

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

MABEL WILLIAMS
AUGUST 20, 1999

CECELSKI: This is David Cecelski, Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This is another in the Listening for a Change series. It's August 10th 1999. I'm in Monroe, North Carolina. Today I'm interviewing Mrs. Mabel Williams.

I was just saying who I was and saying that I was interviewing Mabel Williams in Monroe, North Carolina. And maybe you'll see me looking down here some. And it's not because I'm distracted. I'm watching a little thing that measures, tells me the sound quality is coming through. I might just get a little closer to you.

And I warned you that we'll maybe start out with questions () elementary. But in other ways they're not. We were talking about my daughter and that generation that needs to hear about you and Robert. And if you were visiting a class of young people who wasn't familiar with the story. What would you tell them and where would you begin?

MW: Well, they don't know anything about—

DC: On the way in there yesterday their teacher told them that you and Robert were freedom riders and that they were going to be there to talk about that. But other than that all they've read is Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King.

MW: Yes, yes, yes. I think I would start by explaining to them what kind of a society I grew up in. Like I would tell them what I consider the story of Monroe. The fact that when I was—when I was in elementary and high school, the situation was that

could start here - I will hand into it

we had different communities. We had a black community and a white community. And I lived on one side of town and the white people lived on the other side of town.

I would tell them at that time that most of my activities were with—the vast majority of my activities were with—in my black community. I had a black minister. I had black schoolmates. And my affiliation, or my association, with whites was just very limited. And the association that I had with whites was that my parents were very protective and they taught us. They tried to teach us to protect ourselves because they were in constant fear that we would run afoul of the law or the white community and get killed.

DC: They didn't really mean—they weren't really worried about you committing crimes?

MW: No, no, no.

DC: Be a little more specific. What kind of boundaries were they afraid you would cross?

MW: I was always to say, "Yes, ma'am", "No, ma'am" to white people because at any time they may get angry and maybe slap me because I was being sassy. So I was told. We were in a society where there were rules for white people and rules for black people. And black people had to stay in their place.

And our parents tried to teach us a place to stay in to keep us from running into trouble with white people. When we would go into stores in the downtown area passing through the stores, we were always told, "Don't ever have your hands in your pockets." Or, "When you go in the store make sure you're going in there to buy something and have your money in your hand." And even if they—even if they would—some of the

people in the stores would say that you did something or give you the wrong change, we were not to argue with them because we could get ourselves into trouble and they didn't want us to get into trouble. So we were taught basically to just stay away from white folks because that's trouble for you. Just stay away from them, you know.

And so I would walk to school past the white school. The white school was about four blocks from my house. And I would walk all the way across town to the black school. And I would pass another elementary school on the way that I just walked right passed.

DC: Was that a white elementary school?

MW: A white elementary school. But it never occurred to me to go there because I knew that that was a white school and that I was not supposed to be there.

In our schools we had books. Most of the books that we had in our schools had the names of white children in them. Because what they would do in North Carolina, in Monroe, was when they would get new books for the white schools, they would give us the old books from-- And so, you know, you had to write your name in a book when you got it so that you were responsible for that book for the rest of the year. So very seldom did we ever get a brand new book. We got used books all the time that were--had already been used by the white school.

All our teachers were black. And they, too, tried to encourage us to stay in our places so that we didn't get in trouble with the white people both going and coming to school. And so we abided by that because those were the rules that we were accustomed to. But then not all black folks felt like that I found out later.

DC: Felt like--?

MW: Like we had a place and we had to stay in that place. Some black folks like my husband's family, I later learned, were kind of radical. And they didn't think that we were inferior at all. But I don't suppose that my parents thought that we were inferior but they were not about to assert themselves in any way that would make white folks think that they were equal either.

But there were other people who said, "Oh well, you know, yeah. We're just as good as anybody." And they didn't-- I suppose they didn't teach the kids on the--the other kids like my husband's family, they didn't teach them that you must be subservient. They never taught them to be subservient. And my parents taught me to be subservient to white folks.

But when I met Robert, I found out that not all black folks were subservient--had that attitude of being subservient to white folks. And that was a struggle for me to recognize that I had--that my so-called place was not just a colored place. It was--that I should have--I had as much right to have a place in the world as any other human being. And it was not easy for me to overcome the training that my parents had put into me, you know, and the society that had produced the kind of attitude that I had. Eventually, I did overcome that and I'm happy I did. But it was a hard struggle along the way to do that.

DC: It was something that was based on experience, too. What happened to people that stepped out of their place in Monroe when you were a girl? What were your mama and daddy afraid of? I don't mean as a child. I don't mean-- Moving past the eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve-year old. But what happens to--

MW: Oh well, there had been lots of incidents that you could-- You know, I'd hear the older people talking about--especially with the boys. The boys were really

pressed on not to look at even, look at, white girls because of the--. I heard about lynchings and things like that. I didn't hear of any specific lynchings in Monroe. But just sassy—what they call sassing white folks. I had uncles and aunts who had had run-ins with the police in Monroe, and—because they had sassied police that they--. One of my aunts, I think, one time got slapped when she was standing in a line to go into the movie. She got slapped by a policeman because she had sassied him, you know. So those kinds of things our parents taught us to be--.

And my father always kept his pearl handled pistol under his pillow. And we shot that pistol once a year at New Year's. And he'd even let us shoot it at New Year's. And it was my task to make up his bed. And I never—I would wonder why the pistol, you know. But he said there was always this danger that people would come into our home, come after you. That the white folks were going to come in there for some reason that they have found to get you. And so, that pistol was there for the protection of our home.

DC: So your father had a line, too. He wasn't completely--.

MW: That's right. He wasn't—

DC: I mean it might not have been out there where robbers—

MW: Right, right.

DC: But he had a line in the sand—

MW: That's right. Yeah. He was my stepfather and he worked at—he worked on the railroad. And he was definitely a person who was going to protect his home. But he always tried to teach us to not run afoul of any white folks if we could help it. And I don't know what the history of his family had been. They came out of Catawba, South Carolina, down in that area. And—

DC: Rough country?

MW: Yeah. And so—but anyway, he always—. He believed, my parents both believed, in education and they wanted us to get a good education. And they always wanted us to get a good education so that we could get a job, good job so that we wouldn't have to depend on white folks for a living. My mother was a domestic. She worked for the Belk family.

DC: The Belk family?

MW: The Belk family. In fact my name, Mabel, came from one of the Belk girls. Yes. So looking back on that I remember she was a domestic even before she worked for the Belk family. But my real father was a chauffeur for the Belk family and that's how the name came about when he was serving as a chauffeur for them.

DC: You're—you haven't forgiven—you haven't really—you haven't forgiven white Monroe for the way they were when you were a girl.

MW: I'm still working on trying to forgive Monroe for what they did to my family and to black people in general. And I don't think white Monroe has come to terms with what they did for—to black people. And what they did, you know, to us as individuals. But what they have done to black people over the years. I don't think they have come to terms with that.

DC: Would you mind talking about that a little bit? Aside from your family, Mabel, and what happens in '61 and before. But just to the extent to the people who you grew up and what that society did to black families, black children.

MW: Where do you start?

DC: Yeah.

MW: Where do you start?

[Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

DC: Another () I think it helps people appreciate the courage and to stand up to the () system particularly () those early, early years. () I thought that was a good instinct to talk about Monroe before then you would understand about, you know, about the ().

MW: Well, following the thing that-- In our community, we had a tight-knit community. And I was perfectly happy to be with my people. And that's why I can understand from some standpoint, you're a product of your own upbringing. And I didn't have any desire to be integrated into another society because I was perfectly happy with my black ministers, my black teachers, my black friends. And I was satisfied there. And I didn't know, or didn't feel the hurt of the limitations that we were on. I could see that my mother was working for pittance. And there are a lot of things that we didn't have.

DC: For one of the richest families in the state.

MW: Right, right. But we were—she made our home life so pleasant, so wonderful, that I wasn't able to see how—the hurt that she was feeling, except that I could hear it in her voice. And I could hear it when they were discussing—when the adults would be discussing what was going on or what had happened.

Let me tell you an incident. She was working for—before she worked for the Belk family she was working for a family—. I remember the name. It was a—his name was Turner Stevens. And he worked for the hardware company.

And I heard my mother relate a story that happened at—while she was on the job. She was telling my daddy what happened that day. And she said, "You know today, Mr.

Stevens had some of his grandkids visiting. And I was serving dinner and one of the grandkids looked at me and looked at a little dog that Mr. Stevens had. And said to Mr. Stevens while looking at me, 'Uncle Turner, is Nippy's name really Nippy nigger?'" It was a little black dog. And my mother said, "I couldn't help but speak up." And I said, "No. His name is not Nippy nigger. It's Nippy Stevens." And said, the little boy got upset and said, "Uncle Turner, is it really Nippy Stevens?" And she said that Mr. Stevens said to him, "Yes, it is. Now shut-up and eat your dinner." But she said it made her know he was teaching that child hatred of black people. And had—when she was not there they called the dog Nippy nigger rather than Nippy, you know. And so those kinds of things made me know that there was hurt. She was being hurt from the society the way it was going.

Well, I had a younger brother who died with tuberculosis at the age of—he was six. No. He was nine and I was six. And while my mother was working for the Stevens, I had been diagnosed as having anemia, being anemic and so we had to have milk every day. Well the milkman did not come to the black community. And so my mother would have milk delivered to the Stevens' house and she would bring it home. And on occasion, on the weekends, I would have to go walk to the Steven's house to pick up the milk and bring it back home, you know.

So those kinds of things, you know, the society was just so structured that it was just racist to the core. And there were hurtful things that were happening all the time. And I could hear my father and some of his friends discussing racial incidents, but not necessarily all that was going on. But they were talking about how they would be insulted and how white men on the railroad would talk about black women in front on

them and things like that. And that they—there was a lot of things that they just had to swallow in order to keep their jobs. And then they would really be proud when somebody would stand up even if they would have to go to jail and get beaten up. They would be proud of the fact that well at least he, you know, he resisted what was going on.

But I don't think that the white society—they didn't look on us as human beings. They just did not feel that we were people who had to be considered. We were just servants and kind of nuisance people in the community, I guess.

But going through high school and elementary school, I had teachers who were very dedicated black teachers. And there was one man who was a member of our church. He was a professor. Had a little college started. His name was Baxter Perry. And Mr. Perry was—he was very much a, I guess you would call him a Booker T. Washington type. He wanted us to—he encouraged all of the young black people to excel in education. And he believed in education. And he tried to instill in us a pride in being who we were as black people and the fact that we had a history. And to try to get away from the slave mentality that we had a heritage from, the slavery.

And once a year we got to study black history, you know, once a year—Negro History Week at school. And we would learn about Booker T. Washington and people like that. But Dr. Perry would tell us about people like Nat Turner [laughs]—. And Nat Turner—right--and those people: Frederick Douglas and Sojourner Truth and people like that. But it was done in a way--. He was always--. The white people call him that crazy Baxter Perry. And some of the black people, too, were afraid to associate with Baxter Perry because he was—he was teaching us about the rebels within our race who would not accept being less than a human being in the society.

DC: He was a teacher at the school or--?

MW: No, he was not. He had--. I don't remember when--. I remember he had a bus that he used to pick up people to take to our Sunday school classes at the Elizabeth Baptist Church. I remember people saying that he had taught at a college and tried to start a little college in Monroe. So I don't know.

DC: So when he was doing these things, was it part of Sunday school or was it--?

MW: Yeah. He would do that as a part of Sunday school. Yeah. [Laughs] And it would be interesting to go back and see what Baxter Perry—what other, you know, see about where his college was and all that. That just happened to come to mind as we were talking. But then I guess from that—looking at my early childhood from that point of view. And then getting married to Robert Williams and coming into his family, being united with his family-- When Robert and I first got married I got a job working at the Ellen Fitzgerald Hospital.

