Interview with George Houser
Date:
Interviewer: Judy Ehrlich, Rick Tejada-Flores
Camera Rolls: 50-53
Sound Rolls:

Interview gathered as part of "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors". Produced by Paradigm Productions. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Interview with George Houser, conducted by Paradigm Productions circa 1998 for "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors". Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Paradigm Productions Collection.

Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of "The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It: The Story of World War II Conscientious Objectors".

00:00:11:00-00:00:55:00

Interviewer:

Rolling, rolling. We're now rolling?

Camera Crew Member:

OK, go ahead.

Interviewer #1:

OK. So I guess we'd start by you introducing yourself.

George Houser:

I'm George Houser.

Interviewer #1:

A little bit more.

George Houser:

I'm living in a cooperative community. We've lived here ever since 1949. It's a community of forty-five families, about twenty-five miles north of the George Washington Bridge in the

great county of Rockland in New York State.

Interviewer #1:

I didn't realize this was a cooperative. So all around us are forty-five families living on the—

George Houser:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

—same piece of land.

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

George Houser:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

That's excellent. Oh. Let's talk about that later. Let's—

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

00:00:56:00-00:03:32:00

Interviewer #1:

—I'd like to start by, how, what your early influences were that, that made you take the position that you took when you were faced with conscription in 1940.

George Houser:

Well, I was a child, I sometimes say, of the '30s. I was influenced greatly by the religious convictions of my parents. My father was a Methodist clergyman and I grew up as preacher's kid, a P.K., we were called. And of course my earliest memories are of my parents, our home, and being in the church.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

At a very early age we moved from Ohio. [unidentified background noise] My f-, I was born in Cleveland, and we lived there for a couple of years and then Lisbon, Ohio and from there to the Philippines where my parents were missionaries for five years from 1920-, 1919 to 1924. So I grew up in a religious atmosphere. The formative years, because we moved around, from the Philippines to upstate New York, to Berkeley, California, and then from there to Denver, Colorado. But my formative years were probably my high school years and I was very active in the high school group connected with the church of which my father was a pastor, in Berkeley, the Trinity Methodist Church, just a couple of blocks off the campus of the University of California. And I went to summer institutes, we're talking about the period in the early '30s. And I can't remember when I didn't believe that a basic part of the Christian gospel was to be strongly for peace and against killing others, that the gospel of love was the basic gospel of the Christian faith, and that another important aspect of it was the fact that there is no difference between people.

00:03:33:00-00:05:31:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

And therefore the race relations theme was again, very basic to my own beliefs. So it began through our high school group, which we called Theta Pi, at, at Berkeley. And then I went on to college and I became very active in the Student Christian Movement. It also was very important that my sophomore year, I started out at College of the Pacific in Stockton California. Had my first year there. And the possibility came along of going to China as an exchange student and I applied and I was, I won the position, and so I spent a year in China as an exchange student at Lingnan University. There were twenty-five students in this exchange student group from all over the country. There were four or five from Harvard, and Penn State and Occidental College and Wesleyan University and schools all across the country, and I from the College of the Pacific, now the University of the Pacific, of course. And that year was very important because it gave me a whole, I was pretty young when we, I was in the Philippines, I was eight years old when we left there. But now this international outreach into China with a Chinese room-mate, traveling around China, with a like-minded group of other students from across the country also had at least a subliminal effect, of some sort or other, in giving me an international outlook on things.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

George, let, let me jump in. Methodists aren't—

Camera Crew Member:

No, no, no.

Interviewer #2:

—aren't known as—

00:05:32:00-00:08:37:00

[cut]

Interviewer #2:

—towards pacifism and nonviolence?

George Houser:

Well, it's true that the Methodist Church is not one of the, say, the historic peace churches like the Mennonites, the Friends and the Brethren, but there was a very strong element in the Methodist, and in the Methodist movement, beginning with John Wesley. It wa-, it's a, it's a social awareness gospel you might say. That it was, there are many activists who grew up, and I was, in within Methodism, and I was, drawn into a, see, when I came back from China, my folks had moved from Berkeley to Denver, and so, it was sort of the latter years of the Depression, I decided that, and my folks encouraged me to stay at home for the last two years. So I went to the University of Denver and graduated from there, and became very active in the Student Christian Movement, and at the same time became very active in the National Council of Methodist Youth. That's when I first met Jim Farmer, for instance, I met John Swomley, I came in touch with a, a group of people with whom I had a great deal in common, and, least common denominators as far as our social outlook and our political outlook was concerned, was a gospel of peace and a gospel of racial equality—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

—if there were two strands, that this was a means of expression of our faith. Now that was also true as far as the Student Christian Movement is concerned, and I would go to summer conferences at Estes Park in Colorado, for example. And I became very active on the campus at the University of Denver with the year in China behind me. And it was at this time that I

decided I would probably go into the ministry. So a decision was made to go to Union Theological Seminary. Now this was not a Methodist Seminary—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

—so I was a Methodist in that I grew up in the Methodist Church, and I found those with whom I had a great deal of, in common, both within the Methodist circles and within the wider circles of the Student Christian Movement. And my basic ideas and my beginning action flew fr-, grew from that and then going to Union Seminary in New York City opened up a whole new area for me.

Interviewer #1:

Something that—

Interviewer #2:

Wa, wa, wa, lets—

Interviewer #1:

—seems to be a—

Interviewer #2:

—stop and change tapes.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

00:08:38:00-00:10:04:00

Interviewer #1:

Respond to the idea of being a nonconformist, and being, if that, or, and/or, what makes you take that position? When so many other—

Interviewer #2:

Hands down, hands down, hands down.

Interviewer #1:

I, I'm not gonna use this part! The, how, so many other people with the same background as you don't come to that conclusion. How do you come to that conclusion?

George Houser:

I don't know how to answer that, in reality—

Interviewer #1:

Think about it.

George Houser:

—because—

Interviewer #2:

[inaudible]

George Houser:

—it, it developed at a certain point when I had to make a decision, and when you think back over your life and it was a decision that I wanted to go to China and I applied for that and I, I did it. It was a decision to decide to go to Union Theological Seminary rather than Boston University or one of the Methodist Seminaries, or staying right there in Denver at Iliff School of Theology which was a Methodist Seminary. I wanted something more than that, I was excited about the possibilities of life and I wanted to find out about, I, I when I went to New York, to seminary, after being in the seminary, in the dormitory [phone beeps] for a semester, I decided that I wanted to live down on the Lower East Side.

Interviewer #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer #2:

Ken, please, the phone is on—

Camera Crew Member:

Ken.

[cut]

00:10:05:00-00:11:57:00

George Houser:

Yeah, I was talking about my decision to move out of the, the dormitory of Union Seminary to the Lower East Side. I took a job working with street gangs, out of the Church of All Nations on, on the Lower East Side of New York because I wanted to be among whoever the people were, and I felt that that would be a good place to be. Now, I don't know why I made that decision but I was excited by the world out there and felt that I oughtta be related to it and ought to be doing something about it. I remember when we were in some of our National Methodist Youth gatherings or Student Christian Movement gatherings, one of the hymns that we used to sing was, "Are ye able, said the Master, to be crucified with me? Yay the sturdy dreamers answer, to the death we'll follow thee." Well, where was the action, I mean who was, does that mean anything, really? And I felt, well, you have to be ready to give something up. You have to be part of the struggle for a world that needs a, needs peace and justice and I don't know, I was just impelled in that direction, for some reason or other.

Interviewer #1:

So 1940 the draft comes. Were you gonna finish, were you just—

Interviewer #2:

No, no that was it, but then, you have to be ready, and the question is, when—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Ken, Ken can you tilt that a little bit more?

Interviewer #2:

—when you got the notice, or when you heard that the law had been passed—

Camera Crew Member #1:

No, keep going I'm rolling.

00:11:58:00-00:14:45:00

Interviewer #2:

You knew, or, when that moment came, were you ready or did it still agonizing decision or,

or had you gotten to the point already?

George Houser:

Well we're talking about the period of the peacetime draft, now that was, the Selective Service Act [clears throat] was passed by Congress, I think, in September, 1940. That summer of 1940, I was in western Colorado, in the little town of Norwood. It was a cattle raising community and a, a sheep community. And, it was about thirty miles east of the Utah border, really isolated, about 8,000 feet elevation, great trout streams out there and I used to love to go trout fishing. The, it was isolated, small community, 200 people, lived, and I had this small church which I handled for the summer. Well, I heard about the passage of the Selective Service Act in 1940 and I, I wondered, well what should I do about this? I wasn't sure. But, when at the end of my summer stint with that Methodist church in Norwood, I went back to seminary to start my third year. Seminary has three years and that was my senior year. We, the students, some of my good friends and I started talking about it and one of the options for us, because we were getting an automatic theological exemption as stu-, as theological students, we wouldn't be drafted, we wouldn't have to go. ***It was still peacetime, this was a year and some months before Pearl Harbor, the possibility of war was there, but this was a peacetime conscription act and the only way, or the most effective way many of us figured, of protesting against it, was to refuse to register under the law.*** And what happened in my case is that I was rooming with Howard Spragg at that time. And one of the students came in, in the middle of the night, I was asleep, and said we've been thinking about it and we've drawn up, or we are drawing up a statement of the fact that we will refuse to register for the draft next week.

