

TTT

Interviewee: James Robinson

Session #7

Interviewer: Sheila Michaels

February 26, 1999

Q: [Interview with] Jim Robinson, and this is Friday, February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999. This is cross-fertilization of tapes.

I had interviewed Arlene Wilkes earlier this week and gotten a much, much too concise interview with her, I feel, but I was wondering--she said that she was then in high school; she started in high school in maybe her junior year or her sophomore year, in Woolworth's, and by 1961 or '62, I'm trying to remember, she had been called to go to work as CORE field staff, forty dollars a week, and completely responsible for her own life and actions and getting in jail and everything. Her parents let her go, which is also amazing.

Robinson: She was in high school where? Put that on the tape.

Q: She was in high school in High Point, North Carolina.

Robinson: Right.

Q: I think they did integrate the Kreske's and they may have integrated the Woolworth's. I'd have to go back and listen to the tape.

So obviously she was a student leader and obviously she had great promise, but what was the mechanism for getting in touch with really a child of extraordinary qualities, as we would see it in these easier times, and singling her out and asking her to join the field staff at such a tender age?

Robinson: Well, I would assume that someone who had been very active in the Carolinas, possibly Jim McCain, but quite likely someone younger, would have been able to see her at work during the Woolworth's boycott and maybe have seen her at meetings where she was showing leadership capacities, and recognizing that she was also emotionally stable enough to carry through when she'd made up her mind to do something. It could have gone very easily from someone like Thomas Gaither to McCain or directly to the office in New York, because they were looking for people. They were also, once you got the sit-ins going, from then on there were people coming on staff and going off staff quite often. It tended to chew people up and spit them out pretty fast. It was that. But also I know that we did ask for people, I think I was in touch--I'm making noises with this.

Q: Okay.

Robinson: With possible fundraisers, at the time that I was executive secretary, and this may have been--I think it was before the sit-ins, well before the sit-ins, and we must have placed an ad. Anyway, we did get responses from people, some of whom had had courses in intergroup relations, etc. But what I found was that almost all the people who had had such courses didn't have the kind of excitement that was needed to contend with what they were going to face in CORE. You had to have people coming on staff who emotionally

identified with the action people and who got, hopefully, involved some of the time in action themselves, so that they knew what they were raising the funds for.

So we tended to use people who had had no experience, or no training, in so-called intergroup relations at all, but were excited and radical about what they wanted to do. And the danger of that bias, of course, is that you get some people who are not stable, and that was true of Len Holt, for example; he was not very stable. He was brilliant.

Q: I only met him maybe once and that was when he was speaking before a group, so I have no idea. It's just that Val Coleman told a very, very, very funny, but alarming story about him in his book, a book that he had written called *Beverly* and something.

Robinson: Well, so you had that kind of problem with it.

Q: When you say "unstable," I'm not asking if--

Robinson: Len Holt was a lawyer, and he picked up the ideas of CORE's nonviolent direct action. He understood them intellectually very well indeed, but he also had a kind of a chip on his shoulder, which wasn't evident right away.

Well, when he went somewhere out in the Upper South, and I think it was Kentucky, but I'm not quite sure where it was, he organized some students on a black campus. The president of the school was black and was very upset about what was going on, and called me in the office, and I explained to him that as long as what was going on was within the

rules for action, that local groups were autonomous and there was no way that I could do anything about trying to restrain what was going on.

And besides, he was really--I don't know that I said this to him, but he was really trying to protect himself, because he was the head of a black college which got its money from the legislature in a poor state. But talking to him in any kind of civilized fashion, as far as Holt was concerned, you know, I shouldn't have done that at all. I should have sort of, you know, brushed him off. So I was in trouble with both Holt and the president of the college about this particular thing, and I can't remember what happened. I don't think that anything much came of the whole business.

Holt was good at stirring people up. He wasn't really all that good at following through. That was in 1960, and he did a couple of other things and we decided that, I thought, we really can't have him on staff, and so he was let go. But he caused a certain amount of dissension<sup>A</sup> in the 1960 convention, and there was another young man that we hired on his recommendation, who also caused trouble, but that was the end of that.

Q: What kind of trouble, can I ask?

Robinson: Well, I mean, they raised questions about, you know, how the field staff was being treated, and the field staff was not well treated. When people were hired, they knew they weren't going to be well treated. They were going to get a very minimal amount of money. They had to account for their travel and their overnights and all of that. They had to be able to prove that they'd spent this amount of money, and they had to understand that we didn't have much money, you know, getting right near the bottom of the barrel. They



were encouraged to travel from place to place by bus, and, if possible, overnight, so that they skipped ~~an~~ overnight.

*the expense of an*

The one thing that they were told was that at the end of a year they would not have two weeks vacation coming, they'd have four weeks vacation, because when they were busy, it really often wasn't a five-day week even. It was very, very difficult. But that wasn't true until the sit-ins occurred, you know, and then it was true through the sit-ins and some of the Woolworth boycotts, and then it would slow down. It wasn't that way all the time. If it was that way all the time, you could quit. I mean, you'd just wear out.