DC: The black—or, no—

MW: It was a hospital where black people were in the basement, admitted to the basement of the hospital. And white people were on the upper level. I learned a lot there. I learned a lot about this society there because I worked there in different capacities. I worked there as a nurse's aide. And I worked there a maid. And I worked there as a cook. And I learned a lot about the hurtfulness of the segregation system at that time.

In the basement of Ellen Fitzgerald Hospital, the floors were cement. The plumbing that took care of the hospital was exposed over the patient rooms. And the

babies were placed in a utility room. Newborn babies were placed in a utility room where we had to empty the bedpans, and wash them out and sterilize the needles. And I can see it this day. They had a couple of bassinets they would put in there, in the utility room.

DC: And even at that time you did not just say—you know (). Well, this is—it was accepted as just part of the general, second class racist society. Even then you were--?

MW: I was accepting to it because I was very grateful to have a job at that time. However, I began to see the differences that I had not seen before because as a maid I had to go on all floors of the hospital for cleaning.

And when I went on the-- I don't remember if it was the second or the third floor. And I went into the-- No. I wasn't allowed into the nursery itself. But there was a nursery there with nurses working inside the nursery with masks on. And the babies were put in the nursery and then taken out of the nursery by a nurse, and taken to the mothers when they were, you know, after the babies were born.

While on the basement floor, the babies were taken away from the mothers by nurses or nurse's aides. They even allowed us to do that. And they were taken into the utility room where we washed out the bedpans and emptied the bedpans into the utility room. And as a maid I began to see that. And that was just horrible. I remember—

DC: Pretty hard to forget.

MW: Yeah, yeah.

DC: ()

MW: Yeah. We're talking about little children who are being exposed to germs that could be life threatening. The needles that were being—we put in this autoclave or whatever it was called, to sterilize. We'd take them in there after the doctors or nurses had used them. We'd take them into this utility room to sterilize them. Well that's where the babies were. The bedpans with the waste matter we'd take into the utility room and that's where our blacks babies were in that utility room. So that became one of the most hurtful things that I encountered.

DC: And you had a baby at that time, didn't you?

MW: No. I was expecting a baby. I was expecting a child.

DC: And you were thinking—?

MW: Yes, yes. My children were born at home, thank God, with black doctors.

At the time, if I remember correctly, I don't know if they didn't allow black doctors in the hospital or that the black doctor—we only had one black doctor at the time. And that was Dr. Creft—or that he just didn't go in the hospital.

Before that hospital was abandoned, he did go there. And Dr. Perry did go there. Dr. Perry who became one of our civil rights fighters, did go in that basement and did work with those patients in that hospital. But they never—that society never did change that—the position of black people in that hospital. When that hospital was—as far as I know—when that hospital was—. When I left that hospital it was still that way. Black people could only be in the basement.

And one of the white surgeons down there, Dr. Fulk—. Most of our people thought that, oh, he was the greatest thing since God. He was a good doctor. Everybody said he was a great doctor, a great surgeon. But I remember hearing some white nurses

talking one day. And they said that Dr. Fulk said he'd just as soon work on a dog as to work on a nigger. And that was hurtful. That was very hurtful.

And the white doctors who maintained offices in Monroe had separate waiting rooms, of course, for black people. And when we went to—had to have a doctor, if we didn't go to a black doctor, and went to a white doctor, we had to go in separate waiting rooms. And they would wait until they had waited on all their white customers, patients, before they would wait on us. So that was another way of seeing that something's wrong here, you know.

And I—that began to—it was just so hurtful to see what was happening to our people. They allowed nurses aides and maids in the Ellen Fitzgerald Hospital waiting on the black people there to do injections, and all kinds of things that when I was on the white floor only, I found, only licensed nurses could do.

DC: It didn't matter downstairs?

MW: It didn't matter downstairs. And to this day I feel that that was a form of genocide. I feel that that was a form of genocide that they were actually using to curb our population or to—. Because they just didn't care. They just didn't care. And I'm not so sure that that mentality is not still there because I still don't get the feeling that they're caring about what happens to us anymore.

DC: It's a very deep-rooted thing.

MW: Yes. And, it's very hurtful.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

DC: The reason that you—

MW: One of the reasons that I feel such—not a hatred, a dislike for Monroe as a place. But I know it's not just Monroe as a place. I realize that intellectually, but coming back to Monroe and reliving some of those incidents and knowing what happened—

DC: Passing places that—

MW: Yes.

DC: ()

MW: Other people just look at it and pass by and maybe think no more about it. I remember the incident when my mother was working for the Belk family. And she had been working for the family—I guess she'd been working for the family—I don't know how many years.

But there was one daughter in the family and her name was Sarah. And I used to love to go to the Belk home. And Sarah would give me toys and she'd go in—. She had dollhouses with all this little miniature furniture in it, and stuff, you know. And she would go in and—everybody called me Little Miss Mabel, including her, Little Miss Mabel, you know. And she would go in her dollhouse and give me stuff: little chairs and little miniature stuff. And sometimes her mother would come in and say, "Well now, you've given Miss Mabel enough now. That's enough. Don't give her anymore. That's fine." [Laughs]

But Sarah became—. I guess when Sarah turned thirteen or twelve or thirteen, I remember my mother coming home from work one day and she said, said, "Well, Miss Mabel, today told me off." We said, "Told you off how, you know what?" She told me now that Sarah has become thirteen years old I have to call her Miss Sarah. And she said, and "I wanted to say to her, is she going to call me Mrs. Barber?" That was my mother's

married name. But my mother was crying that day. And that was something. That hurt my heart.

And I remember another time she came home from work. And she said that Miss Mabel had gone out of town. But she had me to go shopping and buy, I forget how many pounds of bacon. And told me, "Now, Emma you feed the dog every day." And the dog was to have bacon and eggs every day for breakfast, which that was what they fed him anyway. And indicated to her not outright, but almost accusing her or letting her know that she was not to take the bacon home to us. But she was to feed the dog the bacon and the eggs. And that's what she bought it for and that's what she wanted her to do. And I remember my mother telling dad. And feeling hurt that she would think that she would take the bacon and the eggs home even though we didn't have bacon and eggs everyday for breakfast, you know.

So, even though they were good to us in a way that-- Well, one, they gave my mother a job. Her father had bought my mother and father a house to live in when my real father was alive. And every year she would buy an outfit for me for school, to go to school. And those were some of the positive things that they did for us.

But my father worked for her for—I think—. I was talking to Gwen today about a living wage. He worked for her for a wage. I don't know if it was a living wage or not. He could not—if he had had a living wage, he would have been able to provide those things for his family himself. And my mother the same thing. If she had had a living wage when she was working for them, she wouldn't have had to depend on them to give us second-hand clothes, and even buy clothes for us from the store, if they had been.

DC: Did your daddy work for the Belks, too?

MW: My father who passed away when I was not two years old. Yeah. But then my stepfather worked for the railroad, yeah. So we were able to-- We had a better economic situation once we were with my father who worked for the railroad. But, at the same time, because my mother came into the marriage with three children, she felt an obligation to help to support the family. And so she continued to work the whole time.

DC: () in your place () within limits. I mean, I'm sure that many people considered him very lucky.

MW: Oh, yes, yes. And when I'd go to the Belk store even the white sales people would refer to me as Little Miss Mabel rather than Mabel because they didn't want to disrespect the Belk family. And she would take me herself to the store to buy the things. And I was privileged to have that connection with her that she was going to give me that stuff. But then I would get teased from the kids at school because of it, you know. [Laughs] "Yeah, Little Miss Mabel, Little Miss Mabel." But, anyway-- So I had some mixed memories, mixed emotions about all of that connection. And I realize now that we still were not looked at as deserving human beings, you know.

So, then coming out of that environment and marrying Rob, and he's determined. He's been off to the Army and back. And he has encountered all kinds of discrimination in the Army. And discrimination was everywhere. And he was trying to get work and ran into all kinds of discrimination because of that.

He was intellectually, I would say he was an intellectual superior to a whole lot of these people in Monroe. He wrote letters to the newspapers. He wrote poetry.

DC: At () absolutely in a grasping kind of mind. Always wanting to learn and--

MW: Yes. He read constantly. He was constantly-- We had a library of books. And a lot of times when we had very little money a part of that money was spent for buying another book, you know, because he really had an inquiring mind. And trying hard to understand what was going on.

And I think Robert had a basic-- He had a basic belief that once people got to know each other and accepted each other on—accepted each other's—our differences and our likenesses, and understanding that we were all human beings. He had a basic belief that people would come around that that we could live in peace and harmony, you know. He even thought that the government was going to come in our side.

From the time I married him until the time that we returned from China, I believe that he had a basic belief that there had to be good people in this government that were going to stand up for what was right because he always wanted to stand up for the right thing. And he felt like other people would join in, good people. And because Monroe did not join in—

DC: They just weren't with it.

MW: They just were not-- And they didn't believe like that. They didn't really believe that way. They didn't really believe that the government should be a government of, for all the people. And I thought—I don't know if they believe that now or not—that the government should be representative of all people and should look out for the best interests of all people.

And that is something that when I'm talking to young people I say, "If the Klan had known what a great education we would have gotten, they would never have run us out of Monroe." [Laughs] You know, the Klan backing up the Monroe officials and the

FBI coming in backing up the Klan and the Monroe officials. But it was a bad thing that turned into a good thing. Because getting out of Monroe and having dealings with people from all over the world, we were able to open up our minds and grow as individuals and grow to know, to really know, that there is a fatherhood of God and a brotherhood of man. That's the only way I know how to put it. And if you really believe in that, and you have to chose sides.

There are forces out here that are forces for good and there are forces out here for evil. And there comes a time in your life when you have to make a choice. And once you make that choice and you choose the side of good, then it just opens up a whole new world for you. You can be tolerant of people's prejudices because you understand that they're coming from, you know, where they're coming from. That that's what made them that way. But then you can appeal to their better side and hope and pray that they will choose as well to support the good forces in this world. And become a part of this big family that I feel that we're--.

Those of us who have chosen the side of good are really a big family. And we are a world family. And there's no racism in that family. There are races in that family. And there are people who prefer to be with their people and that's fine. But there is a respect for each other, and a respect for each other's beliefs. And so, anyway, that's going way beyond where—

DC: Way beyond Monroe.

MW: Yes.

DC: That's not what you found in—

MW: That's not what I found in Monroe. And I haven't seen that seed of good developing. It may be here. And I hope to God one day I'll find it and look at those people and say, "Here is the seed that is developing and growing in Monroe that is a part of the human family that realizes that we are all brothers and sisters in the final analysis. And we're all—"

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START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

DC: There'd be a little statue of Robert and you up at the courthouse and probably in the museum at the center for tolerance and struggle. I see a lot of signs about Williams Memorial.

MW: Well, we--. It doesn't have to be—it really doesn't have to be a Robert Williams Memorial. It doesn't have to be but the seeds that he planted in my mind, in my family's mind, in a lot of people. I think those seeds have to be nourished and hopefully, eventually, there will be some young white Monroviaans who will catch that seed, nurture that seed and let it grow in Monroe. And then we can feel—I can feel better about Monroe. I haven't seen that yet. And I really hope and pray that it will come in my lifetime.

DC: Yeah. I was going to get to this later. But we can go back to it. But that is something that interests me is how you think in looking back on everything that you and Robert, too, would want his legacy to be—y'all's legacy to be remembered. And not those in Monroe, but beyond, too.

MW: Yes, beyond Monroe. I—

DC: What's the images of kind of Robert and y'all that are—but people don't talk as much about kind of the meanings of a life.

MW: What did it all mean and what was the struggle all about. And the fact that, you know, people like to blow up the fact that Robert was a violent man or believed in violence.

DC: That's right. He makes a great poster, you know what I mean. I'm not against that.

