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Interviewee: James Robinson Session #9

Interviewer: Sheila Michaels

Date: March 8, 1999

Q: An interview with Jim Robinson and today is the 8th of March, 1999.

Robinson: From the beginning of national CORE in 1943, the finances were always less than they should have been until well along in the Fifties, and without the Fellowship of Reconciliation, we would not have made it through many of those years. George Houser and Catherine Raymond, in 1943-44, along in there, were in the Midwest office of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in Chicago. When they moved to Cleveland with that office, then the national office for CORE moved to Cleveland, and when they were brought back to the national office of the Fellowship of Reconciliation here in New York City, then the CORE office moved there, too.

Houser really wanted the local chapters to provide some money for the national operation, and most chapters either resisted the idea or simply didn't do it. So the income from the local groups was never really very good, and as a result, when Houser and Bayard traveled for the Fellowship of Reconciliation and talked about something that CORE did, people occasionally gave money, and slowly a small individual contributors list was built up, but the amount of money was tiny and it left the operation kind of weak at the center, although George Houser and Catherine Raymond worked very hard at it.

In 1947-48, things seemed very lively because of the Journey of Reconciliation, and the national CORE meetings decided that they were going to raise the money to help on that Journey of Reconciliation. And the upshot, the Fellowship of Reconciliation paid most of the expenses and some money was raised by people on the Journey talking or appearing at public meetings in the North afterward, and those meetings were, I think, predominantly Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Q: Hang on just a second.

[Tape recorder turned off.]

Q: Anyhow, the Journey of Reconciliation.

Robinson: The Journey of Reconciliation had created a great deal of interest, and the result was that CORE decided that it could expand and have more money, etc., and plans were made for an executive to take over and run CORE out of the Fellowship of Reconciliation office, but it never worked. The funds were not raised, and a year or two after the Journey, CORE was probably weaker than it had been.

By that time, by the late Forties, I was going to the conventions as a delegate from New York CORE, and Lula Farmer was usually going. Marvin Rich was one of the delegates from St. Louis with Billie ~~Carl~~ Ames and Henry Hodge and various people. It varied from year to year. The New York group, particularly, was pushing to do fundraising on a professional basis, and we wanted to hire a professional fundraiser. That was always pooh-poohed by most of the other groups, and in 1951--oh, by 1949--now, national CORE had

started in 1943--by 1949 there were four hundred people on the mailing list who had contributed at least once, and in that year the total amount individuals gave was $1,528. But the local chapters gave only $437. So you see without, in effect, the subsidy from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, we were nowhere.

So in 1949 we began to press for a professional fundraiser, without getting it, but other changes along the lines began to be made. George had worked very hard and very long, and he was supposed to be doing a lot of things for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, too, and he was glad to get rid of some of the tasks. Jim Peck took over the ~~Correlator~~ CORElator at the same time that the national office decided to print it.

Q: And it had been mimeographed until then?

Robinson: It had been mimeographed before. It had been kind of a house organ, reported on this group or that group, and its chief function was to inform other groups of what was going on so that they could pick up ideas. When Peck took it over, it became journalistic, it reported on groups in journalistic terms, then briefly and dramatically, and it was primarily for the individuals on the contributors list. I don't know that he thought of it that way, but it was used also--all affiliated groups got copies of it. But it was quite a different thing from what it had been.

Q: Did he have a journalistic background?

Robinson: He wrote a couple of short books. He may have had a journalistic background. Do you know the story about his going to Harvard? Do you know that?

Q: No.

Robinson: Well, Jim Peck's parents were very wealthy. Maybe they were the Peck and Peck people, I don't know. But he always felt they sent him away to boarding schools to get rid of him. He resented his parents enormously. They sent him to Harvard, and Harvard was quite a proper place in those days. For one of the very big dances at Harvard he brought a black girlfriend and upset the whole place. [Laughs]

Q: Really?

Robinson: It just wasn't done in those days.

At any rate, eventually he left Harvard, and decided that he was out of patience with all the wealthy people. His family was upperdogs, and he sympathized with the underdogs, and he turned to the merchant marine and he was active in the National Maritime Union and so on. All of that was before I met--of course, he was a conscientious objector and so he was in the War Resisters League; not in the Fellowship of Reconciliation because he was anti-religious. But he was completely dedicated at the same time to non-violence, which is a difficult thing. The non-violence in so many cases rose out of a certain amount of religious commitment, but Peck was able to adhere to it.

Q: My first thought was how did the girl feel that he'd brought to the dance?

Robinson: I have no idea how the girl felt. I think he was doing a "project." Later on in CORE when people went out with each other, if we thought it was a "project," we tried to discourage it. We were not opposed to intermarriage, but we were opposed to people getting so ~~head-up~~ het up about CORE that they got married when there was no good reason for them, regardless of their color, to be connected to each other.

But anyway, that was Peck. Well, he took over the ~~*Correlator*~~ CORElator.

Q: I have a couple of other questions, I guess. Did he join the merchant marine during the war or before the war?

Robinson: Before the war. Peck was older than I, so he had done that in the Thirties sometime, and I don't think he ever finished Harvard either. He dropped out of school and went to the merchant marine. One of the reasons he was able to do so much volunteer work in New York was that his father--well, I think his father died, so it may have been his mother, he couldn't stand his mother, but somebody set up a trust fund for him, so he didn't have to be in touch with the family, but he got a certain amount of money.

Q: A remittance man. [Laughs]

Robinson: But on the other hand, he did work. He worked at--

Q: Very hard, yes.

Robinson: He worked very hard and he worked earning money sometimes. He used to work at the cooperative cafeteria on Park Place on the lunch hour, and the War Resisters League office was near there, so he could volunteer there in the morning, and go over and work at lunchtime and then volunteer, if he wanted to, in the afternoon. And of course, eventually the CORE office was down in the same area.

But that was Peck. He was an extremely interesting person who wanted to identify with the working class. I remember he said that ~~Sayers [phonetic]~~ sailors used prostitutes and he did, too.