00:14:46:00-00:14:52:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

We're gonna have to redo this.

Interviewer #2:

Let's stop.

Interviewer #1:

It's too loud.

Interviewer #2:

They're not going away, they're just sitting out there—

Interviewer #1:

What is it?

Interviewer #2:

—there's a whole bunch of roadsters—

00:14:53:00-00:15:14:00

Interviewer #1:

—petition making process and you were clear—

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

Interviewer #1:

—In terms of chronology where was he before we got—

Interviewer #2:

Well, he was in—

George Houser:

Well, I was in, I was in Norwood.

Interviewer #1:

You were in Norwood, OK.

Interviewer #2:

No, then you got back and you said—

Interviewer #1:

No, no, you got back...

George Houser:

The question—

Interviewer #2:

—you said, your friend came into your room

George Houser:

The question was raised, oh, you want to get back to the—

Interviewer #2:

The question was raised, was raised, did you agonize and you said no, I agonized later.

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

George Houser:

That's right.

Interviewer #2:

Go ahead.

00:15:15:00-

Interviewer #1:

I know where you were, though, you were, somebody'd come into your room—

George Houser:

Right.

Interviewer #1:

—with a statement.

George Houser:

OK. Well, Howard and I in our, what, we had two rooms, I guess, were wakened by one of our fellow students with whom he had been discussing this thing. He indicated that some of them had been working on a statement and what did we want to do? Well, we got out of bed and joined the rest of the fellows and the process of writing this statement went on. And there were quite a group, at this point, initially, who were prepared to join in signing a statement of why we would refuse to register as religious objectors to participating in conscription and in war. And what ultimately happened then was that by the next day, and this was, I think around the tenth or so of October, and the registration day was October the sixteenth. There were twenty of us who refused to register then, signed the statement, we would refuse to

register for the draft. This statement was sent to the press, was sent to some church officials, to friends, to family, to other interested parties. The press of course picked it up. I mean, twenty seminary students refusing to register under the law? They're going to get $10,000 and five years in prison, because that was the penalty under the law. This was big news. Now, we were not really prepared for this, because it's one thing to sign a statement, and we'd written and signed other kinds of statements, but this was different, now you're bucking up against the government of the United States, at a critical moment, the first peacetime conscription act going into effect and a group, not just one, a group of theological students in a sense fingering their nose at the government saying, we ain't gonna do it.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:17:47:00-00:20:03:00

George Houser:

Well the repercussions set in very quickly because it was big news and this was something that at a later point in our life we might have known how to deal with, but this was the first of this kind. I mean, headlines in the press, telephone calls coming in, letters soon came in, telegrams came in. The seminary beginning to crack down on us because they were su-, the seminary were subject to a lot of pressure from it's contributors. What is, what kind of theology are you teaching these students who are refusing to obey the government in an act of this sort? Well, this is when we began to wrestle with the position and we went through a couple of days of real struggle, there was no question about it, because the idea of going to prison for a period of time was theoretically one that we might have considered, but now it was real because we were threatened by the head of Selective Service, General Hershey, that we would be dealt with, that we would be dealt with, that he said, We feel that by registration day they will be good little boys. It was pressure from the kind of publicity we got, the pressure from family. Now, in my case, I was very fortunate because although my folks had a difficult emotional time on this, they supported me. That was not true of some of the others of our group of twenty, whose parents became very emotional and distraught with the fear that a parent would have a heart attack, that they would do something drastic about it. Parents came to-, mine were out in Colorado and they weren't coming to New York.

00:20:04:00-00:22:34:00

It was a little, not as simple in those days you couldn't send faxes and emails, you didn't even talk long distance on the phone very much in 1940. Telegrams, we sent telegrams back and forth, this sort of thing. But there was all kinds of pressure that was applied on the members of our group, including, including visitations that came from prominent people, like Harry Emers-, Emerson Fostick, the minister of the Riverside Church just across the street from us, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union, the head of the American Friends Service Committee, they came to talk with us. And the seminary was very adamantly opposed, and the faculty passed resolutions against our act. They couldn't understand it because there was a

provision in the Selective Service Act for conscientious objectors, setting up something which hadn't been organized yet, but which eventuated in the Civilian Public Service camps. And all of this was laid out for us, if you're going to refuse to go along with it, be a conscientious objector and go to the, the CPS camp. They weren't called that at the point. But this idea that you can go out and ref-, not be in the armed forces or in the military, but engage in the, what the Civilian Public Service camps later did, of good works in whatever community. Well, this was what made us struggle. And I remember it was, I think, I think October 16, I oughtta look it up, I think it was a Wednesday. On a Monday, having gone through that weekend, on Monday our group of twenty went through a struggle, no question about it. And we spent most of the day in very serious discussion with one another on what we ought to do. And one could see that there was the beginning of a rethinking on the part of many of the students. And we all had to wrestle with it. What finally happened at the end—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

00:22:35:00-00:27:46:00

George Houser:

—of that day of very serious discussion is that we had a split in the group. It was not—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

George Houser:

—a, an argumentative kind of thing. It was done, I think within a religious conviction, but some, for various reasons, felt that they would have to go, they would register. Eight of us decided that we would not. Now this we had to wrestle with. So by the end of Monday, it was clear that there would be eight of us who would refuse to register, twelve of those who had signed the statement would register. Some would leave seminary and go to the Selective Service Camp. They made, the other twelve others made differing decisions. So, it was, this was the moment of struggle and I can remember seeing the headlines in the “New York Times” and the “World Telegram” and the “New York Post” and other papers at that time with the story of our refusing to register and what was going to happen as a result of it. So on, I think, Wednesday morning—

00:24:06:00-00:27:44:00

Interviewer #1:

How did you react to seeing those headlines?

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

George Houser:

I was nervous. And I think I probably had a shaky hand as I washed my face and shaved in the morning [laughs] and I think others felt uneasy, about, what are we doing? Because the idea of going to prison was one that theoretically you looked upon as a possibility, but not necessarily as a reality. Now it was a reality. And we didn't know what was going to come out of it. But, we took one step at a time, from then on, and refused on that morning of October the 16th, they had set up a special registration for us right in the seminary. Now I think they must have done this, because this was not the regular place of registration, I think they must have done it, because ***the seminary*** certainly didn't want publicity, any more. They'd gotten so much. Eight Union Theological Seminary students refused to register. Henry Sloan Coughlin, who was the president, we called him Uncle Henry, ***sent telegrams to all of our folks saying, your son, despite all of our efforts has decided that he will disobey of the law, this was the effect of the telegram, and is going to disobey the law by refusing to register, can you stop this tragedy*** from taking place? This went to all of the parents of the eight of us, which again, helped to supply pressure. We, there was no one member of the faculty who applauded our action, although some were understanding of it, and others just couldn't understand why we would refuse to register, both because we were theological students and had a natural exemption, or because that we could've decided to be conscientious objectors and taken the alternative action, the alternative proposal under the act. So this was a great deal of pressure on us, without any question, and we felt it. I was twenty-four years old, I think, at the time, and although I'd been through a few experiences, nothing that matched this one. My own parents, although my father supported the action from the pulpit, in Denver, which got some publicity in the “Denver Post” and the “Rocky Mountain News” out there, but they were emotionally involved in this. And so that was tough, when I got letters and telegrams from the folks. But they never tried to pressure me into changing my position, which was different than it was for some of those.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:27:45:00-00:28:19:00

Interviewer #2:

Can I interrupt for a minute? The trial itself, looking back now, or even at the time, did you view that as what—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #2:

—we now think of as a political trial? Did you, did you, did you make the connection between theology and personal commitment and politics? Was that, would you, would you have called it a political trial then, or—

George Houser:

No. I don't think so. Of course, in a wider sense, it was. We were making a political statement.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah, you need to say in a wider sense it was a political trial.

Camera Crew Member:

Could you keep looking at Judy, when you talk?

George Houser:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

Go ahead, say it again.