MW: And that was a part of what happened. It wasn't that he was—. He was not a non-violent person. Well, no, he was a non-violent person. He didn't believe in doing violence himself to others other than in defense of his own. And I think that his stance on violence—violence self-defense. Let me put it that way. I think his stance on violent self-defense did more for the civil rights movement than people want to believe. Because once those evil people out there found that they couldn't do violence and be immune to violence then they didn't do as much violence as they did when they knew they were doing it with immunity. And that nobody was going to prosecute them or—. They weren't going to have to pay any price if they killed. There used to be a saying, "kill a nigger, buy another one", you know, during slavery times. You kill a nigger, you buy another one, you know. And—but when they found out you killed a nigger, you're going to have to maybe somebody—a nigger'll kill you.

DC: Or burn your tobacco barn.

MW: That's right. So I think that that part of Rob's stance in saying, "Just this far and no further", played a big role in letting not only the racist bigots in the local area know that they had to make changes. But let the power structure know that they had to

really move to do some protection or else the country would suffer for it, and fall apart.

So—

DC: () the black community. And the example that Robert () set. And that also affected ()—

MW: Yes.

DC: --particularly (). Could you talk () other with that ().

MW: Here in Monroe or all over? I think it--

DC: Maybe both.

MW: Yeah. I think it affected the black community all over because at last it made them see that, "Well, no, we don't need to accept this lying down and doing nothing. We need to stand up and when we stand up and say, 'no,' we have a greater impact."

If we look at—. This is a story that Robert liked to tell all the time. You go by a school and it's a Martin Luther King school. And a little black child says to his mother, "Mama, who is a Martin Luther King?" The mother replies, "Martin Luther King was a civil rights man. He was a great leader of the black people. He loved his people. And he led them in a non-violent fight, struggle. And as a result of that now we have integration and blah, blah, we." And he said, "Well, oh, what happened to Martin Luther King?" "Well, he was killed." "Why was he killed?" "He was killed because he loved his people and struggled for his people" etceteras, etceteras, etceteras. Okay.

Go down the road and here's a Medger Evers University. Same scenario. "Well, mama who was Medger Evers?" And she explains who Medger Evers was. "Well, what happened to him?" "He was killed because he struggled for his people. He loved his

people. And the racists killed him. They killed him." Malcolm X. "Well, mama this is Malcolm X Boulevard. Who is Malcolm X?" Same story. "He loved his people. He struggled for his people. And he was killed."

And the message that that is giving to young people, young black people, is if you love your people and you struggle to raise their level you will be killed. So what young person is going to want to become a Malcolm X, a Martin Luther King or Medger Evers or any of those martyrs that-- Now we've got Martin Luther King holiday, you know.

DC: ()

MW: Who's going to want to pattern themselves after those people? Not anybody. No--. And now you look out there. Who's leading? Who's leading, you know. What kind of leadership do you have? Who wants to step in those footsteps? Nobody. But then you've got a Robert F. Williams who—as he liked to say, "Went home to Mt. Vernon" [laughter] "and lived out his days as a gentleman." Well, like the president went home to Mt. Vernon and lived out his days as a gentleman.

DC: Surrounded by his family.

MW: Yes. Surrounded by his family and loved ones, and so forth and so on.

DC: Had a long life.

MW: Had a long life, long fruitful life. Loved his people, struggled for people, fought for his people not only nationally, not only in North Carolina. Not only in Monroe, let's say, not only in North Carolina. Not only in the United States, but all over the world. Went all over the world and continued to struggle for his people and then went home to become a gentleman farmer, you know.

So hey, maybe, maybe this is the kind—. That's the kind of example that should be out there in front of, not only black children, but white children as well. Hey, if you take the side of the people and you struggle for the best interests of the people—

DC: The side of good.

MW: And the side of good. And hook your self to that star. Then your life is worthwhile. And that's the legacy that I would like to see for the Robert F. Williams' story. That's the legacy that I'd like to see.

DC: And it goes beyond, I mean, you're right. It goes way beyond like the gun thing.

MW: Yes, way beyond that.

DC: Because it's a--. That, I mean, guns to capture a young person's imagination.

MW: Yes, yes, yes.

DC: In a way that having a milkshake poured in your head at a lunch counter does not.

MW: Right. Of course.

DC: But it's something else, don't you think when a child hears about Robert standing up for himself in this way or any of the other people that you think of () who are () the--. You know people like George Washington--. It's (). It's not necessarily just that--. It's not that they're--. That they're willing to use violence.

MW: Yes.

DC: But one sees something more behind that. And what do you think someone's going to see? What was behind the shotgun? What kind of—what would be good to see in Robert?

MW: I think they would see a person who really knows that one person can make a difference. One person standing up can definitely make a difference. In not only his life but in the lives of other people. And that that one person--.

Rob believed ~~that we all had that responsibility. That everybody's born for~~ something. Everybody is here for a purpose. And that we--. Some people live their lives and they just eat, and sleep and die and never do anything. They don't have any causes. They don't have any purpose. And they think that there is no purpose. Maybe the purpose is just to get money, have a good time, play.

DC: They certainly don't have anything that they're willing to die for.

MW: Nothing that they're willing to die for. But you should have something that you're willing to die for that gives you a reason to live.

DC: That's a nice way to put it.

MW: And I think that that was the legacy, one of the legacies that he left. And I remember one newspaper article during the time that Robert had said about self-defense.

One newspaper article came out and said that he was advocating the indiscriminate killing of white babies in their cribs. Now you know that was horrible. Making people think that this man--. Here's a crazy man out here who is trying to get all the white folks killed. That was just to mobilize white folks against him. And against what was going on that was really the right thing in the society to be happening at the time. So—

DC: Where did he get that kind of--?

MW: I think it was passed down through his grandmother, his grandfather and all the way down from slavery. His grandmother came out of slavery literate, knowing how to read and write. Having been the offspring of a white slave master and a black slave. His grandfather came out of slavery knowing how to read and write. And determined to teach their children that they were as good as anybody on this earth. And that they should stand up for what was right and good. } And I think that's another thing that the white south, and white Monroe especially, has not lived up to.

I remember I was talking to Robert's brother right before I came here. He still lives in Detroit and he's eight^y years old. And he remembers going into Sechrest Drug Store in Monroe, and one of the clerks coming up to his daddy. He was a little boy with his daddy. And the clerk came up to his daddy and said, "John you know we're cousins." This white clerk said to Robert's father, "John, you know we're cousins. But don't tell anybody," you know. So my eighty-year old brother-in-law remembers that to this day. But those family members, family members would never accept the fact that—like I said—we're all one family even though we're black and white.

DC: They don't want to treat people like family.

MW: They don't want to treat people like family. And they refuse to acknowledge the fact that they're family because we're so different because we have that one bit of black blood, you know, that makes us black.

DC: Right. So you think--. Robert had this way back and his grandmother, I understand, was his special—

1 MW: Oh yeah, was his special person that he loved and taught him about world events and got him interested in reading newspapers early on. And, yeah, she was a very-- And handed him a rifle that his grandfather had used way back, and a musket-loaded rifle, which I still have.

DC: Do you?

MW: Yes, yes.

DC: That's ().

MW: Yes. So his brother also told me that his grandmother looked white. And he said one day a white insurance man came by and said to his grandmother, "Are you the only white family in this nigger neighborhood?" And said she looked at him and said, "Don't you ever say that to me again. I am not white. I am black. And this is not a nigger neighborhood. This is a black neighborhood." [Laughs]

DC: Good for her. Lucky he didn't get shot.

MW: Yes. He's lucky he didn't get shot. I remember reading some report when one of Robert's aunts was visited by the FBI. And he wrote that she was more—she was worse than Robert after Robert had left Monroe. She said, "Well this is a no-good town." And she should've burned the damn town down. That was one of the direct descendants of this grandmother, her daughter, who made that-- Aunt Cora. She was really a wonderful person, too.

☆ 1 But, yeah, he got-- He had a tradition of struggle and of anger at the society for refusing to recognize people as people. And I think that's-- Robert didn't like to talk about it. His older brother John would talk about it. But Robert didn't like to talk about that connection. So he wouldn't talk about it very much. But his older brother would.

DC: I wonder why not? ()

MW: I told him that he wanted to deny that portion of his—that German stubborn portion of his heritage. And he would only claim the black portion [laughs] because they denied him. I think that's the reason why. And he didn't like that part of it.

But, you know, that's a reality that we face. That is a reality when you start to go back and research and find-- I don't remember which president said it was the most inhumane form of slavery he'd ever seen because people were selling their own sons and daughters into slavery. And the south knew that they were doing that. They knew that they-- They knew and they have never faced up to that fact. They have never faced up. Monroe has never faced up to the fact.

DC: Everybody (). You have to have a humane society because we're all kin.

MW: Yes.

DC: And, of course, how we treat our kin as well. I mean that's-- You're not southern if you don't, I mean, ().

MW: Yeah, yeah. I—one of the presidents now, one of the old presidents they have found that—

DC: Jefferson.

MW: It's Jefferson that has these two descendants that they did the DNA and found out. Oh yeah. But they said they still won't allow them to be a part of the home place. They can come to the reunion but they still-- So it's not just a Monroe thing.

DC: Apparently they're starting to look at Washington now.

MW: Yes.

DC: Now they can do this DNA thing to answer questions about George Washington as well.

MW: Yes, yes, yes. So [laughs].

DC: No surprise.

MW: No surprise, no surprise. So—but that does not negate the fact that there still has to be ongoing struggle. There still has to be ongoing struggle in order to overcome all of the evils of the past.

And I think because our capitalist society at this stage is so—. We have so engaged all of our people, black and white and all, into materialism that it is becoming more and more difficult to have any meaningful human struggles, social struggles that tie people together—that tie people together. And it gets back to those people who have opted for the good teaching their own—their young people that we have something beyond stuff and things. There's something important in this world that is more important than gathering toys and stuff and things. And there's a human element out here that we need to be concerned with. And I'm hopeful that that is going to happen. I'm hopeful that that is going to happen.

DC: ()

MW: Yes, yes, yes. But I'm—

DC: () Monroe and I can see you wouldn't have got where you are without () that you seem to have. () exactly what's in front of your eyes () further vision or something.

MW: Yes. And one of the things for me personally is that I think this whole experience of my life has taught me that where we are in the world today there is no set

solution out there. That the—there's no ism that's going to do it. It is not coming out of any political, specific political force that's out there right now. It's something that's going to come out of something that we don't even have control over. But we know that once we identify with it that it's going to come. And I think it has to do with spiritual. We're in kind of a spiritual warfare. And I think that that's where the solution is coming from.

I'm wondering if our country, our beloved country, this time is on the edge of the Roman—where the Roman Empire was before it went plummeting down. A lot of people don't like to think about that, you know. But everything lives—everything born lives and dies, right? And we would be blind if we didn't know that societies do the same thing.

But then we have to have a belief and a hope that a society will be developed that can be better. We haven't seen the best of what this society has to offer this world. I hope not. I'm sure, I'm sure not. We haven't seen the best.

DC: () you feel like with especially the end of the Cold War and everything, all of a sudden (), you know, it's like, okay, we're here. And all of a sudden everyone's starting to look inward like you said. Most at a national level. It's like well, all those years () was to beat the Soviets. And now they have this huge empire ().

MW: Right.

DC: And we're looking ().

MW: Not much there. All they're doing is grasping and grasping and grasping.

DC: ()

MW: Yeah, terrible wrong.

DC: ()

MW: No.

DC: ()

MW: And people have to, like I said, they have to make a choice, you know. Do they want to be a part of the mean-spirited evil forces that are going on? Or do they want to be a part of the solution, you know. It's like the civil rights song, "What Side Are You On?" Hey, come on.

DC: You want to take a little break?

MW: Yes, please.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

DC: When is the first moment—we've talked about what Monroe was like.

MW: Yes.

DC: We've talked about the way black people were kept in their place. What were the first signs the first time there were chinks in the wall? When was the first time you saw a black person stand up to Monroe? Stand up and not end up in jail or worse.

MW: Right, right, right. Hmm.

DC: Was Robert the first or were there things before Robert that you remember?

MW: I was trying to think if there were any incidents before Robert. Robert was such a major part of my life that it's very difficult to think of life before Robert. But—

DC: You were just a young thing.

