew about it, but I knew about the *Catholic Worker*, which was very new. Fordham had a paper called *Fordham ^{France} Friends*, which the French department did. It was published in French. I went to the *Catholic Worker* and interviewed Dorothy Day, and did a little article on her -- not a very big article -- in French. That's how I met her. So Fordham was hide-bound in a way, but the minds were not all closed, either. It was not really narrow-minded. They printed the article on Dorothy Day. I found her very, very interesting. And, of course,

Maurin

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she had come from secular radicalism, and she was influenced as much by Kropotkin and the Russian anarchists as she was by Catholic teachings. She sort of put the two things together, and was absolutely opposed to any war. Then the houses of hospitality and so on developed after she and Peter Morin (phonetic) joined forces. He was an older man, a French personalist. The emphasis was on people as persons and not as individuals, making that kind of a distinction. He was interested in decentralism and working with your hands - farming communes and that kind of thing -- and the Catholic order had helped some farms, as well as places in the city.

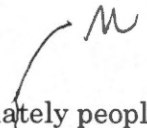
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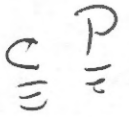
But the only element, really, of Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker* that stuck with me was the pacifism, the resistance to war. The absolute practice of Christianity was beyond me. Those people who lived there and worked there had no other source of income. They had no income at all, really. They lived on the same plane as the people who came in from the street, and the food that was given and the money that was given -- the stuff was shared -- second-hand clothing -- and Dorothy Day had almost no rules at all about who could come in. You really had to be convinced that this is the way that God wants it, in order to stand it.

Q: Yes.

Robinson: I'm not up to that.

But all of that was there before I went to Fordham -- I mean, before I went to Columbia. So it was natural for me to be in the peace movement there. The peace work at Columbia was an amalgam of a lot of different things. It was not all pacifist by any means. When I first



 went there, it was predominately people who were opposed to war, opposed to any war that this country might be involved in -- not necessarily opposed to class war, etc. There were various kinds of revolutionaries. Most of this was purely theoretical, of course, but there were Trotskyists and there were quite a few communist party sympathizers. There were socialists, and the socialists, some of them, were Marxian Socialists and some of them were Christian Socialists. Then there were the pacifists, some of the pacifists were also socialists, etc. The people came from various parts of the university. There were a lot of college students. There were also quite a number of people, particularly pacifists, at Union Theological Seminary. I don't know if it was yet affiliated with Columbia, but --




Q: -- it was right next door.

Robinson: -- it was right next door.

Q: And Barnard.




 Robinson: Barnard, yes. Charlotte Bentley [phonetic] from Barnard was one of the prominent pacifist people who were there.

Q: She was a student?

Robinson: She was a student, right. She was later -- she was a socialist as well as a pacifist, and she later was head of Labor Temple, on 14th Street, for a while. That was a Presbyterian mission, really, to the working classes, and there were lots of -- I went to a number of meetings down there. A.J. Muste, who was later head of the Fellowship of

Reconciliation, was there before he went to the FOR. He was there right after he returned to being a pacifist. He'd been a radical of some sort when -- There was even a group of radicals called the "Musteites" at one time.

Q: Really? The "Musteites!" How exciting.

Robinson: Anyway, I think it was at meetings with Charlotte, who sometimes ate in the cafeteria, down at Union Theological, which had wonderful, WASP food -- scalloped potatoes, and that kind of thing. It was probably the best food on campus. Teachers College had pretty good food. Teachers College classes weren't much, but the food was pretty good.

Q: Home Ec [Economics] teachers were making the food.