Q: He did?

Robinson: He did, too, yes.

So anyway, when he took over the ~~*Correlator*~~ CORElator, that began to create at least a little bit of a sense of the importance of national CORE to the contributors that we had. There were very few. By the 1951 convention in Cincinnati, after I think for two years at least we had pushed the idea of a professional fundraiser, I finally suggested that I would do part-time fundraising for CORE and that I was not a professional fundraiser.

Q: Oh, you weren't?

Robinson: No. I had had a little bit of experience with the details of it at the War Resisters League, but that was a very small amount. I knew how to put things together so you knew which list the response came from and that kind of thing. Before 1951--I'm pretty sure it

was before--we did a couple of mailings to seek new contributors from the Fellowship office here in New York, with volunteers from New York CORE, and I think Catherine Raymond was there, too. I think this was before I began to do the 1951 material. But way back at the beginning I wanted to use liberal mailing lists, as well as peace mailing lists, but I had to go very slowly, because it was only the peace mailing lists that made any money. The liberal mailing lists lost money at the start.

Q: You had mentioned this last week, and what I was wondering is, it made sense then when you had said before that integration was really not high on the liberal agenda, and I had thought that--you know, I was just thinking of my childhood and my impression was that this was on the liberal agenda, but it makes sense if they weren't contributing, they weren't interested.

Robinson: Well, they may have been--even if they were interested in civil rights, to contribute to CORE you had to be convinced of the viability of nonviolent direct action, too, and that ~~was~~ sold with the peace people much better than it did with the ADA. So that I think that the--and you were probably more sensitized as a liberal in St. Louis or in Baltimore.

Q: We weren't very liberal; we were just Jewish.

Robinson: Yes, right. But that would have been more true than it would have been people further north. And certainly in Chicago, most people were not really conscious of the importance of civil rights, and the city itself--a lot of the stuff that went on in Chicago was blatantly discriminatory.

So anyway, that 1951 convention, when I made the offer, I was turned down in the afternoon session, and then in the evening, I think after dinner, Joe Ames, who was a delegate from St. Louis--are you looking for something?

Barbara Robinson: My glasses. It's all right.

Robinson: Joe Ames brought the matter up again. I think I had gone for a walk instead of being at that evening meeting. They decided to authorize me to do that.

Now, I wanted to use the liberal list and to get some of those, the people--we did get some responses. I wanted to build up those responses because we needed to have a market that was much bigger than the pacifist and near-pacifist groups, and because of Peck's ~~Correlator~~ we were able to hold on to some of these people, too, because they began to understand we were achieving things. We weren't achieving a lot, but we were achieving something.

Now, I was married in May of 1950, and I was working as a proofreader, and the fundraising had to be done part-time. I billed my time at a dollar an hour, and I, of course, worked more or less at my convenience. But I didn't realize at the time that I was learning something which would support me the rest of my life. It was all very part-time and not something that I thought--you know, I was doing it because without it CORE was never going to become independent. I was not doing it with the thought that I was particularly good at it, but they weren't interested in hiring a professional fundraiser. As I look back,

we didn't have enough base at that time anyway to support a professional fundraiser, and I had to learn what was going on as time went on.

So when I began in October of 1951, there were just 1,000 people on that contributor list. I'd done some work up to that point, but the 400 from 1949 had grown only to 1,000 in October of 1951. Then it took three more years for that 1,000 to become 1,900 people. So of course, you lose people all the time, as well as gain them.

Q: That's true. We tend to forget that.

Robinson: Yes. But by May 31st of 1954, we had $5,000 income from individual donors. In the meantime, the local groups, we had fewer local groups. There was a big decline in the early Fifties and the income from chapters was $152 that year. The fiscal year ended on May 31st, that's when that--so that was 1954.

Now, in 1954 George Houser resigned. He told us he was going to resign. He wanted to start the American Committee on Africa, and he wanted to leave the Fellowship of Reconciliation. But he continued to be active, to come to some national planning meetings and that kind of thing. As I remember it, Catherine Raymond continued to handle the incoming contributions for a while, too.

So it was at that point, as I said before, that the coordination of the national organization moved to St. Louis with Billie Ames. Then she resigned in March of 1955 when she was in the midst of a divorce, and she was replaced as a coordinator by Lula Farmer here in New York. Lula did it temporarily, only because it was--nobody else that we could see that

would do it. Lula actually did much more in general bookkeeping than she did with coordinating the groups, but she did the coordinating of the groups.

Q: Did she have an outside job at the same time?

Robinson: I think she did, yes. She worked for a long time at the Institute for International Education, and she had a good job there. She was the breadwinner for the family. Of course, Lula, by the time she came to New York, already had Hodgkin's disease.

Q: Oh, I didn't know that. [by Jim Farmer]

Robinson: So she apparently was in remission,. I've been told since that she never really was in remission, but she functioned for a good number of years as if there were nothing wrong with her. She no longer--when I first met her in Chicago, I met her in a picket line at Montgomery Ward and she was a fresh-faced, rosy-cheeked young woman from Evanston, Illinois. But when I met her again in New York, she was already looking different, more sallow and so on. So she was somewhere along in there that this disease had turned up.

Q: And she had the children after Jim started working for CORE or--

Robinson: Before.

Q: Before.

Robinson: Right. So there was that period.

Q: But while she had Hodgkin's anyway? [addressing my wife]

Robinson: Oh, yes. Right. She had at least--Barbara, Lula had had one child or two children before you had James?

Barbara Robinson: She only had two, and she had them both before we had ours.

Robinson: Before, right, because that comes later. But she did have them sometime in the latter part of the Fifties.

Q: Because I remember them being about five or six years old.

Robinson: Right. She probably knew that it was apt to make Hodgkin's worse.

In '53, I think we had had the difficulty with Wally Nelson and then we had fewer groups, and then we had George Houser leave and then we had Billie Ames leave, and we got down to a point where it was--Charlie and Marion Oldham from St. Louis, and a couple of people there, and Lula Farmer and Jim Peck and me in New York, and there were just a very few people kind of holding it together.