Q: Exactly. I don't think that Mary ~~was~~ ever aware that she had a four-week vacation. She was saying that she never had a vacation, and I'm pretty sure she didn't.

*[Hamilton, later Wesley]*

Robinson: Yes. Well, this was while I was still there, and I can't remember anybody ever *actually* taking a four-week vacation.

Q: I remember being surprised when I went through the papers, the CORE papers, to see that Frederika Tear [phonetic] was asking people when they planned to take their vacation. And I thought "Vacation?" [Laughs]

Robinson: Yes.

Q: They had vacations?

Robinson: Oh, yes.

Q: Did they know? They must have.

Robinson: Oh, yes, they knew. So that was one of the ways that it was difficult to spot and to keep people who were adequate on the field staff. And then there was always some friction with whoever was overseeing the field staff. It's kind of built in, because you have someone in the office who is asking for reports and calling on the telephone, and if the person in the field is--actually, we kept the phone stuff to a minimum because of the cost. The person in the field then needed to write reports, and particularly to do reports on out-of-pocket expenses.

In going through those papers, I saw a letter from Gordon Carey to Thomas Gaither, saying, "You know, I haven't had any expense report for three weeks. What are you living on?" [Laughs] But sometimes I think people were busy enough so they didn't get everything written down and they were actually paying some of their expenses out of their salary, and they didn't have much salary.

Q: That's what Mary said she did, yes. She said that she absorbed everything into the hundred dollars a week that she got, because it was just so much bother, you know, when she was under heavy pressure to keep track of the expenses.

Robinson: Oh, sure. In that book, the CORE book, they say that one of the objections to me when I was executive secretary was that I was bureaucratic, but I wasn't bureaucratic about most things. I was very bureaucratic about dollars and cents. I wanted the expenses to be backed up and verified, and I wanted the material to come in quickly. During the

1957-'59 period, Lula Farmer and I were pretty much agreed that as bills came in, we wrote checks, so that all we needed to do--and she wrote the checks. She did the bookkeeping. All we needed to do to see where we stood financially was look at the checkbook balance, because things were paid very, very quickly.

The result of that, of course, later on, was that we had too good a credit rating, and after I was out of there, particularly, and even while I was there, with the Freedom Rides, and the expenses kept going up and up and up, but the creditors didn't follow up very quickly, so the expenses ran out beyond where they should have gone. They carried a big debt there a lot of the time, and I think we wouldn't have been able to carry such a big debt if we hadn't had this reputation of paying everything on time.

It wasn't an expensive policy at that time either. Interest rates were very low, so if we had a little reserve and we had it in a savings account somewhere we would only get 1½ or 2 percent, and that's practically nothing. It was better to--you didn't then have to have a big list of accounts payable that weren't paid, you know, and simplify the bookkeeping.

There was something along there that occurred to me. Oh, later on, of course, at one point, and I don't know, I think this happened with McKissick or right after McKissick with Innis, the bills that they owed to ~~Sauers~~ [phonetic] Printing Company were such that the Christmas card promotion, the money then went--people ordered the cards directly from ~~Sauers~~, or at least all the money that came in from the cards went to ~~Sauers~~ and it went to pay down ~~the~~ debt. It was no longer doing anything for the future; it was paying for expenses for the past.

Sowers

pronounced SOW-ers

The Freedom Ride expenses went out of whack partly because there were too many people who were going and then bailing out, and that was permitted. I think the feeling that the more people who went, the better, and I was not so sure that was true. I think the people who went stayed in the jail made it cost more to the State of Mississippi, certainly. But all that was--

Q: They couldn't make--they didn't, so I'm assuming that for some reason they didn't want to make the people who were on the Freedom Ride work; they were just moldering in cells.

Robinson: Most of them. They did try. They sent people out to a farm there once. I can't remember whose book that's in.

Q: Well, the younger kids in SNCC wound up on the juvenile farms for a while. I know Hollis Watkins and Levon Brown and [unclear].

Robinson: Those farms were awful, because they did work all--just terrible. And the heat. You get in the middle of the summer, you get people from the North and put them in that Mississippi heat and then expect them to really work out in the fields and so on, it must have been just dreadful.

Q: Well, even for kids from the South in that heat.

Robinson: Oh, sure, but at least you'd be a little bit acclimated. I'm surprised, when I think back to Miami Action Institute, that I don't remember being uncomfortably hot most

of the time, even in the jail, and it must have been too hot. It was high up, but there was a lot of sun high up.

*[Ten floors up, I think, above the Courts]*

Q: This goes back to one of my little hobbyhorses, which is that before the advent of these huge windows looking out over everything in the South and the air conditioning, that people built places more sensibly in order to catch the breeze and to retain cold in the summer, you know. I just remember a number of places, growing up in St. Louis, that were quite, quite comfortable—the library, the courthouses and everything else that you went to, and even in the heat of summer they faced in different directions, they had better vent options.