Robinson: The classes at Columbia were interesting and different. I had Contemporary Civilization, which was a melange of history since 1914, and sociology and philosophy, and so on. Granville's book, I think, went back to the Middle Ages. But it was well put together. They produced a syllabus, and you had about twenty students, I think, in each section of it. Some of the teachers were sociologists, some were historians and so on. I can't remember. I had a Dr. ~~Mosax~~ [phonetic], and I think he was philosophy, I'm not sure. He was not a great teacher, but he wasn't bad. Certainly, it was great for me to suddenly be out of the *Aenaid* and into the world since 1914. But I took the English survey, which went back and started with the Greeks and the Romans, and went through the Middle Ages right up to the present. It was a three-year course. And I took a colloquium of Great Books, and I took a little bit more French. But I started out -- I went there as pre-med, and my advisor was ~~Thornton Nardroft~~ [phonetic], who was in the science department somewhere. So I had to

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take inorganic chemistry, to start my sciences for pre-med. I had a terrible time with that course. I did all the reading and I did everything else. We'd have a class quiz every week or two and I'd flunk it. And then we had a three-hour lab once a week, and you get there and you get a mimeographed sheet about what the problem was, and you were to set up an experiment to prove the problem. They didn't tell you what equipment to use or anything else. So, usually, the first half hour, 90% of the class was standing around, while the ones who were adept at this kind of thing, kind of got it worked out. "You need this, and you need this, and you need --" By the time the three hours were up, I never had finished my experiment. Never. So I realized, "Science is not for me. I'm not going to be a doctor, and that's that."

But I thought I was going to fail that course, and I'd never failed anything before. But I had moved from the law-school dormitory over to Livingston, and Bob Browning was a door or two away from me on that corridor. He was very friendly, and he was going to be a chemical engineer, and he was taking this course. I said, "I'm getting nowhere on it." He said, "Well, over Christmas vacation, I'm going to outline the book and make notes on it, because I need to do that for the examination. I'll give you my notes," which he did. The other thing I did was to go over all the class quizzes, and try to find out why I'd been wrong on this and that.

Anyhow, he gave me these notes, and I decided that if Professor Carpenter were really nasty, he would ask about the commercial process for producing sulfuric acid. I sure wasn't getting to understand it, but I memorized it, and it was on the exam. So I answered that, and my friend, who had given me the notes, didn't know that.

Q: Oh, really.

Robinson: So at the end of the course, he got a C+ and I got a B-, which was ~~unfair~~ ^{unfair} because I did well on the examination, between his notes and this sulfuric acid. And I thought, "Well, that's it. I'm out of that. I won't take the second part." As I say, I reproduced the commercial process, but I didn't understand it. But I put it down on paper.

^{Columbia then} ~~So after that they~~ ^{course} had a general science ^{science} for students who weren't going to be majors, and I didn't want to spend a lot of time taking that course. But you could study a course like that over a summer, and take an achievement test, so I got out of my science requirement. So the rest of it -- I took medieval history. I took *Beowulf*, and, as I say, French, and all this English. So I had a great time with school. Then I took the Great Books course, only the first year on it. That was the colloquium course, and that was 7:30 to 9:30 on Wednesday nights. It had fourteen students, seven on each side of the table, a professor here and a professor there. It was a book a week, so it was a lot of reading. You didn't always get it all done. You could have any opinion you wished to have, as long as you could back it up. Otherwise, you'd better keep quiet.

But it was good. Then I was going to the Peace Council, and became very conscious of what was going on in Europe, because the various factions in Peace Council shifted gears in relationship to what was going on.

Q: Is this during the Spanish Civil War?

Robinson: Yes, the Spanish Civil War -- During the Spanish Civil War most of the people were sympathetic, but the pacifists, of course, were opposed to lifting the arms embargo, or

Raymond Weaver of the English Dept. (he re-discovered Herman Melville) and Moses Hadas of Classics were our two teachers and

Bentley

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getting involved in any way, shape or manner. I remember Charlotte Bentley -- three or four of us went to a rally for the medical relief for the Spanish loyalists or something, and handed out leaflets, pointing out that lifting the embargo would merely mean more corpses in Spain and more castles in Delaware.

Q: Castles in Delaware? Oh, because of DuPont?

Robinson: DuPont, yes, because they supplied arms. Nowadays everybody is supplying arms, but they were big in those days.

