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Use Restrictions

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Carey McWilliams would have disappointed Horatio Alger. The first years of his life, after all, seemed the fulfillment of the American Dream as conceived by that nineteenth-century writer: financial reversal and the death of his father forced the young man to move to the big city, where he worked his way through law school, then rose in reputation, esteem, and earnings.

But then the life of Carey McWilliams changed course because of an emotion unknown to those heroes of Alger: compassion. McWilliams discovered the underprivileged, discovered that many in American society were forced by race, religion, or circumstance to live on its fringes. At his memorial last year, he was eulogized not as a wealthy, successful attorney, which he was no longer, but as the successor to Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair as a journalist whose principal concern was the betterment of society.

Carey McWilliams was born December 13, 1905, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, to Jeremiah Newby and Harriet Casley McWilliams. He was born with what passed in the West for a silver spoon; his father had accumulated a fortune in land and cattle and was known throughout the state. His mother, who had journeyed to Steamboat Springs to teach school, had been quickly courted and wed by the rancher. Jerry McWilliams was elected to the state legislature when his children were small, and the family moved to Denver, where Carey was enrolled in Wolfe Hall Military Academy.

The reversal was abrupt. At the end of World War I, cheap Argentine beef flooded the market, and the American cattle industry collapsed. Jerry McWilliams was ruined, and he died a short time afterwards. In his will, he wrote to his sons, "Do not speculate or
seek to get rich too quickly. Be patient, be morally right, keep a clear conscience and
good company, although you may die a pauper be honorable in all things."

Three months after his father's death in 1921, Carey McWilliams was graduated from
Wolfe Hall. He was not yet ready to heed his father's advice; less than a year later, he
was excused from the University of Denver at the school's request.

He arrived in California to join his mother and brother in the spring of 1922 and
enrolled in the University of Southern California. While working in the business
office of the Los Angeles Times, he studied seriously and won his Juris Doctor in 1927.
He passed the California bar and joined the law firm of Black and Hammack, which
became, by the time he left it, Black, Hammack, and McWilliams.

If his law career was successful, his entry into the intellectual and cultural life of
Southern California was even more so. He was part of a group that circled around
Jake Zeitlin's various bookstores, a group that included Paul Jordan Smith, literary
editor of the Times; Arthur Millier, the paper's art critic; Phil Townsend Hanna, editor
of Touring Topics (now Westways;) photographer Will Connell; artist Merle Armitage;
and architect Lloyd Wright. Together they participated in the shortlived but ambitious
magazine Opinion; with Ward Ritchie, they contributed to the Primavera Press.

McWilliams corresponded with H. L. Mencken and published an article on Ambrose
Bierce in the American Mercury. Publisher Albert Boni read the piece and invited him
to expand the topic to book length, and the biography appeared in 1929. The
following year, the University of Washington Bookstore released The New
Regionalism in American Literature, in which McWilliams examined particularly
western influences.

He was friendly, too, with the Yugoslavian American writer Louis Adamic, who was
a radical champion of America's immigrants. In 1935, McWilliams paid homage to
his friend and mentor in Louis Adamic and Shadow-America.

By that time, his world was beginning to change. He was affected by Upton Sinclair,
whose EPIC movement fell short of the governorship but launched a New Deal
Democratic party in California. Four years after Sinclair's loss, Culbert Olson broke
the long Republican stranglehold on the statehouse and was elected governor.

His world changed, also because of his travels in the agricultural valleys of California,
upon which he reported to various eastern magazines. He was stunned by the living
conditions of migrant workers and by their treatment when they tried to organize labor
unions. He became the enemy of the Associated Farmers; for his concern Olson
named him chief of the Division of Immigration and Housing. He resigned from his
law firm and, through the division, undertook to improve the lot of the workers, at least to make their plight better known.

McWilliams assembled his accumulated notes and numbers to write a book, and in 1939 he published *Factories in the Field*. The book remains complementary to Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, fact to fiction; both contributed to an outpouring of sympathy for the so-called "Okies," the refugees from the blighted Dust Bowl states.

In *Ill Fares the Land*, published in 1942, he turned his attention to the national patterns of migratory labor and its exploitation by farm enterprises in such unexpected locales as Michigan and New Jersey. That year, Earl Warren defeated Olson and assumed the governorship, immediately fulfilling his pledge to his friends in the Associated Farmers to dismiss Carey McWilliams as his first official act.

Forty years later, it seems ironic that those migrant workers who so moved the prosperous young attorney left the agricultural fields for battlefields during World War II and returned to a California that was flush with the boom of new industries. Today, many of those former migrant workers are part of the new conservative coalition, apparently blind to the conditions of those who suffer today under the same yoke that once bound them.

It is ironic, too, that Earl Warren, self-admitted enemy of McWilliams, a leading figure in the internment of California's Japanese, developed into one of this century's leading civil libertarians after he became chief justice of the US Supreme Court little more than a decade later.

If his professional life was changing abruptly during this period, McWilliams was undergoing equal change in his personal life. In 1930, he had married Dorothy Hedrick, daughter of an eminent mathematician and UCLA administrator. In 1941, they were divorced, and McWilliams married Iris Dornfeld, the author. Parenthetically, each marriage produced a distinguished offspring: Wilson Carey McWilliams, born to Dorothy Hedrick, is a noted professor of political science; Jerry McWilliams, son of Iris Dornfeld, is an authority on the technology of recording equipment.

When he left state government, McWilliams dedicated himself to his social and political commitments. Primarily he was a writer and journalist, but he lent his legal skills where he felt them appropriate. He was active with the Committee for the Foreign-Born to protect the rights of "aliens" during wartime, and when racial turmoil burst loose against the Chicano in the Zoot Suit Riots of 1942 and 1943 in Los Angeles, he was active in the fight to free convicted teenagers in the Sleepy Lagoon case.
Writing was his occupation, injustice his preoccupation. *In Brothers under the Skin* (1943), he described the history of prejudice and racism in America, detailing the tribulations of yellow, brown, and black minorities. *Prejudice: the Japanese American, Symbol of Racial Intolerance* (1944) appeared while most Japanese Americans were still in internment camps. Their cause, espoused by McWilliams and by Los Angeles ACLU attorney A. L. Wirin, was eventually won in the courts, and rights of citizenship were restored to Orientals.

McWilliams explored anti-Semitism in America in the prize-winning and best-selling *A Mask for Privilege* (1948). He concluded that prejudice against the upwardly mobile, mercantile minority or ethnic group--the Jews, the Quakers and the Huguenots, the overseas Chinese in Asia--can be as insidious as the victimization of economically deprived groups.

In *North from Mexico* (1949), he described the patterns of migration of Mexicans in the United States, their exploitation by growers and employers throughout the nation, and the stumbling blocks they face when they attempt to assimilate into the American mainstream. *North from Mexico* was reprinted with a new introduction in 1968 and has become a standard text in Chicano-studies classrooms nationwide.

*Witch Hunt: the Revival of Heresy* (1950) sounded the alarm against incipient McCarthyism and identified a recurrent strain of intolerance and nativism in America. McWilliams was to be scarred in this era, his wounds from the liberal left were even deeper than those inflicted from the right.

He paused from social comment twice during this period, first in the classic *Southern California Country* (1946), the most entertaining history ever written on this region. McWilliams elsewhere wrote that his feeling on arrival in Los Angeles was "like having a ringside seat at a year-round circus," and in *Southern California Country* he portrayed the big top, that panorama of eccentrics and charlatans who seem more comfortable in the hills and valleys around Los Angeles than anywhere in the land. He described *California: the Great Exception* in 1949, expanding his perspective statewide.

McWilliams met Freda Kirchwey, editor of the *Nation*, in 1945, and their friendship grew along with their professional affiliation through the postwar years. She appointed him contributing editor to the *Nation* in 1948 and in 1951 asked him to come to New York to edit a special issue of the magazine on the threat to civil liberties posed by McCarthyism. He never left, and he wrote only two more books (*The California Revolution*, 1968, and *The Education of Carey McWilliams*, 1979). After a year as associate editor and three years as editorial director, he assumed the editorship of the magazine in 1955 and retained the post until his retirement in 1975.
In New York, his vision turned outward. Los Angeles was for McWilliams a rich source for his writing talents; New York was a backdrop. For thirty years, he attended to national and international issues in the pages of the Nation, and he thrived. He encouraged young writers and was never disappointed when they moved on to higher-paying publications.

And yet these were years of turmoil for the magazine. As an ardent defender of civil liberties even for communists, the Nation became a target of the anticommunist liberal left. Though McWilliams shared writers and ideas with such publications as the New Republic--on civil rights, against the Vietnam war and the Nixon presidency--the rift was never healed. Ironically, both McWilliams and Gilbert A. Harrison, editor-publisher of the New Republic during McWilliams's tenure at the Nation, identified for this interviewer the same threat to America's future: the failure or inability to involve members of the black and brown ethnic minorities in the economic system.

Liberalism, to many, is in ruins today, and it is hard to believe that the movement was once sufficiently large that it had factions, and that they were in steadfast opposition to one another. The so-called Old Left lay scorned and abused in the early seventies, but today many SDS members have crossed back into the mainstream, and no Carey McWilliams has risen from the ranks of the New Left. Carey McWilliams warned in our last interview that demagoguery enters where a political vacuum exists. How close are we to the fulfillment of this terrifying prophecy?

In his retirement, McWilliams continued to write, continued to speak out against injustice, continued to live happily with Iris Dornfeld. He spoke wistfully of returning to Los Angeles, but it was so large and unwieldy, and he hated driving. And then there was the cancer.

I last saw Carey McWilliams in December 1979 in Santa Monica. He had spent four months in Southern California that year, and we had shared a platform for the Friends of the UCLA Library. After he reviewed the edited transcript of this interview, I visited him with my father, whose own operation had required no follow-up chemotherapy. We all spoke in bright, optimistic, but troubled terms, talked about America, about California, about books. At the farewell, we agreed to meet again in New York.

I happened to travel to New York the following June, and a call to Carey and Iris was high on my agenda. After our fifteen hours in interview, I felt a certain closeness to him and I looked forward to the reunion. I arrived the night of the twenty-eighth; had I seen that morning's New York Times, I would have read his obituary.
I attended the memorial service at the Ethical Culture Society the following week, and sitting in those hallowed, nonsectarian halls, pondering especially other memorials, other eulogies, I thought of the nature of the relationship between an interviewer and a narrator. We touch the lives of many human beings, lives that are as fragile and transitory as our own. All we can hope is that we might transmit that to others who will never share our experience. Carey McWilliams offered much for me to draw upon.

In the end, Carey McWilliams fulfilled his father's last wishes. He dedicated his life to that in which he believed, to those who most needed his dedication. In the end, there was no speculation. He died as he had lived, honorable in all things.

Joel Gardner, Baton Rouge,

August, 1981

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- **TAPE NUMBER: X [video session] (July 19, 1978)**

1. **Tape Number: I, Side One (July 10, 1978)**

Gardner

  Now, as I mentioned, we standardly begin by talking about the date of your birth, the place of your birth. And then I'd like to hear something about your family background.

McWilliams

  Sure, certainly. Well, I was born on a cattle ranch near Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and the date was December 13, 1905. My father [Jeremiah (Jerry)
Newby McWilliams started out life as a clerk in a retail men's clothing store in Kansas City. He had been quite successful at it. But he contracted what was in those days known as lung trouble. And in those days there was only one sovereign remedy: that was to go west for the climate. He was twenty-one years old, and he borrowed some money from relatives--some rich relatives--in Kansas City and went out to Denver. In those days you went from Denver on the Denver-Rio Grande to Wolcott, and you took the stagecoach from Wolcott eighty miles to Steamboat Springs. And this is a very interesting part of the West. It's a big diagonal stretch of country that extends from the Continental Divide to the Utah border, and is bounded on the north by sort of a transverse range of the Rockies and on the south by the flattop wilderness area. The year that he went out there was 1886, and he had heard of a townsite that was going to be developed at Steamboat Springs. The townsite was founded by a man by the name of Colonel James Crawford, who had crossed the Continental Divide in 1876 by wagon train and whatnot, and had drifted down the Yampa. The Yampa River flows into the Bear River, and oddly enough it starts flowing north. He followed it down to Steamboat Springs, where it makes a sharp turn, heads west, goes into the Green, which flows into the Colorado. And at that point where it makes a turn, there's always been a collection of warm water springs and mineral springs. And he, Colonel Crawford, thought it would be an ideal place to establish a townsite, so he laid it out as a townsite. But there were no people there to speak of, and when my father arrived, the town consisted of three saloons, and a blacksmith shop, and a livery stable, a stagecoach inn. And there he proceeded to build a big barn of a building for a clothing store, general dry goods, with a big, huge, false front. And I think the name was the New York Emporium. [laughter] And of course with no customers--and even the people there had no money, you know--he went broke in three or four months' time. So the question arose: what to do? He went over to Wyoming, where the Carey family had a big cattle dynasty. The Careys are the subject of a lot of writing about Wyoming. They really ran Wyoming for a long period of time. And he went over there to talk to the head of the Carey dynasty, and he explained his problem. At that time, cattle were as cheap as pennies. They were just a nuisance almost. And this senior Carey said, "Well, there's no problem. We'll cut out a herd for you tomorrow, and some of the boys will help you drive them back to
northwestern Colorado, and you can sign a note." On the first meeting, mind you.

Gardner

Just amazing.

McWilliams

Just as casually as that. So that's how he got into the cattle business. It's an interesting kind of story because there was another Carey family down by Craig, Colorado--great, big cattle operation. Not as big as the Wyoming Careys, but very large. And they spelled their name Cary: C-A-R-Y. And they were very close friends of my father's. And my father succeeded Senator [John] Cary in the state senate from that part of Colorado. So when I was born, my father was in a quandary. He wanted to name me Cary, because that was the family with which he was closest, but he thought it would be confusing to have the spelling C-A-R-Y. There were quite a number of them about and so forth, so he didn't want that confusion. And the logic of it escapes me; I don't quite understand the logic of it. But in any case, he made it Carey: C-A-R-E-Y. And that's how I got the name. My father was, oh, I suppose we would say an eighth-grade-educated person. He was not intellectual. [He] had a very sharp, shrewd intelligence, but he was not in any sense an intellectual. He was not interested in books or anything of this sort. The family were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, so-called prerevolutionary stock: you know, made the traditional western route through the Cumberland Pass, and they were in North Carolina, and they came through the Cumberland Pass to Kentucky. There is still the original farm near Berea, Kentucky: 160 acres. It's still farmed by McWilliamses.

Gardner

Is that so?

McWilliams

Yes. All this period of time. But in my grandfather's time, there were eight children, I think. And it was obvious that all of them couldn't make a living on 160 acres. So my grandfather [Samuel McWilliams] lit out for Missouri and established a farm near Plattsburg, Missouri, which is about, oh, thirty miles
from Kansas City, something like that. And at about that time, the Civil War came along. He enlisted in the Confederate army, was a captain in the Confederate army. He was taken prisoner by the Union army and served some eight or nine months in a federal prison camp, and then he was released and went back to his farm. He was a Calvinist, started out being a Presbyterian, ended up by being what was called a foot-washing Baptist--[laughter] very, very dogmatic character who loved to argue religion with anybody, you know. And really a Gothic American. My grand-mother [Nancy McCorkle McWilliams] was of the same background, but she was a very pixieish kind of character, very humorous, and funny, and so forth. They lived out their lives in Plattsburg. They hardly ever went anywhere. They paid us one visit at the ranch, and it was a tremendous adventure for them to go west. We very frequently went back to see them at Christmastime. Frequently is not the right word. We went back on numerous occasions. Oddly enough this religious background--or not so oddly--disappeared when my father went west. He just sort of cast it aside. It was--you know, the West was the West. So he was not a churchman. He didn't go to church except rarely, and he supported all of the churches in Steamboat Springs, including the small Catholic church, same amount of money each year. But he didn't show really much interest. It was not a religious household. He wanted my brother [Casley McWilliams] and I to go to Sunday School, thought it wouldn't do us any harm. That was his attitude, but he did not insist upon it.

Gardner

Were you raised Presbyterian or Baptist?

McWilliams

No. We just were raised nothing.

Gardner

You were raised nothing.

McWilliams

Yes. I've gotten used to filling out all kinds of questionnaires as nonchurch, unaffiliated, you know, that sort of thing. My mother's [Harriet Casley McWilliams] family--this is even more bizarre because her parents were
Catholics. Her father [Paul Casley] was a French-Canadian; the family lived in Wisconsin. And he ran away at age sixteen to enlist in the Union army as a drummer boy, and was taken prisoner and all that sort of thing, and had a very rough time of it in the Civil War. Her mother was a German-Catholic from Hamburg who came here at the age of eleven as a German servant girl. Didn't speak a word of English: had her name and destination on a label on her coat. As they took the course of migrating west from Wisconsin to Kansas, and from Kansas to Denver, they had shed the religious background pretty largely. And my mother had no religious affiliations of any kind. She came over to Steamboat Springs. It was her first teaching assignment, and she didn't complete the first term in this school because she got married. Because pretty, young schoolteachers didn't survive very long single, you know, in that kind of situation. So they were married at the end of her first term in Steamboat Springs.

Gardner

What was the date of that? Do you know?

McWilliams

I don't know what that date would be [February 3, 1895]. My father died, I know, twenty-five years to the day, I think it was, that they were married. They had just the two of us—my brother, who lives here in Manhattan Beach, and he's three years older than I am—just the two of us. [My father] became—as I indicated in that Los Angeles Times interview, he really was the chief political-economic individual, so to speak, in northwestern Colorado for many years. Everything sort of revolved around him.

Gardner

Was it through the cattle business that he obtained this . . .

McWilliams

Yes, cattle business. He got into the cattle business in a big way. And you see, the cattle empires—open-range cattle industry—moved north from Texas, to Oklahoma, to Kansas, Wyoming, Montana. But it stayed on the east side of the Rockies because there was no rail line. So this development in northwestern Colorado was deferred.
Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

But not entirely, because they raised a lot of cattle, and they would drive them to Rawlins for shipment to Denver, or they would drive them right across the Continental Divide, as my father did on many occasions. But then David Moffat comes into the story. Moffat is really a great hero of the West in a way. He was a Denver banker, and he thought it was humiliating that Denver should be a branch-line city. The Union Pacific came in from Cheyenne, and the Santa Fe came through Pueblo but not to Denver. They ran a lot of branch lines into Denver, and he wanted a direct line from Denver to Salt Lake City and to the West. So imagine this: he had the audacity to project a rail line right across the Continental Divide. It was the highest full-gauge railroad in the world, and it turned out to be more or less a disaster for him, because it took two years to build it to the crest of the Divide to a place called Corona The Top of the World--11,000 feet elevation, with long snowsheds, you know--incredible. And Corona is only sixty-five miles from Denver--took two years to do this. Then they eventually extended it down the west slope of the Continental Divide, and they got it as far as Steamboat. The first train arrived there in 1908, and they eventually extended it as far as Hayden and Craig. But they never got it to Salt Lake City. But as soon as the railroad was completed, the cattle industry, which had been growing pretty rapidly, suddenly began to boom there, because this was the last reenactment of the open-range cattle industry, the whole saga, the whole thing: the cow towns, the cattle rustlers, the gunmen, the hustlers and the prostitutes, and the whole thing as it had developed in Wyoming, and Kansas, Oklahoma, and so forth. There's a pretty good book about this called Where the Old West Stayed Young. It was written by John Rolfe Burroughs, who was a chum of mine as a youngster, and it's got the whole story. And then, you see, when the rail line was completed in 1908, it was easy to ship cattle to Denver, and [it] saved a lot of time. World War I was coming along, so the cattle industry began to boom, really to boom. Up to this point it had been a situation of simply raising cattle and shipping beef to Denver and so forth, but when it began to boom in this way, my father went, for example, to Arizona and New Mexico, where drought conditions had created a buyer's market--thousands of heads of steers--and shipped them
north to northwestern Colorado, ran them one season and shipped them to Denver, sold them on a rising market, as these other cattle empires did. And of course they all got rich. There was a fantastic development, but when the Armistice came, they had not anticipated what the effect the lifting of the German naval blockade on Argentine beef might have; you see, all during the war years, Argentine beef had been kept out of American markets because of the German naval blockade. Once that blockade was lifted, all that accumulated beef began to flow into American markets, and the cattle market completely collapsed—not partially; it completely collapsed.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

You couldn't even sell cattle. And all these big-time operators went broke, all of them, my father included, his operation included. And they just hadn't anticipated this disaster. And of course during the war years the demand was great, and it seemed to be endless. Prices were constantly going up, but it all came to a real crashing finale in 1919.

Gardner

Were you aware of this as you were growing up? It's hard, because it's the years of, say, about seven to fifteen.

McWilliams

Yes. I was not aware of the scale. I didn't appreciate just what was going on. My father had this home ranch, main ranch, where we lived. But he owned a lot of other ranches, too, and it was a big operation. One year, I recall, we ran something like 17,000 head of cattle on the range. My parents were ideal parents in an ideal setting in a way because they were both very busy, no-nonsense types. They had to be busy. They had a great deal to do. And they let us roam pretty wild, do what we wanted to. After all, what the hell? What could we do to harm ourselves? We might break a leg or something, you know, but there were no social menaces of any kind. So we lived on the ranch in the spring, summer, and fall, and then usually went to Denver in the winter when my father was in the state senate. But we had regular duties, things we
did at the ranch; they both insisted on that. My brother and I had worked with the cowhands. We had a string of horses each. We were really part of the operation. We did what they did. [tape recorder turned off] It was in a way an ideal kind of an environment to grow up in. And the town itself was—Mark Twain would have appreciated the town. There were some cowhands in the area who would race their horses up and down Main Street on Sunday mornings, shooting off revolvers, disturbing the pious. The townspeople couldn't put up with this, so they adopted an ordinance that all saloons and that sort of thing would have to move across the Yampa River to the other side of the river. And, of course, you would guess what they called that community: they called it Brooklyn. [laughter] And there they had the saloons, and the houses of prostitution, and a couple of shabby hotels, and a racetrack, and all the rest of it. And it was quite a place, quite a place. And then, you see, it was so ironic in a way that the history comes on tiptoe occasionally. In 1912 a man by the name of [Carl] Howelsen arrived at Steamboat with some skis; he was a Norwegian. And as kids we didn't know anything about skiing. Snowshoes, sleds, yes; skis, no. So we tagged around Howelsen and worshipped him, a great hero from the outside world. And he saw this as a great ski resort country. So the first big carnival, winter carnival, was held in 1914, and they held the world's championship ski-jumping record for a long time there. But it was one of these mountains, Storm Mountain it was called, [that] used to gravely annoy my father, because it was too steep; you couldn't raise cattle on it. He could see no point of trying to turn cattle loose on that part of the range. But it was an absolutely ideal ski course.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

So, it is not now called Storm Mountain; it's called Mt. Werner, after Bud Werner, the first American to win international acclaim as a ski jumper, who was killed in Switzerland. And the Werners, in the meantime, had bought my father's ranch. So it's now called Mt. Werner, and there's a big development there, of course connected with skiing. But he couldn't imagine that that hill—that mountain—would ever be used for anything. He'd turn over in his grave three times, you know, if he could . . .
Gardner

. . . if he could see it today.

McWilliams

. . . if he could see it in its present development.

Gardner

Were there many kids in that area when you were growing up?

McWilliams

Quite a number. But it was--you know, the town itself, the townsit that Colonel Crawford had in mind, didn't develop, really, because by the turn of the century there were only 300 people in the town. But with the railroad coming in, they began to get eastern summer people, and the town began to show some development. The springs are delightful, wonderful. And they had a public bathhouse and all the rest of it, and then it began to grow. And I suppose when I was going to school, there may have been 1,600 people, maybe; I'm not sure there were that many. And in view of all the chatter that we hear nowadays about "roots," it was very interesting, because the Utes, after the so-called Meeker Massacre--I think it was in the late seventies--the Utes had all been removed and placed on a reservation in Utah. So we were not aware of anything even resembling an Indian presence. It had just completely gone. There were three blacks that I knew, but I didn't really know them as blacks. They were just individuals, really. My father had a chuck wagon cook, who, of course, as you might suspect or anticipate, was known as Nigger Jim. But he was a tyrant and a despot. My father was afraid to talk to him, almost, and my mother was, too, because he just ran that chuck wagon as though it were his own individual enterprise. And there was a Negro couple that ran the bathhouse, the springs, in Steamboat who were very much a part of the community--they were known to everyone and highly regarded--and one other black woman, who did laundry and who was also a very highly regarded kind of person. No Orientals that I can think of in retrospect; one Mexican-American family; and one family that ran a jewelry store, a watch and jewelry store, that sort of thing, and may, just may have been Jewish. I'm not sure. But there were no others. It was that kind of community.
Gardner

All the other 1,595 were . . .

McWilliams

. . . mixed, a wild mix. And you didn't know where they came from, really; and you didn't ask where they came from. But many of them, quite a number of them, had come from the South.

Gardner

After the war.

McWilliams

After the war. But you didn't really--you never got into this somehow. And there were two coal camps, coal mining camps--Oak Creek and Mount Harris. The miners were south Europeans, by and largely--Bulgarians, Yugoslavs, Italians, and whatnot. But those towns kept to themselves. They had their own activities, and we had very little contact with them. They would show up on the Fourth of July to witness the bucking-bronco contests and all that, but they didn't really figure in the life of the community. So from the point of view of ethnic mix, it was a big mix. But there were no Mexicans, only two or three blacks, no Jews, no Orientals, no Indians; otherwise, as far as the rest of the population . . .

Gardner

. . . was very wide.

McWilliams

They came from the ends of the earth, so to speak. For example, there was a colony--this accounts for the fact that there was a small Catholic church--of Swiss who'd heard about this Switzerland of America, which it really is. And they had come from Switzerland. They had some ranches, small ranches, in the north end of the valley. My father did business with them for years. They were so isolated there that the kids were as wild as rabbits. If they saw people coming, they'd start running. But there were these Swiss, and there were some Germans, German people; it was quite a mix, but it was all white.

Gardner
Your mother, you mentioned, was German-Catholic. Did she also not observe religion once she. . . ?

McWilliams

Both of her parents had shed their Catholicism by the time the family got to Denver. They had made a series of moves and went from Wisconsin to Kansas; Kansas to Denver. By the time they got to Denver, they had shed this. They probably thought of themselves as being Catholic, but they were not churchgoing Catholics. She was not. She had no suggestion of Catholicism about her.

Gardner

She was a schoolteacher, so she must have had an education.

McWilliams

She had a high-school education, high school.

Gardner

And that was adequate to school teaching?

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes, indeed. She had a small library at the ranch, consisted of some sets of books: Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, and a few other sets of that kind, and some popular novels of the period, such as The Rosary, by Florence Barclay; and novels by Irving Bacheller; Rider Haggard, the American Winston Churchill; and some cowboy novels. And she usually subscribed to at least one magazine like the Ladies Home Journal or Saturday Evening Post. And she did like to read when she had any time to read, but she didn't have much time. I don't know to this day where and how I became an omnivorous reader. I just don't know how this happened, but it did. [tape recorder turned off]

Gardner

You were talking about your reading habits.

McWilliams

Yes. I recall that my first published work was a letter written to the editor of the Rocky Mountain News calling his attention to the fact that they had
published a poem, an English Victorian poem, and they had the name of the poet wrong. And I took great delight in calling their attention to this fact. That was the first thing of mine that ever appeared in print. [laughter] So obviously I was reading some poetry and so forth.

Gardner

How old were you then?

McWilliams

Well, I was still in grade school. I know that, because most of my high school was in a school in Denver--most of it. Well, when my father was elected to the state senate, he of course was a member of the Denver Club and all that sort of thing. And his colleagues, the people that he associated with in business, you know, in Denver--he had a seat, incidentally, on the Denver Stock Exchange and all that sort of thing. And his friends, his associates, convinced him that my brother and I shouldn't go to a public high school. This wasn't quite the right thing to do--the more so since we had gone to quite a different kind of school. They recommended a school called the Wolfe Hall Military Academy in Denver. It was right near Miss Wolcott's School for Girls and right near the Lawrence Phipps mansion on Colfax Avenue. They had day students (and we were day students), and then they had regular boarding students. It was a military academy, and it was run by Episcopalians. It was grotesque. So far as the boarding pupils were concerned, you might refer to it as a quite expensive, high-class reformatory, [laughter] because these were kids who were from Wyoming and New Mexico and all around whose parents had apparently had quite a bit of difficulty with them, and they sort of farmed them out to a military academy, you know. My brother and I couldn't really bring ourselves to tell our parents that they had made quite a misjudgment about this place, so we made the best of it. But as day students it didn't affect us too much. So we went to the Wolfe Hall Military Academy.

Gardner

This was for high school.

McWilliams
For high school. Although during the last year of high school, when all this debacle began, my father was quite ill. He was dying, and he wanted to go back to the ranch, wanted to go back to the ranch. So we took him back there in the depths of the winter. We could do it because the train made a stop right at the ranch. This stop was known on the railroad schedule as Newby, Colorado-- and his name was Jeremiah Newby McWilliams--so that he had a station, so to speak, right at the ranch where the train stopped. Because we had taken him back there in the middle of the winter, I actually graduated from Steamboat Springs High School. But most of my high school was spent at Wolfe Hall Military Academy.

Gardner

I see. Well, tell me something just briefly about your grammar school education and so on. Do you recall anything about it? Do you recall inspiration of any kind from it and so on?

McWilliams

No, I can't say that I do. It had some; I remember one or two teachers that were quite good, quite good. But it was, just as you would expect it to be, a fairly good public school for a community of that kind. I didn't have any particular inspiration there. In this Wolfe Hall Military Academy, there was a professor there from Bowdoin who was quite a literary kind of guy, and I enjoyed my work with him. I enjoyed that. Then, when I graduated from Steamboat Springs High School, I had a scholarship to the University of Denver. I think I was sixteen when I enrolled at the University of Denver. By that time I was very much interested in books and had scribbled notes for a kind of a novel about that part of the West. Of course I never wrote it. But I was interested in writing and books. And I read [F.] Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* the year before I enrolled in the University of Denver. It made a great impression on me; I thought this was a wonderful book. And then when I was in the University of Denver, I worked on the paper, the school paper, and so forth. I had discovered [H.L.] Mencken in the meantime, and I bought every copy of the *Smart Set* as soon as it appeared. I would race down to the newsstand for the latest copy and read all the books Mencken commended.

Gardner
Your background in this circumstance—growing up until your father's debacle, as you put it—was really that of a rich boy. You were always well-to-do and so forth and so on.

McWilliams

That is quite true.

Gardner

And then especially when you mentioned the Fitzgerald and the Mencken and so forth and so on . . .

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

. . . as the first books. Were you aware of that sort of thing growing up? Did you have a feeling that, you know, your father was probably the richest guy in the territory, and there you were in school?

McWilliams

I was aware of the fact that he was universally respected, and that he was a man of very considerable prominence, and was a character: you know, everyone knew him. It was very interesting. He never got over being this clerk in the men's clothing store in Kansas City. For example, we grew up with cowhands. It was a big cattle operation; we always had a lot of cowhands around, and they were our mentors. I don't know whether you know this or not, but cowhands are enormously style-conscious.

Gardner

No, I wasn't aware of that.

McWilliams

Beyond belief. I mean, reins have got to be just so thin. If a stirrup is too wide, it's gauche, kind of vulgar. If a rowel on a spur's too big, they didn't like it, and all that sort of thing. How you trim a horse's tail and clip his mane—how you do all this is very, very important to them, very, very important. Now, they looked for my father as a comic figure. He wore flatheeled boots, for example.
Wouldn't use spurs. His saddle and his stirrups were those of a farmer, just impossible, you know. If he tried to rope, he'd get himself all tangled up in the rope. He wore a coat and a vest, collar and a black tie, and a flat-brimmed black hat that, you know, a Mormon bishop would have worn. So the cowhands used to laugh themselves silly behind his back, because there he was; and we thought it was kind of funny, too. But he commanded their total respect for, I think, essentially one reason: he was an absolutely, astonishingly phenomenal judge of livestock. Where he had acquired this, I don't know. But cattle and horses, age, weight, you know, absolutely uncanny. This deeply impressed them. He was a teetotaler. He wouldn't allow liquor on the ranch, any of his ranches. And if they had guns, as they did, they had to check the guns, [or he] wouldn't let them in. In other words, when they were out riding on the range, he wouldn't permit them to carry guns. And yet, for all of that, they had very considerable respect for him, very great respect. And we assimilated some of their attitude towards him. To them he was a kind of a comic figure, you know. It was odd to see a man of this kind out on the open range at a roundup or something, you know. . . .And he was highly respected in the town itself, I was aware of this, and of course [also when I was] going to school in Denver. I spent a lot of my time in Denver, not in Wolfe Hall, but in riding around on a bicycle, or reading in the state library of the state capitol, or listening in on the senate debates, and that sort of thing. But he was not ostentatious. We didn't live in anything that you would call affluence or anything like this. It was a western ranch-style living, you know. But we were well aware of the fact that he was a person of some considerable substance and standing.

Gardner

Right. Did your brother go on to college before you?

McWilliams

He had to stay because of my father's illness, in this debacle and whatnot. He had to leave college to help out at the ranch. And he was much more, I would say, adept at it than I was. He was much more geared to it. If circumstances had turned out differently he would probably have turned out to be a big dealer or cattle operator himself. He liked that sort of thing. He was not particularly good in school; he didn't get good grades. He got passing grades
but not good grades, and as a result of this interruption he didn't graduate from college.

Gardner

I see.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Well, there you are at the University of Denver, then, at sixteen. What sort of course of study did you embark upon?

McWilliams

Absolutely so irrelevant and eccentric you wouldn't believe it. I was, you know, very naive about that sort of life. I joined a social fraternity, and I had another freshman who pledged at the same time I did. He was an Italian-American, and we were great friends. He was a football player; I was not. So he told me I should enroll with him in the Italian course, take Italian as a foreign language because it would be a cinch: he could take care of any problems that came up, and so forth and so on. I took a course in Italian, a course in art appreciation, an English class, and a class in economics, and a class in economic history, I think it was. So it was really nonsense in terms of. . .

Gardner

Well, economics and economic history. . .

McWilliams

Well, yes. There might have been something to have been said for that. But it was at that break, in that period, the postwar thing was just coming along, you know.

Gardner

Right. Did you have a goal in mind, an educational goal? You ended up with a Juris Doctor [degree]. Did you plan to be an attorney?
McWilliams

No, I didn't at all; I didn't. I never had that in mind. My father had a brother [Edmond] who was for years and years and years the editor-publisher of a small paper in Missouri. I sort of thought that it would be fun to--in fact, I told my father that I sort of thought I'd like to be a newspaper person. He didn't regard this with any favor. He thought newspaper people were sort of transients, who floated in and out. He had a real estate and insurance office in Steamboat in addition to his ranches, and so he thought that maybe I should take over that side of the business. My brother would attend to the ranch side of operations. I didn't find anything disillusioning about that, but I didn't have any interest in that at all. When I was a freshman, I didn't really have any specific aim in mind. I worked on the school paper, a cub reporter, so-called, and that was about it.

Gardner

Now, you weren't at Denver very long, though, were you, before the family moved?

McWilliams

No, my father's health kept getting worse and worse. And when he died, my mother came to--she had a brother [Vernon Casley] who was living here in Los Angeles, and she came west to be with her brother and his family. Our plans were very uncertain because this whole [cattle] empire was being liquidated by then. It was a long, drawn-out, very involved business. My brother was helping out in connection with it. Our plans were quite uncertain. And then I got bounced from the University of Denver in connection with a St. Patrick's Day celebration as a freshman. We put it on a little bit too lavishly. The University of Denver was very Methodist in those days, and this sort of thing was not looked upon with any favor. So I joined her out here. When I enrolled as a freshman, I had a sports sedan and a small allowance, and I was sixteen years old, and it was a lot of fun, a lot of fun being a freshman, you know. So when all this happened, and I came out here and joined her--she was living in Hollywood, and my uncle had an apartment building, flat building, at Hollywood and Normandie. And we lived with him.

2. Tape Number: I, Side Two (July 10, 1978)
Gardner

You're on Hollywood and Normandie.

McWilliams

Hollywood and Normandie. Well, the only skill that I had was I knew how to operate a typewriter and could type. My uncle had heard that if you looked at the bulletin board at the YMCA, you could spot jobs. So I did that, and I held a number of miscellaneous jobs, just for a few weeks here, there, and elsewhere. And then one day there was a notice posted on the board that the Los Angeles Times credit manager wanted an assistant. So I applied, and it was a very odd and very funny situation. The credit manager of the Times was a fixture of the institution. He'd been there for years and years, and he was a total despot.

Gardner

Who was that? What was his name?

McWilliams

His name was M.E. Hillis. And he couldn't keep an assistant for any length of time at all. So I was interviewed by his assistant, the assistant credit manager, and to my astonishment he said, "Yes, you're hired," because they were just anxious to get anyone. The first ten days or two weeks I was there, I had a very rough time of it, because about twice a day Hillis would fire me. He would turn to the assistant credit manager and say, "Get this boy out of here. He's no good at all. Get him out. Get him out." And [C.O.] Denning, who was the assistant, would wink at me, you know; and then at the end of about two weeks his whole attitude began to change. And from then on, I was his boy. I could do no wrong, really. It became a kind of father-son relationship. He gave me sort of free run of the place. And I was pretty good at that, pretty good at this sort of thing. Then I decided I wanted to go back to school. So he said, sure. So I enrolled first at UC, which was then located on Vermont, before it moved out on the [Westwood] campus, before it was UCLA. I went there for a time. I didn't like it. Frankly, I didn't like it.

Gardner

How come?
McWilliams

Well, I just didn't like the atmosphere. It was a two-year [college].

Gardner

Right. Oh, it was still . . .

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

. . . a normal school.

McWilliams

It was sort of a normal school, and I didn't really like it. So I decided I would go to USC. So I transferred to USC. And Hillis made it possible for me to arrange my work schedule, so I held the equivalent of a full-time job.

Gardner

And that would pay the cost at USC.

McWilliams

Yes, paid the cost. For example, we worked Sundays. I worked Saturdays and Sundays. Sundays we had a crew that counted classified lineage in the Times. We did it by hand, counting, at that time. Norman and Ralph Chandler, who were then learning the whole routine of a business, they worked on that crew. And incidentally, we got very, very adept at it. We got so good that we could count that Sunday classified in less time than it takes to tell. And we would be out of there.

Gardner

Got a knack for it.

McWilliams

Yes. We were paid a quite good wage for the time. I think it was maybe twenty dollars for the Sunday, you see. We'd be out of there by noon. We became very adept and adroit. And the Times were very, very--this chap Hillis was very,
very good to me in this respect. He made it possible for me to--I would come in the afternoons and work into the evening, and then work Saturdays and Sundays; and it was the equivalent of a full-time job. Then suddenly it occurred to me one day that--I had an old rattletrap Ford roadster; I would drive down to the campus, [go to] classes, drive back to the *Times*, then drive back to Hollywood--it occurred to me one day that this was kind of nonsensical, because the law school was right across the street from the *Times* in the old Tahoe building, see, and this was the last year in which with three years in liberal arts you could enroll in the law school. So I said, well, I'll enroll in the law school. [laughter]

Gardner

Save some gas.

McWilliams

Save all that wear and tear. And for no better reason, I enrolled in the law school. Well, I had another [reason]: it would have helped me in my work at the *Times*, in the business office. So I enrolled in the law school. Then, of course, by the time I was a senior, I think it was, the law school moved back to the campus. So in the senior year I was back once again on the campus, traveling around in that Ford.

Gardner

So by that time you were a senior. So it was not . . .

McWilliams

Yes. By that time I was a senior, so it didn't matter.

Gardner

Mind if I open the door?

McWilliams

No, not at all. Not at all. [tape recorder turned off]

Gardner

Okay. Well, let's see. Now, you graduated from law school in '27.
McWilliams

That's right, that's right.

Gardner

So that means 1925 was about the time you were turning from liberal arts to law.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

And that's when we come across "Bierce as Poet" in the Dumbook. What in the world is the Dumbook? And how did you discover Ambrose Bierce?

McWilliams

Well, at USC I worked on the school paper, the Trojan.

Gardner

Daily Trojan.

McWilliams

I wrote editorials on the Trojan. And I edited the college literary magazine, The Wooden Horse, and also worked on the so-called college humor magazine [Wampus]. And I was still very much interested in writing books and so forth, and doing tremendous amounts of that kind of reading. I had known for a long time that Mencken admired Bierce, but I had never really gotten into Bierce very much. And one day I was in the old Los Angeles Public Library, which was housed in a building there, you know, between Broadway and Spring on Fifth Street. And you could just wander around through the stacks, you know, with the greatest of ease. Nobody paid you any attention. I came across this collected works of Ambrose Bierce, and I thought, Jesus, I didn't realize Bierce had--these were like twelve volumes. So I began reading them and was delighted with The Devil's Dictionary and some of the other things that I read. Then it occurred to me that Bierce had lived for years in California, and there must be a lot of people around who knew him, who had known him, and why didn't I try to do something about Bierce. So I set to work. I think the
first thing that I wrote about Bierce was just a slight piece about him that appeared in the *Argonaut* in San Francisco, which was still being published. That was the paper that he had edited a long time ago, way back. I sent a copy of it to Mencken, and he said, "Well, why don't you do a piece for the *American Mercury*?" *The American Mercury* [had] then started. "Why don't you do a piece for the *American Mercury* about Bierce?" So I set to work in earnest then really to do something about Bierce.*The Dumbook*, I think, was edited by David Warren Ryder in San Francisco. It was obviously a little magazine. Ryder was a publicist for the lumber industry, a public relations man, and sort of a bon vivant and man about town in San Francisco, all that sort of thing. I got to know him fairly well. Very ironic this particular footnote: that when World War II came along, and all the Japanese excitement and furor was created, you know, there were only three--I think three--Americans who were arrested for having represented the Japanese government somewhere in connection with intelligence and so forth. One was on the night desk of the *New York Daily News*, one was a businessman by the name of Townsend, and one was David Warren Ryder. This same David Warren Ryder.

Gardner

How bizarre.

McWilliams

Yes. Very. Anyway, I started out on this Bierce exploration. I found some people that I could, and did, interview; I went to San Francisco on a number of trips, Napa Valley. And I began to turn up all kinds of material about Bierce and had long interviews with Gertrude Atherton, Fremont Older, Colonel Charles Erskine, Scott Wood, and James Tufts, some of his old newspaper friends; and it began to grow and grow and grow. I had been trying very hard to find his daughter [Helen Bierce], and I couldn't. I couldn't get a lead as to--she had lived one time in Bloomington, Illinois, and she'd had a divorce, and then she had just vanished. And then suddenly I discovered that she was living in San Fernando Valley in California, and that she had come out here about the same time that I had, and just by pure chance. So I got in touch with her. And this is an interesting story. She was her father's daughter in many respects--that is, physically. She was quite handsome, she had a real presence about her, and so forth. But in other respects, she was very much not his
daughter. She was a Christian Scientist; she was addicted to any kind of new thought thing that came along. Can you imagine how Bierce would have reacted to that? [laughter] And all that sort of thing. She knew that he was a very great man. She was aware of this, but in actual appreciation of the stuff that he did, she just didn't have it. But she was very cooperative. She became over a period of time quite co-operative. She wasn't particularly at the start, and then we became very good friends, very good friends. She helped me a great deal. The practice at that time was to--twice a year almost you'd see a feature story in the Sunday supplement section of some newspaper, "What Ever Happened to Ambrose Bierce?" You know, that kind of story. And the facts were all wrong in most of them. No one had ever really tried to pin down his place of birth or. . . . They were all interesting; they were all interesting. And I had tried to find out what had happened to his marriage. Then I learned from the daughter that her mother had obtained a divorce from Bierce in the Superior Court of Los Angeles County. Huh. So I went up to the courthouse, and there was the record! As a result of this, I did this piece for the Mercury, which Mencken accepted and published. And Albert Boni wrote me a letter immediately and offered me a contract to do a biography, or do a book about him.

Gardner

The piece, was that the one called "Mystery of Ambrose Bierce"? Is that an earlier one?

McWilliams

I think that was an earlier one. I think it was an earlier one.

Gardner

I never found it. I'll have to track it down.

McWilliams

And Mencken had, incidentally, been very, very helpful. He had suggested that I look up George Sterling; they were great friends. So I saw Sterling, and we became great friends.

Gardner
Was this after you were out of law school by this time, or were you still in law school?

McWilliams

No, I was going to school. I was going to school. The last year and a half, two years of his life, I knew Sterling very well. His letters to me were published by the California Historical Society--the one that issues the quarterly--kind of interesting letters [*California Historical Society Quarterly*, September, 1967]. I got to know him very well. This was just shortly the year before he died. Mencken came out to see him, to pay him a visit, and Mencken dropped me a note that he'd be at the Ambassador Hotel for a few days en route to San Francisco. So I went over to the hotel and had a chat with him (which was the high point in my year), and then he went on to San Francisco. Sterling, I think, was unable to meet him at the train, and he went to the Bohemian Club where Sterling lived, saw him briefly that day. The next day he came back, and he couldn't see him because Sterling was ill. And the third day they found Sterling dead. He had taken poison, apparently. The idea was that he had been saving up a stock of booze for Mencken, for Mencken's arrival--this was during Prohibition days, you see--and he had been on the wagon. He was supposed to stay on the wagon, couldn't really drink. Then he had suddenly slipped off the wagon. And in one of these letters he wrote me, he said, "I have sworn to stay sober (until he gets here), but was I sober when I swore?" [laughter] And so Mencken wrote a very, very nice piece about him. Mencken attended the funeral services in San Francisco and wrote a very wonderful piece about him for the San Francisco papers and then returned to the East. So in many ways Mencken gave me quite a number of important leads. Then it was so exasperating, because after my book [*Ambrose Bierce: A Biography*] came out, then all kinds of people began to write me--of course, they had known Bierce and so forth--that I had no knowledge of at all. So I did quite a number of magazine pieces after the book came out, in which some of this material was subsumed.

Gardner

So that's when something like the later piece, "The Mystery of Ambrose Bierce," really tried to sift through all the . . .

McWilliams
And I discovered his childhood sweetheart in Indiana. She sent me an old photograph and letters; and I did a piece about that which appeared in the *Bookman*. Then I discovered some collections of his letters which had not been published, and I published them in the University of California *Chronicle* and so forth. Then in the meantime, to get back to the daughter, the daughter had had a second divorce. Her second husband was a chap by the name of Francis Isgrigg, who was a lawyer in Los Angeles. And she was broke, down and out. And she was helping to manage an apartment. I induced her to sell things that she had of her father's which I had not seen, because she was a little wary about this. She kept them under lock and key. But I did go through them, and I could see it was a very interesting collection. So I got Jake [Zeitlin] interested in this project, and Jake negotiated a sale whereby she sold the collection to Mrs. [Milton] Getz for something like $5,000. I arranged to have Mrs. Getz pay the money to me as trustee, because I wanted to dole it out to her, because I knew by that time how totally irresponsible she was about her own affairs. It was orally agreed that I would have access to the material in Mrs. Getz's possession. But that turned out to be a most unsatisfactory kind of commitment because I only had a limited period of time to look at the collection. I discovered that Mrs. Getz had plans about it. She had an English librarian who was going through it, cataloging it and so forth. I had only a period of a couple of weeks to look at it, which was totally inadequate. But I had to put up with it. Then the daughter lived on for a time. She was always in trouble. She was accident prone: she was always breaking a leg or something. She'd become quite dependent by then. I tried to help her as much as I could. And she died eventually in the Los Angeles County Hospital.

Gardner

Sad.

McWilliams

Sad, sad story. Yes.

Gardner
Since you mentioned Jake. . . . You first met Jake, the way I hear it--well, I should have you say how you first met Jake. But you would have been in law school then, too.

McWilliams

Well, I was in the latter part of liberal arts or in law school, and I was doing these pieces for Sam Clover. I had gotten to know him--incidentally, a very kindly, nice gentleman, a real gentleman, snow-white hair. [His] little office I think was in the Bryson Building in downtown Los Angeles--very nice gentleman. He encouraged me to write whatever I wanted to write, mostly literary pieces, so-called.

Gardner

For Saturday Night.

McWilliams

For Saturday Night, for which I was paid ten dollars apiece. And I had heard about Jake, who somehow--I don't know who told me about this, but I know that I went out [break in tape] . . . Jake had published a volume of poems. He was living in a place off in Elysian Park, up on the top of the hills, so you could look down at the railroad tracks. I interviewed him there and did a piece about him which appeared in Saturday Night. We became instant friends, fast friends; and we remained fast friends down the years.

Gardner

For over fifty years.

McWilliams

Yes, a long period of time, long period of time. And then later on I helped him with the bookstores; from the legal point of view, I did the work for him.

Gardner

Well, first why don't you talk a little more about Sam Clover and about Saturday Night magazine and what its role was in Los Angeles.

McWilliams
Well, I tell you, after this defeat that had taken place at the time of the Owens Valley . . .

Gardner

Well, tell about that again, because that was before we turned on the tape recorder that you told that story.

McWilliams

Well, he was the editor of this *Los Angeles Evening News*, and it was supported by private power interests—at least that was the scuttlebutt—and they were opposed to the Owens Valley project because it was a municipal—light and power and water. So they let him take a pretty free hand with respect to—and he was quite critical of the project, the unfairness of it and so forth. I guess you would say it was about the only Los Angeles paper there was that took this position. But when it was clear that the project was going to go through anyway, I don't know exactly what happened but his sponsors withdrew their support. And the paper collapsed. And I don't know when he started *Saturday Night*.

Gardner

I think it was 1920.

McWilliams

It may well [have been]. He had a nice old home, very nice old home, in the Echo Park area overlooking Echo Park. I used to visit with him there on several occasions. He started *Saturday Night*, and there was society news, people, and that sort of thing. It discussed civic affairs to some extent, but not much.

Gardner

And your dealings with it were to do profiles of—were they mostly poets that you wrote about?

McWilliams

No, I wrote about people like Mary Austin, and I did a piece about Clarkson Crane, and Louis Adamic, younger writers in particular that were coming along, some Hollywood people, Jim Tully, and interviews, and that sort of
thing. And it was optional. You know, I didn't have any assignment or anything like that. If I saw something I wanted to do, he was generally glad to get it.

Gardner

This is still while you were a college student. That's very interesting. Did you find him, or did he find you?

McWilliams

I sent a piece to him. He accepted it, and then I sent another piece, and then somewhere along the line I went down to see him and met him and talked to him. But I wish somebody would do a dissertation based upon his life. It would be very interesting.

Gardner

It would be interesting to track down. Now, later on--and this is jumping ahead a little bit but still has to do with this--you were involved with Jake on Opinion magazine.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner

You were the attorney for it. I think you also did some writing for it.

McWilliams

I did some writing for it.

Gardner

At that time Jake was involved with a number of people: Lloyd Wright, Phil Townsend Hanna, and so on. You mentioned that Phil Townsend Hanna became one of your close friends. Did you fall into the crowd about the same time, or was it a...?

McWilliams

Yes, it was more or less. This was, in many respects, an incredibly small community despite its size. But in intellectual terms it was a very small community. If you knew some of these people, you knew the others, see. And
Will Connell, the photographer, was a very close friend of mine. Will was part of this, and Phil Hanna, José Rodriguez, Merle Armitage, Jake [Zeitlin], Kem Weber, Hildegarde Flanner, and others. I don't know just where the inspiration came to start *Opinion*. We just started it.

Gardner

Jake has a wonderful phrase about the fact that it died out because no one really had an opinion.

McWilliams

I think there's a good deal to be said for that. It was published for about eight or nine months, I think, something like that, seven or eight months.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

It was kind of interesting.

Gardner

Why don't you tell about some of the people who are involved with that, what Jake was like fifty years ago. Tell about Phil Townsend Hanna and so on.

McWilliams

Well, Jake was really sort of the center of it, in a way, as you would expect, because you'd meet in his downtown bookstore, then go to René and Jean's, a French restaurant on Sixth Street, to plan the next issue, which we never got around to doing; we'd be gabbing about everything under the sun. It was a very delightful experience. We got to know each other and became good friends. From time to time somebody would breeze into the community, and we would take them out to dinner and so forth. I helped Jake with the Primavera Press; I don't know how long that lasted, but it published some pretty good works.

Gardner

Right. Of course, there you were only involved legally.
Oh, that's right. Then I introduced him to some people that I knew who became part of this same group, like John Hodgdon Bradley, who was a geologist at USC. There were quite a number of people just sort of around at that time. There were quite a number of other small magazines here—not small magazines in the literary sense, but sort of city magazines that didn't last very long. They would come and go; they'd start up and then they'd vanish. *Sports and Vanities*, I think, was one.

Never heard of it.

There were a number of those, and other small magazines that appeared. So in a sense I think we were, as I say in that introduction to the new edition of *Southern California Country [: An Island on the Land]*, I think this was the first group of modern intelligentsia that got together in Los Angeles. S. MacDonald-Wright was part of this group—not very active, but he was part of the group. I used to go around to his studio on Spring Street and chat with him, talk with him. He once put on a Japanese play [*The Infidelity of Madame Lun*] at a Fullerton high school, costumes and all the rest of it; and I helped him set this thing up. He was a very interesting man. And I often wish--again, this is like Sam Clover--often wish that I had had the wit to sit down with Wright and get his story (he would have been very glad to have cooperated), and particularly the story of his brother, Willard Huntington Wright, who at some incredible age--let's say nineteen--became the literary editor of the *Los Angeles Times* and was very good, very good at it. He attracted quite a bit of attention for his fine editorship. And then, of course, after he published his novel *The Man of Promise*, he went east and became a mystery writer and all that sort of thing. But for a time he edited *Smart Set*. He got Mencken and [George Jean] Nathan to take over the editorship of *Smart Set* from him. I think the Wrights were collateral relatives of the Huntingtons.

That could be. I don't know.
McWilliams

I think they were; I'm not sure about it. But I often wish that I'd gotten that story together, because MacDonald-Wright would have been glad to tell me all about it.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

But I didn't do it.

Gardner

Well, that's an affliction that oral history deals with a great deal.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

He was prominent on our list to be interviewed all along, and he kept postponing it because he remained active. And of course he died.

McWilliams

He died.

Gardner

That's unfortunate. In 1930 there's a whole flush of articles and little pamphlets and so forth and so on that you're involved with. There may be many more, but these are the ones that I ran across. One was called "Swell Letters in California."

McWilliams

Yes, that was in . . .

Gardner

American Mercury.

McWilliams
American Mercury.

Gardner

Another was called "Writers of California."

McWilliams

Yes. That was, I think, in The Bookman.

Gardner

And the other was a little pamphlet—booklet I guess would be the best word for it—put out by the University of Washington Bookstore called The New Regionalism in American Literature.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

This is expanding your horizons in some way.

McWilliams

Well, I got interested in this regional thing in part through Mary Austin. We became quite good friends, and I have quite a lot of letters from her. The Southern Agrarians were around and making noises at that time. And this was not quite like that, but it was the feeling that there should be some more attention paid to western history, western writing, that there should be some magazines and publications, and so forth and so forth. So I became very much interested. I wrote some pieces for eastern magazines. I'd have to think about some of them, but there were quite a number of them. And then Glen Hughes started this chapbook series at the University of Washington; I knew him and his wife quite well. We had the same point of view, same interests more or less; that's how I happened to do this pamphlet [The New Regionalism in American Literature] for them. Then I did, I think, maybe three pieces for the Saturday Review of Literature about western writing, regional writing, and so forth. And it seemed at that time as though this might develop into something important. It had the potential of that, but as the Depression deepened, regionalism was sort of pushed to one side, and the interest in it didn't last very long.
Gardner

Well, of course one of the things that you point out in the University of Washington pamphlet—oh, your piece was in opposition to the "sentimentalism" that seemed to pervade an awful lot of regional literature as such.

McWilliams

That's right, that's right.

Gardner

A contrasting of that to, say, Robinson Jeffers, for example.

McWilliams

That's right. The piece I did for the *Mercury* about "Swell Letters in California," a lot of people resented that; but it was an attempt to sort of say, well, it's all right to collect Californiana, and endlessly, but nevertheless there are other things you should look at. The emphasis then was almost entirely in that direction. I had occasion to introduce Louis Adamic to the Jefferses and he also did this little essay about Jeffers which was published by the University of Washington Press in the same series that you're referring to.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And I knew the Jefferses in several different connections. My law partner, Dan Hammack [, Jr.], had gone to Occidental, and then from Occidental to Princeton. He and Jeffers were classmates at Occidental. They'd gone on long hiking trips in the Sierra Madre mountains, and they had remained good friends and so forth. I had that connection, and Sterling of course.

Gardner

Well, since you've mentioned Dan Hammack, I suppose we could back up a little bit back to 1927. You get out of law school, and there's a law firm called Black, Hammack, and McWilliams. Was that right away . . .

McWilliams
No.

Gardner

... or did it take a while for you to become... 

McWilliams

No, it was Black, Hammack and Black. And it was a unique law firm, you might say, in Los Angeles at that time, because the senior [Alfred] Black had gone to Princeton and practiced in Bellingham, Washington, and then came to Los Angeles and started this firm. The senior Hammack had gone to Princeton. They had known each other at Princeton, so they became partners, Black and Hammack. Then Hammack, Jr., went, as I say, to Occidental, then to Princeton, came back, and joined the firm. Alfred Black, Jr., went to Princeton, came to Los Angeles, and joined the firm. So this was a second-generation Los Angeles law firm, which was very unique for that time, you know; most everybody just arrived here the day before yesterday. I just happened to hear that they needed someone. And when I got out of law school, I went around and talked to them, and they asked me to come into the office. It was an incredible office. It was in the old American Bank Building at Second and Spring. Huge library, most of it obsolete, dusty. And, as I say, [the firm was] somewhat Dickensian, and really bizarre, because Dan Hammack, Jr. was a marvelous man, wonderful person, but very shy, kind of shy. He didn't like to go into court, didn't like to try cases, that sort of thing. And Alfred Black, Jr., was just the opposite. He was a very good lawyer, very good, but unbelievably lazy. And he would snarl if the secretary announced that a client was out there to see him, really didn't even want to talk to them. But they had a very good practice. They had some very wealthy clients: J.W. Jameson, Jameson Oil Company, who made the big [oil] discoveries in Huntington Beach; Blue Diamond Cement Company; a lot of independent oil operators. Then you know that Occidental [College] was, of course, always known as the Princeton of the West.

Gardner

Uh-huh, right.

McWilliams
And there was that connection between Occidental, Presbyterianism, and fairly well-to-do families who had settled initially in Highland Park, San Marino, South Pasadena, Pasadena—all sort of vaguely tied in with Occidental one way or another. Dan Hammack, Jr., was there with the California historian Robert Cleland. He was a great friend of his, and they were all part of this sort of network of families. When I joined the firm, their business was growing. They had a tremendous backlog of untried cases and that sort of thing. And you know how young lawyers are: they're very gung ho. So I started to try cases that I should never had been permitted to try, [laughter] well beyond my capabilities and experience and so forth. But they just thought it was marvelous that I would take the initiative and often set these cases up for trial. So I became a partner in a relatively brief period of time.

Gardner

These were mostly civil cases?

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes, yes. And I got them out of that building, which was incredible you wouldn't believe it—long, high-ceilinged offices and corridors, and really bizarre Dickensian—and got them down in the Spring Arcade building, and it became Black, Hammack, and McWilliams.

Gardner

I see. About what year was that?

McWilliams

I just don't know what year that would be. Not too long after I got out of law school.

Gardner

So still late twenties—'28, '29.

McWilliams

And they were both very wonderful. They were very, very good friends. We were very good friends. And when I began to get interested in labor law and social issues and things of this kind, I was aware of the fact that they didn't approve. This was a most unrewarding kind of practice, to put it mildly.
[laughter] And besides, they didn't have any interest in this direction; their interests were quite in the opposite direction, and all of their clients took a different point of view. But never once did either one of those gentlemen ever call me in and say, "Look, this is getting to be a little out of line." They never did. I was aware that they didn't approve. But they never raised the issue, never said anything about it, which is rather remarkable.

Gardner

Right, it is. You left them in '38 when you became commissioner [of the Division of Immigration and Housing].

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Well, we'll get on to that, I suppose, at a later date. We'll also deal a little bit more later on with your growing interest in labor law. Where were you politically in the late twenties? It seems to me that your interests are so much more literary than political at this time.