Robinson: And they had high ceilings and so on.

Q: Yes.

Robinson: But anyway, I was not bureaucratic in the sense that I wanted to cross all the t's and dot all the i's, because that was certainly not--

Q: You couldn't.

Robinson: You couldn't do it. You couldn't do that even really before the sit-ins when it was much quieter; you still couldn't do all that. But quite aside from the inability to do it, it was not the way to get creativity out of the people who were involved in the work. And a lot of people who have a great deal of creativity may not be good on things like expense



accounts or keeping track of money and may be annoyed that they have to do it, but you wanted them to use their creativity on the action.

Also, I always felt that you had to have the tools to go with your action, and that would range anywhere from the dictating machines and good typewriters in the office to being sure that leaflets were attractive. If you were doing a Woolworth boycott and you were asking groups to participate, we got the signs and had them down at the office. That could also be partly for control. The signs then said what we wanted them to say, but it made it much easier for groups to volunteer to take a particular store for a particular weekend.

Q: Well, you know that was always one of the things that were leveled against the Civil Rights Movement, is that they had "professional" signs, you know, like this was so thought out in advance, how spontaneous could it be, or how grassroots could it be if you had these professional signs, you know. "We've caught you." [Laughs]

Robinson: Yes. Well, the civil rights--

Q: On the other hand, if you had hand-made signs, they looked terrible.

Robinson: Well, the fact is that the civil rights people, from the start and well along into the time that it began to decline, were, by and large, not only radical, but they were better educated and more literate and spoke better and everything else than most of the people did on either side of the race line, so that the objection to the professional signs was partly an objection to the fact that these people were upsetting the apple cart and they seemed to be superior to tradition.

One of the things that worked very much with fundraising was that photographs that we got from the news services that had appeared in newspapers and so on of sit-ins, they made the people who were sitting-in look so good. [Laughs] And then the articles would quote what some of them said, and all of a sudden, for many people, the Invisible Man became visible.

[of Ralph Ellison's novel]

It was just a great way of turning around the traditional view, or lack of view, of blacks and of young whites, because the whites were very important in that picture. They were important in places like Miami and in Tallahassee when they had the big student march. They had people from both universities, and they had more blacks than whites, and the North often had more whites than blacks, but it was mixed, and you could see right away that these people were asking for something for everyone that they already had.

Q: Okay. Right. Yes.

Robinson: So this is why the fundraising literature—Apfel and Englander, one of our accountants, said, “Well, you can charge some of the appeal to public education.” So what was done when they did the audits, was to charge, if we enclosed something, as we did on the bus boycotts or on the school integration in Nashville or any of these little pamphlets that we used, they were charged to public education. The ~~Correlator~~ was charged to public education. The appeal letter and the postage that was used for that was charged to fundraising.

CORElator

While I was there, when Apfel and Englander did the spreadsheet, they put the various functions like fundraising and administration and so on and so forth, in one place, and then down the side they had postage and various nominal accounts and then they were spread across. I used to send that spreadsheet to all our contributors, and it did a lot, because I knew what--

Q: Absolutely.

Robinson: What?

Q: Absolutely.

Robinson: Yes. It showed them where the money was going and what the function of it was. Most of our contributors, and almost all of the big contributors, were white, and there was certainly, at least subliminally in most people's consciousness, a feeling that black people weren't very responsible with money. [Laughs] So that was one of the things that Apfel and Englander's reports did. I think Lula was the one who knew about them. She'd worked at the Institute for International Education, and they were accountants, not a very big firm, but they were accountants who specialized in the non-profits.

Q: I was going to say, were they liberal themselves?

Robinson: I think they just did it in general for non-profits. So they had developed these plans and ways that they thought of how the expenditures functioned. And it certainly was true, particularly at that time, that every mailing had, in part, an educational purpose, and

particularly the promotional mailings, it went to lots of people who were not contributors and we got a few contributors each time out of that. But it made a difference with the attitudes, the emotional attitudes that those people had, including the people who were not contributors. Now, we also got people who were just absolutely not on our side at all, and used to put all kinds of interesting things in the business reply envelopes. [Laughs] But that was a small number, actually.

At the end when I was leaving, in the fall of 1961, I was leaving partly because I was not welcome in the national office, and I was leaving partly because I was not satisfied with what I was doing. I was raising lots of money, but it seemed to be a kind of bottomless pit.

Q: This was what year?

Robinson: 1961. After the Freedom Rides, I left. The Freedom Rides were essentially over by the fall when I left. I had the feeling that the controls over expenses were being relaxed. The people that didn't want me there any longer were particularly Gordon Carey and Marvin Rich. And Marvin, I think--I think the two of them really felt that with Jim Farmer that they could run the organization and he could be the front now. I don't know whether that was conscious or not, but it did not work out that way.

