VJD

Interviewee: James Robinson Session #4

Interviewer: Sheila Michaels

Date: February 5, 1999

[TAPE THREE, SIDE TWO, CONTINUED]

Q: This is an interview with Jim Robinson, and it's the 5th of February. Okay.

Robinson: All right. When I first went to a New York CORE meeting, New York CORE was not in particularly good condition. The person I remember best from it is Annabelle Henry (she's now Annabelle Seidman) and she had been a mainstay of New York CORE from the beginning, or almost the beginning. One of the people who was very important was Dorothy Sullivan, Tom Sullivan's first wife, but she was out of it by the time I came to the first meeting. Harper LeComte was not yet back. He'd been in New York CORE before, and they had done quite a lot of work on the YMCAs, which was not really going on when I joined. One of the people on the board, who was a representative of the Harlem Y, Judge Delaney (I've said this before), he used to let them know when the YMCA board was meeting, and they'd picket that. But all that had died away by the time I came, and the meetings were being held at the Harlem Ashram, which was on Fifth Avenue, north of Mt. Morris Park. It was kind of a beat-up old building, but the ashram was modeled, more or less, on the Gandhian ashrams of India. The person who started it I think had been a missionary in India.

At any rate, New York CORE suffered from having -- Although it was meeting in Harlem, it had very few blacks, so it really had very little in the way of program, at that moment.

Q: That part of Fifth Avenue -- had black people moved down there yet?

Robinson: Yes. It was about 122nd Street. It was in Harlem. North of Morris Park.

Q: I'm a little off, geographically; sorry.

Robinson: So after I left Chicago CORE, when it was vibrant, and when I came to New York CORE it was not vibrant -- Of course, in addition to that, I was looking for work, not at all yet set in New York.

Q: Had you been discharged yet, from -- ?

Robinson: When I first went to the meetings, I was still in CPS. I had not yet been discharged. But I knew I would be discharged. It was at one of the meetings -- not the first meeting -- when Annabelle Henry said something about having visited some conscientious objectors at 200 Mott Street, down in Little Italy. She said they said, "Why don't you move over here? It's fun." She couldn't move over. She was living with her mother way out in Brooklyn. But they said, "There will be an apartment available here -- we think," because a woman was living back there with her boyfriend, and her husband discovered where she was and he came by, pounded on the door, and he said he didn't care anything about her,

and he really didn't want her back but he did want his suits. He broke the door, anyhow. He got his suits. But she was frightened and she moved.

Q: The boyfriend was wearing the suits, do you think?

Robinson: She had taken her husband's suits for the boyfriend.

So I said to Annabelle, "When I leave conscientious-objector camp, I've got to have someplace," so I went down there. It had happened, and I got the apartment. It was up six flights of stairs and on the back of the building. But the building was a little higher than the building next door, so that my two back windows were open -- there was a small courtyard there -- and the kitchen window, which was cross-wise, there was an airshaft, but you could step from that window to the next door roof.

Q: Okay. Well, that meant that you could be robbed easily.

Robinson: Yes, you could. But there was a man in the next building, who lived several doors down from the top, but kept his pigeons on the roof. He was a longshoreman. So one day he was up there with his water jugs, and he tapped on my window and asked me if I would give him water from the kitchen, so he wouldn't have to go -- So I used to do that. When I was away one weekend I loaned the apartment, and when I came back he said, "If you loan the apartment, let me know." [Laughs] "You know, we have punks in this area who will ~~rob~~ Rob right in their own neighborhood."

So I was well protected.

Q: Were these War Resisters League people?

Robinson: The people in the front apartment were Russia and Luka. What was Luka's name? I've forgotten. But they were war-resister types; I'm not sure if they were in the War Resisters League. But they were both children of Italian anarchists, who had been miners out in Colorado. Russia was born along about the time of the Russian revolution; that's how Russia got her name. They were all absolutely enamored of the Russian revolution. Of course, they weren't a few years later, because it was anything but anarchist. But that's where she got her name, and she said she could remember, as a child, being trundled along on picket lines, when there was some kind of strike. She was very strong in her opinions. She was very anti-religious. She couldn't understand why I was Catholic, etc., since she'd been brought up to be anti-religious. I think her husband was less so, but he was less opinionated anyway.

But they had a front apartment, so they had two little bedrooms whereas I had one. But she, I think, had never had an opportunity to decorate before, or anything. They had done a very attractive -- It looked very nice. The chairs, actually, weren't comfortable, but they looked good. When I got chairs for mine, my chairs were comfortable. But she certainly made the place look like something.

In the front apartment, the other front apartment, Harper LeComte, who'd been with me at Mancos, and Simon Perchik [~~phonetic~~] moved in there. Simon was not a pacifist. He had been a bombardier in England, and when I first met him I thought, "I sure don't like him."

The couple was Mark and Russia Luca

He was brash as anything. Any kind of personal question he wanted to ask, he'd go right ahead and ask it.

Q: No English reserve.

Robinson: He was not prickly, though. I think Russia was prickly. So it's astonishing that Simon is one of the two or three best friends I've ever had. [Laughs]

Q: Well, I tell you, there's a building down there that was handed from one person to another in the War Resisters League for many years, the apartments. I sort of kept track of the adventures of it when I was a cab driver, which is why I asked if they were War Resisters League people in there.

Robinson: Well, we had a kind of pacifist community around there. Around the corner, Bob and Bunny Davison had an apartment. They had an apartment with an inside toilet, as a matter of fact.

Q: Luxury.

Robinson: And up the street, Tom Sullivan and his second wife, Sally -- she was the wife that I knew -- had an apartment in the back tenement. You went through the front tenement and across a courtyard into the back tenement. It was up in that area somewhere, where Bayard Rustin had an apartment for a while, too. The biography of Bayard talks about the group, the Mott Street group, but he gets his facts all wrong. He says that Lu[illegible]a's wife was Japanese-American. Well, she wasn't Japanese-American, she was an Italian

anarchist. He guessed the name of my wife, and I think he does say that she's a singer, but he has the wrong name. So he had things pretty well muddled up. I don't know where he got the information, but it was not accurate.

Q: Were you married by then?

Robinson: No, no.

Q: You've been married twice.

Robinson: Yes, but I wasn't married yet. That was later. But I was married while I was still at Mott Street.

In the front apartment, when I first moved there, it was not Simon and Harper, it was Kingman Grover [phonetic] and a roommate of his. Kingman was also a conscientious objector, and Sophie ~~Stayson [phonetic]~~ Stasiun liked him. She had the back apartment, opposite mine, she and Joyce Chase. So it was very chummy. In fact, everybody on that top floor -- There were two bathrooms in the hall, for the four apartments, and very often, at night, one of us would go around and tap on the doors, about coming and having coffee. "Bring your own cup," you know, because we weren't washing any dishes. It was easygoing, because when you're ready to go to bed, you said, "Now you can go home," you know. It was very pleasant and a lot less intense, in a way, than the Fellowship House had been in Chicago. There was very little objection to interracial living, most of the time. Bill Sutherland, I think, had been beaten up once in the West Village, but not over where we were.