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And the communists -- It became very evident that they were part of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. They were in favor of the Popular Front in France, in supporting the loyalists. Then, after Hitler and Stalin had a pact, they were for keeping America out of war. "The Yanks are not coming" was their slogan. Then they were in favor of total cooperation, after the Soviet Union was invaded. They really wanted the injustices in this country soft-pedaled.

Q: Really. Really?

Robinson: They were not really interested in civil rights, as such -- at that point. They were interested in winning this war for the Soviet Union. Now that's not true of everybody in it, of course. It was monolithic on the outside, but people within it were not monolithic, really. You had to conform, or you were out on your ear. But people's positions varied, I'm sure.

So there was a lot of exposure to the radicals. I think we picked up some ideas from the cell

groups that led to CORE, and the kind of discipline we had in CORE was partly related to Gandhi, but it was also related to saying that a small group of people, if they absolutely agreed, were very effective.

Now, should I jump on to what I was going to say about Chicago?

Q: Go ahead.

Robinson: Because I think I didn't --

Q: Can I ask if, when you were downtown, you left all those groups behind, the campus groups?

Robinson: Oh. After Columbia?

Q: Yes.

Robinson: After Columbia I went to Harlem. Then I was downtown a little bit. Then I was back in Harlem. But no, I was going to a War Resisters League cell group while I was downtown, and while I was in Harlem, too, but that was outside of Harlem. I also was in touch with Parrish -- I can't remember his first name -- and Lillian Woolcott [phonetic] in Harlem. They were black socialists, and they were working with Randolph. The two things never melded. I wanted to start some kind of pacifist group in Harlem; I never did. But I registered in Harlem, and I think I told you about that.

[downtown and uptown]

A. Philip

Walcott

Q: Yes. [Unclear] for a long time.

Robinson: Then I went to Chicago, to the university. I didn't go there for any social-action purpose; I went there to get a Master's degree in English, because I thought, "If I'm going to teach, I really don't want to teach in high school, and with a Master's degree, I can teach college."

Q: College students? No kidding.

Robinson: Yes. I thought I wanted to teach in a black college, too -- which I did, of course, later, when I went to Talladega. You wouldn't become head of a department without a Ph.D., but you could teach.

So in Chicago, as I said before, the Fellowship House was developed out of the race-relations cells of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. I was one of the most important, possibly the most important, person in getting Fellowship House underway. The most important person in the cell group was Bernice Fisher, who was a founder of CORE. There were two or three things that led into CORE. One of them was Jack Spratt Restaurant, which was near Fellowship House, on East 47th Street, and James Farmer and I were both living at Fellowship House. He was in and out of town. He was traveling for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. But one evening, about 9:30 or so, we decided to go out and have coffee. We went to Jack Spratt's, and it never occurred to us that there would be any trouble there, as a matter of fact. I can't remember whether we got served once and it was the next time but, at any rate, they eventually absolutely refused to serve, and that was where we had our

See Note
first sit-in, called a sit-down. I'm not sure. I think we were already in Chicago CORE. I

think there was the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality at that time.

true
So that was one of the important things of the background of CORE. Another was the White City Roller Rink, and I was not involved in that. I was working, and it was night, and I didn't get to -- It's interesting that after a few turndowns at White City, what they did was to sue rather than to have standing lines, and they lost the case. *at night*

Take Part
Q: They did?

Robinson: Yes.

Q: Even though there was an anti-discrimination law?

Robinson: There was an anti-discrimination law, and all the evidence made it perfectly clear that there was discrimination going on. But the judge ruled against them. And that was the end of White City. Now a couple years later, when there was a much weaker CORE group in Chicago, they went back to White City, they had standing lines at the entrance, and they got the policy changed.

Cottage Grove went like this. Sixty-third Street went like this. This was black. South of 63rd and east of Cottage Grove was White City, and then this side was white. So they were right here, and it was -- At any rate, it's odd. I don't remember objecting to the use of the law, either, but I think it's odd that we tried to use the law instead of trying to follow through on the direct action.