Farmer was slow on making decisions, but he didn't let other people make a lot of the decisions for him, and it would not have worked nearly as well as it did if Marvin Rich hadn't been there, because he was good at the fundraising. He wasn't, in my opinion, as good on the direct mail as I had been, but then they hired other people to work on the direct mail. He did have contacts with labor unions and foundations, some of which was going on

when I was there, but that made quite a difference. So he was good at that kind of thing, and until he went to the Scholarship Education and Defense Fund, he did a lot of the stuff in the national CORE office.

Q: That was NAACP?

Robinson: No, it was the Scholarship Education and Defense Fund for Racial Equality. It was SEDFRE. It was initially set up as tax deductible. This was really after I was out. We were looking for tax deductibility even when I was there, but this was set up as a tax deductible arm of the Congress of Racial Equality and had separate boards, etc., and did education at one time and another, and did provide some scholarships, I believe, for a year or two.

Then at some point Rich was dissatisfied enough with Farmer and CORE so that SEDFRE became independent, it was no longer connected with CORE, and it existed for a number of years as a separate organization. He was head of it and then one of the southerners--I can't remember the name. That would be in the CORE book, too--who had been very active in CORE was head of it. I don't know why eventually it went out of existence.

One of the things that they did that I think appealed to foundations, in some of the areas, once the voting rights were actually being used and you were getting small areas, small towns, etc., where blacks won the elections, SEDFRE did some training in how you run a town. Now, I was no longer there, but it was that kind of thing.



But, you see, it was moving. Once we got over to voting rights, and there was a lot of emphasis on voting rights, then the foundations were interested in supporting that. And then while it was anti-Southern establishment, it really was kind of national liberal establishment, and it was different from the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides. It was nonviolent, but it wasn't direct action in the same sense. Once you get the voting rights, then you are involved in politics, and there's no way in politics that you can stay pure. It's all full of compromises.

Q: Well, it's all horse trading, as they say. I mean, I don't know, but that's what they say.

Robinson: So as that developed, the Civil Rights Movement was kind of a victim of its own success.

Q: Well, the emphasis was--my sense of it is that the government wanted, and people were willing to fund, voter registration, and many people felt that voter registration should be definitely a part, but there was great dissention in the movement, particularly Diane *Nash* ~~Ashman [phonetic]~~ and a number of other activists, as to whether it should be the emphasis of the movement at all.

Robinson: Yes.

Q: We see that it lures you into the fleshpots of politics.

Robinson: Sure. The minor successes of the early years you did get some things open. If you had an employment project and you got two black cashiers hired in a supermarket, it

was such a big victory. Then, of course, later on if you didn't win everything overnight, it was not--there was a great impatience. I think that people like me, who had been through the long, slow period kind of went along with that impatience. You know, I was in favor of the World's Fair stall-in, and in hindsight, it doesn't make sense to do something that will alienate more people than it will convince.

*[New York City government]*  
 The city, as such, was discriminatory on lots of things, and they went along with labor unions. They protected labor unions and they had their contracts with labor unions, and they did not make the labor unions open their ranks. So the city was discriminatory.

Q: We're talking now about labor unions that practiced father-son apprenticeships.

Robinson: Yes. Right.

Q: So that the work only stayed in families. In a sense, wasn't that the result of government prosecution of liberals and lefts in the union that made the unions more vulnerable to gangsterism? I mean, weren't they feeding their own things so that they got crooked unions or non-protected unions?

Robinson: I don't--

Q: Why don't I ask you a tough question? [Laughs]

Robinson: Yes. Right.

Q: Sorry. [Laughs] I asked you something very, very general and unanswerable.

Robinson: Well, no. The unions--it's hard to answer about unions, because the unions that the early CORE people were interested in were the industrial unions, the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] unions, rather than the craft unions. The craft unions, some of the craft unions were already involved in graft before the CIO ever came.

Q: [unclear].

Robinson: Right. And anywhere where there's power involved, and particularly where you've got smart people running something and telling the people who are doing the work what they're standing for, they can get the support of the workers and also make deals with the bosses, so that instead of getting seven cents-an-hour raise, which was a lot in those days, they get five cents an hour, and maybe a penny of the other thing, and then get back as kickbacks. So that kind of thing, I think, is inevitable.

Organizations start with people who are dedicated, but even if you have those same people in it long enough, there's a little less dedication and a little more looking out for number one after a while. I guess it's partly that as people move from their twenties and their early thirties into periods when they have more financial responsibilities, they're looking out for themselves more and they're looking out for their families. As I said, I don't think I would have taken the job with CORE if my wife hadn't died, because of those responsibilities.

Going back to the time that I was on Mott Street, as I said, I went to a psychiatrist and I was conflicted about developing and my religion and trying to fit into the group, and I

observed the--it was an Italian neighborhood, and I realized that a lot of the Italian men were perfectly comfortable being a little less than pure. I think I've told you I was initiated by someone, etc.

Well, after that, Tom Sullivan and his second wife, Sally, whom I'm going to see, incidentally, very soon, she's coming into town in March. He's dead. I wanted to go canoeing in the Adirondacks and they were interested and so was Grace Johnson. Grace Johnson was a light black woman from Brooklyn. She had a couple of brothers. I think both of them became academics. One of them was identifiably black. The other one was lighter than even Grace was. But Grace's husband, while he was light, he was identifiable, too. We had been in touch with him about testing the Brooklyn YMCA, and I think he did that for us.

Anyway, at some point she was a friend of people who were in CORE. She was never a CORE member, his wife. But Gil Johnson <sup>O.K.</sup> ~~[phonetic]~~ decided to divorce her. He's still alive. I think he's had three wives, and I think he's single at this point. But anyway, she was interested in this camping trip, too, so I got the booklets from the state about the camping, the places where you could camp. We took the train from New York to Thendara, and the taxi--there were plenty of taxis in those days--from Thendara to Old Forge. You could actually walk it; it's not very far. And Old Forge is on the first lake of the Fulton Chain.

We rented canoes and then we went and shopped for groceries, and took off with this little booklet telling us where the ~~[unclear]~~ were. It was kind of confusing, because since one lake would get us <sup>into a</sup> ~~the~~ channel and then you'd be in another lake. I'm not quite sure where the break is between first and second, and second and third Lakes.

loan-to's

open-fronted log cabins with  
outside fireplace in front

But anyhow, we had a wonderful time on this trip, and I became very fond of Grace and she became very fond of me, too. But we were not--one of the things that was interesting about Grace is that she liked people who were in the civil rights thing, but she was also a little bit cynical about do-gooders, and that kind of appealed to me.

At any rate, we had this trip and we bought ourselves vodka and we put it in grapefruit juice, which you don't drink too much of that or it'll upset you. But we used to have it before dinner, and every time we had it, we'd say, "You know, it's too bad that we don't have any ice." And then one afternoon when we had decided not to go any further, we were at seventh lake, and we were at a campsite that was up about here and there was a steep bank down to the water--

[Begin Tape 8, Side B]

Robinson: Continuing on this canoeing trip. We had decided that we didn't want to go any further and so we didn't get up very early that day, and in the afternoon it got darker and darker, and all of a sudden there was a terrific thunder and lightning storm and wind and rain, and the hail began to come down. We realized if we leave the canoes there, they're going to kick off, so we had to go down, get pelted with this hail while we pulled the canoes up above. Finally, then we said, "Oh, we've got ice." [Laughs] So we had our cocktails with ice in the middle of the afternoon instead of having warm ones before dinner.



Q: I just remember so many parties where we used to hide--I don't know why anybody never thought of looking in the tanks, where we used to hide our liquors from other people. But that made it cool. [Laughs]

Robinson: Right. Anyway, it was great. We had a great time. There were diners still on the cars, the trains, when we got back. We were gone a week, I guess, before we got back to the train. We looked fairly bedraggled. I had a jacket that looked better that I wore. Anyway, we went to the diner and had a good time with the waiters. We had a nice chilled drink for a change.

But the upshot of it was that Grace and I had a long affair for a year or so, and we finally drifted apart, but we were never--I don't think we ever thought we were going to get married or anything like that.

Q: Was she Catholic?

Robinson: What?

Q: Was she Catholic?

Robinson: She wasn't Catholic. But they had had an apartment over in Brooklyn, quite a nice apartment, and I was over there once for, I think, just before the trip, probably, for dinner. Gil wasn't there, and she had done some green peas that were the richest things I've ever tasted. I finally said, "What did you do with those?"

"Oh," she said, "they're Viennese." She said, "Instead of boiling them in water, fresh peas, you boil them in cream and you pour all the cream off." They're terrible for you, I'm sure, but they were delicious. [Laughs]

But then afterwards, she moved over to Greenwich Village and had an apartment there.

So I think that that was part of my growing up. Without that, I might not have--well, I was constricted or conflicted, I think, earlier on.

Then Sophie ~~Stayson~~ <sup>Stasiun</sup>, who lived across the hall at 200 Mott, had worked at Teachers College Bookstore. One of the people who worked <sup>with</sup> there was Dorothy ~~Overholt~~ <sup>with her</sup>, and we went on a picnic. I can't remember, Harper LaCompte, I think, had dated Dorothy. At any rate, he was on that picnic and she was there and other people from the bookstore and Sophie, and it was up here across the Hudson somewhere above the George Washington Bridge in Palisades Interstate Park, and we did some--I think we even cooked on the little grills there. But we had a very, very good time, but that's how I met Dorothy, and she was from Philadelphia. Have I told you this story before? No, I don't think so.

Q: You've told me something about it, but go ahead.

Robinson: I don't think I did. But that's how I met her, and then we went later with a church group from Broadway Tabernacle up to the Catskills in the middle of the winter, and I can remember we slept out on the outside and so on. But eventually we got married, and I think what I told you before was about the difficulty with her family, etc. I think all that was covered before.