McWilliams

I think the twenties have taken a bad rap as being decadent and politically disinterested and so forth. Now, that's true to a very considerable extent. So many of the people were totally disillusioned by the aftermath of the war, as they had every reason to be. They became expatriates, and they went to live in Paris, many of my good friends, Matty [Matthew] Josephson and others. Yet when they came back, their European experience was, in a way, very helpful. It was kind of an eye-opening experience. So when they came back, they began to see things that they probably wouldn't have seen or paid much attention to if they had stayed here. So it was the literary radicals of the twenties [who] became the political radicals of the 1930s. And I have always had a great admiration for Mencken, particularly as a journalist. I have some marvelous letters from him. He made it very, very clear to me in these letters that he didn't think of himself as a literary critic. He didn't think so at all. He started out as a journalist on the Baltimore Sun, as you know. His experience was in quite a different direction; until he began to take over the Smart Set, he
didn't think of himself as a literary critic or as a literary man. He always thought of himself as a journalist, and he was, in my judgment, a superb editor, particularly the Mercury, where I knew him, had the most contact with him. Prompt, yes or no; if he had a suggestion, he'd make it in a very illuminating way. You knew exactly with whom you were dealing at all times. And then his emphasis on the American scene: he said that he would remind people again and again and again the title of his magazine was the American Mercury. "We're interested in the American scene." Well, that was a very healthy corrective at the time. And he was no respecter of names. He'd take a piece by an ex-convict or a lumberjack or the captain of a tugboat; it wouldn't make any difference to him, you know. And his interests in the American language, his interest in American folklore—all of that, I think, was a very, very healthy influence. And it made people look at the American scene, situation, for a change. The literary magazines from the early twenties were very hot, very fancy. They were interested in Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Stuart P. Sherman, people of this sort. He was, I think, a very good corrective.

Gardner

So you think that sort of literary radicalism prepared the way for the . . .

McWilliams

Yes, I do. Now, for example, I was not interested in politics, except that I was, of course, like everybody else, very much interested in the Sacco-Vanzetti case. I interviewed Upton Sinclair down in Long Beach on the day they were executed. And instead of interviewing him, we just sat there. (Of course it would be an interview in a cafeteria, Upton being Upton.) So we sat there well into the afternoon just talking about [Nicola] Sacco and [Bartolomeo] Vanzetti. And I was convinced—I never had any doubt—about their innocence. I was quite sure of that. I got interested, sort of peripherally at first, in that case. But I was not directly involved in politics. I had very scanty political interest. I was a registered Democrat from the time I became of voting age, and I remained a registered Democrat and only voted that ticket. But I was not directly interested in politics as politics. My friends were mostly different people, like Louis Adamic and some of the early journalists I knew in Los Angeles, Don Ryan, people of this sort. We were not really politically partisan.

Gardner
And yet you were, as you say, radicals on the Left.

McWilliams

Yes, that's quite true.

Gardner

Because your perspective on the thrust of American life was a different one.

McWilliams

That's right. We were quite critical and very wary of the prosperity and the phoniness of the twenties.

3. Tape Number: II, Side One (July 10, 1978)

Gardner

Now, you mentioned Louis Adamic. I guess we should talk about how you got to know him.

McWilliams

I got to know him through George Sterling, who sent him to see me thinking that we would have a good deal in common, as indeed we did; and he became one of my very closest friends. He was at that time working in the pilot stationer's office in the outer harbor at San Pedro, an ideal job for a young writer, because he had the night shift out there, and there was nothing much to do except sit there and watch the ships come in and out, flash signals and all that sort of thing.

Gardner

He was Yugoslav by birth, wasn’t he?

McWilliams

I beg your pardon?

Gardner

Was he Yugoslav by birth?

McWilliams
Yugoslav. Yes, Yugoslav background. He had served in the war, and at the end of the war he had been mustered out here in San Pedro. There was a Yugoslav fishing colony of sorts.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

That's how he happened to stay on in San Pedro. We became very, very good friends. We wrote for the same magazines. We had the same fascination with Southern California, with Los Angeles in particular, checking up on religious mystics, and cults, and all the rest of it. I would see him when he was in Los Angeles, and I would go down to the harbor and spend time with him there. So we became very, very close friends, and remained close friends. He left Los Angeles in--I've forgotten the year; I'd have to check this--went east in about 1930 or thereabouts, and then lived the rest of his life in the East. He had a farm down in New Jersey in Milford, and I would see him there, or I would see him when he was on lecture trips or came to the coast. We remained in very close touch up to the time of his death, a very tragic death. He committed suicide, in part as the result of the whole atmosphere that developed in the nation with the witch-hunt and all the rest of it. [He was] a very gifted, very talented writer, I think. I think that some of the things that he did will be read for a long time and with increasing interest, [considering] this whole current phase of fascination with ethnicity, roots, and all the rest of it. He had some real insights into what he called "shadow America." I did a book about it, a long essay [Louis Adamic and Shadow America] that Arthur Whipple published here in book form about this, a very interesting concept about all the thousands and thousands of Americans who have a kind of shadowy sense of their own identity; they're not quite certain about it, you know. And, of course, with his background, he reflected this very vividly and intelligently.

Gardner

That's something that remains clear even today.

McWilliams
Yes. Oh, yes.

Gardner

Questionable American identity, the transience and so on.

McWilliams

That is right. He had the same standoffish attitude towards the American society of the period that I did. And again it was part of this skepticism of the twenties: not wanting to be too closely identified with the America of that time, the American society of that time. Both of us had reasons, had serious misgivings about it. Then after 1929 our misgivings intensified.

Gardner

Right. Now, you mentioned--well, off tape I cited the section in *Southern California Country* about Upton Sinclair and the San Pedro longshoremen's strike. You said that it was Adamic who had brought you down there.

McWilliams

Well, that's not quite accurate. Adamic was very much interested in that whole longshore situation in San Pedro. He knew quite a lot about it, and it's one of the means or ways he got interested in labor in Southern California. The dynamiting of the *Times* [1910] and all that sort of thing--[his interests] sort of grew out of that. Upton I got to know by interviewing two or three times. I would see him from time to time, and we became good friends. We had differences of opinion from time to time, but they never were very serious. They were just kind of spats about this, that, and the other thing.

Gardner

Well, I'd be interested in hearing a little more about that San Pedro speech of Sinclair's with Hugh Hardyman and Prince Hopkins.

McWilliams

Well, you know there was a . . .

Gardner

Let me ask this first: Was that before or after you interviewed him?
McWilliams

This was before.

Gardner

This was before. This would have been the first time you'd seen Sinclair?

McWilliams

Yes, that's right. As you know, there'd been a fairly strong socialist movement in Los Angeles headed by Job Harriman. That movement was eclipsed with the dynamiting of the *Los Angeles Times*—not so much by the dynamiting of the *Times* as by the fact that Clarence Darrow pleaded [J.B. and J.J.] McNamara guilty.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

That was a terrible shock to a lot of true believers, followers, and so forth; it really destroyed that movement. It also set labor back here for decades.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And by the time you got to the post-World War I period, this was an open-shop community, advertised as an open-shop community. And that flare-up at San Pedro was part of those post-World War I Palmer raids, witch-hunts, and the rest of it. The episode at San Pedro, which was dramatic and very important--free speech kind of situation--it didn't last very long. I mean, the flare-up didn't last very long. We were well into the twenties, and from there on out it was something else until you got to 1929.

Gardner

That moment, too, is really the founding of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union].

McWilliams
Yes. John Beardsley.

Gardner

Were you involved with that at all?

McWilliams

No, I was not involved in the founding of it. I was an early member; I served at different times on the board. I did some pieces for the Open Forum, and Louis Adamic did some pieces for the Open Forum. I was not really an active member of the ACLU at that time.

Gardner

Until the thirties.

McWilliams

That's right. Then I did get more interested in it later on.

Gardner

Perhaps now we should move ahead. I think we've gotten pretty much to the thirties. To inject a personal note: you were married in 1930.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner

For the first time.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Do you care to talk about that at all?

McWilliams

Oh, sure.

Gardner
To a famous name in UCLA history.

McWilliams

To one of the daughters of Dr. E. [Earle] R. Hedrick, Dorothy Hedrick. I had great affection and admiration for him and for his wife. He was a marvelous man. The thing that was wrong with the marriage, so to speak, is that we didn’t have the same interests. At the time of the marriage, I suppose I fancied that I would continue to be as I was at that time; a reasonably successful young lawyer. But it didn't work out that way. My interests began to change very rapidly, and I soon got bored with the practice of the law. It was particularly after 1929 that it seemed to me that I was spending most of my time trying to salvage something for the Highland Park widow who had been taken by these con men. Either that or I was trying to keep some firm from going bankrupt, working at issues of this sort. And I really had no taste for it; I had no interest in it. It was beginning to be a bore, a real bore, and most of my real good friends were not in the legal profession. I had lots of friends in the legal profession, but most of them were not. Most of them were bohemians of one kind or another, newspaper people, men like Bob [Robert W.] Kenny, who was a very dear friend of mine, who combined both: he was part of the intellectual life of Los Angeles, and he was also prominent in the legal profession. But that whole lifestyle began to lose interest for me; and, I think largely as a result of it, the marriage just disintegrated. It was an amicable divorce. And of course there was one son of that marriage, Wilson Carey McWilliams, who, as you know, teaches at Rutgers in the political science department--and has done some good books, incidentally, I think quite good books. But that marriage just--it fell apart, not over any particular issue; it just happened.

Gardner

Well, along with your discontent as a lawyer comes this increasing political awareness, activism, and so on. You mentioned before that you found yourself interested in labor law. How did that come about?

McWilliams

Well, in part because of the fact that Los Angeles was an open-shop community. You could count the labor lawyers on the fingers of one hand,
[lawyers] who knew anything about labor law. Then when the National Labor Relations Act was passed, suddenly there was a tremendous interest, and who did they go to? Since I had written some pieces for the bar association about the new labor act, I was very much interested in it from a sort of theoretical point of view. And so they began knocking on my door; that is, the groups that wanted to organize wanted advice about how to do it, all that sort of thing. And it was very challenging and very interesting and very exciting, very exciting. So I got increasingly involved in labor law. When the Newspaper Guild was organized here, my newspaper friends of course came to me. We were drinking companions, and they didn't have any money, and they couldn't pay anyone a retainer fee, anyway. So they thought I would do it, as I did, and I was the first attorney for the Newspaper Guild.

Gardner

Is that so?

McWilliams

Here in Los Angeles. Represented them in negotiations with the Herald Express, which were very tense, to put it mildly, and represented them during the Hollywood Citizen-News strike [in May, 1938] which was very, very interesting. It was interesting from many points of view because there was a recall campaign [against Mayor Frank Shaw] on that year. It was the year in which Fletcher Bowron was elected for the first time. Bowron and Harlan Palmer, the publisher of the Hollywood Citizen-News, and I were friends. We had been involved in various minor political enterprises and so forth. And yet here, when this strike occurred, it suddenly--to me it was an eye-opening experience to find that a reformer like Palmer, when it came to dealing with his own employees, had quite a different kind of attitude. And I was active in the recall campaign; I was chairman of a labor committee for Bowron [Labor-for-Bowron Committee]. So here were the three of us, all sort of caught up in a situation we ought to have been able, theoretically, to settle, but it was impossible to settle.

Gardner

Why?

McWilliams
Well, Palmer was just adamant, you know. So the strike went on and on, and it became a very colorful kind of strike--because it was in Hollywood, and the actresses and stars would parade on the picket line, had a fashion show on the picket line, all this sort of thing--lots of contempt citations. And then we finally did get it settled, but it went on for, oh, three months or more.

Gardner

It was one of the major newspaper strikes?

McWilliams

It was one of the major newspaper strikes, and we were fortunate that the Guild could get it settled as effectively as it did. And one of the reasons for the strike was, of course, this long-standing dichotomy between downtown labor and anything that had to do with Hollywood. The central labor council was of very little help in connection with this strike, and they didn't respond to it very much. Then I got interested in the trade union situation in Hollywood in connection with the gangsters' infiltration of the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees. That's a long story in itself, but it had ramifications that extended way down beyond the forties and the fifties, that situation.

Gardner

Shall we wait and do that when we get up to it?

McWilliams

Yes, I suppose that's better. Then I represented all kinds of miscellaneous unions that were coming along at that time that didn't have counsel and wanted advice about how to organize. As I say, I found it very interesting and very, very exciting.

Gardner

But not particularly remunerative.

McWilliams

No. It was not, definitely not, remunerative. But, for example, one night I was asked to come out to speak to a meeting that had been organized on the east side of Los Angeles by the women that worked in the walnut operation. It was
all sort of hand labor at that time; they cracked walnuts with hammers [demonstrates] and shelled them. It was a big meeting. It was late August; it was humid and hot. This hall was packed, absolutely packed, with these women (I was the only male there), I would say twelve, fifteen hundred. And they had the front row reserved for these Russian Molokan ladies with their quaint costumes and so forth. They were Mexicans, Armenians, you name it, Jewish immigrant groups. I was supposed to tell them what their rights were under the new labor legislation, how they could exercise those rights. But that wasn't what they really wanted to hear, as I discovered. They really wanted a chance to express themselves about their work, all this sort of thing. And, as I said, it was a hand operation, and they held up their fists like this [shows fist]--blackened--the lower part of the fist, to show they didn't have enough hammers. It was a piecerate thing, and they were cracking walnuts with their fists! And they went on, and they told stories of this kind. At one point in this meeting, a young blond girl in the back of the hall came racing forward to where I was standing. They had been mentioning the fact that the company didn't sweep the floors; the shells were all over them. They would trip and fall on these shells, they'd get hurt, and so forth. So this girl heard this, and she came running forward, and she turned with her back to me and flipped her dress up to show me where there was a black and blue mark, you know. It was right where you'd expect it to be. [laughter] And they just howled with laughter; they thought it was very, very funny. They just laughed like hell. I have said many times that the spirit of the New Deal was in that meeting. That's where the New Deal was, because the only English word they all really understood was organize. They were really ready and ripe for organization. They wanted some help. So experiences of that kind were very meaningful, very exciting, and, I found, very wonderful in a way.

Gardner

In 1934 there were a couple of events that . . .

McWilliams

Yes, indeed.

Gardner
... you wrote about and, I'm sure, participated in as well. First, let me ask you about the Imperial Valley.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

That was in 1934 with Al Wirin, Grover Johnson, and so on down there. What was your involvement with that? I know you did write a piece--was it for Nation, or the New Republic?

McWilliams

Well, I did a piece for the Mercury about the repatriation of Mexicans, which was beginning just--they began to do that during the Depression years. I got interested in it just by reading the press. I had no legal involvement with this situation in the Imperial Valley, but I got very much interested. As I have said many times to people, if anyone had said to me in 1929 when the Bierce book was published that a few years later I would be writing a book about farm labor in California, I would have thought they were just off their rockers, you know. But it all changed so fast. It all changed so rapidly. And when you just read the papers about what was happening in the citrus belt, the Imperial Valley, in the San Joaquin Valley, you couldn't--at least I couldn't--deny that I was intrigued to find out what was back of all this. So I began making some field trips, and at the request of the ACLU I defended four Mexican-American citrus workers in a strike. The case was tried before a justice of the peace in Whittier. What I was impressed with in connection with that was the contrast between the Protestant piety of those communities (it was a beautiful citrus-belt town) and this kind of situation which was very rough and ugly. But the more you checked into it, the more you learned about it, you discovered that the grove owners had really nothing much to do with labor relations. They leased their groves to one or another of the exchanges. They lived in town. They didn't negotiate the labor contracts--there weren't any labor contracts--and they didn't employ the labor. They were employed by the exchange, and without a semblance of collective bargaining. They would just tell me that this was the wage, and you could see that this was a real, real ugly situation that had some farranging implications to it. And the more I checked into it just by
reading the press, then I thought, well, I'll do some research on this. I began reading the farm journals of California, particularly the *Pacific Rural Press*. And you know how it is in the trade associations: they will discuss their problems with a frankness that is astonishing, because "among us boys it's all intramural," you know. Now, the *Pacific Rural Press* would lay it right on the line what their objectives were, what their tactics were, and the whole story. From the beginning of the *Pacific Rural Press* down to today, you can find right out of their mouths how they had done this, that, and the other thing. So I said to myself, this is a helluva story. If you look at *Factories in the Field* you'll see that its subtitle is *The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*. That's what I was out to do. It was really not so much a book *about* migratory farm labor from a sociological point of view as the whole story of this thing, how it developed over a period of time, and these different groups that were recruited and used, and all the rest of it. So I was soon caught up in it, and it became a major interest. I worked on weekends and vacations, whenever I could find the time, to pull the story together.

Gardner

    You must have been working on it for years, too, because the accumulation of information really started in the early thirties . . .

McWilliams

    That is right.

Gardner

    . . . and works its way up through the publication date of what, `38, `39?

McWilliams

    Thirty-nine.

Gardner

    Thirty-nine.

McWilliams

    Yes. That's right.
Did you know Al Wirin at the time you went out there?

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes. I knew Al very well over a period of many years. I was on the [ACLU] board at different times when we were dealing with Al. It was sometimes very amusing, at least in retrospect, because the board would meet, and Wirin didn't get along too well with Dr. Clinton J. Taft--and I didn't either, for that matter. [laughter] The board would meet, and the counsel would not be there. Taft would report to us with very considerable exasperation that, dammit, word had come in earlier that week that there was a strike in Gallup, New Mexico, and that Al had just gone off on his own to Gallup to represent those strikers without any authorization from him or from the board, and it was just a damned outrage, you know. These flare-ups would inevitably quiet down after a bit, and Al would come back. He would give us a very glowing report about what had happened at the time of the strike, and it was very important that he get there as quickly as he could. I knew him very well.

Gardner

What about some of the other early ACLU people? You mentioned John Beardsley before.

McWilliams

Yes, John Beardsley I had great admiration and respect for, and his wife, Helen Marston. And some of the other early ones I just don't know offhand. But the red flag salute case that Beardsley handled--I found all that very interesting; but that case was in the twenties. And then when they got me involved in labor, I was so caught up in the labor law that the ACLU became sort of a minor interest and pushed into the background, because I didn't have any time for it. And it was after 1934, after the EPIC [End Poverty in California] campaign of `34 and the general strike in San Francisco; those two things really were of enormous importance in changing the atmosphere.

Gardner

Well, let's talk about them. Let's talk first about the EPIC campaign.

McWilliams
Well, you know what the situation was. This state had a peculiar, exceptional political tradition because the Republican party had an old-guard wing and a sort of liberal wing. Then there was the Democratic party, and the Democratic party hadn't amounted to anything in California. It was run as a kind of fiefdom by families like the Dockweilers in Southern California and other similar families in the north. They seemed to be easily satisfied, because if there was a Democratic administration nationally, they would always get the patronage in California, such as it was; they would get it, and they didn't seem interested in building the Democratic party as a real party. Then, of course, the split developed between the liberal Republicans and the old guard, and you got this Hiram Johnson movement--very strong, very interesting movement in 1910 when Johnson was elected the governor as a progressive. The Democratic party still slumbered on; it didn't mean anything. And when [Franklin D.] Roosevelt won in '32 (and then you had the '34 gubernatorial elections), almost any presentable New Deal-type candidate would have won hands down in 1934. But there weren't any! There were some characters that wanted to run for the Democratic nomination, but they were not New Dealers; everybody knew it. They were a part of this old Democratic setup. Upton [Sinclair], I think, saw the opportunity, and a year in advance published his pamphlet *End Poverty in California* and started his campaign, which I think--yes, beyond any question of a doubt--is one of the most extraordinary grassroots campaigns ever waged in American politics. It was strictly grassroots. Money was raised in nickels, pennies, and dimes. There were no professionals in the campaign. Sinclair was not a good organizer; he couldn't organize anything. But he was a marvelous educator, polemicist. He went up and down the state, and up and down the state taking this message of ending poverty in California, doing something about poverty. Years later you could see in Northern California slogans painted on rocks, "End Poverty in California" and so forth. It reached all through the state, all through the state, an extraordinary campaign. And if it hadn't been for Raymond Haight entering the race as an independent, Upton just might have won. Well, I never thought he would win. I reported for the Baltimore *Sun* and other papers that he was waging this astonishing campaign, but that he was not going to win, the establishment would close in on him--as it did, and he did not win.
Were you involved in the campaign very much?

McWilliams

No, I was not directly involved in the campaign; I was reporting it. I had reported these early social protest movements in Southern California, like the Utopian Society, and then of course into EPIC. For the Utopians that was a phenomenal thing, but they didn't know really how they were going to do what they talked about. Then here comes Sinclair, who has a plan; "This is the plan." I didn't think, if he were elected, that he could get the plan adopted, or that it would work if he could get it adopted. But nevertheless, as a tremendous protest, it was of major interest and importance. And I reported it. I had a couple of spats with him during the course of the campaign. I went out to interview him at his home one day at the time of the San Francisco general strike, and I tried to get him to say what he would have done had he been governor of California, because Frank Merriam was governor, and Frank Merriam had sent the national guard into San Francisco without being invited to send them in; he had just sent them in with armed bayonets and so forth. But I never could get Upton to say what he would have done. He kept saying, "Well, if I had been governor this would never have happened in the first place." Well, you know, maybe so and maybe not. So he didn't like what I reported about this. This was one of the occasions when we had a brief spat. And I was deeply impressed with this strike in San Francisco, with the longshoremen, and with Bridges's leadership. I am an old friend of [Harry] Bridges; I got to know him very well and was on the defense committee and all that sort of thing. But the EPIC campaign was an astonishing success in the sense that it brought a Democratic party into existence; 300,000 people registered in the Democratic party in the course of that campaign. So after 1934 you had a Democratic party; previously you had not had a real Democratic party. I interviewed Upton the final week of the campaign. He and Craig, his wife, were living in a rich friend's home in Beverly Hills. This previous interview, where we talked about Bridges, had taken place in Sinclair's residence. There was a forest fire in the Sierra Madres--they had pulled the blinds down in the house to keep the glare out--and it was suffocating in there. [tape recorder turned off] The second interview--the interview that took place the last week of the campaign--was in his rich friend's house. Once again the blinds were all drawn, although it's in the middle of the afternoon.
But this time the blinds are drawn because Craig is sure that Upton will be assassinated in the last weeks of the campaign; she is rigid with fear. She was going through a rather difficult time in her life just then, and she was afraid that Upton was going. . . . So there we were sitting in this rich friend's home, which was a very ironic setting considering we were talking about a plan to end poverty in California. [laughter] And I suddenly tumbled to the fact that he had lost interest in the campaign! You know, in that extraordinarily vivid imagination of his he had been elected governor by a big majority, he had enacted his program, in his mind and imagination.

Gardner

And it was over.

McWilliams

And you know it was all--I'm sure he was bored by then. [laughter] He didn't seem to be really much interested in the campaign, and he seemed to realize that he wasn't going to be elected, you know. But of course I never thought he would be elected, really, because there was just too much power that was structured against him. But the campaign itself was an amazing campaign. And so far as that general strike is concerned it . . .

Gardner

Well, let me get back to the EPIC campaign before you go on to the general strike. I'll try not to keep you too long, but we might as well finish this tape. It's only a couple of more minutes.

McWilliams

Sure.

Gardner

Rube Borough was someone who was very active in the EPIC campaign.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner
Were you friendly with him at that time? Did you know him through the newspaper?

McWilliams

Oh, yes. We were very close friends all along for years and years and years. Oliver Thornton was very important. So was Richard Olte. He was very active. Now, these were good organizers, Thornton and company; they really organized. They were responsible for this grass-roots kind of thing that developed. And there were some people in Northern California also that were very good. And it was a phenomenal success as an organizational effort.

Gardner

What about [Raymond] Haight getting into the campaign? Who was responsible?

McWilliams

Some of these Hiram Johnson-type progressives had gotten to Haight to convince him that if he ran in between Merriam and Sinclair, he would win. I think that was part of it, and I also think it was a deliberate attempt to sabotage Sinclair.

Gardner

That's what one would think.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Third party always ends up taking away from the . . .

McWilliams

That's right. I knew Ray Haight, and I had talked to him in the course of the campaign. He would actually have been a very good governor, as a matter of fact, but I think that was the idea: to knock Sinclair down, so to speak. But he probably wouldn't have made it in any case. But the alarm. . . . The public relations counsel at that time for Floyd H. Odlum--you know, that big tycoon, magnate--flew out from New York with a letter of introduction to me (we also
became great friends later) because Odlum was very much afraid of the economic consequences in California if Sinclair were elected. He was going to sell certain enterprises and do this, that, and the other thing. So I told this PR guy, Alex Gumberg, I said, "Go back and assure Mr. Odlum he's got nothing to worry about. He can sue me if I'm wrong, but Sinclair is not going to be elected governor." So this was very assuring. I got word from Gumberg that Odlum was vastly relieved to get this reassurance. But I knew that Sinclair would never make it.

Gardner

He should have sent you a handsome commission afterwards.

McWilliams

Yes, indeed he should. But he didn't.

Gardner

Now the [1934] general strike.

McWilliams

The general strike was one of the very important events of the 1930s. There's just no doubt about it. And the key to the success of the general strike was the quick action and reflexes of George Kidwell, who was the key guy in the Central Labor Council in San Francisco, who became my boss when I joined the state government. Now, Kidwell had been in the IWW [International Workers of the World] as a young man; there was a residual radicalism in Kidwell. And when the general strike was called, Kidwell knew that labor would have to support the general strike. He just knew it in his bones. And he had enough influence and prestige with the Central Labor Council to put them into the thing in support of [Harry] Bridges, and almost instantly. So there wasn't any delay; they just went right in there behind the longshoremen, and they won the strike. And it completely transformed the situation. The number of organized workers and organized labor in California skyrocketed after the general strike. The Democratic party made remarkable gains in San Francisco in the wake of that general strike. I reported this strike, and I have followed it pretty carefully, and it was the beginning of my long-standing friendship with Bridges. I had great, great admiration for Bridges from this point of view, that
he was a superb tactician, just a superb tactician. Now, I didn't think then, and I do not think now, that Bridges was ever a member of the Communist party. He unquestionably accepted support from them and that sort of thing, but he was much too smart for that. He was an alien, for God's sake. Besides, in all of the conferences that I sat in with him at various times and so forth, if he was a Marxist he didn't show it in his vocabulary or his dialogue. He was a very pragmatic guy! He was looking at the immediate issue always, and was a great tactician in the sense that he could beat a retreat without appearing to be retreating--on the contrary, appearing to be advancing, you know. He had a genius for keeping the other side off balance. You could watch him operate. You couldn't help but admire the tactical sense that the man had. And it was a combination of Bridges and George Kidwell that was responsible for the success of the general strike.

Gardner

What would you say the results of that were?

McWilliams

It transformed labor, was one of the galvanizing events of the 1930s. It greatly increased labor membership in California. There are figures on this (Tom Watkins has done some research), and I don't trust my memory well enough to give you the percentage of increase in labor membership that took place after the general strike. But it was a very large increase. You see, you have to remember that when Bridges arrived on the West Coast, this open-shop phase had also affected San Francisco; the waterfront unions were nothing. And from the twenties on, Bridges had to build this, step by step by step, as a movement. And it became a very strong and powerful movement indeed. But it was, again, a grassroots kind of operation, without any support from organized labor, and with the hostility, most of the time, of organized labor. Rather remarkable achievement.

Gardner

Right. Well, should we break now, let you get your exercise?

McWilliams

Sure.
The first question that I come to is a reflective one based on our discussions last time. I was wondering if in any way your political philosophy was shaped or influenced by what happened to your father, the circumstance of the large cattleman.

Yes. I would say that very definitely it was, in the sense that it left me with a distrust of the system. I never could take it completely seriously. I don't mean that exactly: I mean I had no confidence in it. What happened after 1929 just confirmed my earlier feeling. See, we were victims of an earlier depression, this depression that came in 1919 when the cattle market collapsed.

Right.

When the 1929 Depression came, that was sort of old hat to us; we'd been through this. But what happened to my father left me with a deep-seated feeling that it was not all as it appeared to be. I was left with a great deal of residual distrust of it. I didn't want to become too intimately involved in it. I wanted to maintain a certain amount of distance.

It's interesting because he was so clearly a member of the establishment . . .

Oh, yes.

. . . before the demise.

That is right.
Gardner

So had that not happened, it might have been that you would have been encouraged to follow in his footsteps.

McWilliams

It might well have been. It might well have been.

Gardner

That's very interesting. I should add that you showed me Where the Old West Stayed Young by John Rolfe Burroughs, which includes a couple of pages on Steamboat Springs and on your father, and has some photos from your collection.

McWilliams

Not only did his experience influence my attitude, but the work that I did for the Los Angeles Times was very much an influence, because it gave me an extraordinary insight into the underside, the seamy side, of the boom in Southern California.

Gardner

How So?

McWilliams

Well, because the Times and the Examiner were engaged in a tremendous competition to see which paper could have the most classified advertising of any paper in the country, and they would run any classified advertising and take a chance on collecting, you see, because of this competition. And we had to deal with as fine a collection of con men, crooks, bums as you could imagine, all drawn to the magic city of Los Angeles and the big boom of the twenties—all the way from business opportunity swindlers, real estate swindlers, Hollywood crooks—and pursuing them, trying to collect on their accounts. It gave you a wonderful view of an aspect of the twenties boom in Southern California that you wouldn't get from the surface, of course.

Gardner

No, right. Now, what was the year of the C.C. Julian [case]? That was before?
McWilliams

    It came a little later.

Gardner

    Oh, it was later?

McWilliams

    A little later, yes. [May 1927] But I've forgotten the exact years of the Julian business.

Gardner

    I'll try and recall.

McWilliams

    But we played cops and robbers with these advertisers; it was a kind of an intelligence game. We became very adroit at it in terms of the fact, for example, that we could tell from a piece of advertising copy--you could pretty much identify the person that submitted it even if the name was not on it. They would try to put new names on and shift addresses and telephone numbers and so forth to continue to get advertising without paying for it, because advertising was just like water--[laughter] they had to have it. And we became very adroit, very clever at reading copy and spotting what it was. So it was a kind of counterguerrilla, counterintelligence operation, you know.

Gardner

    Did you have any ties to the cityside people, whereby they would have some idea of what frauds were going on, to be used in reporting?

McWilliams

    No, I don't think we did. I don't recall that we did.

Gardner

    Because it's interesting that it influenced you with its angle. Yet I'm sure the Times itself--or I don't know what the Times itself sort of felt about this.

McWilliams
Well, they were committed to this policy, and one or two years they ran--I've forgotten the exact years--but they ran more classified advertising than any paper in the United States. And this was the policy: take the copy and then worry about it later. As a result of it, it was an ongoing, never-ending pursuit of these creepy characters.

Gardner

Did you get to know Harry Chandler during the time you were there?

McWilliams

I knew him very slightly in the sense that on one occasion his secretary was away or something, and he asked to have some assistance. They sent me up, and I did some letters and things for him. Also, when I got out of law school, the business manager of the Times went to Mr. Chandler and got a letter of introduction for me from him to a big law firm in Los Angeles. He wrote a very nice letter (I may have it someplace still), and it was for me a very good relationship. I have lots of reason to be grateful to the management, and to the Chandlers in particular.

Gardner

What about later on when you were writing things about the . . . [laughter]

McWilliams

Ah. I don't know. I can assume they didn't appreciate it. But in the meantime, to show you their attitude, about two, maybe two years (I've forgotten), maybe three years after I had arrived here, my brother finally extricated himself from the responsibilities of liquidating my father's affairs. He came out here, and I introduced him to the people in the business office of the Times, and they employed him. And he stayed there. He's retired now, lives in Manhattan Beach. But he was there until he came to the mandatory retirement age. He was a fixture of the business office.

Gardner

Is that so? And they didn't have any retributions against him after Southern California Country came out?

McWilliams
Not the slightest. I don't think they ever discussed it with him.

Gardner

Did they ever put it together? Were they aware that he was . . .

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes, yes. They certainly knew that. And they never raised any issue of that kind with him, so far as I know. So, you know, they were quite decent about it.

Gardner

That's nice. The other question I had that was reflective based on our discussions before . . .

McWilliams

Oh, before I forget. . . . After I got out of law school and began practicing law, the relationship continued, because I represented Marian Otis Chandler, Mrs. Harry Chandler, in a couple of legal matters that were referred to me. And also, I represented Norman Chandler in a couple of legal cases. So the relationship continued. It's interesting in view of my views.

Gardner

It is. So how long did it continue? I suppose until you started moving into labor law.

McWilliams

That's right. That's right. That's right.

Gardner

Anyway, the next question that I had, pertaining to our discussions last time, had to do with your book on Adamic [Louis Adamic and Shadow America], in which you quote an exchange that he has with a conference, as I recall, in New York with some Marxists. It's fairly derisive of the Marxists.

McWilliams

Yes.
Now, this was 1935. I was wondering how you relate that to where your political philosophy was at that time, or if you could.

I plead vagueness on that at this time. I just don't remember. I know that Adamic's attitude was like my attitude in the twenties. We were rather standoffish about the politics and skeptical about the course of events and the course of the economy. We didn't want to become too involved in any of it. Adamic thought that this country was the "land of laughs" and so forth and so forth. Then after the Depression hit, he very rapidly began to take a more serious view, and he became more involved in the whole situation, but I would say not from a Marxist point of view, because he really wasn't a systematic thinker. He was a very good reporter and writer, and he reacted to events and people. He was fascinated with the United States, and every individual he met was a story to him. But he was not anything like a systematic thinker. While he may have read some Marxist things, it certainly had very little influence on him.

And how about yourself?

Same way, same thing. I was interested, very much interested, in the whole ferment that was going on at that time. I read a bit and tried to read, but so help me, I never finished Das Kapital. I never read it. My attitude was much the same as Adamic's. This was not my dish of tea. But I was grateful to the Left in a way, because they were raising a lot of issues that needed to be raised. They had a point of view about many of these issues, and in many cases they were right. And some of the people that they had in the trade union movement were admirable people. They had a great deal of courage, were first-rate organizers and devoted, dedicated people. Others were a great deal less admirable. But some of them you had to respect.
One of the first little books that I ran across that's political and social in content was something that you did called It Can Happen Here. Do you remember that, on anti-Semitism in Los Angeles?

McWilliams

Yes. I remember that.

Gardner

What was the origin of that? How did you happen to do that?

McWilliams

Well, it was—you know, it seems hard to believe but there were headquarters here in Los Angeles the time for Nazi propaganda: a bookstore, [with] all the stuff that was coming out. They were avowedly Brownshirts, you know. I mean, I don't know how much of an organization there was, but the bookstore itself was very much this way. At one point somebody printed a statement, anti-Semitic statement, and got it distributed with the Los Angeles Times. I don't know how they got it into the pages of the Times, but it was in the edition that went out. Because of this development, the bookstore, this thing created quite a lot of interest and excitement. Also, the international situation was beginning to disintegrate. So I happened to write that pamphlet, to sort of expose what was going on here.

Gardner

There is apparently a person named Ingram Hughes?

McWilliams

Yes, that vaguely rings a bell.

Gardner

He was the leader, according to the pamphlet, of the neo-Nazis. I was very surprised myself to find out the extent of it, the newspaper being published and so on. What sort of reaction did your book have? Was it widely read?

McWilliams

I think it was pretty widely distributed by a lot of groups in Los Angeles. In retrospect I just don't know how large a printing it had, but it was pretty
widely distributed. You see, the thirties, from my point of view, started out with this involvement with social protest groups in Southern California, Utopian Society, EPIC, and so forth. That was the early part of the 1930s in Southern California. But in the meantime the international situation began to disintegrate, with Manchuria, Ethiopia, Spain, the rest. As the decade advanced, the clouds of the international situation began to dominate, and the zest began to go out of the New Deal. So that when you got to 1939, and if you look at the dates, you can see that the New Deal was over. It was really over. Madrid fell in 1939. A short time later, *The Grapes of Wrath* was published, and shortly after, *Factories in the Field* was published. Harold Clurman in, I think, one of the best books about the thirties, called *The Fervent Years*—admirable book: it's ostensibly about the theater, but Clurman is a very perceptive social observer, and it's about a good deal more than the theater—Clurman said, and I agree with this, that *The Grapes of Wrath* sounded a farewell salute to the 1930s, because after *The Grapes of Wrath*, the thirties were kaput.

Gardner

Is that because it exposed the . . .

McWilliams

All of the ferment and the excitement and all the rest of it came to real climactic statement in *The Grapes of Wrath*. But this intersection between the foreign and the domestic that I was referring to is very interesting in retrospect, because even a situation like Ethiopia, for example, aroused a lot of interest—a surprising amount of interest—because it was such a clearcut case of outright aggression against a defenseless people actually encouraged by France and England. They thought that if they could divert Mussolini in that direction, it would be a good idea. So they actually encouraged them to do this. And there was no Ethiopian constituency here, really, to raise the issue. It was raised by the Left, of course. It was one of the reasons that I have to respect some of their accomplishments because this area was one of them. They raised popular consciousness about what was happening in the international field. For example, there was a mass meeting held in Los Angeles on Ethiopia, believe it or not, in the old Mason Opera House. I was one of the speakers. I didn't know anything about Ethiopia, nothing whatever. But the
issues were clear; anybody could see what the issues were. And the very fact that you could have a meeting of that kind was significant. Then, of course, when Spain came along, it was a much broader, deeper, more important kind of issue. And here the connection with Spain—I think the first public mass meeting held in the United States in support of Loyalist Spain was held in Hollywood at the Hollywood Women's Club shortly after the fighting started. This mass meeting was not organized by the Left at all. It was organized by—

the moving force in it was a chap by the name of David Grokowski, who edited a local Jewish weekly and who was quite anticommunist in his attitude and point of view. But he thought there ought to be a protest about this. He organized this mass meeting. The speakers at that mass meeting were the author Lewis Browne, Manchester Boddy, Lionel Stander; I spoke. I think that was it. I'd been told that was the first mass meeting held in the United States in support of the Loyalists.

Gardner

Now, by the time of the Sleepy Lagoon and so on, there's a great mobilization of Hollywood talent available. Was that true even at that point? Were there lots of stars that participated? Or was that too early for that?

McWilliams

It was too early for that. They didn't show up. Stander was there, and there were quite a lot of people in Hollywood who were interested at this early phase. But then, you see, we went through that disastrous period in August 1939 [with] the Nazi-Soviet Pact. This had a tremendous impact; it ruptured friendships. People weren't speaking to other people, the Left was in the doghouse, and [it was a] very bad time, very, very bad time. I think the foundations were laid then for the subsequent witch-hunting that came along later. It was a very, very bleak period. I was in the middle of this because my position was that I could understand why the Soviet Union had done what it did from the point of view of national self-interest. They had tried and tried and tried to get France and England to unite with them in some kind of stand against the Nazis, and they had had no luck whatever. On the contrary, the last straw, so to speak, was when they didn't come to the defense of Czechoslovakia, because the Czechs had a defensible border: they had twenty-two or so first-class divisions, big reserve divisions, and you could have made a
stand. And then not to defend Czechoslovakia and to make a suicidal agreement with Poland--France and England couldn't really get to Poland; there was no means that they could help Poland--it was folly. It was total folly. When you talk about appeasement, if you look at the Anglo-German Naval Pact, it was total appeasement. They gave Hitler everything he wanted in connection with that pact. And that didn't arouse any great indignation. Nobody got too excited about that. But when the Russians got tired of this--from the point of view of their own national self-interest--got tired of this and made a pact with the Germans, that was awful. Of course, it was as bad in its own way as the Anglo-Nazi Naval Pact. But great nations act in their own self-interest. But the Left here went way overboard in its attempt to defend what the Soviets had done, and they alienated themselves; they isolated themselves. That was a very bad period. That was a very bad period. And then of course, providentially, the war came along, and these issues were papered over, but never really disposed of. [My wife] Iris and I were driving down the coast from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and we stopped--this was the day after Hitler had invaded the Soviet Union--we stopped at Pismo Beach for clams (as everybody did), and there we met Haakon Chevalier and J. Robert Oppenheimer, who were driving north. So we had dinner with them. And their faces were droopy; they were both tremendously pessimistic. They thought that this was the end of everything, that the Soviets wouldn't hold out for more than a couple of weeks, that the Nazis would sweep the whole thing. I didn't agree at all, I told both of them. I said, "Hitler signed his death warrant when he invaded the Soviet Union. This is the beginning of the end." In retrospect, I'm quite sure it was, because I doubt very much that Japan would ever have struck at Pearl Harbor if the Russians had not been engaged with the Nazis. They felt that Russia was so tied up and involved, there was no danger from Russia; that front was protected. Therefore, they could make this desperate, dramatic strike at Pearl Harbor. And of course, when they struck at Pearl Harbor, it solved all of Roosevelt's problems.

Gardner

Because he could then enter the war.

McWilliams
He could then enter the war, and this unity came into being overnight. But it was sort of a papered-over unity. It was never really--this [was] finally resolved. And in the postwar period it began to come back again.

Gardner

Interesting analysis. To return to the thirties . . .

McWilliams

Sure.

Gardner

I'd like to pursue that, but I'm not sure in which direction. I guess we'll get to more of that later on. This was also the era in which you were writing for Westways.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

How did that come about?

McWilliams

I don't quite know how it began, but I would just assume that Phil Hanna asked me just to do a page of this kind. I was delighted to do it because it was right down my alley, so to speak. They sent me a lot of California papers, miscellaneous California papers, and I would go out once a month and pick up bales of these papers and then just thumb through them to see what I could cull out of them that might be of interest. It was fun to do and interesting to do. I picked up a lot of miscellaneous information about California by just doing this. And then occasionally, if I saw a name that interested me, I'd pursue it and then do a little research about it. The [feature] page went on from, I think, `35 to `38, `39, somewhere in there, three years or so [1933-1939]. Then it culminated in the way I explained to you the other day.

Gardner

Right, as a result of your connection with [Culbert L.] Olson.
Well, yes. The fact that when *Factories in the Field* came out it created a great rumpus in California. Ruth Comfort Mitchell, who I explained to you was a sister of Standish Mitchell of the Automobile Club—and she was married to a big grower in the San Joaquin Valley—was outraged by the book. And through Standish Mitchell she brought pressure on poor Phil Townsend Hanna, who took me to lunch one day and said, "Well, it is just one of those things." So I understood; I never blamed him in any way for it. So that's what terminated the page.

You said you had access to all sorts of California newspapers. Since I've just spent some time looking through the archives you put together on the basis of *Factories in the Field* were you also looking through the California papers for items of interest and value for the research you were doing then?

Yes, I did. But I did a lot of that research independently. These papers that were sent to *Westways*, or *Tides West*—I think the magazine was first called *Tides West* . . .

First called *Touring Topics*.

I'm sorry. My column was called "Tides West" [formerly "California Curiosa"].

I think that's it. And the Auto Club would get a big collection of papers from small-town communities in California. And on exchange, I guess, or in some connection—I don't really remember—they would bundle them up. I'd pick them up, as I say, once a month and go through them. That's how I started doing the page.
Gardner

It sounds like an interesting one. I'll have to go back and look through them. The next major period is begun by the Olson campaign. Were you involved in the campaign?

McWilliams

I was involved in the campaign.

Gardner

In what way?

McWilliams

Of course, it was the EPIC campaign that set the stage for Olson.

Gardner

As you said on Monday, that really created a Democratic party in California.

McWilliams

It created the Democratic party. Olson was very photogenic. He was the image of a governor, you might say: tall, and snow-white hair, piercing blue eyes, and pink cheeks. He was the whole image of a governor. But one of Olson's problems was, he didn't know very much about California. He was a fairly recent migrant. He'd been a state senator in Utah and then had come to Los Angeles. He'd been elected state senator on the EPIC ticket in 1934, and he decided to run for governor in '38. I was on a labor committee in Los Angeles that worked in Olson's behalf. He knew relatively so little about California and even about the state government. When he sat down with his advisors to make appointments (some of them were easily made), they came to this Division of Immigration and Housing, which was within the Department of Industrial Relations, which had about four or five divisions, and they agreed immediately on George Kidwell, as I mentioned to you the other day, to be director of the Department of Industrial Relations. They got down to these various divisions, and they came to this Division of Immigration and Housing. Olson said, "What's that? What does that do? What's that?" And nobody had a very clear understanding of the history of this division, which had a very interesting history. When somebody said, "Well, it has something to do with
farm labor, labor camps, and so forth," the question arose, "Well, who should we get for this?" And someone who was in this conference said, "Well, what about Carey? He has written a book about farm labor that's about to be published. What about him?"

Gardner

And you also did a lot of articles for publication.

McWilliams

Yes. "What about him? He knows something. He's interested in farm labor." "Okay," said Olson. "That sounds like a good idea." First of all, I had a chat with Kidwell; then I spoke to Olson. I had not applied for this appointment. I didn't know I was even being considered for it, and I really had no desire to be [appointed] because the law practice was coming along very well at that time. Then Olson said to me, "Look, you've written a book about farm labor; you've written magazines and articles about it, and so forth. Now you have a chance to do something about it. Well, why don't you do it?" So he had me on a hook there. I said okay, I would. That's how I got into it. But it was not of my doing in any sense.

Gardner

What was the campaign for governor like? Was it an easy one considering the new Democratic majority at that time, or was it. . . ?

McWilliams

It was pretty rough, and several things helped Olson a good deal. One was that the Simon J. Lubin Society had put together a pamphlet, an extended pamphlet on the Associated Farmers of California. They issued it, and it had an enormous pick-up. It was very widely read; about 100,000 copies or more were distributed. Olson made something of an issue of it; labor was thoroughly aroused and organizing by 1938 as a result of the San Francisco general strike. . .

Gardner

Right, which we talked about last time.

McWilliams
. . . in '34. The state was overdue for a New Deal, should have had a New Deal in '32; it had been disappointed in '32, disappointed in '34. So by '38, you see, there was quite a sentiment for it. Olson was presentable. He had the appearance and attitude of a New Dealer. It was time then, you see. So it was a rough campaign; it was a rough, tough campaign. But he was a beneficiary of the EPIC organization, which was to some extent still intact. I don't remember the margin of votes, but he won by a pretty substantial margin.

Gardner

You mentioned the Simon Lubin Society. Could you tell me something about Simon Lubin and this society?

McWilliams

Yes. I knew him; I admired him very much, indeed. This Division of Immigration and Housing was his idea.

Gardner

Oh, good. So it dovetails to my next question, then.

McWilliams

Yes. He was a son of the Lubin who had founded the Weinstock-Lubin store in Sacramento, a very famous department store. They were very progressive German-Jewish people. Lubin had gone east to college and university. He decided he wanted to get into social work, which was then kind of a new field. He had spent some time in settlement houses in New York as part of his education. He came back to California convinced that California should prepare for a big wave of immigration, because the Panama Canal was about to be completed, and these immigrants would come from Europe through the Panama Canal. They'd come around to the sovereign state of California, and there would be no means of integrating them, helping them, assisting them, and so forth. And he got Hiram Johnson interested in this idea. Then the Wheatland hop pickers' riot [1913] occurred, and this was a galvanizing factor, because Johnson asked Lubin to investigate the Wheatland hop pickers' riot, and Lubin did a very good job in doing it. As a result of this--Panama Canal, labor unrest in agriculture that seemed to be related somehow to immigrant groups--they set up this division, set up under Hiram Johnson. And Lubin was a
prime factor in it. He, I think, was either the first chairman of the commission or executive officer; I've forgotten which. John Collier, who was later the commissioner of Indian Affairs, worked with the Immigration and Housing Commission. Carleton Parker, who wrote a book called *The Casual Laborer* [1920], worked with the division. Also, Lubin made a very fine report of labor conditions in the Imperial Valley in the early 1930s. As I say, I knew him quite well and interviewed him in connection with *Factories in the Field* and so forth. The Simon J. Lubin Society was set up in his honor, so to speak, to carry on investigations into the field of farm labor, migratory labor, rural housing, and all the rest of it, the other thing he was interested in.

Gardner

He died in the thirties?

McWilliams

Yes, in the late thirties, maybe early forties. And Helen Hosmer was the longtime executive director of the Simon J. Lubin Society. Steinbeck was connected with it; I was connected with it. Steinbeck's first pamphlet about farm labor in California ["Their Blood Is Strong"] was based on a series of articles that he did for the *San Francisco News*, I think, and they were reprinted as a pamphlet by the Simon J. Lubin Society.

Gardner

So it was a very active organization.

McWilliams

It was a very active organization. It did some very fine works and very fine lobbying and investigation about the background--it was very helpful at the time the La Follette Committee came out.

Gardner

How long was it . . .

McWilliams

I can't remember when it ceased to function, but it existed for quite some time. Helen Hosmer now lives up near Santa Barbara someplace. She's retired, of course. She would be a very interesting oral history subject.
Gardner

Probably so.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

I know that I read some of the copies of the *Rural Observer* that were in one of your sets of files. It's a fascinating publication.

McWilliams

Very interesting.

Gardner

And put out by the society.

McWilliams

Yes, it was very good. You see, in the fall of '38, we tried to get the La Follette Committee to come out, thinking it would help Olson--that is, when I say "we": Dewey Anderson, myself, and other friends. They were not interested particularly. Robert La Follette seemed to think, well, that's political trouble somehow. He wasn't too interested in doing this. Then we continued to pressure them to do it, and when we got into 1939, then they decided they would come out. I worked very closely with them all the time they were here. They did a superb job, really marvelous job. And it's one of the tragedies of the time that in their thirty-nine, forty volumes--it's one of, I think, the very finest of congressional investigations. They covered every phase of this farm labor situation in depth. By the time they issued their report, when Senator La Follette presented it to the Senate of the United States, I think it carried a date of October 1942. So in a way it was effort wasted because we were in the war, see, and nobody paid any attention to the recommendations. The recommendations would have had very far-reaching, important implications in connection with rural poverty, and some of them might have been implemented. But you couldn't get anybody to pay attention to it because the war was number one, the number-one thing.

Gardner
What were your first duties? Let me ask first, did you have any questions about accepting the appointment in this commission? You were in the middle of writing a book.

McWilliams

I was in the middle of writing a book. I had some doubts about it. From a practical point of view, it was a foolish thing to do. I mean, from my own point of view, my own self-interest, it was a foolish thing to do. But I knew Lubin, I knew Lubin quite well, and I knew the background of this. You see, the division had done a very excellent bit of work when it was first established. Then after Johnson, the life had gone out of it, of course. It had faded, and it had been moribund until Olson gave me the appointment. So I felt that this was a chance not only to do something for farm labor, or about farm labor, but to revive the division. So it was, from that point of view, very tempting. And it was such a unique agency, because here's a state agency that had a commission of five members and a commissioner; I was the commissioner. It had statutory power to hold public hearings, to subpoena witnesses--that is, to inquire into the condition of aliens resident in the state of California, into labor camps, rural housing, et cetera. It had very broad kinds of powers. And we began to use them. [laughter] We began to use them with interesting consequences.

Gardner

Had they not been used before, or had they been used just to...?

McWilliams

They had originally...

Gardner

...under Lubin.

McWilliams

Yes, under Lubin. But they had not been used for years. Then, you see, a big hassle develops because not only was the La Follette [Committee] out here, but *Grapes of Wrath* was published, and some time later *Factories in the Field* was published. Then earlier that same year, I had been named the head of the Division of Immigration and Housing. So the organized farm groups of
the state put all this together, see, and they said that this was a conspiracy: this is a conspiracy to undermine, besmirch farm labor, the farm industry in California. They linked my name with Steinbeck's, and Steinbeck's with mine, and linked the books together. *Factories in the Field* was supposed to be just—the fact that the book had provided the factual information to back up the fiction that was in *Grapes of Wrath*. They screamed and yelled. And of course, the ironic fact is that I never met Steinbeck. We never met. We were on the same committees; we corresponded.

Gardner

You still have never met him?

McWilliams

No, I never did meet him. So the idea that we were conspiring to do all this was, you know, truly bizarre! But they thought this was awful, and they launched this campaign against both books. The two of us should be very grateful to them. [laughter]

Gardner

For publicizing them.

McWilliams

Because they certainly stimulated the sales enormously. And then, you see, a further thing happened that contributed to the excitement. I called a hearing of the commission. At that time the problem, the key problem, was that when the spring season arrived—the agricultural cycle began—they would force people off relief because they would contend that there were jobs in the field. So they would deny them relief. I held a public hearing in Madera, the idea being to determine a fair rate below which people would not be compelled—you couldn't cut them off from relief rolls, in effect, an effort to determine a kind of minimum wage. The first agricultural labor operation of the season was cut-and-chopping, that sort of weeding cotton. I held that hearing in my own name as chief of the Division of Immigration and [Housing]. Correct what I just said, because the commission was not involved in this hearing; I held this hearing. And I made a recommendation, after hearing the testimony from growers and other people, that they shouldn't be cut off from relief rolls
unless the growers were willing to pay twenty-seven and a half cents an hour; their prevailing wage was twenty cents an hour. And they just screamed like banshees. [laughter] Oh, they were absolutely furious. Then that fall, when it became cotton-picking time, I went to Olson and said, "You should authorize me to call the commission together and let them make the same kind of recommendation." So he said, "Okay, go ahead." We called the commission together and held the hearing in Fresno in the city auditorium. It was attended by about 2,500 to 3,000 people. This was a special commission to hear this particular evidence and make a recommendation. We had a representative from the farm bureau, the Grange, organized labor, people representing public interests, Mrs. Erdman (who was the wife of Professor Erdman at the University of California), people of this kind. And we made a recommendation. There was a majority and a minority report, and I was in the minority. I felt they should make a higher recommendation. But the majority recommendation was arbitrarily thrust aside by the growers, and of course they had a big cotton strike on their hands. The historians of agricultural labor say that these hearings were the first attempts of their kind to hold a hearing, make a formal recommendation . . .

Gardner

       Anywhere in the country?

McWilliams

       That's right. So the growers went to the legislature and got very excited about all this. They introduced what was in effect a bill of attainder, described as a bill of attainder; the first and only bill of attainder, I think, in the history of the legislature.

5. Tape Number: III, Side One (July 12, 1978)

Gardner

       Now, the bill of attainder.

McWilliams

       The bill of attainder was a bill to abolish the Division of Immigration and Housing. But the sponsors in the senate and the assembly made no bones of
the fact that it was aimed at me. They in effect said to Olson, "Remove him, and we'll withdraw the bill." But he said he had no reason to do it. He didn't think I had been incompetent, or he didn't have any grounds for doing this. And there was quite a bit of support from the church groups, and organized labor, some of the papers in the state, and so forth. So they proceeded with their bill of attainder, so-called, and it passed. It passed in the senate, it passed in the assembly, and it went to Olson. He pocketvetoed it; he wouldn't sign it. I want to cut back to something else. At the time of the second hearing to determine a wage rate for cotton picking, by that time the investigators from the La Follette Committee were here in the state. So when the big cotton strike broke that year, the investigators were right there on the scene. They could see the violence; they saw exactly what happened. So it turned out to be a very important source of evidence for the La Follette Committee. When they went into this strike and they called these people, they really had them over a barrel because they had been eyewitnesses to the violence that was going on. The report of the La Follette Committee was very important, in the sense that it really put the Associated Farmers out of business. It was devastating so far as they were concerned. They ceased to be what they had been.

Gardner

But they didn't cease to be.

McWilliams

No, they didn't cease to be. But it took a lot of the steam out of the situation. And incidentally, in connection with all this, [Earl] Warren was attorney general. And I will say this: he was anything but co-operative with the La Follette Committee. He was supporting the sheriffs right down the line, and they were resisting the subpoenas of the La Follette Committee and so forth and so forth. So it was not the Warren of the Supreme Court.

Gardner

Well, we'll talk about that more later on when it comes to 1942 and his running for governor.

McWilliams
Right, right.

Gardner

His bedfellows were different, it appears. Well, in 1939 *Factories in the Field* comes out, as you said. What were the circumstances of your publishing that? How did you make contact with the publisher? Which publisher was it?

McWilliams

I had an agent in New York, and he sent it to Little-Brown. It was the first book that Angus Cameron--Angus Cameron had just come with Little-Brown. He had been with Bobbs-Merrill and had become the editor at Little-Brown. It was the first manuscript that he accepted for publication at Little-Brown. And of course it turned out to be a best seller, as you know. So this was the beginning of my friendship with him.

Gardner

And a good choice for him for his first manuscript.

McWilliams

Yes, it turned out to be.

Gardner

You mentioned, and it was also mentioned in the review in the *New York Times*, when *Factories in the Field* came out, that the nonfiction version really helped substantiate and put over *The Grapes of Wrath*.

McWilliams

Well, I think it did. I think it did in the sense that it did provide the story, the background of this problem. The timing of all of this was very fortuitous because *The Grapes of Wrath* was produced as a movie. It was an excellent movie, and it generated enormous interest, you see, in the whole problem. The stage was set for action for the first time in behalf of migratory farm labor. The principal groups were white. They were [of] Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, Protestants, not Mexicans, not Japanese. These books had aroused all of this interest. And the La Follette Committee had backed it up to the hilt, you see. Everything was set for important legislation, but the war came along . . .
Gardner

Of course, in *Factories in the Field* you don't deal simply with the Protestant population.

McWilliams

Oh, no.

Gardner

*Factories in the Field* is an analysis of migratory workers in the state of California, period, and the dealing with all of the minority groups . . .

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

. . . as they were dealt with. We know basically what the response was from different organizations, the Associated Farmers, for example. What kind of response did you get from some of the, for example, Chinese minority, Japanese minority, Filipino minority?

McWilliams

They were interested, and they were friendly, and I spoke at some of their meetings, and so forth. Actually the Filipinos were more actively interested than any of those other minorities. I just happened to have some rather close ties with some of the Filipinos, just by pure chance. They were very much interested. But of course none of these groups--they were all lacking in spokespersons, in a sense. They were all lacking in--the Japanese were better organized than any of the others, but they were not organized to do very much. The Mexicans were hardly at all organized, and so they couldn't do very much in the way of taking advantage of all this excitement.

Gardner

On the other hand, the Associated Farmers were very outspoken. I have a quote from one named Watson who called you the "agricultural pest, number one."

McWilliams
That's right. They were screaming; they wanted my hide from the very beginning. Because of the excitement that was generated, it became a matter of national interest. I had debated Phil Bancroft on "Town Meeting of the Air" in New York, and we had a debate before the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, Friday Morning Club in Los Angeles, all kinds of excitement.

Gardner

Tell me about those.

McWilliams

Well, you know, Bancroft was the son of the Bancroft. He was the Republican nominee for U.S. senator. We had, you know, a real go at it.

Gardner

What kind of reaction did you have, say, to the "Town Meeting of the Air"?

McWilliams

Oh, very interesting reaction. There was a lot of press coverage, big press coverage, and it stimulated a lot of interest, and the same with respect to the Commonwealth Club debate and the Friday Morning Club. Arthur Eggleston, who was the labor editor of the Chronicle, later wrote that as a result of all of this agitation in 1939—including the debates, and the discussions, the two books, and the movie, and the La Follette Committee, and these hearings that I'd organized--for the first time, he said, the whole issue is out in front of the people. The facts are there, they've been publicized nationwide, and this is the first time that this has all been brought to public focus and attention.

Gardner

When you look back on Factories in the Field do you have any thoughts about it? Is there anything you would have done differently?

McWilliams

Oh, if I were to write it today, I wouldn't write it necessarily in any different way. But I would write a different book, if you know what I mean.

Gardner

Well . . .
McWilliams

It's almost an impossible question to answer because there's been so much written.

Gardner

Oh, right, right. I don't mean in terms of "if you were writing it again in 1978)."

McWilliams

Because there's been so much more information available.

Gardner

Of course, of course,

McWilliams

And there was very little at that time. It was to me a phenomenal point that no one had put this material together.

Gardner

Well, you gathered an awful lot of it from a lot of different sources. In dealing with the archive (that, for the records of history, I found in the Public Affairs Service at UCLA [library]) that was donated by the Haynes Foundation, the materials cover a wide, enormous variety of documents.

McWilliams

That's true.

Gardner

So it was not an easy task to pull them together.

McWilliams

No. No, it wasn't. It wasn't. Even more so since I was very busy, as you know; I was practicing law at that time.

Gardner

Practicing law and also involved in free-lance writing of other kinds.

McWilliams
That is right. That's right. The format of the book, I think, was sound. There was a need to tell a story of migratory labor, and that's what I set out to do.

Gardner

Now, did you immediately have in mind putting together Ill Fares the Land? How did that work?

McWilliams

Well, when Factories in the Field enjoyed the success that it did, Angus Cameron wanted me to do another book. I said, well, the thing to do was to extend the analysis nationally, because the La Follette Committee had held a lot of hearings, and there was a lot of material available. So he agreed. Then I set out, as time would permit, looking at these other situations. I had some very good luck in connection with it because, for example, in the early forties I was invited to speak at a conference at the University of New Mexico. I met some individuals who became very dear friends: Allen Harper of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Hugh C. Calkins of the Soil Conservation Service. So they invited me to go on a tour of these northern New Mexico Hispanic villages, Spanish-speaking villages. It was a tremendous experience. It made a lasting impression, because these villages are very colorful and interesting. It gave me a feeling of the tremendous tenacity of these people that had held a position in this kind of terrain for all these years. My wife Iris and I were both enormously impressed, so I got very much interested in the Spanish-speaking [groups] as a consequence. I had excellent contacts in Texas--El Paso and Austin. I was going on lecture trips in connection with Factories in the Field; so in connection with the lecture trips, I would investigate some conditions. For example, Mexicans were then being sent into Michigan in connection with sugar beets, and I got a lot of information about that. I checked it from both ends, from San Antonio, where it began, all the way to Michigan.

Gardner

That's an amazing part of the story.

McWilliams
It's an incredible story on migratory labor on the East Coast, in the Midwest, and so forth. So it was a logical follow-up. And I think it's one of my better books.

Gardner

It also fills a gap in general American information . . . still today.

McWilliams

Yes, it's still in print. It's been reissued; this is the second time it's been reissued.