MW: Right, right. Nothing comes to mind right away.

DC: Okay.

MW: I remember after Robert and I got married. And one thing that brought the realization to me that this, you know, I was in a different situation was when Robert was writing letters to the editor. And I don't remember what the first letters were about.

But I remember Robert's father-- Well, first of all, Robert's father telling me in front of Robert, said, "You know that man thinks he ought to be president—he ought to be president of the United States." That he should be president of the United States. And he was talking about his son, Robert, you know. And Robert chimed up and said, "Well, why shouldn't I be? I'm a man just like they are." You know. "So, yeah, I think I'm good enough to be president of the United States." Well—

DC: Yeah.

MW: That was something. My father called me one day and said—when we were visiting he said—"You need to tell Robert to stop calling these people billy goats." And I said, "What are you talking about?" Somebody had told him that Robert wrote in the paper that these Monroe white folks were billy goats. And I couldn't understand what it was he was talking about. He said, "They are bigots." [Laughter]

But my father was really afraid that Rob—he said, "That boy's going to get in serious trouble calling these folks billy goats and going on." [Laughs] Which billy goat was an apt term for them because they were—

DC: Oh, I like that. I like that.

MW: But his rejection of the way people were treating him and his coming home and talking about it. Because he was out there trying to get employment, trying to

get his G. I. bill thing together, trying-- And he was running into all kinds of problems and he would come home and talk about it. And tell me what was going on, you know.

And the things that he had faced during the day whether it be at the veterans' place where he was trying to get his veterans' allotment. Or, I think they call it a 52/20 or something like that that you get twenty dollars for fifty-two or fifty-six weeks, something like that, 56/20. And so he'd come home and tell us about the problems he was encountering.

But, in the meantime, he was still writing letters to the editor and complaining about just simple things: stories he would read in the newspaper of something happening, and just complaining in general about the plight of black folks.

DC: What did he—what did Robert look like?

MW: What did he look like? [Laughs]

DC: That's a hard question to ask of you.

MW: Oh, yes.

DC: In ().

MW: He was a very handsome, tall dashing young man. To me he was very handsome and he was—

DC: A little bit older than you.

MW: Yes, he was-- In fact he was, what, seven years older than me. He and my sister, and his best buddy were all classmates. My sister was seven years older than me. That was my brother, between my sister and me—the brother that I told you died of tuberculosis—and-- But my sister and I were great friends even though she was seven years older than I. And I spent lots of time at her place.

1 So that's how Robert and I got together. She had married Robert's best friend who was Kenneth Redford. So when Robert came home from the military and he was there, in and out a lot. And I was there and in and out a lot. That's how we got together, yeah. [Laughs]

DC: And how did he carry himself at that time in his life because it was more than looks, right?

MW: Yes, yes, yes.

DC: () What was his physical presence ()?

✱ MW: He was just—he was just an outstanding—. He stood out in a crowd. He was very proud and self-assured, you know, and muscular.

DC: ()

MW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DC: Would some people call him haughty () that he kind of crossed the line?

✱ MW: No, I don't think anybody called him haughty. But he was a little standoffish because he rejected a lot of the social norms that even the black people had, especially black middle-class people who thought that because they had an education that they were a little better than some of the regular working people.

And he took pride in debating them and pulling them down, and you know, letting them know that, you know, if you didn't have your degree, you couldn't prove to me that you—[laughs]—you know, that you had one if you didn't show it to me. There's no way I would know it from your intellect, you know.

✱ But he was not haughty. He was not haughty. But he was bashful. Robert was—. And people find that hard to believe. He was very shy. Shy, kind of, you know. He

didn't shy—he wasn't shy in—. I don't know. He was just shy. [Laughs] I don't know
how to describe that. He gave the presence of being very strong. But he was more, I
guess, more of an introvert. He was a private person. He didn't easily mix into a crowd.
He wasn't a loud person. He wasn't a social mixer, so to speak.

DC: I wondered about that because (), you know, because they're so () but in
 a sense the () and even now in society that someone who writes poetry is usually the
 most masculine () sort of inwardness that might be there.

MW: Yeah. He was very private in a way. In his own way. He was a very
private person. And really shied away from a lot of social interaction. Loved classical
music, listened to it all the time when he was writing, or even reading or studying.

DC: ()

MW: Yeah, yeah. And, well, he loved all kinds of music, but that was—. He
 would listen to classical music when he was real young. And during the first years of our
 marriage he was that way. He was very much family oriented. He was very close to his
family. But he was not a social, real, real sociable person at the time when we first
married.

DC: What did he do to blow off steam, to recreate or did he? ()

MW: He was not a very sports-minded person, so he did not engage in sports. I
 guess he was a self-entertaining person, more intellectual than physical. He liked to go
hang out with the boys and talk.

DC: ()

MW: At the barbershop—


DC: The VFW or anything like that?

MW: Yeah, little places like that, um-hmm. Get together with his friends and—

DC: He seems to have almost like a philosophical () after that. ()

MW: I think so. I think so. I think he started developing his philosophical outlook very early. Well before I knew him. And kind of, I guess, measured everything by that point of view, you know, the philosophy that he had already developed in his own mind.

DC: You thought he was sweet.



MW: Oh yes, handsome, good-looking, sweet, loving. Oh yes. I fell madly in love with him. And, of course, my mother was terrible upset and my father, too, because I was a high school student and they wanted me to finish school and go to college. My sister had finished Spellman College, and was already out and had a job teaching. And so that was supposed to be my next move. I was supposed to follow in her footsteps, you know, and do that. But when I fell in love with Robert that was out the window ~~for a~~ while.

DC: What () there was nothing—they didn't have anything against Robert or did they--?

MW: No. They didn't have anything against him personally except they thought he was too old for me. And that they didn't want—they felt like I was throwing my life away to give up everything for him, you know.

And eventually quit school and got married. And, well I did go back. And he always encouraged me to continue my education. He used to laugh about the fact—he'd said, "I raised Mabel", you know.

And his Uncle Charlie was—had been a teacher. And it seems that Uncle Charlie had married one of his students and, also, sent her back to school to finish her education when they got married. So he'd tell me about that lady, you know.

DC: This is an unfair question, but what do you think a twenty-three or four year old Robert Williams saw in you?

MW: I really don't know. And I can't answer that question except that in later—

DC: Out of sixteen years he ().

MW: Right, right. In later years I—when we would talk and I'd look at some of the development that had gone on before and think about his girlfriends that he'd had before. I think at twenty—what was it twenty-three, twenty-one—I think he was ready to choose a wife. I really do. And I think he was attracted to me biologically, as well as—

DC: ()

MW: Yeah. And I was a little wild. That's the way he—he described me as wild. I didn't describe myself as wild. But he described me as a little wild because I always did walk fast. And very outgoing, loved basketball, played basketball all the time. Got in a lot of trouble because I played basketball.

We didn't have a gym. We had to walk all the way to Camp Sutton from here. Camp Sutton is down about two or three miles outside of Monroe. That's where the Army camp used to be. And we'd walk there to go practice basketball and then have to walk back to New Town and back on to our house. It seemed like six or seven miles. I'm told now that it's only maybe about four miles. But walking four miles a day—. But that was after walking to school and having school all day.

DC: Right.

MW: And then leaving there and going to—out to practice basketball and walk back this way and back home. So, usually I'd leave home early in the morning to go to school and when I'd get home it'd be after dark, in the evening, you know.

DC: Your mama didn't like that?

MW: Oh, she didn't like that at all. And she'd really get on me about that.

DC: Did you play on a team?

MW: Oh yeah, I played on a team. In fact Robert's brother was our assistant coach for a while. His older brother, the one that I told you is eighty.

DC: John?


MW: Yeah, John. He had come home from the Army and he worked with us as assistant coach for our girls—girls and the boys, too. And we used to travel all around: Concord, Wadesboro, playing. And I was one of the star forwards on the team.

DC: Were you?

MW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Enjoyed that tremendously. And even after we got married for a while I went back and I played basketball when I was back in school. Robert didn't like that so well. He'd, "You don't need—a married woman don't need to be out there playing basketball." Finally I had to give that up.

But, yeah, I was really an all-out athletic person. And I loved school. I loved my teachers and I loved the subjects. And I was a good student as well. I think maybe Robert might have-- He didn't know a lot about me, but in our conversations I think he might have seen some potential that I didn't even see in myself at the time. So that's the best I can answer that question.

DC: And you saw it in him?



MW: Yes, yes. And he was a great teacher. Eventually he was a great teacher. Of course, we had our problems like any young couple will have. And especially the fact that here I am a person who was trying to accommodate the status quo. And here was this man that I had married who was always out there questioning the status quo and protesting against it. And not being able to conform the way I could conform. I could accept it and walk away. I could walk away from the conditions like in the basement of that hospital. I could walk away and accept the fact that I was given a job, and that I was allowed to learn some things on that job that would, you know, be helpful to me. But I could walk away from that and walk into another job that was just as segregated, but maybe would give me a little bit more money and a little bit more opportunity. And knowing that this is—it's a job. It's a way of living. I can help support the family. But he was not able to do that. And especially when he was in a position where he had gotten a job.

For instance, they were building this highway down here. He and some of his friends got a job on the highway. The white man was a foreman and he couldn't read and write. And all of those fellows had been—had finished high school and some had been to the Army. And some of them had even had some college training. And they had these minimum wage jobs. And the foreman was a white man who could not read and write.

And Robert, that was something he couldn't accept. He just could not accept. Early on he started having migraine headaches from the pressure of the things that he saw in the society that were so wrong. And when he—

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

MW: Other than the situation being the enemy, you know. And that created a lot of friction with me and him, as well as in the society because I, at that time, could not accept a lot of that either, you know. Well, you know, everybody, all of the black people have to make accommodations with--in order to make a living, you've got to make accommodations.

DC: Right.

MW: And he would make accommodations for as long as he could. But he couldn't keep his mouth shut about it. He would say, "Okay, I got this job. Wonderful. I got this job. That's wonderful." But the first time he encountered a situation-- He didn't hide his talents under the bushel.

If he saw somebody who was supposed to be his superior and that superior asked him a question, he let it be known right away that he knew more about it than his superior did. And that got him in trouble a lot of times, you know. Because a lot of times you have to "hee-hee, ha-ha, yeah", in order to keep a job. Black folks have been traditionally good with that. But he was not good at that, you know.

I could hear jokes about black people and say, "Yeah. Ha-ha", and walk away. But if he heard a joke about a black person that was a derogatory joke, he would not feel the same. And his reactions were different from mine.

And not only that, but he did not stop writing in the paper: letters to the editor and his poetry, and having them published while he was working on these jobs. And if an employer found out that he was one of these, what they called smart or uppity niggers that was writing in the paper, they'd fire him just for that, you know.

So sometimes I would—I was in the position of being a part of the problem for him because I was trying to get him to conform. And he was trying to get me to see that we should not conform. So those were some of the things that caused friction in our relationships.

DC: Especially once you had the children.

MW: Yes, yes, yes, especially then, yeah. And he was very-- He was a good daddy, a good father. He taught the boys a lot. And they learned a lot. They learned a lot from him.

DC: When was the first time that Robert went beyond in Monroe—when was the first time he went beyond the letter writing or standing up maybe to one person on the job.

MW: ~~That came when he~~ became president of the NAACP. ~~I think that must have been~~ around '56 or sometime when all of the local professional people were experiencing a lot of problems if they belonged to the NAACP, or if the white folks thought they belonged to the NAACP.

There was a lot of economic pressures that were coming down. Teachers, just all of those people-- The local white power structure was letting it be known that they were not going to tolerate having their Negroes being part of that—what they called that Communist-backed NAACP. And so the professional people—and they were most of the people that belonged—black people who--

When Robert came back from the Army and he was elected-- He went in the NAACP thinking this is the organization now that's going to help to bring about all these

changes, you know. And the Supreme Court has made the decision and now, everything's going to be just fine. And he went into the NAACP with that in mind.