Q: Yes.

Robinson: Anyhow, that fills in the kind of a place that I had left out. Now I'm sort of at an end now. What--

Q: Well, maybe I should ask you this off--

Robinson: Turn it off for a minute.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Robinson: I think there was some conflict almost inevitable between Marvin Rich and me, because we would go at things from quite a different angle. I think that Marvin is really-- he's was certainly more than just liberal or he wouldn't have been involved in direct action and he had been involved in direct action in St. Louis and he was in New York CORE also. But today I would imagine he is largely a politically correct liberal, and I never was and still am not. So there was that difference.

When it came to direct mail, even when I was leaving, you know, he was saying that I'd been extraordinarily good at direct mail, that that was not being run down. When we were doing fundraising from the unions, which I didn't go to the meetings, etc., regularly, I sometimes had to write the appeals and he wanted me to do that. But when the sit-ins got going and the National Student Association and various other outfits were interested in having meetings to try to coordinate what was going on, that was really not my bag.

That was something that he was interested in, and I think Lula Farmer was interested in it, but it seemed to me that if each of these groups went at it from its own angle, everybody worked at it, we would get more out of it than if we were trying to coordinate it. It's the same feeling that I had later on when SNCC was a big competitor. I just never felt that making CORE bigger, bigger, and bigger was necessarily good. I don't think that I was often as clear on that as I could have been, but it was true and I did say sometimes that. Well, Marvin--all of us including Marvin, but Marvin had said early on that CORE would never get to be big. Not one of us had thought it would get to be big before the student sit-ins, and this was well after the bus boycotts, but we were thinking of a controlled, disciplined kind of group.

After the sit-ins, there was a good deal of interest in making it bigger and that was part of the conflict over--well, it was not my decision any longer, but the Freedom Rides, once they had gotten beyond the first one or two and people began to go on them and get arrested and get bailed out right away, that was part of the idea of making the thing appear bigger than it was.

Q: "Appear" bigger than it was.

Robinson: Yes. CORE and the Civil Rights Movement in general in the Sixties, 1960, once the sit-ins got started, the news media made the whole thing sound bigger than it really was. It wasn't that big.

Q: You mean the student sit-ins were big, though?

Robinson: They were big.

Q: They were big, but CORE wasn't.

Robinson: Yes. But we got some publicity, and some of the student sit-ins were ours. In Tallahassee they were ours. So we got quite a lot of publicity, but the result of it was that people in some of the CORE groups already had the feeling by the 1960 convention that we were bigger than we were. I can remember saying, "To some extent our reputation has been built up by mirrors, and we've got to be realistic. That's not true; we've got to keep growing, but we're not that big."

Well, that, I guess, was anti-public relations. At least that was not the kind of thing that appealed to Marvin. And it wasn't the kind of thing that appealed to Charlie Oldham, either, I think. And this convention was in St. Louis. But I think I was supposed to talk to a television station, and it didn't happen. I think they decided it shouldn't happen. Anyway, there was that kind of inherent conflict.

The other thing is that I think that underneath this kind of conflict was this kind of ideological stuff, was a feeling that Marvin could do more if I weren't in the way. And that certainly was probably true of Gordon, too, but Gordon was a little flaky anyway. Did you know him, Gordon Carey?



Q: I don't think I did. I read just yesterday or day before yesterday, Arlene Wilkes brought me an article about something she'd been in that had been covered by an article that CORE sent out by Gordon Carey. I guess it was Birmingham.

Robinson: As far as I can find out, nobody knows what happened to Carey or where he disappeared or anything else.

Q: I thought I heard--okay.

Robinson: I knew that he and Betty were separated some of the time, but I think, you know, it was one of those off-again, on-again things.

At any rate, these were a couple of big shocks.

Q: I was just wondering why he felt you were keeping them from growing?

Robinson: Well, I think--

Q: Growth is always one of those passwords.

Robinson: Oh yes. Well, I think I obviously probably preferred Gordon over Marvin. *marvin!*  
Gordon was on the staff longer, and I think ~~he's~~ he the one who told the people who wrote the CORE book that I was bureaucratic, but he did things that certainly I wanted done. He was the one who got the press releases going, and sometimes the press releases weren't ready to go out until five o'clock or so, and then everybody stayed and helped get them out.

And he knew about the business of putting photographs with them and all of that, the mats that went, so that we got a lot more publicity than we'd gotten before, and that I wanted.

I was thinking of that publicity, most of which was appearing in the black press until the student sit-ins. In terms of getting people interested in what we were doing and possibly plowing a few furrows for future CORE units, I was not thinking of it in terms of making our image bigger. I felt that our image exceeded our size by several times over, and in a way it was a disadvantage because people kept getting in touch with the office, people from outside of any group, wanting to know why we couldn't do this or why we couldn't do that. Of course, we functioned only through these groups, except for things like the Freedom Ride and the workshops. It was difficult, I think, for people to understand that, that otherwise the office coordinated and raised funds and publicized and educated and formed new groups, and that's the only functions it had.