00:28:20:00-00:31:26:00

George Houser:

Right. We were, we were making a political decision, but we were not primarily taking it out, taking the position out of a political motivation, because it was an a-, ***it was an act of civil disobedience*** in what we a little later would've called a Gandhian position. At that time we weren't into that as much as some of us later became involved in it, but you would have to understand it looking back on it as the same kind of act of civil disobedience that Gandhi took, in breaking the salt laws of India, which Britain had imposed upon the Indians. Or the so well-publicized actions of Martin Luther King in the Montgomery bus boycott. Of course, or what we were doing at a later period in CORE, if, as we violated Jim Crow laws in travelling in the South, where there were Jim Crow laws. This was an act of civil disobedience, and as, as that can be understood in political terms, but we were not primarily thinking of it. We were, it was something that we were impelled to do as a result of our religious convictions at that time. This day in which our group of twenty went through this very difficult time of debate and discussion was also, much of it, within a religious context. That is, there was, there was prayer involved in it. And, I think that one would have said we

were led, by whatever, we were led to take this position. I might state it a little bit differently now than I did then. One wouldn't oversimplify it by saying this is the will of God, but this is what I am impelled to do as a result of my Christian conviction that Jesus taught us that we must love and not hate and not kill, but understand and that we must find some reconciling way of dealing with disputes. It was before, in my case certainly, that one had become conscious of the whole nonviolence alternative. [background sound] This was something which developed for me at a little bit later, that is, a nonviolent way of carrying on a struggle for justice.

00:31:27:00-00:34:14:00

Interviewer #1:

When you talk about the, being the, Gandhi being later, what were your models of civil disobedience at that point? Or did you have a model?

George Houser:

Probably not, but yes there was the influence of Evan Thomas who had gone to prison in the First World War, he was the brother of the great Socialist leader, Norman Thomas. Evan got in touch with us. A.J. Muste, who had just been taken on as the Executive Secretary of the Fellowship for Reconciliation, met with our group. Now, both Evan Thomas and A.J. Muste encouraged us in this position. And in that, A.J. had not gone to prison, but Evan Thomas had gone to prison. And he wrote a very meaningful letter to the group of us about his own experience and also saying, you're gonna have a tough time but you are really doing the right thing. Sort of thing. And this, I think, buoyed us up considerably. So we had that kind of encouragement and that kind of a model to go on. Other than that, you could, from a Socialist perspective, and some of us were members of the Young People's Socialist League at that time and we had the Eugene Debs who had been opposed to the First World War. We had that kind of precedent to go on. But we had the, the precedent of the Christian martyrs, we had underlying it the whole theme of the meaning of the cross in the Christian experience, which is that you must be prepared to suffer for your faith and if this was suffering than we must be ready to accept that and from a theological perspective that would've been a, a very important part of it. And we had that, as a, as a model—

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

—to go on.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

Christian martyrs through the ages. Now I don't know that we tried to put ourselves in, in the position of the great Christian martyrs. Some tried to do that with the letters we received and this sort of thing, articles which appeared subsequently in various magazines, but we didn't try to do that ourselves.

00:34:15:00-

Interviewer #1:

Is it, did we, we haven't really answered the question about nonconformity, I wonder when we're tal-, did you want to get more into the—

Interviewer #2:

Let's go back to that, let's go on to the prison stuff—

Interviewer #1:

OK

Interviewer #2:

—a little, and see if we can get some prison on this tape and then [inaudible].

Interviewer #1:

Great, OK.

00:34:26:00-00:37:41:00

Interviewer #2:

Yeah. So, so then talk about what that meant for you actually going to prison, in terms of doing something that you believed in, and understanding you'd pay the price and also what came out of it, the sense—

George Houser:

Mmm.

Interviewer #2:

—of community with your fellow resistors, the solidarity and those things.

George Houser:

Well, I think that I had a great deal, a great feeling of peace after making this decision and I think that was true of our group as a whole, that we had taken the position, we went into that draft board, we refused to register. Some of us were given a, a call to appear before the grand jury, I was one of them, and we appeared before the grand jury to answer the kinds of questions which they had. The decision had been made, the struggle in a sense, was over, and we then would just follow the routine that takes place. Now we had a very fine lawyer who volunteered his service, Kenneth Walser. He did a good job on our behalf, although we all pled guilty in court. That would, could have been, I suppose, a, a, a question of, of deciding should we plead guilty or not guilty. But we decided that we would plead guilty and because we had consciously refused to obey the law, and we felt all right we're prepared to take the consequences, whatever they were. So the, the court, the day in, in court on November the 14th, as I recall, was straightforward in which Walter presented our case and each of us had an opportunity to make a statement and the judge had received hundreds of communications from all over the country, urging, I suppose he had some negative ones, we didn't know so much about them, but most of the mail he received was, were from people who said, you can't send these guys to jail. But I think that, Mendenbaum was the name of the, of the judge, felt that, and I imagine he had had plenty of discussions with the Department of Justice about what to do with our case, and they decided that, we were the first case, there was no, we were setting a precedent of a sort, they couldn't let us go. So they gave us a year and a day sentence. And, the courtroom was filled, it was an exciting day in one sense, because ***outside the courtroom [laughs] there were picket lines. Benedict told me*** subsequently, because I hadn't noticed it, ***somebody spat in his face***—
Interviewer:

Mmm.

00:37:42:00-00:39:12:00

George Houser:

—***as we were going up the steps to the courtroom there at Foley Square.*** On the whole, those who were there were supporters and of course there was many of our colleagues and fellow students at Union Seminary who were in the court room. In fact, it was over-packed they couldn't all get in. I had just met my wife a few days before that, so we were just getting acquainted at that time, but we got the year and a day sentence, and were immediately put in the paddy wagon. There were pictures taken and this pe-, appeared in the press as we were, I was tied to Joe Bevelac with handcuffs as we got in the paddy wagon, and we were taken to West Street, the detention headquarters down in Lower Manhattan where we were for a week before being sent off to Danbury. We didn't know where we were going. We didn't know anything about Danbury, at the time. So it was following a step at a time leading from our decision to refuse to register, to the, the court ex-, experience, the sentencing, and going to West Street where we w—

[cut]

00:39:12:00-00:39:25:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

—noise.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Well, let me talk to him. We're getting ready to shoot again [inaudible].

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hi Vicente.

Interviewer #1:

[inaudible] think his name was Houser.

George Houser:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

He was a doctor.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[whispers] Hi Vicente.

[cut]

00:39:26:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're rolling.

Interviewer #2:

OK, go ahead George, whenever you're ready.

George Houser:
Well, you know, while we were in Danbury, you get a limited number of people on your

correspondence list. And I was able to correspond with my parents, out in Denver; and with Jean, whom I had just met, and who I was interested in, my wife; and with one of my fellow students at Union Theological Seminary, Roger Shinn, who subsequently became a professor at the seminary. He, I might say, was very greatly influenced by our action in refusing to register and giving up our theological exemption. And he himself gave up his theological exemption and because of his convictions about the justice of the war, he went into the Army and he was actually captured in the Battle of the Bulge. But I had a good correspondence going with Roger Shinn and one letter which I wrote to him on January the 10th, 1941 has this in part:

00:40:38:00-00:42:44:00

[reads] "Sometimes as the routine in here wears on one and some of the depri-, deprivations are particularly aggravating," I wrote. "The idea of getting out here seems very appealing. There are two answers that immediately come up to my mind at such times. The first is that being here is a wonderful experience in itself. It is not just an experience in a bourgeois sense, something which is reality now but will be only past throughout the rest of my life. Rather it is a vital experience because I consider it as definitely a part of my ministry as anything ever will be. All of life, of course, is a ministry. I wish that seminary students could see how out of perspective the world is from a seminary window. The ivory tower of Union is a tragic reality unless one lives outside of it. Maybe not actually outside, but at least in spirit. The seminary should not be a sort of a monastic community of study apart from the world. Anyway, this is part of my ministry here in the midst of human need. But also, whenever I feel the urge to get out of here I remember some of the words in the little book called, “By An Unknown Disciple”. Jesus is reported by this Unknown Disciple when he was in the garden, the Garden of Eden [sic-Gethsemane], and was tempted to escape the cross, as saying, 'Wherever I go, I cannot escape the will of God.' As you know," I wrote to Roger, "I do not think the action which got us here is in any sense the complete approximation of the will of God. It rather is a combination of religious insight with political strategy to me. But it does result directly from my understanding of the will of God. Therefore to leave here would only mean to be driven back again."

00:42:45:00

Interviewer #1:

Very nice. I like the concept of the political insight and the religious belief. I think, I think we've covered that pretty well though, right?

Interviewer #2:

Yes, we have. We have.

Interviewer #1:

Except the poli-, lets go on from there into the idea of political strategy—

Interviewer #2:

But—

Interviewer #1:

—and how you take th-, what—.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

—happens when you get out of prison and start to work for—

Interviewer #2:

We haven't gone through prison yet.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, we haven't finished prison yet.

Interviewer #1:

We really haven't talked about prison at all, let's—

George Houser:

You want baseball, and—

Interviewer #1:

Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.