And most of those folks just either left, or when they joined they told they would join under a pseudonym, under an anonymous name, and "don't tell anybody that I belong." Even a mother who was a teacher and her daughter was a teacher. The mother didn't know that the daughter was a member. The daughter didn't know that the mother was a member because they were afraid of the economic pressure, you know.

And I remember one black guy who was a janitor at one of the local places. And I don't remember what the place was. But he said that--. And he had been a member of the NAACP for a long time. And he was sweeping around and they were having a meeting, or he was in the room somehow. And he said he heard this, one of the fellows said, "I wouldn't have one of those nigger NAACP people working for me." And he had never spoken up, had had the job for twenty or thirty years, had never said anything. And he said he threw his broom down and said, "Well, goddamnit, you got one now." [Laughs] And he came and told Robert about it. And Robert said, "No, no, no, no. That was the wrong thing for you to do." And he said, "Robert, I couldn't help it. I just was fed up."

DC: That was it.

MW: That was it. And after that, "I just couldn't help it. I just couldn't help it." He got fired, you know. And I don't remember what happened after that. But every time Robert would enroll somebody else in the NAACP he would warn them, "Don't tell anybody that you belong, especially the people that you work for, you know. You can tell your other friends. But don't tell the people that you work for that you've joined."

DC: So all these people, the professional people leave and Robert's left—

MW: With hardly anybody and he just went and recruited among just ordinary common folks on the street. He liked to tell the fact that his first members came from the poolroom. He went into a pool hall.

And his mother had been a very deeply religious woman, you know. Had warned him. She was always afraid that her children would turn out to be gamblers or drunkards. She would warn them to stay out of the pool hall because they gamble in the pool halls. So Robert didn't even play pool, you know. He didn't play any kind of cards. And he didn't hang around the pool halls and places. But he said he was passing one one day and he said, "Well I wonder if I can maybe get these fellows to join." He went in there and started talking to them. And he said he wrote up his first members on the pool table.

DC: That's good.

MW: Yeah. So after—

DC: ()

MW: That's right. That's right. And I think that may have been a part of the militancy of that. Not only did he write up regular people, street people. He wrote up maids and cooks. And so we knew what was going on in a lot of the houses of the white power structure because they had maids and cooks in there who were members of the NAACP who'd come back and tell us.

I remember one particular incident where Robert was going on trial for something. I don't know if that was the sit-in case or what it was. But the maid for the judge said that the judge came in that morning at breakfast and said, "Oh honey—" to his wife. "Oh honey, I'm going to be a big man today." And she said, "Why? What's going

to happen?" He said, "I'm going to send that nigger Robert Williams to prison." And she came back and told us about what he had said.

Now he had made his decision and the court hadn't even started. But he knew he was going to send Robert—he going to convict him already, you know. So—

DC: So I guess the NAACP with the ordinary people and then what happens then?

MW: Then they started—. He was really the—. He was the leader and they tell him, "You do what you have to do." So he would go to different places in the name of the NAACP and try to get jobs for people, you know, get them to hire.

I remember the place, Allen Overall. Boy he worked—they worked on Allen Overall for years to try to get them to hire black people. He even wrote to Washington in the name of the NAACP because Allen Overall had a contract with the government and he found all this stuff, you know. That they had this contract and they weren't hiring black people and all. And that's when they had what they called a trickle down thing. They said that the city council said that, "Well, if we—if they hire the white people then the white people will hire the black folks as maids and cooks and then—"

DC: That's where Reagan got his trickle down theory.

MW: Yeah, yeah. And then they will, you know—

DC: ()

MW: No. That's all right. Then they will benefit from it, you know, from that standpoint. I don't remember when it was that—. Whether it was before the NAACP or after the NAACP that we had the—Rob had joined the Civic League, which was also an organization that at that time was working with the city council. They had a Negro Civic

League that would-- Well, at first it was supposed to be a civic league that was made up of all members of the community, black and white.

And—but actually what they would do is when they got ready to have meetings they would call in these members of the Civic League. And most of them were what we called Uncle Tom. And they would go along with everything that the city fathers would propose, like the trickle down stuff, and not protest anything.

Well, once Rob joined that Civic League it almost-- I don't remember if it tore up or what happened. But they stopped calling on the Civic League so much. But I think that was his introduction to the Unitarian Universalist Church.

It was a Unitarian church at that time. And the local white—one of the local white people was Ray Shoot was the head of the Unitarian church. And he was—had been in real estate and he was one of the city fathers. But he was a liberal, white liberal. In fact he used to say—I remember hearing him say, “Well, I’m really a socialist by philosophy. But until such time as all of the capitalists give up their money, I’m going to keep my money. I’m going to keep my money to protect myself.” [Laughs]

DC: ()

MW: So we'd laugh about that, you know. But we would visit them on a social basis. And he and Robert would just sit and talk for hours and hours.

DC: That's very unusual.

MW: Yeah. It was very unusual in this—

DC: That day.

MW: Yeah, for that day. And finally he invited us to become members of the Unitarian church. And before then Robert would go to the Unitarian church. And they

invited them—Ray did. Ray Shoot invited him there to speak on two or three occasions. And he'd go and speak. And then he invited him to become a member.

Well, then when Robert accepted and decided to join, I never will forget, Ray Shoot told us that there was a judge, Judge Williams. Now everybody in town knew the judge was an alcoholic. But every Monday morning he was sending black men to prison for being drunk. Okay? Judge Williams made the remark according to—it was either Ray or some of the other Unitarians who told us that he said, "He'd be damned if he was going to belong to a church where they had a nigger." So he resigned when they accepted Rob into the Unitarian fellowship. It was not a church. It was a fellowship.

But we used to go over there. And we'd have fun around the pool, and sit and talk and have potluck after church services. Well, now Robert was getting involved with the Unitarians. I was getting involved with the Catholics.

So Rob also had another great friend who was Father Thomas MacAvoy. He was a Catholic priest who had come to Monroe and established the first Catholic church. Father Thomas A. MacAvoy. And Father Mac was our friend. We were friends with Father Mac until his death. He died after we came back from overseas. But we maintained contact with him all those years. He remained our friend while Robert—. He was a friend of Dr. Perry's who was also Catholic. And he headed up the—.

We had segregation in Catholic church at that time. There was our Lady of Lords, which is the Catholic church here now. And I still call it the white Catholic church. And then there was St. Joseph's mission, which was a church that I joined and I took my two boys in.

And even though Rob and Father Mac were great friends, he never joined the Catholic Church. Rob didn't. He joined the Unitarian church. And—but the boys and I became Catholic.

And not only did I join the church, but I was very active in our little mission. And worked for the mission for a long time. I worked first as doing their rummage sale in the community. And another time we established a day care for working mothers and I took care of kids in the community. St. Joseph's Day Care Center.

So all of this was going on almost simultaneously. And I was learning from Father MacAvoy and at a later time Father John Garone came in. He was also a very progressive priest.

And—but I was taking part in the Unitarian fellowship and learning a lot there, too. So a whole lot of this was a process of education for me. Dealing with people on an intellectual level that I had never dealt with before. Dealing with ideas that I had never encountered before. Seeing the respect that they had for Robert and his ideas. And the respect that Robert had for them and their ideas and how they exchanged, you know. It was a great university for me.

DC: Yeah, sure. Even better than a real university

MW: Yes, yes. And it also was helpful in dealing with the children and trying to instill some values in them, you know. So—but the Unitarian church, also. That experience started to—. People, when the people found out that Robert was associated with the Unitarian church, that brought on a lot of other kinds of—. Well, you know, we don't want to have anything to do with this nigger, you know.

Mr. Shoot tried as best he could to help Robert get established in a good paying job two or three different times. One time he got a really good job. They were going to make him this or they were going to-- Oh, this new factory was moving in because all these factories were moving in from the north. And they were going to make him a dye man in an industry down in—it was outside of Wadesboro, in Anson County somewhere.

But, the city fathers got to them and they got rid of Rob in a-- At first they started-- The man who was supposed to teach him was a German. And he was, of course, secretive about his guise and so forth. But he was willing at first to teach Rob. But then when the city fathers got involved, all of a sudden, the only thing Rob could do was empty the garbage.

And it kept going like that and Robert kept saying, "Well, when are we going to get into the techniques of the dying and so forth." And they just kept pushing him down and pushing him out further, further and further away. And it turned out that he was driving all that long distance to be a janitor. So that didn't work out.

I don't—I don't think we found out about what the city fathers had done until he got his files from the Freedom of Information Act. Then we found out that, you know, they had a lot to do with undermining our economic situation. But we had lots of support from local people. Farmers who would give us corn and stuff out of their gardens.

DC: Black farmers.

MW: Um-hmm, black farmers. We never did have a—we didn't starve to death. People would come and give us, bring us stuff. They'd go shopping and bring stuff to help us out as well.

And one thing that I point out to a lot of black women today when I'm talking to them about—the situation we talk about. We talk about the male chauvinism and all that. And—but one of the tools that this system has always used, and they used in Monroe. I can always get a job. They'd always open up and let me work.

And I didn't always understand why I could get a job and he couldn't get a job, you know. Or I could get a job and keep it and he couldn't get a job and keep it. I didn't always understand that. I understand the techniques, the tactics now. How that undermines the unity of the family because he's supposed to be the head of the family. The husband's supposed to be the head of the family traditionally to support his family. But it undermines his manhood when he can't do that. It undermines his manhood. So that also creates a lot of problems. Created a lot of problems for us, but not, you know.

So the whole time we were here until we got totally involved in civil rights I was able to maintain a job. I worked at the Union Memorial Hospital once that hospital was established. I worked at the turkey plant. Turkey plant. Yeah, I think we got fifty cents an hour, you know. And standing in water all day cleaning turkeys. But it was a job and I was able to maintain that for, at least, for a while when they had turkeys coming in and so forth.

So all of that had its impact on what was going on. And Robert--. Seeing all of these things that were happening and wanting to make a difference and make a change. And so—

DC: ()

[Recorder is turned off and then back on.]

DC: What was the first time that-- Well actually I was trying (). The first time that things with Rob got beyond letter writing and (). When did it actually become like a real protest ()?

MW: The kissing case had a lot of momentum to it. And, you know, helped to move it along. But I'm trying to remember and I'm not very good at chronological dates and the sequences because now that I look back over it it just kind of melts together.

But, so, I remember Rob going to Cuba. And he went along with several black writers and artists: Leroy Jones and some of the other artists. And while down there learning about what was going on with the Cuban revolution. But then we had already started publishing "The Crusader" before then. So I'm trying to remember.

I don't remember if we were publishing "The Crusader" when the kissing case came along. I think we must have been because we had good mailing lists that we were able to contact people all over. The newspapers stopped publishing Rob's letters to the editor.

DC: I'm surprised they ever did.

MW: Yeah, yeah. They did, but the closer he came to identifying problems that [loud buzz] that existed in our community, the more the newspaper decided that, no, we don't want to let this—we don't want to publish this. So after he got to be president of the NAACP, he tried on several occasions to report things, incidents that were being reported to the NAACP and all that, and the paper wouldn't run anything. They wouldn't tell what was going on.

And so he—they came up with the idea that we need to have our own press, something that we can—so that we can tell the people what's going on. So that's how we decided we better put out a little newsletter.

And he said, "Well, we'll just make it a little one-pager or two-pager, you know." And once we started doing that-- And I guess if I would go back and read some of the earlier editions I would see exactly why it was that we came up that, and what the sequence of events were. But, perhaps, you can do that at some later date.

DC: Well, Tim was actually reading to me from last night the first edition.

MW: Oh really? Okay. All right.

DC: One of the interesting stories that I liked—and it was—you had a piece on an elderly neighbor.

MW: Mama Stitt.

DC: That's right.

MW: Yes, yes.

DC: That was the very first-- It was a two-part thing. The first part was in-- I think your son John came home and then you wrote it. And it said that Mrs. Stitt was telling stories about slavery.

MW: Yes.

DC: And you () oral history that we're doing today. That was in the first issue. I liked that.