Q: Bill Sutherland is what -- how is he related to Liz Sutherland? He was related to Liz Sutherland, if I remember.

Robinson: Who?

Q: Elizabeth Sutherland.

Robinson: He may have been. A black?

Q: He may have been her father. Okay.

Robinson: Anyhow, he spent a lot of time in Africa. He's still around. But, generally, the people I met were friendly enough. It wasn't that they didn't have stereotypes. Sutherland came over to see me one night. He couldn't call me. The phones were short, and I was on the waiting list; I didn't have a phone. So he just came over, and he got to the entry-way, downstairs, and it was even hard to read the mailboxes. One of the kids said, "Who are you looking for?" "Robinson." "Oh, Robinson. He's up on the top floor, in nigger heaven." [Laughs] But he didn't find me, I was out.

But that was strange. The other big adventure that I had there -- James Oliver, who's the friend I've had from the time of the Harlem Y, and who had come to Chicago when I was in Chicago, after he was in Tuskegee -- He and I had gone downtown and rammed around one Sunday. We went into Estelle's Restaurant and sat at the window, and they wouldn't serve us. Here he was, in his uniform, and we had not anticipated that. We'd been in New York before, it just didn't occur to us. It was not a fancy restaurant. Anyhow, they weren't about

to serve any blacks. We sat around for a while and kept them on tenterhooks, then finally left.

But anyhow, he was coming to New York with Clarence Raynor, a friend of his from, I guess, Tuskegee Air Flying School, so they came and they stayed at my apartment. We went out, probably to a show or something, and maybe we had coffee afterward, anyway, it was fairly late at night. We got off the subway at Houston Street and went down, and we had barely gotten inside the apartment when there was a big rap on the door, and they said they were the police, etc. You have to open the door. I didn't think they were police, but I had no telephone and the door was easy enough to break down. So I said, "Well, we're not going to open the door." James Oliver was frightened, but Clarence Raynor was terrified. We never did know whether they were genuine or whether they weren't. But they came in, and they insisted that they were looking for a tall, black, thin criminal from Chicago. So Oliver opened his suitcase and let them look through -- I think he was on his way to graduate school or something.

but I did open the door as I knew I must.

Anyhow, we thought we were going to get beaten up or something but we didn't, and they left.

Q: Were they in uniform?

Robinson: They were not in uniform. So I never knew whether they really were police, or whether they were something else. But nothing happened to us, so after they left I locked the door and went to bed, and went to sleep. Clarence Raynor couldn't understand how anybody could go to sleep.

Anyway, he sat up until it got light in the morning, and he took his suitcase and said goodbye, and he left. [Laughs] Oliver left later, but Raynor got out of there as fast as he could. But that was about the extent of that kind of difficulty ~~of~~ I might run into. I was there a number of years, four or five years, and people changed. After ~~Lukà~~ the Lucas left, Paul Hansen, who was a conscientious objector, had the apartment that they had had. So it kind of kept circulating. Kingman left -- his roommate was a singer, I think, and I don't know what happened to the singer, but they moved up near Columbia somewhere. Kingman was teaching at Cooper Union, but he lived up near Columbia, ~~before~~ after he left Mott Street. He and Sophia ~~Stayson~~ Stasium never did get together. I think he probably was basically homosexual; I don't know. But she was fond of him, and she lived there for quite a long time. She was there the night that these cops came in. She was on the other side of the door. Our door was like this and her door was like that, and they were both these wooden doors with glass slots in them, full of wire, so that -- They were no protection, if somebody was really bound to get in. And she didn't have a phone, either; she couldn't do anything about it.

So that was Mott Street. But very shortly, as far as New York CORE --

Q: Where were they meeting?

Robinson: They had been meeting at the Ashram.

Q: On 128th. 127 nd + 5th ave

Robinson: I only went to meetings there three or four times before we decided to move.

Q: Move New York CORE.

Robinson: Move the New York CORE meeting place. We didn't have an office, but we moved the meeting place down to the Rand School on 16th Street, near Union Square. That was the right-wing socialists -- not the Norman Thomas, the other variety. Annabelle Henry had some connections down there. Her family was Ethical Culture, and they were socialist or near-socialist. But she was a pacifist, and she would have been more apt to have been in the Norman Thomas wing, but I don't know that she was.

Anyway, we got meeting space down there, and I'm not even sure we had to pay anything for it. So we were moving away from Harlem, but we then got involved with Palisades Amusement Park. Someone told us -- Well, the park was very conspicuously mixed. The swimming pool was not mixed; it was restricted. We decided to test that. I was one of the people to go in first, and was to be absolutely an observer -- not to do anything at all, except go swimming, and then sit on the sand near the fence, to see what was going on.

Well, what was going on was that when blacks got to the window, they were told they had to join a club. We only had a couple of blacks, I think, that first time, then we had some more whites, who had no problem getting in. So after that we began to negotiate, and we got nowhere. Then we decided to have a standing-line, and we got a number of people to go that time. We used to meet at Catherine Raymond's apartment, up above Columbia, and then walk down to 125th Street and take the ferry across and the bus up. We used Katherine's apartment for deployment, so people could come back and report what was going on.

Catharine

Q: There was the 125th Street ferry then.

Robinson: Yes. So this particular day, when a couple of blacks got to the window -- I can't remember whether they were told about a club that time, or whether they were told the pool was full. Anyway, they said they thought they would wait for a ticket. The people immediately behind them were white people, and they decided they would wait, too.

Q: Oh, it was CORE people?

Robinson: CORE people. Whites who were otherwise -- not CORE people -- were further back in the line, and it got so that everybody just waited. Then people began to filter away, and they lost a lot of business that day. They decided, after that, apparently, that they weren't having any more of that.

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

Q: This is the fifth of February; this is the fourth tape with Jim Robinson.

Robinson: So the following Saturday, when we thought we would do the same thing, they had – the park must have cooked things up with people who were there to rough us up, and also with the police in these two little towns. By this time -- Somewhere along, before the start of this project at the Palisades, Jim Peck became active. Now he may have been active before, but he was there for this standing-line, and I think I was still not identified as CORE, but going in and observing from the pool. But he and someone else were pushed

around, then the police put them in the police car, and the window was down, and one of the policemen reached in with his night-stick and broke Jim Peck's jaw.

Q: Oh, no!

Robinson: Yes.

Q: Oh, my God.

Robinson: Sally Sullivan, she was identified with the standing-line, I guess. Anyhow, they pushed her around, pushed her out of the park and onto a bus, and the bus got down to the bottom of the hill, so she could take the ferry back, but she didn't take the ferry back, she got onto another bus. By this time I was out of the pool somewhere, and she was pushed around at the gates, again. Finally, I think I was the one who said, "Sally, I think you've had enough." But I don't remember if I was pushed around at all that time. I was later on.

Q: But you were not identified as part of the group then.