Interviewer #2:

Little bit about baseball.

George Houser:

—you want ping pong, I don't know what do you want? [chuckles]

Interviewer #1:

Ping pong, and we want baseball—

Interviewer #2:

Let's do baseball, we may actually—

Interviewer #1:

—sports in jail, yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—have some baseball film. Tell us about—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, OK.

Interviewer #2:

—tell us about, baseball's just a normal sport but it, it developed—

George Houser:

Well, you know, we had—

Interviewer #2:

—significance—

George Houser:

—some very interesting experiences.

Camera Crew Member #2:

You actually look better when you have your arm resting on your, you feel comfortable?

George Houser:

I feel quite comfortable.

Camera Crew Member:

That's better for me.

George Houser:

Yes?

00:43:31:00-00:45:51:00

Interviewer:

There. OK, so what made the baseball game there something special?

George Houser:

We had some very interesting experiences during our year in Danbury. One of the first of these experiences took place just after we'd arrived there which was in November. You would think the softball season, the baseball season should be over. Danbury was a new prison, it had opened up in August, we got there in November. They had a softball team and they played outside teams. Well, our group of eight were all pretty athletically inclined, and one of our members, Don Benedict, had been, really a semi-pro softball pitcher and somehow or other an arrangement was made for our group of eight to play the Danbury varsity. And on, oh, towards the end of November that softball game took place on a Saturday. And Benedict pitched, they couldn't hit him. I think they had, it was a one-hitter, and our seminary group, which, they called us the divinity students, the divinity students beat the Danbury varsity, I think, fifteen to one. That's kind of made us, for one thing, but then subsequently, in the following April, this is November, ***the following April came along the annual, what was called the Peace Strike Against War,*** and all of us, as students, had participated. This was April the sixth, as I recall, which was the, the date that the United States entered the First Wor-, First World War. And we had participated when we'd been students in this student strike against war, ***so we decided we're gonna participate*** in solidarity with students out there. The Second World War had not started yet. We're going to participate ***in that student strike*** against war. We informed the warden, ***and of course this is something which the prison authorities cannot abide by. Prisoners going on strike? No, no, no, you can't do that***.

00:45:52:00-00:48:25:00

So what happened was, ***we were*** all taken before the disciplinary committee or commission, or whatever, of the prison and ***given thirty days in isolation. But during that period, it being April, the softball season started*** and while we were all in our separate cells, Danbury was playing some outside team in softball and was getting beaten. ***And the prisoners started putting up a chant, "We want Benedict, we want Benedict."*** So the warden spoke to the captain of the guards, go and get Benedict. Come on out and pitch. Benedict went out there and he pitched a no-hitter, he wasn't there for the whole game. Danbury won. And then Don was brought back to his cell, still in isolation. The next few days, there was another softball game. And the warden again asked the captain to come and get Benedict out. And Benedict said, no I won't go unless all of us are out. ***So we were all let out, Benedict pitched the game,***

Danbury won. We had only been th-, two weeks into our thirty day confinement period. And what happened was, that ***the warden then lifted the penalty against us***. But he made a strategic error because the time when the prisoners all see each other is when you go into the mess hall for dinner, and he had all of the prisoners sitting down at the table, at their various tables in the mess hall, when our group was let out. And as we went into the dining room, the prisoners stood up and gave us a standing ovation. [laughs] It was a strange thing. Baseball diplomacy, or something, [laughs] I don't know.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

But, it was a fascinating incident. There's more to it than that, but that's roughly—

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

George Houser:

—an outline of one of our interesting experiences—

Interviewer #2:

It's [unintelligible]—

George Houser:

—in Danbury.

00:48:26:00-00:50:31:00

Interviewer #2:

—George, but being in prison was also a serous business. You were there because of conscience.

George Houser:

That's right.

Interviewer #2:

And also, you took a position that probably the other prisoners didn't understand—

Camera Crew Member:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #2:

—or were egged on to disapprove of, so there's a certain amount of tension. Could you explain yourself to the other prisoners or defend yourselves, or what was the nature of that dialogue?

George Houser:

You know, it's very interesting, but I can hardly think of an incident in which we had tension or had problems with our fellow prisoners. Now maybe that was because Danbury was somewhat minimum custody prison and you had men there who were nearing the end of their term in prison, but the fact is that the prisoners held us in respect as the divinity students. Furthermore, we were of assistance, some of them could not write and they would ask us to help them write their letters to their wives or their girlfriends or members of their family. Some of us taught some classes, extracurricular. We took part in the athletic contests. I played ping pong. I was number one on the ping pong team, and I think Benedict or Lovell was number two or whatever. We played outside teams. And we participated with our fellow prisoners in all of the activities and were of assistance to them. Furthermore, we weren't kowtowing to the authorities. We had more tension with the warden and in some cases with the guards, but never with our fellow prisoners.

00:50:32:00-00:51:34:00

Interviewer #1:

Were you ever on strike in Danbury?

George Houser:

Yes, we ha-, of course we had—

Interviewer #1:

That strike,—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:
—but were you part of the hunger strikes for integration, or did that happen at Danbury when

you were there, too?

George Houser:

That, that happened at a later time.

Interviewer #1:

Later? Uh-huh.

George Houser:

In, in, during our period we had some individual actions, in which, because there was segregation, there was segregation in housing, there was segregation in the mess hall, there was segregation if they showed a movie, there was no segregation in church, in the church services that were held. But some of us would go and sit with some of our, our black fellow prisoners and this was frowned down upon. But it, at that point, at a later point there were some strikes, hunger strikes, in protest against segregation. It did not take place during the period of our group in 1940, '41—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

—in Danbury.

00:51:35:00-00:54:53:00

Interviewer #1:

So—

Interviewer #2:

Well, one of the things, you talked about—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer #2:

—individual action during the period. You've mentioned when you wrote about the period that one of the things you did in Danbury was you did some thinking and one of the things

you were thinking about was this issue of integration and racial justice and you were getting ready to, to try and do something, weren't you?

George Houser:

Well, you see, while you are in prison, it's kind of borrowed time of some sort, you have a lot of time to think and to plan, and you're naturally thinking what's, what's my next step? What am I going to do when I get out? Now we had difficulty getting re-accepted into Union Theological Seminary. The seminary put certain conditions on our return, and that meant that, we could not accept these conditions. They amounted to such things [clears throat] as not to take any action without getting the permission of the seminary to do it, which was ridiculous. So, five of us decided to continue seminary at Chicago Theological Seminary. So some of my thinking and planning was in connection with, what are the possibilities as far as going to Chicago is concerned. I had been to Chicago but wasn't really familiar with the city. But, I had done some thinking about what did I want to do. I was approached by A.J. Muste who had just, had been for just a year or so the Executive Secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He invited me to work for the FOR while I was finishing up my work at Chi-, Chicago Theological Seminary. So I began to make plans as to what I would do, working primarily with youth and students in the Chicago area as the representative of the Chicago Fellowship of Reconciliation. So, a lot of my thinking was in that line and one of the important aspects of it was, what could we do as far as the whole problem of racial segregation is concerned? Now it was impossible to go very far in that thinking, simply because I did not know Chicago. So it develops now into another story of a post-Danbury period. The Danbury period was a period of, an experience of its own, mixing with a, a group of men that I might not have ordinarily mixed with and learning a lot of things about their life that might not have been part of mine. But it was also a period of preparation for what comes next. And it, it developed this way because five of us went to Chicago, and a new phase of life developed—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

—after Danbury.

00:54:54:00-00:57:52:00

Interviewer #1:

You, you talked in your [clears throat] writing about feeling guilty—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[clears throat]

Interviewer #1:

—about not having fought the Good War—

George Houser:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

—and that, that motivated you to do something after the war.

George Houser:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

Could you talk about that?

George Houser:

Yes. Now, there was a kind of a guilt feeling that I had, because here, the war had started after I got, in December, of '41, Pearl Harbor took place. And there were men even before that period, of course, who had been drafted. It looked as if war was going to take place. And we were very much opposed to the kind of totalitarianism, the Nazism, that Hitler, the symbol of the whole thing, represented. And yet we were in such a position that we weren't directly related to that struggle. And therefore there was the feeling, well we've got to do something. Now, my feeling always was that if we were in Europe someplace then we could do something in relation to the, the opponents of the Nazi regime, particularly for the Jews who were being so persecuted and murdered under the system. But here in this country we weren't in a position to directly relate to that because we weren't there, we were here. So I think that getting into this whole field of, of race relations, dealing with the problem of segregation partly grew out of an impulse that we've gotta do something and partly it was to help get rid of this guilt feeling. I wouldn't want to put it just in those terms, really, because it stands on its own, that—we discovered Gandhi. Not that we weren't conscious of him, before, but in Chicago there was a cell group, we called them cell groups, which I had helped organize at the University of Chicago, and this particular group ran into some incidents of segregation when they were going for lunch on the South Side, down on 63rd Street, not far away from the campus of the University of Chicago, and it was out of that experience that we began to think about applying the methods of nonviolence and nonviolent direct action, and of civil disobedience to tackling a very real problem on the American front, namely the problem of segregation and discrimination.