MW: That's wonderful. I'm happy to hear that because it had totally slipped my mind. But, yes. And she was a very interesting lady and she told us all kinds of stories about how—what had happened to her during slavery. And there was another lady that

also lived between us and Miss Stitt. Miss Stitt lived on the corner and we lived down on the middle of the block. There was another lady, Mrs. Ola Roddy, who also told us about things that had happened to her right after slavery. And what had happened to her family during slavery. So we did get—have the benefit of that oral history from those two neighbors.

DC: What was your role in “The Crusader?” ()

MW: No, go right ahead. No, no, just go ahead. I—besides writing a column I had to do the corrections—the English and all that on Robert’s work, the editing of his work. And type up the—. Because we put it out on a mimeograph machine, you know. I had to type up the stencils and then help to run them off. And so I was just a big part of it. Robert was mainly the—he was the brains and the editor, and I was proofreader and a mechanics person.

DC: Well you were a writer, too. What did you try to—what was kind of the—how did you approach your column? What was it called?


MW: Looking—was mine “Looking Back,” I believe. Or—I think mine was “Looking Back.” And I talked about historical stuff, things that had happened. I talked about some of Rob’s family history that we had found out about, some people that I had interviewed.

We got news clippings from all over. People recognized that here is a protest newsletter and they would send us stuff. And sometimes I would go through that and pull out things that were, you know, good for our newsletter at the time. Had to find fillers so we’d have to go—. We relied a lot on people like Nat Turner and those kinds of real revolutionary type people who were sincere about struggle and so forth.

We talked about issues or things that were going on in the community. And sometimes he would tell me, "Well, you write about that." So, those were the kind—some of the things that I did.

DC: Well it sounds like you've come a long way as a person. I mean from a sixteen year old to doing this as a--. You're really part of a husband and wife team.

MW: Yes, yes, yes. We were a team. We were a team and we worked together as a team.



During the height of the struggle for survival when the Klan was threatening to wipe us all out, I organized the ladies and we had a phone club so that when things were happening, I'd get on the phone and call some of the ladies. And they'd get on the phone and call other people. And that way we were always aware of the movements that the Klan was getting ready to make on our community or some of our people. So we were active. But I was an active participant. It wasn't like I was just a housewife at that time.


DC: Can you step into that time when things were so, I guess you could say that (). When did—when did you first feel threatened or that you really had to worry about your defense.

MW: Are you talking about the last time or when we first organized the rifle clubs and all that?


DC: From the beginning.

MW: The beginning?

DC: Yeah.




MW: It was early on after Robert became the president of the NAACP. And he was becoming known in town as the president of the NAACP. Other people who were




on jobs and who were members of the NAACP would tell us that, you know, these folks were saying they're going to do this to you. They're going to do that to you. They're going to wipe out the family. They're going to kill Rob, you know, and all that kind of stuff. And then we began to get telephone threats, telephone threats. And at that time I started to realize that this is serious business. These folks mean business. They do to.

DC: They would call and talk to Rob or--?



MW: They would call and talk to whomever answered the phone and threaten to do us harm, you know. They would talk to children, to the children, or Daddy John or me or whomever.

DC: And they'd say, "If Rob keeps doing this we're going to kill you or do you—."




MW: We're going to kill you or blow up your house, and all that kind of stuff. So, Daddy John, who was Rob's father, always kept a twelve-gauge shotgun in his house at the door.

And I remember he didn't always keep it at the door. He had one and he kept it in his room in his closet. But I remember one day when he pulled that twelve-gauge shotgun out and said, "We're going to keep this at the front door because if the bastards come over here after us, we're going to—we may have to use it." Well that was—by that time Robert was going down to help protect Dr. Perry's house, whom they had threatened that they were coming in and going to blow him away.

DC: Because ().

MW: Yes.

DC: Because--.




MW: Because he had been accused of doing an abortion on a white woman. And had been, not only accused, but they convicted him of doing an abortion even without a fetus to prove that there was an abortion. And even though he was a Catholic who had refused to do abortions even for local black people or anybody else. And, who usually, generally, did not even serve white customers. But because this woman had no—so little money, and needed medical attention he let down his guard and let her in there. And then she was—. They were able to use her as a tool against him, and against our struggle. So—

DC: How did Rob ()? Like why were they going—why would they go after Robert because of Perry?

MW: Dr. Perry was—. Rob was the president of the NAACP, and Dr. Perry was the vice-president. So whenever official protests went out to the city council or whomever, it went out as Rob Williams, president, Dr. Albert E. Perry as vice-president. And so Dr. Perry, he was just a part of our movement.

And everybody thought—not everybody—. Most of the white people thought that because Dr. Perry was a doctor that he was the one who was the brains behind the protest movement. At one time a man wrote a letter to the editor in the *Monroe Enquirer Journal*, and said, "What we ought to do is get that Robert Williams, bring him downtown and lock him up and make him write something." Because they didn't believe Robert had the capability of writing the articles with the depth that he was writing. Some people said, "Well, that J. Ray Shoot is the one that's writing all the articles." You know. And they're saying that he was writing and hiding behind Robert or some white man, or maybe Dr. Perry. So anyway, they saw the two of them as a threat and so.



DC: That's when y'all started to have things about ().

MW: Yes, yes, yes, yes. The Klan made a run or two it seems to me. I'm trying to remember. It seems to me that they made a run past Dr. Perry's house and shot—some shots were fired. And that's what made the men organize to go to defend Dr. Perry's home.

DC: And what did they do?

MW: [^] The trenches and stayed up all night—and in the trenches they had sandbags. And our friend, Father MacAvoy would come and stay all night. He was a great friend of Dr. Perry's, too. In fact, Dr. Perry was the one who introduced Robert, I think, to Father MacAvoy. He said, "You all do the shooting and I'll do the praying." And he'd stay up all night and read scripture and walk around, and bring coffee to the fellows.

DC: This wasn't just one night.

MW: Oh no. This went on for weeks on end. And he would be there, you know.

DC: Dug trenches?

MW: Yeah. They had trenches and sandbags. And made Malotov cocktails that they were going to use against any vehicles that people would come in, you know.

DC: And the Klan was fairly strong in Monroe?

MW: Oh, yes. The Klan was very strong. The Klan was having rallies all over. Catfish Cove was on the rise. Catfish Cove was, oh, he was having all kinds of rallies around Monroe. One rally they reported that they had five thousand people out at the rally. And Rob and Dr. Perry and a few of the other fellows went out to some of those

Klan rallies. And were there on the scene and I think it kind of unnerved the Klan people when they did. But, that was what kind of brought on the rifle club. We organized a rifle club. And got a charter through the American Rifle Association.

DC: What did the rifle club do?

MW: We practiced shooting. We were all members. I was a member as well. We taught the kids how to shoot. We'd—we got our charter. We'd have our little meetings. And that was the backbone of our defense group.

DC: And it was like a NRA type thing.

MW: It was affiliated. It was a branch of the National Rifle Association.

DC: That () to white people.

MW: They didn't know for sure because when Robert sent off for the charter he had himself as an author. He had Dr. Perry as a doctor. He had some of the-- Oh, he had one of our officers, McDowell, as a businessman. He had, I think, the women he put down housewives. And he put construction, contractor for the construction workers. And we got our first charter like that. And it's really fun. The year that Rob passed away, the National Rifle Association wanted him to come to Texas to speak about how we survived in the south with guns.

DC: () to do it.

MW: He was going to but his cancer got the better of him and he was unable to go. But he sent a message to them, which they read. And I have a tape that they-- At their anniversary celebration they talked about Robert Williams and how his rifle club allowed them to survive in the racist state of North Carolina. [Laughs]

DC: I bet it did.

MW: Oh yeah. And we were just tickled to death that they did that.

DC: I like that.

MW: I'm sure when we joined and the years after then, had they known we were a black group, they would have revoked our charter.

DC: I think they would have too.

MW: I'm sure they would have. But in the later years when they were under such attack for guns, they came up with the fact that they were proud of the fact that, "Well, if it hadn't been for guns in North Carolina, that man would have been dead", you know. [Laughs]

DC: That's great.

MW: "If he hadn't been affiliated with the rifle association." [Laughs] And that's true. But the ironic part that I want people to know is that although we had an association with guns, we knew how to use guns. We trained other people how to use guns, our children included. We never had the occasion to have to shoot anybody. And that if, you know. That's remarkable because a lot of people, when they think about having guns, they think about killing folks.

And Robert always-- He was the ultimate teacher, always. He always taught the other people and us that a gun is a weapon that can do terrible damage to people. And the only reason you would ever pick up a gun is for self-defense and not for anything aggressive or not to scare off anybody, and not to play with anybody. But it was serious business when you really had to pick up a gun.

Gun use

DC: () But why would it be considered—why would it upset white southerners so much for blacks to have a rifle? I mean the right to bear arms and that kind of thing. Why was that so upsetting in 1956 or 1959?

MW: Because they knew that black people were at the point where they were demanding their equal rights. They were at the point of requesting but actually struggling to get the equal rights. And they knew that if a large number of black people should take up arms that they would either have to officially come down and that it may lead to a civil, kind of civil war. And they didn't want to—that to happen. So they were going to do everything that they could.

First of all, they didn't want to give in and give the rights up. But they knew much better than we did that all of that political power had to be backed up. They were backing their political power up with guns. And the only thing that was going to take it away from them, or threaten, threaten it, was the fact if black people took up guns, too.

So, I think that was the reason they were so afraid, you know. So they were going to nip that in the bud if they possibly could. And keep black people from even thinking about resorting to resistance, not even, nothing aggressive, just resisting what they were doing keeping that power through the gun that they had. They had control of the police department and of the state troopers, the National Guard. And they didn't intend to release that power. And they felt that that was a threat to the power.

DC: Do you think that men were more threatened than by those guns than by the non-violent protest—

MW: Oh yes.

DC: Including y'all's, I mean. There was something about blacks and guns that—

MW: That's right. That's right. They felt more threatened by that because that would mean that they would have to meet black men on an equal basis because that gun would equalize you, you know. And they weren't about—they weren't ready to face that on an equal basis, no. So, yes, they were much more threatened by that than they were by the non-violent protests.

DC: How did—as time went along—

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

DC: Do you have to—() just having a rifle club today. People know how to shoot. Did you have to take greater and greater measures to protect yourself.

MW: Oh yes. Some nights we were fortunate if we were able to get four hours sleep. And we slept in shifts at home because the threats—the telephone threats, the hate mail—stuff would come through the mail saying what they were going to do. People on the street—.

I remember one time a little boy—his name was Prentice Robinson, I believe, was beaten up by some white men. They thought he was Rob's son. They beat him up downtown. Our kids had to—. We had to restrict their activities. They couldn't go to the movies anymore. And they couldn't go out with the kids and play on Saturdays and play like other kids did because that was after the—.

It was known that Rob had kids and that they were in danger. We had applied for them to go to what is now East Elementary School. And the boys-- We talked it over with the boys and they agreed to do it. And so we tried to get them into that school.

And that in itself is a real experience that I will never forget. Sitting in the school board meeting and the superintendent who was a white superintendent. Always the superintendent was white. Kirkman. Never will forget, Kirkman. And that was the first time I had seen a white man and a black man go toe-to-toe, and that was Robert and Kirkman. And Robert stood up to him in such a way that Kirkman was almost in tears at the end of that meeting. He was so angry and so-- I think he was in a state of shock.

Robert told him about the times he would come into our black school with his hat on and call our black teachers by their first names. And have them trembling and shaking and so afraid. And telling the children, "Be quiet, sups in the building. Sups in the building. Shh."

And Robert remembered all of that. And when he brought it out in that board meeting and Kirkman tried to deny it. Rob said, "You know you're lying. You know you did that", you know. "And how intimidated you had all the teachers. And how intimidated you had all of us as children. And you're going to tell me that our school is as good as your school. Did you do that to the white teachers, you know, calling them by their first names? Never a Miss this or a Mrs. that, you know."