Robinson: I was identified at some point, probably that day, later, but I had just been an observer earlier. But as soon as we were suffering violence, we talked to the [*New York*] *Amsterdam News* and gave them all the facts. They embroidered the facts (we were embarrassed); they made things worse than they actually were, and we didn't want that, because we didn't want people to think that we were lying, and obviously we were the ~~force~~ source of it.

[= the news story]

But the upshot of it was that the people who were interested in non-violence and some young black people heard about it, who otherwise wouldn't have, so New York CORE was suddenly not tiny anymore.

Q: Okay. I had heard that that was a violent demonstration.

Robinson: It went on all summer. We were charged with disorderly conduct and so forth. I remember going to a night court thing over there -- which was not night court, it was just the police, really. We had an ACLU attorney who volunteered his time -- but there were court costs, I guess, involved. Anyway, we went over there, and the employees testified this and the police testified that, and then the man who was running it for the police decided these people were guilty, and our lawyer said, "It's customary to allow the defense to say something." [Laughs] So something was said, then there was a court case at a regular court, subsequently, and Melba ~~Valet [phonetic]~~ Valle, who was a black model -- she modeled most of the time in the clothing industry -- she was tall and not very fat at all, so she showed off tailored clothing very, very well. She also modeled occasionally at Art Students League. But she became involved. She lived down on Morningside Avenue (the drive is up here, and the Avenue is down in Harlem). She'd been roughed up. Quite a lot of things had happened to her. But we couldn't use her as a witness. She had no intention of lying, but she never told the same story twice alike. It always varied a little bit. And you can't do that. It looks as if somebody's lying. But we knew she wasn't. So we didn't use her much. The lawyer used people he knew would be--

Q: But she could be active.

Robinson: But she could be active. Oh, yes. She was very helpful, but she was not good for court cases.

Q: I'm just wondering about the modeling. Who was she modeling for? When you say she was clothing modeling -- was she very, very fair?

Robinson: No, she was not very, very fair. She was very good-looking.

Q: But they didn't use black models then, not until the '60s.

Robinson: I don't think -- She didn't do the runway sort of thing. I think she probably was used for photographs that they distributed to the black things, because everything was very segregated in those days. But there were white businesses that knew that they could sell in black areas. But that's what she said, and I think she was telling the truth, all right.

So all of a sudden we were much bigger, Jim Peck was involved, and remained involved from then on. He was very important, of course, later on, in national CORE. But Robin ~~Rowe~~ Roe tells me that he was treasurer that year, and he went away for the summer -- I think he went back to school out in Indiana, where he came from --

Q: Jim Peck was, or Robin ~~Rowe~~ Roe?

Robinson: Robin ~~Rowe~~ Roe. So he said he'd been piddling along with small amounts of money, and he came back to find out that we had this big project in the Palisades, court cases, etc.,

and we were several thousand dollars in debt. I'm very conscious of money, but I don't happen to remember this. But I do know that we then began to have CORE parties about once a month that were pay-parties. We sold drinks. Actually, we sold poker chips that people turned in for drinks. So we did that and raised money, and we contributed money ourselves. Eventually, all those things got paid. It took a while, but they did get paid.

Q: And CORE became known for its parties?

Robinson: And CORE became known, among other things, for its parties. There were some people who came to the parties who never joined. People couldn't become a member unless you were active with one of the action units, and you had to participate on action projects. If you were absent too often you lost your active membership. You could still be considered an associate, but you couldn't vote. Only people who were active could vote. We had that in Chicago, too.

Q: I think it stayed. I think it stayed.

Robinson: It stayed for quite a long time. It was very important, because later on, when things got very big, everything went. There was no -- The rules and regulations all went by the wayside, and it became messy.

Q: Well, I do think that the voting membership really meant that you had to get to meetings.

Robinson: Yes.

Q: I'm not so sure about -- Well, we'll find out from somebody else.

Robinson: Well, you had to be active in order to vote, so the Palisades Project was something that revitalized the New York CORE group. We then worked on the YMCAs again, in Brooklyn and Queens. There was a Carlton Avenue Y, it was an all-white Y, in an area that was virtually all black.

Q: In Brooklyn?

Robinson: In Brooklyn, yes. The Brooklyn Central Y, which is something else now, but it was a beautiful building -- That did not admit blacks, and the Carlton Avenue did not admit blacks. We picketed the Carlton Avenue branch.

Q: Did they need a reason to keep blacks out, or did they have a reason?

Robinson: Well, it had been general practice in the Ys. The Westside Y was all white. If Manhattan wasn't mixed, certainly Brooklyn wasn't going to be mixed. So we picketed there Saturdays, week in and week out, and there were only a few people who showed up every week. Peck was one of them. A.B. Johnson, who was an older black man, used to show up. He came from the upper reaches of the Bronx somewhere, all the way out there, and picketed in the snow. We never achieved it, we never changed the policy. There was a lot of work without any ostensible progress. Eventually, the Ys integrated, but it was not cause and effect. *Eventually*, a lot of things integrated.

But we did spend a lot of time on that. We did some restaurant testing. There were occasional restaurants that discriminated. Very few. And we did nowhere near what we should have been doing on housing at that point. Later on, we did more on housing.

Q: A lot. The first work that I ever did was on housing.

Robinson: Housing. Well, on housing -- I think we should have done a good deal more than we did on housing, because if people live close enough together, if there's enough contact, differences are perceived as incidental, and the likenesses are perceived as quite essential. They put people together in a co-op, in some of these Mitchell-Lamas, and there wasn't any racial divide; there was a divide according to whether some people wanted this and some people didn't want it, etc.

So the housing is something we should have done more on. [Interruption]

So when I first got out of the conscientious objector project and found the apartment at 200 Mott Street, there was a young man I knew at Mancos named Hansen -- not the one who eventually lived in the front -- who was going to live there, too. The black conscientious objector from Big Flats who was in town -- all of us felt we ~~lived~~ would live in that apartment -- Well, the fellow from Big Flats went back to Denver very shortly, and a friend of mine Hansen from Mancos just sort of floated around, getting himself set for employment, etc. He disappeared, too, and I had the apartment then, all to myself, and had to carry the enormous rent, which was $15 a month. There was hot water and no heat, but since the apartments were not very big it was not difficult to heat them with gas stoves with clay candles. I think they're illegal,

probably, now. I had a ~~glass~~ gas plate for cooking, two little burners, so when I came home from work I would turn those on, and turn on the gas heater, and plug in the electric heater, and sit in front of the electric heater while I went through the mail. By the time I had gone through -- sat there for ten or fifteen minutes -- I was warm enough, and could unplug the electric one, and the place was usually getting warm enough. It was the top floor, but it was not frigid.

It's surprising, when I think about it, because when we lived at 131 Riverside, we had a failure with heat one night when we had a party, and the temperature went down to 48 or 50 [degrees farenheit] in the apartment, and the wind blew. It was incredible.

Q: [Inaudible]

Robinson: Yes. So I was looking for work. I worked part-time at the War Resisters League, and I worked on changing addresses -- which was absolutely an interminable job at that point, because people were getting out of prison then -- out of conscientious objector camp -- so you'd get their home addresses, and you'd send them to the home address, and by the time the mailing went out they had moved somewhere else. So we were constantly doing this change-of-address work.

Q: Were those little, individual plates, or did you have to do the whole stencil?

Robinson: They were like mimeograph stuff. You had to wet this membrane and type the name and address on it. It went through a machine with ink on it, to do addressing.

Q: I remember you dropped something in, then you operated a little press.

Robinson: I think so, yes. Something like that. Anyhow, it was quite a chore, but it was lucky that I had it, because later on, when I went to CORE -- because I had a lot of that clerical stuff to do -- at the beginning I was the only person in the office.

So I did that. But I also had gotten a union card in the typographical union when I was in Chicago. I had worked as a proofreader in a place that was organizing, and I joined the union. Normally, you needed a ~~secure~~ apprenticeship; you were supposed to be able to operate a linotype machine and all that before you became a proofreader. I didn't have any of that. So I had a union card, and I got a job at Darcy Press, which didn't last very long. It was two or three weeks, I guess. Then I got a job at The Bar Press and I was there for years. That was an ideal job for someone who wanted to be active in CORE. I worked -- The normal day, I think, was 8:30 to 4:30; or, maybe it was 9:00 to 4:30. It was a half-an-hour lunch, and, of course, it was union, and it paid better than many jobs. On the other hand, it wasn't absorbing; it was routine.

So I found that pleasant. Also, I could walk -- Well, when I first had the job I had to take the subway to it, but later on it moved to a place that was closer to Mott Street, and I could walk to work.

Q: Was it the American Bar Association, or what Bar -- ?

Robinson: No, it was just called The Bar Press, and it was a place that did court records and legal briefs -- the sort of thing that really isn't ~~done~~ printed anymore. I think that's all done on

a computer, nowadays. I know one of their major clients was a firm called Breed, Abbott and Morgan, and Charles [H.] Tuttle was the lawyer there, who sent his work to The Bar Press. We would set up everything he sent us, in the way of a brief, then sent him the proofs, and he'd rewrite it in the proofs. It was great for The Bar Press, because the corrections paid a lot better than setting it up. But you got used to Mr. Tuttle, and you realized you followed this line, and here's where it was, and then you had to get back there to find out where you went next.

So I was doing that, and I was active in CORE, going to CORE parties, and I met a lot of people who were pacifists, ex-conscientious objectors and all that, and there was something new cooking called the Committee for Non-Violent Revolution. I went to a couple of meetings of that, and decided it was much too theoretical for me. Dave Dellinger was involved with that, and Bayard Rustin was involved with that. Dellinger, of course, later did all kinds of interesting projects. The thing that people know about him, I guess, is that Chicago convention stuff. But I think he was one of the people who had gone on one of the boats that tried to sail into an area where they were testing atomic bombs and that kind of thing. He was from a rich family in Boston, and lived in kind of a communal living arrangement in New Jersey.

Q: Was that with the Goodman group?

Robinson: I don't know what it was.

Now I remember — it was Glen Gardiner (Gardner?) if possibly misspelled

Q: What was that called, in New Jersey? I should know the name. I don't remember the name of it. But he had a wife and children, and he would go off on these projects. Frankly, I

This is part of the answer

considered him pretty irresponsible. He left his family responsibilities for other people to pick up, and he didn't worry about it. It's the kind of impractical idealist that sometimes goes, I think, with never having had to worry about things when he was growing up. There was always plenty of money and everything else.

Anyway, those things were unspecific in many ways, and the CORE projects were definite -- If you made some progress, you could see you were making progress. So I gradually moved away from being active in pacifist things to being exclusively in CORE. Also, I was a long time growing up. The time that I went to Harlem I made a big step in growing up. When I was at Columbia I made a step in terms of my social consciousness, what I believed and how you did things, but in relating to people, it was in Harlem, and the CORE in Chicago. But I was still very young for my age when I came back to New York City, and I didn't think very much, initially, of getting married.

I went to a picnic with Harper LeComte and some of the people from Teachers College Bookstore, where Sophie worked, and Dorothy Oberholt also worked at that bookstore, and she was at that picnic. That's when I became interested in her. I think she came with Harper, but after that she went places with me. I particularly remember a CORE weekend in the middle of the winter. It was up in the Catskills, at a camp that belonged to the Broadway Tabernacle, which was a congregational Christian church. It used to be at 56th and Broadway. Allen Knight Chalmers was the last famous minister, but there had been others before that. They had this summer camp, the youth group there, and we had one or two people who were connected with the youth group could get, so we got it one weekend. It was after a Friday night CORE meeting, I think, that we loaded up the cars and went up there, and the snow, I think, was eighteen inches deep. We got there -- It was quite a chore

getting all the cars in. I don't think we got them all the way to the camp. We got them part way. Then we got into the camp. The people from the Broadway Tabernacle knew how to fiddle around until they got the fireplaces going. But the place hadn't been used in two weeks, and it was frosty on the inside of the cabin. When we finally got in there and got the fire going, then we decided we ought to have hot chocolate, so we made hot chocolate and didn't drink quite all of it. The next morning when we got up, it was frozen solid. [Laughs]

But someone who had been there before said, "You know, sleeping inside, after the fireplace had been going, seems cold, because you get the dampness from the -- and if you sleep out on the porch, outside, you don't have that. It's nice and dry. It's cold, but it's nice and dry." So they had these cots you could take out there, and they had loads and loads of blankets. And the way you worked it was to put one blanket at the bottom and let it drag down. Then you put one blanket on top, all the way along, that would fold up this way. The next blanket you put there, and it would fold up this way. Finally, there was one at the top. Anyhow, you had three or four blankets, and when you first got in, it was cold out there. You had all this stuff under you, and all this stuff over you, and you pulled it up at this end, and it kept the snow -- and then you pulled it over here, and you had it over you, so you finally got very warm, and we slept out there. Actually, it wasn't windy, and once you got warmed up, it was very comfortable.

But the warden came by the next morning, and we said something about having slept out, and he said, "It was 18 below zero!" But it was all right, but before we got in, it took a while to get the fires going and have any kind of breakfast. The leftover cocoa was frozen solid.

But we had a great time. The lake was frozen; you could walk on it or skate on it. Anyhow, I

went with Dorothy on that, and when we came back -- she was living near Columbia -- I took her home. I had a nice suitcase, but I was wearing a mackinaw or a lumber jacket that looked very "country," that was good and warm. So after I left her, I got out onto Amsterdam Avenue, and I got stopped by the cops because I had this good-looking suitcase and a mackinaw. Anyhow, that got straightened out. But I was so amazed that I'm afraid I kind of told them off. Anyhow, I didn't have any trouble. But that's interesting that that could happen, even with somebody who was white. It had nothing to do with race in this case.