00:57:52:00-01:00:57:00

And it was out of this that in a very natural way, our, we organized what we called the Chicago Committee of Racial Equality, which we called CORE, later a national group called the Congress of Racial Equality. And as we became better organized, the idea of CORE groups was something which spread. It was partly due to the fact that we had somethings going, we were dealing with the problem of housing segregation, the restrictive covenant system, we were dealing with roller skating rinks that discriminated, with swimming pools, with restaurants and so forth. It was partly due to the fact that we had somethings going, and partly due to the fact that Jim Farmer, who was on the staff of the Fellowship of Reconciliation as a field worker, based in Chicago at that time, and Bayard Rustin, well known, who was in here, in New York and they, Jim and Bayard, were both moving around the country, both excellent speakers, before college students and church groups and trade union groups and so forth were spreading the message of dealing with the problem of racial discrimination and segregation through nonviolent action. I think what happened in, in the Chicago CORE group was that we gave some life to the idea by actually participating in projects, in which Jim was very much involved, Bayard was involved, but Bayard was based in New York and only occasionally came through Chicago. But, interracial housing group, of which Jim Farmer was a part, was, they called it Boyce Fellowship House, was organized in an area covered by a restrictive covenant where blacks should not be permitted to live, and yet they did live there. There was our case at the White City Roller Rink, where we had a standing line, and we got some trade unions to support it. They used the ruse that you had to be a member of a private club in order to get in the roller skating rink, but when any of us who were white went in, we, they would, didn't bother with asking us are we members of the, of the club. So we organized our first real CORE project, was to tackle the discrimination at White City Roller Rink, as we had a standing line, that meant the regular customers coming in, couldn't get in because here was this long line in front of them.

01:00:58:00-01:02:23:00

There was the case of the Jack Sprat restaurant, where we, this was long before Martin Luther King and before the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, or in Nashville, Tennessee. We're talking about 1942, 1943, that period of time, when we first used these techniques of sit-ins at restaurants, occupying enough of the seats so that until everybody was served, nobody would leave, which meant that regular customers coming in, couldn't find a place to sit down, and it put all kinds of pressure on management that told us, you can sit here 'til midnight but you, we won't serve you, who would call the police. The police would come in and see an orderly group there. We didn't have any arrests that took place, in these experiments in Chicago, but we broke down discrimination in a place like Jack Sprat's, and the big restaurant down in the loop in Chicago, Stoner's Restaurant, where we had fifty or sixty people lined up and we occupied that restaurant. With our group, most, of whites going in, [phone rings] occupying a lot of the seats, and [phone rings] Whup!

Interviewer #1:

Wait a second—

Interviewer #2:

Let's stop a second.

Interviewer #1:

—just, [phone rings] mister,

Camera Crew Member #2:

Go, Ken.

[cut]

01:02:24:00-01:03:54:00

Interviewer #1:

Do you want to do that again, or finish the story?

George Houser:

Should I deal with that?

Interviewer #2:

Well, either way—

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

—but yeah talk about this for just a minute. Did you understand the significance of what you were doing?

George Houser:

Yes and no. We certainly felt at that time as if we were getting something unique started, but we had no idea what could it, what it could lead to. We felt impelled to do it, we felt that it was important, we were excited by what we were doing and the fact that we could get some results, but we could only make surmises about, will this be at some point a movement which will gather enough momentum to change the outlook of this country? You always hope that something like that might be the case, but of course you can't tell. We were young people and we just felt, well, we've got this bull by the horns, we've got something that's exciting, it's

something that we want to do. It has some dangers connected with it, which might add to the, the emotion of it, but of course we didn't know what it might lead to.

01:03:55:00-01:05:40:00

Interviewer #1:

Could you clarify something? Was this, were those instances in Chicago and I guess the first one being Jack Sprat or the first one being that...?

George Houser:

Jack Sprat.

Interviewer #1:

Jack Sprat's first. Is that—

George Houser:

First restaurant.

Interviewer #1:

—Is that the first civil disobedience for racial equality in the United States in your knowledge?

Interviewer #2:

That campaign.

George Houser:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

Yes.

George Houser:

Now the question is whether the Jack Sprat restaurant case was the first of its kind, it was the first one we knew about. I did hear about something that took place with Howard University students in Washington, D.C. under the leadership of a woman by the name of Pauli Murray, which may have been taking place at about the same time, quite independently. We later organized a group in Chi-, in Washington because we had an interracial workshop down

there that organized a group on the spot. As far as we knew it was something unique, it hadn't happened before. All we knew about was that the UAW had sit-ins, sit-downs they called them, in Detroit in the '30s and we were applying that kind of strategy to deal with the problem of discrimination, a little different context. We called them sit-ins, and they were in restaurants or standing lines at theaters or at roller rinks or wherever, but we felt it was something unique and we did not have any precedents to go by at the time we got this started.

01:05:41:00-01:07:05:00

Interviewer:

Were you looking at a Gandhism model for what you were doing? Was the-, was there any model other—

George Houser:

We studied, we studied Gandhi. There was a man by the name of Shridharani, who was a disciple of Gandhi who had written a book entitled “War Without Violence”. And we studied that book because he outlined, how do you apply nonviolent methods to dealing with problems in our society. And we developed what we called the CORE Action Discipline for ourselves, we wrote a booklet entitled, “What is the CORE Way?”, what is the CORE Action Discipline which is applying nonviolence to the problem of racism, racial discrimination in our country. And this was I think a reflection of what Gandhism meant to us and we learned a lot from this book by Shridharani, “War Without Violence”. So yes, there was a very real consciousness of the move-, because after all the whole struggle under Gandhi in India was taking place at the same time, in the '40s. And of course it had gone before that, going back to South Africa in the 1915s, or before that.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

01:07:06:00-01:08:42:00

Interviewer #2:

But in 1942, India's not even independent yet.

George Houser:

Not 'til '47. I think it was '47—

Interviewer #2:

So—

George Houser:

—that Gan—

Interviewer:

—so, it's not, it's not modeling a successful campaign because you haven't even seen Gandhi win.

George Houser:

It was not, but the, we, you could see what the results of the work under the Indian National Congress was, using nonviolent techniques and civil disobedience techniques, So we were consciously learning from that and profiting from the experience that was taking place in India, in spite of the fact were in a different context in this country and of course later on that was the theme for Martin Luther King as the whole civil rights movement became a huge popular movement that changed the face of the country in so many ways. We felt we were precursors for this. We were not in a position, of course, because our, our group was interracial there was no one person who was the, the symbol of the whole thing in the same sense that, that King became that. Nor was it in the South where it had to be. Our first experience of that sort was with our Journey of Reconciliation which was a joint project of the Congress of Racial Equality and of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

01:08:43:00-01:09:00:00

Interviewer #2:

We need to change the tape before you start on that.

Interviewer #1:

Yes, OK, can we just do the Stoners?

Interviewer #2:

Yes, let's do—

Interviewer #1:

Could you just do that?

George Houser:

Oh, we didn't finish that.

Interviewer #1:

No, you didn't do the Stoners. Do you need to change tapes?

Camera Crew Member:

We're under two minutes, yeah, we're under two minutes.

Interviewer #1:

We've got two minutes left?

Camera Crew Member:

Less.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, so, start a new tape. Change the tape then.

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

01:09:01:00-01:10:48:00

George Houser:

Interviewer #2:

OK, so tell us a little bit about the story of—

George Houser:

Well, one of our...

Interviewer #2:

—the confrontation—

George Houser:

One of our big campaigns perhaps the biggest one in our early period in CORE was to deal with the problem of discrimination at a fairly prominent downtown restaurant in the Loop section of Chicago, owned by a man by the name of Stoner, who by the way was a good Methodist. And here was a, a restaurant that discriminated. They would not serve any blacks that went in there. We found out about this and decided to put on a survey in the whole Loop

area, and we passed out questionnaires to restaurants, to patrons coming out of restaurants throughout the Ch—Chicago area, would they refuse to go here if Negroes were served here and we got overwhelming response from people saying they would certainly go. Now you got some unfortunate responses as well. We made this public, we publicized it. We gave copies of the responses and the analysis of it to Stoner and to other restaurants, but Stoner's was the main one in Chicago. Got no place. Now we took, we had test cases. We sent interracial groups in there that always ran into discrimination. And on one of those occasions when we were in there, Mr. Stoner who had me tagged came over and gave me a good hard kick under the table. I can remember [laughs] that one.