And I remember somebody saying, "Before there would be integration in Monroe blood would run in the street knee-deep" at that board meeting. And I was scared to death. I was scared. And I'm sure Robert had some fear in him. But he just stood up and

he did all the talking. And I just sat there. And they asked me, you know, and I said, "Yes. Yes, you know. That's what we want." But—

DC: What he said.

MW: Yeah. Whatever he said, that's it, you know. But—

DC: So you really had to almost fortify the house.

MW: Um-hmm, yes. And people would come after threats that we would think that might be—they might be really coming. We'd call and people would come from our rifle club group and sit up with us. Take turns, sleep on the floor, sleep on the couch. But somebody would stand guard on the porch. So, yeah, we went through a period when that was going on all the time. And at one time we got calls around the clock. Just nuisance, you know, just to keep you awake and to disturb you. And you'd answer and they wouldn't say anything, you know, whatever. So all those kinds of things were going on.

DC: But did the Klan ever come into the neighborhood?

MW: Oh yeah. They came into the neighborhood on several occasions. I remember one night they came—some of them came into the neighborhood. And the fellows got out into the street and shot above the cars. And you could hear cars screeching and flying everywhere. And they went out of the neighborhood. And I don't recall them ever coming back again after that. Yeah, yeah.

We had lots of support of the neighbors in the community because they were very proud of the fact that Robert was standing up. And he was getting the young people to stand up with him.

We had a youth group that the ones who were picketing the pool, who wanted to see a change, those young boys and girls, mostly the young boys, had been fighting each other before they got involved in the civil rights movement. They had the Quality Hill Gang fighting against the Green Street Gang. And them against the New Town Gang.

But when they got involved in civil rights they all started working together and having good relations. And the gang stuff went down. The older fellows taught them how to shoot but also taught them that they, hopefully, would never have to shoot. But they taught them how to use guns safely and what guns are for. And so that was good. So the young people grew a lot mentally, intellectually during the movement because the older men and the women were taking the time to talk to them and to listen to them, and see what was going on.

DC: What were the big () during the movement during those years, before y'all left. Survival was a big one.

MW: Yes, that was the big one. That was the big one.

DC: But if you had to ().

MW: I think the biggest thing was the educating of the people, the black people. And the raising of the awareness of the need to struggle even though we didn't have a lot of victory victories at that time that you could say, "Oh well, we won the right to do this. Well we won the right to go the library because the mayor said he didn't read anyway." Or didn't use the library anyway. So little things like that. But I think the biggest impact was the fact that people began to say, "Yes, we do need to stand up. Yes. We do need to struggle."

DC: ().

MW: Yes, yes.

DC: () He was a dangerous man to have around. Dangerous man to be married to. Dangerous man to have as your neighbor. Sounds like ().

MW: Yeah. It may sound like that. But everybody in the neighborhood who knew Robert, and knew his family, and knew his activity knew that Robert cared about his people.

DC: And they rose to the situation.

MW: They rose to the situation especially the old women. Robert always was a person who would go and sit, and talk with the older people and learn from them, and listen to them. And they knew that. They knew that.

I remember a Mrs. King was one of his mother's best friends. His mother passed away the year we were married. But her best friend was Mrs. King who lived right down the street near us. And she came and told him one day, or he went down there and she told him, said, "The FBI came down here saying they wanted to give you a job. And wanting to know about your activities. And I told them that if they wanted to know anything about you to go up there and ask you or your Daddy or some of your people. That I wasn't about to tell them anything." She said, "I don't know what them people were up to. They said they were from the FBI and they were getting ready to give you a good job." [Laughs]

DC: And who was the lady that hid weapons?

MW: His aunt, the older lady. The one I told you the FBI said she was worse than him. Oh, no. She did, too.

DC: ()

MW: Oh yes. But Mrs. Crowder who was a neighbor a couple of doors below us, when we went back to Monroe, Rob and I came back to Monroe, Mrs. Crowder had some of those guns in her attic that had been there. She had hid some of the guns in her house.

DC: She was a domestic or--?

MW: Just a domestic, an older lady, a lady who had been in the community for years, church-going. All of these people were Christian church-going people.

DC: And she was hiding weapons for Rob?

MW: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, for the community.

DC: For the community.

MW: For the community because she felt that if that community had to-- If the Klan came-- Those people were really-- Our people were really fed up with the crap that the Klan had been intimidating them with for all these years.

I remember one family. I think you saw me speak to a young man this morning. A young man who came in. He's in the military now. No, he's retired from the military. He used to be one of our neighbors. And his grandma told us stories about their family down in Georgia and how they had been run out by the Klan. They had been run out of Georgia, her husband, just for speaking up. They had run all the way from Georgia and had settled in North Carolina. Well, needless to say, they certainly didn't want to see the Klan come into our community and do what they had done in Georgia.

So—and most of these men who had worked on the railroad were really—I'll say mentally—they were not—they were impacted by the racism of the white workers on the railroad. And how it impacted our community. They could see how they white men had

no respect for us. And the fact that most of the black men who worked on the railroad were—they could never get a job as say a boilermaker. But they would get the job as a boilermaker helper.

That's what Daddy John was. Daddy John was the one who washed the boilers down. And he was the one who did the boilermaker work because the boilermaker, even though he had the name and the job and got the pay, most of the time he'd be drunk and he knew he didn't have to produce. He had John there to produce for him.

And the same thing about most of the black men from that community who worked on the railroad. And they could see the inequities of the system, and how they disrespected them and got away with it. But they were getting the big pay. And so they could hear them talking about being Klan members and, you know, there was nothing that they felt like they could do about it at the time, way back then. But they certainly didn't like it and they passed that on to their children, you know, letting them know, that you know, these folks are no good for us. They don't really mean us any good. So

DC: What I'm trying to understand () I guess what I mean is your relationship, the connection between the people (). I know, of course, your neighbors were tired of the Klan. But neighbors all over North Carolina were tired of the Klan. You know what I mean. I mean people had been through it everywhere or at least that's what I assume. I assume that New Town wasn't like—that it was a fairly average place with the exception of Robert Williams. Do you know what I mean?

MW: Yeah, yeah.

DC: And that maybe the people were ready, but —

MW: Well you know at a time when Robert first got to be the president of the NAACP some of his old classmates and school mates would cross the street uptown to keep from speaking to him.

DC: Well, right. That's what you were talking about ().

MW: Right. And they were afraid. But the older people, the older people were the ones in our neighborhood. They were the ones who were most supportive it seems to me. I mean the older, old folks. I'm not talking about the ones of Robert's age. I'm talking about these old people who were just fed up with the crap that the white folks had put them through all these years. And when they saw this young man who was a product of their community. The son of Emma Williams who was one of the known Christian women in their community. That they had prayer meeting at his house, you know. And here is this young man that Emma had taught to respect us and to come and bring in wood and coal for us. And do chores around the house. And now he's down there raising a family and he's teaching his boys to come and work for us and help look out for us. Come and read to us if there's something—if we have some papers we don't understand. Call Robert Williams, he'll come down and explain them to you, you know. Those kinds of things. Those are the people that I'm talking about in our community that were—they weren't afraid of Rob.

DC: That's very interesting.

MW: And they would get so angry when they knew that the police were harassing him, or somebody, you know the Klan was trying to harass him.

DC: How would they show their support? Some of them would () hide guns.

MW: Yeah. But that was the—that's not the norm. But they just never broke off any relationship. You know, they would visit, or call for us to come and visit. Fix food for us on occasion. Call us down to come. "Come. I fixed a special pot of this, that and the other." Take care of the kids when we needed somebody to baby-sit.

DC: ()


MW: Yeah. But, like I said, that was the older people. And they knew that Rob was not teaching anything that was detrimental to them or even teaching the young people anything detrimental. And sometimes if the kids were getting out of line, they'd call Rob to talk to them, you know. So that's the way that went.

DC: There was one incident that I wanted to go into with some detail. It—some of it you were involved in, and some of it, I know you were an eye witness (). But the whole (). You talked about it. The sequence of events that starts with the effort to integrate the country club pool. Could we start with that ()? () () incidents at Hill Top and to your home eventually.

MW: I remember that as I told you before I lived on Quality Hill, or across the railroad tracks from New Town where the larger black community lived. And I remember a young, one of my neighbors drowned in a mud pool, mud puddle swimming out on Quality Hill. That same summer two or three other young black boys had drowned in mud puddles in, you know, trying to learn how to swim or just going swimming. You know, hot down here—

DC: Cow ponds and things like that.

MW: Yeah. Right. And so Robert and-- Robert had said, "Well, this is just outrageous. We've got this pool down here." I don't know how he found out that the

 pool was built by the WPA with federal dollars. "You've got this pool down here supported by tax dollars. And it's restricted to white only." And he said, "Let's go before the city council and ask them for a day that they would set aside so that our black kids can swim." Now that was not a—to us it wasn't revolutionary. It was just asking for one day. Or—

DC: Did y'all not really think of it as—

MW: No, no. We just thought they could set aside a day. I think Robert thought that the city fathers would do that. When he went before them and presented that to, "Well what about setting that aside?" I think at first they just said some time, so that the black kids could come in and swim. He really, at that time, I don't think he even thought that they would say no. But when they said no, they couldn't do that because every time the black kids swam they would have to drain the pool before the whites could use that again.

DC: Did they explain that? Did they have any argument that this was just—?

MW: No, because black people had been in it. That was enough. At first they—. At first he didn't ask for a day. He asked, "Could you build a pool in our neighborhood?" That's what they asked, separate but equal, right? Didn't even have to be equal. We're just asking for a separate pool. "No. Can't do that." The city council, city recreation department—"We can't do that. We don't have the money."

Then they went back and asked, "Well, if you don't have the money to build a pool in our neighborhood could you set aside some time when our kids can use the pool that you have? Because, after all, it was built with federal funds and it is tax supported by the recreation committee of the city. And after all, black people do pay taxes." And

they--. Nope. They couldn't do that. And that's when they brought up the fact that they'd have to drain the pool and wash it out every time.

So Robert really got angry after they finally went and told them that, no. There was no way and there was nothing that they were going to do. They weren't going to even try to do anything to help relieve the situation. So he told them, said, "Well, you know, if you want segregation, segregation's very expensive. And if you can't afford it, then you don't need it." And that's when he came back and we started to organize the demonstrations around the pool.

DC: And what were they—they'd be—

MW: Our young people and Rob would get together and they'd go down to the pool and picket around the pool.

DC: Signs and everything?

MW: With signs, yes. Signs and--. This pool's built with federal funds. We have a right to swim. Open up the pool and let us swim once a week, or whatever. I don't even remember all of the signs. Maybe the newspapers recorded. I'm sure they did record some.

DC: Did you go down there some?

MW: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. But most of the time when I was down there--. I didn't picket. I was in the car with guns. [Laughs] But I was not picketing.

DC: ()

MW: Yes, yes, yes. I was always there in the car. Not always, but part of the time I was there in the car. And each time that I was there in the car there was a gun in the car with me. And—

DC: And you were just—

MW: Just sitting there waiting and, you know.

DC: In case the situation arose.

MW: Um-hmm. When we had to protect the kids and get them out of there. My youngest son was—. I think my older son was allowed to go down and picket with the kids as well. So—. At that time, you know, guns were legal as long as they were not concealed in North Carolina. So we had the guns on the seat. [Laughs] They were not concealed. Anybody walking up could see that the guns were there.

DC: I'm sure they noticed them, too.

MW: Oh yes. Yes. I'm sure they did. So—. And during that time did I tell you that Rob had run for mayor?

DC: I never heard that.

MW: You never heard that? He ran for the mayor of Monroe.

DC: That's not in the book either, I don't think.

MW: I don't recall whether it is or not. But he ran for mayor of Monroe. And then the night of the counting of the votes, went downtown by himself with his guns on to watch them count the votes. And I got on the phone and called the rifle club members and told them. And so by the time they got through counting the votes there was a group of black men down there. [Laughs]

DC: With guns.