In September of 1955 my first wife died, and that meant that I had more time to give to CORE, and it also meant that I didn't feel the same kind of responsibility for earning money. I was earning it, but it was--I needed a lot of things to do. I went to the YMCA and

I did a lot of stuff with New York CORE, and I had more time for national fundraising, part-time fundraising and so on and so forth. So that speeded up my activity a little bit. From 1954--

Q: And you had people living in your apartment, too?

Robinson: That was when I first met Barbara. Yes, that's right. They were only living there for a few months.

Q: I thought, it's best to surround yourself like that.

Robinson: Once they both had jobs, they moved out to Queens, but they lived there for quite a little while. Gertruda did potatoes the way the Austrians, at least in those days, did them routinely, which was to cut them into slices raw and fry them, and they're wonderful.

Barbara Robinson: But they're sure bad for you. [Laughs]

Q: I'm sure it doesn't make any difference at all.

Robinson: Anyway, from 1954 to 1957, the individual donor list increased from 1,900 to 3,400, which was a--because the bigger the list the more you're losing all the time, too. People die and they move and you don't get the addresses and so on and so forth. By the end of 1955, the income, which was primarily from individual donors, was $8,200, and the expenses were $6,700. In 1956 we had the income up to $12,000 and we kept the expenses down to $7,500. So we were building somewhat of a reserve.

At the 1956 convention I proposed a budget for spending much more money, and projected a deficit of $2,100 in that year. However, as of May 31st, 1957, the income had gone up to $16,000 and we spent only $16,100. So we did not have the $2,100 deficit. So we went from $8,000 in '55 to $12,000 in '56, to $16,000 in '57. We doubled the income in two years.

Q: And you were building a larger organization at the time, too.

Robinson: Yes. Let's see. I'll go to my notes here.

Q: Well, the purpose was for organizing anyway.

Robinson: Yes, the purpose of raising the money was to open an office in New York and to get a field staff.

Q: You wanted to have an office, too.

Robinson: We wanted an office. We didn't have it, we didn't get that at first; we got field staff first.

Q: Where did you have the space?

Robinson: We were still in the Fellowship of Reconciliation office. Catharine, for a while at least, was still doing the finance stuff, and then Lula took it over, but I'm not quite sure how we managed that.

Anyhow, in '55 after we lost Billie and got Lula, we did have enough money then to hire a field worker, and in December of 1955 we hired Roy Carter, who had worked for the NAACP. So he was available in 1955, early '56 to go to Montgomery. The Montgomery bus boycott started in December of 1955 and he went down as an observer. That was partly to be of any assistance he could be and it was partly for him to learn a little bit more about nonviolent direct action in the South. If you can call a bus boycott--it was nonviolent; it was direct action. He was not, as I think I've said before, any great assistance to King. King got his assistance from Bayard Rustin, and later from Glen Smiley, both of whom were with Fellowship of Reconciliation, and both of whom knew a lot about nonviolent direct action.

Q: Was Smiley white?

Robinson: Smiley was white. When they finally won the bus boycott, the first day that the buses were open in Montgomery, the front seat was Martin King and Glen Smiley. But anyway, Roy Carter was there and he tried a number of other things.

Q: Why do you not consider a boycott--I mean, was it kind of compartmentalized in that this was a consumer action group?

Robinson: No, it really is nonviolent direct action. Yes, it's nonviolent direct action. I think we were fixated on sit-ins and sitting in rental offices, sitting in, but we also picketed, and picketing is direct action in a way, but it's kind of petitioning, too. But the bus boycott was a great big help to us.

The money and the presence of CORE, the importance of CORE, began to be realized a little bit with the school desegregation case, but with the bus boycott it became very much more acceptable. And we did a big mailing on the bus boycott, with A. Philip Randolph signing the appeal letter. The ~~*Correlator*~~ wrote quite a lot about the bus boycott, etc., so that in the minds of the contributors, CORE became associated with the bus boycott, although the ~~*Correlator*~~ clearly said Montgomery Improvement Association. So the association was there, and later on, of course, when we did a pamphlet on the national school desegregation with Anna Holden, Martin King signed the appeal for us.

Q: So this was not something that the Montgomery group or the association felt uneasy about in any way.

Robinson: Well, King certainly didn't. The Southern Christian Leadership, some of the people in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were territorial.

Q: Who?

Robinson: Well, I don't know, but some of them were territorial. Some of the people in CORE became territorial. But Martin King really wasn't.

Q: Well, Val Coleman said at one point that CORE was going to ask Martin King to head CORE.

Robinson: Right. I think it did. But probably it was better the way it--well, I don't know. Anyway, there were--well, we began to do--wait a minute.

[Interruption]

Robinson: From June of 1957 to March of 1958, we did 39,000 letters, appeals, to outside mailing lists, and we succeeded in getting 1131 new donors during that time. We had begun to print the ~~*Correlator*~~ when Peck took it over. The initial appeals that we did were one-color appeals, they weren't very fancy appeals, but by this time, in '57 or so, we began to do two-color printing on some of the stuff that we sent out. We redid the *CORE Discipline* and named it ~~*This is CORE*~~. We simplified the language so that it didn't seem connected to any kind of Gandhian or religious background, but it said essentially the same things. That was the Rules for Action, and we did ~~CORE~~ in that orange and black at about the same time.

Q: So two colors were orange and black?

Robinson: Right, at that time. But the designing was done by Jerry Goldman, and I got to know him, Marvin Rich suggested him, he knew him. Marvin was working for Histadrut.

Q: Oh, really. Tell me, Histadrut was in Israeli Labor [Party]?

Robinson: Yes, that's right, they had an office here in New York. But that's how I went to Goldman, and I soon found out that very modern-looking, bright-colored material from CORE worked better in the mail. I mean, it was wise to spend the extra money, because you got the extra attention, more responses, and it worked all the way around in a way that it wouldn't today, as everybody uses everything.