WRONG - The sit-down was before the founding of CORE. It was organized by the FOR race relation Cell and by others, especially George Houser (not a cell member)


Q: Who sued for you? Because bringing a suit is expensive?

Robinson: I think it was the NAACP, for redress. Because it was --

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

Q: You went to them when they tried to evict you from the Fellowship House.

Robinson: Right. That was after we'd moved to south of 63rd, on Ellis.

 The biggest sit-in that we had was at Stoner's Restaurant in the Loop. The Loop restaurants were worked on by a lot of people in Chicago CORE. I went there once with Frieda Jones [phonetic]. She was from the NAACP youth group, and that was the time that when we got to the head of the line the man who ran the restaurant kicked me in the shins.

Q: Oh, really?

Robinson: The kitchen help, the people who cleaned the vegetables and so on were black in that restaurant, and they got wind of what was going on, and one of them quit and came out and joined us.

Q: Oh, really? Oh my God! At the end of the Depression?

Robinson: The War. The War. ~~He~~ could get another job. But that was one of the things that led to the big demonstration at Stoner's, and George Houser was probably the most important person in getting that underway. And that was done at the 1943 CORE convention. That was when the National Federation of the Committees of Racial Equality was formed, and became the Congress the next year.

Q: And now they had spread to other cities.

Robinson: Right.

Q: CORE had caught fire.

Robinson: It caught fire through the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Farmer traveled for them, so he talked about CORE.

Q: Well, he traveled for them -- When did this start? What was Farmer doing -- I mean, I know he came into the Fellowship House --

Robinson: He was already working for the Fellowship -- for FOR -- and he --

Q: You had nothing to do with FOR at that point? Or you were with them?

Robinson: Well, I'd been on the fringes of FOR really. I'd been to their offices here in New York, and so on and so forth. At the University of Chicago, of course, I was a member of the campus FOR, because the race-relations cell was part of that.

So he traveled for the FOR, and Bayard Rustin also traveled for the FOR. He was spreading the idea. There was something about it in their magazine, with the result that something started in Baltimore, something started here in New York. I don't remember. There were half a dozen groups, I think, that met in Chicago.

Q: Half a dozen groups?

Robinson: Representatives from half a dozen CORE groups that came to Chicago in '43, the first convention.

Q: So it was half a dozen cities, gathered together.

Robinson: Yes; right.

Q: Okay. For a moment, I thought there were half a dozen groups in Chicago in one year.

Robinson: No. The only group -- There was a group in Evanston, in addition to the one in Chicago, but the others were out-of-town groups. There was one in Detroit and one in Baltimore, one here in New York, and, of course, Farmer was occasionally in New York, so he was involved, once in a while, in that.

The background then -- We had Fellowship House, we had White City, we had Jack Spratt and we had Stoner's. But the theoretical background was primarily Shridharani's *War Without Violence*. If you ever read Farmer's book, he talks a lot about the brotherhood

mobilization idea, which was something he drew up in the FOR, about a mass movement against discrimination and they would use non-violence. It was a good idea, but it was not something that could be realized, really. It had the mass to begin with, and it didn't have the same conception of small-group discipline that we had in the early CORE groups. The first CORE group grew out of the FOR race-relations cell at the University of Chicago, it did not grow out of mobilization. But there were some of those ideas, along with *War Without Violence*, that may have been useful.

Q: Tell me a little more about *War Without Violence*, because I'm really interested in how - for myself, I'm interested in how a doctoral thesis or a doctoral dissertation becomes a plan for the movement.

Robinson: Yes. It was published by Harcourt-Brace, I think. It was a trade book. He had written it at Columbia. He may have revised it for the book.

Q: Oh, he wrote it at Columbia.

Robinson: He wrote it at Columbia, for, I think it was, a Sociology Ph.D., and it was an analysis of the Gandhian movement, step by step, establishing that ^{an injustice} ~~justice~~ did exist, trying to negotiate, and the self-purification -- fasting, etc. -- that went on in India, in the Gandhi movement, and the constant willingness to negotiate, even after people had negotiated in bad faith a number of times. So, you didn't get to the direct action until the very end. It was interesting, because it was not all about independence. Some of it was about the caste system. Gandhi -- There was one instance where there was a street that was near a temple, and the outcast people could not even walk along that street. The Gandhi people protested

it, and finally camped out. They camped out, and they had untouchables with them, as part of -- Gandhi, also, of course, worked on things like sanitation. It's interesting to think that while India got independence, the caste system is still there, and the sanitation thing is still a problem.

Well, we were looking for the beloved community in CORE, but we didn't get it. Gandhi didn't get everything, either.

Q: And he may not have gotten the kind of independence they wanted, because so many millions [unclear].

Robinson: He certainly didn't get what he wanted.

Q: How well known was Gandhi in this country? Did it have anything to do with the peace movement before the book was published?

Robinson: Oh, yes. It did. The pacifists in England, who had first started the Fellowship of Reconciliation, they were closely associated with Gandhi. Some of the missionaries -- not most of them -- but some of the Anglican missionaries in India, actually were very much involved in the Gandhi movement, and were also pacifists. So that the whole thing was -- The pacifists were interested in the Gandhi thing way ahead of a great movement, I think. I don't think they knew much about it at the time it first started in South Africa, but by the time I was around, I was hearing about Gandhi in high school. He was widely admired, everywhere in the pacifist movement.

As I said, Bernice Fisher was the most active person at the start of Chicago CORE, I think, and she and James Farmer had a lot to do with setting up the first national CORE meeting. Bernice did all the nuts and bolts work, because Farmer wasn't any good at that at all. He was great for emoting, but he wasn't great for actually getting anything down and getting people in contact, etc. He eventually left the Fellowship of Reconciliation because they didn't think he produced enough.

Q: Produced enough in what terms?

Robinson: In terms of membership, and getting people involved. He'd talk, but he didn't organize. Rustin was more successful at getting people involved in various cities, where the FOR had things going.

Q: Was it too much front and center? Was it too much leadership and not enough organizing?

Robinson: I think it was too much idea stuff, without -- You could have a great idea, but in order to get a sit-in, you had to get people involved, and you had to have a particular -- "We'll do this, then we'll do this, then we'll do this, then we'll do this." Otherwise, it doesn't happen. Now on the first sit-in, he -- I don't know, the first -- Anyway --

Q: Are we talking Jack Spratt, or White --

Robinson: Jack Spratt. He was involved with Jack Spratt. Fisher, and I'm sure George and Jean Houser were involved to some extent. But when it came to the national formation -- the national formation of CORE -- it was Fisher who did the nuts and bolts, and the office was the Midwest office of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. George Houser was in that office.

Q: Did Charlie Oldham tell me that George Houser is still living in Chicago?

Robinson: No.

Q: No, he didn't.

Robinson: George Houser is living right here, across the river.

Q: You're kidding. Okay.

Robinson: I saw him not too long ago. He's interested in a reunion. Right.

Q: Okay. And Bernice Fisher -- ?

Robinson: As I said, Bernice Fisher was very important in all of this. Then she was offered a job running the Chicago Council Against Racial & Religious Discrimination. She took it, and she worked for them for a few months. Later on, Homer Jack, who was one of the early CORE people, was involved with that, for quite a period of time. It was not the right kind of thing for Bernice to be involved in. Bernice was a perfectionist. Everything had to be

absolutely right, and the Chicago Council was really kind of a liberal organization. It achieved things, but it was not like CORE. Fisher became involved in the labor movement, and she was in various unions including the Teamsters, usually finding something that wasn't quite right about the way something was being run, or moving on^{to} something else. So she was not involved more than a couple of years in national CORE, at that stage. Now later on, when she was working for the union in St. Louis, she ~~organized~~. She was one of the people who organized St. Louis CORE, and she was on the fringes of national CORE for a considerable period of time. At one point we wanted her to run the organization, take a job and run the organization -- which she did do.

She had the misfortune of falling in love with Jim Farmer, who was not at all in love with her. He got married to -- I can't remember her name -- in Chicago. I can remember he said -- at Fellowship House once -- he said that he wanted to marry someone who would put his slippers out for him when he came home at night.

Q: You could say that then.

Robinson: Bernice was not that type, and he was really not interested in her.

Anyhow, the two of them had gotten this first thing together. Then, of course, he and his first wife got divorced and he married Lula [Peterson Farmer], his wife. I think that's why Bernice would not come and work for national CORE. I think that was too close to the Farmers.

Q: Okay.

Robinson: But I don't know that. That's just guessing.

At any rate, she was central at the beginning. She was very important at the time that St. Louis CORE got started. Then she was sort of peripheral between Chicago and St. Louis, and after St. Louis. Then, of course, she died in the 1960s, here in New York.

Q: In New York.

Robinson: In New York. She was then working for a union in New York.

Q: Do you know which union?

Robinson: I don't remember which union, no. Strangely enough, she was never in any of the CORE groups here in New York, and I don't remember ever being in touch with her after she came to New York. She was here for years.

Q: Was it injured feelings?

Robinson: I don't think so. I think she was just busy with other things. But I do remember going to her funeral. She died all of a sudden; she wasn't any older than I.

Q: So she died in her forties, then.

↑
Actually, I now know
she was two or three
years older - not
significant.

Robinson: Yes, I think so. She was running around great guns and I guess she had an embolism, or something. So she was important.

Quinn
Joseph Gwynn, who was a pacifist and head of the youth group of the NAACP in Chicago, and he was a friend of ~~Frieda~~ Jones's, he was very important.

Q: Who was ~~Frieda~~ Jones?

Fleda
Robinson: ~~Frieda~~ Jones was also in the NAACP youth group. They were two of the important black people in Chicago CORE. Chicago CORE became fairly interracial in a hurry.

Q: That was something that was kind of not said at first, but became evident as you were talking.

Robinson: Yes. The race-relations cell had only had Joseph Gwynn and a woman who was at Unitarian Seminary, I think. Otherwise, it was very largely white when it started. But when we decided to do Fellowship House, Farmer was very important because we were short of blacks. For one thing, we had Jack Spratt and White City, and it developed very fast. The connections with the Urban League and the NAACP were good. I don't know who did those. I certainly didn't do those -- whether it was Bernice and Arthur and Lillian Falls, who -- he was a black doctor -- I think it must have been that kind of connection. She knew them before I knew them, and they were the ones who had taken the race-relations group around to show them what housing was like in the black ghetto.

And he moved in.

Q: Did they want another race-relations group, or were they trying to use this group to sort of augment whatever --? I mean, the Urban League didn't have such an activist ~~[unclear]~~

pro- union reputation

Robinson: Well, the Falls, Arthur and Lillian Falls, were interested in getting things done. I don't think -- He was involved with the Catholic Worker group, and he was involved with Friendship House in Chicago. There was one ^{*}in Chicago, too. He was not -- I don't think he was a member of any of those things, but I think it was Bernice who had met him. A lot of avenues were opened up, and the availability of white people who would do anything real about race relations -- that was a novelty, in those days, too, in places like Chicago. Chicago was blatantly racist. As soon as we got going we had our own little beloved community. People got along so well, and we had a wonderful, wonderful time.

But, anyway, Bernice was on the periphery, and then Farmer left the Fellowship of Reconciliation ~~to enter at~~ -- For many years George Houser was central to CORE, first in Chicago, with the Fellowship's office there, then he was at a Fellowship office in Cleveland. He got a CORE group started there. Then he moved to New York, where he was never involved in New York CORE; he lived out in the suburbs over in Pomona, and still does. But --

Q: Pomona, New Jersey?