01:10:49:00-01:13:35:00

But, we decided to have our first National Core Convention in Chicago in 1943, I think it was. And as a major project as a part of this national conference where we had, I don't know, fourteen or fifteen groups coming from various parts of the country, we decided that we would have a, a, a case that everyone could participate in which would be helpful to them as they went back home, at Stoner's. And I think we had maybe fifty or sixty people lined up to participate. At first, I should say that there may have been forty-five or fifty whites, who went in, in groups of twos and threes and sat in various places around the restaurant. And then the first interracial group came in, which consisted of maybe two whites and about six or eight blacks. They were refused service. They stood there for probably an hour and a half. The police were called. Told there was a disturbance taking place, but there was no disturbance taking place, so no arrests took place. The black employees who were in the kitchen came out and they said, we won't work as long as you are refused service. And some of the other regular patrons, who didn't know anything about CORE, found out what was going on and they said, we will join, so they refused to leave their seats, in spite of the fact, so we had that whole restaurant pretty well organized in the space of two hours or so. So finally, Stoner gave the order and the first interracial group was seated, then the second one came in, 'cause we had two. And this was a real problem for Stoner. They started serving garbage sandwiches. Some of the employees came out and said, don't eat those sandwiches, we saw them made, they're taken out of the garbage. We sat there for another half hour or so and finally because business had stopped in this place, the order was given to seat that second interracial group and then there was a terrific round of applause that went up in that restaurant from, I would say, practically everybody there. It was a great victory. We always felt that that was one of the, one of the cases that really worked out, just beautifully. Yeah.

01:13:35:00-01:16:19:00

Interviewer #2:

That was, that was in '42 and '43—

George Houser:

'43. June '43.

Interviewer #2:

But then the war ended in '45. And at a certain point you tried, you decided to try something new, and that let to the, Journey in 1947, and I think Bayard was involved in helping you make that decision and developing it.

George Houser:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

Talk about how you, how you came up with that idea—

George Houser:

Right.

Interviewer #2:

—and what you thought it would do.

George Houser:

Well, we had a meeting of the CORE National Executive Committee in Cleveland. I was by this time living in Cleveland, and I was the Executive Secretary of the Congress of Racial Equality, having moved from Chicago to Cleveland. And we, we had our national executive committee meeting in Cleveland. This was in 1946. That year, in June, on June the third, 1946, the Supreme Court had rendered its decision in the Irene Morgan case. Irene was a black woman who had gotten on the bus in Maryland, bound for Virginia, and when the, the bus crossed the Potomac into Virginia, with the Jim Crow law, Irene Morgan was told to move. She refused to move, and so she was arrested. The case went up to the Supreme Court, and the decision of the court was that segregation in interstate travel is an undue burden, on interstate travel. Irene Morgan won her case. Our executive committee, that was in June, in September, we had our meeting, and here was this Irene Morgan decision. And we decided, OK, this is enough of a precedent for us to go on. Now there are states that have Jim Crow laws, what we need to do is to have an interracial group traveling interstate. With tickets that are interstate tickets so that we are definitely interstate travelers, to test whether the Irene Morgan decision is being honored by the bus companies and the railroad companies. And so, at that meeting, in September 1946, we laid our, our plans for what became, we called it the Journey of Reconciliation. It was the first Freedom Ride, in effect. Which became a much more popularized theme in 1961, after the rise of Martin Luther King and so on. This was before it had become the big thing.

01:16:20:00-01:19:09:00

Bayard and I were the co-secretaries, the cro-, co-planners, of this whole campaign. We spent from September until the next April. We were doing other things, too. But we spent that time preparing and planning this trip, which was very carefully done. We had to get in touch with a lot of people in the South. We had to plan what our itinerary would be. And to go to each one of those spots to arrange for speaking dates, because the idea was that we would be a traveling group of lecturers speaking about the problem of racism and segregation, particularly in interstate travel, meeting with student groups, with church groups, with trade unions, with NAACP organizations and so forth. We at first were going to go all the way to New Orleans, but we later decided on the basis of advice from some of our Southern friends, stick to the Upper South the first time. Then plan another trip that will go all the way through the Deep South. So Bayard and I, in January and February of 1947, took a dry run and we went to the places in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky, that we knew we would be stopping at with this interracial group. We had to recruit those who wanted to participate in it. At the beginning, which was in April, April the ninth, 1947, we had nine people, and there is that picture, the only real picture that [laughs] exists, I think, nine of us standing in front of the office of Spotswood Robinson, who just recently died. In Richmond, because he was our lawyer in Richmond, in, in Virginia, as far as that's concerned. And we started this trip in April with nine of us, part of us traveling on Trailways, part of us on Greyhound, and the first arrest took place in Petersburg. My good friend Conrad Lynde, who died just a couple of years ago, was the first person. He lived in our community, in Skyview Acres here. He was my neighbor. And was a very fine civil rights lawyer. I was on that bus. I was the white person sitting in the rear of the bus—

Interviewer #2:

What is—

George Houser:

—in the Jim Crow section. Conrad was sitting up in front!

01:19:10:00-01:22:43:00

Interviewer #2:

Tell us what you saw, what, what actually happened—

George Houser:

What actually happened is that because we'd planned each, each trip out as if it was the, the only thing happening, Conrad was the person in jeopardy. And, and we had other people on that bus who were not in jeopardy. I was supposed to be in jeopardy, sitting in the, in the Jim Crow section in the back. The bus driver got on. The bus was bound through Virginia, from Petersburg to Durham, North Carolina. Interstate. He saw Conrad sitting towards the front, and approached Conrad and said, you've got to move. And Conrad said, I'm sorry, I can, I cannot move, there's the Irene Morgan decision of the Supreme Court which has outlawed

segregation on interstate travel, and I'm an interstate traveler. I'm not giving you exact, but this is the essence of it, because our, our feeling about it was that we are doing an educational job. We have to inform bus drivers that there's an Irene Morgan decision. We have to inform our fellow passengers, who know nothing about it, that there's an Irene Morgan decision. We have to inform the police that there's an Irene Morgan decision, and the segregation and discrimination is unconstitutional according to the Supreme Court of the United States. Well, the bus driver said, It's OK for the Supreme Court, but I take my orders from the bus company. The bus company says you've gotta move. Conrad refused to move. So he said, I'll call the police. Which he did. At this point, I'm in the back. Nobody's paying any attention to this white guy sitting in the Jim Crow section so I went up to him and said, I'm sitting in the back, I protest against this. There were other passengers on board who also protested against the arrest of Conrad. He was arrested. I had the bail money, so I got off the bus and I bailed him out, and then we, the, it, it must've been there for two and a half to three hours, there was one young fellow, I remember, who was going to his wedding. It was be—it was still in Virginia and he was going to be very late [laughs] for his wedding as a result of all this. There was, passengers can be very frustrated, but in spite of the fact that they were frustrated by the fact that here was this interracial group that was, from their point of view, the cause of the bus not leaving, they did not express their frustration. There was a, there was a gang that started forming outside the bus. You see, we planned our strategy very carefully. We had two days of preparation in Washington prior to leaving on this trip, because we knew that we had the bus driver to deal with, our fellow tr-, passengers to deal with, the police to deal with, and people outside who might form some kind of a, a lynch squad or whatever,—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

01:22:44:00-01:24:16:00

George Houser:

—you didn't know what was going to happen. We had at least those four elements, and we had to be prepared to deal with whatever would happen as a result of this. Now this, Conrad was the first arrested there in Petersburg, Virginia. The second arrest took place in Durham, North Carolina. The third took place in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, when four, two blacks and two whites in our group, were arrested and the taxicab drivers outside began to organize. Now this was almost a riot, in that case. And we, we were staying at the home of Charlie Jones, a Presbyterian minister, there, who really put himself o the line in this case, because the taxicab drivers, after the arrests took place, almost barnstormed into the home of, of Charlie Jones, and his f-, his wife and kids were there. And then anonymous phone calls came saying, get those damn niggers out of town or we're gonna burn your house down. Well, this was a real incident that captured a lot of attention in, certainly in the North Carolina press.

Interviewer #2:

But you must have thought about those issues when you and Bayard were preparing.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can you wait just a minute? Let me check something here. Stop for a second.

[cut]

01:24:17:00-01:25:23:00

Interviewer #2:

When you and Bayard were planning the trip you must've weighed the dangers, and I guess, talk about the fact that, that was one of the reasons you didn't go all the way to the South because people had told you you'd be killed.

George Houser:

We were prepared to go all the way to New Orleans, but we were advised that first, let's experiment with this a little bit. See what happens in the Upper South, which might not be quite as dangerous. However, we didn't know. If you get into the rural sections of Virginia or North Carolina, anything could happen. After all, people had been lynched there just a short time before we had had this experience, of course. A, a man had been brutally beaten on a train in North Carolina, and cases had taken place of soldiers in uniform. That's why we felt this was a very good case, because that's to deal with this whole problem of interstate travel, or just travel on, on buses or trains—

01:25:24:00-01:27:20:00

Interviewer #2:

So when you did the preparation in Washington, D.C., was part of it, as was common later on in the civil rights movement, to get people psychologically prepared for the danger?

George Houser:

We, in preparation for this, we had socio-dramas at the place we were staying in Washington, to prepare ourselves for any eventuality, including violence that would take place. And I think we were as well-prepared, and this was a very good group of guys. One of our decisions was of course whether to have women on the trip, and we had decided, against some protests within our group that women should go. But we had decided, again, particularly I think with, from some of our Southern advisors, do this one a little more carefully—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

—than you might otherwise. So, we had decided as a matter of policy, Upper South, no women. And, now, we might have been prepared, as well as one could be prepared, but we were nervous, I can tell you. When we got on those buses, on April the ninth from Washington, we were prepared but nervous about what would happen, 'cause you don't know. Nothing happened between Washington and Richmond. It was the second day, in Petersburg, that the first arrest took place on the Trailways bus. Not on the Greyhound bus. The Greyhound went all the way to Raleigh, North Carolina. The Trailways went to Durham.

01:27:21:00-01:28:05:00

Interviewer #2:

But you, you expected arrests, it was other things—

George Houser:

We expected arrests, that's right. But then you don't know what will happen with the police.

Interviewer #1:

You expected arrests because, but it was not illegal, what you were doing.

George Houser:

It was not illegal, but I suppose there could be a case raised, what makes a traveler interstate?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

George Houser:

I mean, there would be all kinds of legal cases that, that might be made on it. We had interstate, you should've seen those tickets, they were so huge, traveling all the way from Washington to Nashville, and then back to Washington again.

01:28:06:00-01:29:10:00

Interviewer #1:

Those are the tickets that were lost. Later—

George Houser:

The tickets were, they disappeared, someplace, that's correct.

[inaudible background discussion]

Interviewer #2:

You let everyone know in advance that you were coming, too?

George Houser:

We did not advertise it to the police or to the bus companies or the train companies. Only to the places where we were going to stop, where we had speaking engagements, because at each place along the line, we were traveling to, say a particular campus where we would be speaking to the students who would be in an assembly. Or to a church group, or to a community group or to an NAACP group. They knew we were coming. The lawyers knew we were coming, they were prepared. We had our lawyers lined up on advance. It was pretty well-organized, I think. But you never know what's going to happen. And it's always a surprise [laughs].

01:29:11:00-01:32:13:00

Interviewer #1:

Were you, did you fear for your lives when you left? Did you think it was a possibility you'd be killed trying to do that?

George Houser:

Do you think that you're going to lose your life, you know, you don't know. And you don't assume that you will. I don't think we assumed it. On the other hand, we certainly thought we were going to be arrested at various points. We thought that there might be some violence that would take place. We did not assume in planning the trip, that there would be a loss of life, but we knew that it was a possibility. And of course, there were some real scary moments. Chapel Hill was a real scary one. And in that film, “You Don't Have to Ride Jim Crow” there's that, that all-night ride on the Greyhound from Asheville, North Carolina, to I think to Nashville, where Nathan Wright and Homer Jack were, I was on there, too. I wan on there, not to be in jeopardy, but to have the bail money. I was there. It was da-, dark. It was night. It was a virtually all-night trip. And as Nathan explains in that film, he could overhear the bus driver talking and thought very well there might be a lynch squad, down in the middle of the night in some small town, that would drag him and others off that bus. So there was the, there was the real possibility of wholesale violence taking place, certainly of arrests. But who knows what would happen? But I don't remember feeling, yeah we're, we're going to be killed. I've been on a lot of different projects, and I've never felt that way. But then you never know. So you feel expectant and a little nervous about it, but you do it because you

take one step at a time. I like that hymn, “Lead Kindly, Light”. It was Gandhi's favorite hymn. Which ends up that, you take, in effect, one step at a time. One step enough for me, is the theme of that. And I, I believe that. You plan something, and you pursue it, and you take one step at a time. You're not exactly sure what it's going to lead to. I guess there's a little bit of faith, of some sort, that enters into that.

01:32:14:00-01:33:36:00

Interviewer #1:

Are, are you pretty happy with where it's led, the work you've done, that you did, that Journey of Reconciliation, where it led?

Interviewer #2:

Now, yeah, just to look at the Journey itself, with the benefit of hindsight now, how does, how does it look after fifty years?

George Houser:

Well, I would say that the Journey of Reconciliation was a great experience. It didn't lead to wholesale action on interstate travel, at that point. It was the foundation for the Freedom Ride of 1961, which went all the way to New Orleans. It was, in effect, what we were planning originally, so it, it was the, that was the only experience that the group in 1961 had as a guide to what they were going to do at that time. So I think that it stands not as a monument in the civil rights movement, but a precursor of what happened later on, which I think CORE in its early days was. CORE at a later time became a mass movement.

01:33:37:00-01:35:33:00

Interviewer #2:

And do you think it's important that these early steps, do you think they're important just because they're successful, or either way, just the fact they're tried at a certain stage gets people ready to take the next step later on?

George Houser:

I think the fact that you try something is enough, and someone else will have to judge its effectiveness. And I wouldn't presume to say that what we did in CORE was responsible for Martin Luther King or what happened later, but I think we might've made it a little easier for that to happen, as a result of having had that experience. At least part of what we did was a basis for the up-thrust of the civil rights movement. We had, we had done it, what 1943, when we really got going, and that Montgomery bus boycott was 1955. So, there's twelve or thirteen years in there that, before something happened it the Deep South that had, was the, really beginning of the revolution. Ours was a kind of a precursor for all of that. And there's

satisfaction in that. I don't feel that it was something, you know, just greater, I wouldn't feel responsible for saying, we, we got it started. All I can say is that we were there, and we did something, and it was worthwhile in, in itself.

Interviewer #1:

We haven't talked about the American Committee on Africa—

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—and you said you would liken it to, did you you say you'd liken it to the begi—

[cut]

01:35:34:00-01:39:36:00

George Houser:

I did.

Interviewer #2:

Just talk a little bit—

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

—about how you changed that focus—

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

—it was maybe the same principles, but it was a real different—

George Houser:

It was a very natural development on this theme of one step at a time.

Interviewer:

Start over again. Say, moving on to dealing with African issues, 'cause they don't know what you're talking about.

George Houser:

Yes. My getting involved in African affairs was a very natural step which took place in 1952, because I heard from my good friend Bill Sutherland, who had been in London, and who had had some contact with a representative of the African National Congress of South Africa. Bill came back from that trip and talked with me and with Bayard, and, and said that the ANC in South Africa was planning a nonviolent civil disobedience campaign. I was Executive Secretary of CORE, 1952. By this time I was in New York. And, I wrote to Walter Sisulu who was the secretary general of the African National Congress at that time, and said, I understand you are having a campaign. We have done this sort of thing in this country. We would like to be supportive of what you are doing. This was a, an opening letter. He responded very quickly, and he said, we're so happy that your organization is in support. And he told us about it, and he asked us if we would be their representative in their campaign to give it publicity and that sort of thing. They called their campaign the Campaign To Defy Unjust Laws. I had correspondence then with other key people, like Manilal Gandhi, who was the son of Mahatma Gandhi, who was in South Africa at that time. And with a man by the name of Zed K. Matthews, Z.K. Matthews. I say "zed" when I'm dealing with [laughs] South Africa. He was a distinguished professor and he came to Union Theological Seminary in the year '52-'53 as a visiting professor from South Africa. I got very well acquainted with him. So I was in touch with various of these persons who were involved in the campaign in South Africa, against the apartheid laws there. We organized something in this country called Americans for South African Resistance, and our point was that we were going to publicize the campaign of the African National Congress, again in their defiance campaign, as they called it. And we would raise funds to be of assistance to those who were being arrested as a result of their participation in this campaign. This we did. And I was secretary of the Americans for South African Resistance. We put out a bulletin called the AFSAR Bulletin, Americans for South African Resistance Bulletin. We raised funds, we put on some demonstrations, we had a big meeting at Abyssinian Baptist Church, Adam Clayton Powell's church in Harlem, and we got a mailing list of quite a few people scattered around the country. One person, I remember one woman from Arizona sent us her diamond ring and said, this diamond probably came from South Africa. Sell it and use the funds to support the campaign. We had a lot of interesting things that, that happened. Well that campaign went on during 1952—

[cut]

[end of camera roll]

01:39:38:00-01:41:06:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

And rolling.

George Houser:

The defiance campaign in South Africa ended in early 1953. And by this time, the Americans for South African Rest-, Resistance had a mailing list and contributors from around the country. So we had a meeting to decide what shall we do. And we decided, let us set up an organization that is not related just to South Africa, but to all of the continent of Africa. It's all under colonial denom-, domination except for four countries. All of that struggle lies ahead. And our task is one of supporting the struggle of the people for freedom and independence. So we set up what we called the American Committee on Africa. And I decided that this is what I, I took a trip to Africa in 1954, which is a story in itself, and decided after I came back that I would really like to give a portion of my life to supporting that struggle, and became the Executive Secretary, the Executive Director, I guess they called it, of the American Committee on Africa. And we related from that point on, to those who were struggling for liberation and freedom. Now that put us in touch with the movements and organizations from Algeria all the way to South Africa, and points in between. It was an exciting period.

01:41:07:00-01:43:34:00

Interviewer:

And those groups were nonviolent and violent, or were you trying to develop a nonviolent atti-, approach?

George Houser:

We were not, our mission was not trying to make the groups with which we were in contact, into nonviolent missionaries. Our task was to support the, the struggle of freedom on the part of all of these groups, but the American Committee on Africa was not a pacifist organization. We had pacifists on it, and I was, but the mission of the ACOA, as we called it, was not one of supporting a violent struggle, but of supporting a struggle. And we did not supply guns and munitions to these groups. We organized, we really were responsible for organizing the campaign against investments in South Africa. Although we supported the campaign during Mau Mau in Kenya, we were in contact with the, the leaders of the movements, with Kwame Nkrumah, with Nnamdi Azikiwe, with Robert Mugabe, with Joshua Nkomo in Rhodesia. Of course with Sisulu, Mandela and all of them were in prison so much of the time, but with the Namibians, with Sam Nujoma now their president. Kenneth Kaunda in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. We were in touch with all of these people, and I was traveling once or twice a year to Africa. So I, I knew pretty much what was going on. We invited these top leaders to come over to this country and sent them on speaking tours across the country, so we were, and we had a program going in relation to Congress, we set up the Washington Office on

Africa, we had a research program going. We had a very broad program, all related to supporting the struggle for freedom. Lot of work at the United Nations.

Interviewer #1:

Is that organization still in existence?

George Houser:

Still in existence. Of course it's had to change its, the struggle has changed.

01:43:35:00-01:47:10:00

Interviewer #2:

George, one of the perceptions with the people that were pacifists certainly from World War Two, although it was broken down in the Vietnam War, was that pacifists are rigid and doctrinaire and only believe in pacifism, and can't work with anyone else, but obviously what you're talking about in terms of your African work is, is coalition work. How, how did pacifists fit into coalitions?

George Houser:

Well as far as, I can only speak for myself as far as coalitions are concerned. One thing leads to another, and if you are working in the struggle for liberation in Africa, you have to seek your allies who are supporting that objective. And we found them in the civil rights movement. We organized the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa, which was the major civil rights groups. The American Committee on Africa took the lead in organizing Martin Luther King, and the Urban League, the NAACP, Roy Wilkins, Jim Farmer and CORE, Dorothy Hite and the National Council of Negro Women. We or-, and we organized these people to give some attention to the struggle for freedom in Africa, because it's the same struggle as was taking place here. So we sought our allies where they were. That meant we had very good support from some of the trade unions like the UAW, working with Walter Reuther and Victor Reuther, when he was the head of their International Affairs Department in Washington, and was on the board of our committee, and student groups and church groups. We got the campaign started for ending investments in South Africa through a campaign geared to urge organizations and people, individuals, to withdraw their accounts from Chase Manhattan Bank and First National Citibank as it was called before Citibank, and a consortium of ten banks that were loaning funds on a revolving basis to South Africa, which I think was the beginning of what later became the major campaign in this country, pointed to South Africa against investments and trade with South Africa, because of the policies of apartheid there. We certainly got that campaign started. And of course, it gathered momentum as, particularly as the Vietnam War ended. And students were looking for something to do. And churches and trade unions looking for something to do. And I think we played a very important role in pointing to South Africa as a place that was vulnerable, because we were dealing with the majority of the people there, and also, it was dealing with

the whole problem of racism, which we were dealing with in this country. So it was a wedding of the kinds of problems we have in the United States together with the problems existing in Africa and particularly in Southern Africa. So our, our emphasis at a later period became primarily Southern Africa, as countries in Northern Africa became independent.

01:47:11:00-01:47:41:00

Interviewer #1:

So once again you were twenty years before your time in this one.

Interviewer #2:

At least.

Interviewer #1:

More, right?

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

You were doing American Committee on Africa in 1952—

Interviewer #2:

'52, that's thirty years.

George Houser:

'52

Interviewer #1:

And the anti-apartheid movement doesn't really blossom in this country until mid-70s, right?

Interviewer #2:

Well that's when it gets recognition.

Interviewer #1:

I mean really on a mass, as a mass movement—

George Houser:

It was, it was, that's correct, yes.

Interviewer #1:

So, we're talking, you have a longer lead time on your second, so you ...[laughs].

Interviewer #2:

I know, I don't want you to sound self-serving—

Interviewer #1:

Please do. [laughs]

01:47:42:00-01:49:29:00

Interviewer #2:

—but when you look back at your life and James Farmer's and Dave Dellinger and Steve Carey, your generation that, that took your first steps toward social justice in World War Two, do you think you had an effect, did you make a difference in America? Are we a different country because you were able to contribute in some way?

George Houser:

I wouldn't try to overemphasize what my effect has been—

Interviewer #2:

Well just, speaking for your—

George Houser:

—I can say that I have had a very interesting life, and I think that I've done some things that I'm very glad about. And, I would be happy to be involved again in this sort of thing. I, I lived at a time when there were some real problems that we found a way of dealing with. And I'm glad that through whatever influences, I had enough sense to see that one could deal with the problems that we found a way of dealing with. And I'm glad that through whatever influences, I had enough sense to see that one could deal with the problem of racism through nonviolent direct action. I'm, I'm glad that we were able to get CORE started. I'm glad to have played a part in that. And I'm very glad for the role which I was able to play in dealing with the, the, one of the important developments in the twentieth century, this whole struggle for freedom in Africa and elsewhere. And we, through the American Committee on Africa, I

think, played a part in that, and it was exciting, it was rewarding, it had its frustrations, but I'm glad to have played a part in it.

01:49:30:00-01:49:39:00

Interviewer #2:

Would you give us a tune?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, now—

George Houser:

[laughs] Oh it's—

Interviewer #1:

—[laughs] we're gonna make you play the harmonica.

George Houser:

[laughs] I don't know,

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, you may need to set up—

George Houser:

—I don't know what to play. [blows harmonica]

01:49:40:00

[cut]

Interviewer #1:

You're holding the mic. I was thinking, there's no mic—

Interviewer #2:

Go ahead.

Interviewer #1:

—hear you guys—

Interviewer #2:

Go ahead, George.

George Houser:

You, shall I play it?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, we're ready now.

George Houser:

[plays harmonica]

[unintelligible background discussion]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Talking you guys.

Interviewer #1:

Why are you talking?

Interviewer #2:

Because I don't like the shot. I'm saying his, his face is covered. Don't you think we could have him turn around?

[cuts]

01:50:11:00-01:52:44:00

George Houser:

[plays harmonica]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, I'm rolling.

Interviewer #2:

OK, go ahead, go ahead, George.

George Houser:

[plays harmonica]
[singing] And when you get on the bus, and when you get on the bus, get on the bus, sit any place, 'cause Irene Morgan won her case, you don't have to ride Jim Crow. [ends singing] [speaks] To no hidin' place down here.

Interviewer #1:

That's great. How 'bout—

Interviewer #2:

One more chorus? Yeah, one more chorus.

Interviewer #1:

How 'bout one more chorus?

George Houser:

[plays harmonica]

[applause]

Interviewer #1:

[laughs] That's great. One chorus of “Amazing Grace”?

Interviewer #2:

Could you give us a—

Interviewer #1:

A little bit of “Amazing Grace”.

George Houser:

[plays “Amazing Grace” on harmonica]

Interviewer #2:

Beautiful.

Interviewer #1:

Very nice. Nice r—

[cut]

George Houser:

[plays “Amazing Grace” on harmonica]

[applause]

Interviewer #1:

Very pretty, very nice. That's great, that's great. Any more?

[cut]

Interviewer #2:

Turn that way, OK?

George Houser:

Oh, you mean you're filming this?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, yeah.

George Houser:

I'm not, I don't know that I've ever played this.

Interviewer #2:

Oh, just—

Interviewer #1:

Do you know it?

[plays harmonica] No, I can't do it.

Interviewer #1:

No. It's not really—

[end of interview]

01:52:44:00