Q: But also orange and black were "the" colors at that point. I mean, that was what people's curtains were and that was what the lamps, you know, in the pizzerias were. [Laughs] So that was the up-to-the-minute color.

Robinson: Right. Well, that was what we used.

Q: When you said it, I immediately got the time frame. [Laughs]

Robinson: Well, the interesting thing about that 1958 Martin King appeal with the Nashville pamphlet, *A First Step Towards School Integration*, was it was really a pamphlet, and we put it in the mail with the appeal, so that whether people gave or not, they would understand more and more and more about nonviolent direct action, so that one thing kept building on another during this period, as it doesn't often do.

Q: You mean by letting people know what the organization did and they could say, "Maybe we should be doing this here"?

Robinson: Yes. It meant that there was something, at least something subliminal, left behind, so that when things began to show on television or hit the headlines, there was an identification that might go back to CORE. That began as the holiday cards, too, and it was the second year of the holiday cards that we got bright colors and nice designs. Jerry Goldman had done a rapid design the first year that really wasn't very good, but nevertheless, we sold them.

Q: I may still have some somewhere--children playing musical instruments and things like that.

Robinson: Right. The very first one that was--the second year, Gilbert Harris did them. He had done a painting. He was a black artist who lived down near the Jewish [unclear] somewhere-- a typical bohemian kind of place, and he had this painting that was really, I thought, quite impressive. It had bright colors and sort of hanging-over figures. And I thought, that would be nice for a card. He wasn't a touchy kind of artist. So I said it ought to make an appeal to everybody, so he added a little pine tree and a menorah on the thing, and we got permission to quote something from the diary of Anne Frank about, "I still believe in people." It was the best card we ever had. And those cards, of course, were serving also to get the word around about everyone.

Q: How often I have said that to myself, that Anne Frank quote.

Robinson: 1958 to 1959, we doubled the number of contributors. They went up from 4,500 to 9,000, and in '58 we had $24,700 income and $25,200 expense, but the next year in '59 we had $62,000 in income and it slightly exceeded the expenses. So in '59 we approved a budget allowing us to spend $103,500. From $62,000 to $103,000 is a big jump, but we did it.

I don't think I've gone further on how much money we had the next year. This is about as far as I got on looking things up. But we did a lot of fundraising before 1960, and of course, everything became very different when the sit-ins began. On the office people--

Q: Well, you had approved that big raise before the sit-ins began.

Robinson: Oh, yes. That was at the 1959 convention, because we were going to add people to the staff and that kind of thing. I went on staff in September of 1957. Jim McCain became the field secretary in October of 1957. We made fast jumps then, too.

Q: How much was he making? I thought I saw that.

Robinson: I don't remember. He was probably making $4,500 or something like that, maybe $5,000. He wasn't making a lot of money. He was making less than I was, I think, and I was making six, or thereabouts.

In 1958 the convention authorized a second field secretary, and we were having trouble quite covering the budget, but nevertheless, we hired Gordon Carey in August of 1958.

Q: Let me just ask, was that comparable to--I mean, it's less than $100 a week. Was that comparable to what he was making as a principal in South Carolina?

Robinson: No, I think it probably was not. I don't know. But it was comparable certainly to what he'd been making with the South Carolina Council on Human Relations.

Q: Did he have a family to support?

Robinson: I don't think he had any young children. He had a wife. Living expenses were pretty low in Sumter, South Carolina, and he was looking for work anyway. Because of

NOTE: Correction – He did have young children, but his wife was earning a salary as a public-school teacher – she had not been fired when Jim lost his job as school librarian

South Carolina Council budgetary constraints, they couldn't keep him on the staff any longer. But everybody came on at pretty low salaries.

Q: This is a little bit away from there, but do you have any idea how they were supported, how the South Carolina--

Robinson: The South Carolina Council, it was part of the Southern Regional Council, and the Southern Regional Council got foundation money. They also got some individual contributions, I think, from people who were liberal in the South and had fairly substantial amounts of money. I don't think they were ever in direct mail, I'm not sure of that, but they certainly got foundation money. They were not a radical group. In general, they tried to ameliorate the situation. And they were interracial, because otherwise, he wouldn't have been working on that, but the woman who ran the South Carolina Council was a white woman who was far more radical than the council itself. But there were people on it who really wanted to do things. It wasn't a fake by any means.

Q: His wife didn't join him in the North or anything?

Robinson: Oh, no.

Q: He was always based in South Carolina?

Robinson: He was always based in South Carolina. When I went down there after he was hired, I stayed at the white YMCA in Sumter. I'm not at all sure that she was really comfortable with him working for CORE, at least when he first started. She was in a very

background sort of position, I think. She wasn't a college-educated woman who would have joined things like the Links [phonetic]. She didn't come from the upper echelons of black society. But she taught school.

Q: Really?

Robinson: I don't think she did.

Q: Oh, really. Okay.

Robinson: I don't mean she was lower class.

Q: No. No, it's just a surprise.

Robinson: James McCain was somebody I don't think I ever really knew very well. We worked together quite well, but he--

[Begin Tape 10, Side B]

Q: We were talking about McCain. His background was what?

Robinson: His background was, you know, he was educated in the South, but he was definitely of the South and very much someone who made an effort to get along with people. On the other hand, he obviously had been activist enough in the Sumter NAACP so that the school board thought that he was someone they should fire, and that's how he lost that job.

He was very, very tenacious about wanting change. I think he was tenacious without being confrontational, and, of course, in CORE he was involved with an organization which really was confrontational. But he was a very effective person and he was probably on staff longer than any other person. I don't know.

Q: That in itself shows tenacity. [Laughs]

Robinson: Right.

Q: You did say that his--what did his wife do?

Robinson: I don't think she worked. I don't think she worked. Well, many people didn't in those days. WRONG! She taught school.