Gardner

Yes. Because when one thinks of migratory workers, one always thinks of California braceros. One thinks of the thirties with Oklahoma, Arkansas. One rarely thinks in terms of that run that goes up from Florida, New Jersey, or the sugar beet, Detroit.

McWilliams

That's right. It was reprinted in Great Britain and had an introduction by the Earl of Portsmouth. It got very good notices in the British magazines and newspapers. As I say, it got me interested in the Spanish-speaking, very definitely.

Gardner

Which will come up very strongly later on.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

To get back chronologically--again back to 1940--I have some of these things that are just [noted] down under dates because they seem to come up then. One of them is the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born.

McWilliams

Yes.
Gardner

Now, you were chairman of that?

McWilliams

I was national chairman of it in the year . . .

Gardner

I have it for '40; that may or may not be true.

McWilliams

I think '40 is correct, because I remember it was the year of the collapse of the French, and I was chairman that one year. Now, that Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born has a long history. If you look at the letterheads and the sponsors and the committee members as of that year, you'd be surprised, because it was a very representative group of people: president of Smith College, Culbert Olson was a sponsor, Max Radin. It was very broad, because it had started out at an early date as, again, another expression of this social worker attitude towards the foreign-born, the immigrants. It had very important backing and support. And over the years, and particularly subsequent to 1940, that sponsorship left. It got increasingly involved in left politics and left representation, but not as of this period. This is one of the interesting [aspects].

Gardner

How did it start out? You said "a long history." Did it date back to the Palmer raids?

McWilliams

I don't know just when that would be. I don't know when it was actually organized, but it had a considerable history prior to 1940.

Gardner

How long did you remain?

McWilliams

Just that one year.
McWilliams

The main thing it did was that this unique agency, the Division of Immigration and Housing, had this blanket authorization about the welfare of aliens, residents in the state of California. So when the Alien Registration Act was passed as a war measure, as an anticipation of war, anyone who knew the California situation could realize that there would be problems. How would you ever let Mexican-Americans know that they should register? How could you communicate? They didn't have any organization to speak of, and the act had trouble written all over it. So working with Marshall Dimmick, who was in the Immigration Service or the attorney general's office, but he was a high-ranking Washington bureaucrat. Working in connection with him, I set up a conference here in Los Angeles to consider the Alien Registration Act. We brought all of these groups in, these spokesmen. The meeting was held in the auditorium of the State Building here in Los Angeles; had a big attendance. We told them that this was what the act required, these were the registration forms, this would have to be complied with. And we got volunteers to come to our office—that is, the division's office in the State Building. We had a large number of volunteers who could speak different languages to help them fill out their registration forms. And they came in by the droves. Just droves of them came in to register, because if they hadn't registered they would have been subject, of course, to deportation.

McWilliams

Arbitrarily. The reason I accepted this presidency of the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born was largely because of this cloud on the horizon that began to show up in connection with the Alien Registration Act. You could see trouble was brewing. I think we did a quite remarkable job in registering aliens and bringing this act to their attention. Then the county, of
course, wanted to get in on the act and have its registration system. I talked the board of supervisors out of doing that. I told them that I thought it was totally unnecessary and would cause trouble, and explained why. It was in the air; the people were becoming very concerned about the war by then, you see, and the aliens were beginning to be the brunt of this concern.

Gardner

Right, there needed to be a target.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

You mentioned that you can gear the date by the year that France fell.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

You wrote a piece for the ACLU, or that was distributed as a pamphlet by the ACLU, called Liberals in the War Crisis. Do you recall that?

McWilliams

Yes, I do.

Gardner

It's interesting to me because of its implications, not simply for that [specific] war in terms of what America's role was vis-à-vis France, but also the role of liberals in general as pertains to war.

McWilliams

That's right; that is right.

Gardner

Could you comment on that a little bit, what the situation was in France?
Well, there was all this excitement about—see, this was before the attack on Pearl Harbor, and it was after this Nazi-Soviet Pact. And in [September] 1941 the *New Republic* did a symposium. They solicited the views of a lot of people about what should be done. And there were liberals in the United States who were clamoring for the United States to enter the war, get into the actual fighting. I was opposed to this, and that's one of the reasons that pamphlet was written. In this *New Republic* symposium which was published about a month before the attack on Pearl Harbor, I said I was opposed to the U.S. intervention in the war. I thought that Roosevelt was pursuing a correct policy. He was very careful not to get too far ahead of public opinion. He was letting the facts seep into the public consciousness. He was doing what he could to aid France and England. I was in favor of that, but no direct intervention. I thought he was pursuing a very astute policy and a very correct policy. I was in favor, however, of very stern measures so far as the Japanese were concerned, the embargo or economic pressures of any kind, because I thought that was a real danger, but not to have the United States actually enter the war. One of the reasons for that, of course, was by that time I lacked confidence in the French and British leadership. I thought they were quite capable of selling out at almost any time to the Nazis, making a deal, as I think they were, actually, until the big turnover when Churchill came in and the war became very desperate. But up to that time I think they were quite prepared to have made a deal. That's why I didn't want to see the United States actively involved in the war while that state of affairs existed. I was against direct U.S. involvement, but [was] for all kinds of aid, as I said in that piece for the *New Republic*. I thought Roosevelt was doing a very astute job. In retrospect I'm even more convinced of this. I think it was an amazingly sensitive kind of reading. He knew the mood in Congress, he knew the mood in the country, and he spoke out against aggression, quarantining the aggressors and all that. But he was very careful to walk a very narrow kind of tightrope. It was a very astute operation.

Gardner

Of course, there is criticism now for his dealings vis-à-vis Spain, for example.

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes.
Gardner

That he permitted particularly the Germans to get away with an awful lot.

McWilliams

It was a very serious mistake. Now, I mentioned that I spoke of this first mass meeting for the Loyalists. I also spoke at the last mass meeting on behalf of the Loyalists that was held in Los Angeles. It was held in Trinity Auditorium. I spoke at that meeting--I was chairman of that meeting--and Theodore Dreiser was the main speaker. It was a fascinating meeting because Dreiser had conferred with Roosevelt recently. He was rather advanced in years at the time of this meeting. He walked around on the stage at the Trinity Auditorium, and he muttered to himself, and there were long pauses. He'd just stand there; he wouldn't say anything. "And I said to Roosevelt . . . and Roosevelt said to me . . . and dammit, I don't understand why he doesn't see . . ." you know, it was that kind of talk. But it was very, very interesting. And it is true that lots of people who saw Roosevelt at that time--he was really quite aware of the danger about Spain. But in his judgment, the overriding considerations made it impossible to really take a stronger attitude, pro-Loyalist attitude. I think it was a great mistake, of course, because you might say that World War II started in Spain.

Gardner

How is it phrased, that it was sort of the practice run?

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

The German battalions got to try out all their weaponry.

McWilliams

And it's worth noting that--particularly in connection with this first mass meeting that was held here--there was very little pro-Loyalist sentiment. I mean, the Left and other groups were pro-Loyalist, but the Catholics were very much opposed to the Loyalists. But by the time you got down to 1939, 1940, and if you look at the public opinion polls of that time, it is remarkable
that the pro-Loyalist sentiment had come up, oh, conspicuously. So gradually the American public was understanding what was involved in this.

Gardner

But not in time.

McWilliams

But not in time.

Gardner

And that, too, you mention Roosevelt's political sense.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

That may have been part of it.

McWilliams

I think that was part of it. I think that was part of it.

Gardner

And there are other issues that really aren't part of our discussion that come into play and other influences on it that don't have to do with Southern California history.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Any rate, I was interested in the pamphlet *Liberals in the War Crisis* because of your description of the fall of France and the way in which the industrialists there sort of helped the fall of the [Léon] Blum government along and . . .

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner
... maintained the crisis in order to allow the Germans to move in more easily. Also in 1940 are the Tolan Committee hearings.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Can you talk about what they were?

McWilliams

Well, the Tolan Committee was, in a sense, the successor to the La Follette Committee, in that [John H.] Tolan was a California congressman from the Oakland area. But the executive director--and the executive director is one of the key people on the committee, as you know--the executive director of the Tolan Committee was Dr. Robert Lamb, a dear friend of mine who had been the staff director for the La Follette Committee. He moved over into the Tolan Committee and took quite a number of the staff with him. So the staff was partly the old staff of the La Follette Committee. Now, I had extraordinarily good relations with them, of course. The Tolan Committee was concerned with the problem of interstate migration in terms of Okies and Dust Bowl migrants and so forth and so forth. So when the issue arose here about the Japanese, I had the idea that if we got the Tolan Committee to come out here and hold public hearings, it would have a tendency to blow down some of the hysteria--that is, to demonstrate publicly why there was no reason to be concerned about the Japanese as a national security issue, you know. I'm given credit in about four or five books as being responsible for getting the Tolan Committee to come out here, but I'm not sure that I want that credit, because it didn't turn out the way we had anticipated. The events moved too rapidly, and by the time the Tolan Committee arrived, the decision had been made. I remember that Bob Lamb and his staff came to see me in my office in the State Building to discuss these upcoming hearings. While we were talking about these upcoming hearings, word came that Roosevelt had signed the executive order ordering the evacuation of Japanese.

Gardner

So that's later on. That's '42, then.
McWilliams

Yes, that would be in `42. By then, of course, the die was cast. And the Tolan Committee hearings were used not for the purpose that I had thought they might be used, but they were used to stimulate the movement for evacuation.

Gardner

Ironic.

McWilliams

Yes, very ironic. Bob Lamb didn't want this to happen; the staff didn't want it to happen. But by that time it was very difficult to get people who opposed evacuation to testify publicly. They were afraid of the implications of the war. The Japanese were supposed to have done some bombing from submarines up near Santa Barbara, an oil field. The newspapers were full of big scare headlines, so that Bowron--Mayor Bowron--and Culbert Olson, Earl Warren, all these people, testified on the necessity for evacuation and keeping them out of the state of California. We couldn't get good spokesmen.

Gardner

Even Olson?

McWilliams

Even Olson, yes. Well, Olson's--I spoke to him about it, and his rationale was, "Well, this was Roosevelt's . . . Roosevelt did this. Roosevelt thinks this is necessary. I'm a Democrat; he's a Democrat. We have to back the administration." I met with Thomas Mann and others because they were concerned about the German nationals. We did get a statement from them which I got into the record and had arranged for them to make the presentation. It did have some good effects, but the hearings were taken away from us. That's really what happened.

Gardner

Well, while we're on that subject, you were still commissioner of Immigration and Housing at the time that all that was taking place.

McWilliams
That is right.

Gardner

What were your observations of what was going on? Did you have any participation in any of this? I mean, obviously, not collusion, but in the sense of your own involvement.

McWilliams

I was very much involved in it because the moment of the—even before the attack on Pearl Harbor the Japanese here were beginning to become apprehensive. Suddenly they began to beat a trail to my office in the State Building, in part because I knew some of them as individuals. I had some good friends in the community. They came to me, and I tried to do what I could to get the Tolan Committee out here as a moderating influence, and then got more and more involved in the whole Japanese situation. And we know in retrospect that—and I knew then that it was not—there was no national security hazard here at all. The naval intelligence people had been investigating the Japanese communities on the West Coast for years. They knew all that you needed to know about them, and they weren't in favor of mass evacuation. Ironically, J. Edgar Hoover was not in favor of mass evacuation. He thought it was not necessary.

Gardner

And probably easier to keep up with what they were looking for, whatever surveillance that they were doing.

McWilliams

Whatever surveillance they were doing, it would be much easier. I didn't know then, but we know now, that the State Department had sent a man out here by the name of [Curtis B.] Munson; he had studied the situation here and in Hawaii and had filed a report with the administration saying they presented no threat at all from the national security point of view. "You should let them alone."But the problem, as I see it, with Roosevelt, and I don't think this has ever been really understood: I don't think that Roosevelt wanted to do this. Francis Biddle was attorney general, and I don't think that Francis Biddle wanted to do this. He was a liberal, as you know. But the problem was that the
congressional delegations of the three West Coast states had organized under the chairmanship of Senator Hiram Johnson of California who was a diehard anti-Orientalist. He had been active in the anti-Oriental movement in California from way back.

Gardner

A California progressive.

McWilliams

That's right, a California progressive. They had gone to Roosevelt with a unanimous resolution demanding that he take this action. Johnson was a power in the senate, very stubborn man and a very able person in his own way. I think Roosevelt said to himself, "I've got to get this issue once and for all out of the way. Otherwise, they'll be knocking on my door. They'll be agitating this issue." And he had tremendous things to think about at that time. I mean, the war was going very badly! So I think he signed it just to get the issue out of the way.

Gardner

Shut them up.

McWilliams

To shut them up. And not because he thought it was necessary, and not because he had been told that it was necessary. I don't think he had been told that it was necessary, but that's what happened.

Gardner

And you, of course, portray a different sort of Earl Warren anyway.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

It's interesting that Earl Warren never spoke about his role afterwards and later on in the sort of post-midfifties era. He never spoke about his role in the Japanese internment.
Before his death he made a couple of statements to the effect that he was sorry, that he made a mistake about this. He apologized, in effect, to the Japanese, as did Tom Clark, Justice Tom Clark, who was very bad at the time of the Tolan Committee hearings here. He was a real— he was one of the worst. Also in Warren's memoirs, he doesn't talk about some other issues; he doesn't talk about the La Follette Committee.

He doesn't talk about the Native Sons of the Golden West. He was very active in the Native Sons of the Golden West; they were a big factor in this agitation. He doesn't talk about the church loyalty oath and other issues of this kind. He's rather selective.

True. Maybe the time now is apt to talk about his campaign. Before we do that, though (since that's moving up to 1942), besides Pearl Harbor there's another significant event that's placed in 1941, which is your marriage to Iris [Dornfeld].

Yes.

Would you like to talk about that a little bit? How you met? How it came about?

John Fante, the novelist and short-story writer, is a very dear friend of mine and very close personal friend. John was from Roseville, California, originally, and he married a girl who was from Roseville. His wife had gone to high school with Iris in Roseville, and so John and Joyce Fante introduced me to Iris. That's how I met Iris. We were married shortly, a year or so after we met. I have a
son [Jerry Ross McWilliams] by that marriage, who is now in San Francisco. He's a librarian.

Gardner

Oh, a worthy profession.

McWilliams

A worthy profession. And a son by the first marriage.

Gardner

Right, Wilson Carey.

McWilliams

A political scientist. So that's how I met her. She's a novelist. Iris has written a couple of very excellent novels, and she's done some other things. One of them has been dramatized for television.

Gardner

What was that?

McWilliams

A novel called *Jeeny Ray*. She's done some very good work.

Gardner

Stayed married a long time.

McWilliams

Yes, stayed married a long time. Very, very--well, gosh, a long time. [tape recorder turned off]

Gardner

Okay. Anything else about Iris?

McWilliams

She's a native daughter of the state of California. She went to Sacramento Junior College, and then she went to Mills [College]. She was very much interested in theater and in the dance when she was at Mills.
Okay. Well, now that we have 1941 concluded, let's talk about the [Earl] Warren campaign. One of the interesting things about it is that one of his campaign promises was to get rid of you. [laughter]

That's right. That was one of his campaign promises. The interesting thing about Warren is that when he ran for attorney general he gave Bob Kenny a handwritten letter, which Kenny showed me. The effect of it was, "Dear Bob, I want to reassure you of my interest and dedication, et cetera, to civil liberties" and so forth and so forth. So Bob, as a matter of fact, supported him when he ran for attorney general. But then by the time he ran for governor, it was apparent that he hadn't really lived up to that guarantee in many respects. And Olson was a pushover, really, because the New Deal was itself over.

As you said.

The New Deal was over. The Olson administration was anticlimactic in a way. It came in too late. It hadn't been able to get its roots established. And so Warren was an easy kind of winner. It was interesting to me. I became fortuitously, a very good friend of Leone Baxter and Clem Whitaker of Whitaker-Baxter--the first big professional political management outfit--and got to know them both very well. Warren had retained them to handle his campaign, and they largely changed his image in state politics. I still remember the kind of shock that I had to pick up the papers one morning, and here were photographs of a scene at the beach with bonfires. There had been a big grunion hunt at the beach, and here were the Warrens running up and down the beach with all the family. This was so out of keeping with the character of the Warren that I knew, you know. Well, of course, it was Clem Whitaker changing this man, bringing the Warren family into the picture and trying to humanize the guy, you see. So he did a very successful job of changing his image. And then Warren was very astute in that he always ran as a kind of independent Republican. He never really would align himself with
that old guard. He always kept a certain distance. It was very intelligent; from his point of view, a very astute campaign.

Gardner

That was particularly later, wasn't it? Wasn't he very closely linked with the Associated Farmers?

McWilliams

He was, in that '42 campaign; he certainly was. He said that his first official act was removing me from state office. The truth of the matter is, of course, that all of Olson's term appointments expired automatically, as of the end of the year. By the time he came in I was out. But, you know, it was just something he wanted to say, I guess. I think the liberals of the state made a great miscalculation about where the political issues were in '46, so he had an easy time of being reelected. And he didn't have any problems. I mean, the war was going on, and the economy was booming, you know. So what was there to worry about?

Gardner

Right. Did you ever have any positive relations with him?

McWilliams

Never did. Never did. Some aspects of this relationship are very ironic, because one of the things I did when I first was named chief of the division was to call a conference of local, state, and federal agencies concerned with migratory farm labor. We met in Fresno for a two-day conference to try and get these agencies to coordinate their activities, to work out a program about migratory farm labor. We did, and we had some very good things come out of that, very good things. We got hardly any cooperation from him [Warren] in connection with that conference. In fact, he took quite a dim view of it. But one of the first things he did after he became governor, when the farm labor situation began to heat up again, he called exactly the same kind of conference in Fresno: state, local, federal agencies. [laughter] Of course, we were on opposite sides of all kinds of things. I mean, the [Harry] Bridges case, and the Ship Murder Case. and Max Radin's appointment, he blocked. It was a commission of three that had to approve nominees to the [California]
Supreme Court. He was one of the members of that commission, and it was his vote that blocked Max Radin. Olson had appointed Max Radin, and it was the vote of this commission that blocked it. I was very annoyed about that. And then the Japanese issue on top of it, so we've had a great many differences.

Gardner

What about later on when you were in New York, and he was the progressive . . .

McWilliams

Governor?

Gardner

. . . chief justice of the Supreme Court?

McWilliams

Well, when he was appointed chief justice—we now know a great deal about that appointment, of course. On Warren's own authority we know that Eisenhower later said that that was the worst damn fool thing he'd ever done, when he appointed Warren. And it was a kind of commitment to Warren as his compensation, psychological and political compensation, for the fact that they had passed him over for the vice-presidency.

Gardner

In favor of Nixon.

McWilliams

In favor of Nixon. We also know, of course, how Nixon maneuvered to get ahead of Warren. So that was the reason for the appointment. If [Herbert] Brownell and Eisenhower had known or suspected that Warren would turn out to be the kind of chief justice that he did, they never would have appointed him, I'm sure. But on the basis of his California record they had no reason to think this, had no reason to think this. When he was nominated, I wrote an editorial for the Nation about it and said that it was disappointing. It was not the best appointment in the world, but that you should wait and see how it might develop, because I had a kind of feeling on the basis, again, of
what Kenny had consistently told me about him. Kenny knew him very well, you see; and I thought, well, you should keep your fingers crossed about him to some extent. And of course his work on the court from `53 to about `59 was tremendously important. By then, the court had again become sort of intimidated, and that movement, that liberal phase of the court, was over, more or less.

Gardner

You think by `59?

McWilliams

Around `59. Because in some of those cases you will notice, that came out about `59, they began to blur the issues a bit. Up to this point, they had been going consistently in a liberal direction. Maybe even a little earlier than `59, they began to fluff the issues a bit.

Gardner

Of course, one or two of Kennedy's appointments helped.

McWilliams

Yes, definitely, definitely helped in that regard.

Gardner

Helped it shift.

6. Tape Number: III, Side Two (July 12, 1978)

Gardner

Since we've been talking about Earl Warren, you mentioned Bob Kenny. As I said to you off tape, I'd like you to talk a little about him, how you got to know him, and something about your friendship.

McWilliams

Well, he'd had some newspaper background and experience before he became municipal judge, and I had gotten to know him in that connection. We became very, very close friends and remained close friends until he died. I
knew his wife [Sara McCann Kenny] very well, and we had the same circle of friends. He was an extraordinarily perceptive, intelligent person with very warm feelings about people. He was kind of instinctively friendly, wanted to help the underdog element in the society. He was that very rare person who had acute political instincts and could have gone even much further, I think, than he did in politics, if it had not been for the fact that he was also an intellectual, you know; the combination doesn't work too well.

Gardner

Uh-huh.

McWilliams

He was an extraordinary manager, for example, of somebody else's campaign; not too effective as a candidate himself. That was one of the limitations. His family background here was very, very interesting. And I always felt that his crippled hand--the fact it had some psychological impact on his character--made him seem somewhat diffident. But his acuteness about issues... He was an invaluable source of information about California politics. You could sit down with him and he would case any situation for you. I usually talked to Bob if I could about the political pieces I did for magazines and newspapers. He knew all about the cast of characters. Very funny, very humorous, very witty about the whole business--he knew it, all of it, intimately. And then we had some very good mutual friends, like Duncan Aikman, who represented the Baltimore Sun. We were kind of a trio for a long period of time. So Bob was a delightful companion, full of extraordinarily acute political insights, and a man of remarkable intelligence, a very intelligent man. It's a great tragedy in a way that he got caught in the tensions of the period. It's also a tribute to him because he wouldn't change his point of view; he didn't change his point of view.

Gardner

Why don't you go into detail on that?

McWilliams

For example, I remember a dinner in his honor that was given at the University Club, where Judge Edward Bishop introduced or extolled Kenny in the course
of this dinner. One of the things that Judge Bishop said--and it impressed me
at the time--he said, "Kenny is a man who's discovered that in politics one of
the shrewd things to do is to fill vacuums, wait until a vacuum exists and then
just move into the vacuum." This way Kenny had moved up to state senator,
attorney general, and so forth. Now, there was a lot of truth in this, because
Kenny was not a good campaigner, as such. If in '46 he had pursued what I
think maybe his real instincts suggested and had run again for attorney
general, he would have had Warren's tacit support. He would have been a
shoo-in. And eventually he would have succeeded Warren very naturally, you
see. But he got catapulted into this race against Warren in '46, which was a
great mistake. I rather felt at the time that it was a mistake; I had
uneasy
feelings about it. But he didn't think so.Now, I know there are a lot of people
in the community that you could speak to who would say that Bob got pushed
into that campaign by his liberal friends, and they really sort of forced his hand
on the thing and sort of got him into it. I don't think that's entirely true.
Strange as it may seem, he really thought that there was a possibility, with a
strong ticket and unity and so forth, that they could beat Warren in '46. It was
a serious mistake in judgment, although that ticket in '46, you could hardly
have done better: Will Rogers[, Jr.], for U.S. Senator, Pat [Edmund G.] Brown
for attorney general, Jack [John] Shelley for lieutenant governor, Bob for
governor. That was as good a ticket as you could put together.I was very active
in that campaign. I wrote speeches for Pat Brown and helped Kenny whenever
I could. But Kenny had a fairly well organized campaign, so I didn't need to do
too much in his behalf. I had a lot to do with Rogers's campaign and wrote
speeches for him and so forth and so forth. Rogers was a superb candidate,
marvelous candidate, twirling that rope at county fairs and all the rest of it,
and ran a very good race, all things considered. But the times changed, and
the liberals didn't know it--they just thought that this was a postwar period,
and there was going to be renewed New Deal social developments of all kinds.

Gardner

That all the people who had been supporters in the thirties would have come
back from the war and be still backing them.

McWilliams
Still backing them. The truth of the matter is (at least this is my theory) we never had a postwar period. We moved from the war directly into the cold war. This was a mistake in judgment on their part, and of course they all went down to defeat. That was a disaster for us so far as Kenny was concerned, a real disaster. But he went right along with the same groups that supported him. He continued to work with them--represented the Hollywood Ten; went right down the line on all these issues as he had always done. But it’s too bad, because one thing about him that is not well understood: he was, as you know, a debonair kind of character, and he made it look easy. But the truth of the matter is that he was an excellent administrator! People don't understand that. He ran the attorney general's office with the greatest of ease. He made it look easy. He was a very efficient, good administrator. He would have been an excellent governor, a really excellent governor. He understood this state perhaps better than anyone, any politician that I've known. It's too bad, because I thought at one time that he had possibilities of even going further than the governorship of California. I thought he might really make a name for himself in national politics. But he got caught in this cold war situation that began to develop. He didn't get along with Truman, which didn't help. [laughter] I share his feeling. I was never any great admirer of Truman's. I share his feeling about the issues on which he differed with Truman, but it didn't help him in the Democratic party. So the state of California lost a possibility. It would have been marvelous to watch him in the governorship for two terms in this state--that would have been really something--because he would have been entertaining, and he would have been very efficient. He got along well with the legislature and with the lobbyist guys. He was an expert on the lobbyists. He knew exactly how they reasoned, and how they thought, and how they reacted. He would give me all kinds of insights as to his thinking about lobbyists and political issues. For example, he told me about the kinds of lobbies that you could cooperate with, because they would never make a demand on you that you couldn't reasonably honor. They would confine their interest in you to that one issue, so you could support them and support their interests with some assurance that you weren't going to get in trouble. And he had them all cataloged this way. He knew his way around in that maze in Sacramento as well as anyone ever did. And he got along well with the professional politicians, the Artie Samishes, and these people, you know. He would have been a very interesting governor. And despite the fact that he was
defeated by Warren, they remained pretty good friends, I think, always. They had been before the '46 campaign.

Gardner

And probably were again after Warren became chief justice.

McWilliams

I think that's true. I always had a question in my mind as to what Bob really wanted to be or what he might have been best at. In a way, oddly enough, I think he would have been a superb editor, let's say, of the *Los Angeles Times*. He had a real flair for journalism. He understood politics, and at the same time he was an egg-head of a sort, a real intellectual. Didn't quite gel in terms of being an active politician.

Gardner

It's an odd combination.

McWilliams

It's an odd combination. It didn't really work in politics. I thought he was one of the most talented and potentially had one of the strongest futures of any of the people I knew in California politics. But in retrospect, I can see that there were weaknesses there. It really wasn't his dish of tea somehow.

Gardner

Of course, the Democratic party in California died throughout the forties and fifties. It wasn't until '58 that there's any revitalization at all.

McWilliams

All true.

Gardner

But it had its effect. You mentioned Artie [Arthur] Samish.

McWilliams

Yes.
As long as you brought him up, did you know him?

McWilliams

Yes, I knew him.

Gardner

I know you did some articles on him.

McWilliams

I did the first piece about him to appear in the national press.

Gardner

*New Republic*, wasn't it?

McWilliams

It was in the *Nation*, and it was called "The Guy Who Gets Things Done." [July 9, 1949] It was about his extraordinary skill in handling and masterminding the legislature, how he did it. Then I think it was six weeks later, Lester Velie did a big sensational piece in *Collier’s* about Samish. Samish had talked rather indiscreetly to Lester, and as a result of that, Samish got into trouble. He was indicted for income tax troubles and was sent to McNeil Island. I felt badly about that at the time, although my piece was not in that sense pointing the finger at him, because I thought when it came to that sort of thing, he was no worse than the other lobbyists . . .

Gardner

Right. That's what your article is . . .

McWilliams

. . . or the other members of the legislature. As a matter of fact, he had elements of decency about him in a way. I remember at one time, one night, there had been a committee hearing in Sacramento, and they had been working me over for this, that, and the other thing about farm labor. It had gotten pretty lively, this session had. After it was over, I was walking down the corridor, and I happened to bump into him. He slapped me on the back and said, "Oh, Carey, don't let that business that went on in the hearing room bother you. That's just par for the course. You have to learn to accept that.
Don't let that bother you." And when Bob Thomas did this book about him [The Secret Boss of California: The Life and High Times of Art Samish] he comments about our relationship in the book. He knew that in writing this first piece about him I had not tried to finger him in any sense. He was an extraordinarily shrewd guy. He knew how to run that legislature.

Gardner

Fascinating. It's a fascinating bit of history.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

One other thing I'd like you to do, and then we'll quit for the day, is tell on tape some of the stories you were telling about Stanley Rose before we started.

McWilliams

Well, he was a Texas farm boy who had volunteered to be a machine gunner. He told the recruiting officer, "I want to be a machine gunner," and he had served in France. He had been wounded. At the end of the war, he and another soldier friend of his got themselves assigned to a facility near Stanford University, kind of a psychiatric facility, in which they lived the life of Riley. They were there for about a year and a half, and they had a marvelous time! There was never really any psychological problem about Stanley. They had finessed this. And Stanley began to read a lot of books, and he got interested in books. They were just staying there. It was a country club kind of life. Finally the authorities caught up with them and said, "Out you go!" So Stanley came to Los Angeles and began peddling books--some slightly pornographic, some definitely pornographic--in the studios.

Gardner

Which was the way it was done in those days.

McWilliams

That's right. That was the way it was done. And then he had this first bookshop, and then he went into business at the Satyr Book Store with a chap
by the name of [Nicholas McDowell "Mac"] Gordon and another fellow. They incorporated the Satyr Book Store. Charlie Katz was attorney for the corporation. They had published and sold a pornographic item in which they had technically violated the copyright. So the authorities got after them. And Stanley's associates convinced him that he should take the rap for this because they were married and had families and children and he didn't and so forth. But they [the partners] said there would be no [jail sentence]; there would be just a nominal fine. He pleaded guilty and was given either a sixty- or ninety-day jail sentence. He sent for me, and I went up to interview him in the Hall of Justice. He wasn't enjoying that Hall of Justice a bit! So I brought a suit to dissolve the corporation on the grounds that they had taken advantage of him, and also got his sentence reduced. So he was out in a few days. Then I incorporated his bookstore, and he had it right across the street from his old bookstore. [It was a] very attractive bookstore, and it became the hangout, the club, for all the Hollywood writers. Intellectuals would drift in and out, and they were all enchanted with Stanley. He was a Texas farmboy of very great charm. He dressed like a Hollywood swell, you know, like a dude, and was always very generous and friendly in his attitudes. It became really quite a place. He'd come in, in the afternoons, have a few drinks, and then warm up for the evening, and the talk would go on and on and on. Then they would adjourn to Musso's and go into the back room of Musso's, and it would go until the early hours of the morning. He was, of course, a disastrous businessman. He had no sense of business at all, but he did love books. Uneducated as he was, he had a feeling about books. He had a feeling about authors. He helped a great many authors, Bill Saroyan and others. Many of them took advantage of him in one way or another, and many of the actors and directors certainly did, no doubt about that. That bookstore failed. Then he moved on Hollywood Boulevard, right near Musso's, a bigger store. It had an art room. He used to exhibit the works of people like Fletcher Martin, Lorser Feitelson, other artists. That seemed to be going quite well. But again it was the same problem. Stanley couldn't seem to manage. He needed a manager. We were very close friends, and I spent many hours with him. He was a delight to be with. He was great fun. He had a marvelous sense of humor, canny sense of Americana—a very, very warm, generous, delightful guy. Stanley is a Hollywood legend, and he deserves to be, deserves to be because he was the center of whatever there was in Hollywood, in extrastudio
fashion, outside the studios where there was intellectual discussion and so forth. You never knew who you would meet in his stores any more than you knew who you might meet in Jake [Zeitlin's] stores. They would be different kinds of people, however. But they were always hanging out at Stanley's: Louis Adamic, Owen Francis, Erskine Caldwell, and George Milburn, and Nathanael West and, oh, the whole roster of it, you'd meet there. And his death was very unfortunate. But [he was] an authentic character. As I say, I had the same experience with him that I had with Jake. I handled the legal work for Jake's first ventures, as I did for Stanley's. Stanley had a great sense of humor and was a superb entertainer. He kept those bookstore audiences in stitches, laughing at him. It was great fun for them to go in there. He liked to entertain them, and he did. They bought a certain number of books and that sort of thing. But they would take him on incredible junkets upstate in Northern California on hunting expeditions, or he would go fishing off the Channel Islands with Bill Faulkner and others. And Stanley would always go along because he thought it would give him an opportunity to sell the others a lot of books. But they never did buy many books; they really wanted him there to entertain them, which he did. Extraordinary person.

Gardner

Terrific. On that note. . . .


Gardner

As I mentioned, today we'll talk about Sleepy Lagoon, and the zoot-suit riots [1943], and so on, a matter of great topical interest because of the play [Zoot Suit] that's been around this past year. First, I'd like to get your comments, your own personal recollections and point of view on the background of the case. Describe what the case was about and so forth and so on. Then I'll ask some more specific questions.

McWilliams

Well, there was trouble in the community--that is, trouble with regard to Mexican-American young people--before the Sleepy Lagoon case. There was quite a bit of it; there was the beginning of a buildup in the press about
Mexican-Americans. Then, of course, the Sleepy Lagoon case was timed in such a way that it was immediately caught up in this tension. There was a great fuss in the press, and a lot of arrests were made. They were rousting around Mexican-American young people. The trial itself, of course, was a long, drawn-out affair, the largest trial of its kind up to that time, I think, in Los Angeles County. It was the largest mass murder trial. The trial was a travesty. I mean, Charles Fricke had a reputation as being a tough prosecution judge, the worst possible judge for this kind of case. And the defense group that came to their aid headed by—I guess the executive at that time was La Rue McCormick—was Left-influenced, Left-dominated, you might say. But the people on the committee at that time were entitled to great credit because they were the only ones who came forward to offer a defense, and they did the best they could under the circumstances. They didn't have any resources, and they put up as good a fight as they could in the courts, but inadequate in terms of the issues. There were a lot of defendants. I've forgotten how many, but it was a very big . . .

Gardner

I think it started out with twenty-two, and then seventeen were eventually jailed.

McWilliams

And George Shibley. . . . And there was a woman lawyer whose name I can't remember. The trial had taken place in a poisonous atmosphere. Then when they were convicted, this defense group realized they had to do something else. They were at the end of their non-existent resources. So they came to me and wanted to know if I would take over the chairmanship of the committee to raise funds for the appeal. It was necessarily going to be a long, drawn-out affair, costly, very costly affair, big 6,000-page transcript, all this sort of thing. New counsel would be needed. So I said I would, but I wanted to make it clear that the committee would have to be broadened, because there was no way of raising the money that was needed with that committee; it was too narrow. You'd have to have some labor people on it, some prominent Jewish businessmen, and motion picture people, and some blacks, one or two blacks (there were a few Mexican-American middle-class persons that we could get), and the personnel itself would have to change on the committee.
So they agreed to all of this. Oh, yes, I made a further condition. I said every penny collected in the name of the committee would have to be recorded, and the expenditures recorded, and those records have to be certified by an auditor, and they have to be deposited in a safe place like the UCLA Library, so that they might be inspected by anyone with a legitimate interest. Because, as you know, there was always this chatter that—in connection with the [Tom] Mooney case and all of these cases—that they were exploited just to raise money which wasn't really spent on the case. And I didn't want any of that to happen. So they agreed to all this. Then Ben Margolis and his firm came into the case, and they took this appeal. They did a superb job on the appeal. I was in court part of the time when Ben made his argument to the District Court of Appeals, which happened to be an excellent section of the district court of appeals. It was a first-rate argument, quite conclusive, quite interesting; and they, of course, unanimously reversed the conviction. Not only did they reverse it; they gave Judge Fricke quite a working over for obvious bias and prejudicial rulings and outrageous comments about the defendants, and all the rest of it. So it was a terrific victory for the defendants and for the community. I think I would date the so-called Chicano rebellion from the time of that case—or you could go forward to the middle sixties, and it might be more logical to pick that date as the date when Chicano rebellion began to get underway. But this was the first—so far as my knowledge goes—it was the first major victory in the courts of this kind that the Mexican-American community had ever won. While it is true that they didn't win it on their own steam, so to speak (they had outside help), nevertheless they were involved in the case. The late Harry Braverman, who was a very dear friend of mine, is entitled to great credit for it. He was invaluable in connection with fund raising for the defense. We raised a substantial sum of money for that time, quite a substantial sum: $25,000, $30,000, which was pretty good for that time. We had some Hollywood people who were interested: Orson Welles was interested, Joseph Cotten, Anthony Quinn, and others.

Gardner

Well, I'll just ask questions as they occur to me. How did you interest people like Orson Welles, for example? Did he come to you? Did one of your fund raisers contact him? Do you recall?

McWilliams
I just don't recall specifically. He was, of course, fairly active in public issues at that time. It would have been a logical thing to do to ask Welles to join in this, and Quinn because of his background, of course; and how Cotten got into it, I really don't know. It may well have been, you see, that Josephina Bright was responsible for these motion picture people. She was then the wife of John Bright, the screenwriter; they were still married at that time, and they had Hollywood contacts. They may well have been the people who got the motion picture people into it. Josephina Bright was of Mexican-American background herself, so it was very easy to get her to participate in this.

Gardner

How many Chicano--well, they weren't Chicano then--Mexican-American sponsors did you have involved in your organization?

McWilliams

I would have to check the letterheads, but there were a number. There was a doctor who was quite well known in the Mexican-American community, and there were some others who took part in it. It was a substantial victory, no doubt about that, and it generated a tremendous amount of excitement and interest at the time they were released. But of course in the meantime they had served rather long periods in San Quentin.

Gardner

Close to two years.

McWilliams

Close to two years, because they had not been able to make bail; they couldn't raise the bail. It was a very dramatic case, very interesting case. And one could tell in the wake of that case, from what had happened, that there was going to be more trouble. Harry Braverman just happened to be on the grand jury. I talked to him at great length about it and about the possibility of more trouble, future trouble. He got the grand jury to hold an open hearing, public hearing, on the whole question of tensions, this, that, and the other thing. I testified at that hearing and said, "Look, if certain things aren't done, there's going to be more trouble here in the community. It's perfectly obvious, and for these reasons." I cited the reasons. Guy T. Nunn, who was the
representative of Nelson Rockefeller's organization, [Office of the Coordinator of] Inter-American Affairs, also testified. I think he testified. In any case Rockefeller had a representative who was here who said, "This is disturbing U.S.-Mexican relations," and so forth and so forth; but nothing happened. The press went on using the kind of rhetoric that it did, and the police went on doing exactly what they had been doing. It was all this talk about Mexican gangs, and zoot-suiters, and pachucos, and all the rest of it. Then we got into '43, and the whole thing exploded. All those riots of 1943, which was a very important year in the war, all of them I think were triggered--I won't say they were triggered, but the first major disturbance was here with the so-called zoot-suit riots. Then there were, as you know, other disturbances in Beaumont, Texas, Harlem.

Gardner

Detroit.

McWilliams

Detroit--a big disturbance in Detroit and so forth. And they all came within a period of a couple of weeks.

Gardner

Right. What occurs to me is that the time that you were fund-raising for the defense committee is exactly the time that this was going on.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Because the defense committee was in operation for something like a year or more afterwards until a final appeal was going on. I'll ask more about the zoot-suit riots later. But I'd like to ask you now, did that have any effect on your fund raising, positively or negatively, as you were trying to accumulate money to pull these kids out of jail?

McWilliams

I think we had established a pretty good pattern of fund-raising operations. Well, it may have been influenced to some extent by what was going on. It
probably was. But there were some very fine people in this community, many of them in the Jewish community, who had held house parties one after another, and all the way from sort of lower-middle-class people up to and including people in Beverly Hills. Orson Welles threw a party at his home, I remember; I was there for that one. There was a lot of grassroots fund raising. It was not so much a question of great big checks from individuals as it was an organized effort. I have been disturbed to have learned that these financial records are no longer available at UCLA. I don't know what happened to them!

Gardner

That's not true, as far as I know, because I think I saw them.

McWilliams

Did you?

Gardner

Well, I'll tell you what I saw (so you've got it on the tape). In going through the Sleepy Lagoon file--was it Alice [Greenfield McGrath] or you who gave that eleven boxes of Sleepy Lagoon material to UCLA?

McWilliams

Well, she did.

Gardner

Well, in there is a checkbook and the notebook, the audited notebook.

McWilliams

Well, that's good; that relieves me, because I was very concerned that in this particular instance, for once, we would be able to scotch this kind of talk that always comes up in these public-cause trials. And I didn't want that to happen in this case. The court victory had repercussions in Mexico. It received a lot of publicity in the Mexican press, and very favorably in terms of U.S.-Mexican relations. We got an extraordinary response from servicemen who had heard about the case and sent in nickels, pennies, dimes, quarters, dollars, showed a great interest in the case.

Gardner
Let me go back to the beginning. I know that a lot of it is available in other places, but since it's not really well known, you were the first to write it up in any detailed way in several publications and then in *North From Mexico*. Do you recall the circumstances of the case: what happened that night of the murder and so forth and so on?

McWilliams

Oh, I would know in a general way, but I've forgotten the detail of it. I reported it in *North from Mexico*, and I did some newspaper pieces about it. But it was a case of this gravel pit in East Los Angeles being a kind of a rendezvous point and swimming pool. Henry Leyvas had taken his girl out there to spend some time. There had been a ruckus of some sort with the members of a rival group, and he had returned later in the evening with some of his friends. They had broken into it and they had sort of . . .

Gardner

Crashed I think is the . . .

McWilliams

. . . gate-crashed this party that was going on. The next morning the body of this young Mexican-American [José Díaz] was found near there in the area. He had left the party in the company of a friend (who apparently was never called as a witness, very odd circumstances; he never was called), and he had been apparently drinking pretty heavily. It was on the basis of this they indicted Leyvas and members of his group that were there. It was a very weak case so far as the evidence was concerned.

Gardner

Do you remember any of the other oddities and weaknesses of the trial?

McWilliams

Well, the thing that was so terrible about it is they wouldn't let these defendants have a chance to get prepared for the trial, really. Their attorneys would probably have told them to get a haircut, or get their hair trimmed a bit, and a few things like this, but none of this was possible. They looked like a criminal bunch, you know, looked like the stereotype of what the prosecution was saying about them. The atmosphere at the trial was poisonous, very, very
bad. The defense was spirited, and vigorous, and all, but not maybe as tactful as it should have been—that is, in terms of winning a verdict, winning a jury over. But the case itself had a lot of ramifications. It's been written about in pamphlets, and dissertations, and whatnot.

Gardner

What about press reaction at the time?

McWilliams

In the wake of the riots, it was a lot of excitement. And the second night of the riots there was an emergency mass meeting called. I chaired this emergency mass meeting, and a hundred or so people showed up. They decided something would have to be done. Various suggestions were made, and opposed, and so forth. As a matter of fact, out of that meeting came what was known as the Council for Civic Unity. I don’t know how long it survived; it survived for quite some time. It did some first-rate work in the community. But I phoned Bob Kenny, who was attorney general at the time, in Sacramento, and I said this was a very bad situation and something should be done about it immediately. He said he would speak to [Earl] Warren and see if the governor would consent to the appointment of a commission of inquiry to quiet it down, particularly to quiet the press down and to do something about the local law enforcement people. He said, first of all, that he would fly down from Sacramento, and we made an appointment to meet in the California Club for breakfast the next day. It was very odd in that cavernous dining room of the California Club in the early hours of the morning. Bob and I were sitting there having breakfast and talking about this case, what should be done about it. I said, "Here are some people that should be appointed on the commission." I gave him the names of the then Catholic bishop here and other people who would make good, acceptable members of the commission. So he got in touch with Warren, and Warren okayed it, with the exception that he put one of his own nominees on as a commissioner: Leo Carrillo, who was sort of, you know, one of those Mexican-Americans who you hear about on the Fifth of May and then don’t see for the rest of the year. Otherwise, he approved the commission and the idea of the commission. At Bob's suggestion, I had prepared a draft report, so that when Bob called the commission together he could say to them, here's a draft report of what we think should be done, and
what should be said, and so forth and so forth. So they went right to work on it. They mulled it over, they made some changes in it, they watered it down a bit, and it was issued almost immediately. And in the wake of that report the press did tone their language down—a bit, a bit. The police adopted a somewhat better attitude, not a great deal better but somewhat better. Some of the nonsense that had been talked about Mexican-Americans ceased to appear in the press, and a much better tone was established. It quieted the thing down, for the time being at least.

Gardner

Was there any press that was sympathetic? Not just perhaps locally, but even nationally, internationally, besides, say, People's World?

McWilliams

Well, PM and the liberal weeklies were sympathetic to it. I don't know just how the New York Times, for example, treated it or what it had to say about it, as a matter of fact. And then there were some papers here, like there was a Jewish community paper on the east side—pretty good circulation—at that time. It was quite good, quite good. They gave it a fair treatment; and more than fair, they were very favorable so far as the commission report was concerned. Then later, when there were signs that there would be more trouble of this sort, Kenny asked me to prepare a manual for police officers: what to do in case of a riot. And I prepared a manual, which again was watered down considerably and edited, but it was issued officially by the attorney general's office.

Gardner

That's after the first riots.

McWilliams

Yes. They distributed it to police officers all over the state. Well, there were some funny aspects of Sleepy Lagoon. There was a very nice chap—I can't think of his name; I think his name may have been Jack Berman—who was very helpful to us in many ways. He was the manager of the Grauman's downtown motion picture theater. He had had trouble with young Mexican-Americans who would come in there and sit there and sort of carve up the backs of the
seats in front of them, you know, just do it. He spoke to Alice--spoke to me, too--"Couldn't something be done?" So Alice called some of these people together, and Berman was there, and he told them the problem. He said, "I'm helping this committee, this Sleepy Lagoon Committee. I want to continue to help it, but you're making it difficult for me." So they sat there, wise as owls; didn't say a word, just listened. And they were stopped; they stopped it. Things like that were sort of amusing sidelights on what happened.

8. Tape Number: IV, Side One (July 13, 1978)

Gardner

One question that occurs to me in relation to it all, and is not even on my two-page list of questions, is the relationship among the racial communities. In other words, the zoot-suit riots were a Chicano riot particularly, although some blacks were involved.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner

Yet, everywhere else the riots were white and black . . .

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

. . . during that time. Is there any reason why blacks were not included, didn't include themselves or weren't included by the mobs during the zoot-suit riots?

McWilliams

Well, I think blacks were doing relatively better, of course, at that period of time than the Mexican-Americans were doing. Jobs were plentiful and so forth. Mexican-Americans had a lot of grievances, because a large number were drafted because the number that had draftdeferral jobs was minimal. So more were drafted proportionately. The removal of the Japanese-Americans had created further problems so far as manpower was concerned. As a matter
of fact, the railroads had begun to recruit blacks from Louisiana; they brought in quite a number. And I think they were doing relatively better. So I don't know why they didn't get into this to a greater extent, but they were a fringe element in this thing. And the relationship between blacks and Mexican-Americans was not very—it just never had been cultivated.

Gardner

Despite the fact that in many cases the neighborhoods were contingent.

McWilliams

That is right.

Gardner

Nor, on the other hand, were there problems between them. There were just no relations at all.

McWilliams

I think it was more a question of their just never having established any kind of working relationship. I think that would be my impression.

Gardner

Do you want to describe just offhand something [of] what the riots were, how they came about and so forth?

McWilliams

Of course, there were a lot of soldiers and sailors moving in and out of Los Angeles. And there was a problem about housing; there were shortages. Shortages were all over the place in connection with rental units and you name it. These sailors began to mill around and were looking, I guess, for trouble or excitement, as sailors have a habit of doing. They began to go into some of these areas, and one thing led to another. There were some scuffling and some fighting. Then the next night the sailors came back in bigger force in taxicabs, and they began to chase Mexican-American zoot-suiters, particularly in the downtown theaters. They'd barge into the downtown theaters, and drag them out of the theaters, and work them over, and all that sort of thing. And the zoot-suit costume was an incitation to these mobs that were roaming the city. They went on for about a week before it quieted down.
And no one did anything about it.

Not very much. The police were sort of looking the other way when this was going on. They didn't do much of anything about it. And the tone of the press was very bad, very bad. Even after the governor's report was issued, the tone didn't improve too much. They had begun using words like pachuco to describe them, rather than Mexican-Americans. It wasn't very much of an improvement.

The two major instruments of the press at that time would have been the Hearst papers and . . .

Yes.

. . . the Times.

That's right. And there was little to choose between them. One was about as bad as the other.

I'll come back to Sleepy Lagoon now and go through my list of questions. You talked about some of the stars and how they got involved. There were three major benefits that I could find. One was at the Mocambo and featured Anthony Quinn, Gene Kelly, John Garfield, and Lena Horne.
Another was a jazz concert at the Philharmonic. It wasn't called that, but it was a jazz evening at the Philharmonic Auditorium. The third was Pan-Americana, that had a range from Mexican music to Eudice Shapiro to Rita Hayworth.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

How did you go about organizing those benefits? Did you appoint people to do that, or were you on the phone talking back and forth?

McWilliams

We had a pretty good and pretty active committee. Certain individuals on that committee were quite active and quite good. They'd had organizational experience. And Alice was very effective. She knew how to get these people into action. There were those larger meetings, but I think perhaps the most important part of it were the house meetings. I attended any number of those, and they were effective. They were effective in raising money and creating interest in the case, and so forth.

Gardner

What in the world was Rita Hayworth doing there?

McWilliams

Well, I guess she was active at that time.

Gardner

Was she? I wasn't aware of that.

McWilliams

I think she was, in connection with Welles.

Gardner

Oh, right.

McWilliams
I think she was.

Gardner

As long as we talked about Alice, what exactly was her role in the whole thing? Do you know how she got involved?

McWilliams

She was on the reorganizing committee. She was the secretary, executive director, or whatever you want to call it; and she really ran the committee. How her first interest developed in the case, if I ever knew, I've forgotten. I just couldn't tell you.

Gardner

How closely did you two work together.

McWilliams

Very closely. We worked very closely, indeed; we had no problems at all.

Gardner

What was she like at age twenty-five?

McWilliams

Well, she was very much like she is today. She was very dynamic, energetic, and she was sympathetic. She understood what the issues were. She understood these defendants; she had carried on correspondence with them. She knew their families and their relatives. She was a very, very excellent, brilliant secretary, I would say, or executive director. Very, very good.

Gardner

Another person who worked there was Bella Joseph.

McWilliams

Yes. Well, there were a lot of people. There were a lot of people that were in and out of the committee offices.

Gardner

Could you tell me about some of them? Well, those you remember.
McWilliams

Well, Alice would be a better person, but I remember any number of people that would be there at times and who were planning meetings, planning parties in their homes—as I say, many Jewish middle-class people who had gotten interested in the case, and then, of course, Harry Braverman's friends out in Beverly Hills and elsewhere.

Gardner

There were a number of different areas to pursue. Labor, of course, was very helpful . . .

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

. . . was involved in many ways, and the CIO as a whole.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

And then among other unions that I found participating were things like the ILO, the IWO (which wasn't really a union), and the UE.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Could you talk about that a little bit, how the unions were involved, what connections there were?

McWilliams

I know that the CIO was helpful. I don't recall that the Central Labor Council people were very responsive; that's not my recollection.
Slim Connelly was on one or another board.

McWilliams

Slim Connelly would have, of course, been active in it. It was a pretty widespread community affair, and one of those cases where you had Hollywood and other elements in the community working together. The Hollywood people were not running the show; normally they would insist on doing that themselves, you know. There was always that dichotomy between the Hollywood groups and the other groups in the community. But in this instance they all worked together.

Gardner

Right. Talk about some of the lawyers who were involved. First of all, George Shibley--can you tell me about him, who he was?

McWilliams

Well, he is very good. He was a labor lawyer; he was sort of left [-wing] persuasion, I guess. He was a Long Beach lawyer; I think his offices were in Long Beach. He was very good; he did his best on this case. And as I say, there was a woman lawyer that was in the case. I can't think of her name.

Gardner

How did he come to the case, do you know?

McWilliams

I think through this International Labor Defense; he had handled cases for them before, and they would naturally turn to him.

Gardner

I see.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

And then when it came time for appeal, I think he'd been drafted.
McWilliams

    I think that's probably true.

Gardner

    So Ben Margolis took over. Now, Ben Margolis you can certainly talk about at some length.

McWilliams

    Yes. Ben is a very able lawyer. He was active in labor law, had a lot of experience in labor law and had a lot of trial experience, and had represented cases of this kind where there were public-issue cases he had been active in. He did an enormous amount of work on this appeal. It was a major undertaking to sort out the evidence from a 6,000-page transcript and present it properly. He did a brilliant job, very fine job. He had help, I assume, with others in his firm. But he was the lawyer so far as the appeal was concerned.

Gardner

    Tell me something about him, about how you first knew him, what he was like, and so forth.

McWilliams

    Oh, I had known him for quite a long time. I don't remember when--well, I guess, the National Lawyers Guild was formed in the late thirties, and we were both members of the National Lawyers Guild. He and Charlie Katz, who lives next door here, had a law firm together, and there were other members of that firm whose names escape me at the moment. They were very active in representing CIO unions and various committees. They were a well-known firm for this kind of representation in Los Angeles. Charlie Katz had been a classmate of mine at law school, so of course we were old friends. Ben, I knew after I started--I don't know when Ben came to Los Angeles; I've forgotten. But I've known Charlie Katz much longer.

Gardner

    A number of friend-of-the-court briefs were filed. The most prominent would be the ACLU, but there were a number of others. How does something like
that work in a case like Sleepy Lagoon? Do they file all their own briefs and so on?

McWilliams

Well, in most cases *amicus curiae* briefs are filed on the suggestion of someone--that is, you go to an organization or group and say, "Won't you file an a.c. brief?" I don't know in this case. I couldn't even tell you who filed. Who filed briefs?

Gardner

Oh, there were a number of them. The ACLU is the only one I wrote down. There were eight or ten.

McWilliams

I don't remember anything about these people.

Gardner

You were not on the legal side at all, then, were you?

McWilliams

No, I had nothing to do with arguing the case, or preparing the case, or anything of that kind. I was very busy with other matters at the time. I gave as much time to the defense as I could, of course.

Gardner

Guy Endore wrote a piece called *The Sleepy Lagoon Mystery*. . .

McWilliams

Yes, yes.

Gardner

. . . that was used as a fund-raiser.

McWilliams

That's right, that's right.
What do you think about that?

McWilliams

Well, it was a good pamphlet; it served its purpose. And Guy was very helpful. He was active in many ways in connection with the defense; he and his wife Henrietta were quite active. There were many people in the Hollywood area that were active in it. There was a large interest in the case on the part of liberals in the community. It was not a left-centered kind of activity; it really wasn't. And there were a lot of people in the community who just felt that this was going a bit too far.

Gardner

Right. Was the Endore piece his own idea, or is it something that was . . .

McWilliams

That was his own idea; it was his own idea. As I recall--and you can check this with Alice--as I recall, he was very much interested in the case, and it seemed a logical thing to have him do it. We did get quite a bit of publicity for the case in one way or another, in the national press, and I think I did some pieces for PM, and one or two maybe for the New Republic, I'm not sure.

Gardner

I think so. Did you send out a lot of releases across the [country, to] newspapers?

McWilliams

Yes, we sent out quite a lot of press material. It got quite a lot of attention in the press in Mexico, in part because the riots had helped to heighten awareness of this whole situation. And the motion picture people who were in it helped make it well known.

Gardner

Right. The one interesting aspect of the foreign policy connection--well, of course, there's the part about the involvement of Mexico in the war--but there's also the sinarquismo, which apparently played some small role in the community itself.
McWilliams

Yes, they were kind of a troublesome element in the--they weren't particularly numerous, but they were a troublesome element in the community. They were not in favor of the war. They had their own point of view, which I never quite understood. But while they were troublesome I don't think they were much of a factor in retrospect. They did attract some attention. I think Jack Tenney's [California] Committee [on Un-American Activities] had some hearings that referred to what they had been doing, but I don't think they were a major factor. That's my best recollection.

Gardner

One of the things that Alice put out was a publication called the *Appeal News*.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Did that just go to the boys in prison, or was that sent out pretty generally?

McWilliams

I think it was sent out pretty generally to various lists that we were able to get, and to the donors, and to the committee, and to other people in the community.

Gardner

Was that your idea or hers?

McWilliams

Couldn't tell you, don't remember. Just don't remember.

Gardner

It's an interesting piece of--well, *journalism* is not quite the word--but it was a very nice touch, I thought, in going through them, very personal. We talked about the appeal and the fact that the case was dropped.
Guy Endore was active in the thing; he may have helped on it. I think Herbert Klein was active; he may have helped on it. We had some pretty good talent to tap. So any number of people might have had a hand in connection with it.

Gardner

Have you had any contact with any of the defendants before, during, or after?

McWilliams

No, I haven't. The people have written to me from time to time about the case. You know, these people are writing dissertations and theses and so forth. Then Luis Valdez came to see me in New York, as I said, and wanted to talk about the case. We spent an evening talking about it. I put him in touch, as I said to you, with Alice (he didn't know about Alice) and also with Ben Margolis. And I was very much impressed with him as a person, and from what I've heard of the play it has some good material in it.

Gardner

Did you know his work before?

McWilliams

No, I don't think I did.

Gardner

Surely there was a piece in the Nation on El Teatro Campesino at some point.

McWilliams

It may well have been. If so, I've forgotten about it. But this was the first time I'd met him.

Gardner

You haven't seen the play, have you?

McWilliams

No, I haven't seen the play.

Gardner

Are you going to get to see a rehearsal while you're here?
McWilliams

Yes. I hope to get to see a rehearsal; I'd like to.

Gardner

You mentioned *PM*, and while that's 3,000 miles away from our area, still, if that's a publication you were writing for, I think it's one that would be interesting to talk about.

McWilliams

Yes. Well, you know, it was Ralph Ingersoll who had this idea of a national newspaper that would not take advertising and would be truly a national newspaper in scope. That was the concept behind *PM*. He had very substantial backing for it when he started out. I have always thought that if the timing had been better it just might have worked as an idea, but it was an idea ahead of its time. Now, that was one problem, and the other problem was the war. When the war came along, of course, the interest in this kind of journalism was subordinated to other considerations. And then Ingersoll himself went off to the war, was very active. He was a rather high-ranking officer, and he was very active in a strategic sense. He was attached to the commands of ranking generals and all that sort of thing, so it suffered from a lack of leadership. Then they tried to remedy it by beginning at one point to take advertising. That helped for a time; then it ceased to be of much help. Then it became, of course, the *Star* under Joseph Barnes and Bartley Crum for a time. When that ceased, the *Compass* came along. I don't think it was a direct connection between the *Star* and the *Compass*, but the *Compass* did sort of take over; they tried to fill that gap.

Gardner

Did they continue to maintain this no-advertising policy, or had that been dropped?

McWilliams

No, towards the end they dropped that policy. They began to take ads, but it didn't help too much. I think if it had been started at a later point in time, it might well have succeeded.

Gardner
Would a liberal newspaper have succeeded in the forties?

McWilliams

Not in the forties. You would have had to project it maybe as far in advance as the sixties, about two decades ahead of us. But it would have had to be projected at a time when certain issues were truly nationalized, had become truly nationalized. That didn't happen until later.

Gardner

Did *PM* seek a national audience?

McWilliams

Oh, yes. It consciously sought the national audience. It tried to reach out across the country. Tom O'Connor, who had worked on the *Los Angeles Record and Daily News* (another old friend of mine), was on the staff of *PM*. He later went to the *Compass*. I had other friends on *PM*: Leo Huberman, I.F. Stone. Izzy Stone was a contributor and an important figure on *PM*. I reported on the IATSE [International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees] troubles in Hollywood, and this zoot-suit situation, and a lot of issues for *PM*.

Gardner

Were you sort of a local [correspondent], or one of several?

McWilliams

Well, in a way, but not officially, never officially. But I did quite a bit of writing for them. Most of it--when they saw something they were interested in, they'd get in touch with me.

Gardner

You also did some writing on this for the *New Republic*.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner
Who was around the *New Republic* at that time? Who was your contact? Was it Bruce Bliven?

McWilliams

Well, when I first started to write for the *New Republic*—I had written for them before—I think it was Bruce; I think it was Bruce. Of course, I knew most of the people on the paper and had met them in New York and met them in other connections. I knew, oh, Otis Ferguson, and Malcolm Cowley, and the others. They were all people I had met and gotten to know. I'm trying to think of some of the managing editors at that time. I just don't think of names at the moment. But I'd written for the *New Republic* off and on.

Gardner

Right, since the middle thirties.

McWilliams

Yes. I reported the EPIC movement for them.

Gardner

Right, right. At the time of the zoot-suit riots, one of the things that's in the microfilm collection that's based on the material at the Public Affairs Service is an editorial that was in *Script*, Rob Wagner's magazine. Was that unusual for a publication like that? Weren't they more oriented towards the arts?

McWilliams

Yes, I would say that was quite unusual. They didn't usually get into issues of this sort.

Gardner

Were you involved with them in any way?

McWilliams

I think I did a piece or two for them. But I wasn't involved with them in any other way. I knew them. I knew the people there, but I don't recall—I didn't have any connection with the magazine.

Gardner
By the way, the bishop is [Joseph Thomas] McGucken.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right. [laughter]

Gardner

I've got him down here on the [Sleepy Lagoon] citizens committee.

McWilliams

He was very good, very good.

Gardner

I think we've covered everything about Sleepy Lagoon and zoot suit. Is there anything you'd like to add, or can we move on to some other things?

McWilliams

No, I can't think of anything.

Gardner

Well, if you do we can pick it up later. To get chronological again, about the same time all this is going on, you're working on and publishing a book called *Brothers Under the Skin*.

McWilliams

Yes, that's true. As a matter of fact, *Brothers Under the Skin* was published right in the midst of these `43 race riots.

Gardner

In 1943.

McWilliams

That's right. It was accidentally timed, but it was brilliantly timed. And it became a best-seller right away. It remained on the best-seller list for a long time. Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* was published the following year, and I think these two books had an influence of a sort in that they took a new point of view about race and minorities in the United States. Up to this time, as [E.] Franklin Frazier once pointed out, the social sciences had pretty
largely tended to simply rationalize the existing status quo. The theory was the same theory that was reflected for years in the decisions of the California Supreme Court: that if prejudice existed it was in the mores of the society; you couldn't change it by court decision or otherwise. You'd just have to wait until the mores changed, et cetera. And both these books, the Myrdal book and my book, took quite a different point of view: that you could do something about it. In *Brothers Under the Skin*, I recommended creation of what became in effect the Civil Rights Commission, that kind of approach. I was convinced that you *could* prevent discrimination by legislation. And one of the reasons I was convinced is because California was such a marvelous laboratory for the study of ethnic and race relations. It all happened so soon; you could just see it. You could see, for example, that legislation had helped create bias against the Chinese and the Japanese in particular. For example, a school ordinance in San Francisco created a great deal of trouble and excitement aimed at Japanese children in the San Francisco schools at a time when there were just a handful of Japanese students involved. It couldn't have been any kind of issue, you know. And the real reason for it, of course, was that this was when you had that very corrupt city administration in San Francisco. They were in great difficulties. They wanted to divert attention from their own corruption. They began to bait the Japanese, you see. In many other cases you could see that the silly ordinances that were adopted against the Chinese for the purpose of harassment, trying to restrict them in all kinds of ways, had a tendency to increase the prejudice against them. Herbert Hill, who was for years with the NAACP and a great authority, is convinced that a great deal of the Jim Crow legislation that came along in the South in the post-Civil War period--but well into the 1890s, let's say--a great deal of that legislation was patterned on the anti-Chinese legislation in California. So, I think the reason I did *Brothers Under the Skin* is, I said to myself, "Look, this is the one state that has all of these groups." It had a fairly large Indian population, Chinese, Japanese, Hindus, Filipinos, Mexican-Americans, and so forth.

Gardner

Jews and blacks.

McWilliams
Yes. And you could put them all together in a way that would be much easier than if you attempted to do it nationally.

Gardner

At the same time you could put them all together, and each one was discriminated against in a different way.

McWilliams

That's right. So it worked out all right as an idea.

Gardner

One of the most interesting sections to me--well, several of them were interesting--one that interested me the most was the Filipino.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Because persecution of Filipinos is something that's not generally known about in California.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

What sort of sources did you use for your research for something like this?

McWilliams

Well, I knew many of the leaders--well, I won't say many because there weren't many. But I knew quite a number of the people who were prominent in the Filipino community, if you could call it a community. Chris Mansolvas, for example, and at a later date, Carlos Bulosan, the writer. I knew them both quite well, and I knew quite a number of others who I'd met through Mansolvas. I used to attend some of their meetings in Los Angeles and got interested; it was a very interesting kind of situation. Of course, the situation has been greatly transformed since then, because it looked as though at one time the Filipino was just a question of their dying out. They were single men.
The Repatriation Act tried to induce them to go back so that we could sort of close the whole chapter. Some went back, of course; most of them didn't, and it looked as though that was the situation. Then, of course, in the wake of World War II, all the changes that took place--then they began to come back. Now you have a very large Filipino population in the state, probably destined to get larger.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

So they have not died out at all as a group in the state.

Gardner

But they've become more middle-class.

McWilliams

Yes, they have tended to.

Gardner

Plus it's a different makeup.

McWilliams

We have many in New York who are interns in the hospitals, nurses, and so forth. So there's been a reverse movement, a new movement, into the United States from the Philippines.

Gardner

Now, as you say, your conclusion in the book was the creation of a civil rights commission.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Since then an awful lot of things have happened in civil rights, including a commission or two.
McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Will you still conclude pretty much the same things today that you did then?

McWilliams

Well, I think the first thing that had to happen in the whole racial minority situation in the United States, the first thing that had to happen was the civil rights phase. You had to regularize their status, particularly because of the situation in the South. That is to say, they had to be given the right to vote freely, conduct political activities, to move about, to get rid of this Jim-Crow-type of discrimination at public facilities, and all that sort of thing. That was the first thing that had to be done. Now that has been largely done. That objective has been attained. But of course the discrimination is still there, and no one who was interested in civil rights--certainly I never thought that civil rights would, per se, settle the issue. It would make it possible to cope with the issue in an entirely new way. It would open up a big new chapter that should have been opened up in 1867, 1868.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

But the economic side of the problem was still there, which of course it still is. They have a long, slow, uphill fight to win full equality of opportunity and status in the United States, but they have made enormous progress.

Gardner

You think there's a top of the hill?

McWilliams

Well, I think they have made enormous progress, in the sense that in hardly any part of the United States today there's any legalized discrimination, legally sanctioned discrimination, against them. So that they can vote, they can participate in political activities, so forth and so forth. And this is true of
Mexican-Americans, too, who have also made remarkable gains. But as I say, I think this is chapter one. And I think chapter one more or less came to a close-at least from a historical, and in a way a theoretical, point of view—it came to a close with the death of Dr. [Martin Luther] King, but more specifically with [President Lyndon B.] Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam in '65. When they began to escalate the war, the civil rights movement was sort of over the hill—I mean, not necessarily that it had ended, but . . .

Gardner

. . . but it was obscured.

McWilliams

. . . it was obscured by the escalation of the war.

Gardner

And hasn't picked up steam again.

McWilliams

No, it hasn't. But of course many of the objectives had been achieved.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

I think Johnson's ardent advocacy of civil rights legislation was his major achievement and was in part motivated by a desire to quiet some of the criticism of the war. But whatever the motivation, it made a big difference.

Gardner

Of course now what a lot of the minorities face is the same sort of discrimination that the Jews faced at the time that you wrote *Brothers Under the Skin* and, later on, *A Mask for Privilege*, which is the opening of only certain places in the economy.

McWilliams

That's right--token.
Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

But there's been a great change; it's been a great change culturally. If you had looked at television in the early fifties, all through the fifties, well into the sixties, you wouldn't have seen a black face. And now they're all through. Not only are they cast in the soap operas and all that, but they're in the commercials. There's been a great change in attitudes culturally, an enormous change in attitude. Blacks and whites associate in a way that would have been most exceptional not so many years ago. And then, of course, after *Brothers Under the Skin* I wrote *Prejudice* about the Japanese-Americans, which was another book that was--most of my books have been part of the action. They've grown out of what was actually happening at the time. This was certainly true of *Prejudice*, because I was deeply involved in what was going on there. It was the first book about the relocation program, and it was actually published before the program was terminated. Now since then, the interest in that program has grown enormously. The number of books multiplied and so forth, but that was the first book.

Gardner

That was written during the war.

McWilliams

It was written during the war; that's right.

Gardner

Well, you said you were very involved in it. In what way were you involved?

McWilliams

I was involved first of all in this--as I explained to you the other day--in this abortive effort to try and prevent the evacuation, to try and convince the administration it was not necessary to do this, and would be a lasting injustice to these people and a great mistake tactically, tactically a great mistake; and of course that turned out to be true. But there's an irony in that because the racial overtones of the war were, of course, very definite, because of Hitler
and Hitler's attitude about Jews, concentration camps, all the rest of it. Before
the war was over, the Japanese situation became an acute embarrassment to
the administration, and they began to try and do things that would remove
this element. And as you know, the Alien Land Act was knocked out, and other
steps of this kind were taken. So that, actually, Oriental, or Americans of
Oriental background, were the beneficiaries in a way of what happened in
connection with this. Then, of course, most recently President [Gerald] Ford
officially apologized for the great mistake that had been made. And other
statements of this kind have been made to reflect the fact that there was
belated recognition that it was a terrible mistake and the most serious denial
of civil liberties, I think, in American history in a way--I mean, apart from
slavery, but certainly the most serious violation of civil liberties in this century.

Gardner

I was very impressed to see in your collection of--I don't think you'd call it a
publication so much as a little sketchbook, from a group of people who were
at Santa Anita.

McWilliams

Oh, yes.

Gardner

It was done in 1942 and signed by about ten or twelve of the . . . .

McWilliams

As I say, I had many friends of the Japanese community, some of them artists
and intellectuals of one sort or another. I went out to visit them at Santa
Anita. It was an extraordinary experience to see your friends with their
families housed in stable stalls in a racetrack. Then, when they were removed
to various centers, I visited most of the centers at one time or another and
had an excellent relationship with the people who were directing--the war
relocation authority. Dillon Myer was very friendly and very cooperative. They
made it possible for me to move around in the centers pretty much at will and
talk to whomever I wanted to talk to, and so forth. So it was an amazing
experience, very interesting experience.
It must have been. I'll get back to *Prejudice* in a minute. You mentioned that *Brothers Under the Skin* sold very well. Was it a better seller than *Factories in the Field*?

McWilliams

Yes, it sold more copies than *Factories in the Field*. *Factories in the Field* is still in print. *Brothers Under the Skin* has been in print for years and years and years. There's been one edition after the other, and it had a long, long good selling record.

Gardner

What was the reaction to *Prejudice*?

McWilliams

I think the reaction was on the whole quite favorable. It got excellent reviews; *Brothers Under the Skin* got fine reviews, too. *Prejudice* got excellent reviews, and it generated a lot of interest. Again, there were nationwide radio debates. I participated in three or four of them. It roused a great deal of interest. Then the big issue came, you see, as to when they should be permitted to return--that is, the Japanese-Americans should be permitted to return. Tactically, of us who were on the Japanese-American side of the situation felt that they should be returned before the war was over. The all-Japanese-American battalion had made an extraordinarily fine record in the Italian theater of the war. That could be used as a demonstration of their patriotism and all that. And with the sentiment of the war being on, we can't have anything happen to these people; this could be taken advantage of. But there were people who were strongly opposed to the return of any Japanese-Americans till the end of the war, and there were some who didn't want them returned even then. Warren, who at this time was governor, was very strongly opposed to the return of any of them.

Gardner

Really?

McWilliams

Yes, very much opposed. When the ban was lifted and some of them began to return, he became reconciled to the fact. And under the prompting of Bob
Kenny, who was entitled to a great, great deal of credit, the two of them—that is, Kenny and Warren, with Kenny as the motivating moving force—they let all the law enforcement officials of the state know that the governor and the attorney general were not going to tolerate any looking the other way. When these people came back, they would have to be protected and so forth. So they did a very good job. Warren is entitled to credit for that after the decision had been made, so that when they did come back, only a few incidents took place. I did a piece for PM sometime after the ban had been lifted, and I reported that as of that time there'd been something like fifty-four incidents of one kind or another in the state, but nothing of any great consequence. It's interesting: I spoke at Clearwater High School, saying this ban is going to be lifted, these people are going to come back, they must be treated fairly, and so forth. And there were some hoodlum elements, who threw bricks through the window of the school and banged glass around, and so forth and so forth. But in general the returning evacuees were well received; there was less trouble than might have been anticipated. And of course this was not surprising because they were pretty well regarded before they were evacuated. I mean, they were accepted as—there wasn't any great. . . . I never thought that evacuation was ordered because there was mass sentiment against the Japanese; I don't think that was true. As I said to you the other day, it was simply a practical decision on Roosevelt's part: that he couldn't be bothered endlessly with agitation about this issue.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

I really think that's the situation. Another issue that came up was that once it was decided that they were going to be evacuated—now, mind you, they were evacuated without notice, hearing, a chance to be heard, no due process at all; the sole criterion was race. But at the early stage a very important issue was: now that they're going to be evacuated, should the army continue to have charge of this program or should there be another agency? Some of us put up a very big behind-the-scenes battle to get the army out of this picture as soon as possible and to get it turned over to the War Relocation Authority, which turned out to be a very good thing. Its first administrator was Milton
Eisenhower, a very decent sort of person, who was soon succeeded by Dillon Myer, who was a splendid person.

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McWilliams

I was saying that the big issue was whether the army could be eased out, if this program could be turned over to the War Relocation Authority, because the War Relocation Authority was in part staffed to a considerable extent by many top officials who came from the State Relief Administration, because the State Relief Administration was sort of phased out by this time, you see. There was no unemployment problem in California with the war, you see. So these were pretty good people. They were of liberal outlook, and many of them social workers. So we felt it was much better to have the War Relocation Authority handle this program than for the army to handle it, although the army, to its credit, did a good job in the initial business of getting these people from the assembly centers into the relocation centers; they were very proper and correct about this. Even so, it would have been a total disaster if it hadn't been for the people themselves. The Japanese were well organized, self-disciplined largely; they were very correct and proper. They, you know, didn't like this; it was an outrageous thing. But I don't think you could have taken another group and done this. They would have screamed, there would have been all kinds of trouble. But the Japanese made it work, and the Japanese made it work in the centers.

Gardner

Why didn't they fight it?

McWilliams

Some of them did, of course, but they were at a great disadvantage. They felt that it was a very disastrous thing and an unfortunate thing. But they had to go along with it--they were in no position to fight it--and the better record they made, the sooner it would be terminated and so forth. So they behaved very well indeed.

Gardner
Who were some of the prominent Japanese--well, *prominent* is not the right word. Who were some of the Japanese with whom you were [friends] during that time, some of your better friends?

McWilliams

Well, there were some artists here in Los Angeles that I knew: Mary Oyama, for example; her sister, and her brother, Wesley; and the very, very nice young chap who was the secretary of the Japanese-American Citizens League, an old friend of mine; and quite a number of others that I had met in connection with the work of the Division of Immigration and Housing or had met in some other connection. They immediately came to the division for help when they began the program; this whole excitement began to get under way. Of course, there were groups in California that wanted them out, wanted them out--their competitors who thought they could take over certain aspects of the Japanese-American economy. And there were political groups that wanted to do it for political reasons. Of course, people like Warren were very active. Warren was one of the chief protagonists of the idea that they all had to be evacuated.

Gardner

I have two different questions. I'll try and decide whether I should ask them one at a time; I might as well since we're having an outspoken discussion. Given the fact that the racism, by the standard that you've applied in your writing, is based on economics (to sort of tie *Brothers Under the Skin* and *Prejudice* together), doesn't the economic situation still exist that at any time another scapegoat group would come up despite civil rights and so forth?

McWilliams

It's quite possible. But you see, you have a disastrous situation in a way, because the United States Supreme Court upheld this, and the decision was written by some--I've forgotten whether [Hugo] Black wrote the decision in the main case, but he certainly concurred in it. And that precedent is there as a rather haunting kind of precedent to have, and it could be the source of a great deal of trouble.

Gardner
In putting together *Prejudice*, did you work at all with Al Wirin? Later on, *Prejudice* was cited as having been one of the important influences in decisions.

McWilliams

Yes, it was cited in footnotes of the Supreme Court's decision.

Gardner

Korematsu [case], was it?

McWilliams

Yes, but I didn't work with Al on this particularly at all.

Gardner

Because that's what was preoccupying him during those years.

McWilliams

Yes, he was certainly very much then preoccupied. But, you see, later when we got into this domestic witch-hunt and this whole question came up about detention camps for possible subversives, the idea was to use some of these same centers, you see. So that was a very dangerous precedent, and we may not have heard the last of it.

Gardner

The centers are still there, aren't they? Or have they been dismantled?

McWilliams

I think some of them are still there. I'm not sure; I really don't know.

Gardner

Did many of the Japanese who were resettled remain in the places that they went--Arkansas, Illinois?

McWilliams

Some. No, this Oyama family that I knew quite well when they got out of the centers, one branch of the family decided not to return to California. They'd
had it. They settled across the river from Cincinnati, but later came back. I think by and large most of the Japanese returned; that's my impression.

Gardner

The next book on the list that I have is *Southern California Country*. Why don't we talk about that now. While there are lots of things in lots of your books that I enjoy, *Southern California Country* is the one, for me, that stands out because it's, I think, by far the best book written on Southern California and its idiosyncracies. (And as an oral historian I'm not supposed to express that bias, but that's okay.) What was the background of that? How'd you come to write that?

McWilliams

Well, I knew Erskine Caldwell, and he had been asked to edit a regional series about different parts of the United States, sort of patterned on what the WPA Writers' Project had done, only in a different context. And he asked me if I would do the book on Southern California, and of course I responded with alacrity; I was delighted to do it. And I really enjoyed writing that book very much because I'd been thinking about aspects of this for a long time, and this gave me a chance to really unload, so to speak. [laughter] Here again, the timing is important, because that book pretty much had to be written and published when it was. It couldn't have been written, really, at a later date because, you know, so much had changed that you would have had to change the perspective of the book entirely.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

So it was providentially timed, and I think the reason it has continued to do as well as it has is because it was, again, a product of my experience. I had been a part of the local scene from the 1920s to the time the book was written.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams
And also the experience that I had had with Phil Townsend Hanna, the once-a-month page that I had done about California folkways and all the rest of it, had been a big help. I learned a lot of things about California. I had been encouraged to think about it, and I had written a lot about it for newspapers, and magazines, and so forth. So I really enjoyed writing *Southern California*.

Gardner

What were some of the other books in that series? Do you know? Did any of them have anywhere near the lasting power?

McWilliams

I don't think they did, and I'm ashamed to say I can't think of too many of the other titles. There were quite a number of books.

Gardner

There were. It was an enlightening series.

McWilliams

The book had an interesting history because the initial edition sold quite well. But when it was sold out, it wasn't reissued for quite some time, and then it was reissued, first in a limited hardcover edition, and then it was reissued in paperback, and it's still in print. It still sells quite well.

Gardner

And the subtitle has slowly taken over as what most people know it by: *An Island on the Land*.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

The paperback was that way. How did you accumulate the information for this? I have a specific question about that later.

McWilliams

Well, just endless reading, and the California press, and I got very interested in California. I wanted to find out some of the answers to aspects of California
life that had intrigued me. My law practice was helpful in a way; it taught me a lot about Southern California. My association with people like Louis Adamic and other friends was important. More or less, when I got started on it, it was an easy book to write, actually. It was so much a product of my own personal experience. Robert Towne, who did Chinatown, I think said something that pleased me very much about the book. He said it opened his eyes to aspects of Southern California life that he had not been aware of. And he was a native of the region; if not a native, he had lived here a long time. And he got the idea for Chinatown, of course, from what I had to say in the book about Owens Valley.

Gardner

Right. That's just such an interesting thought to think of [the play] Zoot Suit coming from North from Mexico and Chinatown coming from Southern California Country.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Maybe we can figure out something to do with Ill Fares the Land.

McWilliams

That's right; that's right.

Gardner

It [Southern California Country] covers such a vast range. One thing I ran across in your own archive and in Special Collections--in a couple of boxes that are there--was an interesting exchange of letters with the attorney--Robinson, was that his name? At any rate, there was one talking about the C.C. Julian case, the pools . . .

McWilliams

Yes, yes.

Gardner

You know the story?
McWilliams
   I vaguely remember it.

Gardner
   You care to talk about it?

McWilliams
   I don't remember it well enough.

Gardner
   Well, what I recall from the exchange of letters is that the attorney for one of the people you had mentioned wrote in and said, "As a matter of fact, the person whose estate I'm in charge of had nothing whatsoever to do with this."

McWilliams
   Yes.

Gardner
   You wrote back a letter saying you were sorry, but that you were basing it on primary and secondary sources; but you did send an apology and had it excluded from further editions.

McWilliams
   Yes, yes.

Gardner
   And supposedly there was a note. I don't know. I have a first edition myself, so I don't know if the footnote got through.

McWilliams
   I should be able to answer that, but I don't . . .

Gardner
   . . . don't recall.

McWilliams
   I just don't recall. I don't recall.
Gardner

What were some of your primary and secondary sources in putting it together? I mean, like for instance, let's use the C.C. Julian. What did you use in putting that section together on C.C. Julian?

McWilliams

Well, I had a lot of experience with the C.C. Julian episode because some of it I knew from working on the Times.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And I had friends who had been involved in aspects of the Julian case and knew the press of the community—and [through the] process of osmosis, I guess you'd say. [laughter] James Hart up at the Bancroft [Library] wants some of these bibliographies, notes that I used. I don't know whether I gave them the notebook on Southern California or not, but I have a notebook full of references; it's a big notebook. I had been reading about Southern California and California for a long time and done quite a lot of writing about it. I had become fascinated and, as I say, this work for Westways was quite helpful, quite helpful, because I turned up a lot of stuff there that was very useful that I would not otherwise have run across.

Gardner

Right. Well, as methodical as you are, and this was obvious in looking through some of your collections, it would have surprised me if you didn't have something like that.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

What did you think of Chinatown?

McWilliams
Well, I just came from this conference in Sun Valley, and they devoted a couple of sessions to *Chinatown*. I gave a keynote talk on Owens Valley because it was part of a session about water in the West and so forth. I think *Chinatown* is a brilliant film, and I think symbolically it's got the situation about right. The character who is named Mulgrave or something is obviously not anything like the kind of person that Bill Mulholland was, but that doesn't make any difference really. The whole episode about land and the getting water to the land for irrigation purposes in the San Fernando Valley is all authentic and true. The creating of an artificial water shortage is not necessarily the way it was done in the film, but they did it. I think it's a brilliant film. And the whole concept of Chinatown--so many interests were involved, conniving and manipulative and deceptive and so forth. It was a Chinatown of interests. Here again, there's been some latter-day research that I would like to have had a chance to look at when I wrote *Southern California Country* that confirms in great detail a lot of what I said in the book. But if I'd had access to that material, I could have elaborated on certain sections, certain parts of that story.

Gardner

Right. Is that true of a lot of the other stories in the . . . ?

McWilliams

It's true of quite a number of them, because there has been, as you well know, a great upsurge of writing about Southern California. There has been some pretty good scholarly research that has come out that was not available then.

Gardner

Interestingly, [the UCLA] Oral History [Program] did a series on water resources that I suppose would be best said to be the other side of the story since it was the MWD [Metropolitan Water District] people and so forth and so on that we interviewed. Now, the California [State] Water Project is in a lot of ways one of the man-made wonders of the world.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner
It was sighted by one of the astronauts as he circled the earth, or went up to the moon. One of the things he could see was the California Water Project.

McWilliams

Of course. And you know it's a fantastic project, no doubt about it. And the aqueduct was, from an engineering point of view, a tremendous undertaking. But it didn't need to have been carried out the way it was. It was carried out by unfortunate tactics, to put it mildly: deception and misrepresentation and so forth.

Gardner

Right. Does Southern California Country still sell well today?

McWilliams

Yes, it still sells well.

Gardner

Still does. It must be used in a lot of history classes and so on around the state.

McWilliams

I assume that it is, because the company that reissued it as a paperback doesn't have a very good sales force. People are constantly complaining to me that they can't find it in particular bookstores, but it sells very well. So I assume that a lot of that must be for schools, libraries, and so forth.

Gardner

Well, should we stop here and pick up tomorrow?

McWilliams

All right.


Gardner

To backtrack a bit from where we ended up yesterday, there were a couple of things I'd like to ask about. The first of them has to do with a fellow named John Phillips.
McWilliams

Oh, yes.

Gardner

John Phillips popped up a lot in your early writings and then in the clippings you had in your archives.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Did you have any contact with him at all? What were the circumstances? Who was Phillips, and what role did he play?

McWilliams

If my recollection is correct, this must have been the John Phillips who was a state senator from down near Beaumont, Banning, that area. He had been, before and during the time that he was senator, and I guess afterwards--he had been a kind of spokesman for the farm organizations and particularly for the Associated Farmers, which of course brought us into a kind of collision on a number of occasions. He was very active in this agitation in the senate to get me out of the Division of Immigration and Housing. And that's the John Phillips that I'm sure is referred to in the clippings.

Gardner

Right. Now, at one point in one of the books--I'm not sure whether it's *Factories in the Field* or *Ill Fares the Land*--you had some quotes from him upon a return from a trip to Germany, and then later on he disclaimed them and called you all sorts of names in the course of disclaiming them.

McWilliams

That's right. Well, he did say those things. He probably didn't intend to say them in quite the way in which he did. But he was quite a right-wing kind of character in California politics as of that period.

Gardner
Was he prominent, was he important, or was he just sort of another state senator of...?

McWilliams

No, I think in the context of the times he was a pretty well known statewide figure as a spokesman for these groups, primarily as a spokesman. He was a rather articulate person, and he was better known than most state senators, particularly from rural areas or nonurban areas.

Gardner

Another thing from that period that I'd like to hear some comments about is relief. Now, the State Relief Administration was set up pretty much about the same time that you were getting involved in government.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

And there were lots of arguments, pro and con, at the time. What were some of them?

McWilliams

Well, it was supposed to be a boondoggle, and a political thing, and so forth and so forth. But there was incontestable need for relief. I think the program was stimulated to some extent by the EPIC campaign. It was interesting from many points of view because it attracted quite a number of young people who were talented and well educated and who could find no outlets, no employment outlets or professional outlets. Many of them got into the State Relief Administration, and then got interested in social work, then went back to colleges and universities and got graduate degrees, and then went on from the State Relief Administration to UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency], and all kinds of federal agencies. They proliferated out, and there were quite a number of them--quite talented individuals, it just so happened. So the State Relief Administration was a source of endless controversy during the Olson administration, of course, with certain groups wanting to force people off relief. I talked the other day about these hearings that I organized to try and counter this tendency. I think it's important to keep
in mind that California agriculture has always been, from an employer point of view, extremely well organized, so that what they had up until this time (and to some extent this is still the situation) was a unilateral collective bargaining—that is, the employers collectively got together and determined [what] they would do on a regional basis or on a crop basis. The Association of Tomato Growers, for example, would meet, and they would fix a rate. Well, that rate always became the maximum. The growers would all adhere to it, and this was always done, of course, without the slightest semblance of collective bargaining.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

It kept wage rates low and uniform. This is why I've always felt that there should be some kind of instrumentality such as you now have with a wage hearing board that could do something about this in order to inject an element of really real collective bargaining. And this was a very big factor in relief because the growers would meet and would fix a rate and then bring pressure to bear on the State Relief Administration to force people off the rolls in order to take the jobs at these predetermined rates. And it created a lot of controversy.

Gardner

In addition, one of the other things you cite is that the rules then would say that because the person took a job they were not eligible for relief when the crop picking was over with.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

It was also a means. Well, the history of the State Relief Administration can be told elsewhere.

McWilliams

Yes.
Gardner

It's not really your area. Okay, the next one, then, is the Tenney committee [California Committee on Un-American Activities].

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

You started to tell me off tape something about your relationship with it. So why don't you start retelling that story now, and I'll ask questions and so forth.

McWilliams

Well, I knew [Jack] Tenney. I knew something about his background before he became an assemblyman and later state senator. And I knew Sam Yorty, of course, when he was in the state assembly. The truth of the matter is that both of them were redder than a rose as of that period. At least the rhetoric of what they said and the positions that they took--for example, in the first session of the legislature after Olson had been elected (and they were elected to the legislature at the same time), they introduced a resolution urging the Congress of the United States to lift the embargo against the Loyalist government of Spain. This would be in January 1939. And so fast did the situation change that by March that same year they had broken with Olson.

Gardner

Oh, that quickly.

McWilliams

That quickly. And each of them had started on his respective right-wing career. So from then on out, they were very much opposed to the Olson administration and also to the people that they had known or associated with in various political causes and issues previous to that time.

Gardner

To what do you ascribe that?

McWilliams
Well, I think to the changing temper of the times. I don't know just what motivated these gentlemen, but they did switch; they made a very sudden switch, and they were consistently to the right after that and very vehement critics of the Olson administration. Tenney, of course, became president of this quite powerful Musicians Union in Los Angeles, because it seemed to be in the pattern of the times after the--well, even before the war he had started on this career which accelerated after the war as being a Red-hunter. I had great difficulty always in taking him seriously, you know, because I did know the background. I knew about his background. I had a lawyer friend in Imperial Valley in Calexico, who had known him when he was playing a piano in a honky-tonk in Mexicali. As a matter of fact, he had asked me to--I'm quite certain about this--to sign his application to take the bar examination in California. So I knew the background. I knew from whence he came and all the rest of it, and I couldn't take him seriously as a character, really. He started these hearings, and they called me before the committee on this occasion that I refer to, and they asked me about these various listings, et cetera. I think one thing that should be kept in mind is that the procedure of these committees--both the Tenney committee and, to a very large extent, HUAC--was to pay an enormous tribute to the communist publications, *People's World* and so forth. They would clip these papers, and anytime a person was listed as having spoken at or having sponsored a cause, they would list it; it would go into the files. Now, in many cases those were quite accurate reports, and in a great many cases they were totally inaccurate, you see; but there was no way of correcting this. For example, on an issue that I was annoyed about, very much annoyed about, I was listed as a sponsor and member of the executive committee of the American Peace Crusade. This was not true. I never was. And the way this happened is revealing. I was in San Francisco or Sacramento--this was when I was in the state government. There was an organizing meeting here held in Hollywood or somewhere in Los Angeles for the American Peace Crusade. It came time to make nominations and set up the executive committee, et cetera. Somebody got up and proposed my name. It was accepted; it was . . . [laughter] you see. I was never consulted or asked or anything. When I came back, somebody called my attention to this, so I immediately wrote them. I said, "No, I don't want to be associated with this endeavor." Yet this goes into the record. And there were any number of these; just any number of these were on the record. Anyone that relies on the record
is going to run into trouble because the record is inaccurate. In many cases it's accurate, but in a great many cases it's totally inaccurate. And Tenney had a venomous dislike of me, in part because of my attitude towards him; and he was really quite malicious about it. And at the time when he was state senator, and the time he was doing this sort of thing, I used to talk to friends in various organizations in Los Angeles, including spokesmen for the Jewish committees, various Jewish communities here, and I said to some of them, "You're going to have trouble with this fellow one of these days. You're going to have very serious trouble with him." Well, you know, they didn't think this was really true and so forth and so forth. But later he broke with the Democratic party, became a Republican; and then he broke with the Republican party and became an ally of Gerald L.K. Smith.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And when Smith ran for president on some screwball independent ticket, there was Jack Tenney as the vice-presidential nominee. And you could have predicted this from his early beginnings; you could have seen how opportunistic he was, and how motivated by personal sense of spite and hatred. And when he thought that his political future had been retarded--to put it another way, he wasn't getting the Jewish community support--he promptly turned against them, of course, as you could have made book that he would do.

Gardner

Right. So ultimately it was his destruction, however.

McWilliams

Oh, yes.

Gardner

Because it took him to a corner of philosophy that was self-defeating.

McWilliams
Oh, yes. I had played a role in connection with the exposure of gangsters in the industry.

Gardner

Film industry.

McWilliams

Yes, in the film industry. And later on, if you want to get to that I can tell you about it because he figured in that, too.

Gardner

Okay. Well, you want to get into it now?

McWilliams

Well, in essence it was this kind of situation: the motion picture industry is a bizarre industry in terms of crafts, jurisdictions; it always has been. At the same time there's always been one union that was--actually, it was organized before the American Federation of Labor came into being. It's the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, the IATSE. And the IATSE, by its constitution, had a grant of jurisdiction that would have included a great many of the crafts in the motion picture industry. It had the potential always of being an industrial union in the industry. And furthermore, it was backed up by the fact that they had the projectionists in the motion picture theaters. And a projectionist can intimidate a motion picture theater owner in a dozen different ways: just accidentally the film is shown upside down, you know; or stench bombs are rolled down the aisle in the dark. There are dozens and dozens of ways that they could blackmail. So they easily organized the projectionists, and they had the projectionists in their grip. Then they came to--well, first of all, the thing that happened is that Willie Bioff and George Browne, who were Chicago gangsters, took over a couple of projectionist locals and were making a lot of money. They were shaking down the theater owners, and the Capone people saw this, and Frank Nitti and the others, and they went to Browne and Bioff, and they said, "Now, look, you boys need some help and guidance here. You work with us. We will see that you, George Browne, are elected president of the IATSE. But there's got to be a division of the spoils here," you see. So this is what happened. Through their control of
the projectionists, they had the votes; and at the convention at which Browne was elected president of the IATSE, some newspaper report said that there were more gunmen there than there were delegates. They just railroaded him right into the office of president. Bioff was never a member of the union, but he was always Browne's handyman. They came here after this, but before they came here they had a meeting with the industry spokesman in New York. And one of the things that was always wrong with labor relations in the industry was that the negotiations took place in New York instead of here. And at this meeting they--Browne and Bioff--told what they'd have to do. First of all, I should say that shortly previous to this time, the IATSE had called its workers out on strike in the industry, and it had proved to be a disastrous strike. They had lost the strike entirely; their membership in the industry had dropped from something like 10,000 to, let's say, thirty-five or forty members. And the jobs that they had were taken over by carpenters and the other groups in the industry. Now, at this meeting in New York, Browne and Bioff said, "We want all that jurisdiction back. And in addition to this we're going to levy a 2 percent assessment on these workers; and in addition to this we as individuals want some money." So they screamed; the executives screamed and yowled, and then capitulated, as you might expect. So this was the deal that was worked out. So here one day in Hollywood in the studios the notices come up: from and after a certain date all workers in these categories will have to take out membership in the IATSE. And they had given the IATSE a closed-shop agreement! Well, these workers were totally astonished. They had heard these reports of gangster influence, and they didn't like that. But there was nothing they could do. In addition to this, once they were back in the IATSE they learned about this 2 percent assessment. Now, that 2 percent assessment which raised millions, that money was split between Browne and Bioff personally. That was just their personal cut in the situation. Well, some workers in the industry, they knew that I was interested in labor, that I had written about the imminent National Labor Relations Act and so forth, so they came to me. First of all they asked me to speak at a meeting in Hollywood, which I did. And then they came to me and said, "Is there anything that can be done about this?" And I said, "Yes, I think there is something to be done." So I brought a class-action suit in the name of some of these workers, reciting this set of facts, asking for an injunction against the 2 percent assessment, and also asking that this contract be set aside as being totally illegal. Well, the
industry and the IATSE tried to get the suit dismissed. They failed. The motions were dismissed and were denied. We began to go through the process of having it set for trial. But I realized that the trial would drag on interminably, just for ever and ever; and in the meantime these guys were suffering, really suffering. So I have a very good friend [Elmer Gertz]--a lawyer friend--in Chicago, and I got in touch with him, and I said, "Can you find out from the Chicago Crime Commission something about the background of these characters?" So he went to the Chicago Crime Commission, and he got a lot of information for me, including the fact that Bioff had been arrested and convicted of pimping at an early time but had never served a sentence. The sentence was still pending over him. The speaker of the assembly at that time had been a classmates of mine in law school, William Mosley Jones. I went to Bill Jones and said, "You have this legislative Committee on Labor and Capital"--I think it was called--"and there's a great possibility here from publicity point of view and otherwise. If you will get that committee to investigate this situation-- because here are the records; this is the background of these people." And he said, no, he didn't think they could do it. It didn't seem feasible, et cetera. And then about two or three days later, he got me on the phone, and he said, "I've been thinking about this. And I think it is; I think you're right. I think it is a good issue for the committee to investigate. So you come over and meet with the committee and with me, and we can set this thing in motion." He was at that time in the office of Senator William Gibbs McAdoo and Colonel William Neblett. And they began to function as kind of unofficial counsel for the committee. I gave them the information and told them who to subpoena, what to do; and they scheduled a legislative meeting in the auditorium of the State Building here in Los Angeles. (I should say also that among the members of this legislative committee was Jack Tenney. He was a member of this committee, and he was very much interested in all of this. He claimed not to know about this background.) So the legislative committee opened to an immense crowd; there was great interest in the industry in this. The counsel for the committee called some of my clients, who told how, when they had tried to protest this takeover, they had been beaten up and harassed and lost their jobs and so forth and so forth. And then they called Willie Bioff to the stand. They asked Bioff a few questions, just a few questions: you're from Chicago and this, this, this. And then the hearings adjourned. It was towards the end of the week, and the hearings adjourned,
and they were never resumed! And I couldn't find out what the reason was, although later I had my own thoughts about the matter. Sometime later there just happened to be this Howard Philbrick [who] had been asked to conduct an investigation of legislative corruption. Philbrick had organized an open grand jury hearing in Sacramento, and he asked me to come up and testify. I was the lead-off witness at this hearing, and I told about this strange situation, and I wondered why the hearings had been called off. Well, Philbrick had been doing a pretty good job of investigation. He was able to demonstrate that [Joe] Schenck had given Bioff $100,000, and he got into some aspects of this background and this connection. Bioff was there at the hearings. He saw me out in the hall, and he said, "Look, I want to talk to you." I said, "Well, I don't think we have anything to talk about." He said, "Well, look, can't we get together on this?" [laughter]

Gardner

Aha.

McWilliams

I said, "Absolutely nothing doing. You're out of luck." I should say that the IATSE was represented by a law firm that I knew very well, and they were a good law firm; members of the law firm were friends of mine.

Gardner

Which ones were they?

McWilliams

Pacht, Pelton and Warne. I knew them very well. Anyway, after this hearing things began to move very fast, because the United States government then began to get interested in this because of the income tax possibilities and so forth. They got into it, and they discovered, of course, the whole plot. They found out all about this, and of course, they eventually indicted Browne and Bioff for extortion. I wrote at the time that it was not so much extortion as it was bribery. The industry had bribed them. The industry, while it didn't like the idea of paying off these characters--still, they saved millions in terms of wage rates and whatnot. In any case Browne and Bioff were convicted. And there were some very, very funny aspects about that trial. Bioff had an acute
sense of humor, you know. He was being cross-examined, and he was asked, "Do you mean to sit there in the witness stand and tell us that you perjured yourself when you said this and this and this? How can you account for that?"

11. Tape Number: V, Side One (July 14, 1978)

McWilliams

Well, after Browne and Bioff were convicted and sentenced to federal penitentiary, the government then discovered that in the background was the Capone syndicate.

Gardner

Well, you've got to tell the punch line of the story you started.

McWilliams

Oh, yes, the punch line of the story. [laughter] They asked him about how he could account for having perjured himself so often. He said, "Well, Mr. So-and-so" (whatever the prosecutor's name was), "I guess you just have to say that I'm a kind of uncouth guy." [laughter]

Gardner

Great.

McWilliams

After they had convicted them, they went after the real big shots--Nitti and company. They indicted them, because Browne and Bioff had agreed to testify by now as government witnesses.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And the day that indictment was returned, Frank Nitti committed suicide. They went ahead with that trial, and they used Browne and Bioff as witnesses, and they convicted these people of various crimes--income tax violation and whatnot. It looked for a time as though we were going to be successful in
getting Browne and Bioff out of this situation in Hollywood: a new president was elected of the IATSE and so forth. But no: gradually the situation resumed, right where it had been; it continued under that same general kind of leadership. Eventually, of course, Browne and Bioff were out, and Browne retired to a suburb of Chicago--very lush estate. Bioff went to Phoenix, changed his name to William Nelson, bought a big place there, and hobnobbed around with all kinds of people in the community, like Senator [Barry] Goldwater. He was a contributor to Goldwater's campaigns and all that. Then it was all right until Bioff began to be consulted by some of the Las Vegas people. The Chicago crew didn't like that a bit; they had not forgotten his behavior in connection with Nitti and company. So one day Bioff waves goodbye to his wife, who is in the back of the house, and he gets in the car, and he steps on the starter to start the ignition, and the whole thing blows up--a tremendous blast!

Gardner

Oh.

McWilliams

That's the last of . . .

Gardner

Well, literally.

McWilliams

That's literally the last of Bioff. But one thing: after this legislative hearing, over the weekend between the time the hearing was called and the time they failed to resume it, there was a big conference called here. The leaders of the industry--Leo Spitz, and Joe Schenck, and [Louis B.] Mayer, and others--they brought Nicholas Schenck out from New York. Bioff was absolutely convinced that Louis Mayer had started this legislative hearing as a means of getting the IATSE out of the industry. He was threatening Mayer, and Mayer was panic-stricken. He told his colleagues, "Listen, something has got to be done. I had nothing to do with this hearing," which was true: he had nothing to do with this hearing. "We have to convince him [Bioff] of this fact." So they got Colonel [William] Neblett to talk to them on the phone at this meeting at which Bioff
and Browne were present and listening in to the conversation. Colonel Neblett assured Mayer on the phone, "Of course you had nothing to do with it." He said, "I'll be glad to tell these guys that you had nothing to do with it." So the conversation is terminated, and Mayer turns to Bioff and says, "Now are you satisfied?" He said, "Well, I listened to it, but I'm still not satisfied. I still don't believe a word of it. But it's all right. I will go along with this." [laughter] This is when the industry people bought Mr. and Mrs. Bioff a fancy luxury cruise ticket around South America, you know, as a gift. They sent them bon voyage messages and orchids for Mrs. Bioff. This was a man who had ostensibly been threatening him. So, really, it was a comedy--well, a tragedy, too, but a comedy in certain aspects. And at the time of this hearing in the State Building, Jack Tenney was quite friendly. I had known him for a long time before that. He was quite friendly; he had not yet turned sour on this thing. But the hearings which we had initiated had these tremendous far-ranging consequences, and it's all documented in various books, and so forth. But it was an extraordinary business, and it had a profound effect. I don't think you can understand what happened subsequently in the industry unless you understand this background. Because Herb Sorrell and company--he was probably an oral interview.

Gardner

Yes, he was.

McWilliams

Herb Sorrell and company organized this Conference of Studio Unions to get some local democracy into this trade-union setup in Hollywood. They were, of course, bucking the IATSE; they had to. They were in that position. And that Conference of Studio Unions strike, which went on in one form or another for nearly a decade--it was called a strike; it was really a lockout.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

It led, I think, indirectly to the investigations and to the case of the Hollywood Ten.
Gardner

Very interesting.

McWilliams

I think that's the background that has to be understood.

Gardner

Would you pursue that two sentences farther?

McWilliams

Well, in the sense that the Conference of Studio Unions strike or lockout, however you would like to regard it, was a real rank-and-file thing. It had a lot of steam behind it, and Herb was directing it with great vigor. Actually this was *exactly* what the industry did not want. It wanted those negotiations to continue in New York City at the high level where you could make deals, things of that sort. So it felt it had to oppose a Conference of Studio Unions. Of course this split a lot of people in Hollywood, and groups in Hollywood; it created great divisions. I've always thought that it was quite logical for the industry to have looked with some favor on the congressional investigations when they started because this could be a means of undercutting the unions, because the Conference of Studio Unions had the tacit support of many of the people in the Screen Writers Guild and Directors [Guild] and so forth.

Gardner

The Hollywood Left.

McWilliams

Yes, the Hollywood Left. That's right.

Gardner

Okay. Now, this whole story started by means of introducing your relationship with Tenney.

McWilliams

Right.

Gardner
Tenney was more or less on your side at that point.

McWilliams

Oh, yes. Yes, he was.

Gardner

So where does the first antagonism come in?

McWilliams

Well, it began of course after he was elected to the state legislature and after he made the switch, the turnaround with [Sam] Yorty.

Gardner

Which is `39.

McWilliams

In the spring of `39. After that he began to move increasingly in that direction. His whole career is a progression to the right, so to speak, after that.

Gardner

Now, your own relationship with his committee: you started to tell me that before we turned the tape on.

McWilliams

I was called before them and was questioned about my wicked political past and all the rest of it. And I told them what some of my views were. They wanted to bring out as evidence of my political inclinations the fact that I was not opposed to mixed marriages. [laughter] So you can imagine. I testified under oath I was not a member of the Communist party--never had been. But it's odd that they never made anything of this denial. They never challenged it. And they continued to list me as having been involved in all these front committees. I was identified with many front committees. I took the position then, and I take the position to this day, that I'm not going to sort out or sift out the people who want to--if there's an issue that comes up, and it's an important issue, and there are people who want to take a position with respect to it, and it happens to be a position with which I agree, I'm not going to refrain from sponsoring or joining that group because I don't like the
backgrounds of some of these individuals. After all, the ad hoc committee has been one of the sources of democracy in the United States. I have a reference somewhere--maybe I can dig it out and send it to you; I can't think of this historian's name--but anyway, he says that from the husking bee on, this idea of groups of people getting together to do things has been a very central and very important aspect to American democracy. He points to the fact that you can't find any parallel for this, really--you can't find it in Great Britain--but it's always been an aspect of American democracy. And of course the reason why it has worked is because you don't examine the backgrounds and the affiliations of these people. If they want to get together because they are all opposed to capital punishment, all right. Now, if that includes fascists, communists, or you name it, that's all right. They are engaged in this enterprise. This is the thing that they're doing. So I always took this position. I was in a way grateful to the Left for raising issues at that time that were not being raised and about which I felt very keenly. For example, the invasion of Ethiopia, issues of this kind, nobody else gave a damn about it then. They took the lead, and they initiated the actions. So I had no hesitancy about speaking at their meetings or participating with them in these limited activities.

Gardner

Well, it was interesting to me that while your own testimony and denial is not included in the brief record, the digest, that was put out, the accusations of one Rena Vale are included.

McWilliams

Oh, yes.

Gardner

Who's Rena Vale, and why was she worthy of so many pages?

McWilliams

She was with the local Federal Writers' Project, and many of the people on that Federal Writers' Project were people that I knew. There was an effort made, I think, to get them to join, to form a union, or to do something, and she was quite opposed to that. I don't remember meeting the woman except on one occasion. But the point I want to make is that somewhat later--I think
in 1940--she wrote a piece for the *American Mercury* after it was, I think, in Lawrence Spivak's hands, not Mencken. She wrote a piece for the *American Mercury* about Reds in California. She went into all the background about Reds in California. But in that piece in the *Mercury*, she mentioned me; but she made it quite clear that she did not think that I was or ever had been a member of the Communist party. That was in 1940. Then later, of course, when she began to function as a kind of professional informer and testifier, she tried to imply that my involvement was more serious than that. She was scheduled to speak at a women's meeting, dinner meeting, here in Los Angeles at which my colleague in the Department of Industrial Relations, Marguerite Clark, was a member. Mrs. Clark told me about it, and she said, "Wouldn't you like to attend the dinner meeting as my guest?" I said, "I'd like to," because at this meeting Rena Vale was scheduled to make a big exposé kind of speech, you see. So I went there, and I was introduced to her, first time that I recall that I'd ever met the woman. Anyway, she made a very tepid speech; she had nothing to say about this horrendous background. Very funny.

Gardner

Well, she claimed in her testimony to have seen you at party meetings.

McWilliams

Oh, ridiculous; yes, ridiculous.

Gardner

And what amused me, I think, was in one of the connections that Tenney made, in the light of our discussion yesterday of the Sleepy Lagoon, was to your connection with La Rue McCormick on the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and so on.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right. Well, it's quite true. In *North from Mexico*, in the section I devote to Sleepy Lagoon, I mention this whole business about La Rue McCormick having been the organizer of this first committee and so forth. That's all quite true.

Gardner
Another thing that was mentioned was your being an instructor at a field workers' school in Chino that was sponsored by UCAPAWA.

McWilliams

I certainly was not an instructor at any school. I may have gone out to talk about the legal aspects or the socio-political aspects of organizing or something like that, but was never an instructor.

Gardner

Yes. Now two more things about Tenney: First of all, I think it's very interesting that he doesn't appear very much in your writing. Did you not consider him worth recording?

McWilliams

I didn't consider him worth recording or saying anything about, really, because I couldn't take the man seriously. As I said before, I knew the whole background very well. I always thought of him not only as a supreme opportunist but potentially mischievous.

Gardner

Which he turned out to be.

McWilliams

Which he turned out to be.

Gardner

Did you have any contact with him later on?

McWilliams

No, never did.

Gardner

Okay, enough about that. I'm going to make some more chronological zigzags, go to some of the things that I had in my notes that we didn't talk about yesterday. In 1944 you wrote a small pamphlet called *What About Our Japanese-Americans*? It was done for the American Council of the Institute of
Pacific Relations. What was the occasion, the group, and so forth and so on? How did that come about, do you recall?

McWilliams

As a prelude to writing *Prejudice*, the Institute of Pacific Relations wanted me to do a report about these relocation centers. I had made my first visit to the centers in connection with that, and I gave them a report about my findings and observations, which they mimeographed. I don't think it was ever published. Then they wanted me to do a pamphlet sort of based on that, which is what I did.

Gardner

This is all before *Prejudice* came out?

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Did it help sort of inspire you to do the book?

McWilliams

Yes, it did. It was a factor because it gave me a chance to visit all these centers, or most of them, and I had free run of the centers. I had met a lot of people in the centers: some I had known, and some I had not known, who as a matter of fact became great friends, like Mine Okubo, who was a very distinguished Japanese artist. I first met her in the Wyoming center in the middle of the winter. She was sloshing around in the rain and the snow. She's done a couple of very good books about her impressions of the centers--drawings and sketches--very fine artist, very fine artist. And I met any number of other people in the centers who kept in touch with me for years afterwards.

Gardner

What sort of distribution did the pamphlet have?

McWilliams

It had very good distribution. And of course *Prejudice* sold very well, too.
Gardner

We talked about that.

McWilliams

It's been reissued, and it's still in print.

Gardner

On "Town Meeting of the Air" that same year, 1944, you participated in a debate. The transcript happened to be in your archive, so I thought I'd bring it up. It was called "Can the Japanese be Assimilated into the American Way of Life?"

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Do you recall it?

McWilliams

Yes, I recall.

Gardner

Your colleague on the "yes" side was Tully Knoles of College of the Pacific.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

And the "no" side were Robert Faulk and Wayne Millington.

McWilliams

Yes. I also debated it from Santa Barbara when Max Radin and I were on one side of the situation, and Congressman [John M.] Costello and someone else from one of these superpatriotic organizations was on the opposition. That was also a "Town Meeting" program. So I was on a number of those "Town Meeting" programs, as I was at the time that Factories in the Field came out; I
took part in a number of debates. The debates, largely on the Japanese theme, hinged on the question whether they should be permitted to return before the end of the war or whether they should not be permitted to return. Of course, they had no spokesman. I guess it never occurred to the "Town Meeting" people that they might have gotten a Japanese from one of the centers to speak.

Gardner

Oh, from the way it sounded the "no" people would probably not have participated, with their outlook towards the Japanese.

McWilliams

Probably would not have.

Gardner

What was the organization that Faulk was from? I had it written down, but I forgot to put it on this sheet. It was an organization that was sort of a coordinating council of different groups. Do you recall that at all? He was on the "no" side. Millington was from the Native Sons [of the Golden West].

McWilliams

Oh, yes, Native Sons.

Gardner

Faulk, I thought, was from another; well, I should have written it down.

McWilliams

I just don't remember.

Gardner

In 1945 you became contributing editor for the *Nation*.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

What did that mean? Did you do more than contribute?
McWilliams

Yes, it did. My understanding with them was—I had been back in New York—I always saw them generally when I was in New York—and they asked me if I would become a contributing editor with the responsibility for the West Coast. The responsibility consisted of submitting one or more unsigned editorials for each issue, and at least one article a month. So that's how I happened to become a. . . . If I had known, I would have probably hesitated about this, because this was in January 1945. We were just on the threshold of the end of the war; people were talking very excitedly about the postwar prospects. The politics of the country, including the politics of the West, had been in a state of freeze, you might say, during the war years. The war had dominated every other consideration, and people had been talking about what would happen once the war was over. So everybody was keenly attuned to this so-called postwar situation, which never really developed, as I suggested the other day. And the politics of the whole West was beginning to bubble. When they announced that I was their West Coast editor, all these groups began to converge. I got all kinds of people sending in materials and letters, wanting me to investigate this, or write about this, that, and the other; and it took a great deal more time than I had any notion of. And I was getting some ridiculous stipend for this. It was not well paying at all; the Nation couldn't afford it. But it got me involved in politics, western politics, in a way I'd never been involved.

Gardner

Was it the entire West that you got involved with?

McWilliams

Yes, yes; it did.

Gardner

Rocky Mountains?

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner
Well, you were also in the middle of much of your writing at that time.

McWilliams

That is correct.

Gardner


McWilliams

That is right.

Gardner

How did you handle the writing schedule? What was your procedure for writing in those days, timewise?

McWilliams

I worked very hard. I just slaved away at it as I had, and I tried to fend off these outside activities as much as I could. But I also went on lecture trips, usually twice a year.

Gardner

Yes, that's true.

McWilliams

It was a very active, very energetic, very busy period in my life. My wife, Iris, is entitled to a lot of the credit. She urged me to go ahead with my writing, do what I wanted to do. And she was very supportive and encouraging, and I don't think I could have done it without her backing and assistance--and more than assistance, her active support. So I worked very hard.

Gardner

What kind of schedule did you follow? I don't mean week by week or anything like that, but in the day. Are you a morning writer, an afternoon writer, all-day writer?

McWilliams

Morning, noon, and night--when I had the time. [laughter]
Gardner

That's interesting.

McWilliams

Well, I've always been a hard worker and self-disciplined. I've never had any problems about this.

Gardner

Your writing style is a very easy one; it's been called that a number of different places. It has the readability of good journalism, and yet it presents historical facts. Does it come easy to you? How many pages a day would you turn out in those days?

McWilliams

My experience is you have to write something three times before it's--you have to do a draft, and you have to do a redraft, and then you have to rewrite it. And in that period I could do eight to ten pages a day.

Gardner

Three drafts. No wonder you can turn out 300 pages of book a year. [laughter]

McWilliams

I won't say I averaged that, because there were constant interruptions, but I turned out a lot of copy, because I was doing magazine pieces and all that sort of thing at the same time.

Gardner

Right. What about on this most recent book that you've done [The Education of Carey McWilliams]. It was really returning to writing a book for the first time in twenty-five years.

McWilliams

First time in many years. I had a great deal of trouble with it in the process of doing that because after twenty-five or thirty years largely devoted to writing editorials, it's a hard act to step out of that stance and start thinking about a book. It's a different thing; it's a different kind of writing.
Gardner

Yes, completely.

McWilliams

Yes. And it was difficult for me to get into the groove of it.

Gardner

But once you did, you were . . .

McWilliams

Yes, once I did, I was reasonably well satisfied with what I turned out. Not entirely. [laughter]

Gardner

I'll look forward to seeing it. Okay, to return to my chronology and notes: In 1945 you did a piece for *Science and Society* called "Race Discrimination in the Law."

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

It was reprinted. One thing that I found very interesting that reflects on some of our discussions in the last few days is the differentiation that you made at the time between passive and active segregation.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

The connection I see, I suppose, is in light of what we've been talking about: about the many improvements that have gone on over the last thirty-five years, where segregation, when it exists, is no longer necessarily legalized; it just exists.

McWilliams
That's right.

Gardner

What were circumstances of that? Was that also the sort of thing where you were putting together the...?

McWilliams

Well, I'd been thinking about some of the theoretical aspects of race discrimination. And as I mentioned to you the other day, I was convinced that up to a point the American social sciences had been on the wrong track, that they continued to see racial discrimination as just more or less a natural outgrowth of the mores: that people of different backgrounds and language and color, when they had their contacts, didn't get along. This sort of feeling was engendered, and it got structured in the culture. So it just went on and on, and you couldn't do anything about it. And this was not the way I read the record. The contacts of groups, for example, in California was to the contrary. Their initial contacts in many instances were extremely friendly. When the Chinese first arrived in San Francisco, they were welcomed with open arms. There was a celebration of the fact that they had come to help build the Central Pacific. The prejudice came later. You could almost fix a date for it and assign a set of reasons for it. And so this piece—which was circulated very widely, as a matter of fact—was a piece in which I tried to set down some of my thinking, based on my experience about issues of this sort. And it does that. It makes the point that a lot of racial discrimination has been induced by legislation and sanctioned by legislation. Therefore, you can get rid of some of the legally sanctioned part by using the law in another way.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And it grew out of my California experience, and I think I would agree with the conclusions today. I think so--most of them.

Gardner

Yes. It's a shame to me that something like that isn't more readily accessible.
McWilliams

Yes, it should be. Because it's been quite influential in a way. It's been quoted here, there, and elsewhere by people whose judgment I respect. It continues to be commended for the point of view it attempts to articulate.

Gardner

In running through your many archives, for a while you did something called the "West Coast Letter" for the Chicago Jewish Forum.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

How did that come about?

McWilliams

Well, the editor of that paper was a friend of Louis Adamic's and also a great friend of my lawyer friend in Chicago, Elmer Gertz, who was the lawyer who helped me on the IATSE thing. And he just asked me to do pieces for him, which I did from time to time.

Gardner

How frequently?

McWilliams

Oh, I think it was a quarterly, as a matter of fact. I've forgotten even the subjects of most of them. There was one that I think I would like to see reprinted or something done with sometime; it was really about this issue of the Communist party, and why I never could see it in the context or the terms that it was seen in this country. During the McCarthy period, the witch-hunt was at its worst. The whole party was regarded as, and indicted as, a conspiracy of some kind. I would say it was one of the least conspiratorial organizations that I ever observed. It had an obsession for mimeograph machines! They had publications at every level: propaganda, organizational, ideological, theoretical, and they would spell the whole thing out week after week, month after month, year after year. Anyone that could read could see
what the line was and what was going on. It was far less conspiratorial, for example, than the kind of meetings in both major parties that go on in smoke-filled rooms. And that it was ever a menace I could never for a second believe! Because it was too small, it was too marginal, and it made very, very fundamentally serious mistakes. So I could never see it as any kind of threat. For example, the way it completely misjudged and failed to do anything with the racial situation in the South: it was far less influential in the South in relation to Negroes and race than the Negro church. It didn't begin to compare with the Negro church, and in the few issues it got into in the South--Herndon case and one or two others--it really didn't get anywhere. It was active at one point in the Scottsboro case, which was a landmark case, but generally it completely missed its opportunities.

Gardner

Well, even its activities in Scottsboro have been criticized.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right. It completely missed the opportunity that existed in the South. It missed, or miscalculated, with regard to many of its trade-union activities. All of this is spelled out in this piece in the Chicago Jewish Forum where I explained why I could never take it seriously as any kind of national threat.

Gardner

Well, to preview Witch Hunt a little bit (we'll get into Witch Hunt later), why was it perceived as a dangerous enemy?

McWilliams

Well, I have my own theories about this. One of them is that we've always had in this country a mind set about socialism. The emphasis here is on private, individual capitalism: each man for himself and so forth. And the issue of communal approach to things was raised in the 1840s and sort of defeated in the debate and discussion of that time. From that time on, socialism has been a very marginal consideration. Under the leadership of [Eugene V.] Debs, there was a phase when socialism seemed to be getting rooted in American society, and the American kind of socialism began to develop. But that was terminated
by World War I. It never revived after that, with the exception of that Debs movement. Socialism has been excluded as any kind of viable alternative or even discussable alternative, with the result that we are the one big industrial nation in the world today without anything, really, that you could call a socialist movement. And I think this is most unfortunate. It has been most unfortunate because capitalism has had a free ride in the United States. We do not discuss capitalism, because socialism isn't there to raise the issues. We discuss the market; we discuss business; we discuss the economy, all in the most impersonal terms, as though this were not a capitalist economy, that capitalism has certain kinds of imperatives, that the market functions as it does because of these imperatives, that the economy functions as it does because of these imperatives—all of that is pushed to one side. We prefer not to see it or to discuss it, so that in one sense American economists have really nothing to say to us. I mean, conventional economists really have nothing to say to us. And it's beginning to embarrass them! Really, it is. And this is why I think that [America holds] this long-standing bias against socialism and a sixty-year obsession about Russia. You can always press this button and get a reaction. I think this is jumping too far ahead, but to understand the McCarthy phenomenon, I think you need to look at the situation at the time of World War I and immediately after World War I, because then, by the wildest stretch of anyone's imagination, Russia was no kind of threat. The government had just been barely established. It was shaky and so forth, so the membership of the Communist, Left, party here was minimal. And yet you could trigger a very strenuous witch-hunt, and it was very effective. I want to tell you the membership in the American trade-union movement dropped by about a million as a result of that post-1919 witch-hunt. And they discovered that they could use this push-button kind of situation, this kneejerk reaction, by talking about communism and so forth, because we had never assimilated the idea. We knew nothing about Russia, really, and we've had this obsession about Russia for years and years and years. We have never been willing to consider socialism—which makes communism appear foreign, conspiratorial, outside the realm of discussable ideas. And of course some of the early members of the Communist party in the United States did have foreign backgrounds, were from Russia, or had immigrant backgrounds and so forth. This contributed to this feeling that it was totally un-American.
Right. Very interesting. So when we came out of World War II with that--well, let me phrase it this way: I suppose the confusion in American thought came about because we had been allied with the Soviet Union for several years, and those people who had kept quiet before the war felt that they were able to speak and then suddenly found that they were not.

McWilliams

Suddenly found that they were not. It's very interesting to note that before the war was over in January 1945, a motion was introduced to make HUAC a permanent standing committee of the House. It caught the liberals in the Congress off guard. They weren't prepared for it; they weren't anticipating it. The vote against it was the largest vote of its kind that had been recorded in the Congress, but was still not large enough to defeat it. John Rankin had jumped the gun on the situation, and you had the House committee established as a permanent committee of the legislature, which was a warning sign to me at that time.

Gardner

That was during the war.