Robinson: Pomona, New York. It's just a little north of the Jersey line, on that side. But he and Catherine Raymond ~~[phonetic]~~ really held national CORE together here, during those

a

Catherine

** As well as the first one in Harlem in NYC*
Machona

years. They had periods when there were more groups and periods when there were fewer groups, and, of course, the Journey of Reconciliation, in 1947 --

Q: That was the trip down to Washington?

Robinson: No, it was a trip from Washington. It was the precursor of the Freedom Rides, and it originally was going to go as far as Birmingham or New Orleans, I don't know which. Bayard Rustin and someone else -- not George, but someone else -- went down over some of the route, to see what it was like beforehand, and George asked for NAACP contacts along the route that they were planning. The NAACP said they didn't want to be involved, but they did give him contacts. But they absolutely said, "You must not go to Birmingham." It was 1947. They finally talked them out of doing that. They had enough trouble in North Carolina, let alone --

So that stimulated a lot of interest, and there were more CORE groups for a year or two after that.

Q: After the Journey of Reconciliation.

Robinson: Yes. Have we done enough for today?

Q: If you want to, yes.

Robinson: Let me see if there's anything else that I have here.

Oh. I might say that here in New York, in those early days -- this is before I was here -- they did a lot of work at the YMCAs, without much success. The white Ys were exclusively white, but since there was a major black Y in Harlem, with two buildings, actually, and there was a smaller black Y in Brooklyn, Judge Delaney -- I don't know whether the Brooklyn Y, maybe they were separate -- But anyhow, Judge Delaney represented the Harlem Y, and --

Q: Judge Delaney?

Robinson: Judge Delaney. He was a black judge. That early CORE group was in touch with him, and he wanted them to upset the policy at the Y, anyhow. So he used to let them know when and where the board was going to be, and then *CORE people would* show up with picket signs. But he was the only black person on the board, and the board got to know where the leak was, and -- so he didn't get notices of these meetings. He used to get a phone call the day before the meeting took place. [Laughs]

But -- Tom Sullivan and ~~unel~~, *Harper Le Compte* who was a pacifist who was involved in some of that stuff; Annabelle Henry, who was a pacifist -- all these people I'm thinking of who were involved in that early, New York CORE, were white -- Farmer was around occasionally but he wasn't there regularly. They must have had a couple of others but I wasn't here, so I don't have any memory of it.

Anyhow, it was fairly -- It grew and then it got smaller. By the time I came back, after CPS

camp there were very few people. There was Annabelle Henry. It wasn't a vibrant group by any means.

Q: This was in '46?

Robinson: ~~'47 or '48~~

'46 or '47

Q: You were in CPS camp that long?

Robinson: I didn't get in until -- when did I get in? I got in in '45. I was out in '46 ~~or '47~~. ~~I'd have to check it.~~ Then I did some work at the War Resisters League, and I got a job here in New York. I was around CORE but not really terribly active until about '48, I guess. But I'd have to check. I could check the CORE book to see when we did the Palisade project. When we did the Palisade project, all of a sudden we got a lot more membership, in a hurry. Jim Peck ~~[phonetic]~~ was involved with that. Robin ^{Roe} ~~Rowe~~ ~~[phonetic]~~, who now lives in California, tells me that CORE was perking along, and there were very few people in it, and he was elected treasurer, and then he went away for ^{that} ~~the~~ summer. I can't remember what he had to do -- whether he went to school or something -- he said, "I came back in the fall, and here I was, treasurer, and we owed several thousand dollars after the Palisades project. We had a lot of parties. I think we must have had a fund-raising party at least once a month, at that time. We did eventually get the bills paid, and so on and so forth, but it was exciting. And curious -- because I'm so much interested in money -- I didn't remember very much about being that far back in debt. When I was in national CORE, from 1957 on, I was very conscious of the dollars all the time. I tend to be very conscious about money anyway, and I was very careful with money in college. I'm a Depression kid, etc.

OK

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I think I've done enough for today.

Q: Okay. Great.

[END OF SESSION]