Q: I know they didn't, but it seems like with a salary like that, that it might have been necessary. right!!

Robinson: Well, a salary like that was not unusual at that time. Salaries were beginning to go up, and salaries in the South were certainly very much less than they were in the North.

Q: I was working in St. Louis and I think I was making $45 a week with some perks. I was assistant publicity director of a television channel and some secretarial work was thrown in. I mean, I've done that before.

Robinson: Forty-five a week times fifty-two weeks isn't very much money.

Q: No, it isn't, but I always used that as a kind of gauge, you know. I think on forty-five you weren't quite expected to be completely self-supporting. I think you were expected to be a beginner, but still there was always the chance that you might have been. So a hundred to run a household seems--about the same time, yes.

Robinson: Yes. Well, at any rate, there was never any--he never objected to the amount of money and it was the amount of money we could afford.

Q: Yes, you could afford. Yes, absolutely.

Robinson: So Gordon Carey came on. He must have earned about the same amount of money. He came on in August of 1958. So from October of '57 to August of '58, that's only ten months when we hired the second field secretary. His father was a Methodist minister and he came from the Methodist Youth Fellowship; he'd been a member of it. He was a conscientious objector. He'd spent a year in civilian public service camp for--I think, he was sentenced to civilian public services, but I'm not sure, instead of prison, because I think he'd refused to register or something. He refused to go, anyway. So he had the same kind of anti-war background as Houser and Joe ~~Grinnin~~ ~~[phonetic]~~.

Q: And you.

Guinn

Robinson: Yes. And Wally Nelson, too. Joe ~~Grimm~~ Guinn and Wally Nelson were both black, but they were both conscientious objectors, too. He had been active in CORE since 1951 in Pasadena and then in Los Angeles, and he was national vice chairman in 1956-57. He must have been glad to move from--I think he moved from the Pasadena to the Los Angeles CORE group when it started, because the Pasadena group was mostly middle-aged and terribly conservative, and they were not one of the groups that we were ever very proud of. [Laughs]

Q: Really?

Robinson: Well, they didn't do very much, you know.

Q: But meant well.

Robinson: Yes. The office was at Park Row, 38 Park Row, and Marvin Rich had been coming to the conventions. We had a convention at--Gordon Carey was at the convention in 1958, and maybe a prior year. He must have been. So I knew him and I knew Rich. Rich was then living in New York City and I used to see him and his wife every once in a while.

Q: Had they married in St. Louis?

Robinson: No. No, his wife comes from Pennsylvania somewhere, I think. She went to Bryn Mawr [College]. So I don't know where they met or anything.

But one thing that we then had in CORE, we had two field people. We had Lula Farmer who was doing the bookkeeping and writing the checks and, I don't remember, she may have been paid some, I just don't remember; certainly not very much. And I was doing the fundraising, and the ~~*Correlator*~~ was being done by Jim Peck as a volunteer; he wasn't getting paid anything. So we had that much going at that time.

Lula and I saw pretty much eye-to-eye on how to handle the money when it came in. We had a policy of paying bills as soon as they came in, and once in a while they had to be deferred because we didn't have enough money, but we paid them, in general, as fast as we could, which meant that we had a good credit rating with the suppliers that we used, and relatively lower prices as a result. But we did have extra money eventually and we put some of it aside as reserve funds, but you didn't get much interest anyway in those days. I can't remember it was one and a half percent or something. There was never a lot of money. But she did a lot of just taking checks out of the envelopes and doing the deposits and that whole business. So that was the kind of operation that we had.

The only public relations was the fund appeals. That was partly public relations. The ~~*Correlator*~~ was partly public relations. We were not good on general public relations and publicity, because we didn't regularly send out press releases and we had no one who was great at doing press releases, as a matter of fact.

That was when I urged Marvin Rich to join the staff. So he joined in October of 1959. He did not want to work at the same salary. He wanted more money because he was getting more money at Histadrut, so he did come in at a higher salary, not very high, but higher than anybody else was getting, which made him uncomfortable. By another year or so I guess I was making the same amount that he was. But anyhow, he had a wife, and he

wanted to be sure there was enough money there, which I might have felt, you know, when I came to CORE if my wife had still been living, but she wasn't. So he came in '59.

All this time I was going around with Barbara and we were seeing quite a bit of each other and going to--has she gone to sleep?

Barbara Robinson: No, I'm awake. I'm listening.

Robinson: Going to shows.

Barbara Robinson: We were dating, dear.

Robinson: Dating. Right. Okay. And she'd moved from East Rockaway over to Brooklyn, but she didn't know that she wanted to marry anybody who was an agitator and all that. So I was interested for a long time before she was interested, but I was also busy enough so that I wasn't importunate.

At any rate, in '59 I asked her to go home with me to meet my family for Christmas, and she decided to do that, and we went--before we took the plane, she had had a drink or two at an office party.

Barbara Robinson: And I'd brought a red dress.

Robinson: At Young & Rubican, where she was a receptionist.

Q: Oh, you'd gone from being a nurse to being a receptionist?

Barbara Robinson: Oh, yes. I told them I could type. It's a funny story, but go on.

Robinson: She got her job because of her British accent. You've heard that story, right?

Q: No. Nancy Sheria [phonetic] or Jill Sheria, she got this very--I mean, she was an Oxford graduate, but she got this very posh job, for the time, at MOMA [Museum of Modern Art] as a secretary because of that accent.

Robinson: Well, Barbara said she went in and applied and they said, "Can you type?" She said--

Barbara Robinson: "Well, years ago."

"How long will it take to brush up?"

I said, "A week." I thought, oh, god, that's funny; I haven't typed since I was sixteen. So I went back to East Rockaway and I found a typewriter and some paper, and I bought a book on how to type in forty-eight hours, and bought a mountain of paper, borrowed the next-door neighbor's typewriter and I shut myself up.

I went back in a week. She said, "How long will it really take you?"

I said, "It will take another week." I don't know what I thought I was doing, but I did it, and they gave me the job and I was there two and a half years.