McWilliams

Yes, the war was still on. It was a warning to me--and I wrote about it in these terms at the time: "Look out, it's going to be resumed." The Red-hunting that had gone on in 1939 was now about to be resumed, and it was as a result of this whole situation in Hollywood that I've been talking about. It's interesting to note that the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals was formed in 1944. It had as its avowed purpose the cutting down of the influence of the Left in the industry. It was really designed as an attack on the unions and guilds, and so forth. That was set up in 1944. So, as I say, to my thinking we never had a postwar period. The Cold War got started almost immediately. And from then on it was, I would say, the dominant national consideration until the debacle in Vietnam. So that would be from `45 to `75, a thirty-year period, where the cold war was the prime consideration.

Gardner

That's a long time.
McWilliams

Long time.

Gardner

Were you involved at all with the Hollywood Ten?

McWilliams

Yes, yes, indeed. Some of them were friends of mine. I knew them all, of course, and some of them were friends of mine. I wrote about the case at the time. Then when it got into the Supreme Court of the United States, Alexander Meiklejohn and I wrote an *amicus curiae* brief which got a lot of signatures to it, which was submitted to the Supreme Court. And that brief is an interesting thing because some of the people who signed that *amicus* brief as sponsors of it—one was William Shirer. Bill Shirer was blacklisted on no ground other than the fact that he had signed that *amicus* brief. And in retrospect it's extremely interesting because the position that the Hollywood Ten took was an understandable position. The only way they could raise what they thought was the key issue was by reliance on the First Amendment. If they had pleaded the Fifth Amendment, they wouldn't have gone to jail; but they probably would have been blacklisted in the industry anyway. But if they pleaded the Fifth Amendment, they couldn't talk. You couldn't argue the issue, and they wanted to argue the issue, and they wanted to invoke the First Amendment. Now, in the excitement and the turmoil of the hearings—although they were very well represented, and although they were a very intelligent group of men—they didn't get across what they were trying to say. It seemed inconsistent to the public. Here you were trying to talk back to the committee, and yet you say you don't want to answer these questions.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

"What's going on here?" That, I think, cost them; they did not get their position across to the public, and the press didn't help them any. So that's what we were trying to address in this *amicus* brief. And Meiklejohn, of course, was a brilliant, brilliant political thinker. I went up to Berkeley, and we spent a
week or so talking it out, and then I did the work on the brief. He went over it, and it was filed. I think it raised a very, very important point, because a year or so ago, a case arose in New Hampshire. [Wooley v. Maynard (April 1977)] This case got hardly any notice at all. But this present United States Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment does in fact protect a right of silence. If you want to discuss your political beliefs, you can discuss them. But if you're called before a legislative committee where there's implicit in it the potential of punishment or damage or injury to you, you can't be compelled to discuss your political beliefs. They decided this as casually as anything in the world and apparently not even aware of the fact that they were reversing the whole situation as it developed in connection with the Hollywood Ten. And this was the point that Meiklejohn and I were arguing in the brief. [As] Meiklejohn put it, there's a fourth branch to the American government: there's the executive and the legislative and the judicial, and then there's the electorate. The electorate has some rights! You can't intimidate the electorate. To call a man before a committee and focus the spotlight on him and say, "Are you a Republican?" or, "Are you a communist?" and under circumstances where it could result in injury or harm to him, is a violation of the First Amendment. That was the point we were arguing in the brief.

Gardner

We're just about at the end of the tape. So I think I'll turn it over and then ask you the next question that I have.

McWilliams

Sure.

12. Tape Number: V, Side Two (July 14, 1978)

Gardner

Whose idea was it to use the First Amendment of the [Hollywood] Ten?

McWilliams

I don't know exactly. As I said, the Hollywood Ten were represented by brilliant lawyers: Bob Kenny and Bartley Crum and Charles Katz. They certainly explained to them, I'm sure, that they could plead the Fifth Amendment. But
they didn't want to. They didn't want to. They were a notably independent group of people; and I would say in some cases more than independent: stubborn!--like John Howard Lawson, who was a hard man to push around. They were determined to take this position, and it was a correct position to take. The problem was that they did not succeed, in my judgment, in getting across what their real position was. It wasn't their fault that they couldn't get it across. There was shouting, and the hearings were confused, and all the rest of it. But they had a sound position.

Gardner

Also in 1947, on a slightly more frivolous note, you wrote a piece called "Cults in Los Angeles" for *Holiday.*

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

It was in an issue put together by John Steinbeck, I think.

McWilliams

I don't remember whether it was or not.

Gardner

Do you recall anything about that?

McWilliams

I remember doing the piece, but I don't remember . . .

Gardner

You don't recall how come. I just thought that was interesting.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

It covers such a thing as John Steinbeck's California, and then yours is one of the prominent articles.
McWilliams

I was always interested in cults out here. I did a lot of research about them.

Gardner

And you were just on Southern California Country, which had dealt with a lot of the same material.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

In 1948 you wrote an introduction to Guy Endore's pamphlet Justice for Salcido.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

While I don't think we need to go into too much detail on the Salcido case, it's one that seems to get replayed about once a year in Southern California; somebody's shot by the police.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

There were some interesting things that you talked about in the introduction. Do you recall them at all?

McWilliams

I don't have any recollection on that.

Gardner

They were, again, things like race discrimination and the law: something more theoretical than your normal thing, dealing with social repression.

McWilliams
Okay.

Gardner

Now, also that year you were on "Town Meeting [of the Air]" dealing with military preparedness, *Does Military Preparedness Mean Security*?

McWilliams

Yes, I was.

Gardner

That doesn't ring a lot of bells.

McWilliams

That doesn't ring a lot of bells. [laughter]

Gardner

I'm going to try one that will.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

1948 is the year of the Progressive party.

McWilliams

Yes. Well, I think the background of the Progressive party is the '46 campaign in this state, where I mentioned to you the other day, a fine set of Democratic nominees went down to defeat. And in the meantime, of course, the Cold War was heating up. But to cut back to '46 again: the key to what happened in '46, of course, was the abysmal performance of [Harry] Truman. He was a dreadful president in that early phase, and understandably so. He was suddenly put into this position with all of these responsibilities--a courthouse politician from Missouri, and, I'm sure, a very likable, decent, nice man--but a terrible president. Certainly in this period, it set the stage for the gains that were made that year by the opposition. They could fault him on all kinds of issues. Then of course the exodus began from the administration: [Henry A.] Wallace stepped out, Ickes stepped out, and so forth. Everyone began to feel that
something has got to be done because this means the end of the New Deal. 
This agitation led to the formation of the Progressive party. I've forgotten the 
extact dates, but the Progressive Citizens of America came into being 
[December 1946]. And I was actively identified with PCA. Then, of course, the 
following spring, the Americans for Democratic Action came into existence, 
and the liberal movement was split between these two groups. I wrote in my 
political diary at the time that this was a very bad omen, that this split or 
division would have disastrous consequences.

Gardner
Your political diary?

McWilliams
Yes, I sort of, from time to time . . . it's not systematic.

Gardner
Just something you keep?

McWilliams
Yes, from time to time, I jot down my ideas. I have some passages in there 
where I said this at the time. And then we had a lot of debates and discussions 
in this thing about this question: what should we do? what would happen? My 
friend Harry Girvetz at the University of California, Santa Barbara, was very 
active in the group that set up the Americans for Democratic Action. And most 
of them in this state were friends of mine and people that I'd worked with. I 
had long discussions with them and with Harry about this, and I said, "I can't 
join Americans for Democratic Action because of this explicit bar that you 
have about the Communist party and people from the Left." I said, "Make the 
statement of your objectives as specific as you want to make it; provide for 
the expulsion of any member who is obviously trying to undercut these 
objectives after a hearing; but don't bar people by a generic name. Don't deal 
with groups in this fashion, because this is very, very dangerous." And the 
whole history of the test oaths down the years, down the centuries, shows 
this to be dangerous business. They went that path, so that we had a parting 
of the ways, a very friendly parting of the ways. We were always good friends-
-Girvetz and I were always good friends--but that was the situation. Then when
the Wallace people, for many reasons--and quite a number of reasons--decided they were going to run an independent candidacy, I resigned from PCA because I thought that an independent candidacy would be a disaster, because Wallace didn't seem to understand the old New Deal forces, how devoted they were to the Democratic party. You couldn't do this. Besides, the Wallace movement in this state was a Democrats for Wallace movement. It had been projected as a movement within the Democratic party. We had a big meeting in Fresno, we had big meetings here, and always it had been in the context that Wallace would be a candidate within the Democratic party. And it drew enormous crowds. I think probably the biggest political rally--mass meeting--ever held in this community was the one in Gilmore Stadium for Wallace, where the permit to use the Hollywood Bowl had been withdrawn. They then decided they would use Gilmore Stadium. Katharine Hepburn spoke; Linus Pauling spoke; Wallace spoke. They charged admission to that rally--28,000 [attended], something like this--and in addition to that raised something like $30,000 or $40,000 in contributions--a very enthusiastic meeting. But a little later on, the whole thing began to sag, in large part, when it became clear that Wallace was going to go as an independent candidate. Now, at the Democratic convention in which Truman was nominated, it's very ironic but it's true that ADA was doing their best to dump him at that convention. There were all kinds of midnight meetings here, who shouldn't be and who should be gotten to oppose Truman within the Democratic party. Even talked about trying to draft Dwight Eisenhower, William O. Douglas, all kinds of possibilities. So this was the measure of the low state that Truman's candidacy had fallen into at that time. And then, of course, Clark Clifford got him really off the hook by this famous memo that he prepared, in which the idea was--not in these terms--to take a very aggressive tone toward the Soviet Union, and strong emphasis on civil rights, appointment of a commission to investigate civil rights, commission to investigate loyalty, and so forth. And then by Wallace being in that fight in 1948, it diverted the Red-baiting that would otherwise have been directed against Truman; [it] was directed against Wallace. So Truman could almost have retained Wallace to get into that race and actually help him. And despite the fact that [Strom] Thurmond was running on his state segregation [Dixiecrat] party platform, Wallace drew less votes than Thurmond, and Truman won this surprise upset victory. But people seem to have forgotten
that he won it by a very narrow margin. It was not a big sweep in that sense. It was a surprise--there was no doubt about that--a very definite surprise. But Clark Clifford set up a very ingenious, clever campaign, and it worked. It worked.

Gardner

Did you participate in the Wallace campaign at all?

McWilliams

No. I issued a statement--as a matter of fact this will interest you. At the time I resigned from PCA, Jake Zeitlin and Albert Dekker, the actor--we were very close friends, the three of us--we had sat down and talked it out and said we couldn't go along with this. So we all resigned at the same time.

Gardner

Oh.

McWilliams

I took no active part in the Wallace campaign. I will say this: I voted for him; I could vote for him with a clear conscience. But I thought the campaign was a mistake; I think it was. J. Raymond Walsh, who had been one of the first activists in PCA, did a piece for the Nation at the time, in which he said this candidacy of Wallace would set the liberal-progressive movement in the United States back by decades. And I think there is a great deal to it. And that was the position of the Nation; that is to say, Freda Kirchwey was quite friendly with Wallace and quite pro-Wallace in the early stages. Then as it became clear that it was going to take this form of an independent party and breaking with the Democratic party, she wouldn't go that route. I agreed with both Walsh and Freda, but I had this additional reason that in California it was a very serious mistake because a lot of people here felt deceived. If they had run Wallace as the Democratic nominee in this state, they might have captured the delegation; it's possible. You know, you can always say things are possible and everything. . . . [laughter] But assuming they had carried the state, they could have taken a delegation to the Democratic convention and could have exerted a very substantial influence on the course of events. And although Wallace would not have been nominated, because they probably
would not have had enough strength for it, they could have exerted this influence.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And if you looked ahead to 1968, it's interesting to note that the real fight took place within the Democratic party. If Eugene McCarthy had started out as an independent candidate, he wouldn't have gotten very far. But running in the Democratic primaries, he really broke this political logjam about Vietnam. And this is why I think that Wallace's independent candidacy was a mistake, although I admired him in a great many ways. I thought his foreign policy speeches were very good; they stand up very well in retrospect. I was in the early phases of the Wallace movement; before this decision was made, I was active. I spoke at a meeting at the Beverly Wilshire [Hotel] for Wallace where there was a great enthusiasm--a dinner meeting. I went out to the airport with some other people and picked him up, brought him into the city at that time. Also, another thing that's interesting about that: I have always thought that it was very, very unfortunate that Sidney Hillman died when he did, because he had been out here in the early phases. I had been active in connection with his visit here; I was chairman of aluncheon meeting at the Alexandria Hotel for Hillman. Later there was a big meeting at the Ambassador for Hillman--and great enthusiasm, a lot of money raised, and so forth. Now, Hillman was a total pragmatist. And if Hillman had lived, I think the Wallace thing would have taken a different form. It was very, very unfortunate that he died. I think he died in '46 . . . yes.

Gardner

Wasn't that also the year that Helen Douglas ran against Nixon? Was that '46 or '50?

McWilliams

Helen Douglas ran against Nixon in, I think, '50.

Gardner
Oh, '50; that's getting ahead of the story. Because I know Jake was active in working for Helen Douglas. That's something we can talk about.

McWilliams

That's right. In '46 I had been after the *Nation*--and you get penalized for your gabbiness; people take you seriously--[laughter] I'd been after them to hold a meeting in Los Angeles: "You're too centered in New York," and all that sort of thing. So they said, "Go ahead and organize a meeting in Los Angeles." And Lillie Shultz from New York came out, and we worked; we set up this meeting in the Ambassador Hotel--first time the *Nation* had ever done anything of this sort: daylong sessions, big banquet in the evenings, and so forth. I edited a special issue--special supplement--for the *Nation* about the prospect of liberal politics in the West, all of the West. We had a big meeting. The sessions were great; they were turning people away from the sessions. One of the speakers at those sessions was a gentleman by the name of Ronald Reagan, who was then a liberal, you know. [laughter]

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And Oscar Chapman, from the Department of Interior, Will Rogers, and others spoke--a very successful meeting. But you could sense at that meeting, which was in September '46, that there was a real business developing between Truman and anti-Truman people. There was an under-current all through these sessions, very disturbing and also very significant.

Gardner

Well, wouldn't it date back also to '44 and the moving-out of Wallace as Roosevelt's vice-president?

McWilliams

Yes, it would date back as far as that. And of course it had to do with Truman's unfortunate decisions about the bombs and all the rest of it. I think the Cold War started from the dropping of the bombs; right at that instant, I think, is when it really began, because we know now that the bombs were not dropped in Japan for military reasons. Truman later said it was a hammer on
those boys--meaning the Russians--and they wanted to send a signal to the Russians. Well, they sent the signal, and it was noted very carefully. [laughter] It was noted very carefully in the Kremlin, and I think this is when the trouble really began.

Gardner

That's very interesting.

McWilliams

Yes, very unfortunate. But I think that's the way the [Cold] War began. That's where it happened, what set it in motion. There would have been trouble in any event, because World War II was a world war, and the collapse of powers like Japan and Germany would create vacuums and dangerous situations. There would have been trouble with Russia under any circumstances.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

But it need not, in my judgment, have taken the form that it did if we'd wanted to really continue the wartime relationship; but we didn't want to do it.

Gardner

It could be the subject of volumes.

McWilliams

Oh, absolutely; indeed, indeed.

Gardner

And also in 1948 you wrote A Mask for Privilege: [ Anti-Semitism in America].

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner
There are so many things to talk about there that I suppose we could begin with what prompted you to do it. You had begun to do some of that with *Brothers Under the Skin*.

McWilliams

Yes. Except in the first edition of *Brothers Under the Skin*, I had not gotten into anti-Semitism. Then in the course of all the lecturing that I did on race relations, people would ask me, "Why don't you do something about anti-Semitism in the United States?" I avoided it for a long time because it didn't seem to me to grow out of my California experience, and I thought it was not something that I should undertake. And then in the course of these lectures, I came on so many interesting local situations involving anti-Semitism that I got sort of intrigued. I also formed some marvelous contacts, particularly with the leaders of Jewish communities, and they gave me a great deal of information. I did a piece, for example, for *Common Ground* about the Twin Cities. I referred to them as the capital of anti-Semitism. This was an extraordinary situation because in these communities at that time, Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Jews were really pushed to--they were excluded from all the significant clubs, even the service clubs. And you won't believe this, but they couldn't join the Automobile Club! This seemed to me to be bizarre because there was no real basis for it in any way. So I wrote this piece, and it was very well timed, very well timed. It came as a real shock to the community. Honestly, they didn't quite . . .

Gardner

There weren't aware of it.

McWilliams

They really were not aware of the extent of this. Sermons were preached on it, and the newspapers reprinted it. Hubert Humphrey had just been elected mayor. And Max Kampelman, one of his great friends, had a piece this last year in the *New York Times*, at the time of his death, in which he said that it was this article that prompted Humphrey as mayor to have this community survey made of group relationships in Minneapolis. As a matter of fact, Humphrey asked me to confer with him. I conferred with him in his early days as mayor, encouraged him to set up this council of race relations; and it was
done. It was the first one in the United States that was set up by ordinance—a precursor, in a way, on a local basis of the Civil Rights Commission. And in 1976 the local Minneapolis magazine had a retrospect on all this. It said that after this article appeared and after all this activity had taken place, Minneapolis today was totally free of these particular kinds of barriers; and the Jews occupy executive positions in all these companies that had previously excluded them. Now, just the doing of this article got me interested. And I thought, well, just as California was the ideal state to study race relations, so the United States was the ideal place to study anti-Semitism, because you didn't have the medieval heritage.

Gardner

Exactly, as you point out in the book.

McWilliams

Yes. And therefore you could take a different kind of look at this thing. That's what prompted me to do it. And my theories that I developed about race relations have included this kind—I was convinced that there were two kinds of stereotypes, two kinds of minority groups. One is the working-class kind of stereotype; it's the group that comes in and lacks the skills, the education, the background to get up. So you exclude them; you give them the undesirable jobs, and you sort them out—residentially and otherwise. And of course, you fashion a stereotype to justify what you've done to perpetuate it. So you say of this group that they are lazy, shiftless; they have too many children; their sexual morals are terrible, et cetera, et cetera. And then there is another kind of stereotype; it involves another kind of minority. It affects the overseas Chinese, and the Indians from India in East Africa, and other groups of this kind.

Gardner

The Ibos of Nigeria.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right, and Jews, of course. And you say of this kind of minority, "They're too smart. They're too clever. They're too resourceful. They're too clannish." It's a stereotype, but it's quite a different kind of stereotype
because it has to rationalize a different kind of situation. They're both rationalizations, of course. I used to have great fun with this business of stereotypes on lectures because I had obtained from historical sources some statements about the Irish when they first came to Boston. I would read these statements, and I would say, "Now, this is a description of a group. What group does this refer to?" See. And they would guess Negroes, Mexican-Americans, you know, so forth. But the statements referred to the Irish! Then, of course, from California you had a classic demonstration of this, in connection with Okies and Arkies: they were Protestants, white, Anglo-Saxon background, and all the rest, and they got categorized in exactly the same way. So one of the reasons I was glad I did A Mask for Privilege was that it gave me a chance to develop this kind of an argument, this difference, and also the very significant fact that you didn't get any manifestation of modern anti-Semitism in the United States really until about 1876. It was an aspect of the Gilded Age and the nouveau riche that were coming along: new people that were making money and wanted to preserve their status, and so forth. They used social discrimination as one of the means to do it, and it worked very well for a time.

Gardner

Right, sure. Fascinating book: it was a selection of the Book Find Club.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

How did that work? Was that done by the publisher?

McWilliams

Yes. The Book Find people got in touch with the publisher. It won a Newspaper Guild award and other awards at the time.

Gardner


McWilliams
The day I received notification of the Thomas Jefferson award—and incidentally Governor Thomas Dewey was on this committee, the award section—I was scheduled to speak at Teachers Institute of Riverside, and the subject was racial discrimination. The American Legion raised a great rumpus about it, and they had been forced to cancel the meeting. I thought this was really, really funny. But it's interesting that there were church groups and other groups in Riverside that stood up on their hind legs and said, "We're not going to put up with this," and the meeting was rescheduled. The Legion still was objecting and making noises and so forth, but I went out and spoke in Riverside, California.

Gardner

Did that ever happen to you at any other time? Was that the only time that you were [canceled]?

McWilliams

Oh, no. I had meetings canceled. I had trouble at meetings, particularly in the McCarthy phase. I had trouble at different times with meetings, but I always, in most cases, managed to speak. I don't recall, except one or two instances, where a meeting was really canceled.

Gardner

Well, the Riverside [incident] got all kinds of press.

McWilliams

Yes, I guess it did.

Gardner

Even a Glendora paper wrote an article that was obviously sympathetic to you. And there was an editorial by V. V. McNitt in the Westwood Hills Press that defended your right to speak. I found that very interesting. But then Dewey denied knowing anything about it.

McWilliams

That's quite true; Dewey denied knowing anything about it. It was also ironic because just at that period, I had done a series of recordings for the State Department, which were for use overseas in connection with their overseas
program. So I was speaking on behalf and under the sponsorship of the State Department but having trouble speaking in Riverside, California.

Gardner

It's another country. There were lots of reviews, and I guess about 98 percent of them were not simply positive, but glowing. As a result of *A Mask for Privilege* you appeared to have done a lot of work with the American Jewish Congress. Or did that start before that?

McWilliams

It started before that. I had some very good friends there: Will Maslow and Justine Palier and, well, I also knew Rabbi Stephen Wise. She [Justine] was his daughter. So I had many friends there, and I had friends in the American Jewish Committee; not so many, but I knew lots of people in Jewish organizations in different parts of the United States. In this Minneapolis-St. Paul area, for example, I had prime advisors--the very best--who knew the whole story and could tell me exactly what had happened over a period of years.

Gardner

Do any of the reviews come back to you now? You got front page in the *Herald Tribune* book section, and second page in the *New York Times*.

McWilliams

I knew it was well received; I mean, I remember it was well received. It got good notices and reviews and so forth. I'm pleased and satisfied with it in retrospect in a way, and yet not in another respect. It was written under tremendous tension because of the times; the times were beginning to change, and the pressures on me were enormous. And it wasn't--in my judgment--as well written as it should have been. There were certain phases of it that I'd like to redo. So it's not one of my favorite books. But the argument and the concept, I'm very well satisfied with.

Gardner

You did get into hot water with one publication--you talked about that the other day--called the *Menorah Journal*. Was that what it was?
McWilliams

Yes. Yes.

Gardner

And that in a way presages what's going to be happening over the next twenty years, as you said, the whole Cold War where you were attacked because your solutions to the race problem, which included social change and economic change, were attacked as communist.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right; that's right.

Gardner

What was the circumstance of that? Did you know the person who did this before?

McWilliams

No. But, you see, that was a trend in Jewish intellectual thought. It was represented in the *Menorah Journal*. It's interesting: for example, Elliot Cohen started out--I don't know whether he was the editor for the *Menorah Journal*. He wrote for the *Menorah Journal*, but he became the editor of *Commentary* and was then succeeded by Norman Podhoretz. And that clique was always very, very (quote) "anticommunist," although I've written for *Commentary* over the years. Nevertheless, they have always had this stance; they have been critical of various things that I've written and said and done.

Gardner

The virulence was surprising more than anything else.

McWilliams

And on this case, for example, these people were for the most part on the opposite side of the issue, and that generated a lot of feeling.

Gardner

Right.
McWilliams

We get into that later.

Gardner

My favorite statistic about *A Mask for Privilege* is that it rose to number three in Los Angeles in one week and number one at the time of the Kinsey report. [laughter] So you were in startling company.

McWilliams

You were asking whether being a West Coast editor included the entire West, and it did. A book that pleases me quite a bit is a book that I edited for [W.W.] Norton; it's called *Rocky Mountain Cities*.

Gardner

And that's coming right up; that's fine. Talk about it now.

McWilliams

I'm pleased with that and the introduction to it because I think it focused attention on aspects of western history and western politics that had been neglected. These contributors that I lined up were first-rate. They really knew these cities, and so you got a picture. My introduction, I think, sets the stage for it pretty well. When I was at Sun Valley recently for this conference on writers in the West, I was interested to note that so many of these issues, in one form or another, are still in these communities.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

It's a book that didn't get much attention, but I think it's quite a good book.

Gardner

It got some good reviews.

McWilliams

Yes, it did.
Gardner

Your introduction was widely quoted for trying to bring it all together.

McWilliams

I was trying to bring it together, right.

Gardner

I wasn't aware that you had spawned that whole project. How did that work?

McWilliams

I spawned it because for about two years, I had an agreement with Norton's to line up books for them, particularly from the West. I'm very happy to say I got them to publish John Collier's *The Indians of The Americas*, among the other books that I lined up. That book still sells to this day; it sold down through time. Of course it's a classic; it's an indispensable book about Indians in America. And I got some other good books for them. But then I got so busy with other things I had to terminate this relation with Norton's--which I really enjoyed; I enjoyed that very much.

Gardner

But in the meantime you put this book *[Rocky Mountain Cities]* together, really.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

You solicited the articles.

McWilliams

Yes, yes.

Gardner

Did you edit it as well?

McWilliams
Yes, I did. Of course, they edited it, too, in New York.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

But some of those contributors were close friends: Charles Graham, who did the chapter on Denver; Duncan Aikman, who did El Paso; and Joseph Kinsey Howard, who did a chapter [on the Coeur d'Alene]. I think it was an interesting approach.

Gardner

Who did the Tucson one?

McWilliams

June Caldwell.

Gardner

Right. There was some controversy--Erskine Caldwell's . . .

McWilliams

Erskine's wife at that time.

Gardner

There was some controversy over that: Tucson wasn't very pleased with that.

McWilliams

I know they weren't quite pleased. [laughter]

Gardner

One of the things that seems to be prominent in those years for you were speaking tours.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner
You did an awful lot of speaking.

McWilliams

Yes, a dreadful amount.

Gardner

How were those lined up, usually? Did you have an agent?

McWilliams

Yes, through W. Colson Leigh Agency in New York. I have files of the lecture engagements, a couple of them; they're about this thick. And it's just appalling to think of the places! It was a rough life because the transportation was often bad and conditions were bad, particularly in the war years.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

I would stagger from one meeting to the next, you know. They just lined them up one right after the other. But it was also very helpful in a way, because it gave me a real kind of a feel about other parts of the country--oh, many parts of the country. If you spoke on race relations in some of the towns that I spoke in, in those years, you got a real unvarnished impression of what the American people think. It was very lively, very strenuous, and exhausting, and at the same time a rewarding kind of experience.

Gardner

Did you share podiums often, or was it usually you as featured speaker?

McWilliams

Usually as a featured speaker at college campuses--all over. Except in the Deep South--I did very little speaking in the Deep South. I was disappointed; I would have liked to have had a chance to.

Gardner

Was that because they didn't set them up there?
McWilliams

No, they couldn't. It was just they didn't want me. They weren't interested in what I had to say. But in the West, and Midwest, Northwest--lots in the Northwest--and Northeast section of the country, [I spoke at] colleges, universities, trade associations, service clubs; spoke before the Rotary Club of Butte, Montana, once upon a time--[laughter] all kinds of groups, just every conceivable kind of group.

Gardner

And all kinds of speeches, I imagine.

McWilliams

Yes, in a limited range, things that I felt competent to talk about: race relations, and the importance of dissent, witch-hunting, and things of that sort.

Gardner

You are also interested in history, though, throughout, as we've made plain.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Did you talk about history also? Or were you generally a more social. . . ?

McWilliams

These were mostly social issues, important social issues of the times.

Gardner

One speech that you made that got written up (and I found in your archives) was to the NAACP in Los Angeles in 1949. I don't know that that's any different from any other speech, but if you recall anything about it . . .

McWilliams

I just remember the occasion; I have no idea of what I said. I remember the occasion. Loren Miller was, of course, a dear personal friend. Thurgood
Marshall, whom I knew, was counsel for the NAACP. I knew most of the local people here, and they were old friends. I remember the convention being here and [I remember] speaking, but I don't remember anything more about it.

Gardner

You might say a few words about Loren Miller, as long as he's come up.

McWilliams

That is a beautiful, beautiful person and an extraordinarily sensitive, perceptive, intelligent man--frustrated because of the way in which he was sort of boxed in. He was brilliant. He should have had a much bigger national career than he did. His book *The Petitioners* is a very fine book. He was gifted. He could have done lots of good books, but he was caught in a kind of situation; he couldn't really get out of it. And this was unfortunate because he had an extraordinary background and experience. He was one of the brilliant people that I've known. And I was devoted to him, I loved him--wonderful guy. Iris and I were both devoted to Loren and his wife.

Gardner

That's wonderful. Did you ever do any legal work with him?

McWilliams

We may have worked together on certain cases. He was active. I know that we tried to get him admitted to the Los Angeles Bar Association once upon a time and had a real rumpus about that. I've even forgotten how it turned out.

Gardner

I think it was successful, wasn't it?

McWilliams

I think eventually it was successful, but the first time around I think we lost. He was a very fine person and a very fine influence. The black community at that time hadn't sufficiently grounded itself so that it could develop elements that would support a man of Loren's caliber. This was a great disappointment to him and to everybody else. They did support him in a way, to a degree, but he was too much of an intellectual. I think today he would have been an extraordinary figure.
Another thing that you did during that year, apparently, were book reviews for the *Herald Tribune*. Was that just sort of odds-and-ends kind of work?

Odds and ends.

Okay, now we have three more books to go through. How are you doing? Up for more tape?

I'm fine; sure.

Good. All right, next we come to *California: The Great Exception*, 1949. Now, that was written for Current Books. How come you did that one?

Well, they wanted me to do a book--something about California. I wanted to, and my regular publishers weren't interested.

Why is that?

Well, they wanted me to do something else. [laughter] I wanted very much to do it because I wanted to look at the state as a whole, as I had looked at Southern California. So I was anxious to do it--and did it for A.A. Wynn, I think it was. It's been reissued and it's still in print, you know. Still available--it's now available in paperback.

How do you like it?
I like it. I'm satisfied with it. For that time I think it was an interesting presentation. Increasingly you hear this--and a note was struck in California--"This is an exceptional state," that things start here, and all the rest of it. So I enjoyed doing it, and I think it's had a very wide reading. It's been widely read and commented on. I had a lot of fun doing it.

Gardner

And so much of it is still appropriate, as the smog quote that I gave you when you walked in.

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes.

Gardner

One thing that I found interesting about it was that it seemed to have two different strains. The first strain is the chatty, amusing history that it goes through, with serious events and light events. And then suddenly the last two or three chapters are devoted to the very serious problem of water in California.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

And the book takes a much more serious turn.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Was there any intentionality in that--sort of grabbing up the reader and then holding him?

McWilliams

I think that it just developed that way. Of course, water is one of the great problems of the West; there's no doubt about that.
Gardner

And continues to be.

McWilliams

Continues to be. And, again, at this Sun Valley conference--two or three big sessions were devoted to water in the West, and it had a familiar ring to me. Because, you know, it's all there. We haven't heard the end of it by any means.

Gardner

No, no.

McWilliams

It's a great theme. I'd like to reexamine certain aspects of it if I had the time.

Gardner

For example.

McWilliams

Well, the whole problem of Colorado River and what happens, and the kind of problems you run into when you move water out of one watershed into another watershed, and all that sort of thing. Oh, and the problem of Owens Valley is still very much--we still haven't gotten that out of the way. So I enjoyed doing California: The Great Exception. It didn't sell very well at the time. It got fairly good notices, but it was not a best seller.

Gardner

It's a very nice history, though. It's selective, but it covers a lot of ground.

McWilliams

Yes, it does.

Gardner

I'm going to stop the tape because we're almost at the end, and I'll start a new one.

McWilliams
Okay.

13. Tape Number: VI, Side One (July 14, 1978)

Gardner

The next book that you published is one that has turned out to be one of your most important in many ways, and that's *North from Mexico*. Now, there are all sorts of origins to that, because you've been dealing with the problems of Mexican-Americans in many different ways.

McWilliams

The real story of the book is that Louis Adamic had been commissioned to edit a series for [J.P.] Lippincott's called "Peoples of America." As a matter of fact, I helped him line up authors for certain of those volumes. I got J. Saunders Redding to do the book on blacks, and D'Arcy McNickle to do the book on Indians, and then Louis couldn't find anyone he thought could or should do the book about Mexicans. He asked me if I would do it, and so I said I would; I'd been thinking about it for a long time. Again, this was a product of my experience. It got less attention when it was first published than any book I've ever written.

Gardner

That's surprising; it got good notices.

McWilliams

Fairly good notices, but not very. Lewis Garnett spoke well of it, and a few other people. But it sold slowly . . . slowly. Then when the edition was exhausted, Lippincott's didn't want to reissue it. They gave me the rights to it, and my friends in the Monthly Review Press decided they'd like to publish it--get out an edition. They got out an edition, and that edition sold out. They reprinted it, and that edition sold out. That edition attracted some attention in Mexico City, and there was a Spanish-language edition that was then prepared and issued in Mexico City; and it is still in print. Then Greenwood Press wanted to reissue it, and I gave them permission to reissue it. The timing there couldn't have been better, because it was issued just at the time that the
Chicano rebellion was getting under way. So it was reissued. It's a rare, rare case of a book that became a best seller twenty years later.

Gardner

Twenty years later.

McWilliams

Twenty years after it was issued. Greenwood did a documentary film *North from Mexico: Exploration and Heritage* based on it that is shown in colleges and universities. And that's done fairly well, quite well. Then there's now a hardback and paperback edition of the book, and it continues to sell.

Gardner

I imagine it would.

McWilliams

And I did a new introduction for it. Arthur Corwin, in a book that I have, refers to me as a Lone Ranger: here was this situation and nobody had written about it, really--nationally--and along comes, he says, this Lone Ranger who was not of Hispanic background at all. As a matter of fact, I had no real qualifications to write this book, [laughter] except a very lively interest in the subject.

Gardner

Of course as it comes out, or it has come out, you had worked with the Mexican-American population of Los Angeles and did know something about that.

McWilliams

That's right. And I had done a lot of research. I have a big volume of bibliographic notes. I had researched it for years; I had run down aspects of it. I enjoyed writing it very much. I liked writing that book. It does have a wide influence, I think. If you're interested in this subject, this is the book that you start with.

Gardner

Right.
McWilliams

And it's amazing that it hadn't been written up to this point. But no one had really put it together.

Gardner

It's the book I started with on the subject. It's probably ten years ago. One attack upon the book was that it was anti-Catholic. The Catholic press wasn't too happy with it.

McWilliams

No. I'm sure. I think they would be more favorable--or less critical--today.

Gardner

Or ten years ago.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right. But it is a fact--or was a fact--that the church didn't do very well by these people, because most of the priests were non-Spanish speaking in origin, and the big bulk of [the people] were. Mass was not celebrated in Spanish, and many of these people couldn't afford to send their kids to parochial schools. For years, in this community, the church did not really show an active interest and wasn't much of a force. It could have been as it is today; it's a very important force today, but it was not then.

Gardner

The book was also the first real publicity for the Mexican-American ghettos in Los Angeles and parts of Texas, and so forth, and of things like the Sleepy Lagoon trial. Was there reaction of any kind to that when it first came out? On lecture tours, for example, did people start asking questions?

McWilliams

Not very much. But you see by the time this book came out, we were well into the Cold War. The big freeze had set in, the exciting, or excitable, issues had shifted.

Gardner
Yes, which comes to the next book, I suppose. But I have two further questions.

McWilliams

Sure.

Gardner

Robert Joseph originally got the film rights for *North from Mexico*.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

What did he intend to do with them?

McWilliams

He wanted to make a film about it. It had certain possibilities, as shown by the fact that Greenwood's did this documentary. But he never succeeded in doing anything with it.

Gardner

It was going to be a documentary, though?

McWilliams

I think it was; I think that was the idea.

Gardner

As an aside: in reading through your archives, I ran across a gossip column in which someone named Craig Rice was about to write a book called *The Defense Never Rests* that was inspired on a train ride with you. Do you know anything about that at all? That sounded absolutely fascinating to me.

McWilliams

It sounds interesting to me, but I don't remember.

Gardner
I haven't tried to track down the book yet; I don't even know if it was written. It was well planted, anyway, by some PR person, and it got you mentioned.

McWilliams

I don't remember anything about that.

Gardner

You don't recall what that was. Okay. Well, on a more serious note, your next book is *Witch Hunt*.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

My first question about *Witch Hunt* is, were you the first to use that metaphor?

McWilliams

No, I'm sure I wasn't. But the origin of the book is that on these lecture trips, I had sensed that after 1948 a real freeze was coming along. You could tell in the questions and the attitudes; the good feeling that had existed in the wartime was gone. And on one of my lecture trips to New York, I sat down with Angus Cameron, my editor at Little, Brown, and said, "I want to do a book about this. This is going to develop into a big, big issue, and I want to get right at it." So he said all right. He said it was all right to do it, so I proceeded to do it. *Witch Hunt* is a book that I think quite well of in one sense, but it was premature. It was one of the cases where my timing was off, and yet you would have thought the timing was perfect. What I mean is this: McCarthy's Wheeling, West Virginia, speech of 1950--the book was really written before that speech. I had to refer to the speech in the introduction to get any kind of reference or mention of it into the book. The Korean War started in 1950. The Hollywood Ten went off to jail; their appeals and all that had been exhausted. The witch-hunt was really just getting under way when the book was published. Now, you would have thought that because of that, it would be well timed and would have been widely read and discussed, and so forth. But it wasn't. I think one of the reasons is that the freeze was so great, people didn't want to. They didn't want to look at this thing. It's a flawed book in the
sense that it deals with some of the issues but not with all of the issues, because many of the big issues developed later. It was a book written in anticipation, really, of the witch-hunt that came. It was published just as the witch-hunt got under way. Of course, it does deal with the Hollywood Ten and with the loyalty-oath controversy at Cal--University of California--and issues of that kind, but there was so much more to the witch-hunt. It was flawed also in the sense that when I got into it and was doing the writing, I became fascinated with the history of witch-hunting and of the concept of heresy and what heresy really is all about, and so forth. I couldn't suppress that curiosity. So it's not a well-integrated book.

Gardner

You think there's too much of that in there?

McWilliams

Maybe a bit too much of that, yes. It would have been better if I had waited, and then I could have taken a--but on the other hand, I'm glad in a way I did it when I did, because as it happened, I wouldn't have had the time for it. It was really the last book I wrote.

Gardner

Because when you went to the Nation, you no longer had the time.

McWilliams

No longer had any time for the writing of books. That's right.

Gardner

Well, did it ever cross your mind [that] even though you had no time to write books anymore--say, four or five years later when the first reaction came, and when [Edward R.] Murrow stood up to McCarthy, and books that were more antipathetic to the witch-hunters started to become popular--did you think you maybe ought to do a little updating?

McWilliams

It occurred to me. But, again, there was no time for it. I just didn't; I had no time for it. I became intrigued with the concept of heresy and what prompts it, how it happens, and the whole history of witch-hunting, particularly in this
country, and the fact that it does surface at certain times when there are
certain kinds of tensions, that it usually takes very much the same form. So I'm
glad I wrote it. But, as I say, I think it's a flawed book in some respects.

Gardner

A lot of the early part of the book, particularly, has to do with the university
loyalty oath.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

A great deal of it has to do with the University of Washington. Was a lot of
that personally gleaned information? Did you go up to Seattle?

McWilliams

Yes, because on lecture trips I had learned of this situation and knew about
the Canwell committee in the state of Washington, which was the counterpart
of the Tenney committee. (Incidentally, Canwell had a history very analogous
to Jack Tenney's history.) I knew about that, and I knew about these three
victims of the Canwell committee at the University of Washington. I knew
them. I talked to them, and I discussed the case widely in Seattle and Portland
and Tacoma. I had spoken at a couple of big mass meetings in Seattle on the
case. So I was fairly familiar with the background of it, and I'd written about it
for the Nation. And I'd written about the loyalty controversy at Cal.

Gardner

That's what I'd like to talk about.

McWilliams

Yes, sure.

Gardner

What are your personal experiences having to do with the situation at UC
[University of California]?
I was involved in the sense--you know, there were all kinds of meetings that raised a great hue and cry. I don't know how many times I spoke about the loyalty oath, and the loyalty oath in general, and the history of test oaths and how abominable they were, and what the consequences were, because people couldn't see this; they couldn't understand this and couldn't see that if you establish this kind of precedent, how easy it was to expand it and to extend it, and how rapidly it would spread to the professions and everywhere else--as it did.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

As it did, indeed. So I spoke quite a bit about it up and down California and in the Northwest. I did quite a lot of writing about it for the *Nation* and other magazines, mostly for the *Nation*.

Gardner

You must have known quite a few of the participants.

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes, indeed I did. And people like John Caughey I very much admired for the outstanding way in which they bucked this. I had occasion to discuss this with Eric Erickson when he was at Cal in those years. He just left the university. He didn't want to get involved in all this controversy, apparently, but he was very much opposed to the oath. And I knew other people that were involved. You know, there were a series of mass meetings in San Francisco, Oakland; I think I did some radio debates on it, too. I think so. As you know, it was an ongoing controversy. It went on and on and on. I think of it in retrospect: I remember a big meeting at UCLA when Harold Laski was here on a visit, and there was a cocktail party and reception for him--or cocktail party and dinner before he spoke--and it was a very interesting group. There were all kinds of people there, and [Robert G.] Sproul was there. He was so amiable and pleasant. Everything was under such genteel auspices, and genuinely so! He enjoyed Laski; Laski made a very brilliant speech. Yet in just a short time, the whole atmosphere had frozen, changed. They wouldn't have
had Laski within two miles of the campus. But at this occasion, when he did speak, there was no problem.

Gardner

Sproul's role was an interesting one, too.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

He originally proposed the oath and then ended up voting against it later on.

McWilliams

That's right. Well, so many people got trapped. I think Truman may really have thought that his loyalty program would head off the worst of this, but it never works this way.

Gardner

It works in the opposite way.

McWilliams

Always works in the opposite way. And what Truman did greatly stimulated--he must bear a very large measure of the responsibility for what happened, because, you may recall, the day before or the day after he signed the loyalty oath, he was talking to former governor George Earle of Pennsylvania. He was telling Earle that all this talk about Reds in government and all that, "It's a bunch of baloney; there's nothing to it," and so forth. Yet he signs the loyalty oath. And Dean Acheson, to his credit, says in his book that it was the worst mistake the Truman administration made--was their whole handling of the loyalty, civil liberties issue. And I think it was; I think it was irresponsible. Truman was responsible for much of the damage that was done.

Gardner

Do you think he was ever aware of it?

McWilliams
Well, if he was, he would never admit it, you know. He was that kind of man. He was not exactly a very sensitive man. Years later the townspeople of Hiroshima sent him a very politely worded resolution that they had passed; they had said they were kind of appalled by his public statement that he had never had any compunction about his decision to drop the bomb. They said to him in a very polite way, "Mr. President, do you really mean this?" He very abruptly said that he certainly did and never had the slightest qualm about it. But I don't know how anyone could say that, you know: when you think a decision of yours could cause a loss of life of that magnitude, and you never had any qualms about it--unbelievable.

Gardner

I know.

McWilliams

For all of the good qualities that he had, he was, I think, a disaster as a president.

Gardner

Did you ever get to meet him?

McWilliams

Just on one occasion, and that was just a perfunctory occasion. Robert Donovan's book [Crisis and Conflict: The Presidency of Harry S Truman, 1945-1948], incidentally, I think is quite good. But it was a very cleverly projected book, because to carry the Truman story just through the surprise upset victory in 1948 was tactically a very shrewd thing to do, because that makes a very fine story. But then the disaster of his next four years, that's quite a different story.

Gardner

To get back to UCLA--it seems so trivial after talking about Hiroshima and Truman--what was the role of Edward Dickson in the whole thing?
I don't know too much about the background of the thing. I really don't. I mean specifically with respect to him, I just wouldn't want to comment because I don't know.

Gardner

You don't know what role he played or what role any of the other regents might have played?

McWilliams

No. I think Sproul had sort of intended to put a stop to all agitation about individuals: to get rid of this individual or get rid of that one by just going and adopting this loyalty oath, thinking that this would end it. Of course, it just gave it impetus.

Gardner

And, of course, many other oaths were adopted here.

McWilliams

Oh, yes, every which group. There was an oath mania, including the church, you know, to maintain their tax deductability. And how--in retrospect--how the Jewish groups and the Protestant groups and the others, knowing of the whole history of this kind of oath, could have gone along with this baffles me, because that kind of oath can be highly destructive, you know. It has a long, long history, but they completely ignored their history. Essentially there was one church in the state that really just took a stand against it. That was the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles--Steve Fritchman.

Gardner

Steve Fritchman.

McWilliams

And actually won the battle, as a matter of fact, but with so little support, hardly any support, from the very people that you would think would be the most active.

Gardner

How about ACLU?
McWilliams

Well . . . too. It was astonishing that there wasn't more perception of how oaths of that kind had been used in the past. You know, if it had been really upheld and adopted, these witch-hunters could have closed churches, and [there would have been] all kinds of trouble. It would have imposed a kind of censorship on the kind of speakers they could have invited because they would always be afraid of the tax exemption.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

Sure.

Gardner

Witch Hunt didn't enjoy the sale of some of the others.

McWilliams

No. For this odd reason: I think people were sort of afraid of the issue. As a matter of fact, the real airing, the real basic opposition to witch-hunting and the premises on which witch-hunting is based suffered from a lack of public attention. Everybody joined in this crusade, or whatever it was. As you know, there's a very good book, incidentally, I mentioned, I think, the other day-- Crisis on the Left by Mary McAuliffe. She describes this four-year hiatus and the ACLU's position--certainly doesn't do it any credit in retrospect. They backed away from the whole business.

Gardner

I think you talked about that off the tape. I think I'll save the talk about your ACLU role for the video tape [Tape X]. That might be interesting, because you were a board member, and so on. But it is true how many organizations went through that.

McWilliams

And at that time, Stringfellow Barr, Thomas Emerson of the Yale Law School, and myself--the three of us--signed an open letter calling attention to the fact
that there were individuals who needed legal representation and couldn't get it, and that there were these political pariahs; and since there seemed to be no organization willing to take their cases and defend them, that something would have to be done about it, including, if necessary, the formation of a new civil liberties group. Now, this was issued and printed in the press and had quite a bit to do with the formation of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. But Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was then doing a column for the *New York Post*, and he picked it up--picked up our statement--and referred to the three of us as "dough-faced typhoid Marys of the Left" and thought it was outrageous that we should propose that these people should have some kind of defense. And all we were saying was just that. We were saying that there was a gap in the structure of the defense of civil liberties. We didn't refer to the ACLU by name, but anyone who knew the situation would know that this was the case. And then out of this came the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee with Leonard Boudin as counsel. It began to take on these cases; it won some quite remarkable victories. And then after three or four years, the ACLU swung back to its initial position.

Gardner

But only after the air cleared.

McWilliams

Yes, only after the air had cleared. And, I think, only in part because the ECLC had then come into existence, and they felt a bit embarrassed by the fact that another group had to be formed in order to meet this need.

Gardner

To what do you attribute--well, of course you attribute it to a lot of things in *Witch Hunt*--the abdication of the Left during that period?

McWilliams

It is a very remarkable thing, very remarkable thing. [I would] trace a part of it back to the split that occurred between the PCA people and the ADA people and, after the Wallace campaign, the whole Progressive Left [which] sort of fell apart, and the incessant witch-hunting by the committees. These people were so preoccupied with just staying alive, so to speak, and defending
themselves that they had little energy or time or resources left to take up the fight. And politically, they had been decimated.

Gardner

And the fear was there.

McWilliams

The fear was there, right.

Gardner

Well, shall we break for today?

McWilliams

Okay.


Gardner

As I mentioned last time, we'll start talking about the Nation now. I think the first thing that should be discussed will probably be your first contact with the Nation, which would have come, I suppose, in the thirties.

McWilliams

Yes, I contributed to the magazine in the thirties from time to time, and then sometimes they would write me about things that they were interested in. I got to know some of the people in New York, but rather casually, in the 1930s. I didn't get to know them well. Then they asked me to become a contributing editor in January of 1945, which I did. And then, as I mentioned earlier, I induced them to organize this conference at the Ambassador Hotel in September 1946, which was the first time that they had ever held a function in Los Angeles, and it turned out to be quite successful. I think that was one of the reasons why Freda [Kirchwey] asked me to come back in the spring of 1951, because by then the magazine was having more than its normal quota of problems, and she needed some help and she asked me to come back. I had been urging them to get out a special civil liberties issue because of the McCarthy thing, which was becoming very evident. She said if I came back for
a brief period of time, I could edit a civil liberties issues; so that was the bait.
[laughter]

Gardner

And you took it.

McWilliams

I took it, and I went back, and of course one thing led to another. As a matter of fact, I stayed for virtually thirty years because the magazine was in a critical state, and it was quite apparent that she did need help. When I first went back there, I was very active in trying to raise money for the magazine, get new people interested in it, and so forth. It was a day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month kind of emergency, and I just got locked into a situation. I had no thought of staying; I had thought of staying maybe just for a month or two.

Gardner

Really?

McWilliams

Yes, that's right. I never really talked to her about it. I don't know what was in the back of her-- that is, Freda's--mind. But when I went back, I'm sure it never occurred to her that I might ultimately be her successor. I don't think she had that in mind.

Gardner

You really don't?

McWilliams

I don't think she did. It's possible that she did. But anyway, when I got back there, I got locked into this situation; I just stayed on.

Gardner

What did your family think about the move at the time?

McWilliams
Well, it was rough, very difficult for them. Iris had never lived in the East, and as a matter of fact, I had never lived in the East; but I was much more familiar with New York than she was. And it was very rough for our son to adjust from a California-type school to New York City schools. It was very difficult for them, very difficult.

Gardner

Did you move right away to 115th Street?

McWilliams

No, we lived in the [Greenwich] Village.

Gardner

That's right--the Nation's offices.

McWilliams

The Nation's offices were in the Village. Well, at first they were at the lower end of the island when we first went there, still down on Vesey Street. We lived in the Village, however, because Freda lived in the Village, in Washington Square. [J. Alvarez] Del Vayo had an apartment there, and he went to Europe for a time, and we sublet his apartment. After a time we moved up on the West Side of New York because of the school situation for our son. And we lived at 321 West 78th for, oh, quite a long time. And then we moved into our present apartment in New York, which is opposite Columbia University at 115th Street.

Gardner

Did your family adjust, though, after a while? I assume they did. Or did they always maintain a yearning to return?

McWilliams

I think there was always a problem in connection--I think Iris had continuing difficulties in adjusting, because it is a very different way of life, particularly apartment life. We had our own home here and spent a lot of time outdoors, and that sort of thing. It's much easier: if you want a brief vacation, you get in your car and go to the mountains, the beach, or whatever; it's not that easy in New York. We decided that we would stay right in Manhattan because I was
so busy most of the time--not every night, of course, but three or four nights a week--with conferences and meetings, and that sort of thing. We realized it would be better to stay right in Manhattan. We've always lived in Manhattan; we've never lived in the suburbs since we've been in New York.

Gardner

What did your work load consist of at first?

McWilliams

Shortly after I arrived in New York, Hal [Harold] Field, who was the managing editor, resigned. His resignation, I might say, had nothing whatever to do with my being back there; it was just one of those things.

Gardner

Glad to hear that.

McWilliams

He got an offer of a much better paying job, and he felt he had to take it. We were great friends then and have since remained very good friends. I had to begin to take over some of his responsibilities because there was no one else there. Freda was so preoccupied and busy with various things that she couldn't look around for a successor for Hal Field. I'd never done editorial work of this kind before--getting out a magazine. I had no credentials for it, no experience, no training. But, you know, you adjust to the situation. So I had to take over his load as well as helping her on her fund-raising activities, and also carrying a large part of the editorial load--writing editorials and that sort of thing. And I became more and more involved in the whole editorial side of the magazine.

Gardner

What made you decide--once you were in the swing of things--what made you decide to go ahead and stick with that and not just chuck it and come back to California and write some more books?

McWilliams

That would have been my preference. But when I got there I saw what dire straits the magazine was in; and I had such a great appreciation for the
magazine and its importance that I thought this was the thing that I should do by all means. And I kept thinking that, well, after six months or a year the situation would change. But it didn't change, essentially didn't change. So we just stayed on, and we found ourselves more or less anchored in New York, although we did not have the intention really of staying there. It's an odd thing. If we had thought that we would stay there, we probably would have gotten a place in the suburbs; it would have been easier for our son going to school, and so forth. But we just never did.

Gardner

And once you were there you stayed. You say dire straits--is that financially?

McWilliams

Yes, yes. The magazine--from 1865, when it was founded, on, it had been a deficit publication. And it's very interesting; the early financial history is very interesting. Frederick Law Olmsted was one of the founders, one of the sponsors originally. There's very interesting correspondence between Olmsted and [E.L.] Godkin, who was the initiator of the Nation. When they started it, they had $100,000 capital, and Godkin writes Olmsted that this is great: "We have $100,000 capital. It's more money than we can spend," and so forth and so forth. But within six months, they had hiked the price of the magazine, and by the end of the year, I think they had doubled the subscription price, and most of the capital was exhausted. And from that time on, it's always doing this fund raising in one way or another. Then there was a long period when the Villards owned it, when it was in effect a kind of weekend magazine for the New York Post (they also owned the New York Post). But it had always been a deficit publication of a sort, except for the years '38 to '42.

Gardner

Why is that?

McWilliams

Well, I think in those years it found itself moving sort of in the mainstream for the first time. Then as the Cold War began to emerge, it was of course again on the outside; it was again critical, and its troubles began. And when I say "its troubles," it had always had troubles, but they had been pretty easily
resolved. Except that in this postwar period it found itself the target of a section of the intellectual community—the section that turned sort of in favor of the Cold War; there was a division there. It is quite interesting that during all of the period of McCarthyism, no member of the staff of the *Nation* was ever called before any of the inquisitorial committees. It never happened. But as a matter of fact, it would have been much better if we had been called, because this would have generated support for the magazine; but the trouble came from the sort of social-democratic element in New York. They were very critical of Freda. They had always been critical of Freda because she was a notably independent person, and so forth. They had been not only critical, I think they had been jealous of her prestige and her influence. And they took advantage of this situation to become highly critical of the *Nation*, and to imply that it was a fellow traveling publication, soft on communism, et cetera, et cetera. That kind of criticism from intellectual circles in New York was then very damaging—very damaging in terms of money raising. It really made it very difficult. And from 1945 on, and particularly after 1948, she had increasing difficulties. The routine thing that they did was to throw a couple of big functions a year and raise enough money to cover the deficit. It had been relatively easy to do this until about 1950; then it became very difficult. You wouldn't believe this, but they threw a function at the Waldorf on, of all subjects, "Arab-Israel Peace [: Key to Stability] in the Middle East." Now, you wouldn't think in 1950 there was any element of controversy about this, particularly because these elements that were critical of the *Nation* were also very much pro-Israel—most of them.

Gardner

As was the *Nation*.

McWilliams

As was the *Nation*, because the *Nation* played a key role in the whole partition business. But they tried to disrupt that meeting. They Red-baited the sponsors and the other people that were there, and it got picked up by Frederick Woltman of the New York *World-Telegram and Sun*, who was the chief needler of that time, you know; and it became very difficult, very nasty. Freda found it difficult to cope with this kind of situation, and it continued. It got worse during McCarthy. Now, when I say it would have been better if we had
been the direct target, I think there's no doubt about this. [Oswald Garrison] Villard in his autobiography [*Fighting Years: Memoirs of a Liberal Editor*] tells that when he took it over, the circulation was at a very low point, one of the lowest points in its history. The magazine was the target of some very vicious attacks by all of the elements that were involved in the Palmer Raids, and all that sort of thing--very vicious attacks. Its circulation jumped, and it rose to one of the highest points in its history. Then once that particular witchhunt was over, it declined to about its average. So we would have been much better off if Joe McCarthy or some of the inquisitors had taken out after us, but they never did.

Gardner

Rather than a simply internecine sort of battle.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right. It was very much that, but very vicious, very vicious.

Gardner

What was the circulation at that time?

McWilliams

It was around 28-29,000; it would be up to 30-33,000. It hovered right in that . . .

Gardner

What had it been in the '38-'42 period?

McWilliams

In the '38-'42 period it got up to around 40,000, something like that. The costs at that time were not what they became, and it was because it had very low production costs, very low editorial costs, relatively speaking. It had a very good chance of survival--it could be self-sufficient with a doubling of the subscription; the paid subscription at any time would have put it in the black. It was that close to being self-sufficient. The problem is with magazines of this kind, they have to grow by kind of a natural creation process to be successful, because you can go out and double your circulation very easily if you have lots of money to spend. It's just a question of willing to spend x amount of dollars
to get $x$ number of new readers. But of course it doesn't do you much good because you can't hold them. The *New Republic* under Gil Harrison spent a huge sum of money to promote the *New Republic*. The naive readers would be very much impressed with those figures showing they had a great deal larger circulation than the *Nation*, but it really didn't mean anything. Because if they had also looked at the list of expires—subscriptions that were constantly expiring—they would have seen what the problem was: the *New Republic* was having to repeat the same process, and it was very expensive; so it's really not the way to promote magazines of this kind.

Gardner

Well, the *New Republic* through the years did use a method of having a sort of benevolent ownership that paid the deficit.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Was there any thought of doing that with the *Nation* at any time?

McWilliams

Oh, yes, yes. We looked for sponsors. We tried to find—the *New Republic* was a special case because Mrs. Harrison had access to a lot of money.

Gardner

But before that, the Straights, also; they were very wealthy.

McWilliams

The Straights also. And under Gil Harrison they bought various subsidiary enterprises which in turn fed money to the *New Republic*. So at times it appeared to have a much larger circulation than the *Nation*. But if you were looking at it with a hard critical eye—cynical eye—the circulation was never that much greater. And our costs were a great deal less. Early on—that is, not early on, but after [George] Kirstein came in as publisher [in 1955]—the two of us decided just to stop the direct mail activity entirely to see what would happen. And the circulation declined. We lost about 2,000 subscribers for a period of time, and then it began to come back. We took the position that
those people were people that were just waiting for that special offer. [laughter] And when they discovered that no special offer was going to be made to them, they subscribed. And actually we were much better off financially, in terms of not spending large sums of money and big mass mailings and advertising campaigns, and that sort of thing.

Gardner

What about advertising within the journal itself? This is more at the time you first got there than anything else, but . . .

McWilliams

Its traditional sources of advertising were largely the book-publishing industry, of course. And it's very interesting to note that at times various people tried to give us some assistance on advertising. One was George Braziller, and George had the idea that he could get some book-club advertising for the Nation.

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Gardner

You were in the middle of a thought about advertising.

McWilliams

Yes. As I was saying, George Braziller thought he could get some more book-club advertising. I said to him that I didn't think it would work, because our readers were not the kind of readers who wanted book-club books. They selected their own titles--"Thank you," you know. So he made a great effort to get book-club advertising, and the results were as I had anticipated: the book clubs were not getting the returns, sufficient returns. So then I organized a book club for the Nation--informally, you know--and it did very well indeed because we were very careful to select titles that we knew would be of special interest to Nation readers, like Earl Jowitt's book on the Hiss case, for example. And it began to grow and to burgeon, so much so that we had so much extra added paperwork and that sort of thing, it became very difficult with a small staff. And a chap who had a whole number of book clubs made us an offer to take over the book club that we had organized, and we entered into an arrangement for him to do that. It was a grave mistake, because after
a very short period of time, he began to make selections that were, again, not of the kind that our readership would be interested in. So it collapsed in his hands.

Gardner

There's a special sensitivity that is essential.

McWilliams

Very definitely so. As a matter of fact, that is one of the key problems about magazines of this kind: everything about the Nation is special. I mean, rules that apply for magazines in general and principles and management practices that would be very good for other magazines don't work for the Nation. It's highly specialized and its readership is very special. The readership has a very special relationship to the magazine. And all of this has to be understood in connection with the Nation.

Gardner

How did the circulation go through the years? Between the time you got there and the time you left, were there peaks and valleys?

McWilliams

Peaks and valleys. But it held its own very well. It did reasonably well all during the fifties and into the sixties. It never varied a great deal, because after Kirstein and I had made this basic decision, from then on we did very little in the way of large-scale mass mailings. If we had a special issue or something, we would promote it a bit. But we decided not to spend money that way.

Gardner

And just stick to your basic readership.

McWilliams

And stick to our basic readership. By and large this was a successful policy.

Gardner

Of course, the New Republic is one, but what were some of the other magazines that would have been in the same, oh, say, classification as the Nation back when you first started out?
Well, there would be the New Leader, which was a social-democratic publication; the New Republic; Christian Century, which was Protestant, as you know; Commonweal, which was the liberal Catholic. Essentially those, and then of course later the National Review came along, and the Progressive.

Gardner
Right.

McWilliams
William Buckley's National Review.

Gardner
And the Reporter for a little while.

McWilliams
And the Reporter.

Gardner
Not really in the same category.