Q: It's extraordinary how we became actually kind of the thing that the racists said that we were, which was outside agitators who were in the pay of the NAACP or whatever, because it had started out as being local groups that were supported and that the field secretary was just supposed to go and tell people what other people were doing and maybe make suggestions, and suddenly it was a sort of mobile force that included people like Arlene Wilkes, you know, this eighteen-year-old girl whose parents had allowed her to travel and could go from town to town helping to organize. So that's an extraordinary change.

Robinson: Oh yes.

Q: And one that CORE hadn't been able to do at first, you're saying.

Robinson: No.

Q: Or had not intended to do.

Robinson: Well, we continued to use field secretaries to help organize. That was the thing that was behind the push to do fundraising. But we'd never contemplated having mushrooming things all across the South, which happened, most of which were outside of CORE's control, but not outside of help from CORE, especially the first few months there when our people were running back and forth all over the place. It was Gordon Carey and James McCain and Leonard Holt and that young man whose name I've forgotten, who worked with Len.

Q: That wasn't Tom Gaither?

Robinson: No. Tom Gaither was one of the people who was extremely dedicated. Did you know him?

Q: Very slightly, yes.

Robinson: He stayed in our place when he was up here in New York probably for a week or so before he joined the field staff, but I never really got to know him. I just know that when he first was around, he was extremely religious and very dedicated, and what he felt was right he was going to do. He was one of these people who would have stuck to it if he was going to get killed for it, I think. But he was not somebody who was easy for me to relate to.

Rudy Lombard from New Orleans was easy for me to relate to. Now, he also, he and some of the people in New Orleans apparently talked about being willing to give their lives if they had to. But at the same time, he was loose and easygoing and easy to talk to. I think Gaither, like Joe Perkins, sort of thought that I was self-indulgent and went in for gracious living. [Laughs]

Q: Hope so. [Laughs]

Robinson: Perkins, however, was wonderful at that Miami Institute. But, see, he was the one, I think, who really convinced everyone they should stay in jail. I think it was Perkins primarily. The Stevens sisters who were there, Pat had pushed that in Tallahassee, and that was something that we then did in Miami, and it became a big idea. Gaither did it later on. It was, I think, an important thing to do, because--well, it was important in two ways. It was astonishing to the law enforcement people that people would say, "No, I won't pay the fine," and they would go to jail, and then while they were in jail, it stirred up at least the black communities to some extent. They were afraid, but they were still stirred up about these youngsters being jailed. So it had a big effect in that way.

It also had a big effect on the attitude toward jail in the middle-class black community, because a lot of these kids who went to jail were college students, and that was very middle-class at that time. There were people who had been brought up that, you know, just don't get yourself into a situation where you'll get arrested, and then these people deliberately got arrested and then they stayed in jail, and for a cause. It may have been true in India, but it was something that their parents just had no conception of. And I think most of the

people who did it had never thought of doing it six months before they did it. One thing built up to another.

Q: Badge of honor.

Robinson: Yes. Having been in jail was a--

Q: I mean, you had to go to jail. You know, you had no status if you hadn't been to jail.

Robinson: That's right.

Q: I remember somebody in India--you know how Indians love to dish each other. At the postgraduate women's hostel in Delhi, somebody was saying, "Yes, her father's--they always say that her father was in jail during the 1947, but it was for profiteering. They never mentioned that." [Laughs]

Robinson: The Gandhi Shridharani stuff, of course, had been particularly strong way back in the beginning of CORE in '42, '43 and '44. When did partition come?

Q: '47.

Robinson: Yes.

Q: It was worked out when it happened.



Robinson: So it was amazingly close, but by that time we had absorbed *satyagraha* via osmosis, there was no question in our minds about it, and of course there was no question in Gandhi's mind about adhering to non-violence through all of that.

Q: Which became more and more difficult as CORE grew.

Robinson: Oh, yes. Sure.

Q: To go back to that, yes.

Robinson: But it was certainly interesting.

Q: I'm sorry, I really interrupted that train of thought of yours.

Robinson: About?

Q: *Satyagraha* and having absorbed it by the time India broke into three as it were.

Robinson: And I think we absorbed it and then we tended to use it and observed what worked and became increasingly pragmatic about what worked, so that when St. Louis CORE first set up those test sit-ins where they arranged with the owners to have people go, to show them that they would not lose business, that kind of thing seemed to many of us unprincipled, just wrong. But St. Louis CORE was able to do it and stick with it, and they made it work, so that if something worked, then that was the criteria, as far as I was concerned, and as far as many people, I think, accepted pretty much at that time. Now,

later on, of course, anything like that would have been rejected as not insisting upon the absolute right. It didn't make any difference whether it affected the business or not, but it worked. It worked, so there was a lot of that.