I'd been to a dentist before that, working with a dentist. He was awful. He didn't like me. Just didn't like me. It was really very peculiar, and he fired me one lunchtime. I was furious.

Q: He didn't wait till Christmas Eve?

Robinson: Anyway, Barbara decided to go home with me for Easter.

Barbara Robinson: Christmas.

Robinson: Christmas. And so she had the drinks there and then she came down to the CORE office and we had drinks at the CORE office, and all of a sudden we realized that we didn't have a lot of time to get to Newark to take the Capital Airlines plane, but we made it. But when we got there, we checked in and we ran out and the plane was completely full, except for two seats in the bulkhead that were facing backwards. So those were our two seats. And we had a little bit too much to drink, but it all rolled off us. We were fine.

Barbara Robinson: I had never flown before in my life.

Q: Oh, well, that's the way to go.

Robinson: We got home and Barbara thought my family was a lot nicer than I was. [Laughs]

So she decided that she would be glad to get married.

Barbara Robinson: I didn't say I'd be glad to. I thought I might as well.

Robinson: Might as well, yes. Might as well. Might as well settle for me.

But anyhow, we had a very pleasant time at CORE that Christmas and then we got married in February.

Barbara Robinson: Yes, he phoned me from the office, and he said, "There's a wonderful cruise leaving from New York on February 6th. Let's get married on the 5th and we'll go."

I said, "Okay," and I hang up. And I said to my boss, "I'm going to get married in three weeks." [Laughs]

Robinson: Anyhow, it was all very informal. I took her, we ran to the priest and so on and so forth, and she--

Barbara Robinson: I had to get things from England to prove that I had never been married, for the church and for everybody here and everything else. We did it.

Robinson: So we sent out--

Barbara Robinson: We invited everybody we knew and they all came.

Robinson: And they came and it was seven o'clock on a Friday evening on 14th Street at Immaculate Conception Church, and we had a young priest who was red-headed. I had found out who to ask for by asking somebody else in the building, and I knew that they went to church, as I did, but they were also active. They had children in the school, so they knew which priest was which, because in those days the bulletin didn't list the names of the priests. Sullivan; his name was Sullivan. When I went to see him, I think he told me--did we go to see him together?

Barbara Robinson: Yes, but we went in separately to be interviewed.

Robinson: Anyhow, he said he got all the odd types. [Laughs] The Puerto Ricans and--

Q: The pacifists, the Puerto Ricans. [Laughs]

Barbara Robinson: And the English girl.

Robinson: Anyway, it was at seven o'clock on a Friday evening, and afterward people came over for a very modest reception, which was champagne and a few snacks and then the wedding cake.

Barbara Robinson: Which my sister made.

Q: Fruit cake?

Barbara Robinson: Beautiful fruit cake, traditional English, three layers, and she put ~~[unclear]~~ on the top. She loaned it to me. Yes, it was very pretty.

a statue

Robinson: And her brother-in-law gave Barbara away.

Barbara Robinson: She was my maid of honor.

Robinson: And Simon Perchik, who had gotten us together in the first place, was the best man. These people that told me about Father Sullivan, I invited them to come, and when I ran across her in the lobby one day, she said, "My husband said, 'Seven o'clock on a Friday evening? Is this a Jewish wedding?'" [Laughs] It was an unusual time.

So I said, "No, it's not a Jewish wedding, but my best man is."

And she said, "We didn't know you could do that." But Barbara's sister was your maid--

Barbara Robinson: My maid of honor, matron of honor, whatever you want to call it.

Robinson: Anyway, it was all very nice. My mother came down and my aunt--her sister and husband--and one of her brothers[,] wives came down. We had a great, great time with the dance music on the record player and that was it. It was all a great deal of fun.

and his

Note: Correction – it was Feb. 1

Anyhow, this was going on and we went off on our honeymoon. We went on the honeymoon on the 6th and it was either the 4th or 5th of that February that the first sit-in took place in Greensboro, and we read about the sit-in somewhere along in the middle of our cruise in the ship's bulletin. So everything was going great guns when we got back.

Everyone up to that time had expected CORE to develop in a slow fashion. We thought we could play an important role. Nobody ever thought we were going to be big or a major player, and now all of a sudden it became possible, and as soon as that happens, you get frictions. Everyone was quite happy during the first phase of the sit-ins, and Gordon was running all over North Carolina and McCain was around quite a bit. Gordon got a lot of publicity down there because he was white, and McCain is a quieter type anyhow and got a lot less publicity.

But then I was invited to the meeting where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was started and that was--I was invited by--what is her name?

Q: Ella Baker?

Robinson: Ella Baker, right. And I told you this before, I guess.

Q: No, I know who Ella Baker is, when I was--you know, we used to work out of the WRL office.

Robinson: Well, Ella was working then for King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Q: Briefly.

Robinson: Yes.

Q: At that point, after that.

Robinson: Right. She pulled this conference together over Easter weekend, but she was determined, first, that the student movement should not be controlled by any of the adult organizations, particularly the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but also CORE. So I was there and I was around, but I didn't get to any of those really founding meetings, nothing internal. I did speak at a mass meeting very briefly, because I said CORE would give what help it could, and that was pretty much my feeling about these things, that we should do whatever we could with the student sit-ins, and wherever we could, we should get a CORE group, which we did in Tallahassee and in New Orleans. But that if we didn't get a CORE group, but the action was going on, that was fine, too.

Anyhow, when we got back from the honeymoon, the Woolworth boycott had already started, and that was very important to the success of the sit-ins, because a number of places, many places in North Carolina and elsewhere did open eventually and it was partly the pressure in the North, the business of Woolworth's and the other dime stores that were picketed did drop off, and that was a great vindication of the position that Tom Roberts and I had taken at one of the conventions,

↑ maintaining that CORE in the North could be important to the struggle.