McWilliams
Not really in the same category. I've done a review of a book about [Max] Ascoli that will appear shortly in the Columbia Journalism Review. I was very interested in the book because [when] the Reporter came out, its first issue coincided with, you might say, the beginning of the worst phase of the Cold War, and its termination coincided with the escalation of the war in Vietnam. So it really was carved--it filled a niche, a very special kind of niche there. And it did some very good things; that China Lobby issue of the Reporter was first-rate, first-rate. And then of course Ascoli was very much pro-Cold War; during the time it lasted, it was even more than the New Republic. It was the journal of the best and the brightest element in the Kennedy Administration, who were very much pro-Cold War, although oddly enough, and for reasons that are explained in this book that I mentioned, Kennedy never liked Ascoli. He had a very sharp dislike of Ascoli. This grieved Ascoli no end because he was, I think, inclined to hero-worship Kennedy. In any case his favorite political
figures were Charles De Gaulle and Lyndon Johnson. He really hero-worshipped those two.

Gardner

Who? Ascoli or . . . ?

McWilliams

Yes, Ascoli. Oh, yes, very definitely so.

Gardner

Well, that's an interesting pair.

McWilliams

Yes. The only major difference from a technical point of view between the Reporter and these other magazines [was that] it had more money to spend. They spent a very large sum of money on the Reporter. The deficit was very large every year, but it had the format of a slick magazine, and in that sense was somewhat different.

Gardner

Right. Tell me about Freda Kirchwey.

McWilliams

Well, Freda was a beautiful, radiant, wonderful human being--marvelous, absolutely marvelous. She was a daughter of George Kirchwey, who was head of the Columbia Law School for a long time and also a leader in reform politics in New York State. And nationally, he was part of the progressive movement; [he] played an active role in the progressive movement. He was a candidate for public office on the Progressive [party] ticket when Theodore Roosevelt ran. He was a leader in the movement to abolish capital punishment, an outstanding authority on penology and prison reform, and all that sort of thing. And Freda grew up in that kind of atmosphere in New York. The family had lots of intellectual friends, lots of faculty friends, at Columbia, and she grew up in a very privileged and very special kind of environment. She went to Barnard and was president of her class, and almost immediately she went to work for the Nation. And she did everything at the Nation. She was a copy editor; she did a special department about women's affairs. As a matter of
fact, she was responsible for getting some pieces by important American women about their life experiences, which were published anonymously and will very shortly be reissued by the Feminist Press with their names, and all the rest of it. She was always a feminist, *well* ahead of the time. She was also extremely interested in foreign affairs, because she did a kind of roundup of significant developments in foreign affairs for the *Nation*. She was very much interested in that, and those were her main kind of interests. She didn't care too much about--well, she was very interested, but . . . I mean she didn't know much about the country west of the Hudson and didn't care very much about it, as a matter of fact, and wasn't too actively interested in domestic issues, and so forth.

Gardner

Which is why, I suppose, you had more contributions to the *New Republic* than the *Nation* in the 1930s.

McWilliams

I think that's probably true. And she was a splendid human being, extraordinary human being, [and an] unflappable, wonderful working colleague. You know, I don't think there's any relationship which is more fraught with a potential for disagreement than the role of a publisher and the role of an editor on a magazine. You can get into endless arguments about everything under the sun. We had plenty of disagreements, but we never had a serious major argument. And I was devoted to Freda. I had the greatest respect for her and the greatest affection for her. She was very kind to us--to my family, to my wife, our son--and really a great human being. When I say *unflappable*, she could take all of this kind of pressure and tension and still maintain her good nature. Her attitude toward her colleagues was impeccable, and she was very--I won't say carefree, but she never permitted any of this to really get at her in any way. Quite a remarkable human being. And also a very fine editor! This is what she really liked to do; she liked to do that. She became, over a period of time, a public personage in her own right. She was quite a figure in the liberal progressive movement, particularly in New York. She was that for a great many years, and she was very actively interested in the UN--from the very beginning. She played a key role at the UN; she was very widely known at the UN, very widely respected.
And in connection with the partition of Palestine and keeping Franco's Spain out of the UN, the *Nation* played a critically important role in both of those fights. And she was very actively interested in it, as was Lillie Shultz, who was the head of Nation Associates. Their emphasis was largely in this field: the United Nations, foreign affairs, foreign policy, et cetera.

Gardner

What was the Nation Associates?

McWilliams

It was just a device by which a certain number of people paid more than their normal subscription, which was regarded as a contribution.

Gardner

I see.

McWilliams

And Lillie Shultz was in charge of the business arrangements for these functions.

Gardner

Who was she?

McWilliams

She had originally been in Philadelphia and, I think, with the American Jewish Congress. But she was a professional organizer and public relations person.

Gardner

I see. Was it Freda Kirchwey who brought her in?

McWilliams

Yes, Freda brought her in.

Gardner

Then in 1955 comes the major change. First, in 1954 you become editorial director.
McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

What did your job consist of then in relation to the rest of the...?

McWilliams

The fact of the matter is that in terms of actually getting the magazine out, I was in effect the editor from the middle of 1951 on, because she was so preoccupied with other things. So the designation of editorial director didn’t mean very much. Actually, what I did didn’t change to any great extent at all. I was really responsible for getting the magazine out and all that. When she left, of course, I had considerably more freedom of decision, in a sense, about policy and manuscripts and that sort of thing, although I was not hampered to any great extent while she was there. But she had certain preferences: she had certain issues she thought should be emphasized; she had certain theories about the magazine; she was more inclined than I was, for example, to rely upon regular staff contributors—that is, people in certain subject areas would be constantly writing for the magazine. It’s much easier to edit a magazine that way than to be constantly looking around. It’s easier, and it makes for a certain kind of continuity since people identify a certain writer, and they subscribe to a magazine because they want to be sure that they see what he has to say about the subject in which they are most interested, and so forth. On the other hand, it has definite limitations, in my judgment. So when I took over the editorship, I relied much less on regular staff contributors. In the long run it’s less expensive to rely upon regular staff contributors. You know what they’re going to do, what kind of manuscript it’s going to be; they understand you. But then that, too, has its counterproductive side, because if they are writing regularly for the magazine, some of them tend to be a little nonchalant about what they write. Sometimes they don’t really put their best effort into it, you know.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams
It's just another column or it's another page, and so forth. So I was really quite strongly inclined to a different kind of editorial policy in dealing with contributors.

Gardner

Right. In other words the change to editorial director and then to editor is really more one of formality in title.

McWilliams

That's quite right. She came to me fairly early in 1955 and said she had been. . . I should explain: she had been trying to find a successor who would assume the role of publisher--more a successor as a publisher than as an editor, because she had the title of publisher and editor. She was trying to find someone who would assume the role of publisher and take over the responsibilities and the burdens and the debts which the magazine had assumed. She came to me in the early spring of 1955 and said that she just hadn't been able to do it. Well, of course I knew this because I was involved in most of these negotiations. But in any case she said, "Will you see what you can do?" So I set about looking for a successor publisher. I had just about given up on it because it was really asking quite a bit of someone to come in under those circumstances. Then a friend of mine told me that George Kirstein was at the moment at loose ends. He had been head of the Health Insurance Plan of [Greater] New York for quite some years. He had resigned, and he didn't know quite what he wanted to do next. I had met him just once--a social occasion. But I sought him out, and he expressed some interest, and we had a long series of negotiations with the two of us and then with Freda. He finally agreed to take it over, to assume the responsibilities. He's the brother of Lincoln Kirstein and brother of Mina Curtis. His father was with Filene's and the Federated Department Stores in Boston. His father was one of the chief movers of the Sacco and Vanzetti fund raising and all that. So although I had only met him on one occasion, I knew about the family and of their long-standing interest in issues and their relationship to the *Nation*; they had always been more or less friendly to the *Nation*. So it was a logical kind of thing to do. And Freda knew about this, and she was satisfied that he would respect the traditions of the magazine--its standing and its values--which he certainly did. There were other reasons for the transition at that time. We had
gotten involved in a--I go into this in some length in the book [The Education of Carey McWilliams] that I've been working on, and I will only say this briefly because we can go on on this for two days. The Nation got caught in one of the oddest situations in connection with the Cold War that you wouldn't believe, just wouldn't believe! It was a situation for which we had no responsibility. We didn't even know the source of the trouble! What happened in essence--to make it very, very brief--is that a man by the name of Paul Hughes, who had worked with McCarthy on McCarthy's committee, was suddenly terminated by McCarthy. He was dropped. He apparently didn't like this too much, and he went to Joseph Rauh [Jr.] who is one of the attorneys for ADA and a founding member, I think, of ADA, and said that for a certain amount of money he would supply Rauh and company with information about what McCarthy was up to; he had the contacts. He would be a kind of informer, if you please, for them inside the McCarthy setup. So Rauh went to Clayton Fritchie of the Washington Post and to James Wechsler of the New York Post, and between the three of them they raised some $11,000, which they paid to this fellow Hughes to assume this role. And Hughes fed them a tantalizing series of memos about what McCarthy was up to, and so forth. They were just about ready to publish this big exposé when suddenly their better judgment and some things that happened convinced them that the guy was not reliable at all. So they canceled; they bowed out of the whole thing. Now, of course, what had happened was that Hughes--the minute they made this arrangement with him and began to pay him this money--he had doubled back to McCarthy and told McCarthy about all this, you see, so he was kind of a . . .

Gardner

. . . double agent.

McWilliams

He was kind of double agenting. [Hughes] in turn had gotten in touch with [Herbert] Brownell to get Brownell interested in [investigating] a great campaign to smear Joe McCarthy, and so forth that Brownell thought that he had to go along with this, you see. So Brownell started a grand jury investigation in the Southern District of New York to investigate this conspiracy. Now, the fact is that no one at the Nation knew anything about
this Paul Hughes-Rauh-Wechsler-Clayton Fritchie operation. We had no knowledge of this whatever. But we had run a special issue by Frank Donner on "The Informer." Brownell didn't like it, McCarthy didn't like it, and they thought that we were part of this cabal, this conspiracy. They also thought this because after the "Informer" issue came out, Harvey Matusow had gone to Frank Donner and told Donner a lot of fancy stories about his life in the political underground. Donner had sent him to me, and I had been entertained by the stories because he was a very good storyteller. But I said, "But we can't verify any of this and, therefore, we're not going to publish any of it." We never published anything by Harvey Matusow. But in the process of this, I knew that the Nation's lawyer had some clients that would be very much interested in some of the things Matusow had to say because Matusow by this time was beginning to think that he might recant some of the testimony that he had given as an informer. So I sent him to our lawyer, Larry Siegel, and Siegel was quite interested because he was a civil liberties lawyer. He had some clients who were up against the committees. And on one occasion Matusow went to Siegel's office and Siegel wasn't there. He inquired where he was, and he was told he was at a restaurant with a client. And Matusow, who was anything but a shy person, barged in to the restaurant and went up to the table. And here was Larry having dinner with a very famous client, Gloria Swanson. So he introduced Matusow to Swanson, and Matusow sat down and began to entertain them with some of his fancy stories of his life in the political underground, and so forth. Of course the FBI by this time had a tail on Matusow. So when they saw Matusow having dinner with Gloria Swanson, you see, this began to assume very interesting dimensions to them. Incidentally, the matter that Swanson was consulting Siegel about was strictly private matter; it had no political importance whatsoever--none, none! But when the FBI saw all this, they got very suspicious. So when this grand jury began its inquiry. . . . Well, first of all, I should cut back and say that by this time Matusow had decided to recant, and he did a book--I've forgotten the title of it [False Witness], but it was published by Carl Marzani and Angus Cameron--and when they announced they were going to publish the book, this grand jury tried to subpoena the original manuscript, and also tried to subpoena it from the printers. They wanted to stop it because they knew it would discredit some of their prime informants. They didn't succeed; the book
was published. It had a tremendous impact because Matusow was the first professional informer to recant.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

So this was all in the background of this grand jury hearing. When the grand jury hearing opened they subpoenaed Freda, and I was subpoenaed, and neither one of us could tell them anything. We didn't know anything about this fund raising in connection with Paul Hughes. We had no knowledge of this at all. We had never run anything by Matusow, and so forth and so forth. Then they subpoenaed the lawyer--Siegel. And Siegel said he had no knowledge of any of this fund raising, et cetera. As a matter of fact, he said he had minutes; he kept notes and minutes of all of his meetings with Matusow. So they said, "All of that's very splendid; you produce them, please." So when he began to go through these notes, he came across this meeting with Swanson. He thought that would be very embarrassing to her, and it had nothing to do with the general subject of the inquiry, so he decided to omit those portions of the notes. Well, it got him into some very neat trouble because they knew of the meeting with Swanson. It got him into some very deep trouble. He was convicted of violating some section of the U.S. code. When Swanson heard about it, she was appalled and said, "Well, why didn't you tell me? I would have gone down and told them what this was all about. I wouldn't have been embarrassed by it." But he just panicked, and he made a very, very serious mistake. All of this, of course, had created a great deal of stress in the office. When it finally broke and all, Freda was trying to help get Siegel out of this terrible mess. It took weeks and weeks and months of effort--weekends, nights, and so forth--really to find out what was going on, because we didn't know what was going on. Incidentally, it's very interesting to note that Matusow really was one of the heroes of that whole operation. Because after he recanted his testimony, he was indicted for perjury, and convicted, and given a three-year sentence. Mind you, he was indicted for perjury because he had finally told the truth--great irony in the situation. He was given a three-year jail sentence because he had finally decided to tell what actually happened, knowing that he was under very considerable hazard! So it took a
lot of courage on his part to do it. He was the only--I think the only--major informer that the government ever proceeded against. [Louis] Budenz, [Elizabeth] Bentley, and all the others--they ignored their manifold perjuries, but in this case they indicted Matusow--convicted.

Gardner

Because he recanted.

McWilliams

Because he recanted. [laughter]

Gardner

That's an interesting sidelight into your witchhunt theory.

McWilliams

Oh, yes. And there's a lot more to it than this, but this will give you some idea of the wild zaniness, because this had nothing to do with anything. It was just as though we had been standing on a street corner and a truck had come by and run over us. It was as accidental as that.

Gardner

Was this during the time that Kirstein was there?

McWilliams

It was just before Kirstein came in. When Kirstein and I took it over, it was with the distinct understanding that this was at Freda's request in both cases. And in the issue of the magazine in which we announced the change, this was made quite clear. So Kirstein came in and was publisher for a decade.

Gardner

What was the function of the publisher? Obviously, it was largely a troubleshooter, sort of, person in charge of finances. Did the two of you overlap quite a bit?

McWilliams

Not greatly. One of the problems, of course, with a magazine like the Nation is if you are relying on a publisher to meet a substantial part of the deficit, you
have to pretty much accept that as a fact of life and go along with the situation. And the kinds of people who are willing to become publisher under those circumstances--the rich individual who is willing to become a publisher under those circumstances and the very nature of the situation--is going to be more interested in the magazine itself than he is in the role of publisher. So with all due credit to Kirstein and Storrow, neither one was really a publisher in the traditional sense. They were really interested in the magazine. When you have this kind of relationship, the publisher naturally wants to minimize losses. You can't argue with that, because he's a generous person who is meeting a substantial part of the deficit. So it's not altogether a satisfactory relationship. I think that magazines of this kind ought to be set up and regarded as kind of public trusts, which is what they are. There should be a different mode of financing and a different set of relationships. But Storrow and Kirstein were great; they were very generous. When I spoke to Kirstein about this, his lawyer had prepared an elaborate kind of agreement. I said, "George, this is all right, and I'll be glad to sign it, but it's no good, because this relationship will either work or it won't work. No amount of fine print will do any good at all. We will either make it work or we won't." So he said, "I agree with you completely," and we never signed any agreement. And all the time I was at the *Nation*, I never had a contract of any kind. I was not a member of the [Newspaper] Guild; I couldn't be, because I was editor. I never had a contract, never was a member of the guild. Again, although I had many arguments with both Kirstein and Storrow, I never had any major quarrels with them. The reason for it, of course, is that we were all--they had the same kind of interest in the *Nation* and devotion to it that I had. So we just did our best to try and make it work.

Gardner

He lasted, as you say, for a decade.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner
During that time—the first decade of your editorship—there were a number of changes in style, logo—I mean, the way it looked, not the writing style. The writing style remained fairly consistent.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Were those sorts of decisions yours?

McWilliams

Well, in a way they were, and in a way they weren't. When it became apparent that I was going to have the responsibility for it, I recruited Robert Hatch, really, as managing editor; and he is a very, very fine editor. I think he's one of the finest editors in New York magazine journalism. He's been at it all of his life. He was for years with the New Republic. So Bob had a lot to do with the changes in the format and appearance. He also had charge of the back-of-the-book section for a time, but he's always had charge of the columns in the back of the book, with the exception of the fact that I recruited Harold Clurman as drama critic even before Bob came with the magazine. And there were other changes: Margaret Marshall had left as back-of-the-book editor, and I think she left in 1953.

Gardner

Yes, I want to get to all of those people a little later on, when we get to the staff. One problem that was brought up in the course of your stay was at the time of the Kennedy assassination, when deadlines and odd dating methods led to the magazine coming out dated something like three weeks after the assassination. Do you recall that?

McWilliams

I don't recall that.

Gardner

Because there was a note in the magazine at the time that said because of the long time that it took to mail to the West Coast, it had been decided to have a
layback of seven days--something like that--and you were cutting it down back to five.

McWilliams

That's probably true.

Gardner

If you don't recall that, I suppose it's not worth going into. Well, let me go through the publishers first as long as I have them all on this page. In 1966 James J. Storrow[, Jr.] became publisher, and Anne Abramovitz became assistant.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Who was Storrow? Why did Kirstein leave, and so on?

McWilliams

Well, Kirstein left because I had--from time to time at luncheon conversations, and not taking it too seriously--I had said, "George, you really ought to write a book about the American rich, because you have the ideal credentials." Namely, that he was a rich man but not too rich, and he was of Jewish background and yet not of the Jewish community, and he stood outside the situation just sufficiently. Although he had inherited a lot of money and it was inherited wealth, he did have a point of view about the rich. It did sort of intrigue him, and over a period of time he began to think more and more about it. He finally decided he did want to do this. So he told me that he was going to look around for a successor because he did want to do this book about the American rich. As a matter of fact, he did do it. It's a book called The Rich: Are They Different? It was published by Houghton-Mifflin.In the course of looking around for a publisher successor, he met Storrow. The Storrows had been Boston Brahmins for generations. Literally five generations: five Storrows graduated from Harvard College, for example-- that is, in a generational sequence. Storrow Drive in Boston is named after the family. And this publisher Storrow's grandfather [James Jackson Storrow] was a very important man in the life of Boston. He had played a key role in the reorganization of
General Motors for Lee Higginson and company. [He was] a man of very great wealth. And also in reform movement, when [Edward] Filene and the others gave Lincoln Steffens $10,000 or $15,000 to conduct an investigation of corruption in Boston—Steffens was assisted by Walter Lippmann, who was, I guess, a graduate student or student at Harvard, and others—and they got out this report about corruption in Boston, the Filenes decided they would run a reform candidate to clear up this situation. They turned to James Jackson Storrow, the grandfather of the publisher. And the opposition were very smart indeed: they turned to Honey Fitz, Jack Kennedy's grandfather [John F. Fitzgerald], who had been forced to retire from Boston politics for a time but now had come back. The contrast couldn't have been greater, because Honey Fitz was an amiable kind of person, convivial, and Irish, and Catholic, and part of the setup. Storrow was a Boston Brahmin of impeccable rectitude, couldn't warm an audience; he was not that kind of person at all and seemed to be quite cool and distant. He really wasn't, but that was sort of the impression he created. So when they had the election, Honey Fitz won—but not by a very wide margin of votes. It was quite a close election. So this reform tradition was part of the Storrow background; they had been active in all kinds of civic affairs. And Storrow, the grandfather, had sort of called the turn on Calvin Coolidge at the time of the Boston police strike. Villard had praised him for his role in making it clear that it didn't happen quite the way that Coolidge tried to make it appear that it happened. Incidentally, John F. Kennedy and James Jackson Storrow [Jr.], who was the publisher, were classmates at Harvard.

Gardner

Oh, at Harvard?

McWilliams

Along with Blair Clark, who succeeded me as editor. They were all members of the same class at Harvard. So the Storrows had a long-standing traditional interest in the magazine. And it was a logical choice, as Storrow had a lithograph and a photocopying plant in Boston, and he was very much interested in the magazine. So Kirstein had made arrangements for him to take over the magazine. I met Storrow just as I had with Kirstein. I met him just once before this arrangement was concluded. He asked me if I would stay on if he did decide to take over the magazine, so I said yes, I would--without
knowing anything more than that about him. But I felt that I owed it to Kirstein because Kirstein wanted out, and he had been very generous.

Gardner

And you had suggested that he write the book.

McWilliams

And I had suggested that he write the book. [laughter] So I felt that I should, and that's how the transition was effected.

Gardner

Was your relationship with Storrow as good as your relationship with Kirstein?

McWilliams

Yes, it was. I never had a serious argument with him. He's a very generous, kindly, decent person. He was not cut out for the business role of the publisher any more than Kirstein was. To make that clear, I should say what, from my point of view, I think a publisher of a magazine like the Nation should do: a publisher of a magazine like the Nation should be visible, should have lots of contacts in Washington, attend these dreary three-hour luncheons and dinner parties and cause-meetings, and call on senators and representatives, and go to meetings out around the country, and be an external kind of voice and figure for the magazine. Now, neither Kirstein nor Storrow were interested in doing this. It just wasn't their dish of tea. It wasn't anything that they wanted to do. Kirstein had excellent business judgment, and he straightened out the finances of the magazine. It had a very substantial debt when he came in, and the two of us worked on that. Even before Kirstein had come in, I had recruited some people of substantial wealth who made contributions to the Nation, and they continued to do so under both Kirstein and Storrow. So I raised probably as much money as either Kirstein or Storrow individually put into the magazine. But their role was essential; even so, their role was essential. Kirstein was a man of very good business judgment, and excellent in handling staff problems, dealing with the Newspaper Guild; he had had a lot of labor relations experience. He had been executive secretary of the War Labor Board, for example. He was very good, very good. The magazine made definite progress under Kirstein, so that when Kirstein left, it was relatively free of
debt--oh, less than it had at any time in the past--and circulation was up, and it had miraculously survived a decade of McCarthyism and whatnot. He had been very good in another way, particularly with staff problems--very good, very good.

Gardner

In 1967 Gifford Phillips became associate publisher.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Was that part of the Frontier deal? How did that work?

McWilliams

Well, I had known Giff Phillips even before he became publisher. Phil Kerby and Giff Phillips were Coloradoans. I was from Colorado, and I had known Giff in Denver. We had a mutual friend in Denver, Charles Graham, and I had met him through Charlie Graham even before he came out here, even before he decided to live here. He and some associates were getting out a little magazine in Denver, the Rocky Mountain--something-or-other [Rocky Mountain Life]. When he decided to move out here, they stopped that, and he decided to start Frontier. I did a piece for the Nation about Gifford--about him, his interests, and the fact that he was starting this new magazine. And I had very close relations with Frontier during the time that it existed; it existed for about nineteen years.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

Surprisingly enough. I think if it had been sustained a bit longer, it would have come into this new phase of communications, and it just might have succeeded. But Giff had put a lot of money into Frontier and just felt he couldn't sustain it any longer. He was anxious to work out some arrangement so that some publication would take over the burden of servicing the unexpired subscriptions and also providing a position for the time being for
Phil Kerby. So we named Kerby associate editor, and took over the subscription list, and named Giff as associate publisher. It was just sort of a friendly, cooperative kind of arrangement. When we had finally concluded the details about all this, it was decided we ought to have a function out here to announce it, to make this known. So I got busy and, largely on my own, organized this conference that we had out here in ’67, which was, I think, of major importance.

16. Tape Number: VII, Side One (July 17, 1978)

Gardner

You were about to describe the conference.

McWilliams

It was held out here in ’67. For example, I got speakers. . . . I personally recruited George McGovern, Eugene McCarthy, Mark Hatfield, Ernest Gruening, who of course was an old Nation hand himself. We got Malcolm Browne, who was just back from Vietnam; Seymour Melman, who was a contributor and friend from Columbia; and others. Quite a number of others staged this conference here in Los Angeles, and it was extremely interesting. Oh, yes--Martin Luther King [, Jr.] was one of the speakers at this affair.

Gardner

That's amazing!

McWilliams

The timing was very interesting because we had structured it in terms--I had given it the title of "Reordering National Priorities," but the way it was set up it was definitely in opposition to the war in Vietnam, because how could you do anything with priorities until you did something about the war? And it was apparent almost from the opening gun, so to speak, that the audience here was, if anything, urging these speakers to be even a little more emphatic than they were, although they made excellent speeches about the war--McGovern, McCarthy, Hatfield, and so forth. After he [McCarthy] had spoken, I was sitting up on the platform with McCarthy, and I said to him, "You know, I get a definite feeling here that if someone were to make an issue of this in the `68
primaries, particularly a senator who is not up for reelection"--McGovern was up for reelection in '68--"someone like yourself, not up for reelection . . . the results might be astonishing." And he said, "Well, I'm inclined to agree with you. I'm inclined to agree with you." It was at this meeting also that Martin Luther King, Jr., made his first emphatic statement against the war in I think one of the most eloquent speeches he ever made. You will find that he had, in print, said certain things against the war, but this was the first time [he took] a very emphatic position, clear-cut, square-cut position against the war. And this meeting here was in February. He later spoke at the UN Plaza at the big rally in New York, and that meeting has gotten into the books and the histories as being the first time he came out against the war. But actually it followed our meeting by a full month or six weeks; this meeting was the first one.

Gardner

Is it transcribed anywhere or written down? Did you publish the speeches?

McWilliams

I have a copy of the text. I don't know that we ever published it, because like all great speeches, in a way it didn't read like a Nation piece, you know. But it was very moving and very, very impressive. And of course we had a close relationship with him. We had supported the civil rights movement from the beginning, and I had induced him to give us an annual report on the status of the civil rights movement, which he did up to the time of his death.

Gardner

Starting in '61, I think.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Very early on.

McWilliams

Very early on. So we had a very good relationship with him. Even before this conference, I had come to the conclusion that you could have rallies and demonstrations and marches galore, but until you actually made a political
issue of this, you were never going to get anywhere. They could afford to ignore you, you know. They had the power, and they were proponents of the war, but they could ignore it. But the minute you made a political issue of it, this is something very different. And I don't think there's any doubt but what McCarthy broke the logjam on this issue, because, as you know, Robert Kennedy had made a speech or two about the war, but he had said he would not be a candidate; he was not going to be a candidate. And the the minute the returns came in from New Hampshire, even before they were fully counted, he decided he would jump into the race. Of course, we supported McCarthy. From the very moment he made his announcement that he would be a candidate, we supported him. We welcomed Bobby Kennedy's coming out against the war the way he did, but we didn't think it was a good idea for him to get into the race. It would have been better to have one candidate. For one thing, when Robert Kennedy got into it, then George McGovern didn't feel quite free to support McCarthy. He was more of a Kennedy man, and so forth, and that was a limitation. And I think it's interesting in retrospect to note that it worked out the way it did, because for all of the fact that McCarthy disappointed a lot of people after '68--and I was disappointed in some of the things he said and did--he got something started politically.

Gardner

Right. But, again, as you say, the disappointment with McCarthy, I think, was that once there was an opportunity really for him to pursue the nomination after Robert Kennedy was shot, he seemed to back off.

McWilliams

He seemed to back off. He impressed me at the Chicago convention. He impressed me as being pretty cool about the whole thing, even a little bored with the whole business. One of the most impressive things about that convention from my point of view was the meeting of the California delegation. There, at that meeting, Humphrey said what you'd expect Humphrey to say. McGovern made one of the finest speeches I've ever heard him make; it was excellent. And McCarthy [had] kind of a cool-cat attitude about the whole thing, slightly above the whole battle; [he] had that kind of affectation. It was very disappointing, very disappointing. And then of course what happened, as you know, is that he waited until the zero hour before
endorsing Humphrey, too late so that the McCarthy constituency couldn't be too much annoyed by it, because it came so late, but yet in time so that McCarthy could retain his status as a Democrat. But it wasn't calculated to do Humphrey any good.

Gardner

And it was also too late to carry the election for Humphrey.

McWilliams

And it was too late to carry the election for Humphrey. So I was kind of disappointed in McCarthy's general attitude after the first big victory in the primaries.

Gardner

Right. Well, to return to what started this discussion, you then absorbed Frontier.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Did Frontier add any sizable subscriptions to your list?

McWilliams

Not substantially, because the subscription list of Frontier by that time was way down.

Gardner

What was Gifford Phillips's role as associate publisher? Did he come in and perform an active function?

McWilliams

No, I couldn't say he performed an active function. When he was in New York, he would come in and we would meet with him and go over things relating to the magazine. And we'd consult him by phone from time to time, particularly about California politics, and so forth. But it was not a--actually, it was designed to relieve him of the problem of Frontier.
Gardner

Right. And Phil Kerby contributed to the *Nation* intermittently for a couple of years. I don't think we have to talk about James Storrow's wife becoming associate publisher. I don't know if there's anything out of the ordinary in that. The only other thing on the publishing page has to do with the advertising, and Mary Simon who was advertising manager for years and years.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Any comments about her?

McWilliams

Oh, she had been with *Survey Graphic* before she came with the *Nation*. She was one of the oldest in terms of service of any of the *Nation* employees. She'd been there for a long, long time. And, as I say, these magazines have a limited appeal to advertising. If a magazine has a circulation of less than, let's say, 250,000, it's of very little interest to most national advertisers. You can start special-purpose magazines for surfers or whatnot, and that will be of immense interest to certain kinds of advertising. But a general-purpose magazine with a circulation of less than 250,000 is not going to get much national advertising.

Gardner

Liberals don't necessarily buy tennis shoes.

McWilliams

That's correct; that is correct.

Gardner

Well, now I'll turn to my sheets of topics. I'll mention a topic and talk about it, and we can discuss it. I'd like you, if possible where you can recall, to go into the different articles that you can remember about it, different writers that may have contributed. The first one is the blacklist. My first page is civil liberties and civil rights. You yourself did a lot of work on that.
McWilliams

Yes, we did a special issue called "How Free is Free?"--a book-length issue, came out right in the depth of McCarthyism, so to speak. It was a pretty good issue when you read it in retrospect, and it has some distinguished contributors: Ben Shahn gave us a handsome cover design for the magazine. And it was very good. Then we did a follow-up civil-liberties issue a year or so later. And we did this issue on the informers, and we covered almost every aspect of McCarthyism one way or another because it was a major preoccupation.

Gardner

You did a number of pieces yourself.

McWilliams

Yes. I did a number of pieces and wrote an endless number of editorials, and so forth. I did a great portion of the editorials. Up to the time when Freda was still there, she did many of the foreign-policy editorials--not all of them but many of them. I did a great many of the domestic ones.

Gardner

Who were some of the other contributors on blacklist? I know Elizabeth Poe did one piece.

McWilliams

Yes. Dalton Trumbo did a piece about the blacklist and, oh, Matthew Josephson did one about the problem of the blacklisting of artists, and we did a number about problems that were arising in connection with publishing. There was a lot of behind-the-scenes activity going on at that time where books were not being published, largely for this reason. And attempts were being made to suppress the books that had been published. Max Lowenthal, who I knew very well, did a book on the FBI that was published in 1950. It was the first good book about the FBI, and that book was suppressed on publication. I mean, the publisher honored the obligation to bring it out in book form, but the bureau had brought such pressure to bear that there weren't any copies. It was just suppressed on publication. There were incidents of this kind going on, and we coped with this in various ways.
there was a group in New York called "The Observers." It was just an informal group; it had been meeting for some time, a few weeks or so before I got back there. I became the liaison between that group and the Nation because I knew many of the people who were in The Observer group--Arthur Miller, Matthew Josephson, Gerard Piel of Scientific American, Millard Lampell, Edgar Snow--maybe two dozen in all, and they would meet from time to time. They all had stories about what was going on in the media world: about this radio program or this television program that had been forced off the air, things of this kind that had been happening. We fed a lot of this back into the magazine because some of these people had very good sources. So we were able to get a lot of first-rate information about what was really going on behind the scenes. It was very distressing, of course. I mean, it was very bad. It's hard to believe in retrospect what was going on, what actually happened.

Gardner

This sort of follows into it: a case that you started working on early that the Nation has continued to follow through the years is the [Alger] Hiss case.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

You were talking the other day about the reaction to the latest work. But in 1957 Fred Cook did a special issue--a special study--on the Hiss case.

McWilliams

Yes. Well, I had always thought that Hiss should not have been convicted. But I didn't meet him until he was released from prison, which was in 1955, and I met him for the first time. Then over a period of time we got to be good friends; I saw quite a bit of him. And I became more convinced than ever that this case was a bad case. So I called Fred Cook in, and I said, "Here's all this material that I have collected on the Hiss case. The Hiss defense people would be delighted to cooperate with you. Why don't you do this? Do a reexamination of the case against Alger Hiss." And he said he didn't want to do it because he really thought Hiss was guilty. I said, "Well, take a look at this. Take a look at this material." And so he did. He studied it for a couple of
weeks, and then he phoned me up, and he said, "I think you have a point. I'm beginning to have some very grave doubts about his guilt." And he said, "I'll do it." He agreed to do it. I think that Fred's book was one of the books that really started the whole reexamination of the Hiss case. Earl Jowitt's book, the distinguished British jurist's book, was very good, but it was strictly from a legal angle and confined to just certain issues. Fred's was a different kind of book, and the issue he did for us sold remarkably well, had a very fine sale. He promptly got a contract to do this book, and it was done as a book, and the book had a very good sale. And then down the years we kept a spotlight on the Hiss case. Anytime there was any new development, we called attention to the fact. We were the first publication to call attention to the fact that Nixon in his Six Crises had sort of let the cat out of the bag. Amazing that he would be so careless and let... Or, if he was careless, he may just simply have been telling the truth. You really don't know. But what he had to say about the typewriter in that book was quite contrary to what many people had thought. So we called attention to this, and we called attention to other new evidence as it came along. Victor Navasky has focused the spotlight on this Allen Weinstein book [Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case]. This is interesting because Weinstein had come to the office when I was still editor. He said he was thinking of doing a book about Hiss, and we all had the impression that he was pretty much of the opinion that Hiss was innocent. I introduced him to some people who could help him in connection with his research, and he did a book review or two for us and other things. Then he phoned me—I've forgotten the date, whether it was a meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington—and he asked if I would take part in a discussion of the Hiss case and the witch-hunt with him. We would be on one side of the discussion, and Richard Rovere and Joseph Starobin would be on the other side. I said that I would agree to do this. This meeting was held, and I spoke, and Weinstein spoke. He was at that time—at the time of the meeting—still of the opinion that Hiss was innocent. This was his pitch. Rovere did not show up at the meeting, which was a great disappointment to me because I have been waiting for a long time to get a chance to ask him some questions in public about the role he had played in connection with the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, and so forth. But he didn't show up. But anyway, even as late as that meeting, Allen was still pro-Hiss. I don't quite understand this
whole situation about what prompted the change in his attitude and his position.

Gardner

It would be interesting for you to talk to him and find out.

McWilliams

Yes. To show you how these things operate: he was asked to do a review for the *New York Review* of John Smith's book about the Hiss case. It was a long, long piece and really a kind of hatchet job on Smith's book. I thought, from the point of view of a scholar, it was most unfortunate.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And the *New York Review [of Books]* sent advance galleys of the piece to the *New York Times*, and for reasons that baffled me, the *Times* put it on the front page: Scholar Says So-so-and-so about the Hiss case. And there wasn't anything that new or anything that might have been said in the review; he just disagreed with Smith. Now, Smith had been with the *Herald-Tribune*; he had covered the two trials for the *New York Herald-Tribune*. He had the advantage of having sat through both of those trials. His book is not the last word on the Hiss case, but it's a good book, particularly on those so-called documents. It's very good about the so-called documents, which you might best describe as State Department junk mail. [laughter] That's about how important those documents were, you know. And he had some rather good merits. I've always had my mind set on the case. I've never, never felt that Hiss was guilty, for several major reasons, one being that I just couldn't believe Chambers about anything. Not only did he perjure himself, but he perjured himself repeatedly and admitted it. But if you read *Witness* carefully and you read certain sections of it aloud, I don't see how you can fail to be impressed with the phoniness of it. It just rings false. And that's one reason. Another reason is that I think most of the people who have written about the case have not seen the importance of the November 1948 election—which was a great upset to everybody, but particularly to Whittaker Chambers and Richard Nixon. Chambers tells in his
book that he realized instantly that he was a target for perjury indictment. He had embarrassed the Democrats during the administration. Now they were back in power. It was only after the November 1948 election that he changed his story. Before, up to November 1948, this vile word espionage had never been uttered by Mr. Chambers. He had never said anything about it. As a matter of fact, he had denied any aspect of espionage. After the November election, he suddenly changes his story. He suddenly begins to remember things that he had not testified to under repeated examinations before November 1948. He began to find documents after November 1948, and so forth. And the same with Nixon, who saw that his whole career was in jeopardy; if they indicted Chambers, he was through. So he had an enormous stake in inducing that grand jury to indict Hiss. They were reluctant to indict Hiss. If Nixon's grand jury testimony is ever released and you can hear what he said to that grand jury, you'd probably understand better why Hiss was indicted, because obviously Nixon pulled all the stops in that testimony. The third reason why I never had any doubts about the case is that I have gotten to know Hiss. And Hiss was never a member of the Communist party. As a matter of fact, he's kind of aristocratic and kind of conservative by taste and temperament. He is, in addition to this, a square. He's a real square. The thought that a person of Hiss's character and temperament, who had risen rather rapidly in government and was in the position of some considerable importance in the State Department, would be caught up in any kind of negotiations with riffraff like Chambers, is just completely out of keeping with the man's character. So I just never could take the case seriously.

Gardner

Unfortunately, many other people did.

McWilliams

Many people did. I guess many people still do, because the case goes on. The reason it goes on is because there's a clique of New York intellectuals (literary figures and so forth) that have a big vested interest in Hiss's conviction, in the sense that they came out against Hiss. They unquestionably feel that if it were ever demonstrated that he was in fact innocent, then they are put in a very undesirable role. The role that they played certainly would reflect on them. So they always band together, and they always rally round anytime there's any
question raised about Hiss's guilt. [Richard] Rovere is a classic example. Rovere had a left-wing background, and then he switched completely over. He became a strenuous anticommunist. He was on the executive board of the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, which was CIA financed, as you know, in part. And just in reviewing Weinstein's book Rovere says, "Well, you know, if Hiss had only done what other communists did, and said that this was a youthful indiscretion, and so forth, and so forth, there wouldn't have been any trouble." Well, the only thing wrong with that is that Hiss was never a communist! What does he want the man to do? Does he want him to commit perjury? Hiss was never a communist. The best evidence of this is that one of the committees subpoenaed Pressman--Lee Pressman--after Pressman had sort of lost some of his prestige, and so forth, but then he was in some troubles. They subpoenaed Pressman. Now, Lee Pressman was as canny and shrewd a lawyer as you would ever want to meet. You did not have to warn Pressman about the dangers of any possible perjury prosecutions, particularly at a time when he--Pressman--was in some difficulty anyway. Yet nevertheless, when he was called before the committee, he denied under oath that Alger Hiss had ever been a member of this group that they were always talking about. He would never have done this. He would never have taken this risk if it had not been indeed the fact.

Gardner

Fascinating case.

McWilliams

Yes, it is.

Gardner

In looking over the Nation, I felt that Fred Cook was probably the most important investigative reporter that the Nation had, especially in the period in your first ten years there.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner
Can you talk about how he came to the *Nation* and how he came to write for you?

McWilliams

Yes. He had been on the staff of the *World-Telegram* as a rewrite man--and a very adroit, very skillful rewrite man. Bernard Nossiter, who was an old friend of mine, was on the *World-Telegram* and had come to admire Fred very much. He told me; he said, "This man is a genius when it comes to organizing materials and doing a rewrite job." For example, he had been working on a case as a rewrite man involving a murder in Brooklyn. Just in going over the copy and looking at it and from studying the reports, he had come across a fatal discrepancy in the case that had been presented. The *World-Telegram* called it to the attention of the authorities, they reinvestigated, and they saved this man from the gallows! And it was just on the basis of Fred's very careful reading of what had actually happened. You can imagine it had to be a pretty conclusive kind of situation for the police themselves to reverse themselves. Anyway, I got in touch with Fred and got him to do some pieces for us. And in connection with the big issues that he did for us--the Hiss case, the FBI, the CIA, the military industrial complex, the New York City scandals, all of those cases--I would simply bundle up the trunkload of materials accumulated about the FBI and turn them over to Fred. Fred could really sort them out, rearrange them, organize it, make sense of them, and present them in a way that made sense to the reader. He was very skillful at this--very, very good and probably the best in the business. And they were enormously influential special issues and they sold very, very well. I think virtually all of them resulted in books, so that he was eventually able to leave the *World-Telegram* and do what he's doing now: pursuing a career as an independent writer.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

Yes, very talented man.

Gardner
Nicholas Von Hoffman did a piece on you and the *Nation* back in `72, and he mentioned two of the Cook pieces, especially [the one] Cook did on the CIA in 1961 which was remarkably early for that. And went on to "Juggernaut: The Military-Industrial Complex," which, I think, was the following year.

McWilliams

That's right. If you look at the one he did on the special issue on the FBI and the one he did on the CIA, up to that time the only critical thing that had been really written of any consequence about the FBI was Max Lowenthal's book, which had been suppressed on publication. And then if you come forward from the date of the Cook issue on the FBI and the CIA and then as you get further down the road and you come to the death of [J. Edgar] Hoover, Watergate, and Vietnam, then the stuff just proliferates--endless number of books about the CIA and the FBI, but not before Cook! These were the first pieces of the kind that really broke the ice. I know that when we did the one on the FBI, I had been warned that we would be in for some serious trouble. And I was sort of prepared for it. When the issue came out you could almost feel the silence for a bit. Then there were a couple of pretty vicious attacks: one by [James] Cardinal Cushing--I think then an archbishop--and a couple of other spokesmen for Hoover; and then oddly enough there was some response. I mean, some of the papers began to sort of say, "Well, the piece has its merits, you know. It's not wholly critical of the FBI. It says the FBI has done a good job in certain fields but that its reputation has been vastly overestimated and overpraised, and also it's done some things to its great discredit." So gradually, it began to quiet down. We were prepared to be roused around and subpoenaed, and all that sort of thing, but this never happened. And I think those issues were very influential. I think they were very influential. And then as a result of it we had some very interesting experiences because some of these FBI agents began to come to us. One young chap by the name of Jack Levine (who now practices law in Phoenix) with a delightful sense of humor--he came to me. He had been a special agent and had been assigned to subversive activities. He told me in a conversation that he would estimate that about a fourth of the members of the various city central committees, or state central committees, of the Communist party were informers. He said that they would put down their dues as part of their expense account; [laughter] here was the FBI subsidizing the Communist party
of the United States. He had put up with as much of it as he could, and he finally resigned in disgust. He was through with it. So I pleaded with him to do the story of his experience. He didn't want to do it under his own name because he was going to open a law practice in Phoenix, and he didn't think this would be very helpful, you know. But he finally consented to do it. He did the piece for us, and it was a huge success, of course. It was picked up by Art Buchwald, who thought it was very funny, and Jack Paar devoted a bit to it, and it really got around. It really got around. Then Arthur Murtagh, a former FBI agent, and William J. Turner, a former FBI agent—they all came to initially because we had done the FBI exposé. This was true also in connection with the CIA because we ran the first piece by Victor Marchetti ["CIA: The President's Loyal Tool"] about his experience with the CIA, and this was before his book had come out, and so forth. So I think they were quite influential.

Gardner

Very definitely. The other that I have down under civil liberties and civil rights is the obvious one: the black revolution.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

You picked up on Montgomery very early, and as you mentioned before, you had Martin Luther King writing annual summaries as early as 1961. How did that come about? Did you contact him?

McWilliams

Well, when I went east, I was convinced that I had followed this situation very closely, because in my judgment and experience, the civil rights movement really started during World War II. That's when it began. It then lapsed because of the inception of the Cold War. So from 1945 to 1955 it's kind of a hiatus. It didn't entirely cease, but it was not active. And with the Montgomery bus boycott it suddenly comes back. But when I went east in '51, I was convinced that the whole movement had come to a turn in the road, that the key problem was the South, that until something began to happen in the South this would not be a national movement and you couldn't get the kind of
legislation that you needed. So one of the things that I did was to project an issue called "The Southern Negro." It came out, I think, in September 1952, and it raised the whole business about the South and said that this is where the issue is. The trouble with that issue--it was about two years too soon; it anticipated too much. Then when the Montgomery bus boycott developed, we immediately moved in behind it as fast as we could. That was very fast, because we were one of the first to really pick it up, and we kept the spotlight on it all the way through.

Gardner

Right. But did you contact King, then, in the sixties, or did he contact you?

McWilliams

I got in touch with him. First of all, a young man came to see me one day. He had just graduated from Columbia, and he had been a student of C. Wright Mills, who was one of our contributors and friends, and he wanted to go south to cover the Emmett Till case. He said he would go down there and cover that trial for us if I would give him round-trip bus fare. [laughter] So I didn't see how we could lose on that kind of proposition, and I gave him the round-trip bus fare. We did better than that by. . . . This was Dan Wakefield.

Gardner

Oh, right.

McWilliams

This is how we first got in touch with Dan, or he got in touch with us. So Dan got intimately involved in the whole thing, you see. And through Dan and through the contacts that he had and others--a whole list of people that wrote for us about aspects of what was going on in the South--we had sort of an inside track to the thing. And through this I got in touch with King and suggested that we would like to have these annual reports. He was very glad to do them, and we let him reprint them. They used them on money-raising campaigns; they were very useful in that regard. And we had a very good relationship with him. That's why we were able to get him to come to Los Angeles for this meeting here--excellent relationships with him during his entire lifetime.
Gardner

What about some of the other black leaders? Who were you close to? Who were you not close to?

McWilliams

We had excellent relations because, of course, the *Nation* had been founded really to cope with the problem of blacks in the South after the Civil War. That was really what it was all about, so we've had this historic relation. Villard was one of the founders of the NAACP, and so we had these excellent relationships. Henry Lee Moon of the NAACP and Rayford Logan and J. Saunders Redding, and all of the people of this kind, we had excellent relationships with. They wrote for the *Nation*, reviewed books for the *Nation*. We ran the first published piece by James Baldwin and Julian Mayfield. Then these young political leaders, like Andrew Young and Julian Bond--they also wrote for us at different times. And we had excellent white contacts in the South that were sympathetic to this position: Aubrey Williams, [who] was a dear friend of mine; and Clifford Durr, who played such a key role in connection with the bus boycott as a lawyer. All these people were very close to us. So this was an area we could cover very easily. We had all of the contacts.

Gardner

What about later on, when the going got rough with the black community, when black power began?

McWilliams

Well, we had difficulty then because you couldn't in all conscience really--at least we didn't think that we could--support some of the things, the tactics, that they were pursuing, and so forth. But we tried; we kept the spotlight focused on what was going on and tried to be as understanding and sympathetic to the situation as we could but at the same time maintaining a certain kind of critical distance. Same thing happened with the protests against the war in Vietnam. We were into this early, but then there came a time when we began to think that a lot of the things they were doing were counterproductive. But we still reported all the major incidences--the marches, the political trials, all the rest of it. But we did it in a way that
sometimes annoyed some of the protagonists who didn't think we were being out there in front as they thought we should have been. We had been there too early, too soon almost, and we knew what was going on. And there were certain things going on that we couldn't approve of. This happened in so many cases. For example, Vietnam: we ran marvelous pieces about Vietnam very early, very early in the game. Before the French had left, we ran pieces by Alexander Werth and . . .

Gardner

. . . Bernard Fall.

McWilliams

Yes, and others that said it all, as a matter of fact. And we continued this right down through the years. So that by the time the war began to be escalated in '65, it was an old, old story so far as the Nation was concerned--many-times-told story. In the late fifties we discovered some marvelous talent with respect to the Vietnam war. I can't think of this guy's name that wrote--young scholar who was killed in the war stepping on a land mine. He did a couple of excellent books about Vietnam. I'll think of his name in a moment. We published his first writings, and he became sort of a major resource for the American press about Vietnam because this was at a time when the general press was not paying too much attention to it and didn't know much about it, as a matter of fact. And he was superb.

Gardner

That was Bernard Fall, wasn't it?

McWilliams

Yes, Bernard Fall--I just couldn't think of his name. We discovered him. I was tipped off that this young scholar had just gotten back from a recent trip there and might have something interesting to say. I got in touch with him, and sure enough he did. But that was a problem. We had exactly the same problem with China. We were so involved in the folly of American policy toward China that we ran so many editorials, so many articles. And there's a limit. You bore your readers after a while if you just harp constantly. We had really no alternative but to continue harping. We ran superb pieces on China by Edgar
Snow, and O.E. Clubb, and [W.] Macmahon Ball, and many others. We just kept hammering away at the thing.

Gardner

Since we've gotten onto foreign affairs, I guess I'll turn to my foreign affairs page. Another area in which you covered lots of ground and were committed all along was the Middle East.

McWilliams

Yes. The Nation had this historic relationship with the old Palestine issue with the leaders of the American Jewish community and was very much pro-partition and pro-Israel down to fairly recent times. Then the magazine began to take a somewhat different stance, which we felt we had to—not so much critical but pointing out certain considerations and certain issues where we thought a mistake was being made.

Gardner

For example?

McWilliams

Well, in not really seeing that sooner or later some understanding would have to be reached, that the Palestinians had a point, and you really were going to have to do something about this. The longer you put it off and postponed it, the more aggravated it became. The loyalty of the Jewish readership and the Jewish community to the Nation and of the Nation to them was so well established I don't think they ever really took a grave offense at anything we said, but we lost some of our enthusiastic support--some, some. But that was an issue that we had a long-standing--we usually had a correspondent in Israel that we managed to find one way or another and to keep there by one means or another. We devoted a lot of attention to the Middle East--a lot.

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Gardner
Well, the Middle East. There were correspondents there--I remember noticing that. The UN, of course, is another. You mentioned the long commitment of Freda Kirchwey, for example.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

And of the *Nation* with the UN. You had a UN correspondent for a long time.

McWilliams

That is correct. I recruited Anne Tuckerman, who represented us there. We had others, too, at different times. We tried to focus as much attention on the UN as we could. I think it's one of the tragedies of the situation that the UN has never *really* captured the attention of the American press to the extent that it should, you know; you'd think that it would. But something about it--the scope, the size, and the way in which issues tend to be protracted--it's hard to cover in one sense, and so forth. It never really has gotten the press that it should have.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

It never has--very unfortunate.

Gardner

Who was Anne Tuckerman?

McWilliams

Well, Anne Tuckerman represented the French press. She still does. She's been at the UN since it was founded, and I think knows as much about the inner workings as anyone. She was a very effective correspondent. We got some very good foreign correspondents, some of whom I recruited: Raymond Williams in England--excellent, really excellent--and Claude Bourdet in France, after the death of Alexander Werth, who represented us for many years. We had, oh, excellent correspondents in Eastern Europe and Germany.
As long as you brought them up, you might as well go through them, starting with Alexander Werth. I have down that he was first on the masthead in ’59. What was his background?

He had a very interesting background. As a matter of fact, he started writing for the Nation much earlier than that--from the early thirties on. He was born in the Soviet Union--a Scotch father and a Russian mother. The mother died, I think, when he was quite young. He was raised by his father and went to school in Russia. He became very fluent in four or five languages and was there at the time of the revolution. As he wrote in a letter to a friend of his, he said at the time it was all very exciting. [laughter] His father was quite a well-to-do businessman. He was ruined, of course; his business was ruined. He went back to Scotland, and Alex was educated in the University of Glasgow and worked on the Glasgow papers and then the Manchester Guardian and then began writing for us. He wrote for the Nation all during the thirties. He was probably, of this whole period of the Cold War, the most experienced journalist that we had any contact with. For example, he had covered the Reichstag trials. He had been in Spain. Well, he was in France at the time of the fall of France; he did a very good book about this. France, incidentally, was his real specialization as a reporter; he knew French politics inside and out. Then he had fled to England and had done very fine reports for the BBC and a book about the fall of France, and then had gone to Russia after the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union. I think his finest book is Russia at War. He and Henry Shapiro were the two reporters--I think they were--[whom] the Russians let into Leningrad at the time of the seige of Leningrad. And he knew Russia; he was excellent because he knew the language. And he had other insights into it. He was a very good musicologist. He knew [Sergei] Prokofiev very well. When some of the heresy trials began, he became very disturbed and uneasy about this. The purges started and all the rest of it, and they didn't like what he was writing, of course. Eventually, he decided that he couldn't take it anymore. So he left the Soviet Union, and then he wrote from Eastern Europe for us--mostly the East European countries as he traveled around: he did Yugoslavia, and East Germany, Hungary, and so forth. He got into a situation where his normal sources, aside from the Nation, began to
evaporate because he wasn't sufficiently anti-Soviet to please them. On the other hand, he was sufficiently critical of the Soviet Union, but some publications didn't want what he had to say. So there was a period there when we were one of the few outlets that he had. And it's too bad because he was truly one of the very great journalists of the period—and marvelous insights. He'd been there. He knew De Gaulle. He had associated with all these people he met in France, and the rest of them—and very great journalist. It's interesting that we got him an invitation from of all places, of all universities, Ohio State through Harvey Goldberg, who was one of our contributors. Harvey was on the faculty there, and we said, "Why don't you invite Alex to spend a year at Ohio State?" So Harvey arranged it, and Werth spent a year there and wrote a book. It was published in Britain. It never was published here, but it should have been. It's called America in Doubt, and it's a marvelous example of how a more or less complete outsider with a certain kind of sensitivity could capture the mood of another country at a certain time. It's a very interesting book. So he was a great asset to us—and a great friend. I knew him very well indeed, and we were very intimate friends.

Gardner

The first person you had reporting from the United Nations was Jane Stolle.

McWilliams

Yes, Jane Stolle. She had been married at one time to Edward Morgan. Then she and Morgan were divorced, and she married Kirstein. But through the Morgan connection, she had been at the UN a great deal and covered it. So for a few years we used her as our correspondent to the UN.

Gardner

You mentioned Raymond Williams from London. You said you recruited him.

McWilliams

Yes. I've admired his work for years and had admired his work for a long time. I got in touch with him and asked him if we could put his name on the masthead, if he wouldn't do pieces for us whenever he felt like it more or less, and he agreed. He did quite a lot of work for us--very good, too. It was excellent. I recruited Geoffrey Barraclough when he was still at Chatham House.
in London and before he had developed a big American reputation. We were the first American publication to publish him. Then he, of course, has developed quite a big following as a journalist here—excellent, very good on the Middle East, for example, and on the Third World, which was just then beginning to attract attention.

Gardner

Did you have lots of personal contact with these people, or was it mostly by letter?

McWilliams

Both, by letter and in person. For example, Jay [Jacob] Bronowski I got to know very well. This was one of our real services as a publication. I had admired his work for a long time and had gotten him to do a couple of pieces for us. Some years before, I read in *Universities Quarterly*, I think it is—there I came across "Science and Human Values." I was enchanted with it. I thought it was an absolutely brilliant and wonderful piece. I couldn't believe it had never been published here; they were lectures that he had given at MIT. So I got in touch with him immediately and said, "Can we have the rights to the American publication?" He said sure. So we published it as a special issue at the end of the year. We had to devote an entire issue; the manuscript is quite long. It was a great success, caught on immediately, and we sold thousands of copies. And then it was published here in a hardback edition, published in Harper's Torch Book series and was a great success. Finally, it was reprinted as a book in Britain—years after the lectures were first delivered at MIT and quite some years after we had first published it. And of course the publication of "Science and Human Values" made his American reputation.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

From then on we did other things—special things—and he was always very, very grateful to the magazine and to me. He did all kinds of things for us, and we had a very fine relationship with him. We were responsible, really, for his coming to this country, because when one of the men [Leo Szilard] who was
active in the [Salk Institute for Biological Studies] at La Jolla read "Science and Human Values," he said, "That's the man we need to direct our scientific research at La Jolla. He's got a sense of the sciences' responsibilities," and so forth. So it was on the basis of that that they extended this invitation to Bronowski to come to this country. He was interviewed, and they liked him, and he was taken on there and remained there until his death. So we had an excellent relationship with him. We had very good relations with C.P. Snow, who would come to see us at the office when he was in New York. And Bronowski always did. Any number of writers of that caliber, we had very cordial relations with. Bronowski was a special case because we had a lot to do with his American reputation.

Gardner

You mentioned Claude Bourdet in Paris.

McWilliams

Yes. Claude was a brilliant journalist. He was the editor of the Observateur for years and was very active in the European peace movement--city councilman in Paris, very active in French politics, had sort of a left-socialist position, and a charming man. As a matter of fact, I think he had gone to Oxford as a young man. When Werth died I asked him to take over Werth's responsibilities, and he did. I don't think he's written for us lately because he's quite old--an excellent person.

Gardner

Who was C. Amery?

McWilliams

C. Amery was--it was interesting. It was a conference of West German scholars, and I think there may have been some East Germans. It was held at Princeton, and the discussions seemed to be very pertinent and lively and relevant. I got in touch with the people at Princeton, and they said Amery was the man that was primarily responsible for it. So I got in touch with him and invited him to New York and got him to do a piece for us about the conference and that established the relationship.

Gardner
What was his first name?

McWilliams

Damned if I know. [laughter] But he did quite a few things for us over a period of time--was excellent and a very good source of information, and so forth. Then he became the librarian at Munich, and his professional duties were such that he just couldn't seem to find the time to do much writing for us. We had good people in the Far East. C.P. Fitzgerald.

Gardner

Of Canberra, of all places.

McWilliams

Yes, of Canberra, and W. MacMahon Ball, who had been the Australian ambassador in Tokyo during the war--a very shrewd man who did any number of fine pieces for us and did a book about nationalism and communism in Asia. And if anybody had read it--strictly, any State Department higher-ups had read it--and had pondered it, it would have saved us a lot of trouble in Asia.

Gardner

Well, those State Department members that did probably got fired from the State Department anyway.

McWilliams

Probably got fired anyway. But it was a very perceptive book.

Gardner

An area that was covered quite a bit during the years that I read through was Latin America, and particularly, of course, Cuba, because the whole revolution succeeded during the early years, and then different crises under Kennedy. Do you recall much of the Nation writing on that?

McWilliams

Yes. Here again we had a great advantage because our old contact, Carleton Beals. . . . For example, Villard had at one time given Carleton $100 to go into Nicaragua by burro at the time of the Sandino revolt. Carl went through the back door, so to speak, and found Sandino and got an international scoop! It
was a big sensation at the time. From then on Carleton was very closely identified with us. He did a lot of reporting for us. Carleton Beals was one person, and Waldo Frank was another. Carleton wanted to go to Cuba. This was just about at the time of the transition and also after the transition. So I raised it; I did scare up enough money so that we could pay his expenses to go there. And he did some very perceptive pieces about it in terms of what was likely to happen and why, and so forth. Then Paul Baran, the economist at Stanford who was an intimate personal friend of mine, phoned me one day and said, "You should get in touch with Ronald Hilton here at Stanford, who's just gotten back from Guatemala and who says that there's a secret base--so-called secret base--down there where the CIA is training men for an invasion of Cuba. So of course I phoned Hilton immediately, and he told me what he had observed, what he had seen in the papers, what he had heard, actually been reported in the papers in Guatemala. I said, "Can I quote you as saying all this?" He said, "Absolutely. Go right ahead." So I did a piece--a long sort of unsigned editorial--about this and said that if this is true, and it does seem to be true, it ought to be investigated immediately because this is a piece of prime folly, you know. This was published in the fall [November 19, 1960] preceding the Bay of Pigs invasion. And it's been reported in many of the journalism reviews as the first report in the American press of what was happening in connection with the Bay of Pigs; it foreshadowed the Bay of Pigs invasion. Of course we didn't publish anything there that Castro didn't know, because there had been the Guatemalan press, so he unquestionably knew what the situation was. Later President Kennedy told the editor of the *New York Times*, Turner Catledge, "It would have been much better if you guys had published the whole story." And Catledge said, "Well, it was published. It was published in the *Nation.*" [laughter] Kennedy said, "Well, but you know, Turner, it's not news until it's published in the *New York Times.*" But he, I think, really felt that it would have been much better if he had been warned off this thing.

Gardner

And the pressure would have been taken off him, too, because if it had been published widely, then he could have heeded the reaction instead of having to deal with the military invasion.

McWilliams
I let Hilton have the last word, so to speak, by doing a piece called "The Cuban Trap" in which he said that the trouble was that the press had not discharged its adversary role with the exception of the Nation--not discharged its adversary role. It would have been much better if it had. "As a result of this situation," he said, "this will set back Cuban-American relations by two decades," which was a pretty good estimate.

Gardner

Right. [laughter] That was exactly right.

McWilliams

Almost exactly right.

Gardner

Any particular correspondents in foreign policy other than that that you have in mind, or writers?

McWilliams

There were so many things that happened that were interesting.

Gardner

I know. That's why I didn't bother to write down everyone who did it: there were just so many important figures.