CORE later

Then, of course, the use of the ~~Correlator~~, the Christmas cards, and all of that, was the same kind of thing that Gandhi did with his *Harijan* paper, really, except that it was aimed at least as much to the contributors as it was to the people who were doing the work. And it was clearly American commercial art, the CORE later ~~Correlator~~ not so much, but the things that we did with brochures, etc. We used Jerry Goldman <sup>O.K.</sup> ~~[phonetic]~~ to design them, and we used color, so we did a lot in the way of communicating that was certainly different from what would have been done earlier. The result was that what we were doing here was based on and in many ways reflected what had been done in India, but it was done in a different way and eventually became more pragmatic and less principled, which is one of the reasons it went down the drain eventually. But of course, it went down the drain in India, too.

Q: Well, but that was quite--I mean, that was slaughter. There was mass--that was just not hysteria so much as evil.

Robinson: Yes. People think of Gandhi's group as having been successful because they got independence. He didn't think it was successful because of the partition, and they forget that many of his campaigns were on sanitation and on the caste system, and on neither of those things was there any kind of permanent success. The caste, the demonstrations against caste, became involved enough in the psyche of people in the Congress Party so that there were all kinds of protections written in the Constitution in India, just as there were special protections written in for Muslims.

Q: Which worked to the detriment of Muslim women, of course.

Robinson: Yes. But the caste system still exists. And that recent novel, *The God of Small Things*--

Q: I didn't read it yet.

Robinson: Well, it is--

Q: Wonderful?

Robinson: It's a very interesting novel, but it deals with the ferocity that still exists in the caste system. I found the novel fascinating, but because it goes here and there, it jumps around, you know, what actually happened was not totally clear to me, but it was so well-written, I went back and read it over again and the whole story became clear. The woman who wrote it [Arundhati Roy] has been campaigning against the nuclear stuff in India. Apparently there's some--maybe there is something happening there, since they're--

Q: They're making peace.

Robinson: They're trying to make peace, and that would be great.

Well, I'm sort of off the track now. Finished for the day?

Q: I had, as I said, wanted to ask what was happening sort of underground in the spread of Gandhian thought, or the spread of the ideas of direct action. We have talked about that.

Robinson: Well, leave that on for a minute, then. The Gandhian thing aroused so much interest in the pacifist groups—the War Resisters League, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and in radical groups like the Catholic Worker, that it was studied, and to some extent copied, by various groups, but it worked--the copying became most explicit and focused in CORE, I think. Today, it's still difficult to focus action. The most recent thing that I have seen that was a demonstration that was nonviolent, was at the School of American--what is it called? Anyhow, it was the--

Q: Torturers' school.

Robinson: Yes. And they had hundreds of people turned out for that. A lot of people got arrested. The media's not interested in those things. You don't get very much of it anywhere in the press.

One of the things that was happening at the time of our civil rights thing was that many younger people were ready for the change and were sympathetic to it, and there were people in the media who were able to push it. The media was a little freer, I think, than it is now. It seems to be very much controlled by business interests. Because [Edward R.] Murrow got away with what would seem to be murder.

Q: Who did?

Robinson: Ed Murrow. But there was a lot of publicity given to what we were doing, and there were a lot of people in the media who didn't believe that there should be any race lines. They had not done much about it individually, but they were ready for it. So the interest was there and was spreading, and I suppose it was spreading in the elite colleges and universities, some of the ideas. Now, as far as I was concerned, I never got it in any classes, but I think people later on did. By the late Fifties there were courses in intergroup relations and that kind of thing in some of the colleges. So the whole climate of opinion was opening up.

Q: Groups like maybe National Conference of Christians and Jews were certainly trying to get people to talk to each other.

Robinson: Oh yes. Right.

Q: I mean, that certainly was a big part of my high school experience.

Robinson: Right. There was a funny saying about the National Conference of Christians and Jews back in the Fifties. They said the National Conference of Christians and Jews--I remember hearing someplace--is an organization financed by Protestants and run by Catholics for the sake of Jews. [Laughs] I'm sure it was initially funded by WASP whites.

Q: I just remember I was so earnest, and I had a friend--I still have a friend--named Lester Goldman, who was with me at one of these conferences, and he said, "I'm going to go to the one on popular music."



I said, "Oh, how could you?"

He said, "Oh, come on, the alternative is not that good."

And I went with him, and it was a huge group and it was the first time people actually started to talk to each other.

Robinson: Oh, sure.

Q: We had something in common that we all really knew.

Robinson: Right.

Okay. I think I'm out of steam. I should get back to some of those papers and see if there's a lot of stuff, more stuff that I could bring up. I think I've told you most of it. But when you go through the tapes, develop some questions. We'll get something that way. That will give us a little structure, because I tend to go this way and that way.

Q: Which, you know, I should have been doing, and what I've been doing, unfortunately, is taking mental notes, because I listen in the car.

Robinson: So how was Mary this time? You saw her yesterday?

Q: No, I didn't. She was much too tired to see me and I was at a funeral. Maybe I should talk off tape.

[END OF SESSION]