But that's how she and I got to going together. When we decided to get married, she went over to Philadelphia to talk to her people about it, and I got a call -- I think it was about 1:00 in the morning -- and she said she was coming back to New York, she was going to get a late train. They had really, but really, objected to her marrying anybody who was Roman Catholic. She was not Catholic. She had a cousin who had married somebody who was Catholic, and they had a couple of children, then he left her. So there was some actual experience with this business. But anyhow, she was so upset with her mother and father, and her sister, too. She said, "The amazing thing is that, in the middle of all this, my grandmother and my aunt came in," they lived right in the same neighborhood, and she said, "With my grandmother, I can remember when I was a little girl, if somebody said anything about anyone getting married, she would say, 'Well, is he Pennsylvania Dutch?'" So she said she was amazed, they said, "Well, so what?" They didn't really object in the same way her parents --

Anyway, that all worked out fine. We got along very well later on. Actually, after she (Dorothy) died, I used to get phone calls once in a while from Mrs. Oberholt. She was concerned that I was

living alone in New York City. They had always been a little worried about Dorothy coming to New York City. Then, after ~~we~~ Barbara and I were married ~~and we had the children [unclear]~~ That was four-and-a-half years later, after Dorothy died, before we were married, then we had a child the first year and a child the second year, and the Oberholts wanted us to come over and bring the kids. We said, "Well, we'll do it, but we're coming on the train. They'll probably get tired and fussy," but they were perfect little angels that day.

Third person: They were there just long enough.

[My wife Barbara]

Robinson: And they wanted us to stay longer. We were there, oh, two and a half hours, I guess, and we said, "We'd better quit while we were ahead." So that all worked out very well, indeed.

Q: Can I ask how she died? Dorothy? How she died?

Robinson: Oh, yes. She had diabetes. She had diabetes, and I knew that when we were married. It had caused her no trouble, although she had gotten it when she was seventeen or eighteen. But it went out of whack within the first year, after we were married, and she had a diabetic coma and was hospitalized. Then she went regularly to the doctor, first to one doctor and then, finally, Dr. ~~Charamia~~ Scharamela, who was in the same building, in Stuyvesant Town -- He was a general practitioner but he knew a lot about diabetes. His mother was diabetic. He used to show me her blood tests. He said, "It's very difficult to control, because the blood sugar is too low and then it's too high." But it was controlled fairly well, and she worked for quite a long time, and was able to do things. I remember once, going on the train to Philadelphia, we had decided we would eat in the diner (there were diners then). The

Scharamela? sp?

trouble was that there was a line for the diner, and we had to wait in the line. She had to eat sugar, because her blood sugar was going down. But there wasn't that much difficulty after that first upset, for a while. But it kept recurring, and eventually she had ~~Chemostein [phonetic]~~ Wilson's disease, which is a breakdown of the capillary system, from the fluctuations of the sugar and so on. So that's what made her blind. She was not completely blind. She had light perception, but at night, a neon sign, she could read it, but she couldn't read, in general. So she got a seeing-eye dog from over at Morristown, and she was there a couple of weeks for that training. She got instruction on how to cook and various things of that sort, from the Lighthouse, and she learned Braille. Then we bought a loom, and she learned to weave. Oh, this -- she wove this.

Q: Oh, for heaven's sake.

Robinson: She did stoles and various things. She had them planned out, so the patterns came out right, despite the difficulty with the --

Q: I was going to say, that tie has such lovely colors in it. If she couldn't see --

Robinson: Well, the colors are -- I didn't wear it for many years because it faded. Now it's faded into a color that's all right again, I think.

Q: Sorry.

Robinson: But the yarns in it really did fade, and they weren't kept out in the sun, they just did.

So, anyhow, in 1955, in September -- By 1955, in August, we went to Shelter Island on vacation, and the doctor said if she wanted to have a drink she could have a drink. She takes straight insulin. She could have straight insulin, just before going over to have the drink, and he said she might as well have it, because -- but he told me a year before that that it was going to get worse, and it was going to be fatal. So we went out there, and we had a very good time. She went into the water almost every day. She had to spend part of the day in bed some days, but the two nights that they had dancing she was able to dance, etc. That was in August. Then she died in September.

We had lived at Mott Street when we were first married, then we had applied to Stuyvesant Town, and we got a letter back saying there was Veteran preference, but neither -- I wrote back and said that no, neither one of us was a veteran but that we were up six fights of stairs in an old law tenement, and my wife had health problems. Then we got a letter back saying that while there were no apartments available, if you bring this letter to the receptionist, someone will see you. So we did that, and, actually, I talked to a woman who was interested that we lived in a tenement. She'd been to a party, she said, on the Upper East Side, where she sat on top of the bathtub in the kitchen.

The upshot of it was that they typed up an application for us, while we were there, and we got into Stuyvesant. Then when we had the seeing-eye dog, we had permission for that, too.

Q: No dogs in Stuyvesant Town. Was Stuyvesant Town integrated yet?

Robinson: No, but it's not integrated. The Talbots, who were on our floor, were on the committee to integrate Stuyvesant Town, and they were on the list to be evicted. Stuyvesant Town was going to evict a whole bunch of these people. I think there were six or eight families they were ready to put out -- people who had been active in this committee. But Paul Talbot ran a television business. It was mostly export to Mexico and things like that, but he had some contacts so he got one of the big news services to call Stuyvesant Town about where the plugs were: They wanted to televise the eviction. [Laughs] The eviction didn't happen.

Q: TV was quite new then. People used to go to each other's apartments to see it, so it would have been a big event.

Robinson: Yes. So the Talbots had packed up most of their stuff, so it wouldn't be ruined when they were put out. Rudolph Halley was president of the City Council, I think it was. He had just been elected. He was on the Liberal party ticket. The Liberal party then had some liberality. Now it's just another thing. Anyway, he had been elected, and he decided to try to negotiate this Stuyvesant Town thing. The upshot of it was that several families, who had been involved with trying to integrate it, agreed to move out. The black family, who was there in somebody else's apartment, they would give them a lease, and they would change the policy -- which happened. Now I haven't been around there lately, but I don't think there are very many blacks, even now. And the Talbots were not put out.

Q: But they got rid of their "troublemakers," in return for putting in the blacks?

Robinson: They got rid of some, one or two, two or three of the "troublemakers," yes. The black family who was there was in an apartment that somebody else had leased and lived in, then they had moved out and these people had moved in. But that kind of thing was getting just sensitive enough that Metropolitan really didn't want to evict the black family.

Q: They built Stuyvesant Town just after the war, right?

Robinson: Right.

Q: And then they built Metropolitan Houses, because they had built Stuyvesant Town as white, and didn't let any blacks in.

[NOT Metropolitan]

Robinson: Well, Riverton, up in Harlem. Riverton was very similar to Stuyvesant Town. The apartment sizes were slightly smaller. But no, that was supposed to make up for the fact that this other place was all white.

Before the war, they built Parkchester, up in the Bronx, and I think there was a little difficulty, initially, about Jews, but they were in Pelham, in an area where there were quite a lot of Jews, so there were Jews in Parkchester. Parkchester is still a nice development.