McWilliams

For example, Del Vayo once told me that I should get in touch with a Portuguese refugee by the name of Henrique Galvao. So I did, and he did a piece for us about Portugal and the situation in Portugal. And then a year or so later, I was astounded to see this story in the papers where he and his comrades had seized the Santa Maria.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

It was cruising around out on the South Atlantic with British and American warships all hovering around, and so forth. So I sent him a message by way of
the radio transmission asking him to do a piece for us. I thought, well, this is just a one-in-100 chance that, first, he would ever get the message and, second, he'd be able to do anything about it. But when they finally conducted this very strategic retreat and marched off with great aplomb—after having held this ship for a week and captured the headlines of the press of the world, focused them on the situation in Portugal—went marching ashor, I got a letter from him saying, "Here's the piece that you asked me to do." I was astounded! So we ran it immediately, and it was, oh, reprinted all over the world. And we got the Sunday Times-- oh, I don't know how many papers reprinted it. It's very interesting because when he was still cruising around on this boat, the insurrectionary group in Angola thought that he was probably going to bring the boat to Angola. They staged an uprising. This was their first uprising of the MPLA [People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola], I think it's called, in Angola. (Also the gentleman who is the present head of the Angolan regime [Cuino Agostinho Neto], you know, is an intellectual and a poet. We did a couple of pages of his poetry once upon a time. He's now the head of the regime.) So there was just an endless series of adventures about articles and things of this sort that had happened.

Gardner

Anything else on Africa like that?

McWilliams

Well, we had a lot of stuff about it. We had very good ties and contacts in the Union of South Africa, and people that knew a great deal about the situation in the Union of South Africa: British journalists and others--Anthony Sampson. People of this kind did very good pieces for us. We did, I think, a very good job on-- and then we had just good luck about a lot of crazy situations. At the time of the Suez bit, there was all this talk about the Egyptians not having the know-how to take ships through the canal—it's very treacherous and difficult, and it required a great sophistication, and so forth. We got a manuscript from a captain—a sea captain—who had worked out of the Port of San Francisco for years, and he’d also had experience in the canal. He sent us this piece, and he said, "This is a lot of rubbish. Don't believe a word of this. It's not all that difficult at all. They won't have any major difficulties." And he was so convincing—so totally convincing—in what he said that we decided to run the
piece. It was really a ground-breaking kind of piece, because he was right. He knew what he was talking about. We ran all kinds of pieces that have stories backing them, including pieces by prisoners and convicts who later became pretty well known, like Eddie Bunker, for example. We sort of gave him a boost on his way to fame and fortune, and any number of others. And a lot of good reporting, as I said, from Vietnam--a lot of good reporting. I discovered that you can finesse a lot in situations of this kind. For example, the networks would send people there who would form their own opinions about what was going on but couldn't really get it across in the networks. They were actually grateful for a chance to do pieces. So we ran pieces by Mike Wallace and Desmond Smith, who was with CBS, and a chap [who] was with ABC--I can't think of his name offhand [Ted Koppel]. We would get pieces from people like this, and then we got foundation grants for people who wanted to go--like William Eastlake, the novelist, who I happen to know. He wanted to go, so we arranged this for him through a foundation. We couldn't have sent him there; we didn't have the money. We got a foundation grant, and he went there. He did some brilliant pieces for us out there, collected in a book called *The Bamboo Bed*--I think probably the most savage satirical writing about the war in Vietnam--really, really sharp and savage. I found that if you manipulated these sort of things--foundation grants, parlaying what they did for you and selling it to somebody else, using network personnel--you could do a very good job of covering a situation like the war in Vietnam without having a regular correspondent there.

Gardner

And having everybody's correspondents covering.

McWilliams

Your having everybody's correspondents: that was the trick.

Gardner

You mentioned Edgar Snow in China.

McWilliams

Yes.
Now, of course, he's probably the most important writer on China there was. Did you know him well?

McWilliams

Very well, very well. I knew him in California before I went to New York, and we were great friends from then on. As a matter of fact, I think it's one of the great tragedies of American diplomacy and of American journalism that a man with Ed Snow's background and experience should have been kept in a kind of unofficial blacklist category. The reason that I think this is Ed was not an ideologue. He was just a good reporter! He had been an associate editor of the Saturday Evening Post. He knew Roosevelt fairly well, and he had excellent contacts in Washington. He was listened to by a very wide audience that had come to respect him as a journalist, and so forth. Then suddenly [he was] put in the doghouse, so he couldn't get anything published. It was outrageous. Here was probably the finest single journalistic resource on China in the country. He knew the leaders of the Chinese revolution personally; he had this personal relationship with them. And not to use this kind of talent, or make his insights available, was outrageous. So we did everything we could to break this situation. We wanted very much to send him to China; we didn't have the resources to send him to China. But he did lots of pieces for us. And, as you know, he was probably responsible--responsible as any single person--for Nixon's visit to China. It was a piece that he did where he suggested that Mao and Chou En-lai had said that Nixon would be welcomed that was picked up by Kissinger and used as the basis of this. He was scheduled to go with the Nixon party on the visit, and of course he died just then. Of course he would die just then--great tragedy. But a marvelous person, marvelous person. He'd been clipped in this way with never anything explicitly said to him, but all the publications he had written for just cut him off like that. And his wife Lois, who had been quite a successful television and stage actress, was clipped in the same way because one of these blacklisting agencies had confused her with somebody else. They got the names mixed up. And she didn't discover this until years later--just cut her career in half. She wasn't the person that was supposed to be referred to at all. So there were many tragedies of this kind in that period, and his was one of the very dramatic ones. Well, so many cases: Louis Adamic and F.O. Matthiessen and other friends who were caught in exactly this kind of situation. So I never could forget and never could
really forgive these Red-baiters for doing what they did. They ruined so many fine careers and were responsible for so many tragedies we will never be able to count them.

Gardner

Right. To finish up foreign affairs: the foreign editor when you got there and for some time afterwards was, as you mentioned, the person you sublet the house from, J. Alvarez Del Vayo.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Who was he?

McWilliams

Well, Del Vayo was a Spanish socialist who had been a newspaper correspondent for many years. Then he became the representative of the Spanish government at the League of Nations, where he played a brilliant role in connection with the whole fight about Spain, and whatnot. Then he became the foreign minister of the Loyalist government. When the Loyalists were finally defeated, he came to this country. Freda met him, and became very attached to him, and liked him very much indeed, and had him as a kind of foreign editor. He was very helpful to the Nation when they were putting up this fight to keep Franco out of the UN, of course; he was enormously helpful about this. And he had served as a representative in Mexico, and he had had journalistic experience in many South American countries. He knew South America very well, and [he was a] great man of international reputation as a journalist and as a diplomat, and so forth. When Kirstein and I took over the paper, I told Freda that one of the things I would want to do would be to make some kind of new arrangement with Del Vayo because he was not really the person who should have been foreign editor of the Nation--for very practical reasons. He didn't know anything, really, about Washington politics or American politics, and the whole focus of foreign policy was what was happening in this country, how it affected foreign policy. That was one tremendous limitation. The other was he did speak English, but you had one
helluva time trying to understand him. And he wrote in Spanish and it had to be translated; the copy had to be translated from Spanish into English, and it was just incredibly, awfully difficult in a weekly where you have short deadlines, and all that sort of thing.

Gardner

So he wasn't really a foreign editor.

McWilliams

No.

Gardner

He was a contributor.

McWilliams

He was really a contributor. So I went out, and when we took over, I raised the sum of money that would be equivalent to the amount that he would be paid if he had been a member of the guild. He continued as a contributor, but not as a foreign editor.

Gardner

I see.

McWilliams

Very gallant man, very intrepid character. He was the subject of a big controversy between the *New Leader* and the *Nation* about whether or not he was an agent of the Soviet Union, as the *New Leader* charged. And this is so humorous to anyone who knew this man because he wasn't anybody's agent. He was a very proud, aristocratic Spaniard, [laughter] and enormously indiscreet--even about his own safety. I mean, the Russians would have had to have been out of their minds to even think of using this man! Not only that, he didn't agree with them to that extent anyway; he was a left-socialist [with an] internationally well-defined, recognized position and reputation. A tremendously interesting man, very interesting. Knowing him was a real privilege. He was great on the issues that he understood, particularly Spain. He was an absolutely marvelous source. He was the best. We had the best kinds of insight into the whole Spanish situation through him, and this continued to
be the case. Galvao died before the regime had fallen in Portugal. Incidentally, Galvao—after this *Santa Maria* episode—he and some of his colleagues hijacked a plane, flew it over Lisbon, dropped leaflets, [laughter] took the plane back. He did a piece for us about this. But anyway, Galvao died before this Salazar regime was overthrown, and Del Vayo died before the situation had changed in Spain, which was a great pity because it would have been the joy of Del Vayo's life to have returned to Spain.

Gardner

When did he die?

McWilliams

Well, I can't give you the date offhand. I did an editorial about it at the time. It was about a year before the situation turned over. But he would have so thoroughly relished the opportunity to go back to Spain.

Gardner

Right. Well, we have a few more minutes on the tape, so I'll just keep going through these. Robert Sherrill was your Washington correspondent for a long time.

McWilliams

Yes. I take credit for having discovered and recruited Sherrill as a correspondent. He had worked for Texas papers, and he worked in Florida for a couple of Florida papers. I got in touch with him and got some quite good pieces from him. He did a very fine piece for us about H.L. Hunt, the Texas tycoon.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

I said to him finally, "Instead of trying to free-lance from Tallahassee or Austin, why don't you go to Washington? And we will designate you as our Washington correspondent. See if you can make a go of it in Washington as a free lance." He said he would try it; he liked the idea, and he went there, and of course he's been a great success. I think in a certain range of subject
matter, he's probably the finest American political reporter that we have, certainly so far as people are concerned. He's marvelous, wonderfully perceptive about people like Jungle Jim [James O.] Eastland, and Senator George Smathers, and George Wallace, and all kinds of personalities of this sort—excellent, excellent. And the book he did about Kennedy at Chappaquiddick is a first-rate book. I had to do a lot of needling to convince him that there was a good book to be written about Johnson, which he finally did, called *The Accidental President*.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

He's a splendid correspondent. And the issues—when I say the issues that he understands, [I mean] he knows a great deal about oil and gas, and about Texas politics, about Southern politics—not so much about West Coast politics or Midwest politics. But in the areas that he really knows, he's certainly one of the very best.

18. Tape Number: VIII, Side One (July 18, 1978)

Gardner

We finished off a lot of our discussion on the *Nation* yesterday. I thought we'd finish it up today for the rest.

McWilliams

There was one detail I forgot to mention about the contributors, a special case, and I should mention him—-that's Ralph Nader.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

We discovered him when he was still a student in college.

Gardner
Where was he?

McWilliams

He was at--I think it's Harvard. We got him to do some pieces. He was still in college when he did his first piece for us; I remember that.

Gardner

How did you discover him?

McWilliams

We had word about this interest that he had in the automobile, you know. So we got in touch with him, and he did a piece for us. Then down the years he did a lot of pieces for us, and he's been very close to the magazine from that day to the present time. Hunter Thompson was another. There were, oh, so many, I couldn't start to name them.

Gardner

Right. The Von Hoffman article said that you were the one who advised Hunter Thompson to do the Hell's Angels.

McWilliams

That's right. I sent him a report of the attorney general's office in California about motorcycle gangs. As a matter of fact, I had been interested in them before I left California. They were beginning to develop even then. And on a trip to the University of Chicago--or to Chicago when I visited with David Reisman in Chicago--I told him about it. He was very much interested. I sent him the file that I had at that time on motorcycle gangs. So I had a long-standing interest in it. And I knew Hunter in New York slightly.

Gardner

How did you know him?

McWilliams

As a free-lance writer, just happened to know him. And when he moved to San Francisco, I thought he would be just the person for this. I asked him and sent him the report of the attorney general's office, and [he said], yes, he'd do a piece about it for which I would pay him $100. He tells about this in an
interview in *Playboy* and says that at that time he was so broke he would have done anything for $100. [laughter] It turned out to be quite an adventure for him because he got beaten up by one of the gang. I think he got a broken arm or something.

Gardner

Something like that.

McWilliams

But he enjoyed it very much. And as soon as the piece came out--he tells in the interview how he was inundated with offers for book contracts and magazine assignments, and so forth and so on. It was really the thing that escalated him into a free-lance writer's position.

Gardner

Right. And the book, of course.

McWilliams

And the book. That's a very good book, very interesting book. It was one of the nonfiction best-sellers of the year and I think a very good book, very good book.

Gardner

What was he like in his youth?

McWilliams

Well, he was just like he is at the present time. Even before I left the *Nation*, he used to come in and visit with me from time to time, carrying a six pack of beer, you know, [laughter] clunking it down and just starting to talk about everything under the sun. So we've been friends for a long time.

Gardner

That's curious because I had wondered whether that was an evolved state or one that he was born with.
But he very soon got out of our price range. Of course, this happened again and again and again. It's nothing that you can blame writers for. They want to write where they can make the most money, or most of them do. And so it's a natural kind of process. They move out of your category. But that's the function of these magazines, really--to develop new talent.

Gardner

Right. Right. Of course a lot of them would continue to write for you, regardless.

McWilliams

Oh, yes; yes, indeed--people like Nader and others who always continue to write for the Nation

Gardner

Who were some of the others? Are there any others?

McWilliams

There are so many I could pick names out of the . . .

Gardner

Well, there was one young writer I discovered who ties into the next subject, which is going to be domestic affairs, named John Lindsay.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Was Lindsay a congressman when he first wrote for you?

McWilliams

Well, there were two John Lindsays who wrote for us. One had been with the Washington office of Newsweek--that John Lindsay. The John Lindsay, the mayor, we knew from the time he was a congressman. I got Fred Cook interested in the case of a Captain Kauffman who had gotten a very bad rap in a court-martial proceeding, and it was entirely undeserved. It was one of those bizarre miscarriages of justice. His brother was in the real estate
business in the Village. He came in and got us interested, and we got Fred Cook interested. Fred did a piece about it, a very good piece. We sent it to John Lindsay, who was a congressman for the district, and this was when I first acquired a real respect and admiration for Lindsay. Because instead of dealing with this in a perfunctory way, he pushed it all the way through. He went right to the secretary of the air force to find out how this could have happened, and so forth. He devoted a lot of time to it. And as a result of this, it was cleared up; the record was cleared up. So we had known Lindsay for a long time.

Gardner

But he did do some articles for you later on.

McWilliams

Yes, he did.

Gardner

On the city, and so on. The first one on my list--and I guess since you mentioned Fred Cook, it's a good place to start--is the Pentagon and militarism, which is a theme discussed often by the Nation throughout.

McWilliams

Oh, yes. I think the first major piece that we did was a two-part feature called The Big Guns by Matthew Josephson, published as a pamphlet and very widely distributed. Then we did Fred Cook's special issue called "Juggernaut: The Warfare State." Then down the years we did pieces on, I think, every aspect of it: the public relations aspect of the Pentagon (the way they promote themselves), and the retired officer bit, and pieces by Stanley Meisler and Al Toffler, and also the way they got appropriations. Seymour Melman was very helpful about that. He knows a great deal about it and did all kinds of pieces for us. So it was with C. Wright Mills. C. Wright Mills, when I first went east, had his bias against the Nation. He had been influenced by that coterie of New York social democrats who had this bias against the Nation, and he had been some-what influenced by them. I sought him out one time and said, "Look, what's this all about? Whatever feeling you had is really not justified," and so forth and so forth. And I succeeded in convincing him that it wasn't. He did some very fine pieces for us. They had a big influence at the time, and they
were just right in tone and manner at that time. And it was a very good relationship. He did a piece for us, for example, called "A Pagan Sermon for the Christian Clergy." It was a very savage piece about their attitude towards military appropriations in the war, and so forth. It was reprinted by church groups all over the country for a long period of time. He did other pieces that had exactly the same response. So we got to know him very well, and his death was really a great tragedy for everyone who knew him. Most remarkable man--I think a better polemicist than a sociologist, but he was just right for us.

Gardner

What about reaction on the part of the U.S. Pentagon, and so on?

McWilliams

We never had any particular trouble with them. We were aware of the fact that they didn't like these pieces, but they didn't cause us any particular trouble. We got very healthy response to the things that we did about the Pentagon--very healthy--from all kinds of people, ranging from Cyrus Eaton clear across the board to local peace groups. And we did, I think, a very good job, if I do say so, on the peace movement--the early phases. See, the peace movement was virtually obliterated by, say, 1950. I mean, there was nothing much left of it except the old-line, traditional groups, and they had been pushed to one side. Their influence was minimal. Then beginning in the middle fifties, we began to try to help revive it. We had very good historic relations with the traditional peace groups like the War Resisters, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, groups of that kind, Quakers--Quakers were very good friends of ours, traditionally. But then when we went beyond that in the late fifties, when the whole question about testing in the atmosphere, and so forth, there was a couple of years there when we were carrying on, you might say, a crusade to try and revive the peace movement--to get it going. And it did revive. It became a real force. And some of the articles that we did have been collected in a book [Peace and Arms: Reports from the Nation] that Henry Christman edited, which was published by Sheed and Ward, the Catholic publishers. They paid the Nationa very remarkable tribute; it said no other publication had done as much in this area as the Nation had done. As I say, the peace movement did revive. The trouble
with it was that it still remained a peace movement: it hadn't really faced the
problem of what are you going to do in a community when you close down
the shipyard. If you don't have alternative forms of employment, those people
are going to be for renewal of contracts to build ships or build guns or planes,
or whatever it is. And it has, therefore, to be a political movement--a real
political movement with a program. And because it didn't have that, its
influence was minimal. They thought that when they got an agreement for
suspension of nuclear tests in the atmosphere, they had won a great victory.
Well, in a way they had. But they began underground testing almost
immediately. So, you know, if it wasn't one thing, it was another. And it was
too limited in its approach; that was the trouble.

Gardner

Did anybody have a broad program?

McWilliams

Not at that time; it was very difficult. We kept insisting in two pieces--
excellent pieces by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy and others--that it had to have
an economic base to it, had to have economic support. And it had to have
political support. We tried our best to support the first peace candidates that
came along, two of them: a chap by the name of [Byron] Johnson--I think his
name was--who was elected in Colorado; he was a contributor of ours. And
one was the first Democrat to be elected to Congress from Vermont. I can't
think of the man's name offhand [william H. Meyer]. He, too, was a person we
had long-standing ties with. And we were very active in H. Stuart Hughes's
campaign for the Senate in Massachusetts. But these campaigns were local
campaigns. They were not supported by any national peace movement. Well,
to a degree they were, but they were not part of a national political
movement. So the effect was not as great as some of the people involved
thought it was. We kept trying to get it to be more political, and [we were]
ot succeeding too well.

Gardner

Would you say that this was the case also in the sixties?

McWilliams
Yes, I would, because by the time you got into the sixties, there was such a
disillusionment with politics as politics, it was very difficult to get these young
people to see that in the last analysis, you would have to be political, have to
assume a political expression. As I said earlier, say what you will about
Gene McCarthy, he did raise this issue in political terms, and it made all the
difference in the world, forced the retirement of a president, and despite the
fact that Johnson got his revenge, in a manner of speaking. . . . Because after
all, if you went from Johnson to Nixon you weren't. . . . [laughter] And I think
that the '68 convention in Chicago really assured Nixon's election, because the
Democratic party was torn apart. There was one section of it that was
completely disillusioned with the peace movement--wouldn't support
Humphrey--even though he was the lesser evil, so to speak. I don't blame
them for this, because by that time you couldn't have too much confidence in
Humphrey, because he had been a part of this. Later on he told about how he
worked behind the scenes, and so forth. I don't doubt that it's true, but you
couldn't blame people for not being very enthusiastic about him. So the
Democrats were split, and the regulars were disaffected. The old-line regulars
were disaffected, and Nixon won by default. He just moved into a vacuum.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

It's also very odd that the liberal Republicans never seemed to get their act
together. We had a lot to say about that editorially and in articles, and I was in
fairly close touch with some of the liberal Republicans. I talked to them quite
freely about what was going on and why they weren't more specific in their
opposition to the war. They were, I thought, in an ideal position to raise some
of these issues politically. And to a degree they did, but always sort of sotto
voce; they never really got it in line. Thruston Morton and John Sherman
Cooper and Mark Hatfield, who was quite good--they never really reached out
and grabbed the issue there. And one of the reasons, I think, was the
unfortunate influence of Nelson Rockefeller. He sort of overshadowed the
whole liberal-Republican situation to a degree that made it difficult. And this is
what happened in connection with Nixon. First, they started with George
Romney because Nelson Rockefeller said he was not going to be a candidate.
It started with George Romney, and the Romney campaign was terribly bungled—oh, grossly mishandled. Romney realized he was through, so he bowed out very quickly. Nelson Rockefeller bowed out two or three weeks later, and there was Nixon with the nomination in the palm of his hand, just took it by default. Anyway, that's what we tried to do in connection with the war issue, with militarism, and also with the peace issue. We devoted an inordinate amount of attention to the peace movement as such, because we were not specifically a pacifist publication, even though we were always very sympathetic with them and worked very closely with them. But after all, Freda and the Nation supported World War II, you know. I would say Villard, to his credit, was a consistent pacifist, and in retrospect it's hard to fault him. You know, he may have been more right than we were.

Gardner

Where would you say the peace movement is today? Did it pretty well disintegrate after Vietnam?

McWilliams

Pretty much so, pretty much so. Again, I think until they have a political movement—a broad coalition of forces of sufficient potency so that you can propose within all seriousness an alternative program with priorities: "This is what we are going to do; these are our national objectives; we're going to do them and arrange them in this order," and so forth, which would include alternative modes of employment—until you do that, they'll continue to vote for these appropriations, that is, for military procurement in one form or another.

Gardner

Well, since we've gotten into '68 a little bit— it's such a critical time, and I have a note about it. One of the things that you were very close to throughout the years was the posture of youth, not just in America, but abroad as well. There were periodic issues devoted to what's our youth like. There's one in the fifties in which many leading educators give up on youth in general.

McWilliams
That's right. I thought it would be an interesting idea because there was so much talk about. . . . It's so ironic that there should have been so much preoccupation in the late fifties with the question of apathy and conformity, and so forth. So to sort of test this out, in the late fifties I projected this first issue--special issue--and I think a very good one, called "The Careful Young Men [: Tomorrow's Leaders Analyzed by Today's Teachers"]. I think it was good for several reasons. First, instead of going to the faculty people that you might normally expect us to go to, we went to the best writers who were on various faculties, who were primarily literary people.

Gardner

Right. Karl Shapiro.

McWilliams

And Carlos Baker, and people of this sort because they were good writers, and we thought we could get more out of them. We sent them a kind of a letter that I dictated, explaining the nature of the issue and asking them a series of questions: "What do you think about this oncoming generation?" and so forth. The replies were very interesting. None of the contributors had seen any of the others' responses; they sent them directly to us. But there was a surprising kind of unanimity about it. While there were some undercurrents of dissatisfaction--what they seemed on the face of things--the graduating students of that year seemed to be pretty quiescent, and so forth. It's true. The following year [1959], or I think it was the following year, we repeated it and we had contributions--that is, repeated the same idea--and we had contributions by William Sloane Coffin, [Jr.], of Yale and by Louis Reik, the psychoanalyst in residence at Princeton, and people of that kind. And they said they detected some rumblings. By the time we got to the third year, the thing was off and running. I think it was that year, or the following year, the special issue was called the "Indignant Generation." [Note: The 1961 issue was entitled "Rebels With a Hundred Causes." The "indignant generation" was contributor Jessica Mitford Truehaft's description used in her article.--ed.] So it had gone completely turned around--from apathy to activism.

Gardner

Why do you think so?
Well, I think it was the impact of events. But I also think that during that period in the late fifties, they were thinking a lot; there was more going on there than met the eye. I think the apathy was in some respects an illusion. It wasn't quite a fair characterization of what was going on. But there was that intense preoccupation, as there was in the whole national cultural scene, about men in gray flannel suits and men in executive suites, and all that sort of thing--upsurge of suburbia, conformity. And there was a lot of truth to it; that's what was happening. We did a piece by the young chap that I had recruited as a contributor, a novelist, Alan Harrington. He came in and brought me this piece one day telling about his experience working in the public-relations department of a major corporation--a big oil company, as a matter of fact. He described a setting in which the public-relations department was located: exquisite wall-to-wall carpeting, piped-in music, elegant lounge, fine restaurant, every-thing. And it was really a very funny kind of piece, and the title of it was "Life in the Crystal Palace." I wanted to run it, and he said, "Oh, you have to use a pen name. It would mean my job instantly if you published it." I said it won't mean a thing to publish it under a pen name; the readers have got to be convinced that this is an authentic situation. So with much persuading--and I said it's against our policy to run pieces under pen names--I finally convinced him to let us run it under his name. These were the reactions (it's very funny): first of all, his supervisors told him they thought it was quite an interesting piece--[laughter] didn't get a bounce back or backlash from them at all; second, he got a contract immediately for a book; and third he got a foundation grant of $8,000, volunteered to enlarge it into a book. So it worked out very nicely for him. He quit his job in the "crystal palace" and went to work on his book, and it's a good book; it's a very good book. But the point of it is, is that it shows that by that time big business had learned how to cope with a lot of this dissent. They had made life so easy, so comfortable, and they were so tolerant of certain--they could afford to be tolerant of certain kinds of aberrant attitudes as they were with him. They didn't get upset about it all. Earlier in the fifties, he would have been bounced on his ear, you know, before you could say Alan Harrington. But not then. And it was extraordinary the way the whole temper of the times turned around.

Gardner
Well, it built up enough until, I suppose, the climax comes in the period from about `67 to `70, probably, with the introduction of the drug culture and then with the Chicago riots.

McWilliams

That's right. I think a critical date, of course, in the sixties is 1965, when Johnson decided to escalate the war. And that marked, really, the terminal date of the civil rights movement--not literally, but that was a high-water mark, because from then on out it was a different kind of situation. And all the money that Johnson had been throwing into these big splashy social programs of his--they began to cut it off because they couldn't do it. Besides, it was done primarily, I think, to quiet dissent, and it was having exactly the opposite effect. The more youngsters that could go to college--the larger you extended the college enrollment--the greater the dissent was going to be. So what Johnson was doing was really counterproductive. They realized this, and they escalated the war. So that was a terminal date. That was really a shift in the whole emphasis. It's interesting about Johnson because I always had a feeling (we've had some interesting contacts with him) that it was just an outside chance that Gulf of Tonkin and the rest of it to the contrary notwithstanding, that once he had won a spectacular victory over Goldwater--which clearly he was going to win--once he had done that, then he would reverse his field and begin to cut the war back and try and seek an agreement, and so forth and so forth. But the fact is he had laid the plans to escalate the war shortly after he had been sworn in as president. So he never really had any intention of cutting back on the war. And that was a great tragedy because he had some capacities for doing certain things or getting certain things done. When Kennedy ran against Eisenhower, we said we gave two cheers for Kennedy.

Gardner

Against Nixon.

McWilliams

Well, yes, that's right--Nixon. We said two cheers for Kennedy. We couldn't get really enthusiastic about Kennedy. We never were enthusiastic about Kennedy, and we couldn't get enthusiastic about Johnson, but we thought that Johnson was a better bet surely than Gold-water and that there was a
chance that he might have done something; and I think maybe he was slightly preferable on some counts—even that's debatable. So it went, you know. And Humphrey-Nixon, we didn't make any endorsement. By that time we were quite disillusioned with Humphrey. He'd always been very friendly, and I'd known him personally, and all that. He was a special case in many ways because I don't think he really remembered on Tuesday what he'd said on Monday. I think he quite literally forgot what he said, because he talked endlessly and he just kept this, you know, going-going-going-going. You could fault him on gross inconsistencies in positions that he had taken. Very good on civil rights, very good on labor, but not so good on other issues. And there, again, was this whole Cold War reflex of some of the people like Humphrey, who'd been overly influenced by their feuds with the Communists, their dislike of Communists, and had overreacted. It put them into a position so that it became very easy for them, as it was all through the fifties and into the sixties, to have a kind of consensus politics—both the Republican party and the Democratic party—to be for a certain amount of reforms that would fall under the heading of, say, corporate liberalism and support the Cold War. And the corporate liberalism was never much more than just token money support for certain kinds of programs, as though the money itself would do it. And of course money in and of itself doesn't do very much in the way of reform. You've got to have something there to make it work. And what you had in the 1930s that made it work was the enthusiasm of the New Deal and the caliber of the people that were at the top. I read a recent book by Henry Adams about Harry Hopkins; and it had quite an emotional impact on me. Here this man is an ill man—Hopkins—getting his salary as head of WPA of $12,500 a year, and his enemies in Congress wanting to rebuke him cut it by $2,500. He's getting $10,000 a year, and he's directing a billion-dollar WPA program.

Gardner

Yes.

McWilliams

And that program—say what you will—of course, he was able to do it outside the normal bureaucracies, which made it possible to do it (it would be very difficult to do it today because the bureaucracy would be there confronting you). But that program had great social importance; these were useful
projects. They won the support of people, and it was done with a minimum of corruption—astonishing achievement and, largely I think, because of Hopkins's driving determination to see that it was done, and to see that it was done quickly and to see that it was done the right way. Now, that kind of drive and that kind of determination was not present in the Great Society programs. I think that's one of the things that was wrong with them. Hopkins was an extraordinary administrator.

Gardner

Staffing, of course, does make a tremendous amount of difference. The 1950s and up through the nomination of Kennedy you were very, very pro-Stevenson.

McWilliams

We were pro-Stevenson, and more so than I think that we should have been. Well, before Stevenson was nominated the first time, we had tried to ignite a movement for W. [William] O. Douglas.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And we did our best to get that moving off the ground, but it didn't catch on. It just never worked, because Truman had indicated that Adlai Stevenson was his favored successor; so that Truman was going to support Stevenson, and Douglas never had a chance. And so we supported Stevenson the first time around. Then after the election in '52, I went out to Illinois and had an interview with him at the state capital in Illinois, and I came away distinctly disappointed in the guy because I had not realized, prior to that interview—for all of his excellent qualities I hadn't realized the extent of his limitations. To give an illustration: the night before I went down to see him, I had spoken at a dinner meeting in Chicago in connection with some phase of the Harry Bridges defense business, and so forth. And Stevenson had read about this in the papers, and he seemed to be curious and kind of interested. And I found it rather appalling that a Democratic nominee for president of the United States could be so out of touch with the labor reality of the kind that was
represented by Bridges and the ILWU. He was light years removed from this, didn't understand it. And then I was also quite surprised to discover that he thought that so far as the civil rights issue was concerned that there wasn't very much that needed to be done if you had--he mentioned a couple of things about the poll tax and one or two other things, but that was as far as you needed to go. And this seemed to me to be quite unrealistic. Then on the subject of foreign policy, he also surprised me by a general kind of conservatism. He talked about John Foster Dulles, and he always referred to him as Foster in the course of this conversation: Foster says this, Foster that. His position on Korea was that we should hang in there, you know, and so forth. Now, it's true, I think, that Eisenhower was sort of jockeyed into going to Korea by Emmett Hughes--that speech that he wrote which was good politics, and then Eisenhower had to deliver on it. But in any case, there were other reasons why I was disappointed in Stevenson in this interview, and it was an off-the-record interview, incidentally, so I never reported it in the Nation. But I was distinctly disappointed. And then in '56, the thing that influenced us in '56--by '56 we were quite disillusioned with Stevenson. But the thing that influenced us then was Eisenhower's illness, I guess, and the fact that Nixon was right there. If anything happened to Eisenhower, Nixon is president, and this was very disturbing to us. So, again, we endorsed Stevenson, but with less enthusiasm, and I think that the '56 campaign was a disgrace from the point of view of the Democrats. This includes both Stevenson and, I'm sorry to say, Mrs. Roosevelt, because they were so afraid of that Dixiecrat revolt and the consequences of it. They were sort of craven in their attitudes, from my personal point of view, towards the Dixiecrats and towards the whole; they should have been much more in favor of the civil rights movement than they were. And I think Mrs. Roosevelt--I'm not sure about Stevenson--but I think Mrs. Roosevelt later conceded that the whole strategy of that campaign was unfortunate.

Gardner

Yes, the Nation maintained a fair level of enthusiasm for Stevenson.

McWilliams

We did because of this. We admired his personal qualities.

Gardner
You couldn't help but admire his personal qualities, and you couldn't help but deplore many aspects of the Eisenhower administration. But we were very much disturbed by this business that Nixon just might sneak in to the presidency. It was a major consideration. And then, of course, in the '60 campaign we were sort of pro-Stevenson in the sense that we still thought he would be a better nominee than some of the others who were proposed, including Humphrey and Kennedy. And when Kennedy was nominated, we said, "Well, two cheers for Kennedy," but we had our fingers crossed. We never liked Bobby Kennedy. We always had serious differences with him over, oh, many issues. His behavior as attorney general and the conduct of the prosecution for Jimmy Hoffa--Hoffa was certainly no plaster saint, but those methods were intolerable. You plant an informer in his defense setup--a very corrupt informer, incidentally--and do things of this kind. Outrageous--no--for an attorney general to do. First of all, he never should have been attorney general. I mean, the president shouldn't appoint his brother as attorney general and particularly a brother who had no more legal experience than Bobby Kennedy had. And then we had a quarrel with Bobby Kennedy because he came barging into New York State when he was really a resident of Massachusetts by any fair test--as Pat Moynihan was, as a matter of fact--came barging into New York and in effect forced Robert Wagner, Jr., out of the race. Well, we weren't wildly enthusiastic about Robert Wagner, Jr., but he would have made a good senator in the tradition of his father, and it would have been much better. But if Kennedy had lost... 

Well, I think he would have. I think he would have, and we thought this was very unfortunate. As a matter of fact, we endorsed Kenneth Keating, the Republican, which didn't make us any friends in the attorney general's office. Kennedy never had much enthusiasm for the Nation
Yet there was one piece that you wrote when Robert Kennedy went to South Africa, I think, the following year.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner

That was very hopeful about Robert Kennedy, that he had reacted very well.

McWilliams

He did. And he reacted very well on some other issues when the Kennedys thought that they could get by that first administration without doing very much about the civil rights issue. They were trying to finesse it. In truth and in fact, they didn't do very much about it. Even when the sit-ins first started and the rest of it began, they were very cool and standoffish. If it hadn't been for the way in which they were pressed by circumstances, they wouldn't have taken the stand that they did, in my opinion. But once they were pressed, to their credit, then they reacted in a creditable way.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And I think, incidentally, that the assassination of Robert Kennedy had a big political impact, because you hook it up with the assassination of King and it was utterly demoralizing in its impact. It just made politics suddenly seem irrelevant to a lot of people, to thousands and thousands of people. I thought at the time of the assassination of John Kennedy, I thought this marked the beginning of a major change in American life in politics, a kind of revolution, but a revolution of a very strange character; I could never actually define it to my own satisfaction. That's why I didn't write more about it than I did, but I had a very profound feeling that this was a major turning point.

Gardner

In what sense?

McWilliams
For a lot of reasons. It came as such a shock to the American people. And suddenly some of the violence, for example in Vietnam which was beginning to heat up then, you know--violence had come home to roost here. It was such a shock to people--they were so dismayed by it, and so forth--it seemed to me that this was a real turning point in American politics. I think it has proven to be that in a way because we've had pretty much one-term presidents--Nixon, of course, being the exception, but not very much of an exception. [laughter]

Gardner

Before we return to Nixon (we just have a little bit more on this tape side), you ran a poll before the 1956 election among your readers that showed great enthusiasm for Stevenson-Kefauver. I was a little bemused by the conclusions that you drew: that because the Nation represented the liberal segment, this could indicate a greater strength for Stevenson.

McWilliams

I guess we were just whistling in the dark because, of course, Stevenson never had a chance in '56. And because he didn't have a chance, he should have run a different kind of campaign. He would have lost in any case, but if he had run a stronger kind of campaign, it would have been much better for the Democratic party and for the country. As a matter of fact, if he had run a stronger campaign in '52, it would have had the same effect. He couldn't have beaten Eisenhower in '52. There's no way you could beat Eisenhower, but a stronger campaign would have had a better effect. For example, he started out in '52 by speaking to the American Legion at its convention in New York as the Legion has never been spoken to before or since. He told it to them right to their face, you know, about some of their attitudes and the way they tried to intimidate people, and so forth. That was great! That's the spirit in which his campaign should have been conducted.But then some things began to happen in the international arena and elsewhere. On his first tour of the country, by the time he had gotten to California--it was down in Arizona--he made a speech in Arizona in support of the Smith Act, the Smith Act prosecutions. Shortly after that he approved the discharge of teachers, and so forth. This was totally unnecessary and improper, from my point of view and from a political point of view--most unfortunate. It didn't win him any votes.
That vote was going to go to Eisenhower in any case. And if he had run a stronger campaign in those two years, it would have had a better effect on the future. I think that although Douglas would have been beaten in '52 if he had been the nominee, Douglas would have run an entirely different kind of campaign--on these issues--and would have had a much better long-term effect. But on the other hand you could say that Stevenson did hold the Democratic party together in '52 and '56. That may have been his most significant achievement, but he paid quite a price, in my judgment, to hold it together.

19. Tape Number: VIII, Side Two (July 18, 1978)

Gardner

Okay, what about Nixon?

McWilliams

Well, I had always been, in a manner of speaking, a student of Richard Nixon, from the time he ran against Jerry Voorhis and from then on. For example, I knew quite a bit--from my former legal practice, and so forth--about the background of the Chotiners, Murray Chotiner and his brother and their activities in the bail-bond business in Los Angeles and the clients that they represented. This was also a factor in my attitude about Nixon. So I watched his career with microscopic care and interest because of his California background. I knew the kind of milieu that he'd come from, and I knew also that--I wasn't surprised that he defeated Jerry Voorhis because Jerry Voorhis was living on borrowed time in that district; that was basically a conservative district. But Voorhis had such a fine reputation as a Christian family, respected for their good deeds and their good work, and so forth, that they were content for a time to make an exception in the case of Jerry Voorhis. But sooner or later he would have been defeated in that district. And at this time, the time had come because it was basically . . .

Gardner

It was the postwar era.

McWilliams
Yes, postwar era and basically a conservative district. After all, Jerry had been in the EPIC campaign, and so forth. So I think his time had come politically. And then of course I had followed Nixon's campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas, who was an old friend. I thought I understood Nixon from the very beginning.

Gardner

What? [laughter]

McWilliams

I think I understood there was really nothing there. Somebody tried to convince me once that those Watergate trials were political prosecutions; and I said they were not political prosecutions, because the fact is that Nixon wouldn't know a political value if it came up and bit him. [laughter] He's not interested in political values; he's interested in power. And there was a most remarkable book *Man in the Modern Age* written by Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher, and published first in Germany in 1931 and then not published here until somewhat later in translation. But it's a book about modern man and society. Jaspers makes the point that with the development of these big bureaucratic organizations--governmental and private--and the spread of technology, that man becomes lost in the function. If there was anything human about him, it tends to be shorn away or ground up in this meat-grinder process. And I always thought that Nixon was a classic example of it. There was nothing left there except the politician. And I don't think he had any values one way or the other. I don't think it made a hoot of difference to him.

Gardner

Did you ever meet him?

McWilliams

Actually, and ironically, I never met him. I say "ironically" because we were juxtaposed on a number of occasions, but it just never happened. So I never met him. And Pat Buchanan, who was one of his aides, I had known as a journalist in St. Louis. As a matter of fact, he once did quite a good piece for us about a prison scandal in Missouri. In the '68 campaign I got in touch with Pat
and said, "I wish you could set up an interview for me with Nixon. I know he
would not be inclined to grant it, but tell him I just want to interview him to
get his ideas about California politics, the extent to which it is or isn't different,
and so forth." And Pat called me back and said, "Well, he's too busy with the
campaign. He thinks it's an interesting idea. Sometime later," and, you know,
so forth and so forth. But we never had the interview. It would have been
interesting to see what you could get him to say on the subject, because I
knew he had some ideas about it.

Gardner

Did you have anybody do firsthand pieces on him throughout this--I know
there was a lot of opinion.

McWilliams

We did, well, one by Gene Marine that was, I thought, quite good called "The
Cardboard Hero." We did a very thoughtful piece by a psychoanalyst whose
name escapes me at the moment, but it was a very thoughtful, good piece in
which he said that there wasn't any character there; it was just a career. There
really wasn't any persona there, the same thing I'd been talking about. That
was a very good Nixon piece. And we did a very good piece by Mark Harris, an
excellent piece ["Nixon: A Type to Remember"]'). And Mark Harris had covered
the campaign with Nixon versus Pat Brown.

Gardner

In '62?

McWilliams

Yes, for Life, I think, as a matter of fact. And he'd interviewed Nixon a couple
of times, went up to his home in Bel Air, and so forth. That was a very good
piece. And down the years we ran some very good pieces about Nixon; you
can make an anthology of things that we've said about Nixon. When the
Watergate thing started, I felt it was such an ongoing affair and so difficult to
project pieces, because you never knew what the next week's headline would
be, that I began to do rather long, signed editorials, which continued all during
that period in an effort to keep our readers abreast of what was really going
on in those hearings. I agree with William Buckley about this: that Nixon was
the most important American politician of the thirty years from 1945 to 1975, from the inception of the Cold War to the debacle in Vietnam, the most important American politician. And I have an interesting notion about Nixon. I've always felt that Nixon was so transparent he didn't really fool anyone. A friend of mine, Noel Parmentel—we don't agree politically at all but he was an occasional Nation contributor, very interesting fellow—and Noel is credited with that slogan beneath the photograph of Nixon: "Would You Buy A Used Car From This Man?" I always thought that he was so transparent that it couldn't be that he was fooling people. And to a degree I think that is true. I think those that voted for him tended to vote for him because they knew he was a kind of confidence man politically, but that this was necessary; this is what you had to have. And also for another reason: that in their innermost natures they recognized that there was quite a bit of Richard Nixon in them, that they had this same kind of sleazy sense of values that he had, and so they could identify with him. I don't think they were really fooled by the man, because I don't see how he could fool anyone. His manner of speaking, the tone of voice, and all the rest of it didn't ring true, didn't ring true at all. And he couldn't create that atmosphere, because he didn't believe in anything, fundamentally—very strange man. I once asked Leone Baxter of Whittaker and Baxter, the firm—they were very canny people—and I said, "What's Nixon really like?" And she said, "Well, I don't know. I really don't know. Furthermore, I could think of only a couple of people that might have an answer to that question." She said, "Pat Nixon would not be one of them. I think he mystifies her as much as he mystifies me." She said, "I think one person who would know as much about him as anyone would be Robert Finch, Bob Finch." And she mentioned someone else that I've forgotten offhand, but she said, "Haldeman. I've discussed it with Haldeman. Haldeman didn't really feel that he knew him." So he is a very strange man.

Gardner

He certainly is. Do you think that it's that emptiness you speak of that enables him to be so resilient?

McWilliams

Yes. And also he has a canny mind about American politics and certain standard ploys and moves—like a quarterback, a professional football . . .
His favorite sport--things that you do. For example, he has always known that if you come from the right or the conservative section of politics and you are elected to office, the standard ploy is for you to move a little bit to the left of center because you've got your constituency; you've got them in a captive role, and you then can do some of the things that maybe a liberal couldn't do in the same circumstances. He knew this; this is why he went to China and for the summit meeting with Moscow. You will find that as early as 1960 he let out a few hints that he was thinking in terms of some kind of detente with China as being not only necessary but also very good politics for a Republican, which he was surely right about, surely right about. He, I think, would have raised the issue in '60, but Goldwater promptly clobbered him. And he shut up about it; he didn't mention it anymore in 1960. But as early as 1960 he was thinking that this was a classic ploy, a move for him to make, to reverse the field and go to--he understood this reversal-of-fields gambit as well as any American politician. He understood that perfectly. And he understood how to keep that right wing in some kind of--get their support and hold their loyalty without at the same time letting them completely call the turn. When Goldwater was nominated in '64, Goldwater should have done what Nixon would have done under the circumstances. He should have reversed his field.

Right.

And begun to make gestures towards the liberal Republicans.

Because he had with the Right.
And instead of doing that he cheered the right wing on! He became more vocal and rhetorically more extreme than he had been before the convention. He didn't understand this kind of politics at all. Nixon did.

Gardner

Fascinating. Well, there were six presidents during the time that you were editor or affiliated with the Nation. Did you ever meet any of them personally, interview them?

McWilliams

No. Well, I met Kennedy; I met Truman. I never interviewed them, really, just met them. Well, six presidents--it's interesting to me that six presidents, three Republicans and three Democrats, all felt locked into this war in Vietnam. This is an astonishing commentary on the Cold War pressures, and so forth; that not one of them. . . . And when asked, you know, that one question they would always refer to them as commitments. Well, who had made the commitment? They hadn't made it. Their predecessor. Well, had their predecessor made the commitment? No, he hadn't really made the commitment. See? Here we were in a terrible war for reasons that no one could really spell out. Incredible.

Gardner

Get back to the '68 very briefly. That was sort of the culmination of a lot of different things. We talked about the way it was the culmination of the '65 boundary that you put up. Who covered Chicago for you? Do you remember that?

McWilliams

I covered the Chicago.

Gardner

Did you?

McWilliams

Yes, I was out there. I covered most of the conventions in that period, Democratic conventions. I think I covered all of them. I covered the '64 Republican in San Francisco, which was extremely interesting. And I think I did
some pretty good reporting of the `64 convention, the Republican convention in San Francisco, because I said this is a case of a new class, a new kind of class that's emerging in the sun-belt areas that is taking over. They've got the drive and the energy, and they have really targeted this New York, eastern-seaboard Republican elite. If they could push them into the ocean, get rid of them entirely and have control over the Republican party, that would really satisfy them perhaps as much as electing a Republican president. Their primary aim was to get control of that party. And I learned early on that when you cover a national presidential convention, there's not much point in listening to what goes on in the floor of the convention; you have to lock yourself in with certain delegations and see it from the delegates' point of view, to see what's really going on. And in the Cow Palace convention, I spent a great deal of time with the delegations from South Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, Florida, and particularly South Carolina. And it was very illuminating to me because I did not meet many old-boy southern types. These were hustlers. New kinds of people had come along in the South, very ambitious and socially very well mannered and easy enough to get along with as a reporter--but a new breed, a new breed. And I was very much impressed with this. I did a couple of lengthy pieces for the Nation, one called "The Goldwater Ideology," and I've forgotten the title of the other--but these were kind of sociological pieces because the character of these delegates impressed me. And I didn't think that Goldwater was a transient kind of thing. I thought this was a critical election, and I doubted that the Republican party would ever come back soon to reestablish itself in terms of its old traditional conservatism or of liberal Republicanism. It was now in the hands of these new people.

Gardner

What do you think now?

McWilliams

And I think very much the same thing now, because they changed the rule of delegate selection at the Cow Palace convention so that the states that would go Republican in the election would have more delegates the next time. So they had perpetuated this control. And they're going to be very difficult to dislodge. They're going to be very difficult given the fact that the liberal Republicans have a death wish. They don't seem to know how they should
move. And they have some very fine talent: Senator [Charles] Mathias, I respect greatly. He's done three or four pieces at my instigation for the *Nation*, and he's a very interesting man to talk to, very thoughtful. And there are others, you know-- Charles Percy, some very able people. But they don't seem to be able to get their act together. And you had in the New Jersey primary this year--Clifford Case, fourterm incumbent Republican, knocked off by a man that used direct mail techniques almost entirely, addressed to special constituencies where you have these buzzword kind of situations, and getting money; 85 percent of his money came from outside the state. See, Case didn't seem to understand that this could happen to him or what was being done to him. And I think there will be some other liberal Republican casualties, because they've had chance after chance after chance to group themselves, to position themselves within the Republican party, and they haven't done it. They failed to do it.

Gardner

That's very interesting. The radical Right is something that you covered very intensely throughout.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Does this tie in? Do you think that the radical Right is really the group that's there? Or do you think it's a slightly softened version?

McWilliams

I think our politics has been thrown completely out of balance. The two-party system in the historic sense, I think, was a casualty of the Cold War, because the liberal Democrats were clobbered very quickly; they were told to get in line, and they got in line so far as the Cold War was concerned. The only exceptions were [Wayne] Morse, and [Ernest] Gruening, and one or two others, but they really went along with the whole business. It had disastrous effects on the political spectrum and on the Democratic party in particular because it was really-- we had one really big party--with different tendencies, but essentially that has been the situation. Now, in this kind of atmosphere the
radical Right comes along, and it's interesting to note that it came along almost simultaneously with the demise of McCarthy. McCarthy was censured in `54; he died in `57. But in `54 Bill Buckley started, I think, the National Review; this so-called new radical Right developed right in connection with McCarthy's death, so there was a real continuity. There wasn't any break in McCarthyism.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

There wasn't any break. And the radical Right, so-called, was very much a different kind of movement than McCarthyism, although [it was] an outgrowth of McCarthyism because McCarthyism--no one ever accused Joe of being an intellectual. And it didn't attract intellectuals to any great extent. The radical Right is a very different story. They were smart enough to pick up these disaffected individuals, like Max Eastman and the others, and get them involved in this sort of thing, and to form a kind of ideological structure, and then go out and solicit money in support on the basis of this. So as a result, they began to be very vocal after Kennedy's election in particular; [that] is when they began to really show signs of strength. They have organized very tightly and compactly; they know how to raise money. And as a result of this, they've been able to exert enormous pressure on the Republican party, and they force the Republican party in their direction. In doing so, they've kind of changed the whole center of gravity of American politics, because there's no countervailing Left. There should be a force out there to the left of the liberals in the Democratic party, but there isn't any, the kind of force that McGovern put together in the primaries in `72; it's not there anymore.

Gardner

Well, there were some congressmen and so on elected that are almost there.

McWilliams

Yes, they're almost there and . . .

Gardner

People like Gary Hart.
McWilliams

And the potential is there. I've seen figures: an estimated 2 million people took part in the Vietnam protests, and so forth, mostly young people. Well, they're out there somewhere. I don't think they've changed all that much.

Gardner

Well, that's something I might debate with you, but that's

McWilliams

I think there's a residual something there, you see.

Gardner

I suspect so.

McWilliams

And there's a potential in the labor movement, if you could ever get--as will happen in due course-- get Meany out of there, because Meany was one of the figures that came in with the Cold War.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

He has played a role of great strategic importance in connection with the Cold War by keeping labor in line and making it an active partner, if you please, in the Cold War.

Gardner

And his coherent opposition--Reuther, for example--died off.

McWilliams

They died off, and so forth. But there are potentials in the labor movement today. There is some quite good leadership. Sooner or later I think it will come to the surface and invest the labor movement with what it lacks so much today. They should realize this now, particularly with Proposition 13 and measures of this kind. They at one time were the beneficiaries of a certain
amount of social idealism that was associated with the labor movement, and
during the Cold War years it dissipated. So how can you blame people for
taking a cynical attitude about labor? When have they ever stuck their neck
out for some other group? Note one exception, and it’s an interesting
exception: Cesar Chavez. Meany did tolerate and support this.

Gardner

But why did he do it?

McWilliams

For several reasons. First, because there was a Catholic tie, I think. Secondly,
because he thought it was kind of good for the labor movement to have one
movement of this kind that it was supporting: better this than anything else
that seemed to be on the horizon. And for these, and maybe reasons that I
don’t understand, he has tolerated it and to some extent supported it. But
with the exception of this, [there has been] very little in the way of any kind of
civic-action movement, where the labor movement could have been so helpful
just by lifting its little finger.

Gardner

Of course, labor’s opposition to the antiwar movement was one of the great
negative forces, great frustrating forces, for the youth.

McWilliams

That is right.

Gardner

The hard-hat attacks in New York, and so forth.

McWilliams

You see, the residue from Vietnam, the potential in the labor movement, the
ecological emphasis in American politics, the special issue constituencies . . .

Gardner

. . . and the minorities.

McWilliams
And the minorities--if you could ever pull them together you might have a force there.

Gardner

Think you could?

McWilliams

And I think maybe it could happen.

Gardner

The last time that any sort of coalition like that came together was in the 1930s, and it was mostly because there was such an overwhelming economic problem.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Do you think it would take something like that again to bring them together?

McWilliams

Well, I think there's a great sense on the part of a great many people that we are at a big crossroads, so to speak, in industrial societies all over the world, and that there is a need for new thinking, fresh thinking, new models of what the economy is really like, and so forth. I think there's a receptivity there that could be appealed to. And some of these social action groups that have come along, not Nader so much as some of the others that have been trying to do some new thinking like the one that is headed by Gar Alperovitz, who's an old Nation contributor; we were the first to publish him--movements of that kind that feed ideas, new ideas. There's a great need to pull this together, make a movement of it of some kind. But I don't see any politics in the United States today. I mean, I really literally feel--I'm not speaking about the city or county or state; that's a different story.

Gardner

Nationally.
McWilliams

Nationally, I just do not see any politics.

Gardner

I wish I could disagree with you, but it's awfully difficult. [laughter]

McWilliams

Yes, I don't see any politics. It's lobbying and public relations and television, and you apparently influence a candidate by leaking stories to the newspaper, and then the other side leaks other stories, and all this is what passes for politics, but this is not politics.

Gardner

Do you see a brightening on the horizon?

McWilliams

I think there will have to be sooner or later. It has to be.

Gardner

I hope so. I think that covers domestic issues, and I think that's a wonderful place to stop discussing that. So I'll move on to the staff that I have listed here.

McWilliams

Sure.

Gardner

We've talked about Del Vayo.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Did we talk about Victor Bernstein?

McWilliams

No. Vic Bernstein was a marvelous managing editor, very good. He'd had a lot of journalistic experience, and [he was an] ideal working colleague. He retired,
and then we got him to come back and help finish the editing of the special
issue that we did for the centennial [September 20, 1965].

Gardner

Ah, that's something else we have to talk about.

McWilliams

And Victor is a dear, dear friend of mine. We couldn't have asked for a finer
working colleague than Vic. Marvelous.

Gardner

Where was he from?

McWilliams

New York.

Gardner

A local journalist?

McWilliams

Yes, he worked on a lot of papers around the country. He worked in California
at one time. Then he covered the Nuremberg trials, had a lot of experience in
connection with Europe, lived in Paris and Berlin for quite a time, knew Europe
very well, European politics--very good, very useful.

Gardner

The rest I think are--well, I'll mention names and see how much you want to
say about each one. Marion Hess was an assistant editor and then a copy
editor?

McWilliams

Yes. She's been there a long time. She's a jewel, a jewel beyond price, a
marvelous copy editor, faithful, loyal, devoted worker, dear friend of
Freda Kirchwey's. She was there when I came there. She's a superb copy
editor and a wonderful person, wonderful person.Bob Hatch, Robert Hatch, I
recruited; I think that's one of the better things I did for the Nation because
he's awfully good.
Gardner

Ned Polsky was a managing editor.

McWilliams

Yes. That didn't work out at all. That was quite unsatisfactory. And we had a rotation of back-of-the-book editors, some better than others. We had problems with getting a good back-of-the-book editor.

Gardner

Is that what the managing editor's job really was?

McWilliams

Well, Bob Hatch had charge of the back-of-the-book section, including the columns. But also having the books is such a business in itself; we always tried to have a book editor. We had Warren Miller at one time until his death, and we had Helen Yglesias.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And we had Beverly Gross, who was, I thought, quite good, and Elizabeth Sutherland, who was quite good. But they left. Because in the case of Beverly Gross: she was teaching at Queens College, and I read a piece that she had written for the Antioch Review about the small magazines, so-called, and the handling of books. I thought it was an excellent piece, showed real insight. I wrote her and had her come in, interviewed her, and asked her if she would like the job. She was stunned to be offered the job under these circumstances, and she said she would. She came in and she was very good. And then what happened: her departmental people at Queens were so impressed by the fact that she had become the literary editor of the Nation that they offered her a job at $24,000 a year at Queens. [laughter] And she went back to Queens.

Gardner

Pulled her away.

McWilliams
They pulled her away. And we've had that kind of experience. You mentioned poetry. I always strongly favored the policy which we established (I helped establish it) of rotating the poetry editorship. But of recent years--and I think it's unfortunate; Grace Schulman is an excellent poetry editor (this is no reflection on her; she, too, is a personal friend)--but they haven't rotated. They've sort of abandoned this rotation idea, and I think it's unfortunate because you get far more unsolicited poems than any other type of manuscript, far more. And if you are not careful, any poet is going to have certain preferences. Then all the other poets think that they're excluded by categories. You can, I think, get a better effect and get better poetry by rotating it. We've had some excellent poetry editors.

Gardner

Yes, you have.

McWilliams

Denise Levertov and many others, first-rate.

Gardner

Right. Well, one thing that's interesting to me is that you brought a special sensitivity to the back-of-the-book [section] that an ordinary editor might not have had because you had started out in literary criticism. Did you pay a lot of attention to the back-of-the-book? Did you keep up with what was going on there?

McWilliams

Well, the genesis of the problem about the back-of-the-book was Margaret Marshal's leaving in 1953. Now, she had for years--twenty years or more--been the back-of-the-book editor, and she and Freda had been intimate friends, and all that sort of thing. Then the Cold War came along, and Margaret Marshal tended to identify with the Cold War intellectuals.

Gardner

Really?

McWilliams
Yes, she did. And people accused--this is a completely phony charge--they accused Freda of easing Margaret Marshal out because of her views. And nothing could be further from the truth; nothing could be further. Freda was so imbued with this Nation tradition that the back-of-the-book should have almost autonomy. And I don't agree with this: I think it has to be supervised like any other section of the magazine. But she was so impressed with this that she would never have dreamed of suggesting anything to Margaret about her handling of that section; that was her responsibility. But there was a lot of scuttlebutt talk in literary circles about how Margaret Marshal had been mistreated and how she had been eased out. Not a word of truth to it.

Gardner

Very interesting.

McWilliams

Not a word. And then after that there was a period when we didn't have a book editor, and I think some of the best work we've done with books was done during that period because we relied on people in certain categories. For example, history, William Appleman Williams: sent him all the books on history, had him sort them out, tell us which ones should be reviewed, deserved to be reviewed, which ones didn't, suggest possible reviewers, do some himself and do listings of the ones that he thought deserved the least mention. Same way with sociology, and so forth and so forth. Now, for two years, I think it was, this worked very well. I think it's not a bad way to handle the back-of-the-book section. But I do think the back-of-the-book section of a magazine like the Nation has to be supervised, because no one person, particularly a person with strong literary feelings, is going to be able to pick out all of the books that should be reviewed in a magazine like the Nation. There is that important economic book of the year that comes along, and how is she going to be a judge of this--or he--you know? And that kind of book has got to be brought to their attention, and they've got to be told, "Listen, this is a very important book, and here are some possible reviewers"--don't need to dictate the reviewer to them but--"these are some people who might do a good review." But you have to feed ideas.

Gardner
Right. Oh, we talked about Robert Hatch yesterday, didn't we?

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

He came originally as a film reviewer.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Which I thought was very interesting.

McWilliams

He's always been very much interested in films. He still does the film column. As I said, he was originally with the *New Republic*, and when *New Republic* moved to Washington, he didn't go with them. He couldn't leave New York.

Gardner

He found another home.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

The drama critic when you arrived was Joseph Wood Krutch.

McWilliams

That's right. And he had left on his own steam, so to speak, because he had retired from--he was in the process of retiring from Columbia, and also ill health in part. [He] moved to Arizona. He was the first person on the staff of the *Nation* that I got to know personally, strangely enough, years back. So he moved to Arizona. I've forgotten when--they've had a couple of people in there.
Gardner

    Harold Clurman came in there.

McWilliams

    Well, anyway, I got Clurman to come in--an excellent choice. You couldn't improve on Clurman.

Gardner

    How did you get him to do it?

McWilliams

    Well, he just happened not to have an outlet at the time. He'd been producing plays . . .

Gardner

    Right.

McWilliams

    . . . and so forth, but we just happened to catch him at the right time.

Gardner

    You only had a few music critics. I think that's true, music and art.

McWilliams

    That's right.

Gardner

    The first one was B. H. Haggin.

McWilliams

    That's right. And the Haggin story would be a small novel because Haggin is quite good in a way. But he is idolatrous. Toscanini is one thing, and the second thing is that--this tends to be true of music critics--they're interested in records. And we began to be sort of irritated by Haggin because if they show an interest in records and review records, then the people that make records will send them what they want, and they begin to develop vast libraries.
[laughter] It's all right except that we felt that he should review live music more. So this led to some tensions, and one thing led to another; we had a big row and blowup with Haggin, and he left in a state of great indignation. He was very sore at me personally. He thought I was a vulgarian who had eased him out unfairly, and so forth. But everyone who's ever had any dealings with him would tell you much the same kind of story that I'm telling you.

Gardner

What happened to him afterwards?

McWilliams

Well, he did music reviews for a number of publications. I think he still does.

Gardner

And still continues to collect records.