Note: ~~We said CORE should develop Northern groups as well as groups in Border and Southern cities.~~

Well, at the time that I think it was the convention where Gordon was hired or that Peck and Marvin thought that most of the emphasis, virtually all of the field emphasis work, should be concentrated in the South and border. Tom Roberts and I felt very strongly that we should do that, but we had to be in the North, too, because it was a national problem because employment and housing were vitally important issues and things that could be worked on in the North.

So ultimately the convention took that point of view, and the result was that most of the time Gordon was to work in the North and West primarily, and McCain primarily in the South, ~~because the sit-ins kind of upset him~~. But at least we had--you know, we had something in the North that we could orchestrate. Well, a lot of it was spontaneous. We weren't big enough to orchestrate all of that.

Q: And you got a lot of other groups to cooperate.

Robinson: Right. And by and large, it was very well handled. Many of those details, of course, I didn't handle at all. We had Darwin Bolden, who came on the staff for the New York area from the national office and he worked on the coordination of the picket lines. We had that woman whose name I constantly forget, who came on the field staff.

Q: Not Genevieve Hughes?

Robinson: Genevieve Hughes. Genevieve Hughes, before she was on the field staff, was the volunteer coordinator.

Q: Now, she's just a name. I don't know her or anything about her.

Robinson: Well, she was very--you never did meet her?

Q: I don't think so.

Robinson: Well, she was very, very competent. She worked for Dun and Bradstreet, and she was very competent and she got along very well with people. Darwin was brilliant and competent when he felt like it and he did not get along with people. He was brilliantly sharp-tongued and he always appealed to me.

Anyway, that whole thing was going and there were efforts to go and negotiate at Woolworth, etc., etc. Len Holt was in touch with us. He was a lawyer from Virginia and he did a little bit of field work. There was an opportunity to be on television with *Open End* on Channel 13, and he went on that program for CORE, and Martin King was on it for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And Holt did a very, very good job about CORE and constantly mentioned the name. So it was great, great public relations for CORE--undergirded fundraising, particularly in the New York area.

But Holt was not--he was not dependable in the field. He tended to be confrontational and there was difficulty out at one of the upper South, Midwestern black schools. So that was creating some tension, and he was let go. That created, I think, some tension at the national level, too, because while I felt he should just be let go, I think that Marvin thought he should be sort of edged out. At the subsequent convention in 1960, some of his people, including another field secretary, caused a certain amount of trouble. So we were beginning to get various kinds of tensions going in the national office.

So that when Barbara and I went to Europe, Barbara was already pregnant and I know that Lula was through with her children, because she loaned Barbara her bathing suit.

Barbara Robinson: She loaned me a beautiful bathing suit. It was very nice. I used it in Sicily.

Robinson: Because in Sicily we were right on the beach.

By this time, Marvin and I weren't getting along very well together anyway, in addition to which there was a feeling that CORE could be very big and important, and I thought it could be very important without being terribly big. I was working on building it all the time, all this time, but I did not see it as expanding so fast we couldn't keep track of what was going on. So there were a lot of little things going on there, and beneath the surface I think that Marvin, in particular, wanted to run the organization, and Gordon went along with that, kind of. But I think he would say that wasn't true, but I think it was true, and I think whether it was conscious or not conscious.

The other fact is that we are different types. My orientation was, and to some extent is, religiously based and it is not primarily political. I'm not necessarily attuned to liberals, although I had pushed the business of CORE, broadening it to include liberals, etc. I'm not a great believer in politics or majorities, and I do believe that small groups of tightly organized people make big changes, and voting majorities, most of the time, don't. If they do, it's because some tightly knit group has done something to make them think they're changing it.

So there were all these things going on, and we went away and I think the undermining went on while I was away. So by the time I came back, the people should be hired or fired by the conventions, but my position was really already undermined and the CORE book says that it was illegal, there wasn't much point--I was very, very upset, but there wasn't much point in opposing it either.

Q: What was illegal? The hiring?

Robinson: Well, they decided to abolish the position of executive secretary and establish a position of executive director. On the other hand, they didn't want to lose my fundraising, so they wanted me to be membership director. I was no longer single and I did have responsibilities and Barbara was pregnant, so on and so forth, and I needed money. So I took that job as membership secretary and it may have been at that point that my salary increased, too, I'm not sure. But I know it was--at some point along in there it had increased, because I think I was up to $8,000 a year when I left. I'm not absolutely sure of that.

So I did a lot of direct ~~payoff~~ mail fundraising from beginning in early 1960, and then 1961 continuing with the kind of thing I'd been doing. And then the Freedom Rides came along and the need for money just went out the window. I can remember doing one appeal, I had somebody draw a cartoon of CORE being a human figure, being put through a wringer by the State of Alabama, I think it was, or maybe it was Mississippi, because of the bail money that was being used. It probably was Mississippi, I think. We raised loads and loads of money that way.

Marvin had done regular press releases once he came on, and that helped get the word around, particularly early on in small--well, in the black press. Most of it was small, some of them were big, but we got our name around a great deal more than we had before. The real publicity, of course, that expanded the whole thing was the beatings in Birmingham and the burning bus in Anniston. New groups began to spring up there. Farmer did a lot of talking and he had this idea for the--had had the idea for the Freedom Ride and I think he may have had the name for it, but it was copied, of course, from the Journey of Reconciliation. And there had been--while in 1955 when Billie Ames was the coordinator, she had tried to get that thing together then.

So the Freedom Ride attracted all this attention and got lots and lots of interest everywhere and some people kept volunteering. I wasn't interviewing the people who were going, but it seemed to me that there were some people who were going who shouldn't be, and that it wasn't being sufficiently tightly controlled. People, I think, thought that I was concerned about that, because it got us in financial trouble and it was hard to raise enough money to keep up with it, which may have been part of the concern. But the major, major, major concern was the lack of control.

[Hamilton Wosley]

Q: Mary said that when she and another--I may have told you this, I'm sorry if I did, but she and Louise Ingram [phonetic] and one guy with the people who were coming from Los Angeles CORE and whoever had prepared them--you know, they had to wait a while--whoever had prepared them said, "You know, you look for other people and you weed out the crazies. You weed out the kooks."