Q: It's all right, yes. Yes. I haven't been up there in about twenty years, there would have been a little difficulty then.

Robinson: I think it's stabilized since then. I think there are a great many Asians there, as a matter of fact, because it's now a condo anyway, or at least most of it is.

So in Stuyvesant Town, something -- I was doing something with CORE, there was an article about it in *Town & Village*, which was a local, neighborhood paper, and that was after we were married, I think. We got a letter in our mailbox that said, "If you're ~~still~~ so interested in Nigers (sic), why don't you marry one?"

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

Robinson: -- married May 13, 1950. My wife died in September -- September 18th --

Third person: No, not 18th.

Robinson: Twenty-third, 1955. Then ~~we~~ Barbara and I were married February 5, 1960. So it was four and a half years.

Third person: My birthday is ~~also~~ September 18th.

Dolothy died Sept 23, 1955. Barbara was born Sept 18, 1923.

Robinson: I always have trouble with the 18th.

Q: So that was when I met you, and that was when I thought you had boys, because you had probably one boy then.

Robinson: Probably, yes.

Q: In '61, yes.

Robinson: I became active in national CORE, again, at the very end of the '40s. When I first came back into New York CORE, I did not go, I think, to the first convention. I've got some records now, but I did go to a convention in Michigan, at Circle Pines Camp, then I went to the ones in Cincinnati, etc., as a delegate from New York CORE.

Q: So they were moving into smaller cities already.

Robinson: Yes. Well, the conventions were not necessarily held in cities where there were groups. They were usually held out in camps somewhere, connected with a church, or places that provided a place to sleep, and food, and didn't cost much, because no one had very much money. So the place we went to out near the Twin Cities, there were two conventions up there, and I think I went to only one of them. But that place I particularly remember as letting you feel hungry all the time. There just wasn't enough food. I don't remember that anywhere else, but in that place, it was true.

Q: That was the Michigan --

Robinson: No, that was the place we didn't get enough to eat, near Minneapolis. We had a CORE group in Minneapolis-St. Paul, they found this place, and it was otherwise a nice place to have a meeting. I can remember a group of us went down someplace, after the evening session, into the village to a place to get something to eat, and George Houser came with us. We were talking about the food not being very good and there not being enough of it, and he said he thought it was all right. In the course of the conversation, we realized that he didn't have any idea what we had been served. He had eaten it, but food was of no importance to him. He just didn't know.

Q: I lived with someone like that for five years.

Robinson: Anyhow, at that point we were having a very pleasant time, and we were reporting on projects, and the various groups were telling how they experimented with this, that and the other thing. There were no serious divisions of opinion, but that ended. New York CORE got the feeling that CORE was being hobbled by its connection with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. George Houser and Catherine Raymond worked for the Fellowship, and they ran the office for national CORE, they did not get paid by national CORE. Some people in the Fellowship of Reconciliation didn't like that very well, either, but it was an experiment in the use of non-violent, direct action. Initially, A.J. Muste had been very much in favor of it, when he was running the Fellowship of Reconciliation, but several of us in New York CORE, including Lula Farmer and ~~Mae~~ Me, thought that as long as we don't have any money, we really have no way to make the thing grow. You've got to have paid staff. We pushed the idea of hiring a fundraiser, which went over like a lead balloon. So the next year, at Cincinnati, I said that I was willing to do part-time fundraising. I was going to keep my other job -- I think it was $1.00 an hour or something. Anyhow, that didn't go over, either, at the afternoon -- Some people thought, oh, well, these things should not be paid for.

However, the St. Louis people -- ~~I must talk~~ must have talked to people during dinner. As I remember it, I didn't go to the evening session. I think I went for a walk. Anyhow, they decided at the evening session that they should go ahead with it and I should do it.

Q: This was St. Louis people.

Robinson: It was the St. Louis people who pushed it, right. Houser didn't object to it, either.

Q: So he would have continued, unpaid, and you would be paid $1.00 an hour to be a fundraiser.

Robinson: Right.

Q: Okay. And he was being paid a salary by FOR.

Robinson: Right.

Q: But he wasn't working for them.

Robinson: He was working for them.

Q: So he was part-time. Catharine

Robinson: He was part-time. He and ~~Katherine~~ worked part-time for CORE, but they did -- They set up the conventions, they found the places, they did literature that went out, the mailing list was maintained there. When I began to do the fundraising the mailing list was maintained, and ~~Katherine~~ did it. So the participation of the Fellowship was absolutely essential, and continued to be so. -Catharine

Now at that same convention, we decided we ought to have somebody who was trying to do field work. Wally Nelson volunteered to do that on a subsistence basis (he got paid very little for it), and he did quite a bit of work. Eventually, he actually ran the summer workshops in Washington, D.C., and did innovative things like organizing the surrounding community on the swimming-pool project that they had. The surrounding community was partly black. The pool, the public-playground pool, was restricted to whites, and he got the local people involved in the protests. Eventually, they got that pool opened.

But Wally was also an anarchist type, and belonged to the peacemakers. The peacemakers were tax resisters, among other things, all of which was good, but he mixed that in with what he was doing for CORE from time to time, which we felt restricted the appeal that CORE had. It was also the McCarthy period, and CORE had a policy of sorting people out politically, and making sure we didn't get anybody who was Communist or pro-Communist, because the older ones of us had been on college campuses when the Stalinists tried to take over liberal organizations, and they used them or smashed them, and that was it.

But Nelson felt that that was a very un-Christian kind of approach.

Q: Were they using them as front organizations, or were they just destroying them to not have any competition?

Robinson: They used them as front organizations, but if you got a front organization to be way out on the "Yanks are not coming," and then all of a sudden Hitler attacks the Soviet Union and you're the other way -- you were dumping people out right, left and center, too.

So there was a lot of fuss, and also he tended to push the idea that CORE groups should act with unanimity -- which, of course, meant that if you had anybody in a CORE group who wanted to hold something up, they could really hold it up, because it only took a vote or two.

Q: Was he an anarchist? I guess I can see that.

Robinson: So he was difficult, from our point of view.

Now he's still around. He has lived his life that way, the whole time. I think he has stuck to his beliefs better than almost anybody else ever connected to CORE. But I had the feeling that I was a pacifist -- and I am a pacifist -- but if you're going to get anywhere, you had to get outside the pacifist orbit and into the general, liberal orbit. Liberals, initially, when I was first working with CORE, any kind of integration was way down on the agenda. It could be sacrificed to anything else, practically. I remember something about an education bill in Congress, and the NAACP decided to be in favor of the bill in spite of the fact that nothing was written into it about protecting the amount that would get to black students, because it was better to have something than nothing. But it was our feeling, some of the time, that if you were willing to settle for half a loaf, you wouldn't get more than a slice.

But I did want to involve people outside the radical pacifist fringe, so we were very much opposed to Nelson, after a couple of years, and engineered his not working for national CORE anymore, as a volunteer. There was a lot of dissension over that, and some of the groups sort of disintegrated, as a result. It was a very small number of people who then held CORE together. St. Louis CORE was active, New York CORE was active, and there were a couple of other groups that were more or less active, but there was just a handful of

Note: Wally Nelson died two or three years after this interview (1999).

He and his wife Juanita attended the CORE reunion near Chicago in October 1999.

people who kept it going. George Houser decided he wanted to work for the American Committee on Africa. He wanted to do something about Africa, and he wanted to get out of running CORE. This was, you know -- the CORE office was still at the Fellowship.

Q: Which was --

Robinson: It was here in New York City, on Audubon Avenue. But he didn't get out precipitously, so it was worked out that Billie ~~Coyle~~ Coil Ames, of St. Louis, would be the coordinator. She would be in St. Louis and I would do fundraising here in New York. Catherine Raymond was still going to handle the records. She was still being paid by the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Then something happened in Billie's life. She and her husband were divorced, and she felt she had to get out of CORE completely, and she did. Someone else in St. Louis took over temporarily, and --

Q: Did he remain in CORE or something?

Robinson: Her husband, Joe -- Joe was important, I think, in that discussion about fundraising, where I got to do the fundraising. But Joe was a labor organizer, and he was never as important to St. Louis CORE as Billie. Billie, at some point, was the one who kept everything going. They did the most complicated things in St. Louis. When they negotiated with the eating places in the department stores, and the people would say, "Well, we can't do it. We would lose customers," St. Louis CORE's response was, "Well, we don't think you'll lose customers. Why don't you let us try it. If it's agreeable with you, we'll set a

specific time and day of the week, and we'll send two people, one black and one white," or three people, "and you'll know they're coming, and you can observe what happens." In some cases -- They did this week in and week out, week in and week out. It was terribly difficult to organize. I can remember Bernice Fisher, who helped at the start, thought it was -- "This is something you don't do. It doesn't make any difference whether they lose business or not. It's still wrong."

But it worked. They got things open that way.

Q: Yes, that kind of makes sense out of a story my mother told me, about going to -- I think it was [unclear] with me.

Robinson: Yes, right.

Q: Going there and finding out that it was closed, but somehow or other we did get to eat, anyway.

Robinson: So Billie had done that --

Q: Many years have passed since I heard this story.

Robinson: She was wonderful, and if she had stayed -- She did try to set up a second Journey of Reconciliation.

Q: When was the first?

Robinson: The first was 1947, under Houser. This was in '55 or '56, somewhere along there. The idea was for it to end in New Orleans. But before the NAACP wouldn't participate, they did give Houser a list of contacts, all the way along the road, so their meetings were set up with the assistance of the local NAACP. When Billie was trying to do it, Martin [Luther] King [Jr.] was already on the scene, and they weren't about to help any other organization do anything. So she couldn't get any kind of cooperation.

Q: I'm shocked. I'm shocked.

Robinson: Thurgood Marshall was very much opposed to these things -- and said (which, of course, later proved to be true) that it would be extremely dangerous.

At any rate, she worked on that, but then she had to give it up, and someone else took over temporarily, in St. Louis. But that really wasn't working, with Billie. Even though she had a couple of children, she did something about CORE every day, and she was there and we were here, but we were in constant touch by mail. Not by phone. We couldn't afford the phone. It was by mail. That's the reason why so much stuff is down in writing.

So it didn't work. So Lula Farmer took over the job of coordinating here in New York, then I pushed the fundraising.

Q: So because she left CORE -- because Lula Farmer took it over, then everything shifted over to New York, and New York became the hub, completely.

Robinson: Yes. Everything was in New York, except the national chairman was Charlie Oldham, in St. Louis, and he was in touch with everything that went on, and very hard-nosed about things. [Laughs]

Q: Why does this not surprise me?

Robinson: He and his wife, of course, were vitally important to St. Louis CORE. So that brings us up to a point -- Well, we had Carter -- My fundraising was building a list and we were getting more money, and we hired LeRoy Carter, who had worked for the NAACP as a field person. I was still doing the fundraising part-time, but renewals worked very well and we had enough money. He was not well paid but -- So he traveled around, and he was down with Martin Luther King at the time of the bus boycott. Bayard Rustin was influential with King, then Glen Smiley, Bayard was asked to leave the area because a number of the people who worked with King did not like Bayard. But Glen Smiley, from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, was down there a lot after that. Actually, when the buses finally integrated it was King and Smiley who sat on the front seat together.

Q: So Smiley replaced Bayard.

Robinson: Yes, really. Now later, Bayard was connected with King all the way along, but a lot of people in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, did not trust or like him.

Q: Well, the story that I heard was that Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. had put pressure on King to get rid of Bayard --

Robinson: That's probably true, too.

Q: -- and that it was a sexual thing.

Robinson: Oh, yes. It was a dangerous thing, in Alabama, at that particular time, too. But, anyway, so Smiley had a lot of influence with King, and King learned a lot about non-violence -- He knew something about Gandhi, he knew something about it, but he hadn't thought about it to the extent that Smiley had.

Q: I was wondering about that, and I was wondering about how influential Gandhian thought was in the -- What seminary did he go to, do you remember?

Robinson: He went to a place in Pennsylvania. Now what was the name of that?

Q: Starting with a "G" or something. But I was just wondering how influential Gandhian thinking was in the seminaries at the time.

Robinson: Gandhian thinking, I think, was emphasized by people who were pacifists at the seminaries.

Q: That's what I thought.

Robinson: It certainly was -- The Gandhian and pacifism and the whole business was very important, particularly in certain churches, like the Methodist church. But it was new within the black churches. A number of the black pacifists were in the regular Methodist

church. Their pacifism was integrated from the beginning. But the idea of Gandhism, for King, in that context, was new. He learned a lot from Rustin and Smiley. And Carter was there.

Now Carter did not have the same kind of influence.

Ralph Blackwood

Q: Carter?

Robinson: LeRoy Carter, our field person. He traveled around the country and tried to organize groups. It didn't work very well. There was another person, named -- ~~Blackman?~~ Blackwell? -- I've got his name somewhere -- who did part-time work for CORE, too, and he'd been quite successful in starting a group. But, as a field secretary, that didn't work out very well, so he decided to leave, and Carter got sick and decided to leave. All of a sudden we had Lula Farmer coordinating, and I was doing fundraising, and that was it. We had nobody to work in the field. About that time -- 1950 -- My wife died in September of '55, so I didn't have the same kind of financial obligations that I had had before. In 1957 the CORE convention wanted me to become executive secretary, and open an office in New York. I decided to do that, and we had to find someone, then, to do field work. Through the Friends Service Committee, or maybe through Nashville CORE, I'm not sure -- maybe both -- we found James T. McCain. Nashville CORE was -- Oh, what was her name? Holden. Anna Holden. She was a white from Florida, and had been in the Human Relations Council -- Southern Regional Council -- and the Human Relations Councils in the states were affiliates of the Southern Regional Council, and James McCain had been a school principal in Sumter, South Carolina, and was involved in the NAACP, which was a very careful kind of organization, I must say, but, apparently, they did a little bit too much and he lost his job

as principal of the school. Then he worked for the South Carolina Council on Human Relations, run by a white woman who was very much more liberal than the Human Relations Councils, in general, were. You know, these were establishment people who wanted race relations to be smoother and nicer, but they weren't radical integrationists, by any means.

Anyhow, McCain had worked for them, and they ran out of money. They didn't have a salary for him anymore. But they recommended him, and --

Q: Didn't they have hearings throughout the South, too, for the Southern Regional Council?

Robinson: They did a lot of things like that. This woman, on the South Carolina Council, really did something quite unusual for the councils, after McCain was working for us. I'm getting ahead of the story, but I might as well do it, while I'm thinking of it.

The airport near Sumter -- I think it was the airport near Sumter -- where Jackie Robinson had come down for something, for the NAACP, and had been met at the airport and there was difficulty -- segregation, etc. -- Anyway, they were very upset about the airport.

Q: What happened? He couldn't go to a waiting room?

Robinson: I can't remember whether it was the waiting room or the toilets or what it was, but it was something. Things were segregated there, and blacks couldn't eat. Blacks weren't flying very much, and there probably was only one set of toilets. Anyway, McCain was then

working for CORE, and we wanted something done about that. He worked with NAACP groups to organize a march on that airport, and it was set, I think, for New Year's Day. Anyway, it was all well organized -- it was all black -- but it wasn't a secret, as far as the South Carolina Council on Human Relations was concerned.

So the blacks met at a church and had this march down to the airport, and when they got there the South Carolina Council had organized a whole group of whites who met them at the airport, and they sang hymns together. And the airport opened. They didn't open immediately, but they opened very shortly thereafter. It was astonishing, in that day and age, to get anything that interracial anywhere in the deep South. But that's how McCain came to us.

Q: I'm amazed, because I met somebody online who has been teaching there for many, many years, at the University of South Carolina, and we were talking about how little integration activity there had ever been in South Carolina. And I'm finding, from these conversations, more and more evidence that there was a great deal going on in South Carolina.

Robinson: Well, there was a lot of very hesitant stuff going on in South Carolina. McCain, when he joined CORE, he didn't know anything, really, about non-violent direct action, and he certainly didn't know anything about the direct kind of confrontation. I was running the office. I'd only been there a few weeks, I guess, and he came up here. He was here for three or four weeks, and we were in the process of forming a committee to push the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Bill, which was the first city ordinance anywhere in the country, prohibiting racial discrimination in housing.

Q: In New York.

Robinson: Yes, it was here. It was one of those things that was going to be killed by everybody being in favor of it, and then the mayor would veto it. So it was a strange deal.

Q: The mayor would veto it?

Robinson: Yes. Mayor Wagner was going to veto it. Robert [F.] Wagner. [Interruption] So we got a number of groups -- First of all, there was a state committee against discrimination in Housing, and the state committee was supporting the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Bill, but they didn't want to do anything that was going to upset the Democratic party, and Tammany was still very influential in those days. Carmine [G.] DeSapio was running Tammany Hall, and Stanley Lowell, who was the upstanding, Democratic liberal, didn't want any demonstrations about the Sharkey-Brown-Isaacs Bill. See, everyone was going to get credit by voting for it in City Council, but it really wasn't going to happen. The *New York Times* ran an editorial against it.

Q: Against it?

Robinson: Oh, yes they did.

Q: They're pro-landlord, in every possible way, all through their history, but what did they say against it?

Robinson: I can't remember the ins and outs of it, but they were opposed to it. Anyway, I was at the State Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, and so was Naomi Levine, from the American Jewish Congress. There was someone, maybe, from the Bronx NAACP. Anyhow, Naomi Levine and Elsie Carrington, of the Bronx NAACP and I thought, you know, this business of no demonstration is for the birds. We ought to have a demonstration. So we organized a committee. It was run out of the CORE office, at 38 Park Row, right across from City Hall -- to have a demonstration. Now we didn't have enough people in New York CORE. We were going to be able to parade around from 12:00 to 2:00 on a weekday, and it had to be that kind of time. But we got some of our people, and Naomi Levine got a whole bunch of people from the American Jewish Congress -- upstanding, well-dressed women in their thirties and early forties -- to come down there. Some of them said, "I haven't done anything like this since college."

Anyhow, it made a very impressive, well-dressed, integrated line, and it was set up so that Jackie Robinson went in and talked to the mayor while this demonstration was going on. Well, the upshot was that the bill passed, and I was invited to it, the signing -- Mayor Wagner did sign it. So it was a big success.

But while it was going on, McCain was in the office, and I had some conversations with Fran -- the woman who was running the State Committee Against Discrimination in Housing -- and it was polite enough, but it was very definite that we were going to go ahead with this, whether the State Committee thought we should or not. But I do remember I hung up the phone and he said, "How can you talk to people like that?"

Q: Oh, really?

Robinson: Oh, yes. He was so diplomatic. Actually, one of his big plus values in CORE -- he was there for a long time -- was that he was soft-spoken enough so that, even in the most radical situations, he helped calm things down, I'm sure. And he became radicalized, of course, too, with the experiences. But he had grown up in South Carolina, and, certainly, you made a little progress if you were very tactful, and you were moving with, more or less, the successful black and white people. And when you get into non-violent direct action, of course, you use people who are not necessarily successful. It's a different kind of thing. It was a real learning experience for him, and he was older than I was. I had, by this time, been with it since 1942, so it was old-hat as far as I was concerned. It was new to him.

So he was really a remarkable find.

Q: I remember him -- maybe not rightly at all -- as an impressive-looking man who, of course, was older and everything quite as it should be -- the vest and the good suits and always quite, you know, from the cleaners.

Robinson: Oh, yes. He certainly was that.

Q: Also, a very, very mild but commanding manner.

Robinson: Oh, yes. He had that. When I look back I'm surprised, in a way, that I continued to have all that faith in field work, when we had raised the money and had Roy Carter for a year, and Blackwell for a few months, and that had gone by the board. Then we got McCain, who had not come up through CORE, who was working too much with NAACP-types in

South Carolina. And I don't think that I ever understood him completely, and I don't think he ever understood me completely. But I don't remember having any doubts about keeping him. I went down to Sumter, and they took me around to see the schools and various things. I stayed at the YMCA, which, of course, was a white YMCA, and I met a lot of the people he knew, which I think was important for him, to show me off as not completely irresponsible. But it was just something they had not -- there was no experience with pushing -- with whites and blacks pushing together on this issue. It was hard, I think, for them to gather what it was all about.

But there was a college there at Sumter. It never occurred to us -- to me or to him -- that we should have had a meeting or two with students. Now later on it did happen, but it happened after the sit-ins had begun, and we might have had something going earlier. I don't know, but we might have.

I think I've gone about as far as I can today.

Q: This is super.

[END OF SESSION]