McWilliams

And still continues to collect records. So I didn't think that that was a very good choice. I didn't know anything about music, but just from a--well, for example, this is a B. H. Haggin story: he brought in two long pieces about Olin Downes, the music critic for the New York Times. [It was a] venomous, personal attack on Olin Downes. I showed them to Bob Hatch, who was not yet a member of the staff, whose judgment I respected. I went over the whole situation with Kirstein, and I said, "These I'm going to have to reject. I think there's trouble in it, probably libelous. In any case this kind of personal attack is inappropriate for a magazine; there's no excuse for it." So I told him we would not run them. He was--oh, he was furious. He put on a tremendous scene and, oh, he told all kinds of people about censorship, and so forth. Now, as it turned out, if we had run article one--Downes died before article two would have been scheduled--we would have been in the position of announcing a two-part feature about Olin Downes, and then Downes died a day or two after the first issue [would have] appeared. We would have been in a very embarrassing position not to have run that second piece; or if we had run it, we would have looked like dogs!

Gardner

Right.
McWilliams

We had a problem with art and architecture, and I think we've had some very good people. Maurice Grosser, I think, was one of the best we ever had as an art critic, simply because Grosser is a fine artist himself, and he has a remarkable talent for explaining to a person that doesn't understand painting why this is a good painting. He just doesn't say that it's a good painting, but it's a good painting for these reasons. So if you read Grosser and then went to a show you could see more than. . .

Gardner

Understand.

McWilliams

You could understand more, and you could see more. I thought he was excellent.

Gardner

Let me finish up the music people first . . .

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

. . . since there are only four, and then move to art. Lester Trimble succeeded Haggin.

McWilliams

Lester Trimble was very, very nice, very good. I would think not the greatest music critic of the world, but very good, knowledgeable, good.

Gardner

His successor, Benjamin Boretz, was a professor of my sister's at NYU.

McWilliams

Yes, Ben Boretz was a much better critic.

Gardner
And he lasted a long time, too. He was there from `62 to `70.

McWilliams

That's right. He was much better.

Gardner

Had you solicited him?

McWilliams

No, I think Hatch was responsible for that.

Gardner

Oh. How come he left?

McWilliams

At this date, I just don't remember.

Gardner

Then David Hamilton is the most recent.

McWilliams

Yes, David Hamilton is the most recent.

Gardner

Okay, under art, Max Kosloff was . . .

McWilliams

Max Kosloff was there, and Max Kosloff was, I thought, very good. Some of the things he first did for us resulted in his getting a contract for his first book of art criticism; it's a good book. And Max is a very nice guy. I like him. I like him very much. I don't know why he left. I think it was to go someplace, come to the West Coast maybe.

Gardner

Hilton Kramer also did art criticism for you.
Yes. I'm not too pleased with that. I think Hilton Kramer--I don't know how that ever happened, really, probably through Hatch, because by then Hatch was in charge of the columns. But Hilton Kramer has a strong political bias. He is a "Cold Warrior," vehement, "anti-Communist"--put it in quotes--and he can't resist getting into these feuds. I think it's unfortunate. Apart from his being an art critic--as I was leaving for a trip to Europe, he phoned up and he wanted to review Ella Winter's book. It sounded like a reasonably good idea, and I hadn't quite learned all the things you need to know as an editor, so I said all right. I told people in the office to send him Ella's book. The only reason he wanted to review that book was to zero in on some of her ideas about art in her personal collections, and he made it a kind of a personal hatchet job. And Ella's an old friend of mine, so it was kind of embarrassing. But I was away at the time the review appeared, so I couldn't do anything about it. But I learned then to regard with great hesitation any request from anyone to review a book: either they want to do a hatchet job on it, or the author is their brother-in-law. [laughter] Much better to regard with great coolness any request to--unless you have great confidence in the person making the request. Make your own independent judgment about who should review it.

Gardner

The last art critic that I have listed is Laurence Alloway.

McWilliams

Yes. Alloway has been there for quite some time.

Gardner

Since 1970.

McWilliams

Yes. I think he's quite good. Art is not my field; I'm not in a real position to say, but I think he's quite good. I think Hatch is very good on movies, although I have a quarrel with him--not a quarrel but an argument I've never been able to resolve. Hatch only wants to review the film that interests him. And I've said to him again and again, "Bob, it doesn't make any difference. This film has got great social and political overtones; it's a cultural phenomenon. It's a dog
of a movie, but we should pay attention to it." But he has very little interest--for all of his great merits--very little interest in any movie that doesn't interest him. So he tends to review the artistic, very good movies. Well, that's all right, but it isn't broad enough perspective, in my judgment, for a motion-picture critic.

20. Tape Number: IX, Side One (July 18, 1978)

Gardner

I'm running out of names, but there are some more that I wanted to go through. In the poetry section you mentioned a couple, and I'd like you to talk about some of them in greater detail, and so on. But first of all, M.L. Rosenthal was your first poetry person . . .

McWilliams

Yes, excellent.

Gardner

. . . for a long time.

McWilliams

Long time, very, very good, excellent.

Gardner

Your relations were good, I suppose. . . .

McWilliams

Oh, yes, still to this day, very good, very good.

Gardner

Then David--I can't pronounce his name--Ignatow . . .

McWilliams

Ignatow.

Gardner

. . . took over for a year.
McWilliams

Yes, he was good. And there were a couple of other people in there.

Gardner

Maybe so. They may have done the poetry, but weren't on the masthead; I just took [the names] off the masthead.

McWilliams

That's right. I don't know whether Bill Merwin was ever poetry editor or not.

Gardner

No, he just contributed.

McWilliams

He was helpful to us in bringing poetry that he thought well of. We had a very close relationship with W. S. Merwin.

Gardner

When you say "we," does that mean you personally as well?

McWilliams

Well, it means me, but he was also a personal friend of George Kirstein.

Gardner

I see. Now, of course, you were very interested in poetry. Your first works had to do with poetry.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Did you follow the poetry section closely?

McWilliams

I just kept an eye on it, you know, to see what was going on. There were certain arguments I could never win at the Nation. [laughter] And I just gave
up. I couldn't get them interested in--couldn't get Hatch, in my judgment, sufficiently interested in popular culture--an awful time about television.

Gardner

You had a TV reviewer for a while, Ann Langman.

McWilliams

Ann Langman. We had others. Now we have a chap who, I think, is quite good. But it was very difficult to get any attention focused on television despite its enormous impact and influence. And another thing I had trouble about: I was always opposed to the idea in general of reviewing a book of poems unless it was something very, very important and special. I much preferred to look at the poetry of the quarter, where you could get some sense of what was going on, and also mention more titles.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

This argument I had great difficulty in winning, and I lost it repeatedly, and the same thing with respect to other areas of book reviewing. I like the idea that the British do so well, the sort of survey piece.

Gardner

*New York Review of Books.*

McWilliams

Yes, and the *New York Review of Books* to some extent. It was very difficult to get, for reasons I don't understand. But it was always difficult to get this idea across at the *Nation*.

Gardner

Could you, as editor, put your hand down and say this was what you were going to do?

McWilliams
I could have, but I didn't. I was so busy with other things that we would discuss it, then forget about it.

Gardner

Right. Some of the other poetry people--John Logan was there for three years.

McWilliams

Yes. Yes.

Gardner

Allen Planz.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Anything particular to say about any of those people, feel free.

McWilliams

No.

Gardner

How did Denise Levertov come to the Nation?

McWilliams

I don't know, but she was a jewel. I thought she did a splendid job, and she's a beautiful person. I'm just enchanted with her as a person. She's a very delightful human being and was very nice to work with. And she had very interesting political ideas; she was very aware of what was going on in the world.

Gardner

Right. She and her husband were both involved very strongly in the antiwar movement.

McWilliams

Yes, very much so.
Gardner

Let's see. Talk about some of the book editors. You mentioned Elizabeth Sutherland very briefly.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

She was only there a short time.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

And Grandin Conover also a very short time.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Warren Miller was there, though, for three or four years, I think.

McWilliams

Last years of his life. Last years of his life. He did, I think, a respectable job, but he was ill even during that time. He was not quite up to snuff.

Gardner

How did you happen to bring him in?

McWilliams

This was another case when I was away on a European vacation. I've forgotten the circumstances, but there was a sudden vacancy there, and something had to be done because everybody else was planning on taking vacations. So someone suggested Warren Miller, and this seemed like a very good idea because of his reputation as a writer, and so forth. So he was brought in. He was a very delightful man to work with and very nice, and I think he did a good
job. But he was in ill health when he came there. He wasn't in a position, in other words, to really concentrate like he might have done at a different stage in his life or his career.

Gardner

Is that why there was an assistant literary editor?

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner

Helen Yglesias.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Helen Yglesias, of course, comes from a fascinating family.

McWilliams

That's right. [Her husband] Jose--and their son [Rafael] writes too, yes.

Gardner

Four or five novels. Emile Capouya was there from `71 at least until the time you left.

McWilliams

Yes. Yes.

Gardner

How did you bring him in?

McWilliams

I had known him for a long time and liked him very much. He's a very nice, very nice person; I'm very fond of him as a friend. He'd had a lot of experience in publishing. And he'd gotten sort of jaundiced on publishing, and he wanted a chance to do something else. It seemed like a good selection, and I think it
was. Curious thing about Mike, as we called him, is that I never cared too much for his writing. But his judgment about books and so forth was, I thought, very good. But just about the time he resigned, he did a long three-part thing for the *Nation*. I read it two or three times, and I to this day don't know what it said. [laughter] If I had been there, I would have raised questions about it. But he's a wonderfully nice guy, wonderful guy, and I think a very good book editor; he was very good.

Gardner

Now let's talk about that hundredth anniversary.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Because it occasioned both a huge issue in the *Nation* and a book [*One Hundred Years of The Nation*], a retrospect, for which you did an introduction.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

How did you go about putting it together?

McWilliams

Well, we were approaching the centennial, and also Kirstein was in the process—he had announced that he wanted to be relieved of his publisher's responsibilities. His wife knew James Storrow, or she knew Mrs. Storrow—that's the way it was. So he met Storrow for the first time. They got along very well, and Storrow seemed to be very much interested in the magazine. It was obvious that we couldn't take on the burden of editing this big centennial issue without adding to the staff. We'd either have to add to the staff or have it done outside the office, and so Kirstein asked Storrow if he'd like to be the publisher of the special issue. He said he would be delighted, and he picked David Boroff to be the editor. Then shortly after that, Boroff died quite unexpectedly, and we had to get [Victor] Bernstein to come in out of retirement to take the job over and edit it. And I think they put together a very
good centennial issue. And we couldn't bring it out right on the centennial date, because it would have been in the middle of the summer--July 5 was the actual date--so we brought it out in the fall [September 20, 1965]. We thought this would sort of wind out that decade. I mean, more than the centennial, it was a good time to do it because things were changing. Kirstein had been there a decade, and Storrow was coming in as publisher, anyway. So that's the way it happened.

Gardner

Is there anything in that issue that stands out in your mind?

McWilliams

There's quite a good history of the publication up to a point--he didn't bring it down to date--by Richard [Clark] Sterne. It's a good history of the magazine and very useful. And then Henry Christman, the anthologist, did a special anthology [One Hundred Years of The Nation] that year and also brought out those remarkable letters of John [Richard] Dennett about the South in the wake of the Civil War, which you could read in 1965 with the greatest of interest because there's something almost contemporary about them, you know. So in many respects the South had seemed to change so little. So we had a great flurry of activity in connection with the centennial.

Gardner

You wrote an introduction for the anthology . . .

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

. . . that I found to be a very modest introduction, in that you really only dealt with the period up until and partly through Freda Kirchwey.

McWilliams

That's right.
It was mostly historical background. Is there any reason you left your own fourteen years out?

McWilliams

Well, it would seem kind of self-serving to get into it, and so forth. But mentioning that centennial issue reminds me of another contributor that I was very proud of, and that's Christopher Lasch. I think he did excellent things for us. My habit was to put together bales of papers about a subject that intrigued me, you know, and then try and find somebody to write about it. I talked to Lasch, and I said, "I've got this batch of materials about the cultural Cold War. Won't you take a look at it?" I finally got him to do it. And he did a very, very fine piece that we made a special issue called "The Cultural Cold War." And the same technique worked very well with Ted Roszak, Theodore Roszak, because I had this pile of material, and I said to him, "You look at this." He had just gotten back from a year in England, which is interesting. He was the only American secretary of this big peace movement in England, and he'd gotten it by running an ad in the Nation magazine. [laughter] So he'd spent a year in England, and I just gave him this batch of material. I selected him deliberately because he is a very interesting guy. He is very curious, very curious mind, and is not put out at all by the most outlandish kind of idea or suggestion. He just regards it as coolly as you please. "Let's take a look at it," you know, that kind of mind. I thought he would be ideal for it because he'd done some excellent pieces for us. So he examined it, and four of the eight chapters of The [Making of a] Counter Culture, his book on the counterculture, appeared in the Nation and were based on the materials that I had given him; they were the same subject. When I gave it to him, I gave him an outline, and he followed it. And I think that's a very fine book. I think that will stand up in time as being the best book on the subject because it was written at the time, right at the time.

Gardner

Is that a method that you use yourself a lot, accumulation of materials?

McWilliams

Quite a lot.

Gardner
Where would you gather them from?

McWilliams

Oh, well, all kinds of sources. I'm a tremendous clipper of newspapers, and building files. Ted's book on the counterculture, incidentally, was a huge success, as you know. It sold well over 100,000 copies. He had the curiosity and the interest, and he saw it as something new; and he looked at it kind of sympathetically but critically, too. So it was a good combination of material and author.

Gardner

Right. As a clipper of papers, what papers do you regularly read?

McWilliams

Well, we got a tremendous volume of publications in the Nation, mostly on an exchange basis. And then papers we subscribed to: I always saw the Los Angeles Times, the Chronicle, a Boston newspaper (varied them a bit), the Christian Science Monitor, Washington Post, Washington Star.

Gardner


McWilliams

New York Times, of course, St. Louis Post Dispatch. And on the magazines we got on exchange, Business Week and all the others, Wall Street Journal. And British publications--the Manchester Guardian, and the Observer.

Gardner

No wonder you hadn't the time to write books.

McWilliams

No wonder, of course. I not only had no time to write books, but Philip Rahv once used the phrase cultural amnesia that overtakes editors. I know exactly what he had in mind because I had suffered from it after coming to the Nation. I used to have a very good memory, an exceptionally good memory, for titles of books, authors, and what it was about, and so forth. And then during the years at the Nation I read very few books--no time to read
books. And it's amazing just what--reading the manuscripts and sending them back and rejecting; working on manuscripts, and editing; and then seeing it in galleys, and then reading it in page proofs; and going through this kind of routine week after week after week: It will drive almost everything out of your mind. I discovered that I had forgotten a lot. You ask me what the plot of such and such novel was, and I would have to scratch my head about this, because I hadn't thought about it in a long time. And so many other thoughts had been going through my mind in the meantime.

Gardner

And you were dealing with such a wide variety of subjects.

McWilliams

Oh, yes. Yes, punishing variety of subjects.

Gardner

What books did you read when you had the time to read books? What sorts of things?

McWilliams

Well, I liked to read biography, I liked to read social histories, and I liked to read sort of realistic novels. But my judgment of fiction is pretty erratic. I'm not the best judge of fiction.

Gardner

Who do you like these days?

McWilliams

Well, I don't read enough modern fiction to have an informed judgment, largely for the reason I've just indicated. But it is odd. It is disturbing what happens getting involved in routines like this over an extended period of time. I used to look forward to a vacation period because then I could maybe take a couple of books along of my own choice that I wanted to read with no ulterior thought in mind, just read for the pleasure of reading. And I could do that very rarely because I took stuff home almost every night to read, and weekends the same thing.
Gardner

Right. Looking back over your years at the Nation, what do you consider to have been your high spots, your greatest accomplishments?

McWilliams

Well, such as they were, just keeping the magazine alive was certainly the most important one. I think beyond any doubt it would have foundered if I hadn't been there. I was able to keep it going in part through effort and diligence and hard work and the rest of it, and also through luck: meeting the right people at the right time. I had a lot of occasions when good luck loomed very large as a factor in this thing, but that certainly was one. Leonard Downie, in his book on muckraking [The New Muckrakers,] says we kept the muckraking tradition alive--says that I did, being more specific--and I think that's true. I think that in the fifties it had sort of gone over the hill, so to speak. There wasn't much journalism of this kind. And we, I think, certainly revived it with some of the things that we did, the special issues, and so forth, and the subject matter we brought into the arena of public discussion, we removed the taboos from. I think that was reviving the muckraking tradition and certainly would be on that list of things we accomplished. Then after we'd done this, the movement went ahead of us. First Newsday set up an investigative-reporters team. Then the Associated Press set up a team of investigative reporters, and one of the Philadelphia papers had an excellent team of reporters. Other papers began to do it. They could sort of take the ball away from us because they could spend a lot of money; it's a very expensive kind of journalism.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And we did it. We did it not through direct investigations so much as pulling materials together as Cook could do, organizing them, making sense of them, and so forth. And incidentally, this was one of the things that the original muckrakers understood: that it wasn't enough just to investigate a subject, but you had to do it in a way that made sense to the reader, that he could grasp what it was really about. They were very good at this. Muckraking had
fallen to disfavor, and we brought it back to high favor, so to speak. And then it suddenly had these investigative-reporter teams. You had the alternative press, and you had a lot of things happening. And at one point in time--as the Nixonites would say--[laughter] there were some very good and some hopeful signs of documentaries. There were some very good documentary television filmmakers at one time, and then that went out of the picture. Documentaries now are few and far between, the good ones.

Gardner

Oh, there still are some.

McWilliams

There are some; there are some, indeed. And those two things, and also the consistent attack of what we did with regard to the defense of civil liberties and civil rights, civil rights in particular--I think we did a very good job on civil rights--we did a reasonably good job about the military and the Pentagon and the state of the economy, but one of the very difficult things to do in the 1950s was to try and get people to see that the prosperity of the fifties was really a bit phony. The big highway program, the move to the suburbs--it was hard to get people to see initially that this was in part a product of the Cold War, you know, that this money was flowing back, and there was a lot of money in the society. These things were happening, but it didn't mean that we were necessarily creating more real wealth, or that it was being redistributed. It just meant that a lot of people were enjoying a kind of phony prosperity, or as Mr. [John Kenneth] Galbraith said, affluence. Well, affluence is sort of, you know, an ambiguous word. And it was very difficult to do this because to the average American it seemed all very real: the new car was real, the new house in the suburbs was real, and initially the tax bite wasn't too impressive. And I did, oh, any number of editorials about this. One of the very significant things that happened was the pay-as-you-go tax plan, and the payroll deduction. Because very shortly after all of this was set in motion, the average American salaried worker, you ask him, "How much do you make at such and such plant?" he would give you his take-home-pay figure. He'd ceased to think of the fact that his salary was more than that. And this made it possible to carry on some of these extravagant programs, these enormously wasteful programs: military aid abroad, and all the rest of it. It was a very unreal
prosperity. But [it was] very hard to get people to see this, very difficult. We did good economic pieces. Then we tried to do it by satire, by calling attention to the folly of some of this. That succeeded a little better because they could sense from the satire what we were getting at. But that was very difficult to do. I call this aspect of the fifties and sixties the "Great American Barbecue," you know. [laughter] And it was very real to us and very hard to get people to think about it.

Gardner

In looking back, are there any things you would have done differently? I'm sure there are.

McWilliams

Oh, yes.

Gardner

Any major issues you would have dealt with differently, any points of view you might have taken?

McWilliams

Well, I'm sure I could pinpoint a lot of things that we would have done differently. I think we would have perhaps been more inclined to be indifferent to the Stevenson-Eisenhower campaigns. I think we went a little bit overboard for Stevenson, for reasons that I've indicated.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

There are other things where the political emphasis was bungled. I think we should have been more critical about Johnson at the outset and should have realized that the chances of his not going ahead with the war were minimal. But we did sort of feel--for a bit--that he intended to do what I've suggested, but there was no basis for it. I don't know. Incidentally, I think we did a very good job with labor all through this period. We had excellent copy; we had some very good labor people who wrote for us. I think that was a first-rate accomplishment. I think we could have done better with the economy
somehow, to make people realize the connection between overseas aid programs, Marshall Plans, and all the rest of it, and the way it fed back into the economy here. This was kind of an unreal prosperity that was being generated. And the neglect. . . . You talk about the crisis of New York City—well, most of the major cities have been in crises in a sense since World War II, you know. They couldn’t do certain things during World War II; they had to hold back. The idea was, "Wait a bit, the shortages will be eliminated, the prices will come down, then we can do this and that," and they kept postponing doing things. There’s a long neglect of major urban problems in the United States, and we could have done a better job with that. We did one big issue on "The Shame of New York," which makes very good reading in retrospect, because this so-called New York fiscal crisis was all implicit; we had to say what was happening in New York then.

Gardner

Did you have special handling for New York since it was your location? Did you go out of your way to do more pieces about it, or did you try to retain a national perspective?

McWilliams

I tried very consciously to get more of a national perspective into the magazine. We ran for a time a page called "Around the USA." I tried to get local pieces from clear across the country, the most remote unlikely places interested me the most. You have to put a great deal of effort into that because the New York media scene tends to be compulsive, and you tend to get caught up in it and to write about what seems there to be the big thing of the week or at the moment, and so forth. And it very seldom is all that important, really. So I did try to put a great deal more emphasis on developments out across the country than my predecessors had done.

Gardner

On the other hand, as a California historian and a great fan of Californiana, did you find yourself leaning toward California as a subject?

McWilliams
Yes, I did; I did, indeed. It was so easy; it was relatively easy for me because I knew the state, and I knew people I could turn to, and so forth. Our circulation did show there was a response to it, you see. And I knew certain other sections of the country quite well in a way because of my extensive lecture trips. I had the advantage of moving around--knew Chicago pretty well and Milwaukee and these other cities and college campuses; I had visited so many college campuses. So I did try and put as much emphasis as possible on getting outside New York.

Gardner

You had some good correspondents out here, too, and I don't think we've really--we've mentioned Gene Marine. He also did a lot of writing for Frontier.

McWilliams

And Phil Kerby and Hannah Bloom, and in labor, Harry Bernstein.

Gardner

Now with the Times.

McWilliams

Now with the Times and, oh, lots of people.

Gardner

Kenneth Rexroth did a . . .

McWilliams

Oh, Kenneth Rexroth did a lot of things for us. He's a great friend of mine--long, long-standing ties and relationship with Kenneth.

Gardner

Is that so?

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

How? Dating to where?
McWilliams

Oh, way back. Almost from the time I went there to the Nation; I got to know him, of course. His publishers were in the same building we were in, so I would see him every time he had occasion to come to New York. We got to be very good friends. And from the campus trips, I developed lots of contributors I thought were very good, people like Allan Seager, the novelist.

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

A whole host of people. The tradition of the magazine, as I said previously, tended to be eastern seaboard. Godkin thought that was sort of the center of the universe, and Freda had some of the same idea. They were primarily interested in things that were centered there--perfectly natural given their respective backgrounds, just as it would be natural given my background to be more interested in the rest of the country.

Gardner

Well, when you left the magazine you left it in the hands of the Boston Brahmins.

McWilliams

Yes, I did.

Gardner

Have you found any change in the emphasis?

McWilliams

A bit. The point I would like to make is that I resigned as editor of the Nation. As editor I was never a member of the Newspaper Guild, so there was no severance pay situation involved here. And I had a very profound intuition that the time had come when I should, on my own steam, withdraw from the magazine and resign. Because if you think about it, December 1975 did mark a kind of conclusion to a lot of things. I mean, the Watergate thing was over, Vietnam was over, the Cold War was continuing and might get
worse--it might not, but it would not be the same. I was convinced of this; it was not to be the same. There had been a qualitative kind of shift in the whole scene. So this was the logical time to get out and let somebody else come in and maybe develop new points of view, and so forth. But it was my decision and not at all suggested by Storrow. As a matter of fact, he was very much opposed to it. But I felt that I just had to do it at that time. You're guided by your intuitions and your instincts in matters of this kind more than you are by anything else. And I thought, "This is the end of the chapter; this is the time to get out." So that's why I resigned when I did.

Gardner

And the chapter ended. Well, what do you think about what's happened to the Nation since you left?

McWilliams

Well, I think it's been quite good in some respects. I think what [Victor] Navasky has done about the Hiss case is excellent. I think they've done some excellent pieces. I've urged them to be more interested in the rest of the country. It's very difficult because they're reorganizing, and they're so preoccupied. They're so pinned down there at the moment that it's hard for them to do it. I think in that respect I can understand why they're still caught up in the reorganization; I think they'll do better as time goes on. It's just, I think, they feel they don't have the time for it now. Navasky's got ability; he's an eastern seaboard character, you know--Yale and New York Times Magazine--and he edited his own magazine, called Monocle, at one time. He is interested in that scene primarily, and he doesn't know too much about the rest of the country--should get out and see it. I think the editorial part--I don't quite agree with the way they do editorials and the way they handle editorials. I was always a great admirer of Walter Lippmann's editorial style: Keep it as simple and as plain, and make it as forceful as you can; avoid quotations if you possibly can, or references; keep it confined to a subject--a subject--and don't try to write it. Don't try to make it, you know, "written." I think they tend to want to write too much--know what I mean?--with flourishes and cadenzas, and so forth. I think that's all right in its own place, but I don't think it has anything to do with an editorial section.

Gardner
Particularly with the *Nation*.

McWilliams

And particularly with the *Nation*, that's right. So I don't quite agree with the way they do editorials.

Gardner

You still do pieces.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

I suppose you'll continue to.

McWilliams

For the time being I will, yes. And if I can help them in any way, they know all they have to do is phone. I try not to interfere with them in the slightest degree. People want me to submit manuscripts, and so forth. I tell them, "No, you just go ahead and submit them." I don't want to try and make them think I'm pressuring them in any way, accept a piece or do this or do that or the other.

Gardner

What do you think about the future of the small independent magazine?

McWilliams

Well, it's got very, very serious problems, these small circulation magazines. Yet the survival potential for some of them, particularly for the *Nation*, is, I think, quite good because the *Nation* has this solid base of libraries and institutional readership and other newspapers, and so forth. It's got a real base to build on. It is relatively low, very low in terms of its editorial costs, its overhead costs. So it's got a good chance of survival. And I think the role and function of these small magazines of opinion is more important than ever in this big mass-media world and all the rest of it. I think they are more needed and more necessary and they have a great role, but they've also got hideous problems. For example, the newsstands are all cluttered up with all kinds of
publications. Newsstand distributors don't like to fuss with the magazine that sells [few copies], even though it sells regularly a certain number of copies. But if it's not a large number, they tend to be disinterested. Very difficult to get any kind of newsstand distribution for magazines like the *Nation*, and the great bulk of magazines sold today are sold out of supermarkets. You know?

Gardner

Right.

McWilliams

And actually, the whole relationship has changed, so that the magazine pays the supermarket for the display slot that it has. Developments of this kind--and television, too, of course--are making it very, very difficult. And I think the subscription price on the *Nation* is too high. I would greatly favor reducing it, taking a chance on it, because a lot of people that would like to subscribe to the magazine feel that they can't, young people in particular.

Gardner

Right, which is the important constituency.

McWilliams

Very important constituency--young assistant instructors, and so forth, and students. But they can't. The Newspaper Guild contract is there; they have to meet the guild requirements. And every cost has gone up, as you know, so they never will get a great deal of advertising. So I think that what it comes down to is that people have to understand their importance, have to understand that they must be supported. Pick the one that you like the best and do what you can to support it. I think these magazines have to go out and organize their constituencies and get their readers to go out and get new readers, and so forth. Do it in an organizational way rather than through mass advertising or through direct mails, which are too costly and don't work well for magazines of this kind.

Gardner

We talked very briefly about what the field was when you first came into it, what some of the other publications were. What are they today? Pretty much the same ones?
McWilliams

Pretty much the same ones.

Gardner

I remember we talked about *New Leader*.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

*Commonweal, New Republic.*

McWilliams

*Christian Century* and *New Republic*, the *Progressive*—same group of publications. The *Reporter* has dropped out, but there's basically—but of course you have *Rolling Stone*, and you have other publications of this kind. But I don't see that they really fit into this category.

Gardner

Of course *Rolling Stone* has outstanding investigative reporting.

McWilliams

It does indeed. Yet I don't have the feeling it's read the way people read these other publications.

Gardner

Not the same way they read the *Nation*.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

The *Nation* doesn't tend to have as many ads for guitars.

McWilliams

That's right. I think these magazines, as I say, have very, very tough problems. The people don't understand the importance of supporting magazines of this
kind. Once upon a time I did a survey of quite a considerable number of contributors who had written for the magazine. And the whole point of the survey was to find out, "Are you a subscriber? Have you ever been a subscriber to the Nation? If not, why don't you subscribe to the Nation? What have been your reasons for not subscribing?" Well, the answers were predictable: a great many of them were not subscribers. They were obviously reading it in the university library. These were people who would almost knock your door down to get a piece published in the magazine, but feel no responsibility to see that there were some outlets for the kind of thinking that they practiced. They don't seem to sense this as any kind of responsibility of theirs.

Gardner

Right. Buy a copy of Writers Market rather than a subscription.

McWilliams

Yes, that's right; that's right. That was in general the kind of attitude reflected. If all of the people that submitted manuscripts to the Nation were subscribers, they wouldn't have a problem in the world.

Gardner

Do you think that's true of the other magazines as well, or do you think the Nation had...?

McWilliams

I think it's true of them, but I think it's particularly true of the Nation because it's so well known.

Gardner

And its long tradition.

McWilliams

And its long tradition. But there's a tremendous flow of manuscript material. And I sympathize with them; there are limited outlets, you know. But this is all the more reason why they ought to do what they can to support it. And even though the subscription price has gone up, they spend money for all kinds of
other purposes not as sensible as subscribing to the *Nation*. You know?  
[laughter]

Gardner

Right. Well, let's end our session for today on that note.

McWilliams

Okay.

21. Tape Number: X [video session] (July 19, 1978)

Gardner

First of all, as I mentioned to you, the first subject that I wanted to discuss today was the ACLU of Southern California, and then nationally as well, because we do have a very strong archive on that downstairs and because I've done some interviewing in the area. We talked briefly about your seeing Upton Sinclair at the beginning in the 1920s. When did you first get involved with ACLU and in what way?

McWilliams

Well, I don't exactly remember, but it would be in the early thirties. I can't remember the years in which I served on the local board, but I did serve for some time on the local board, and I did handle a few cases for them, not many. They asked me to defend some Mexican citrus strikers out near Whittier--I remember doing that and one or two other issues that I handled, but I wasn't active as a counsel for the ACLU. I knew Dr. Clinton J. Taft very well, and the late Al Wirin was a close friend. I knew him and the other board members, of course. Then I would go with Dr. Taft on his annual fund solicitation meetings in San Diego and other communities. I remember this with some amusement because he had saved a big box full of pencils which had become smaller with the years, and he would sharpen them to a very sharp point so people could sign their pledge cards. [laughter] He had saved these pencils for years and years and years. And we would go to San Diego. I would go with him, and I would talk about the criminal syndicalism act and other atrocities and things of that sort, and then he would distribute the pledge cards, and we would see what the response was. [laughter]
Gardner

Did you alter your pitch according to what the responses were?

McWilliams

No, no. There was no point in trying to do that, because most of the people that turned out for those meetings were old friends of the ACLU anyway.

Gardner

What was your function as a board member, or what were your functions?

McWilliams

Well, we met from time to time to discuss policies and whether we should get into particular cases, and that sort of thing. But as it usually worked out, Al Wirin was a jump or two ahead of us. [laughter] He would get into cases before the board had authorized it or had known much about it. And I think it was good that he did. I remember one case that made Dr. Taft very annoyed was Al's racing off to Gallup, New Mexico, to defend some strikers. But actually he did exactly the right thing. He acted very quickly to get down there; it was a case where counsel was badly, badly needed. So his impetuosity was one of his major virtues as a counsel for the ACLU, but it used to be amusing to listen to Dr. Taft's annoyance with him. [laughter]

Gardner

Were there any conflicts on the board that you participated in and battled over?

McWilliams

Well, there were a number of issues that we discussed at some length. And most of our controversies were with the national board or, more specifically, with Roger Baldwin, who I think was disturbed by the presence on the board of Leo Gallagher. He wasn't originally, but he became disturbed with the presence of Leo, who had a reputation for being--and I think was perhaps--a member of the Communist party. But the point about Leo was that he was really dedicated to civil liberties, and you couldn't fault his conduct as a board member. He hadn't done anything on the board that any of us could take
exception to, so we continued to defend him and to defend his presence on the board, and I think this annoyed Roger a bit.

Gardner

During what period would this be?

McWilliams

I can't quite remember the years in which this was true. But the finale to the story is that some years after this particular controversy, Leo broke with the Communist party with a resounding thud, and this had reverberations all through the Left community. And it demonstrated what we, all those of us who had known him, were convinced of from the beginning: that he was really a civil libertarian. And there were other issues of that kind that came up, and we had our disagreements, but it was fun serving on the board. I enjoyed it; I always enjoyed those meetings. Clore Warne was a board member and was a very dear friend of mine, and I can't recall offhand some of the other board members. Then, of course, when Eason Monroe came down, I--it just so happens that I had known about Eason's difficulties in San Francisco and the fact that he was looking for a position of some kind. I reported back to the board here in Los Angeles, because just at that time they needed a new director. I said this person I think would be admirable, and that's really how they came to consider Eason's application.

Gardner

Was he aware of this?

McWilliams

Yes, yes; he was. I think he was a very good director, excellent director. That's my impression, certainly.

Gardner

Did you get to follow his years out here closely? Because after all, those were the years that you were in the East.

McWilliams
No, no; I didn't. I would see him from time to time when I was out here, because I've been out here usually once a year at least since I left, and sometimes more often, but always for very short visits.

Gardner

Why don't you give some of your own perspective on some of these people? I'll start with Eason as long as he's the most recently mentioned.

McWilliams

Well, he was admirable. He had sensitivity, he had understanding, and he had energy, and he had presence, good speaker, and all that sort of thing. And I think, if I may say so, [he was] a better director than Dr. Clinton Taft. Dr. Taft was a very old-fashioned kind--and limited civil libertarian. As it developed, he wasn't exactly a partisan of Gerald L.K. Smith's but he came very close to being; there was that kind of element in his background. So he really was, let's say, a rather primitive civil libertarian and limited in his perspective of civil liberties. So I think Eason was a better director.

Gardner

You mentioned Clore Warne.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

I've been wanting you to talk a little bit about him. I had a note about that the other day.

McWilliams

Well, Clore was a very dear friend of mine and a wonderful person, wonderful person. And he had had--I think fortunately--he had had an involvement with the socialist movement in St. Louis just preceding World War I. I think this was very good for him because it gave him that kind of perspective. He had to come to Los Angeles for reasons of health. Then when he began to practice law, he became interested--he was always interested in civil liberties--but he always had this carry-over of interest, a political interest which he never lost. And it's to me interesting that people who have been involved, or who were
involved, in the socialist movement in that period usually retain their interest. It was not something that they altogether abandoned; they kept [it] up. Through Clore I met Louis Boudin and other people of this kind, and it was very interesting, a very valuable experience for me. And we were neighbors of the Warnes for many years. As a matter of fact, the home that we still own in Los Angeles was purchased from Clore originally. So he was a neighbor. And we used to discuss everything under the sun every Sunday morning.

Gardner

Over the *Los Angeles Times*?

McWilliams

I beg your pardon?

Gardner

While reading the *Los Angeles Times*?

McWilliams

Yes, while reading the *Los Angeles Times*, right.

Gardner

Isaac Pacht is another one I think might be interesting for you to comment on.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

He and Clore Warne were . . .

McWilliams

The firm when I knew it was Pacht, Pelton, and Warne. And Clore was the--law firms, in my experience, successful law firms, tend to have a front man, a spokesman, sort of, for the firm, who is usually referred to as the business getter. Then they have a good trial lawyer. And then they have a workhorse, who runs the office, does the research, and all that sort of thing. Clore was the workhorse for that firm; [laughter] and Judge Pacht was the trial lawyer--very good one, too, I might add; and Pelton was one of the prime business getters
for the firm. I knew the members of the firm very well, had many dealings with them. They were all good friends of mine.

Gardner

What sort of emphasis was their law?

McWilliams

They represented a wide diversity of interests here. At one time they represented the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees in the motion-picture industry at a time when I represented some of the dissidents of that union. We were involved in this law-suit, which had some far-ranging kind of developments and implications. But they represented a lot of diversified interests, all the way from commercial interests and banking interests and companies of one kind and another, and also Las Vegas interests. At one time they represented Bugsy Siegel.

Gardner

Is that so?

McWilliams

Yes. But it was a very good law firm. They were very astute and had an excellent reputation.

Gardner

Since you've mentioned Leo Gallagher, perhaps you could talk about him for a moment or two.

McWilliams

Well, I was always fascinated by Leo because of his background, his training as a Jesuit, and his combination of rather devout Catholicism, which he and his sister and his family had, with his radicalism. He was a fascinating man to watch. In the trial of a court action he wasn't the most tactful trial lawyer in the world, because his temper usually got out of hand. But he was always willing to defend people, all kinds of people. And he did, I think, by and large a pretty good job of it. And I knew him very well and was always very friendly with him.
Gardner

Were you involved with the national ACLU at all?

McWilliams

Yes. There was a period when I was on the national board. Here again, I think Roger looked askance at Nathan Greene, who was a New York lawyer, a friend of mine. He regarded the two of us with some degree of— I won’t say suspicion, but dubiety, because we took the position that people like Elizabeth Gurley Flynn should be left— she had been elected to the board, she had served a term, and she had been recently reelected. And it was at this stage that Roger thought that she should be removed from the board. And the only reason, of course, was that she was a well-known member of the Communist party. But there was no evidence that she had ever caused any trouble on the board. Nathan and I thought it was most unfortunate to proceed to put her on trial, so to speak, and to vote her out of membership. Morris Ernst was the prime mover in this operation, and he had a great influence on Roger. And Morris Ernst also had very close ties with the FBI, very close ties with the FBI. So that was the threshold of the period in which the ACLU didn't really do what it should have done. But Roger resigned about that time, and it was his successor, Patrick Malin, who was in that position, who was there in the four or five years when they seemed to retreat from their defense of political pariahs. Then of course they corrected that situation, and they swung back to their original position, but not until after the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee had come into being—and not as a rival organization in any sense, but as an organization that was willing to defend some of these people who couldn’t find a good defense counsel.

Gardner

Were you involved with the ECLC?

McWilliams

Yes, I was one of the organizers of ECLC.

Gardner

Along with . . . ?

McWilliams
Along with Clark Foreman, and I.F. Stone, and Corliss Lamont, Palmer Weber, and--oh, I can't think of some of the others, but there was quite a group back of the ECLC. Well, Leonard Boudin, of course, who was counsel and is still counsel for the committee. And I think they did a good job in filling a gap in the whole defense of civil liberties at a time when there was great tension and pressure, did a very good job.

Gardner

And it exists still?

McWilliams

Oh, yes. It's now called the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee and is very active in a lot of major issues at the present time. I haven't been active in it for some years, so I'm not fully apprised of its current agenda, but it does a good job.

Gardner

Corliss Lamont became quite a pariah of ACLU after ECLC . . .

McWilliams

Yes, that's right.

Gardner

Did the same thing happen to you?

McWilliams

No, it never really did. The relations were always as friendly on a personal basis as ever; I've never had a personal quarrel of any kind with Roger. We were very good friends then; we are very good friends today. But there was a certain coolness in the relationship for a time because they were a little afraid of involvement with people like the people who had organized the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. They regarded it somehow as a rival organization, which maybe to some extent it was in the sense that a man like Corliss, who had been a large contributor to the ACLU, was now contributing to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee.

Gardner
McWilliams

Corliss is a very stouthearted, consistent person in the defense of civil liberties.

Gardner

Tell me about Roger Baldwin. When did you first meet him? Was it through ACLU?

McWilliams

Through ACLU. I don't remember just when it was, but it was fairly early on. I know that he reviewed my book *Prejudice* and thought very highly of it. We had quite a number of contacts in re the Japanese-American situation. But I had known him before that. Just when I met him for the first time, I couldn't tell you; I just don't remember.

Gardner

But you remained on good terms through your *Nation* years.

McWilliams

Oh, yes. And a couple of times when we were on vacation, we would meet Roger and spend quite a bit of time with him at Martha's Vineyard.

Gardner

When you got to New York, did you continue your relationship with ACLU?

McWilliams

Not actively, because I was so very busy, preoccupied, with the *Nation*, I didn't have time for any organizational activities. I spent very little time, as a matter of fact, in connection with the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. I was a board member, but I didn't show up at all meetings. I just couldn't; I didn't have the time for it.

Gardner
Well, that covers all the questions I have, I think, about ACLU. Let's talk now about the things you've done since you left the Nation. You left in the end of '75.

McWilliams

That's right. I resigned as editor. I stressed the fact that I resigned, because the word retirement has--I don't know why--it has certain connotations that I regard as unfortunate. You're a retiree. And I wasn't retiring in that sense. I was resigning. I felt that [with] the political situation in the country, a chapter had been concluded, a thirty-year chapter had been concluded with the culmination of Watergate and the removal of the last troops from Vietnam; and regardless of what happened in the future, it would be a different kind of story. So I felt that the time had come when I should resign on my own initiative. I was asked to stay on by the publisher--and urged to stay on by him, I might add--but I didn't think that I should. And since then I've been very, very busy. I'm busy with a lot of miscellaneous journalism, book reviews, and articles, and quite a bit of lecturing, and attending conferences of one kind or another, and also helping the Nation in various ways. I've done some book reviews and quite a lot of editorials for them and currently do--supposed to do--a column twice a month. So I've been very, very . . .

Gardner

Supposed to, or do?

McWilliams

Do, have been doing. And also I finished a draft of a book, so I have been very preoccupied and very busy.

Gardner

What are some of your lecture topics these days?

McWilliams

About politics and a retrospective view of the whole period from 1945 to 1975. I sometimes talk about what's happened to the civil rights movement, and things of that kind, generally I would say, however, in the area of politics and journalism, about the role of the journal with small circulation,
muckraking in the past and muckraking at the present time, and issues of this kind.

Gardner

And when you do book reviews--as you say, you did them for the Nation--who are some of your other outlets?

McWilliams

The Chicago Sun-Times. I do quite a number [of] editorials--not editorials, but signed pieces [that] appear on the editorial page of the Baltimore Sun and other outlets of this kind that I write for. Occasionally, a magazine editor phones and wants me to do a piece, and that sort of thing. So I'm kept very busy indeed.

Gardner

And the book you have coming out [The Education of Carey McWilliams] is autobiographical?

McWilliams

Well, I wouldn't say "autobiographical," because I'm much too discreet to write an autobiography. [laughter] But it's a personal political memoir; it's personal history, sort of in the vein of Vincent Sheehan's personal history, and only autobiographical in the sense that I have to explain how I got involved in certain movements and political affairs, and so forth, but not autobiographical, really. It's more history, although I should immediately qualify that, because I make it very clear in the introduction that I'm not a historian. I don't fancy myself as a historian, and this shouldn't be read as history, because it would be too limited a point of view. It's just my point of view about certain things that happened in my lifetime that had had some national repercussions and importance.

Gardner

Do you cover your whole lifetime?

McWilliams

Well, yes, because I found it necessary to key the reader in, so that he would know my background. He would have some basis to judge whether I inherited
my views, whether this was representative of a family bias, or something of this sort, and also what my formal educational background was, because so far as my education was concerned, it was monumentally irrelevant to any of the issues that I had to cope with when I got out of university, and I make this clear, I hope. Also, my family background was interesting. It no doubt had its impact and effect, but I didn't come from an intellectual family--that is to say, there was very little discussion of books or anything of that sort in our household. It was a western cattle-ranch kind of background. My parents were very, very busy with their activities and what they had to do on the ranch. So I still don't know where and how I became such a devoted reader of books and began to acquire literary interests. I just don't know how this happened, and it happened quite early on. But certainly my family, as nearly as I can determine, had no influence on my political views at all, none whatever. As a matter of fact, both my father and my mother were quite conservative, quite conservative people. She came from a Republican family background, my father from a traditionally Democratic family background, but they were both equally conservative.

Gardner

We talked about the fact that you're a great collector and personal archivist.

McWilliams

That's right.

Gardner

Did you draw on your vast archives to put this autobiography together, or was it more a think piece?

McWilliams

I started out thinking that there were certain areas that I should research and go over to refresh my recollections, and so forth. And after spending months at this, I finally abandoned it because it was too vast, too big an undertaking. For example, the bound volumes of the Nation--two a year during the period that I was editor and also during the period that I was a kind of de facto editor--would fill a big shelf in a library.
And you start going through those bound volumes—sixty or more—and you get lost. I found I was being led down all kinds of byways. Just turning the pages would recall to me how I got this particular piece, and what the point was about this article, and who this contributor was, and all this sort of thing.

I just realized suddenly that I'd have to stop it because it was leading me too far astray. So sometime I may do a book about the _Nation_ as a publication, but this manuscript that I just completed deals with the _Nation_ only peripherally. I describe how I got involved and my experience under three publishers, and so forth, but I don't go into the details of the magazine and its background, and all that, or its problems for that matter.

Probably. Well, I've always collected material on subjects that I've been interested in. I've said again and again that books that I've written were largely written to relieve my ignorance on certain subjects. [laughter] When I was in liberal-arts college, the social sciences were really—all they just did essentially was to rationalize the existing racial status quo. And at USC in particular, they were preoccupied microscopically with measuring social distance between certain racial groups and the majority in certain relationships. I spent a lot of time in researching dozens of theses on this kind of business of social distance, but they never really got into the question of what created the distance in the first place. So my exposure to that kind of sociology was not helpful at all, nor was my exposure to political science and theory at USC of any help to me, although my professors in that field became very good friends, and I liked them very much and had continuing relations with them. But it didn't help very much to take textbook courses in political
theory when you could see what was happening in Southern California at that time; it was far more interesting. So my books have essentially been written to relieve my ignorance about subjects that I got immensely interested in.

Gardner

Right. You know, one thing that just occurred to me in listening to you just now is realizing that though you’re a USC alumnus, you’re really not very involved with the university in many ways, are you?

McWilliams

No. They were kind enough to give me an honorary degree some years back. But when I was there I wrote editorials on the [Daily] Trojan that caused all kinds of trouble for the editor about every other issue. I wrote editorials for the Trojan; I edited the college literary magazine, the Wooden Horse; and I also wrote for the college humor magazine [Wampus]. So I was involved in those kind of activities on the campus.

Gardner

But afterwards?

McWilliams

But not really afterwards, because at that time USC was not the kind of institution that I would have picked if I had been at total liberty to decide where I wanted to go to school. Football emphasis was very great. I was interested in football, and I was a loyal Trojan fan, but not obsessively so, not obsessively so. But I had formed many, many close friendships while I was there, and I have nothing but fond recollections of the years that I spent at USC. But it was not the kind of institution that could have made much impression on me in those years.

Gardner

Did you have much of a relationship with [Rufus] von KleinSmid or Norman Topping?

McWilliams

With von KleinSmid, I think. One of my contributions to the college humor magazine was to just print without any comment at all the biographical
information about Dr. von KleinSmid that appeared in *Who's Who*. It filled column after column after column in *Who's Who*, and it was all really trivia, listed every petty distinction that had ever come his way, you know: man of the year by the Rotary Club of Merced County or of whatever. [laughter] And when you sat down and read it out of its context in *Who's Who*, it was, I thought, very funny. But that was the extent of it. Of course, I didn't like compulsory chapel, and I wrote an editorial against compulsory chapel that caused a great deal of trouble--for my editor, not for me. But he was a gallant man, "Teet" Carle, who later became head of the public relations department for Paramount Pictures. But he was very gallant; he wouldn't do any backstepping on the thing. But I did resent compulsory chapel.

Gardner

What about relations with UCLA later on? As you told me, there'd been several gifts that you've given, for example.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

Were your relations with Larry Powell, Ernest Carroll Moore, with--well, we talked about Sproul, so we can skip that.

McWilliams

Well, my relations with UCLA were always very good, in a sense that I knew Larry Powell. [He] was a personal friend of many years, and Jake Zeitlin was a personal friend of many years, and he has had close relations with the library here and some of the faculty people. Dean McHenry and others who were here were very good friends. Leonard Bloom and others, I knew very well. And then I was at one time married to Dorothy Hedrick, who was the daughter of Dr. E.R. Hedrick, the distinguished mathematician who was vice-president and provost of UCLA. So I had ties with the institution.

Gardner

Over the last few years, there's been, of course, a great Carey McWilliams revival, partly I suppose because of the liberalizing of philosophy--or the
apparent liberalizing--partly also because of the film *Chinatown*, and the play *Zoot Suit*. How has this affected you?

McWilliams

Well, I've been, you know, naturally pleased that interest in some of my books has carried through. As a matter of fact, I'm very pleased, and I take considerable satisfaction in the fact that virtually all of them--I think with two exceptions--are still in print, including the Bierce book, which was published in 1929. So they continue to be of interest to people, and that's to me the most important thing. And also the fact that a book like *Southern California Country* would stimulate Robert Towne to do the script for *Chinatown*, which is flattering and interesting. And also that a book like *North from Mexico* should have a continuing interest of the Mexican-American community, not only here but in the United States.

Gardner

Right. You say that as though this is a foreign country.

McWilliams

Yes. [laughter] So it is, in a way.

Gardner

Also, a lot more people have been beating paths to your door doing interviews.

McWilliams

Yes.

Gardner

There are graduate students and professors and journalists. Has this disrupted your schedule in any way?

McWilliams

Yes, it has to a considerable degree. I feel if a graduate student wants to talk to me about something, I feel sort of a compulsion to go along with the suggestion because it seems churlish not to. But it does take time, and they come with their recorders, and they are working on various subjects that they
think I might be able to help them with. They want suggestions, and so forth, and it does take quite a bit of time. But I do it; I haven't declined any of them, because I think I should [do it]. I think it's some sort of obligation, particularly if it is something that has a bearing on the Nation or my years at the Nation. If I can help them in connection with that, I feel I should.

Gardner

Right. What about your plans for the future?

McWilliams

Well, there's some books that I would like to find time to write that I would still like to get into. I would like to write another book about California, or two books about California, as a matter of fact. I would like to do a book with some such title as "California Political Tintypes," with chapters about all kinds of politicians that I've known in this state--some of them are rather deviant characters--because I found them very fascinating, very interesting personalities. And I just happened to have had some insight into the careers of some of them. I would like to do a chapter on Ellis Paterson, Sheridan Downey, Kent Parrott, William Bonelli, Arthur Samish, people of this kind, and give the impression that I had of them at the time, and the insights that I was able to acquire about their backgrounds and their interests, and so forth. That's one I would relish doing because some of them were very colorful characters and very interesting. I'd like to do that. Then there are a couple of other books about California that I would like to do. And I have other projects in mind.

Gardner

Since you mentioned California, you get out here--what? about once a year now, once every couple of years?

McWilliams

Well, I've averaged at least once a year. And sometimes a couple of times a year.

Gardner

What are your impressions of California now? It's over fifty years since the first time you set foot in the golden valley.
That is right. I think it's changed--of course it has changed, obviously. It's changed a great deal, and I think in no part of the state more than Southern California. I'm amazed at the transformation of, for example, San Diego, because the San Diego that I knew when I first came to live in California--I used to go down there for meetings and to speak occasionally, and that sort of thing--that San Diego was Republican, extreme Protestant, and very, very conservative. Now this modern San Diego is quite a different community, and I think a very interesting and very fascinating community. There've been great changes in Los Angeles in terms of racial composition, population, and that sort of thing. And the whole influx--the relative position of the Spanish-speaking has changed a great deal. California as the first third-world state, the concept of your lieutenant governor is, I think, a very interesting one. And there's been all kinds of changes. Of course, there are aspects of the changes here that I don't like. I think it's a less charming community than the community I first knew, in terms of atmosphere and all the rest of it, and the traffic and the things that have happened: the freeways, high-rises. I don't like high-rises anywhere, whether in New York or in Los Angeles. That kind of development here rather appalls me. But it still retains basically its essential character. It still is an exceptional state. And it's reacting to its problems in an exceptional manner, and in the course of doing this it really is providing an example for the rest of the country. The innovations that spring up here are extremely interesting. That, too, is in the pattern of its exceptional background as a state. I wouldn't be surprised, of course, if there are numerous Southern Californias [that] come into being via California all the way down the peninsula. So one of these days it probably will be possible to start in Santa Barbara and drive all the way down to the lower end of the peninsula, with all communities that are really all linked together in one way or another, or with very little open space between them.

Right. Well, that's on its way.

And that's sort of an appalling thing to contemplate, you know. But I rather expect to see it happen.
McWilliams

We have been torn--my wife and I--as to where to reside because we have ties; we've lived in New York since 1951. We have lots of friends we know; it's very congenial for us to live there. At the same time, we have lived in Los Angeles, and we have many, many personal friends in Los Angeles, and that creates quite a constant tension. After all, we reversed the pattern of migration in the United States: we went from West to East, and the trend, of course, is the other way and continues to be the other way. So where we will end up, I don't know. I don't think it will be midway between. [laughter]

Gardner

Kansas City. Well, one of the themes that you deal with in a couple of your works is the idea of the Pacific as the--well, say, that the nineteenth century was the Atlantic century, the twentieth century being the Pacific century. Do you see that reflected in California today?

McWilliams

I'd say [it's] beginning to be reflected. It's very odd that it has been so slow for the Pacific to have its full impact here. You know, there were people like William Seward and the historian Frederick Jackson Turner who wrote about the Pacific in all its mystery and its potential impact on the future, and all that. But they wrote things of this sort before the turn of the century. And yet, despite the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the acquisition of Hawaii, and so forth, California in my judgment has yet to feel the full impact of the development of the Pacific basin. And it's been slow to do this despite all of these developments which have involved it in the Pacific and made it aware of the Pacific in a way that was never true before. But we still haven't felt the impact of it. I've been obsessed for years, and I've written quite a bit about this--the relationship between Australia and California and why one is the logical supplement of the other. They are very much alike. If you think of California and then if you think of a big circle around the West, that circle around in the West would be the equivalent of the outback in Australia, you know. And they're complementary
in terms of seasons, and so forth. They have many of the same interests in the potentiality of solar energy and things of this kind. And yet there has been very little, relatively little, contact between that great continent and California. And one of these days it's going to begin to happen. When it does happen, it will have astonishing repercussions. The Australians, of course, were involved in the gold rush, but then they developed their own gold rush, and that sort of terminated it for the time being. And the Australians are so amusing in their insularity in a way. If there's the slightest increase in unemployment, a third of one percent, it has vast repercussions politically in Australia. They have not been so much developmental-conscious as they have put the emphasis on staying as they were, as they are. But one of these days, this is going to end. They're not going to be able to do it. When this happens, I think you'll be amazed at the developments between these two great powers.

Gardner

That's very interesting. Our governor now is an old California Democrat. Have you known Jerry Brown for any length of time?

McWilliams

No, I didn't. Well, on one occasion, when his father was running against Nixon for governor. Pat Brown was in New York and phoned me and had wanted to see me at breakfast. So I met him at the Waldorf, and, as I recall, Jerry was along.

Gardner

Had you known Pat?

McWilliams

Oh, yes. I had known him for years and had written political speeches for him when he ran for attorney general and all that sort of thing, and had had contacts with him down the years. So I knew him quite well. But I don't know the son, except I think I just had this one meeting.

Gardner

That's very interesting. [I'm] surprised that you didn't see him growing up, playing in the yard, while you were writing the speeches.
McWilliams

That's right. As a matter of fact, speaking of Australia, I sent Pat Brown a memo once upon a time suggesting that he get in touch with some journalistic interests, contacts, that I had in Australia, and try to get them to work with him in setting up two commissions: a group of Australians that would come and be shown California throughout the state, and a group of Californians that would go to Australia and be shown all around Australia, so that these two entities would have a better understanding, each of the other, and of the potentialities for trade and cultural exchange and scientific exchange, and so forth, because they're so alike in many respects. He was very much interested, but of course it got bogged down in other more urgent issues at the time.

Gardner

Right. What about Pat Brown? I hadn't realized that there was that close association early on.

McWilliams

I think he was an admirable--that he is an admirable person, that he was a first-rate governor. One thing I regret: that at the time of the [Caryl] Chessman case, I had an impulse at the time to fly out here so I could set up an appointment with him and sit down and talk to him about the Chessman case, because I was convinced that I could get him to see why he should have maybe taken a different action than he did. But I didn't, and I've regretted it ever since. But he's an extraordinarily humane and decent person. Well, as a matter of fact, the former wife of George Kirstein, one of the publishers of the Nation, was returning from a trip to Italy on the Andrea Doria, and her husband was lost in that disaster. And an Italian seaman was extraordinarily gallant in helping rescue her and one of her daughters. Some years later he was arrested in California and given a prison sentence--I don't remember what the offense was--and he wanted very much to be able to return to Italy and to leave the country. He had family problems in Italy and so forth, and Jane Kirstein spoke to me about it. I said, "I think this can be arranged." I said, "You write out in some detail exactly how gallant this man was in this disaster, what he did. Just write it out in detail and let me have it." She did that, and I sent it to Pat Brown. I said, "Can you do anything to help this man? He did a great service and rescued some people when he acted a bit beyond the call of duty."
So within a couple of weeks I heard from him and the chap--the man--was paroled from prison, or released, on condition that he would leave the country. Of course he wanted to go back to Italy; he had family problems there and so forth. So this is a sample of how well he reacted to situations of this kind. The Chessman case was sort of an exception.

Gardner

He got in some trouble with CDC [California Democratic Council], too, later on.

McWilliams

Yes, he did.

Gardner

It had a little split-off. Were you involved in any of that? Did you know CDC?

McWilliams

Yes, I knew those people in CDC very well. But editorially, we said that they should support Brown, and that they should keep in the background some of their personal preferences on issues and so forth because he was so obviously, in my judgment, a superior candidate than Nixon. But I think they expected too much of him. They were rather unfair to him. But of course the war in Vietnam was a major underlying cause.

Gardner

Right. Well, as a last note, why don't I solicit from you your opinion, as an observer of American politics for half a century, on the situation now as you see it happening over the next few years?

McWilliams

Well, I think this is a very strange period that we're in at the present time. I have said, and I think I may have mentioned to you the other day, that as I see it we have no politics at the present time--that is, national politics. City, state politics are a very different story. But nationally we really have no politics, in the sense that the parties are not viable political entities. They don't really function as political parties. They do not address themselves to national priorities. They are not trying to create for the public's benefit models of what a strange kind of economic situation we face, not only nationally but in the
world at the present time. They're not doing this. They're preoccupied with trying to retain exclusive possession of the center position, and both parties are competing for that position, with the exception that the right wing of the Republican party is well organized and very well financed and very astutely led from their point of view. The right wing of the Republican party exerts a very real pressure, a very effective pressure, on the Republican party, controls the organizational structure of the Republican party to a large extent, and thereby keeps the Democratic party off balance. The liberal Democrats are more or less quiescent. They really don't have any position, because there's no left wing of the Democratic party that is exerting pressure on them. So as a result of this, you have this kind of stalemated political situation, which I think is very bad indeed because vacuums do have a habit of being filled eventually. And what may fill this vacuum we may not like. Now, there are two scripts that could be written about this situation: one is that the kind of coalition that McGovern put together in the primaries in '72 could be reinstituted with the right kind of candidate, and they could begin to bring pressure to bear on the Democratic administration and to sort of straighten out some of its problems. But that would only be on the condition that you could get a candidate who would run with what I call a campaign for the future—not so much to win, but to run a campaign that really made sense, and even to the point of taking positions that would be clearly not in the immediate political advantage of such a coalition. For example, I think that especially in the absence of national politics of a significant character, these special single-issue constituencies have developed—and they are having, I think—a very unfortunate effect on American politics. They're diverting attention from the real issues. And worse than that, these are issues that involve people emotionally to a very large extent. The people who oppose abortion, any kind of abortion, under the real brink of the "right to life"—oddly enough, not one percent of these people oppose capital punishment. As a matter of fact, most of them favor it—capital punishment. So it isn't life that is so sacred in their judgment. And they're also, most of them, hawks! But these emotional issues are being heated up in a way that it inflates them way out of relation to their inherent importance, in my judgment, and at the same time makes it very difficult for politicians who don't know how to cope with this kind of pressure: if they defy these single-issue constituencies on these emotional issues, they're in trouble, and they know it. And so this inflates the impact of these issues out of all relation to
their inherent importance. And in the course of heating up these issues, this leads to a possible scenario number two. I think I may have suggested to you the other day that we could, you know, get a Jarvis plan nationally that would not be addressed to taxes or to government. But somebody might come along and say, "Look, this drift has got to end. These are things that have to be done, that must be done," and inject an authoritarian tone and outlook. Given the disillusionment of representative government at the national level, and the cynicism, the remarkably low turnout in national elections, the emergence of such a figure or such a movement is not to be written off as impossible or not likely to happen. It could well happen. Besides, I have a cyclical theory of national politics. I think it does move from periods of turnover and turmoil, and that sort of thing, to these long periods where nothing much seems to happen. And I think we're approaching the end of such a period at the present time. But what lies ahead, I don't know, because it has these two potentialities.

Gardner

Well, I guess we'll hope for the first.

McWilliams

Yes. Yes, indeed.

Gardner

Mr. McWilliams, thank you very much.

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Notes
1. The 1961 issue was entitled "Rebels With a Hundred Causes." The "indignant generation" was contributor Jessica Mitford Truehaft's description used in her article.--ed.