She said she and Louise looked at each other and said, "How will we figure out who the kooks are? How do we know, we might be the kooks, for all we know." [Laughs] But that was the level, apparently, on which it was done.

Robinson: Well, it all got so rushed and then, of course, after the CORE Freedom Ride came to an end in Birmingham and they had to be rescued and flown to New Orleans, and there was going to be a hiatus at least before anything else was done, that's when the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee people came in. And of course, the congressman--

(Snick)

Q: John Lewis.

Robinson: John Lewis, right, was on the first Freedom Ride, the CORE Freedom Ride.

Q: He was on the CORE Freedom Ride. I was thinking about that this morning.

Robinson: He was on that first bus, right. So he and Diane Nash and--Diane Nash and maybe it was Bevel [phonetic], a couple of those people in Nashville, anyhow, said, "Well, you know, it can't stop because there were beatings and so on, non-violence can't be stopped by violence in that way." So they had people to continue the Freedom Ride and then CORE wanted to continue it, too.

At one point in John Lewis' book, he says that Farmer felt he owned the Freedom Ride, everybody should consult him, which was, of course, not true. He wasn't on that fatal leg of the trip anyway. But quite aside from that, the Coordinating Committee had gotten some

sort of approval from the office, national office of CORE, for them to go ahead and do it, which made good sense. CORE wasn't going to do it right away. There was no way they could.

But anyhow, all of these things were created--

Q: Just for a second, I remember a Freedom Train when I was a little girl. So the term might have--was out there, the idea of the Freedom Ride.

Robinson: Right. It was a great title, too.

Q: Yes. The Freedom Train went from--I can even remember the song that went with it that they played on the radio all the time. But it went around the country. It was like a train like, you know, the way Harry Truman used to go from one city to another, but it went from little town to little town with the Constitution and a number of other documents in it, and it was sort of a traveling little museum on a train.

Robinson: Right.

Q: But it was all over. I mean, as I said, I can sing the little song to this day. I won't.

Barbara Robinson: Spare us, right? [Laughs]

Q: Yes.

Robinson: Anyhow, I was not happy in the national office of CORE, and I was an active member of New York CORE, I wasn't as active as I had been, but I--

Q: Can I stop a second and ask what happened? SNCC started taking over the Freedom Rides, so what happened in the office at that point? What happened in CORE?

Robinson: Well, then CORE did some more Freedom Rides. I mean, it got--

Q: It had to.

Robinson: I think it had to, but at this point, you know, was it advancing civil rights and non-violence primarily, or was it making sure that our brand wasn't completely overtaken by another brand? You know? It was that trouble.

Q: Well, that's sort of Howard Zinn's interpretation, I would think, and he gave Diane pretty much sole credit for stepping in and saying, you know, "This has to go on."

Robinson: Yes.

Q: Leading people and so on, at least one bus that she was on that got stopped somewhere around Tennessee and then they went back and got another. I'm trying to remember this from reading it years ago.

Robinson: What happened with some of Diane's people, they got to Birmingham to take the bus and they were picked up by the sheriff and driven back to Tennessee or somewhere

near there, and then they--I think to the border, and they stayed overnight at some place and got in touch with Diane and went back. They weren't expected back, and they were able to continue the Freedom Ride. The sheriff, I don't know, wasn't there or what, but anyhow.

And by that time, of course, it became a little more difficult for the [Ku Klux] Klan to be--they didn't have free--such a free hand in Birmingham, because the Justice Department guy had been beaten up, which really--

Q: Nothing like it to focus the mind, I'm afraid.

Robinson: It focused Robert Kennedy's mind on, you know, what was going on there. I don't think that he was yet on the kind of emotional wavelength that he reached later where he was really on the side of black people, but I think he certainly was incensed that his henchman got beaten up.

So all of these tensions were going on, and February 25th of 1961, while I was working there, James was born at Mt. Sinai Hospital, and by that time I was not having anything on a personal level to do with other people, the Farmers and so on. So Lula, when she discovered we had the baby, she was quite put out I hadn't told her.

Lula was a very important person in preserving CORE, and she must have had a very hard time later on with some of the things that Farmer did.

Q: Like what? Can I ask?

Robinson: Yes. Well, you know, when he found--and I wasn't in the office anymore, so I'm telling you stuff that I don't know of my own knowledge really. But when he was--his position in CORE was not viable anymore. There were all kinds of efforts to get some sort of a job, an important job, in the federal government on literacy or something of that kind, and it didn't go through, it got stopped somewhere in the bureaucracy. But he needed something important. So when [Richard M.] Nixon was elected, he became an assistant to--what was it, [Robert H.] Finch in [Department of] Health, Education and Welfare?

Q: I remember it so vaguely.

Robinson: It seemed to many us, and I bet it seemed to Lula, that here was black window-dressing for the Nixon administration. In his own biography, it sounds as if he never achieved anything much there.

Barbara Robinson: Did he ever? Oh, excuse me. [Laughs] Who was that?

Robinson: Anyway, that was February of '61.

Q: Come. Come closer. [Laughs]

Robinson: And the convention in '61 was in Washington, D.C., and Lillian Smith came to it. It was a big convention.

Q: She was the writer of "Strange Fruit," among other things.

Robinson: Yes. So she was on the advisory committee. She didn't belong to a group, but she was influential. She was very helpful to us. But anyhow, it was a very big meeting and a little disorganized, I thought, but I was no longer that important anyway. I can remember after, in the evening after the meeting, going with some people around Washington and going to an after-hours club. There were lots of black after-hours clubs in those days. When I got back in, I was in the same room with Ed ~~Mallette [phonetic]~~ in the hotel. Ed had locked the door and gone to sleep, and he might as well have been dead. [Laughs] I had to go down to the hotel desk and get them to--

[END OF SESSION]

Mollette

~~Mollette~~