MW: With guns waiting for him to finish looking at the—. He said, "Well I didn't want anybody to put their lives on the line for me." So he wouldn't tell anybody he was going. But I told them he was down there by himself.

DC: And he wore his guns where people could see them?

MW: Yeah. He wore them in a holster on his hip.

DC: Only one?

MW: Oh yeah. Sometimes he would wear two guns.

DC: Was this ()

MW: Legal by—

DC: Would that be typical for Robert at that time? He'd go around with a gun through town, wearing a piece.

MW: He didn't do that often because most of the time he just had it in the car. But when he started getting threats, then he started doing that. Especially when they had a Klansman on the courthouse square getting petitions and Dr. Perry out of town. A Klansman with a table on the courthouse lawn.

DC: So would Robert wear a holster?

MW: Uh-huh. Robert went up to this Klansman who was getting petitions and asked him, said, "Well, who is this Robert Williams? Do you know him?" And he said, "No, I don't know him." "But he's a dangerous man. Caused a lot of problems here in Monroe and we want to get rid of him."

And Robert told him, said, "Well, I'll tell you who Robert Williams is. I'm Robert Williams. And if you're planning to run me out of town, it's going to take more than a petition." And he said the Klansman said, "Well, I just wanted to let you-- I didn't know that. I'm just doing what they told me to do." [Laughter]

Oh, but it was after then because they had somebody named Hornbecker who was a Klan recruiter. And Robert had seen him several times at the police station. And that

also made him know that the officials were allowing him to recruit right on the grounds of the law. And so when Rob found out about the law saying that you could carry, have a gun as long as it's not concealed, he started wearing his to let them know, "You can petition, but don't try to do it physically", you know.

DC: So back to the pool. So the protest goes on. It goes on for a long time or—

MW: Over a period of weeks. And maybe protest one day and not go back for a week.

DC: How did people react to the pool--?

MW: At first it was just a giggly kind of thing. The people would come out of the pool, and look and laugh. And—but, then the pool officials would get scared and close the pool. And then they would have to come out and leave.

And so, strangely enough, we had a young woman visiting us from Japan, an exchange student who Rob had met when he was on speaking tour as—for the Friends of Cuba. And she had wanted to come south to see what the civil rights movement was about. She was a political science teacher. By the way, she has remained friends over these years.

DC: Has she?

MW: Yes, yes. I just had contact with her a couple of months ago. And she came down. Robert had told her, "Yes. You can come to Monroe and we'll let you see what it's all about." He took her around to places and sent her on her own to places to get information about what she wanted to know about. Strangely enough, during that

time, because the Japanese are--. I don't know for what reason but they were looked on as white.

DC: I always wondered how that got decided.

MW: I don't know how that got decided either. But she went inside the pool while we were outside protesting. [Laughs]

DC: That would have been interesting.

MW: And she was a guest in our house but they never knew that. She was inside the pool. And she had gone down and they had allowed her to interview officials. And she found out how they felt about us. And they were just really candid about those old Negroes over there and what they're doing, you know. And that was also very interesting.

DC: Very interesting.

MW: Very interesting. She wrote about it in Japan. She became a political history—political science professor. And with her expertise on African American studies, of course. [Laughs] And so that was very interesting.

But the protests at the pool went on, off and on for a few days. But the more the protests went on it wasn't the people at the pool so much who were getting stirred up. But it was people who wouldn't even have gone to the pool in the first place. The Klan and I think the powers that be, the local authorities, were stirring up to--. They just intended to get ready to kill Robert really. And, therefore, tried to kill the movement by killing him.

DC: I assume that this was not just a reaction to the pool protest. This was--. These people had built up a lot of frustration.

MW: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

DC: And Robert—

MW: Because at one time the governor sent a black man, a Dr. Larkins, in who was the governor's Negro. Sent him into Monroe to find out what Robert wanted. And Robert gave him the ten-point plan that the NAACP and civic league all had agreed on, which included jobs and, which included equal pay, and which included integration of the schools. And either the provision of a pool or the setting aside of days that black kids could use the pool. Ten points.

And Robert told Dr. Larkin, "What I want is the ten-point plan implemented." And Dr. said, "I didn't come down here to find out what your ten points are. I want—the governor wants to know what you want, individually. What you want." And Robert told him again, "I want what my people want. And my people want this ten point plan." And so when they found out—when the governor found out that Robert was not going to sell out the movement—

DC: ()

MW: He couldn't be bribed. Then that's when all hell broke loose. And these people started to say, "Well we got to kill him. He's not going to give in." Even the NAACP after they had suspended him for saying that we needed to defend ourselves, they sent a man down and told him that if he would renounce his statement that—about violence, that they would take him to New York and make him the biggest Negro leader in the country. Or if it wasn't the NAACP--

Somebody contacted his lawyer, Conrad Lenn and told him that. So Conrad said, "So what do you say, Robert?" And Rob told him, "Say, go to hell. You tell them I said

go to hell." And Conrad was just—oh, he was delighted. He said, "Well I already told them that because I knew that's what you would say." [Laughs] So when they found out that he was not going to give into be elevated as a leader of the black people sponsored by the white folks, then they said, "Well if we can't buy him, then we've got to kill him."

DC: What happens then?

MW: Then, three attempts that I know about on his life. I was behind him in cars twice.

DC: Can you tell me a little bit about that? The first couple I know (). It happened during the pool protest.

MW: Yes, yes, yes.

DC: Could you tell me about what happened?

MW: We were on the way to the pool. Robert—. The kids had been taken to the pool. Robert had gone to get, pick up some more kids. And then Mrs. Johnson and I, one of our co-workers—

DC: ()

MW: Aselee. We were behind—. Rob was in the car with one of the kids. And we were in the car behind Rob. Of course we had our pistols on the seat. And we were going down this road, Roosevelt Boulevard. Got to the place where they had the little—. It was a Highway Patrol station up on the hill. And Rob was driving his little Hillman car.

And when we left this side of town and were trying to follow Rob to the pool, a car came along side and cut in between us. And then another car came and cut in in front

of that car. And we couldn't get around. But the other car started bumping into his car and trying to run him off the side of the road.

Well, going down that hill, if they had run him off the side of the road in that little car, it would have killed him. And when we were passing the Highway Patrol, that scene stands out in my mind. I was waving and pointing. The Highway Patrolmen, two of them, were standing out watching what was going on.

DC: And just watching.

MW: And just watching. And I was standing—. I was in the car pointing to what was going on in front of us, and they were just standing there laughing, you know. That was one time when they tried to kill him. But he was able to maneuver and get away.

And I think what happened is the—. I think he said that the car seat jammed on the rifle, else he would have been able—he would have had to kill somebody who was trying to kill him. Then when he tried to get the people arrested who had done that the policeman Mooney, told him, "Well you go get him and bring him in and we'll consider arresting him." Well, now you know, even though Rob knew who it was, had he gone on his property to try to get him and bring him in, he would have been killed right then. So, that was one of the situations.

And the other one was when we were protesting again at the pool. And they blocked him off and they were getting ready—the police were getting ready to kill him except that one of the—. That he got out. Rob got out with his gun, a long rifle, which he had one of the kids to hand to him. And when he went to put a bullet in the chamber—this big, long bullet about that long fell out. And then the people—. They were getting

ready to lynch him that day. They were talking about, "Pour gasoline on the niggers. Kill them." You know. "Burn them up."

DC: That was at—

MW: That was at Hilltop, yeah. That was—. And we were behind him at that time.

DC: They—

MW: In a different car.

DC: They stopped his car?

MW: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DC: And were there a lot of white people out there?

MW: Yeah. It just seems like hundreds and hundreds.

DC: Was it—

MW: And the police were just directing traffic and pretending they didn't see it until he stepped out with the rifle. And when he stepped out with the rifle and they found out he was armed, then they came running and tried to disarm him at that place. And he would not be disarmed. And finally they had to—they let him out of there because he was armed and they weren't about to disarm him. So he was able to escape that time.

DC: All he had was a rifle?

MW: He had a rifle. But then the young kid on the other side had his Luger. I believe it was his Luger. And when the policeman went to the side of the car and was going to shoot Rob in the back, the kid put the gun out the window and told him, "If you pull that trigger you're dead." And he backed up. That cop backed up and fell in the ditch. But then, fate, I guess, was with us. God was with us. Those prayers that his

mother and my mother and everybody else had had and the neighbors protected, protected us.

DC: And the young people had been well-trained. That took a lot of restraint.

MW: Yes it did.

DC: Not to shoot first and then—

MW: Not to shoot, yes.

DC: To let the situation play out ().

MW: Yeah, a lot of kids would have just gone on and shot. And then all of them would have been killed at that time. They would have been wiped out. They would have been wiped out. God is good.

DC: And you said there was a third time?

MW: That was going down Morgan Mill Road one time. And it seemed that Rob—I think Rob outran them. They weren't able to stop him. We were just going down Morgan Mill Road to the pool.

DC: What was the occasion that the deputy took—stopped Rob's car when it had no lights?

MW: That was after they had butchered up his car. You know when I told you they were jamming his car that time. They knocked out one of his headlights.

So I think it was the following Saturday or the Saturday following that. We had just put out "The Crusader." And we were out distributing it. And he was going down one of the back streets near Winchester Avenue. And he was going down Fairley Avenue. And it was about dusk dark. And the police pulled him over and told him that he was under arrest for driving a vehicle with-- That he didn't have any lights on. And

he said, "Well it's not dark yet. Why would I be having lights on?" And they said, "Well, it's time for you to have your lights on. And since you don't have your lights on we're going to arrest you and take you to town."

And so somehow he was able to convince them that, "Well, let me drive my car. And I will drive the car on and then I'll follow you and I'll go on." And that was down Fairley Avenue. And our street, Boyd Street, ran into Fairley Avenue. And when he got to our street, the police had already passed Boyd Street. He turned in. And then he turned into our driveway.

DC: Now, he didn't think they were going to take him to jail or what--?

MW: Oh yeah. He felt that what they were getting ready to do—and we all felt, knew, that what they were getting ready to do was set him up for a lynching for that night. And so he wasn't about to go to that jail with them. He convinced them somehow that he would follow them to jail. And then he turned off and came into the, our driveway. And I heard the tired screeching and all that.

DC: You were inside the house?

MW: I was inside the house. And I knew something was up. I didn't know what had happened. But I came out with the shotgun. And he jumped out of the car, his car, and tried to—was trying to get our dog loose because our dog was a German Shepherd and he was bad. And I was standing there with the shotgun.

So that's when the police came up and they jumped out of the car. And they were saying they were going to take him to jail. And I said, "Do you have a warrant?" And they said-- They backed up and they saw me with the shotgun. And, so, I said, "If you don't have a warrant, you're not taking him anywhere." And so [laughs] I guess I was

shaking like a leaf. And they said, "This crazy woman is nervous and crazy enough to shoot us." And they got in their car.

DC: What was Rob doing at this time?

MW: He was trying—he was struggling with the dog because the dog was raging against the chain, you know. And then, well, once he saw that the police were all—they were getting scared, and I handed the shotgun to him. And they really flew them.

DC: I bet they did.

MW: Later on one of the neighbors said, oh, that's the first time they'd ever seen the police run that fast out of a neighborhood. [Laughs]

DC: Did they arrest Rob?

MW: No. And they never did come back. They never did come back. But we got our gun club together that night because we felt like they were coming back. I told the man, "Well, don't come back unless you got a warrant." But they never did get a warrant and they never did come back. They knew they were wrong. They knew they were wrong. And it wasn't even dark, you know. So, that's another time they would have killed him for sure.

DC: I think we're about—I'm about running out of things.

MW: Okay.

DC: But, didn't you get a--? Didn't you just want to like run off to Canada or something like that long before you actually had to leave?

MW: Yes, yes.

DC: Didn't you get tired of having to live--?

MW: I did get tired of it. I was scared to death.

DC: Did Rob?

MW: There were times when he was just disgusted with it all and would have liked to have gone away. And he got the opportunity to travel, to do speaking—

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW